The Theme of Redemption in the Fiction of William Styron.

Ardner Randolph Cheshire Jr

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College
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THE THEME OF REDEMPTION IN THE FICTION OF
WILLIAM STYRON.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural
and Mechanical College, Ph.D., 1973
Language and Literature, modern

University Microfilms, A XEROX Company, Ann Arbor, Michigan
THE THEME OF REDEMPTION IN THE 
FICTION OF WILLIAM STYRON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the 
Louisiana State University and 
Agricultural and Mechanical College 
in partial fulfillment of the 
requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy

In 
The Department of English

by

Ardner Randolph Cheshire, Jr. 
B.S., Louisiana Polytechnic Institute, 1966 
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1969 
December, 1973
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study is dedicated to Professor Percy G. Adams, who taught me how to write, and who was chiefly responsible for my being awarded an NDEA Fellowship. For these and many other considerations, I will always be grateful.

I would also like to thank my advisor and dissertation director, Professor Lewis P. Simpson, for his guidance and astute criticism of my work. Finally, I wish to thank the other members of my dissertation committee, especially Professors Otis B. Wheeler and Darwin H. Shrell, for their many helpful comments and suggestions.
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ABSTRACT

In William Styron's fiction, redemption is primarily a matter of faith. In order to be saved, a man's faith in self or something beyond self must justify his existence in a universe which is all-too-frequently chaotic, absurd, and dehumanized.

All of Styron's characters initially believe in a Winnie-the-Pooh world of sweetness and light. Time and experience, though, always destroy a character's childhood innocence -- his naive faith in an ordered and benevolent world. Sometimes, because of fate or weakness, the character cannot accept this loss. Suicide or insanity is the result.

If the character is strong enough to continue on after the end of childhood innocence, he may become simply a bitter and disillusioned man, incapable of a sustained struggle for new values. He may not commit suicide, but neither can he discover anything which will make his life meaningful again.

On the other hand, instead of remaining inert, a character may struggle actively to assert himself as a human being of worth. Most often, the struggle is against an organization or a system which tries to deny him the right to determine his own destiny. In resisting such moral totalitarianism, however, Styron's characters sometimes fall into the abyss of solipsism or fanaticism, believing that their vision of truth alone justifies whatever actions they take. In their struggle for redemptive freedom, these characters lose, completely or temporarily, their humanity.
If a character is able to avoid solipsism or fanaticism, he may indeed be able to create new values for himself. But his new values may again be destroyed by experience or fate, so that he is forced to go through the same process of introspection and struggle. He is forced once again to reorder his perception of self, the world, and God and to find a faith which will justify his existence in a fragmented, confused world.

Styron seems to imply that man is always having to modify or change his values in the light of experience. Therefore, the redemptive pattern that we find in his fiction is a cyclical one, of man's values being destroyed and perhaps recreated, of man's faith being lost and then perhaps renewed. Possibly, this is why all of Styron's "redemptive endings" seem a little forced. In Styron's estimation, there is no such thing as a perfect moral code; there is no such thing as a perfect faith. Nevertheless, if man is to be redeemed, he must forever continue to struggle for both.
INTRODUCTION

In the last part of the opening section of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, we are witnesses to a scene which is symbolically at the center of Styron's fiction. We find Nat Turner in his prison cell after he has been sentenced to death by the County Court of Southampton for "plotting in cold blood the indiscriminate destruction of men, of helpless women, and of infant children." On this his judgment day, all of Nat's sacrifices and efforts on behalf of his black brothers seem to have been in vain. His brief rebellion has been quashed, and his personal dream of freedom has been shattered. As Nat lies alone in his cell, wishing he had a Bible, his lawyer Mr. Gray visits him. In his usual, blunt fashion, Gray tells Nat that he and his Christianity are personally responsible for the death of "one hundred and thirty-one innocent niggers both slave and free," and that Nat's revolt has defeated black emancipation forever. Then Gray asks, "'I reckon you didn't figure on that back then, did you?'" And Nat replies, "'No.'" (113).

After Gray leaves him, Nat begins to think that maybe the lawyer is right, maybe his bloody revolt "was for nothing," and that all he did "was evil in the sight of God." In the quiet of the late autumn afternoon, he asks the question which is either repeated aloud or

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1 *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 105. All subsequent references to this edition will be given by page number within the text.
silently considered by all the main characters in Styron's fiction:

"Then what I done was wrong, Lord? . . . And if what I done was wrong, is there no redemption?" (115).

A man on his judgment day, questioning his moral responsibility for past actions and the possibility of redemption -- this, I believe, is the most important motif in Styron's fiction. At the beginning of Lie Down in Darkness, for example, we are shown Milton Loftis on his judgment day as he awaits the coffin which holds the body of his beloved daughter Peyton. For the first time in his life, Loftis is unable to evade the present, unable to evade the "evidence of all his errors." Therefore, as he waits for Peyton's body to arrive on the train, Milton returns in his mind to time past, hoping to find answers to the questions which have been pushing their way into the forefront of his consciousness: What did I do wrong? What is my responsibility in Peyton's death? Is there any hope that I can transcend my sorrow and my guilt?

Similarly, in Set This House on Fire, both the narrator Peter Leverett, and the hero of the novel, Cass Kinsolving, are drawn in memory back to Sambuco, Italy, because of Peter's feelings of sorrow, regret, and recrimination, and to those old questions, "What am I doing? Where am I going?" Most of the narrative, however, centers around Peter's friend Cass Kinsolving and his actions and his moral responsibilities in time past. He is the one who struggles to redeem himself

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2 Lie Down in Darkness (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), p. 14. All subsequent references to this edition will be given by page number within the text.

3 Set This House on Fire (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 7. All subsequent references to this edition will be given by page number within the text.
from an alcoholic, faithless, empty existence. It is Cass, primarily, who must come to moral terms with himself concerning the rape and murder of a girl he loves and his subsequent murder of the rapist, Mason Flagg. Like Nat Turner and Milton Loftis, Cass "didn't figure" that he would be directly or indirectly involved in so much human sorrow and destruction and that he would be forced one day to weigh the evidence of his actions and pass judgment on his own soul.

It seems quite likely that Styron's imagination was engaged from the very first by the image of an imprisoned, trapped, or doomed man weighing the evidence of his past actions in order to pass judgment on his own soul. In an interview with George Plimpton in October 1967, Styron said that he had wanted to write about Nat Turner's revolt, capture, and death since the early 1950's but could not quite decide how to do so. In 1962, though, after reading Camus' The Stranger, he found the specific image he had been searching for. Styron says of Camus' book: "There was something about the poignancy of the condemned man sitting in his jail cell on the day of his execution -- the existential predicament of the man -- hit me." But even though Camus gave Styron the particular image he needed for The Confessions of Nat Turner, I think that Lie Down in Darkness, Set This House on Fire, and even The Long March show that he had long been preoccupied with this kind of "existential predicament."

The precise nature of this "existential predicament" in each of Styron's novels and his one novella will be one of the chief concerns

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of this study. In general terms, the dilemma that faces Styron's characters is what Karl Jaspers calls "the basic problem of our time," that is, "whether an independent human being in his self-comprehended destiny is still possible." It is a dilemma which finds man, condemned eventually to die, doing battle with the forces in society and in self which are opposed to his true being, to his true self-hood, to his freedom. For example, almost all the characters in Styron's novels gnaw upon their own souls because they feel trapped, damned, and sick at the core of their being. Because of this feeling, each character struggles to a greater or lesser extent to redeem himself, to find a way out of the personal hell he knows he is locked in. Therefore, the story of each novel is one of modern man in quest of himself, a quest which forces a character to walk a high, narrow path if he is to be redeemed. On one side of the path is the void of authority and on the other, the void of solipsism.

Styron's novels are not, however, simply "existential." In fact, one of the thorniest questions involving Styron's fictional world is whether or not his values are basically existential or basically Christian. For example, does Milton Loftis or Nat Turner pass judgment on his soul based on such Christian values as love, humility, patience, temperance, and obedience or on such existential values as courage, commitment, action, and independence? This tension between Christian and existential values is evident in all of Styron's work. It is, I believe, what Styron partially had in mind when he said that the South offered such wonderful

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material for the novelist because there one still could find "the conflict between the ordered Protestant tradition, the fundamentalism based on the Old Testament, and the twentieth Century."^6

There is also a third element which must be considered in an evaluation of Styron's novels in general and the theme of redemption in particular, and that is fate or necessity. Especially in Lie Down in Darkness and The Long March, one feels at times that a man's values, be they existential or Christian, and a man's actions mean no more than his luck. Consequently, it is sometimes quite difficult to determine just what Styron's moral or philosophical attitude is. This elusive moral center is especially disconcerting to critics such as John Aldridge, who feels that in Lie Down in Darkness Styron's "efforts to marry Fitzgerald, Freud, modern history, and provincial tragedy . . . result in artistic sodomy."^7 Being even less kind to Set This House on Fire, Aldridge says that "one is never sure . . . why the events occur in this way rather than that, why they should have this effect rather than some other -- and one feels that Styron, while writing it, was never sure."^8 That Styron's fiction does not fit into any tidy moral or philosophical category is true. However, it seems to me that his fiction thereby accurately reflects the complex, fragmented attitudes of contemporary society. Just because Styron's characters are frequently confused does not mean Styron is.

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^8 Ibid., p. 46.
Whether Styron's values are ultimately Christian or existential, the cost of redemption for his characters is high, if not impossible. To be saved, they must suffer, both by sacrificing self for the good of others and by struggling to free themselves from the people, forces, and systems which attempt to annihilate their very being. They must be both the anvil and the hammer in a world where God is either dead or too weak to offer help and where fate or necessity may suddenly reveal a hidden flaw in the best of forge work. Despite these difficulties, the possibility is always present in Styron's fiction that a man can forge himself into something authentic, strong, and free. Karl Jaspers might have been speaking for some of Styron's characters when he says, "Although I am an anvil, as a hammer I can consummate what I suffer."\(^9\)

This study will be concerned with the "existential predicament" of Styron's main characters and with their quest for meaning and purpose. It will look at the chief figures in Styron's novels and his novella and try to see exactly why these people are, or think they are, damned. Next, it will follow each character's search for redemption, decide whether redemption is, in fact, possible, and if so, explore its nature.

Viewed from this pattern of damnation, struggle, and, perhaps, redemption, Styron's fiction takes on added significance: first, because the theme of redemption with all its many ironies is one of the grand themes of American literature; and second, because the very serious religious and philosophical questions that Styron poses through an exploration of this theme elevate each of his books beyond the oftentimes

\(^9\) Jaspers, p. 185.
controversial, literal level of dramatic action. For example, it seems to me that one cannot fully appreciate *The Confessions of Nat Turner* until he sees that Styron's art in this book transcends the questions of the relationship between black characters and a white author and the questions about the institution of slavery in the Old South. Of primary importance are Nat Turner's redemptive quest and the parallels between Nat and contemporary man. And the same thing is true, I think, of all of Styron's heroes and heroines.
CHAPTER I

GROWING UP DAMNED

-- "Ah, for a man to arise in me, that the man
I am should cease to be." -- Milton Loftis

Styron's first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), tells the story of the Loftis family of Port Warwick, Virginia. The central characters in this book are Milton, Helen, and Peyton Loftis. Milton is a lawyer who does little more than drink, play golf, and smother his youngest daughter Peyton with love. Milton's wife Helen is a puritanical, cold woman who spends most of her time thinking about sin and all its many manifestations. Milton and Helen have two daughters, Maudie and Peyton. Maudie, the oldest, is mentally retarded and physically crippled. Peyton, on the other hand, is bright, beautiful, and physically healthy. Eventually, Milton and Helen separate, and Milton takes Dolly Bonner, a rather common, but soft and loving woman, for a mistress. Maudie dies in her twenties of tuberculosis, and Peyton commits suicide soon after she is married.

We are introduced to Milton Loftis at the beginning of the novel as he and Dolly wait at the railroad depot for the arrival of Peyton's body. (The time present sequence of the book begins here and ends, for the Loftises, at the chapel where Peyton is to be buried.) Overwhelmed by sorrow and by feelings of guilt, Milton returns in memory to the past and attempts to ascertain what responsibility he had in his
daughter's death. Insofar as Loftis is concerned, the past finds meaning in five key scenes: (1) a Sunday when Maudie and Peyton are small children; (2) the dance in honor of Peyton's sixteenth birthday in August 1939; (3) Peyton's return home from college during the 1941 Christmas holidays; (4) Milton's trip to Charlottesville in November of 1942; and (5) Peyton's wedding in 1944.

If one considers merely the surface details of these five scenes, he might conclude that Styron's first novel is simply another variation on what is sometimes called the Faulknerian theme of "decadence." It is not surprising, then, that few critics of the book view it as little more than warmed-over William Faulkner, specifically, Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. John Aldridge, for example, says that Lie Down in Darkness is a remarkably skillful adaptation of the Faulknerian imagination to materials that have not, perforce, been reimagined at all. It is Faulknerian not only in its evocation of the familiar Southern Gothic air of evil and almost meteorological damnation (the sort that can now be had in Southern fiction simply by seeding the clouds with a little essence of sweet William,) but in its heavy indebtedness to specific Faulkner novels. The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying are especially prominent as original sources for the funeral setting, the idiot-child motif, and the figure of the guilt—burdened and ultimately suicidal young person who cannot escape, even in the alien North, the destructive force of Southern fatality.

This kind of criticism is very entertaining, precisely because it is so glib. One gets the impression that Aldridge simply is not interested in the story of Lie Down in Darkness, much less in the significance of the action. It could be that he came to the novel bored in the first place, for he tells us in the Preface to his book Time to Murder and Create that "our most characteristic present response

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to the novel is a feeling of boredom and *deja vu*, a tired realization that we have been here before and have seen it all happen again and again."²

Critics less affected by ennui have seen that Styron's *Lie Down In Darkness* is akin to Faulkner's work only in its surface similarities. In her book *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*, for example, Louise Y. Gossett recognizes Styron's debt to Faulkner in his use of violence and his "elaborate rhythmical sentences meditating on human tragedy." But Gossett also sees that unlike Faulkner, Styron "does not sing of a golden past nor does he prophesy doom of evil inherent in the past."³ Similarly, in *The Faraway Country*, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. points out in considerable detail that while the situations and some of the characters in *Lie Down in Darkness* appear to be greatly similar to those in *The Sound and the Fury*, the implications of the two novels are quite different. The gist of Rubin's detailed comparison is given in one of his summary statements: "Where Faulkner envisions the disintegration of a leading Southern family as something dynastic, the result of the spiritual and moral exhaustion of generations of aristocratic Southern life, Styron portrays it as being psychological, the result of the personal weaknesses and sins of a father and a mother. Faulkner's tragedy is historical; Styron's has no important basis in the past."⁴

Having removed Styron from the tracks of *The Dixie Limited*,

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(as Flannery O'Connor called William Faulkner), we can deal with *Lie Down in Darkness* on its own terms. But what are Styron's major concerns in his first novel? Ihab Hassan in *Radical Innocence* sees the book as "a domestic tragedy" in which the Loftises search for childhood innocence and find only death. In their "encounter with necessity" (the title of Hassan's essay) neither Milton, Helen, or Peyton "can fully penetrate his situation," establish connections with others, or accept the realities of an absurd, "adult" world. Each remains trapped in an isolated, closed world of childhood. Helen's encounter with experience drives her mad; Milton's leaves him screaming, "'Nothing! Nothing!'; and Peyton's causes her to commit suicide.

David D. Galloway in *The Absurd Hero in American Fiction* also emphasizes the existential aspects of *Lie Down in Darkness*. It is, he says, "a plunge into chaos . . . a dismissal of more pervasive traditional 'answers' to that chaos and an enumeration of contemporary absurdities." Consequently, Galloway believes that the "chief concern of this novel is with the efforts of Milton and Helen Loftis and their daughter Peyton to arrive at some sort of personal identification."

Again on an existential note is Louise Y. Gossett's view that Styron

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is concerned with "the conditions of freedom for man within institutions and within himself." Lie Down in Darkness, Gossett thinks, "records the decline of freedom and the increase of violence during the dissolution of a present-day Virginia family."\(^\text{10}\)

While recognizing the existential elements in Styron's first novel, critics such as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. emphasize the moral and theological aspects of the book. Rubin thinks that Styron is exploring the validity of any theology or morality to possess meaning for the Loftis family. To him, Lie Down in Darkness is a "literary exploration of the potentialities of certain surviving attitudes for imparting meaning and order to modern human experience."\(^\text{11}\) Likewise, Gunnar Urang in Adversity and Grace asserts that in his first novel Styron is concerned with "the vexing problems of fate, freedom, and responsibility."\(^\text{12}\) Urang thinks that in Lie Down in Darkness Styron puts philosophy and religion to the test of action and seeks "to envisage redemptive possibilities in a time that is said to mark the death of God."\(^\text{13}\)

In one way or another, what most of these critics seem to imply is that the characters in Lie Down in Darkness search for a reality or a theology, which, if accepted, will enable them to make their lives meaningful. This search, of course, is a complicated one where

\(^{10}\) Gossett, p. 117.


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 209.
there appear to be more questions than answers. Is traditional Christian theology no longer acceptable? Is a God-given and guaranteed meaning for existence any longer available to man? If not, where is meaning, where is reality to be found? In other words, how is a man to be saved from an empty, boring existence?

Milton Loftis is the central figure of *Lie Down in Darkness* because he is the one who is forced to assess his responsibility for the breakup of his marriage and the deaths of his two daughters, Maudie and Peyton. At the beginning of the novel, Milton and his mistress, Dolly Bonner, wait at the railroad depot for Peyton's body, "the symbol of his doom" (14). Once a young and reasonably happy married man with a bright political future, Milton is now in his fifties, separated from his wife and forced many years ago by drink and by weakness to forget about his political aspirations. On this hot August morning he thinks, "Life tends toward a moment" (15). With the death of his daughter, that moment has arrived for Milton Loftis. The actions he took and the actions he did not, all his past in fact, are now concentrated in this one day. He must examine this past and decide how much he is to blame for the way things have turned out. He must pass judgment on his own soul.

For most of his adult life, Loftis is a selfish man who depends on his wife's money, his mistress's adulation, and his daughter's love instead of on his personal abilities and virtues. From what little we find out about his childhood, there is every indication that life was all too easy for him as he grew up. Sent by his well-meaning father to the University of Virginia at the age of seventeen, Milton quickly became "a sot even by university standards" (15). When World
War II broke out, Loftis was "greatly relieved" (16) that his father was able to get him a commission in the Army's legal branch at Governor's Island. Milton evidently accepted without protest everything that his father did for him. But by the time of his marriage, he comes to realize that the "old man had given him too much" (17).

As matters turn out, Milton has no need to worry about striking out on his own after his marriage because Helen tells him that when her mother dies, she will inherit a hundred thousand dollars. After Loftis hears this, he protests "mildly" that the money makes no difference, all the while being secretly "elated" by the news (16). Once again, he chooses to rely on others instead of relying on himself, and the pattern of dependency established by his father is continued in his marriage.

In the early stages of his marriage, Milton is not called upon to face any of the harsh facts of existence. His and Helen's life is pleasant, if not very meaningful or exciting, simply because they are young and in love. With Maudie's birth, however, unpleasant questions that call for answers begin to arise. Maudie from birth is retarded. But how could such a child be born to him and Helen? After the doctor tells Loftis that Maudie will never know much more than she did at birth, Milton thinks, "Great God in heaven, was it his fault! Well, whose? What?" (49). Sometimes, though he loves Maudie, he can hardly bear to look at her eyes. Instead, he looks at Helen's body "with suspicion and his own with infuriate guilt. The mystery of birth . . ." (49). Maudie is one of the first hints Loftis gets that perhaps the universe is not orderly, meaningful, and benevolent, and that life is not necessarily rich and beautiful.
With the birth of Peyton, however, Milton's faith in the future is reaffirmed. The beautiful, young Peyton becomes in effect Milton's Godhead and Redeemer; it is she who gives his life and the world meaning and reality. Though trapped in a profession he finds boring and in a marriage he finds unsatisfying, Loftis continues to believe that the universe is benevolent because his daughter is a part of it.

That Milton worshipped Peyton from her early childhood to her death is obvious. Earlier the same Sunday that Peyton and Buster Bonner tie up and hang Maudie from the cedar tree, for example, Peyton, with a mirror in her hand, runs up to her father while he reads the paper and says, "Daddy, Daddy, I'm beautiful!" Milton turns to admire his daughter as any father would. Then, he picks up Peyton "with a sudden, almost savage upwelling of love," presses her against him, and murmurs in a voice slightly choked, "Yes, my baby's beautiful." With this sudden emotional response, Loftis realizes that he is "paying homage to this beautiful part of him, in which life would continue limitlessly" (46).

Milton's veneration of his daughter is so strong that any time she or their relationship is threatened, he becomes either overly protective, violently jealous, or both. For example, on the Sunday that Peyton tied up Maudie, it is Milton who soothes Peyton's hurt feelings after Helen has slapped her, and because he is scared that his wife will in some way hurt his daughter or destroy their relationship, it is Milton who takes Peyton to Helen's room so that she can apologize to her mother. When Helen accepts Peyton's apology less than wholeheartedly, Milton wants to shout at his wife, "Keep your hands off my daughter!" (66). Instead, he takes Peyton on a night-time drive away
from Helen and attempts to assure himself and Peyton that everything is and will be all right. In the car with Peyton curled up beside him, Milton looks down at her and says, "'When you grow up, baby . . . you're going to be wonderful!'" (67). Likewise, at Peyton's birthday dance, Loftis not only defends himself and Peyton to Helen over Peyton's drinking whiskey, he also agrees after their argument to buy his daughter a "big old sinful Packard convertible" (96). The promise of this gift, of course, once again reaffirms Peyton and Milton's very special relationship with each other, a relationship that has been threatened by Helen.

In his mind, at least, this special relationship becomes something less than Platonic. On several occasions, we see that Milton's almost sacramental love for his daughter is mixed with incestuous desire. For example, on Christmas morning 1941, Peyton begins to undress in front of her father after he has come to wake her up. "Fascinated and confused," Milton cannot keep his eyes off his daughter's partially naked body. He leaves, "swallowing hard," only after Peyton yells for him to get out (165-66). Similarly, at Peyton's wedding, all Loftis can look at as his daughter stands at the altar is the outline of her "solid curved hips trembling ever so faintly." At the same time, his thoughts turn toward sexual images of "wet hot flesh, straining like a beautiful, bloody savage" (271). Disturbed by his imagination, Milton downs several glasses of champagne immediately after the ceremony is over. As the drinks start to take effect, he begins to realize that his incongruous, sacramental-incestuous love for Peyton will bring both of them nothing but grief.

In a trance, Milton's memory takes him back to a time when
Peyton was young, when he and she heard the church bells together one day. With the chimes ringing a hymn about Jesus and the Christian promise of heavenly peace, Loftis squeezes his daughter to him and kisses her "in an agony of love" (290). At that moment in the past, it seemed to Milton that Peyton promised to be his Redeemer and that through her he would live forever in a world of love and childhood innocence. But the bells on Peyton's wedding day tell him that he was wrong, because the kind of Edenic love he has had for her is wrong; it is doomed in the end to fail them both. On the one hand, Peyton cannot be his little girl forever and can never be his lover. Her wedding is concrete proof of this. On the other hand, since Peyton has depended for so long on her father's kind of devotional love, she can never love anyone else in an unselfish, mature way. Therefore, at the end of his vision Loftis wants to tell his daughter, "Forgive me for loving you so" (291). Realizing that his love for Peyton has doomed them both, Milton can only ask for forgiveness at this point in time. It is too late to save either himself or his daughter.

As Loftis himself eventually realizes, from childhood to his daughter's marriage his life "had been in the nature of a dull hangover" (152). He had been only half-aware of his own self and the world around him. By the time he awakens to his selfishness and his misguided love, it is too late to rectify the damage already done. However, had Loftis been able to open his eyes earlier and had he chosen to act forcefully and responsibly in each of the major crisis situations in which the family was involved, one wonders if he could have prevented his and the family's final ruin. If he had seen and then had the courage to confront each moment in time which called for responsible but
radical action, could Milton have forged his own redemption?

The Sunday that Dolly and her husband come over, as Robert H. Fossum points out, "inaugurates Milton's fall from grace."\(^{14}\) On this day, he comes "precariously close to an understanding of something: himself, perhaps. Ghosts of things done, things undone lingered on the lawn in that complacent afternoon sunlight. Had he just turned soon enough he might have seen them and been properly frightened. But when he did turn it was too late, evening had come, and the moment for recognition was lost forever" (54-55). The ghosts on the lawn are Milton, of course: the Milton who is a morning drinker; the Milton who is bored with religion and has only "toyed with the idea of grace" (52); the Milton who smothers his youngest daughter with love; and the Milton who is dependent on his wife's money and not his own ability. Loftis, however, refuses to confront his existence. He turns away from his domestic, religious, and psychological problems by saying, "The hell with it." By evening, he is drunk again, "secure in his misty Eden" (55).

He likewise takes the path of least resistance instead of responsibility at Peyton's birthday dance in August 1939. First, though he knows how Helen feels about drinking, he lets Peyton have some whiskey. Second, after Helen orders Peyton home for this, Milton does not really attempt to resolve the matter. He elects to receive several gluey kisses from Dolly, have a few more drinks, and then abuse his wife verbally. He finds her as she fumbles with Maudie's leg brace. Even

then, had he offered to help Helen, perhaps a reconciliation could have been effected. Instead, "hesitant and afraid," he makes no move to assist her. "There are moments," he thinks, "when action is clearly indicated but impossible" (95). The moment passes, and as the whiskey begins to take effect, Loftis simply watches her struggle wildly with Maudie's overshoes and the straps of the brace. When Helen leaves the dance with Maudie, he decides "that in this world there was no way of telling right from wrong and anyway, the hell with it. What had happened and what might happen would happen and so he took a drink and let his knee rest against Dolly's, safe in the all inclusive logic of determinism" (97). Later that night, with "faltering, only half-willing hands" (98), he makes love to Dolly for the first time, not because he loves her or even because he has an overpowering need for sex, but because he does not have the courage to rebel against his fear of and his dependence on his wife in any other way.

As time goes by, the need for decisive, responsible action on Milton's part becomes increasingly critical. But since he has no real faith in anything other than his love for Peyton, he does not really know what to do. Consequently, so inert does Loftis become that on certain mornings after awakening with a hangover, he would feel that he did not exist at all. Each object around him possessed life, "shoe trees, knobs on the kitchen range, his fearful razor." The inanimate one was him, "listlessly humoring a queasy stomach . . . . At the age of fifty, he was beginning to discover, with a sense of panic," that his "decisions were reached not through reason but by rationalization" and that selfishness had "always seemed to prevent his decent motives from becoming happy actions" (152-53).
Thoughts of time and the prison-like nature of his life cause Loftis much pain because they make "him realize the precarious sort of life he was living and brought him closer and closer to the decisions he knew he would eventually have to face." Especially when these thoughts of weakness involved Peyton, "they left him shaken and furious, but even less able to act, like a bug wriggling upside-down on the floor" (155). Such is the case at Christmas 1941 when Peyton comes home from Sweet Briar for the holidays.

Milton has high hopes that this Christmas will be a happy one. "He had a few suspicions but he overlooked them. He glowed" (156). Unfortunately, one of Milton's unresolved dilemmas in the form of Dolly Bonner brings his great expectations crashing down around his ears. Just before Peyton is to arrive, Dolly calls Milton, but Helen answers the phone. Naturally, Helen is very upset, and she angrily closets herself in her room. Since Milton wants Peyton's homecoming to be a joyous one, he goes to his wife's room, prepared to do anything to make amends. Both Helen and Milton wish that love would bloom again in their marriage. Too much has happened in the past, however, for an immediate reconciliation -- Milton's drinking, the fights involving Peyton, Dolly Bonner -- all are ghosts that haunt both their memories. So Loftis and his wife hold hands for a brief moment before she pulls hers away. "That moment," Milton later thinks, "had expressed for the last time the tenderness that existed between them. It seemed the closest they could ever get. Why hadn't something important happened, then?" (159). As he goes downstairs, he thinks that the whole scene had been "charged with a violent inevitability. . . . he could have halted the outcome only by dynamiting the house" (160).
After Helen ruins the holidays by insisting that Peyton stay home Christmas Eve, Milton longs to take some sort of action that will avert a terrible outcome to his daughter's visit. He realizes, however, that "pity had him shackled in frail impotence; he felt bound by threads of affection -- or was it merely habit? -- too thin to break. Even then, in the monstrous blush of pity which verged close to despair, he somehow knew that his vast pity for Helen was only a form of self-pity, and he cursed himself for an unmerry Christmas, for Peyton's unhappiness and his own bleak inertia" (163). It is also Milton's "own bleak inertia" and his lack of courage to depend on himself and not Helen's money that keeps him from telling his wife that their marriage is through unless she becomes a little more human. Consequently, on Christmas Day, when Helen plays the suffering, wronged mother until Peyton cries with frustration and leaves Port Warwick with Dick, Loftis does nothing more than get drunk and shout at his wife, "'Helen . . . you're a real horror, do you know that. Why, God damn your soul, I -- '' (172). He goes to bed that night "thinking of Peyton, close to tears" (173).

Milton falls to his lowest level as a human being on his trip to see the dying Maudie and Helen in Charlottesville. Before he even arrives at the hospital, he is drunk. Though he tries to become sober as his wife is telling him that Maudie may die, Loftis is still not in enough command of his will to keep his promise and stay at the hospital with her. Instead, after meeting an old fraternity buddy named Hubert MacPhail in the corridor of the hospital, Milton turns away from his responsibilities and follows his friend to the Kappa Alpha fraternity house. Milton tries to rationalize his defection by telling himself that he is searching for Peyton, who is also supposed to be there. After
missing his youngest daughter, Loftis does not return to the hospital. He gets drunk and goes to the University of Virginia football game.

The football game is a symbolic representation of the world Milton Loftis finds himself in. For men such as he, existence, like football, is an absurd, chaotic, meaningless battle between almost indistinguishable adversaries. This moral greyness is further accentuated in Milton's case because he sees the world through the misty eyes of an alcoholic. Styron captures the essence of this world in his description of halftime:

Gray light rolled over the stadium. Above, an airplane hung in the sky, hovering nearly motionless. A high-school band, gay with plumes, paraded out onto the field and nobody watched or listened. On the other side of the field the stands were gaudy with blankets and pennants, a patchwork quilt upended. Somewhere a siren howled and died, and on the sidelines there was brief clot of people, a fistfight, but two fat cops ran up brandishing sticks, and the spectators scattered in all directions, like boys from a firecracker. It was a moment of suspension, of gloom even, although the score was tied: it had nothing to do with the game. It seemed merely as if all these thousands had been seized at once by the same numbness: gathered here between the halves, sitting idly, mainly silent now, it was as if, imprisoned by their boredom, they had been here since the beginning of time and would go on being here forever (208).

In the midst of this absurd situation, Loftis suddenly understands that sitting here evading all, hiding his very identity among people for whom that fact, at least, was of no importance, he had committed the unpardonable crime. It was neither one of commission nor of omission, but the worst combination of both -- of apathy, of a sottish criminal inertia -- and it seemed that if he didn't rise at this very moment, become sober, strike boldly, act like a man -- it seemed that if he didn't do all these things, his enormous sin would be advertised to the sky like a banner (209).

Drunk, but perhaps more aware of his plight than he has ever been, Milton leaves the ballgame and sobers himself somewhat "by an effort of will so strong, so unfamiliar, that it frightened him" (212). As he walks down the road, though, he realizes that he is "going in
the wrong direction, away from Peyton, away from Maudie and Helen and the hospital, away from his colossal responsibilities" (213). Then, a voice seems to begin chanting in his soul, "I will be strong, I will be strong" (213), and he turns around and heads in the opposite direction, toward responsibility. Feeling a little calmer and a little more capable, Milton offers up a prayer to God: "'God, if You are there, forgive Your foolish son'. . . . It was at that moment that he fell into the culvert" (213). The implication here, of course, if that either God is not there or that Milton is not forgiven, though Styron probably has the former in mind. In Lie Down in Darkness there is no reason to believe that God exists, or, if He does, that He ever reveals Himself to man. Consequently, a man who looks up for divine answers or divine forgiveness might well end up like Milton Loftis, stunned and bleeding in a very secular sewage ditch.

Milton's literal and symbolic fall into the sewage ditch also marks the beginning of his rise as a man. After that dark day in Charlottesville, Milton does struggle to redeem himself. He does quit drinking and quit seeing Dolly, and he does his "utmost damndest" to make Helen see that he still cares about her and their marriage. Nevertheless, all Milton's sacrifices seem for nought because after Maudie's death, Helen only lies in bed "with eyes that still glassed in like watch crystals the hollow reflection of shattered nembutal dreams, an incarnate No -- reasonless and mute" (255). Finally, in a last attempt to reach his wife, Milton asks her why she can afford the luxury of this particular kind of self-pity and self-hate? Why, by God? Helen, I've done my utmost damndest to make you see how much I care. How much I care to the extent of doing everything I know to make you see that I'm not the broken-down unredeemable wreck you thought I was. I wasn't noble,
either, about it, or self conscious about it. . . . If only you could see that I who I admit am nothing great, I guess, was still willing to do anything to start things right again. God almighty, Helen, forgive me for saying this if you're as sick as I think you are, but what have you wanted from me, my manhood guts and balls and soul? What in Christ's name have you wanted? I offered you everything I've got -- (255).

Loftis, unfortunately, is partially right in his suspicions of why his struggles to redeem his life and their marriage have failed.

For a brief time after this confrontation with his wife, up until Peyton's wedding, Milton's change of habits seems to effect the kind of reconciliation he had hoped for. In the spring of 1943, he and Helen go on a kind of second honeymoon to a resort near Asheville. They ask one another to forgive the mistakes of the past and then make love for the first time in years. At the end of this vacation, Helen even tells him that she wants Peyton to come back home for a visit. When his wife tells him this, Milton feels for a moment that his life has been redeemed. "It had been, by almost any standard the most gratifying moment he could remember, and the night before Peyton's wedding he had retrieved it, the hearts' reunion, with a triumphant and savage ecstasy. A man so unaccomplished, he reflected, might achieve as much as great men, give him patience and a speck of luck" (259-60).

But then he adds, prophetically, "though his road slopes off to a bitter sort of doom." Styron finishes the section concerning Milton's halcyon days with a rather awkward, though telling, comment: "and the wind through chill acres of stars, suddenly made Loftis feel cold, and his life a chancy thing indeed - he has had his moment, a clock-tick of glory before the last descent. You know this man's fall: do you know his wrassling?" (260). Styron seems to be implying here that fate ultimately is responsible for the Loftis tragedy. But is this really
true? Does fate or does Loftis himself cause his final descent?

One could argue that Milton's struggle to change his life is simply too little too late and that all he changes are his habits and not his fundamental values. There is no evidence, for example, to indicate that Milton tries to practice law for any worthwhile social, political, or personal purpose. He evidently continues to dabble at it and to support himself with Helen's money. Also, there is no evidence to indicate that Loftis has changed his almost sacramental concept of Peyton. In fact, while Charlottesville taught him the need for strong, responsible action, nothing has taught him as yet the necessity to ground the action on something which is more stable than his Edenic love for his daughter.

Also in support of this view that not fate but superficial action and a lack of true purpose cause Milton's downfall is Styron's earlier ironic statement about Loftis succumbing to "the all-inclusive logic of determinism" (97). Are we to assume that Styron himself finds determinism the only logical explanation for the Loftis tragedy?

Finally, if fate alone determines the outcome of Milton's struggle to save himself, how are we to interpret Peyton's outburst to Harry about her father? She tells her husband on their wedding night that her father has "lived fifty years in total and utter confusion, made a mess of his life." "Don't be too bitter, baby," Harry replies:

'Bitter!' she cried, 'don't be bitter you say. How can I be anything else when I see where his life's led him? How can I be anything else? Don't you see -- he's never been beyond redemption, like Helen. That's the terrible part. Can't you see? She was beyond hope I guess the day she was born. But Daddy! He's had so much that was good in him, but it was all wasted. He wasn't man enough to stand up like a man and make decisions and all the rest. Or to be able to tell her where to get off!' (317).
Louis D. Rubin, Jr., also dismisses the idea of a Greek-like fate in the novel. Rubin says:

Had Milton Loftis' love for his daughter been less selfish, so that the father had been willing to incur his daughter's momentary displeasure by insisting that she do what was right rather than what she wished to do; had Helen Loftis' firmness been the product of genuine love and understanding for Peyton and not a hypocritical mask for jealousy and hostility; then Peyton might have grown up into someone who is able to love in her turn. . . . A father's weakness, a mother's cruelty have brought about a daughter's destruction.  

From this point of view, the family is destroyed because Milton and Helen lack a faith or a purpose which would enable them to love one another and Peyton in an unselfish, responsible way.

Other critics, however, think that weakness of character cannot totally explain Milton's and the family's downfall. In fact, many of Styron's critics believe that there are forces operating in Lie Down in Darkness which are wholly or partially beyond human control, though they define them in different ways and attach varying degrees of importance to them. David D. Galloway says that Styron's characters in his first novel are "tormented, and destined souls" from a Greek drama who are "doomed to play out their fates without external interference."  

They are incapable of achieving any full or complete existence. Frederick J. Hoffman sees the Loftises "as persons engaged in pitifully trying to save themselves, or each other, from a fate they are somehow not able to forestall." Though Hoffman does not dismiss completely the personal, moral responsibility of each member of the family, he does


16 Galloway, p. 55.

think that there is a "'fate,' terribly and pathetically human, that hangs over the novel."\textsuperscript{18} Gunnar Urang calls this fate "Freudian,"\textsuperscript{19} and it is perhaps as good a term as any. Whatever one calls it, it does appear to be an ineluctable force in \textit{Lie Down in Darkness}.

Would any action by Milton, for example, have changed his wife's puritanical, almost psychotic equating of sex with sin? Given her adolescent background, where she was subjected to the military discipline of her father, "Blood and Jesus Peyton," there seems to be a strong possibility that Helen was very neurotic about SIN (her capitals) and sexual matters even before meeting Milton. "'I'm afraid,'" she confesses to the Episcopalian minister Carey Carr, "'that all my life I've been very sensitive about right and wrong'" (114). As her actions, thoughts, and dreams prove, however, this sensitivity is most evident regarding sex.

Though Milton is surely to blame for much of the agony surrounding Peyton's birthday dance, Helen precipitates matters by ordering Peyton home for drinking. Had she done this simply because of her antipathy towards whiskey, it would have been understandable. However, the real reason that she orders her daughter to leave is to hurt Milton because he has been dancing with Dolly; Peyton's drinking is a convenient pretext to injure her husband. As she talks to a friend while Milton dances with Dolly, Helen feels "sick, alone" (81). Then, "a frantic vision appeared to her." She sees herself in bed at home in the dark. Milton comes to tell her that their marriage is through.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 149.
\textsuperscript{19} Urang, p. 186.
In her reverie, Helen collapses "back into bed, or rather into absolute
darkness, knowing that by one word -- Yes or Forgive or Love -- she
might have affirmed all, released all of the false and vengeful and
troubling demons . . . and everything would be all right again" (82).
But she falls back into darkness and the door closes, sealing off the
world. Immediately after this vision, Peyton appears, and the emotion­
ally disturbed Helen attacks her.

At one of her meetings with Carey Carr, Helen tells him of the
day before Peyton was to leave for Sweet Briar. Helen has put Maudie
down for a nap and is standing at the window watching Milton and Peyton
play together. As she looks at them, Helen can see only Peyton's "hips,
the cotton drawn tight against them" and can think only of Peyton
"stretched out in the woods at Sweet Briar . . . so vulnerable to some
sleek boy from the University" (117). Then it seems to Helen that the
devil is standing beside her and that he says: "Look at them, look at
their sin, look how they have betrayed you both: you and that feeble
beloved heart behind you that must vanish soon. One has betrayed you
through infidelity and one through vice and meanness: the ingratitude
of a shameless child" (118). While Milton has been unfaithful to his
wife, it is hard to believe that his affair with Dolly is responsible
for Helen's visions of the devil or of Peyton copulating in the woods.

At Peyton's wedding, Helen's feelings about sex, sin, and the
world around her are most clearly revealed. Spoiling for a chance to
revile her daughter, Helen overhears her tell Milton not to smother her
with his drunken love. After asking Carey Carr to step outside with
her, she accuses Peyton of being a sinful little tramp and tells Carr
how cruel it is for a mother to have such a whore and a drunkard for
a child. When Carr tells her that he has no intention of listening to such talk, Helen wonders how he could be so stupid that he cannot "see the deeper things she was getting at, trying to tell him" (296). She then thinks about the dreams she has constantly, dreams which indicate partially the nature of that fate which helps to destroy the Loftis family.

In one of her dreams Helen tries to protect Maudie from strange, fearsome enemies who want to rape Maudie first and then her. In another dream, Dolly Bonner dies of disease in a land that is strewn with faceless corpses, "iridescent with decay, soft in parts or part leathery, invariably female." Helen and Milton, or Carr or her father, would walk through this landscape of death and admire the bodies, particularly one corpse, "faceless like the rest, head down in the shadows, with its legs -- suppurating, clotted by a swarm of sucking, avid flies -- unmistakably Dolly's" (297). In a third dream Helen rides a white horse "just like her father's" (298), and the gelding kills Dolly by sinking its sharp hooves into her skull.

It is obvious from Helen's dreams that her hatred and fear of sex cause her to hate and fear not only Dolly, but men in general. In fact, her twisted views of sex, man, and religion are all a part of another dream. In it, Carey Carr, naked to the waist, "fat and pink with his belly button showing," pulls her through the garden, "threatening her with a big stick. Fat and pink, his titties bobbing with greasy yellow fat beneath, like butter on oatmeal. Threatening her with the stick, saying, 'You must believe! You must believe! I am the way, the truth and the life!'" (299). Helen remembers this dream as she walks outside with Carr after the wedding ceremony. Because he is both a
man and at least nominally a figure of moral authority, she turns to
the minister and accuses him of only pretending to help her with her
problems. "She groped for something crushing, annihilating to say, to
this her enemy. 'Your God is a silly old ass,' she said, 'and my God
... my God is the devil!'" (299). Helen had expected life to be one
"nice, long, congenial tea party, where everyone talked a little,
danced a little and had polite manners. She had come to the party and
it had been ghastly" (273). When she finally realizes her adolescent
vision of life is not to be, Helen casts religion aside as she would a
toy and employs her will (as she rather dramatically tells Carr) in the
service of evil.

After viewing Helen's mind through her dreams and her actions,
one wonders what, if anything, Milton could have done to make their
marriage a complete and harmonious one? The only possible solution to
his, and perhaps Peyton's, dilemma would have been to leave her long
before he did. But Loftis shuns divorce until it is too late "because
he was ever an idler of the most accomplished sort ... he could never
earn enough, he knew, to maintain his self-imposed, patrician standard
of living" (153-54).

If Helen is beyond redemption because of her psychological
problems, so, finally, is Peyton. In fact, she is an inverted image of
her mother. Helen hates sex and coldly abstains; Peyton hates sex but
wildly assents. Helen cannot love because she must dominate others;
Peyton cannot love because she has been smothered by her father's love.
Helen escapes reality through madness; Peyton escapes reality through
suicide.

From her internal monologue just before she commits suicide,
we know that Peyton is tormented by sexual guilt (symbolized by the
birds in her imagination) and that this sexual guilt is also associated
with her father. For example, when she finally locates Harry just
before she jumps to her death, Peyton does not know how to tell him
of her feelings of guilt and despair. She thinks:

Couldn't he [Harry] see, couldn't I convince him of, instead of
joy, my agony when I lay down with all the other hostile men,
the gin and the guilt, the feathers that rustled in the darkness,
my drowning? Then I would say: oh, my Harry, my lost sweet Harry,
I have not fornicated in the darkness because I wanted to but
because I was punishing myself for punishing you: yet something
far past dreaming or memory, and darker than either, impels me,
and you do not know, for once I awoke, half-sleeping, and pulled
away. 'No, Bunny,' I said (377).

Since Bunny is Peyton's affectionate nickname for her father, the dark
"something far past dreaming or memory" might be called an Electra
complex, which when combined with her puritanical view of sex in general
explains why she tries to expiate her sexual guilts by letting almost
any man use her body. Robert H. Fossum discusses Peyton's Freudian
problems at length. Insofar as her father is concerned, he says that
Peyton feels "a double-edged guilt: guilt for desiring her father and
for having denied him. To assuage the latter, she lies down in dark­
ness with other 'fathers.' But in so doing, of course, she adds to
that dirt underneath her bed which symbolizes the former."^{20}

Peyton also feels that "something . . . a guilt past memory or
dreaming, much darker," impels her to leap from the upper floor of the
Harlem garment shop. As she is about to jump, her thoughts fly back
and forth among sexual guilt, death, God, and her father: "oh my Lord,
I am dying . . . oh my father, oh my darling. . . . Peyton you must be

^{20} Fossum, pp. 16-17.
proper nice girls don't. . . . I turn in the room, see them come across the tiles, dimly prancing, fluffing up their wings, I think; my poor flightless birds, have you suffered without soaring on the earth? Come then and fly. . . . I am dying, Bunny, dying. But you must be proper" (386). Peyton commits suicide because she is unable to remain an innocent child constantly protected by her father's love. She longs for an existence "where a whimpering Jesus gently leads Winnie-the-Pooh down a land of aching plum blossoms," (367) but she finds instead a nightmare world of hate, guilt, and pain.

Some critics believe that Peyton is redeemed in the end because of her courage to face death. Ihab Hassan, for example, says that "in a strange way, a way undefinable by any dogma or creed but perhaps simply by the compassion art bestows, her ashes do give forth light. . . . Stunned and horrified, the reader's mind is purified without recourse to a genuinely tragic catharsis."21 Jonathan Baumbach sees Peyton's suicide as a ritual of purification, where after stripping off her clothes ("the vestments of her corrupt life"), she returns "to nature in the state of innocence in which she came. Ironically, it is through 'falling' that Peyton achieves her redemption. Styron's point is that only through hell -- the ultimate Fall -- can one finally come to heaven."22 Cooper R. Mackin thinks that Peyton is redeemed because of her allusion to Sir Thomas Browne's lines from Urn Burial. Because Mackin sees these lines as "preeminently optimistic," he believes that

21 Hassan, p. 133.
her death is only "a moment of darkness which paradoxically leads into an eternity of light." 23

However, after considering Peyton's entire monologue and evaluating it in light of Styron's view that God and the Supernatural probably do not exist, it seems obvious, as Robert H. Fossum points out, that Peyton's final act is primarily "a leap of despair rather than of faith." 24 She does not really believe in a life after death, but only hopes that a redeemer exists in some "far fantastic dawn." Existence is so painful that she is willing to take a "fatal chance" that a new father awaits her in death (382). Also, as Frederick J. Hoffman points out, within the context of the novel, the epigram from Urn Burial is anything but optimistic. It "offers us no hope of immortality and bids us prepare for our own death." As Hoffman goes on to say, the structure of Lie Down in Darkness reenforces our sense that Peyton's death is but a pitiful attempt to find something other than pain and disappointment. Since she is dead as the novel opens, "we are forever beholding the fact of death" and asking ourselves, "Why did she die?" 25 In the end we realize that "we are all doomed; that our lives are but a preparing for death; and most importantly, that we somehow (without overtly wishing it, but nevertheless, as if compulsively) help our own way toward self-destruction." 26


24 Fossum, p. 18.

25 Hoffman, p. 150.

26 Ibid., p. 153.
Had Milton acted differently that Sunday Dolly and her
husband came to the house, at Peyton's birthday dance, at Christmas
1941, at Charlottesville the following year, in fact at all times, would
Peyton still have been haunted by the same sexual guilt? Would she and
her mother still have hated each other because they both wanted and
needed Milton, though in different ways? As Gunnar Urang says, "The
burden of guilt rests on Milton more than on the others, for contriving
the net of failure in which they are all enmeshed." But while this
is probably true, the Loftis tragedy cannot be explained simply by
blaming Milton for a lack of responsible action. As the minister Carey
Carr says, "Who . . . lest it be God Himself, could know where the
circle, composed as it was of such tragic suspicions and misunderstand­
ings, began and where it ended?" (239). It seems to me that both
character and fate combine to destroy the Loftises.

However, at Peyton's wedding, Loftis himself comes to believe
that the destruction of the family is ultimately the result of a kind
of sexual fate. As he watches Peyton, Helen, and Harry from the other
side of the room, he suddenly understands that his wife and his daughter
have always "hated and despised each other." All of his recent sacri­
fices, his struggles to quit drinking, to be faithful and loving to
Helen, and to be a stronger man were destined to fail. "Not anything
he had done or had failed to do had made them hate each other. Not even
Dolly. None of his actions, whether right or wrong, had caused this
tragedy, so much as the pure fact of himself, his very existence,
interposed weaponless and defenseless in a no-man's-land between two

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27 Urang, p. 188.
desperate, warring female machines" (284). What Milton fails to see is that he has placed himself in such a position by basing his existence on the selfish and unrealistic love of two things which were destined to fail him: his wife (or more accurately, Helen's wealth and its attendant security) and, more importantly, his daughter. Nevertheless, though he must accept some of the responsibility for Helen's madness and Peyton's suicide, there do seem to be dark, powerful forces at work in *Lie Down in Darkness* which perhaps overshadow his efforts to control his own destiny.

Milton's small nobility lies in the fact that in the end he will not passively accept his doom. Even after Peyton is dead, for example, he attempts to convince his wife that their only hope for salvation lies in loving and helping each other. As they leave the chapel which holds Peyton's body, Milton tries to reach his insane wife: "'Why have I wanted you?' he shouted. 'Because you're the only thing left! That's why! My God, don't you see? We're both sick, we need to make each other --'" But Helen placidly asks her husband not to "make a scene." Incensed, Milton storms at her, "his hair flying," and grabs her by the arm. "'Scene! Scene!' Loftis shouted. 'Why God damn you, don't you see what you're doing! With nothing left! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!'" (388). Having lost the two things which seemed to promise a meaningful existence, Loftis passes judgment on his life and the world around him. His love, just as Peyton's wedding, should have affirmed the moral order of the universe; instead, they both revealed only the absurd, chaotic nature of existence. His life, like the wedding, is "a nightmare in vivid technicolor, with no director and clumsy actors, and wired -- rather than for words and music -- for one vast and febrile noise" (306).
If all the Loftises in *Lie Down in Darkness* are doomed because they lack a meaningful faith, it would seem at first glance that the Negro can achieve redemption because he believes without reservation in Christianity. A closer look at the situation, however, proves otherwise. Much early criticism of Styron's first novel parallels the Negro in it with the Negro in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Even such an outstanding critic as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. at first felt that in the last chapter of his book Styron contrasts the aimlessness of the Loftises "with the happy faith of their Negro servant, who is untroubled by acedia. The servant believes, and on the foundation of that belief is able to conduct a satisfying life."

Jonathan Baumbach in *The Landscape of Nightmare* echoes Rubin's early view of the last chapter because he sees the Negro as a child who finds salvation through simple faith. "The source of the Negro's strength," says Baumbach, "is his unquestioning faith in God as opposed to the gentry's religion, which has formalized God out of existence. . . . Coming after the burial of Peyton, the Daddy Faith baptismal ceremony achieves a special resonance as a symbol of the redemption of Peyton's life and of the possible redemption of our own."

As more recent criticism has pointed out, to believe that the circus-like religion of Daddy Faith and his follower is a symbol of our possible redemption is to miss the irony and the complexity of Styron's intentions. For one thing, Daddy Faith is a con-man, a black charlatan who drives down from Baltimore once a year, puts on his flashy

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29 Baumbach, p. 133.
show, and uses the money from the collection plate to buy Cadillacs and fine clothes. Styron's description of Daddy Faith's gospel raft should be sufficient evidence to show this irony:

It lay anchored offshore in the shallow water, bobbing gently in the waves. On it had been erected a sort of stage, surrounded on four sides by a golden damask curtain; embroidered designs -- dragons and crosses and crowns, Masonic emblems, shields, bizarre and unheard-of animals, an amalgam of myth and pagan ritual and Christian symbology -- all these glowed against the curtain in green and red phosphorescent fabrics, literally hurting the eyes. At the corners of the curtain were tall golden rods and surmounting each was a transparent globe, through which an electric bulb shone, giving outline to painted red letters, which said simply: LOVE (392).

In a classic understatement, Rubin says that "Daddy Faith is not Jesus Christ; he is in no sense divine; indeed, his establishment is a gaudy parody of all known religions. He is effective in his charlatry because of the gullibility of his audience."30

The ending of the novel seems to underscore the ironic but tragic hopelessness of this pagan "Christianity," for as the Negroes point to the sky and shout, "'Yes, Jesus! I seen Him! Yeah! Yeah!'" the northbound train drowns out their shouts. The "gigantic sound . . . seemed to soar into the dusk beyond and above forever, with a noise, perhaps, like the clatter of the opening of everlasting gates and doors" (400). One's first thoughts about this last sentence are that God has heard the prayers of the Negroes and the gates of Heaven are opening for them. The central image here, though, is the train, and it is headed North, certainly not the Promised Land in Lie Down in Darkness. Also, it is going into "the oncoming night," surely another apocalyptic image of darkness which calls to mind the many allusions in the novel

30 Rubin, The Faraway Country, pp. 204-05.
to the atomic bomb. Consequently, while the Loftises attempt to escape reality through their dreams of childhood love and innocence, the blacks attempt to escape through pagan Christianity. Neither way, Styron seems to say, offers salvation from apocalyptic necessity.

Is there no possibility of redemption then in Lie Down in Darkness? In a world which seems to be absurd, chaotic, and on the verge of being destroyed, is there anything which will sustain a man and give his life meaning and value? It appears to me that Styron does not completely rule out this hope because in the person of Harry Miller, we have a man who has achieved faith in himself and in something which is not subject to fate or mortality.

It is no coincidence that just before she commits suicide, Peyton finds her estranged husband at the apartment of Mr. FREEMAN [Styron's capitals]. Here, Harry has been painting a picture which symbolizes the role of the artist in a world where religion is useless and true faith in life is all but dead:

He was painting an old man. In greys, deep blues an ancient monk or a rabbi lined and weathered, lifting proud, tragic eyes toward heaven; behind him were the ruins of a city, shattered, devastated, crumbled piles of concrete and stone that glowed from some half-hidden rusty light, like the earth's last waning dusk. It was a landscape dead and forlorn yet retentive of some flowing, vagrant majesty, and against it the old man's eyes looked proudly upward, towards God perhaps, or perhaps just the dying sun (374).

When Peyton pleads with Harry to take her back once again, he tells her:

'Remember that line you used to quote from the Bible, How long, Lord? or something --' 'Remember how short my time is,' I [Peyton] said. 'Yes,' he said. 'Well, that's the way I feel. With your help I used to think I could go a long way, but you didn't help me. Now I'm on it alone. I don't know what good it'll do anyone but me, but I want to paint and paint and paint because I think that some agony is upon us... I want to crush in my hands all that agony and make beauty come out, because that's all that's left, and I don't have much time --' (377).
Harry has achieved redemption because he has found freedom and meaning in his own existence. Just as the old man in his painting, Harry can look heavenward even if there is no heaven and have hope in the face of the apocalypse.

In terms of the structure of the novel, however, Harry's redemption is not effectively handled because Styron devotes only a few pages to his life as an artist. Also, though we feel that Harry must have suffered greatly before he found the way back to himself and to freedom, Styron does not dramatize this struggle. In Lie Down in Darkness the forces which make Helen and Milton Loftis in their despair scream "'Nothing!'" and which push Peyton from the upper floor of the Harlem garment shop seem to have been paramount in Styron's mind. It was all he could do to allow even the smallest ray of sunlight to fall on his landscape of darkness.
CHAPTER II

REDEMPTIVE POSSIBILITIES IN A CLOSED SYSTEM

-- "All of his life he had yearned for something that was as fleeting and as incommunicable, in its beauty, as that one bar of music he remembered." --
Lieutenant Culver

William Styron's The Long March (1952) tells the story of two middle-aged men, Culver and Mannix, who are called back into the Marine Corps just before the Korean War. Specifically, the novella centers around the response of Culver and Mannix to the accidental death of eight young soldiers by a short mortar round and to a subsequent forced march of thirty-six miles ordered by their commanding officer, Colonel Rocky Templeton. What begins simply as another story of the inhumanity of the military, however, becomes a fable of the nature of existence in the modern world. On a philosophical or religious level, The Long March dramatizes the quest of a human being (Mannix) for redemptive freedom in the face of inordinate, doctrinaire authority.

Whether Mannix succeeds in this redemptive quest is debatable. His gross insubordination to Colonel Templeton during the hike results in a promise of his being courtmartialed and assigned to Korea. At the end of The Long March, the Colonel and the Corps still seem very much in control, while Mannix is seen as an exhausted, suffering man.

Richard Pearce indicates that in the opening scene of the novel "Styron pictures the irrational violence exploding from beneath the placid surface of life, expressing explicitly and with sharper clarity a view that he had begun to conceive in his story of Peyton Loftis, and which would dominate the world of Cass Kinsolving." Eight young marines have been killed by two mortar shells that misfired as the men stood in the chow line waiting patiently for their lunch. A landscape once dotted only with loblolly pine and poison ivy suddenly is strewn with "shreds of bone, gut, and dangling tissue" and becomes, as Robert Fossum says, "a bloody wasteland which God seems to have abandoned."

At the sight of the "slick nude litter of intestine and shattered blue bones," Lieutenant Culver vomits "helplessly onto his shoes," not because "he had a weak stomach or . . . was unacquainted with carnage" (6), but because the sight of such death is totally unexpected in times of peace. Culver could have accepted the brutal loss of life in war; war was irrational anyway. But how does one explain such an occurrence in peacetime training here in the States? Here, seemingly, was death for no logical reason. In the subsequent action of The Long March, this scene of death flashes frequently through Culver's mind, constantly reminding him that his world is one of chaos and irrationality and that death is a fearful and ever-present possibility.

On the heels of this illogical accident comes an irrational order by the commanding officer, Colonel Templeton, for a forced march

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3 Fossum, p. 21.
of thirty-six miles. Templeton says that the march is necessary to keep his soldiers from "doping off." His men, continues the Colonel, are "going to act like Marines. They're going to be fit. If they meet an Aggressor enemy next week they might have to march a long, long way" (28-29). To Lieutenant Culver and Captain Mannix -- middle aged reservists grown physically soft but mentally independent -- this order seems especially cruel and absurd. Mannix in particular is outraged by the forthcoming hike: "'So H&S Company is fouled up. So maybe it is. He can't take green troops like these and do that. After a couple of seven-or-ten-or-fifteen-mile conditioning hikes, maybe so. If they were young, and rested. Barracks-fresh. But this silly son of a bitch is going to have all these tired, flabby old men flapping around on the ground like a bunch of fish after the first two miles. Christ on a frigging crutch!'" (33).

Culver and Mannix are shaken psychologically not only by thoughts of imminent physical suffering but by thoughts that they are prisoners in an absurd, inhuman world. Culver thinks that "after six years of an ordered and sympathetic life -- made the more placid by the fact that he had assumed he had put war forever behind him -- it was a shock almost mystically horrifying, in its unreality, to find himself in this new world of frigid nights and blazing noons, of disorder and movement and pursuit" (36). In this nightmare world, Culver and Mannix are forced to listen to abstract lectures on "'the new amphibious doctrine'" (46), which contain phrases such as, "'Our group destiny . . . amphibiously integrated, from any force thrown against us by Aggressor enemy'" (48). They are forced to pursue relentlessly a make-believe Aggressor enemy for days on end in the hot Carolina summer.
forced to spend their off-duty hours in the tinsel-bright, sham-luxury of the Officer's Club (ironically named Heaven's Gate) because there is no other place to go for a hundred miles. And they are forced to march thirty-six miles because Colonel Templeton thinks it will be good for the "group esprit" (27).

Styron further emphasizes the nature of Culver and Mannix's existence through such images as the "bleak cell-like rooms" which are shown to Culver and his wife as they look for housing in a town close to the Post. While on maneuvers in the field, Culver feels that his tent is "a coffin" (38). At night, the radio in Culver's tent will not pick up normal news or music programs or even the human sounds of another soldier relaying some military information. All he hears on the radio are "a crazy, tortured multitude of wails . . . like the cries of souls in the anguish of hell" (41). These images emphasize the death-in-life aspects of the Marine Corps.

Perhaps the most important image of the dilemma Culver and Mannix find themselves in is presented in the form of a story that Mannix tells his friend. This extended "metaphor of the human situation" concerns the only time in the last war that Mannix was afraid. He and some of his friends were drunk in a tenth-floor hotel room in San Francisco. When Mannix tried to sober up by taking a shower, his buddies grabbed him, pushed him out the window, and held him by the heels upside down. "'I just remember the cold wind blowing on my body,'" Mannix tells Culver, "'and that dark, man, infinite darkness all around me. . . . I really saw Death then'" (57-58). His friends pulled him

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4Pearce, p. 20.
back in only after Mannix began to scream at the top of his lungs. "But every time I remember that moment," says Mannix to Culver, "a great big cold shudder runs up and down my spine" (58). As Culver thinks of this story, thoughts of war and memories of home also crowd into his mind. He suddenly feels "like Mannix, upturned drunkenly above the abyss, blood rushing to his head, in terror clutching at the substanceless night . . ." (60). Mannix's frightening experience in San Francisco seems to be a metaphor not only of the nature of life in the Corps but of life in general. It is all too frequently a chilling and terrifying encounter with irrationality and death.

Trapped in a meaningless, absurd system, Culver feels as if he has been banished forever from the Edenic peace of civilian life. The "vanished simplicity and charm" of those days can now be captured in "one recurrent vision" (9). Culver sees himself, his wife, the baby in the carriage, and their beagle on a Sunday afternoon stroll in the park. Since in this vision it is always winter, the city possesses "in the sooty white tatters of a recent snow" a quiet, "Old World calm" (9). Returning from these walks, cold but happy, Culver remembers the warmth of home, the peanut butter and liverwurst sandwiches, "the familiar delight of the baby's goodnight embrace" (10), and the music before going to sleep. In fact, the music was perhaps the most pleasant part of those winter evenings. "Some passage from some forgotten Haydn" would carry Culver's thoughts "to an earlier, untroubled day at the end of childhood. There, like tumbling flowers against the sunny grass, their motions as nimble as the music itself, two lovely little girls played tennis, called to him voicelessly, as in a dream, and waved their arms" (10). As Welles T. Brandriff points out, every incident in
Culver's reveries contrasts with his present situation -- the warmth of family vs. the cold, impersonal Corps; winter in the city vs. summer in the boondocks; the formal compositions of Haydn vs. the disordered, screeching of the military radio; and a stroll in the park vs. a forced hike of thirty-six miles.

Culver's dreams are very far removed from the horrible reality of the present. Now, family and civilian life seem to exist "in the infinite past or, dreamlike again, never at all." The "freedom, growth, and serenity" (7) of that Edenic time have given way to anxiety, enslavement, and death. Culver feels "unreal and disoriented" (34), "profoundly alone" (35), and filled "with an anxiety which would not have been possible six years before" (37). In his own mind, Culver is a man in hell, a man fallen from grace into damnation.

Mannix, too, believes that he has been exiled from all that is meaningful or good in the world. Like Culver, Mannix is aware that they are now slaves within a closed, absurd system and that after their six years of relative freedom, Colonel Templeton and the Corps hold "an absolute and unquestioned authority" over them (19). Also, Mannix, even more than Culver, has an acute "perception about their renewed bondage, and a keen nose for the winds that threatened to blow out of the oppressive weather of their surroundings and sweep them all into violence" (45). But unlike Culver, Mannix's discontent with the hell he finds himself in is "rocklike and rebellious," openly revolutionary (45).

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Culver first meets Mannix the revolutionary at the compulsory lectures on "'the new amphibious doctrine.'" As soon as the Colonel who is giving this military lecture turns out the lights in the room, Mannix falls asleep and begins to snore. Culver wakes him up when the lights are turned on again, but Mannix immediately begins to flirt with danger by making snide remarks during the Colonel's talk. Finally, when the Colonel asks Mannix "to answer some generalized, hypothetical question" (6), Mannix stands up and flatly tells the superior officer that he doesn't know the answer. "'And I'd like to respectfully add, sir, if I might,'" continues Mannix, "'that there's hardly anyone in this room who knows that answer, either. They've forgotten everything they ever learned seven years ago. . . . They're too old. They should be home with their family''" (51). Surprisingly, Mannix is not court-martialed for his insubordination, a fact that makes him only "more tense, more embittered, more in need to scourge something -- his own boiling spirit, authority, anything" (52).

The forced march provides him with a chance to rebel against his enslavement by the Corps. He realizes that an existential moment has come; if he is to redeem himself, he must confront his existence, act forcefully, and reclaim his identity as a man. To accept passively Colonel Templeton's order would be tantamount to accepting the existence the Corps has made for him -- that of a non-human, robot-like, fighting machine. To Mannix, the forced march becomes a quest to reclaim his autonomy as an individual.

The representative of the Marine Corps and the man who tries to keep Mannix in the role of the slave is Colonel Rocky Templeton. As Peter Hays says, Templeton is "the embodiment of all the values of his
community"; he is Styron's Grand Inquisitor who "represents a system of order amidst chaos."⁶ Cooper Mackin echoes Hays by saying that the Colonel is "an almost impersonal element of inexorable power, the power that belongs to the established order."⁷ In fact, Templeton is much like an impersonal god, whose universe is the Marine Corps and whose laws demand an absolute and unquestioning obedience.

Templeton the cold, god-like authoritarian and Mannix the passionate rebel -- two men who seem to be polar opposites -- are brought together under the conditions of a forced march of thirty-six miles. A confrontation between the two men is inevitable. The conflict begins as soon as Templeton gives the order for the march. When Mannix indirectly questions the wisdom of such an order, the Colonel, with the tone of a stern father, is quick to point out that the march is for the esprit and unity of the entire company. That Mannix and some of his men think of themselves as individual reservists, not Marines, is something that must be changed. "'First and foremost,'" says the Colonel to Mannix, "'they're marines'" (28). For an instant after the Colonel tells Mannix this, both men appear to Culver as "classical Greek masks, made of chrome or tin, reflecting an almost theatrical disharmony" (29). Mannix, of course, is the mask of tragedy, for on his friend's face Culver sees a "look of both fury and suffering, like the tragic Greek mask, or a shackled slave" (30-31).

On the march itself Mannix decides to rebel against the system


by going beyond what the system expects. He and his entire company will finish the march, "not," as Culver explains, "because the hike was good or even sensible . . . but out of hope of triumph, like a chain-gang convict who endures a flogging without the slightest whimper, only to spite the flogger" (72). Mannix's rebellion will take the form "of proud and willful submission, rebellion in reverse" (73). In accepting what he considers to be the Colonel's challenge to his manhood, Mannix intends to prove that he is an individual who can take even such an absurd ordeal as a forced march of thirty-six miles and turn it into a personal victory.

In order to accomplish this "rebellion in reverse" and redeem himself, Mannix needs to sustain his innate hatred of the Colonel and the Corps for thirty-six miles. Consequently, when he discovers a nail penetrating the inside lining of his boot, he makes only a half-hearted effort to remove it because he knows that without some kind of sharp, local pain, weariness eventually would dull his righteous anger. By the time the Company has gone a few miles, Mannix is limping noticeably, and by the second rest stop his heel is bruised and bleeding. Still, he does not remove the nail or see a Corpsman. This nagging injury feeds his rage and reminds him constantly that he is still a slave.

If his revolt is to succeed, it is necessary that Mannix force his own men to accept the same challenge and march the entire thirty-six miles. But to do this, the heretofore humane Mannix, ironically, must drive his troops like an overseer does his slaves. When some of the men start to fall behind, for example, he angrily yells at them in a tone which is "terse and vicious; it could have been the sound of a
satrap of a Pharaoh, a galley master. It has the forbidding quality of a strand of barbed wire or a lash made of thorns" (77). As August Nigro says of Mannix, "His rebellion in reverse . . . ricochets on his men and he becomes to them what Templeton is to himself; he becomes the force against which he rebels; the enslaver."8

Mannix continues to bully his troops almost every step of the way. Toward the end of the march, he finds one of his men lying in the weeds and holding up "one bare foot, where there was a blister big as a silver dollar . . . dead livid white, the color of a toadstool" (105). When he orders him to get up and continue, the soldier replies that he cannot. Mannix angrily rasps, "'You can, goddamnit... You're a Marine'" (105-106). The hillbilly soldier answers, "'Ah may be a marine and all that but Ah ain't no goddamn fool . . . .'" (106). Mannix appears on the verge of seizing the lame soldier and dragging him to his feet, but Culver grabs his friend and brings him back to his senses. Nevertheless, for most of the march, Mannix is a man in a rage, who temporarily loses his humanity because of the way he chooses to rebel.

Though much of his rebellious fury falls on his own Company, part of it does reach the Colonel. At the second rest stop, the Colonel, who sees Culver and Mannix inspecting the latter's heel, asks Mannix if he is all right. When Mannix shows Templeton his hurt foot, the Colonel can express concern for the other's injury only in a mechanical, cold way. As Templeton squats in the sand "almost indecently now, stroking

Mannix's foot," Culver thinks that the Colonel "had too long been conditioned by the system to perform with grace a human act" (89). Mannix, of course, is "lacerated" (89) by the touch of the Colonel's hand. Therefore, when Templeton suggests that he ride back to the Post in one of the trucks, Mannix jerks his foot away from the other's hand and fiercely shouts, "'No, Sir'!" The Colonel tells him that he will regret not doing so. After getting up and "limping off toward his company," Mannix angrily yells back to his adversary, "'Who cares what you think'" (90). By recklessly asserting his individuality against the Colonel's callous inhumanity, Mannix seeks an open battle with this representative of the system which keeps him enslaved. For the time being, however, the Colonel refuses to recognize Mannix as anything other than a Marine who has had a brief lapse of propriety.

Finally, Mannix forces the Colonel to see him as at least a Marine to be reckoned with. With only six miles of the march to go, Mannix and his "seedy, bedraggled column of people" meet the Colonel, who has been waiting for them up the road. After watching Mannix's grotesque limp, Templeton orders him to return to the Post in a truck. "'No, Sir,'" Mannix replies, "'I'm going to make this march'" (110). Again the Colonel orders him to get into a truck. This time Mannix rasps, "'Listen, Colonel ... you ordered this goddamn hike and I'm going to walk it even if I haven't got one goddamn man left. You can crap out yourself for half the march --'" (111). "'Wait a minute, Captain, now --' the Colonel blurted ominously. 'For your information --'"

"'Fuck you and your information' said Mannix in a hoarse, choked voice. He was almost sobbing. 'If you think --'" (112). The Colonel tolerates no more of Mannix's insubordination. He places his hand swiftly on his
pistol and looks at his antagonist with eyes that are "cool and passionate and forbidding" (112). Then he tells Mannix that he will be court-martialed and sent to Korea for his actions. Since in Templeton's eyes "Mannix was no longer a simple doubter but the heretic" (109), the Colonel as high priest of the Corps pronounces anathema upon Mannix's soul.

That Styron intended The Long March to have much wider implications than a conflict between two different types of men is partially indicated by the religious metaphor above. The religious implications of the march and the theological roles of its participants are also evident in several other scenes. To Culver, for instance, the Colonel looks at times "like certain young ecclesiastics, prematurely aged and perhaps even wise" (18). His normal demeanor reminds Culver of a priest in a "devout, ordered state of communion" who shows emotion only "from a priestlike, religious favor" (29-30). "By that passion," thinks Culver, "rebels are ordered into quick damnation but simple doubters sometimes find indulgence -- depending upon the priest, who may be inclined toward mercy, or who is one ever rapt in some litany of punishment and court martial. The Colonel was devout but inclined toward mercy" (30). Finally, when Templeton comes over to Mannix and Culver during the rest break to inspect Mannix's foot, Culver thinks that the Colonel does not look "so much the soldier but the priest in whom passion and faith had made an alloy, at last, of only the purest good intentions; above meanness or petty spite, he was leading a march to some humorless salvation" (87-88). It is obvious that Styron characterizes the Colonel as the religious leader or even deity of a system which worships order, efficiency, and unity and damns the free, individual man
as a dangerous heretic.

If Templeton is a cold, efficient, religious potentate, then Mannix is to be seen, in part, as a Christ figure who opposes all attempts by men to crush the individual's spirit. The first word Culver hears his friend utter is, "'Jesus'" (16), a name Mannix repeats many times before and during the hike. Also, his suffering and his refusal to submit bring to mind the figure of Christ on his forced march to Calvary. Fossum even believes that there is a deliberate parallel between the stations of the Cross and the increasing pain Mannix endures from the nail in his boot. Mannix, Fossum asserts, is "an all-too-human 'Christ on a Crutch.'"

Fossum also goes so far as to enumerate the essential aspects of religion in The Long March:

The spirit of this religion is the famous Marine esprit de corps; its dogma is the new, the grandiose 'amphibious doctrine'; its incantations are the gibberish of military passwords; and its ultimate aim is the 'group destiny' of victory over its version of Satan, the 'Aggressor Enemy.' The institution supporting this theology of war is the Corps. The rock on which its temple is built, its high priest (even perhaps its god) is Colonel Rocky Templeton. Wearing a uniform as vestments and a gun as scepter, the Colonel is as filled with religious fervor as a priest.

Through his imagery and allusions, Styron also identifies Mannix (who is Jewish) with a whole line of heroes who have rebelled against enforced bondage. August Nigro compares Mannix to Ahab, Christ, Old Adam, and even Old Ben in Faulkner's The Bear, while Peter Hays puts Mannix in "a mythological and literary heritage descended from

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10 Ibid., p. 22.
11 Nigro, p. 108.
Prometheus, Satan, Old Adam, and Jesus -- representatives all of indomitable will in spite of pain and suffering.\(^{12}\) Some of Nigro's and Hays's specific comparisons appear tenuous at best, but it is probably true, as Hays says, that Mannix "must be seen not as just an individual rebel but as a spokesman for the worth and human dignity of all people who have endured centuries of pain and persecution."\(^{13}\)

Nevertheless, only a part of Mannix's nature should be identified with the noble suffering of men such as Christ. The other part of him is much closer to "the baffled fury of some great bear cornered, bloody and torn" (97). Indeed, for most of the march, Mannix is like a bear that is being baited by the impersonal authority of the Colonel. In his animal-like rage, which is both pitiful and comic, Mannix strikes out at himself and his men. He becomes more fanatical, more destructive than Templeton; he temporarily loses his humanity and becomes not a saintly but an absurd hero.

This absurd aspect of his role is evident when Mannix is told that the Colonel has tired and is no longer marching. Frantically trying to get his men out of the trucks and back onto their feet so that they can finish the march, "He lunged forward onto the road with a wild tormented bellow. 'Hey, you people, get off that goddam truck!' He sprang into the dust with hobbled leg and furious flailing arms. By his deep swinging gait, his terrible limp, he looked no more capable of locomotion than a wheel-chair invalid, and it would have been funny

\(^{12}\) Hays, p. 74. Also see Eugene McNamara, "William Styron's Long March: Absurdity and Authority,"*Western Humanities* Review, XV (1961), 267-72.

\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, p. 73.
had it not seemed at the same time so full of threat and disaster" (97-98).

Culver also underscores the absurdity of Mannix through the "crazy cinematic tape, chaos, vagrant jigsaw images" which dance in his mind. He somehow associates Mannix's voice, the march, and the landscape with "a carnival tent" (103). And as he watches Mannix suffer through the last few miles of the march, Culver thinks that "it was impossible to imagine such a distorted face; it was the painted, suffering face of a clown, and the heaving gait was a grotesque and indecent parody of a hopeless cripple, with shoulders gyrating like a seesaw and with flapping, stricken arms" (114).

During the march, Mannix is both slave and enslaver, both saint and clown. The question is, does his "rebellion in reverse" redeem him? In the end, does Mannix gain faith in himself or in something beyond self which makes life meaningful or which justifies the agony he has both suffered and inflicted? How one answers this question depends in part on how he interprets the final scene of the novella. Having completed the march, Culver first lies restlessly in his bed, but realizing that he is too tired to sleep, he gingerly lowers himself out of his bunk and finds a chair near the window. Below him, oblivious to the existence of human suffering, the wives of the officers swim and chatter with one another in the late afternoon sun. Letting his head fall on his arm, Culver remembers the eight soldiers who were killed earlier the day before and wonders whether they are not better off than the living:

Suddenly Culver felt a deep vast hunger for something he could not explain, nor ever could remember having known quite so achingly before. He only felt that all his life he had yearned for something
that was as fleeting and as incommunicable, in its beauty, as that
one bar of music remembered, or those lovely little girls with their
every joyful, ever sprightly dance on some far fantastic lawn --
serenity, a quality of repose -- he could not call it by name, but
only knew that, somehow, it had always escaped him. As he sat there,
with the hunger growing and blossoming within him, he felt that he
had hardly ever known a time in his life when he was not marching
or sick with loneliness or afraid (116-17).

Culver's redemptive longings are unfulfilled because, as he
admits to himself during the march: "He was not independent enough,
nor possessed of enough free will, was not man enough to say, to hell
with it and crap out himself; that he was not man enough to disavow all
his determination and endurance and suffering, cash in his chips, and by
the act flaunt his contempt of the march, the Colonel, the whole bloody
Marine Corps" (102). Instead of quitting, Culver completes the march
for much the same reason Mannix does -- pride. But now he seems to
realize that within the system such pride is futile and results only in
self-flagellation. Colonel Templeton and the system just do not care,
do not recognize contemptuous, individual expressions of this kind. As
Culver says of Mannix's attempt to engage the Colonel in a personal
battle: "Couldn't he see? That the Colonel didn't care and that was
that? That with him the hike had nothing to do with courage or sacri-
fice or suffering, but was only a task to be performed . . . and that
he was as far removed from the vulgar battle, the competition, which
Mannix tried to promote as the frozen, remotest stars. He just didn't
care" (111). Louise Gossett comments that "violence which might once
have had meaning as the attempt of man to justify himself is now an
absurd expenditure of energy and nerve. . . . The private rebellion
. . . merely mutilates the rebel."14

14Gossett, p. 121.
If it is true that Culver's dreams of salvation always pale before the realities of pain, sickness, loneliness, or fear, is it necessarily true in Mannix's case? Some critics think not. Marc L. Ratner, for example, says that Mannix's rebellion is a "redemptive act" because he endures the punishment of the forced march, defiant till the end. "Through the purgatory of suffering," continues Ratner, "he discovers the evils of the 'system' in himself, cuts through his self-illusions, and exorcises his devils to become a mature person."¹⁵ Shaun O'Connell likewise believes that Mannix is redeemed because, unlike the Loftises, he is able to understand his predicament and resist. "He does not plunge naked from a high building as did Peyton, but learns from his vision of Death. He ends with scars but also with understanding."¹⁶

It seems to me that critics such as Ratner and O'Connell perhaps fail to make an important distinction between heroism and redemption. Mannix is a hero, though not in a classical sense, because, as Fossum indicates, "History . . . has consistently awarded the role of hero to the man who prefers suffering to submission."¹⁷ But a man can suffer without being redeemed. The test is whether or not the suffering gives one faith in self or in something beyond self which makes life meaningful. In Mannix's case, there seems to be no evidence to prove that he has done anything more than endure with contempt a flogging by the system.


¹⁷Fossum, p. 23.
Mannix is not able to forge for himself an authentic, free existence because he works within the system and adopts the methods and the values of that system for a completely antithetical purpose. It seems impossible to suppose that tyrannical authoritarianism, a total dedication to a group goal, and a total disregard for individual suffering could produce freedom in any shape or form. Yet, ironically, Mannix temporarily accepts these very same values of the system he wishes to defeat.

At the very end of the novella, we witness not a redeemed man, but a man who almost has been chewed to pieces by the system. As seen through Culver's eyes, Mannix slowly makes his way to the shower, "clawing at the wall for support, his face with its clenched eyes and taut, drawn-down mouth was one of tortured and gigantic suffering. The swelling at his ankle was the size of a grapefruit, an ugly blue, and this leg he dragged behind him, a dead weight no longer capable of motion" (119). Culver starts to help his friend but stops when one of the Negro maids who has been cleaning the Officer's Quarters crosses Mannix's path and says, "'Oh my, you poor man. What you been doin? Do it hurt? . . . Oh, I bet it does. Deed it does.'" This unexpected display of human sympathy in a world which seemed devoid of all but callous, impersonal strife seems to put Mannix's rebellion in reverse in perspective for him. Undoubtedly realizing the dichotomous, saint-clown, rebel-enslaver aspect of his own nature, Mannix gives the woman "a sour, apologetic smile" and replies to her "with the tone of a man who, having endured and lasted, was too weary to tell her anything but what was true. 'Deed it does'" (120).

Styron appears to be implying in The Long March that modern
man is hopelessly trapped in a world which denies him the right to an individual identity. As Culver thinks to himself at one point in the march, the only way to beat the system is to be completely indifferent to it, "to disavow all . . . determination and endurance and suffering" (102). But since most men cannot be so stoical, they must be either robot-like parts of the system (men such as Sergeant O'Leary and Major Lawrence); unwilling participants who nevertheless cooperate with the system because they are afraid to act (men such as Culver); or rebels who are coldly and impersonally crucified by it (men such as Mannix).

Perhaps one of Culver's thoughts best expresses Styron's pessimistic view of existence at the time he wrote *The Long March*. Culver has just restrained Mannix from assaulting the hillbilly soldier who refused to march another step. Suddenly realizing that in his anger and his frustration he has turned into a kind of demonic Templeton, Mannix mumbles to Culver something "incoherent and touched with grief" (106) and limps away. As Culver watches his crippled friend, he catches sight of the Colonel, who has been eyeing Mannix all the while. "Culver's spirit sank like a rock," and he thinks, "You just couldn't win. Goddam" (107).
CHAPTER III

CASS KINSOLVING'S "HANDMADE HELL"

--- "How will I ever forgive myself, for all the things I've done?" -- Cass Kinsolving

Set This House on Fire (1960) is primarily the story of Cass Kinsolving's quest for redemption. "Trapped by terror, trapped by booze, trapped by self," (54) Kinsolving is an artist who cannot paint, a father who cannot love, and an American (specifically, a Southerner) who cannot find a spiritual home. Self-damned and utterly miserable, Cass searches in Europe for a faith he cannot find in America, a faith which will make his life meaningful. For most of the novel, however, he can discover nothing that will deliver him from what Kierkegaard calls the "sickness unto death."¹ Like Milton Loftis, he is able to face life only through the soul-numbing consumption of alcohol, though Cass's drinking bouts make Milton's look tame by comparison.

Styron's concern in Set This House on Fire with the terrors experienced by a faithless man who struggles for redemption is partially revealed by the passage from Donne's sermon "To the Earle of Carlile, and his Company, at Sion" which prefaces the novel. Donne says that a man secluded from God is "a miserable, and a banished, and a damned

creature" who can neither die nor live but "that God, who when he could not get into me, by standing, and knocking, by his ordinary means of entering, by his Word, his mercies, hath applied his judgments, and shaked the house, this body, with agues and palsy, and set this house on fire, with fevers and calentures, and frightened the master of the house, my soule, with horrors, and heavy apprehensions, and so made an entrance into me." "As its motto from Donne indicates," says Robert Fossum, "Set This House on Fire is an apocalyptic picture of the world as purgatory, of man as the tormented inhabitant of a fiery house in which he struggles to attain redemption and a glimpse of God."²

Most of the significant action in the novel takes place during a twenty-four hour period in Sambuco, Italy, but these events are recalled by Cass and his friend Peter Leverett two years afterward as they fish together in South Carolina. Both men still do not understand fully the significance of the tragedy in Sambuco, especially Leverett, who thinks that that fateful day somehow holds the answer to questions of who he is and where he is going. "Estranged from myself and from my time," Peter thinks, "dwelling neither in the destroyed past nor in the fantastic and incomprehensible present, I knew that I must find the answer to at least several things before taking hold of myself and getting on with the job"³[as a lawyer in New York City](18-19). He therefore goes to see Cass in South Carolina, "in the hope," says Fossum, "that by penetrating the past he can come to terms with the present."³ Together, they try to assess their moral responsibility

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³ Ibid., p. 27
for this violence and thereby give order and meaning to a past (and consequently to the present) which seems chaotic and fragmented.

As so many of Faulkner's characters discover, Kinsolving and Leverett learn that the key to a man's present predicament lies farther back in time than he at first thought possible. Therefore, they are forced to recall some of their memories of childhood and adolescence in order to place the events in Sambuco, and their lives in general, into some sort of meaningful perspective.

When we examine their boyhood worlds, we find a South of much beauty and substance, certainly no Garden of Eden, but a far cry from the modern South of the post-Korean War. Once a pleasant, quiet, shipbuilding community, Leverett's home town of Port Warwick, Virginia, is now a vast "streamlined and clownish looking" metropolis (10). "As a boy," says Peter,

I had known its gentle seaside charm, and had smelled the ocean wind, and had lolled underneath quaint magnolias and had watched streaked and dingy freighters putting out to sea, and, in short, had shaken loose for myself the town's own peculiar romance. Now the magnolias had been hacked down to make room for a highway along the shore; there were noisy shopping plazas everywhere, blue with exhaust and rimmed with supermarkets; television roosted upon acre after acre of split-level rooftops and, almost worst of all, the ferryboats to Norfolk, those low-slung smoke-belching tubs which had always possessed their own incomparable dumpy glamour, were gone, replaced by a Yankee-built vehicular tunnel which poked its foul white snout two miles beneath the mud of Hampton Roads. Hectic and hustling, throbbing with prosperity, filled with nomads and the rootless and the uprooted . . . the town seemed as some place on the order of Bridgeport or Yonkers (10).

Peter also remembers the beautiful, grassy field that once had been down by the James River, where he and his friends would play baseball, buy peanuts and deviled crabs from old Negro men, and later in the evening, watch young lovers walk "beneath the trees to the sound of sycamore balls plopping earthward in the stillness and the whistle
of a freighter seaward-borne in the dark" (11). Now, instead of a river-side playground, Leverett finds "a snarling Greyhound bus station and a curious squat lozenge-shaped building, greenly tiled, whose occupants numbered among them a chiropodist, a lay analyst and -- of all things to tell about the fading South -- an office full of public-relations counselors, or consultants" (11).

Peter finds himself in a South which has become just as ugly and just as faceless as any city in the North. And not only have the magnificent old magnolias and elms been felled to make way for such things as "laundromats and Servur-Selfs and Howard Johnsons" (11), the few men who cared about things of the spirit or the soul have been replaced by a wave of big-hog materialists who have never read a book in their lives and who, as Leverett's father says, "go whoring off after false gods, and the fourth or fifth best is best, and newness and slickness and thrills are all" (12). The South and America are fallen societies because men are no longer compassionate human beings, but "a bunch of smug contented hogs rooting at the trough. Ciphers without mind or soul or heart" (13).

The "epitome of this warped and infantile culture" is Mason Flagg. Though he calls himself "unswervingly modern" (159), he is really more a prototype of the forthcoming American. As Cass says, he is "future's darling," a man "unacquainted either with sorrow or joy" (184). His knowledge is divorced from wisdom, his sex from love, and life in general from all morality. In fact, he seems to be a new life form:

It was as if he was hardly a man at all, but a creature from a different race who had taken on the disguise of a man ... a creature so strange, so new -- so remote from the depths of your own experience,
your own life, your own past -- that there were times when you
looked at him with your mouth wide-open, in awe, wondering that
you could communicate with each other at all. For him there was
no history, or, if there was, it began on the day he was born.
Before that there was nothing, and out of nothing sprang this
creature, committed to nothingness because of the nothingness that
informed all time before and after the hour of his birth (446).

Leverett first meets Flagg at St. Andrews, an Episcopal prep
school set bucolically in the Virginia Tidelands. "Into this dutiful
Christian atmosphere," says Peter, "Mason burst like some debauched
cheer in the midst of worship" (73). With his money, his friends in
important places, and his incredible erotic stories, Flagg was able to
fascinate Peter much as Gatsby does Nick Carraway. But looking back
on his friendship with Mason, Leverett thinks that it was a sign of his
corruptibility that he was eventually the only friend Mason had.

To Peter, Mason comes to represent much that makes life worth-
while -- sex, money, and art. "But," as Gunnar Urang points out, "he
also represents a perversion, a parody, of each of these things."4
Living in New York after being expelled from St. Andrews, Flagg sur-
rrounded himself with all the appointments of a successful, Bohemian
artist -- a studio in the Village complete with skylight, "elegant
Chinese bric-a-brac, a Calder mobile and three Modiglianis" (135); a
beautiful wife and a mistress; plus a following of art critics, lovely
girls, and various and sundry hangers-on. Despite all of these appear-
ances that he is a successful, dedicated artist, in reality Flagg is a
grand fake who has produced absolutely nothing. All he does is talk at
great lengths to Peter and others about the death of art and the
emergence of sex as the "last frontier" of individual expression (151).

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4Urang, p. 196.
Mason's sex, however, proves as sterile as his artistic endeavours. Instead of actually engaging in mind-expanding, exotic, sexual practices, he collects pornography. His personal sexual experiences seem to be limited to having a mistress and participating with her in dreary, perfunctory, swap parties.

Finding himself in a land of mindless Rotarians on the one hand and pretentious, neurotic hipsters on the other, Peter is captivated by Mason's flamboyant style. "Here," Peter says of Flagg, "was a truly distinctive young American -- able in time of hideous surfeit, and Togetherness' lurid mist, to revolt from conventional values, to plunge into a chic vortex of sensation, dope, and fabricated sin, though all the while retaining a strong grip on his two million dollars" (158). In Flagg, Peter seems to find the complete opposite to all that is "paltry and commonplace" (160) in himself and in those around him. What he sees only dimly, however, is that instead of being "a superb Renaissance spilling over" (160), Flagg is an American Mephistopheles who seeks to corrupt the innocent, the weak, or the unweary. Fortunately, Peter does suspect "that there was lust for a kind of ownership in these big gestures of Mason's." He also realizes "with shame" that he is more willing to be owned than he cares to admit (149).

If Peter is living in a fallen country, partially estranged and with limited knowledge of who he is, where he has been, or where he is going, and if he is almost willing to become Mason's boy, what does this have to do with Cass Kinsolving? As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. says, "In the novel ostensibly both are friends of Mason Flagg, and that is all."5

Rubin, however, goes on to point out that "dramatically, [and] psychologically, . . . they are more than that. They are one and the same person," or, more strictly, "Peter Leverett . . . becomes Cass Kinsolving."\(^6\) Therefore, we must give Peter's background to Cass. It is Peter's encounter with the fallen, modern South and the corrupt American of the future, Mason Flagg, that helps to explain why the Cass we meet in Europe is a drunk who cannot paint and why he becomes trapped in a degrading dependency to Flagg. "Now from a strictly logical point of view," Rubin explains, "that ought certainly to compromise Styron's novel." But so believable is Kinsolving as a character that "we accept him, when he turns up in Paris, for what he is on the basis of what we know about Peter Leverett."\(^7\) As to why Styron separated his characterization of Cass, Rubin surmises simply that Styron "did not fully recognize the essential connection between Peter Leverett's experience and Cass Kinsolving's."\(^8\)

While I believe that Rubin is correct in his belief that Peter's experiences help to explain Kinsolving's, I also think that Rubin is wrong to assume that Styron did not realize what he was doing here. It is important to remember that Leverett is by his own admission "something of a square" (5). He comes from a stable, middle-class, Episcopalian family, possesses "no romantic glint or cast," and is orderly in his habits (4-5). By profession he is a financial lawyer. Kinsolving, on the other hand, never had much of a home life, having

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 221.
\(^8\) Ibid., p. 222.
been raised by his uncle, a Methodist minister, after Cass's parents were run over by a train. Far from being mentally stable, Cass ends up in a psychiatric ward during the Korean War. He is also a passionate, reckless romantic and has chosen a calling far removed from that of a financial lawyer. Consequently, if Peter is saddened by the changes he sees in Port Warwick and is disturbed by the fact that most Americans are greedy materialists, we can imagine how Cass feels about these same things. After seeing through Peter's "square" eyes the unappealing nature of modern America and Americans, it is easy to understand why Cass is violently against his native land. Likewise, if a basically conservative, stable person such as Peter is almost ensnared by Mason's insidious life style, it is little wonder that an insecure alcoholic like Cass subsequently is. In short, Peter's background is not really Cass's, but it does lend credibility to Cass's bitterness and help to explain why he is an expatriate and readily susceptible to a dependency on Mason.

While Peter is saddened by the changes that he sees in the South and in the country as a whole, he can still make his home in America. Cass, on the other hand, cannot, even though this renunciation of the United States is one of the reasons that he lives in despair. As Rubin indicates, Kinsolving is "a man who requires the stability of belonging to a place that is anchored in time and that possesses order and stability." But the modern South for the most part can no longer offer such a culture. As we have seen from Peter's descriptions of Port Warwick, much of the South, like the rest of America, defines itself

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9Ibid., p. 226.
only in commercial terms, so that even the simple beauty of the land is being destroyed by the modern Southerners' worship of the all-mighty dollar.

Partly because he is a man sensitive to beauty, partly because he is a self-educated man who had to work for everything he got, and partly because he is an idealist who cannot accept a noble dream which has been profaned, Cass does not return to America after the Korean War. Once a country he could love, America to Cass is now a "soft-headed, baby-faced, predigested, cellophane-wrapped, doomed, beauty-hating land" (364). America's crimes include: "its degradation of its teachers and its men of mind and character, and its childish glorification of scoundrels and nitwits and movie trash, and its devotion to political cretins -- military scum and Presbyterians and such like whose combined wisdom would shame some country sheriff's harelip daughter -- and its eternal belief that it's God's own will that illiterates and fools shall lay down the law to the wise" (397).

Cass's portrait of the modern American hero is no less flattering to his former country than his view of its national character. He is "the man in all those car advertisements -- you know, the young guy waving there -- he looks so beautiful and educated and everything, and he's got it made, Penn State and a blonde there, and a smile as big as a billboard. And he's going places. I mean electronics. Politics. What they call communications. Advertising, Saleshood. Outer space. God only knows. And he's ignorant as an Albanian peasant" (392). Most of the Americans Cass sees in Europe ("the flicker creeps" (46), the McCabes, "Emilio Narduzzo of West Englewood, N.J." (480), and, of course, Mason Flagg) do nothing to change his image of the modern-day, New-World man.
In addition to hating most Americans and what much of America itself has become, Cass, unlike Peter, hates himself. This loathing of self is the reason Kinsolving cannot paint, cannot love, and cannot stay sober. As he says of himself in Europe, "I was a regular ambulating biological disaster, a bag full of corruption held together by one single poisonous thought -- and that was to destroy myself in the most agonizing way there was" (54). A complete nihilist, Cass simply wants "to get out of life, be shut of it" because he has faith in absolutely nothing -- America, family, art, or self. "A man cannot live without a focus," Cass tells Peter. "Without some kind of faith, if you want to call it that. I didn't have any more faith than a tomcat. Nothing! Nothing!" (54). Unlike all the Loftises in Lie Down in Darkness, however, Cass realizes that he is lost, though he cannot understand why. "I was sick as a dog inside my soul," he admits to Peter, "and for the life of me I couldn't figure out where that sickness came from" (55).

Cass's actions in Paris, Rome, and Sambuco substantiate his rhetoric. For example, living in a small apartment on "a sad dusty little side street not far from the Gare Montparnasse," he at first manages to paint a few "miserable, pallid, ineffectual, self-centered" pictures, but eventually becomes "in front of a sketch pad or a canvas . . . like a man who had suddenly had both hands chopped off at the wrist. Completely paralyzed" (250). No longer even attempting to work, he lies around his dingy, cluttered studio on a day bed, drinking "a bottle of very low-class cognac," smoking cigerattes, and reading Confidential and Front Page Detective (253). He tries to ignore the constant howls of his three children and the pleas for help from his wife Poppy. On one very noisy occasion, however, when his youngest child is sick, he
is forced to rouse himself and bellows: "'Get out of this goddam house, you pack of slimy maggots! . . . At once! All of you! . . . All of you goddam people, out of here! Jump in the river! Die! Get run over!'" (253).

After this abuse of his family, Cass feels enough shame to swear off liquor and to summon the initiative for a move to Florence and then Rome. For a few months afterwards, he stays sober "and in a dozen other ways became a good family man, striving for the sunny ideal of mens sana, etc., removing himself from the seductive world of the night and from erotic daydreams and sour semi-suicidal moods, brushing his teeth twice a day and polishing his shoes and cleansing his breath with Listerine" (296). Despite these outward and visible signs of health, he still has not extirpated his deeply rooted feelings of guilt and worthlessness, nor has he found faith in anything which will sustain his good intentions to live a sober and upright life. Consequently, the first time Cass finds himself in an unpleasant situation, he retreats to the safety of an alcoholic oblivion. This relapse occurs when Poppy invites to dinner the McCabes, a liquor-store owner and his wife from Mineola, New York. Though Cass is furious with his wife for her indiscretion, it is not long before he is entertaining McCabe with sophomoric religious jokes. To show his appreciation of Cass's wit, McCabe breaks out a bottle of Old McCabe sour mash whiskey and offers his host a drink. In no time at all, Cass is in a misty haze. After playing and losing heavily at cards with McCabe, he picks a fight with his guest and throws him out of the house. Having broken his vow not to drink and having lost more money than he cares to think about, Cass seeks to drown himself in an orgy of liquor and sex. The next morning
he awakes to find himself in a bug-infested brothel outside of Rome, with nothing left of his personal possessions except his glasses. Hungover, feeling wretchedly guilty, his body crawling with lice, Cass returns home with Poppy in a taxi.

Cass again longs to escape, to flee the scene of his crimes as swiftly as possible, after this sorry fiasco. Three days later, drunk on grappa, he wobbles toward Southern Italy on his motorscooter, winding up in Sambuco only because he runs out of gas and Sambuco is the nearest town. Once settled here with Poppy and the children, Cass spends his mornings drinking with a "fascist-humanist" (337) policeman; his afternoons drinking either by himself or, later on, in the company of Mason Flagg as they make a supply run to the nearest Army PX; and his nights drinking alone as he listens to Leadbelly or Mozart. By this time, he is unable even to hold a paint brush because his hands shake and twitch like an old man's with palsy (54). A modern Cain, Cass has run halfway around the world trying to escape a guilt that always travels with him.

Cass's nightmares, which are hardly less real than his experiences while awake, also indicate that he is a fallen, damned man trapped in his own sense of guilt. In Paris, for example, not too long after he has thrown his family out of the house, he falls asleep and dreams that he has been taken by his uncle to the North Carolina state prison. Though he cannot remember what his specific crime has been, Cass does know that it was "something unspeakably wicked -- surpassing rape or murder or kidnapping or treason, some nameless enormous crime." His sentence for this crime is also unspecified. He is to remain in prison for an "indefinite term which might be several hours or might be decades. Or Centuries" (272-73). Most of Cass's "fellow-damned" (273) in prison
are blacks, who despise him and demand that he be sent to the gas cham-
ber. But Cass keeps trying to ask them, "What have I done? Why am I
here? What is my terrible sin?" Never receiving an answer, he then
sees himself, as he says to Peter, "forever climbing endless prison
ladderways and going through clashing gates and doors, chased down by a
guilt I couldn't name and burdened with my own undiscoverable crime"
(273). Throughout this nightmare, Cass keeps hoping that his uncle
(a minister) will obtain a pardon (forgiveness of sins?) from the gover-
nor (God?), but just before he awakens from this "handmade hell" (274),
he is taken to the gas chamber by two preachers and the prison warden.

It is easy to interpret Cass's dream simply as a psychic mani-
manifestation of the guilt he feels as a Southerner for the white man's
treatment of the Negro. To a certain extent, I think this is true, for
Cass himself links his dreams involving blacks to a shameful experience
he had as a fifteen-year-old boy in North Carolina. Working as a part-
time clerk in a Western Auto store, Cass goes with his employer (a man
named Lonnie) one day to reposess a radio from a Negro named Crawfoot.
Crawfoot is not at home, but Cass and Lonnie find the radio hidden under
a loose floorboard. In order to "'teach every black son of a bitch in
this country'" a lesson, Lonnie methodically destroys everything break-
able in the house, including a beautiful, old maple Grand Rapids chiff-
onier (377). Though Cass wants his boss to stop, he is too scared to
say anything. So when Lonnie needs some help in turning over a big,
cast-iron stove, Cass does as he is asked. He lacks the courage to say
no.

After relating this story to Peter, Cass says, "I should be able
to tell you a nice redemption story, about how I maybe robbed the auto
store at night and went back to that cabin and laid a hundred dollars on the doorstep, to pay for all the wreckage. . . . But of course I didn't" (378). Cass has had to live with this guilt ever since, and, he tells Peter, Crawfoot's ruined cabin becomes for him "the symbol of the no-count bastard I'd been all my life" (398). It is the memory of this incident that makes him say to Flagg at the end of their first conversation, "'How will I ever forgive myself for all the things I've done?'" (398).

Cass's destruction of Crawfoot's property is his first taste of man's inhumanity to man and of the evil that exists in himself and the universe. Cass cannot accept this evil. Having once lost his naive conception of himself as a courageous, and completely honorable human being and the world as the benevolent handiwork of a just God, he loses faith in everything. He views the world with the eyes of a nihilist, discerning nothing that is beautiful, joyous, or hopeful in himself, America, or each new place in Europe he flees to. As Jonathan Baumbach remarks, Cass is the victim of "a raging interior guilt." He is an idealist in an "unredeemably corrupt world, for which he as fallen man feels obsessively and hopelessly guilty."10

The origin and nature of evil is of central concern to Cass. The events in Sambuco, his own feelings of guilt and worthlessness, and the nature of the universe as a whole seem to be tied closely to this thorny problem. Does evil really exist at all, or is it "just a figment of the mind?" (128). If it does exist within the soul of man, can it be "cut out and destroyed" like certain cancers without killing the

10Baumbach, p. 134.
patient, or, as in the case of a flea who carries the bubonic plague, must the carrier be eliminated before the disease can be controlled? (128-29). Cass is involved in what Camus calls the "one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide," though Cass's emphasis on evil rather than the absurd is perhaps more a Christian than an existential concern. If through struggle and suffering, a man cannot exercise the corruption in his soul and achieve a state of grace, why live? For a long time, Cass is unable to arrive at any satisfactory answers to these questions, so he continues his suicidal way of living.

When his children are about to die with scarlet fever, Cass explains evil in Biblical (decidedly Old Testament) terms. Corrupt man lives in a fallen world because he disobeyed God's commandments. God is "a mean old Jew with a dirty beard and flashing eyes and nostrils snorting smoke and hellfire who had graven upon Cass' mind The Law . . . THOU SHALT NOT" (290). Therefore, the Christian (Catholic) concept of erasing evil with acts of good is "simple-minded" (289). Evil exists because man sins against God's Law and God in turn punishes man through acts of nature and the acts of other man. God "would get you if you done wrong, and if he got you, you were doomed. That was the simple sum total of the whole situation" (290).

This picture of a sadistic God creating evil and then using it to punish sinful man is to Cass "fitting" because it gives the universe order and a sense of justice, no matter how severe that justice might be. With such a belief, man has a definite adversary whom he can at least

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shake his fist at when calamity strikes. Consequently, Cass can see his children's sickness as a wrathful God's punishment for his non-productive, sinful life. God would not let such a worthless man immortalize a part of himself through progeny. Once he conceives of God and evil in these terms, Cass can turn to his Creator "in fury" and hiss, "'Take them! Take them!'" (290).

At other times, however, Cass sees God and evil in quite different terms. Instead of being an omnipotent, vengeful Deity, God either does not even exist, or "worse, . . . He was weaker even than the evil He created and allowed to reside in the soul of man . . . God Himself was doomed, and the landscape of heaven was not gold and singing but a space of terror which stretched in darkness from horizon to horizon" (275-76).

In one of his "wild Manichean dreams" (275), Cass is riding on a bus that runs over a dog. Stopping the bus, the driver and all the passengers find that the dog is not dead. They stand by helplessly as the dog, trying to get up and walk, moans and whimpers and rolls his eyes in anguish. Finally, the bus driver gets a stick and beats the dog in the head, "saying over and over again, 'I must put him out of his misery, I must put the poor beast out of his misery!'" (357). The suffering animal will not die, though the bus driver continues to pound his head with a stick.

Suddenly, the dog's head turns into that of an old woman whom Cass has seen in Sambuco carrying back-breaking loads of fagots which she sells for almost nothing. "Lying there crushed and mangled, with her poor tormented body pressed against the dust, she let out piteous cries, shrieking, 'God! God!' over and over again. 'Release me from this misery!' And each time she called out, down would come the flailing
stick which would knock her bleeding head against the earth, only for
the head to rise again to cry out for deliverance from all this agony,
and each time again the stick would strike her, futilely, releasing her
not into death but only into endless mystery of pain" (358). In this
dream, the bus driver, of course, is God and the old woman is mankind.
To Cass, existence is nothing more than an endless confrontation with
pain in a universe where the evil that causes this pain is stronger than
God.

Cass does not commit suicide because from time to time he has
thoughts and visions which are completely opposite to his nightmares of
evil and suffering. During these sudden and infrequent moments, he feels
that redemption is not an impossible dream. For example, when his
thoughts turn to a fatherly Navy psychiatrist named Slotkin, who in-
troduces him to Greek tragedy, Cass senses that there is something
noble in mankind and something worth living for in the world. In his
Sambuco journal, he writes: "Whenever I think of him . . . I get an
extraordinary feeling in my bones, I can recall as clear as the shining
air that day when I quoted that line from Oedipus that hit me so between
the eyes, from the book he gave, now should I die I were not wholly
wretched etc., and he said something on the order -- yes we fail often
but it is our birthright no less than the Greeks to try to free people
into the condition of love" (362-63). For brief moments, Cass can
believe that Slotkin is right.

The tragedy of Oedipus (especially as it is dramatized in
Oedipus at Colonus) is very important to Cass (see 118-19; 362; 369)
because he can take solace from the parallels between himself and
Oedipus and can hope that his suffering, like Oedipus's, will event-
ually lead to wisdom and to an understanding and acceptance of his
Like Oedipus, Kinsolving, as his name implies, is required to solve a riddle, the riddle of a chaotic, seemingly evil universe and his responsibility in it. Also like Oedipus, Cass is an exile from his native land; he is "blind" drunk much of the time and blind to the meaning of the world around him; and he is supported by a girl (his wife, Poppy). Both men come to a country which is outwardly peaceful and beautiful, but which is sacred to the Furies, those spirits of retribution who torment sinners. Finally, Cass hopes that this acquaintance with "some of the horrors of the night" (364) and his laying up of "many things nearer unto grief than joy" will ultimately lead to affirmation. He hopes that like Oedipus he can eventually conclude that all is well.

Perhaps another reason why Cass does not kill himself is because he is still drawn to his native land by its original promise to men and by thoughts of what yet exists there that is simple and authentic. Though he hates what America in general has become, "There are times," Cass writes in his journal, "when just the thought of one single pine tree at home, in the stand, & a negro church in a grove I knew as a boy & the sound of the negros singing In Bright Mansions Above (?) -- then I feel or know rather that all I would need is that one trembling word to be whispered or spoken into my ear. AMERICA. And I could hold myself back no longer and blubber like a baby" (363-64).

One such time occurs when Mason and Cass first meet. Cass can

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stomach no more of Mason's insincere appreciation of his art and his
glib talk, so he lets Flagg know this in clear, forceful language. Part
of Cass's tirade has to do with the shortcomings and crimes of America
and Americans like Flagg. But as he attacks his native land, memories
of "simple homely things" begin to flush the anger and the hate from
his mind. "This reverie came upon me as I sat there," Cass tells Peter,
"and I thought of all these things and as the memories flowed through
me I began to feel like a total stranger, and the anguish and mystery
of myself, you see -- of who and what I was and had been and was to
be -- all of these were somehow tied up with these visions and sounds
and smells of America, which were slowly breaking my heart" (397).
With a catch in his throat, he tells Mason that "'the only true experi-
ence, by God . . . is the one where a man learns to love himself. And
his country!'" (397-98). Deep inside, Cass still has hope that he can
one day return to America and recapture its promise and his identity.

In addition to the faint hope that Slokin, Greek Tragedy, and
America have given Cass that life is meaningful, he also has experienced
epiphany -- "the crystallization of a moment in time . . . which encom-
passes and explains and justifies time itself" (257). In one of his
very low moments in Paris, just after he has ordered Poppy and the
children out of the house, Cass stares out the window at a springtime
scene of green leaves and lady bugs, smelling in the afternoon breeze
the pleasantly mingled fragrances of flowers and baking bread, and
listening to the Magic Flute on his record player.

And then finally, in a sort of doze, and with all my hatred and
poison lost for the moment, or forgotten, I looked up. And I'll
swear at that moment as I looked up it was as if I were gazing
into the kingdom of heaven. I don't know quite how to describe
it -- this bone-breaking moment of loveliness. I was almost sick
with desire and yearning for what I saw... Brought straight down from the Maker of us all! Ah, my God, how can I describe it! It wasn't just the scene, you see -- it was the sense, the bleeding essence of the thing. It was as if I had been given for an instant the capacity to understand not just beauty itself by its outward signs, but the other -- the elseness of beauty, this continuity of beauty in the scheme of life which triumphs even to the point of taking in sordidness and shabbiness and ugliness, which goes on and on and on, and of which this was only a moment, I guess, divinely crystalized (256-57).

Cass's epiphany is not unlike Shelley's vision of Intellectual Beauty, and like Shelley, Cass is determined to find an earthly embodiment of his reverie.

In Francesca Ricci, a beautiful peasant girl, Cass thinks that he has found such a soul mate. Even before he actually knows her, Cass feels that there is something almost ethereal about Francesca. For example, when she comes to see Cass about working in his house as a servant, Cass feels, the moment she has vanished, "a kind of warm gentle joy... like a man who knows a tremendous secret" (390). Later, after they have fallen in love with each other, Cass cannot bring himself to have sexual intercourse with Francesca, not because he is already a married man, but because she represents an ideal of beauty and innocence in a world which is otherwise corrupt. She is to Cass what Peyton was to Milton Loftis. Urang says that she is "the other side of the Gnostic or Manichean coin... the paradisaic vision of perfect goodness and beauty." She brings Cass "a vision of this other world."¹⁴ "I found some kind of joy in her, you see," says Cass to Peter, "not just pleasure -- this joy I felt I'd been searching for all my life, and it was almost enough to preserve my sanity all by itself. Joy, you see -- a kind of serenity and repose that I never really knew existed" (439-40).

¹⁴Urang, p. 198.
In the presence of the angelic Francesca, Cass is no longer a completely paralyzed artist. Instead of drinking every afternoon, Cass sometimes makes sketches of her in "one marvelous little secluded grove where there were willows and a grassy bank and a stream flowing through" (440). As Cass would paint, neither of them would "say a word, just sit there sketching and posing and listening to the water flowing over the rocks and the crickets in the grass and the cowbells on the slopes." In this idyllic setting, it seemed to Cass that he was "under a spell -- as if all . . . madness had been washed away for the moment, clean . . . untouched by anything except this momentary, fabulous, bountiful peace" (440).

In the midst of this sacramental relationship, Cass meets yet another example of the pain and tragedy which are part of the human condition. Francesca's father (Michele), who is tubercular, recently fell from his roof and broke his leg. Because his tuberculosis is miliary, his leg will not heal properly, and the old man lies in his dirty, fly-infested hovel slowly and painfully dying. When Francesca first takes Cass to see her father, he cannot believe his eyes or his nose. Almost gagging as he breathes the air which smells of manure, sour milk, and rotting meat, Cass suddenly realizes that he has smelled all this before. "It is niggers," he thinks, "The same thing, by God. It is the smell of a black sharecropper's cabin in Sussex County, Virginia. It is the bleeding stink of wretchedness" (416).

When Cass hears from the local doctor that Michele has no hope of living, he is determined that this shall not be so. Because of his love for Francesca and because Michele's wretched condition takes Cass back in his memory to similar images of wretchedness in the South and
ultimately to his own guilt, he knows that he cannot turn his back on
the old man. "'What do you mean there is not a hope in the world?'" he
asks the doctor. "'I'm no doctor but I know better than that! . . .
There are drugs for this now!'" (418). Cass's "need to do something
had become like a panic, a fierce drive upward and outward from his
self that had begun to cut like flame through the boozy dreamland, the
nit-picking, the inertia, the navel-gazing" (417-18). In a world that
is filled with wretchedness, Cass longs to bring salvation to at least
one poor sufferer. In his drunken daydreams, he sees himself as Christ,
commanding Michele to "'Rise up. . . . Rise up and walk!'" (425).

Because of his love for Francesca and his concern for Michele,
Cass is partially able to escape the despair of being wrapped up only
in self. For the first time in a long while, he is able to turn his
thoughts outward and to forget for a time his own feelings of guilt and
failure. I think that Rubin overstates matters when he says that Cass's
devotion to Francesca is simply "an insubstantial, idyllic romance" and
that his attempts to save Michele's life are merely "quixotic and
forlorn."15 Through these two relationships, Cass gains a very real
insight into the meaning of love. His love for Francesca is the aesthetic
love of beauty, purity, and truth for its own sake. His love for
Michele is the active, sacrificial love that Christ commanded of his
disciples. Both kinds must be experienced before Cass can deliver him-
self from impotent despair. What he lacks, however, is love of self.
Cass fails to see that until he is able to find beauty and meaning in
his own soul, he cannot be truly redeemed. While Cass has progressed

through Kierkegaard's aesthetic mode to the ethical, he is unable to move to a religious or existential level.16

Ironically, in partially freeing himself from his preoccupation with self, Cass becomes more enslaved by Mason Flagg. With his PX privileges and his ability to get illegally almost anything, Flagg is, Cass knows, the only person who can obtain the drugs necessary to treat Michele. Mason, however, is not about to give Cass something for nothing. Before he will supply Cass with medicine, Cass has to paint him a pornographic picture. Though he regrets having to make such a bargain, Cass has no other choice. When we recall that Flagg is in many respects the representative of modern society, it is easy to see what Styron is implying here about the dilemma of the serious artist. He is only used and manipulated by an "affluent, anti-human"17 society that cares nothing for beauty or truth.

With the drugs he "buys" from Flagg, Cass is able to give Michele the treatment he needs. Despite this, and despite the fact that Cass is by the old man's side "at least six times daily and often more" (421), Michele's condition grows worse and worse. Combing through the medical book he has, Cass finds out that he has a chance of saving Michele if he can procure another, more powerful drug, para-aminosalicylic acid. Once again, he must swallow his pride and his hatred of Flagg so that he can


help Francesca's father.

Hiding his insidious intentions behind "a smile of benevolence" (423), Mason promises to purchase the medicine Cass wants for nothing. When the time comes to deliver, however, Mason holds out on Cass because he suspects that his heretofore completely obedient slave has had a taste of freedom and will soon no longer be dependent on him for food, money or liquor. Therefore, he tells Cass that he is going to keep the drug until Cass comes to his senses. "Look me up tonight, ' Mason says in a queer choked voice. "Maybe we'll be able to strike some sort of bargain" (429).

That night Mason rapes Francesca. Though he always talked a great deal about sex, Mason just did not seem like a rapist to either Peter or Cass. His interest in pornography and his not being a father pointed, if anything, to his being either impotent or homosexual. Puzzled by this for a long time, Cass eventually sees that Mason was in reality raping him. "I just mean this, you see," he explains to Peter:

He must have understood what was happening. He must have seen how things were shaping up. Because for more time than I care to think about I had allowed him to own me -- out of spinelessness at first, out of whiskey-greed and desolation of the spirit, but at last out of necessity. And the paradox is that this slavish contact with Mason that I had to preserve in order to save Michele freed me to come into that knowledge of selflessness I had thirsted for like a dying man, and into a state where such a thing as dependence on the likes of Mason would be unheard-of, an impossibility. And Mason understood this, too,and not so dimly either. . . . He knew that for a while he had the pluperfect victim -- a man he could own completely, and who lay back and slopped up his food and his drink, and who was so close to total corruption himself that he gloried in being owned. But he sensed, too, that his victim had changed now, had found something -- some focus, some strength, some reality -- and this was a dangerous situation for a man who wished to keep a firm grip on his property: bum that I still remained, each hour I strove to bring Michele back to health, each day I sweated and strained to regain my sanity by taking on this burden which God alone knows why I accepted -- save that to shirk it would have been to die -- I moved closer to a condition of freedom, and Mason knew it even if I didn't, and this he couldn't bear (443-44).
By raping Francesca, Mason defiles all that is holy in Cass's life. "At that very moment when through Francesca I had conceived of life as having some vestige of a meaning," Cass tells Peter, "he tore that meaning limb from limb" (444). Mason becomes for Cass a symbol of all that is evil in the universe. It is because of Flagg and people like him that poverty and pain and wretchedness exist. If, as Cass has come to believe, "hell is not giving" (453), then Mason is surely Satan himself. He is, to Cass, as Fossum indicates, "an American Satan let loose from chaos to wander to and fro upon the earth."18

Cass kills Flagg because he thinks that Mason also committed the second rape and mutilation of Francesca. In a world where there is no moral order, Cass believes that he must be both Flagg's judge and executioner (440). He also rationalizes that in killing Mason, he is destroying that corruption in himself which almost made him glory in being owned (444). But when he learns from Luigi that the town idiot Saverio was responsible for Francesca's death, Cass is sickened "to the bottom of his soul" (484). He has only added to his already intolerable feelings of guilt and despair. Instead of destroying the evil in himself and the universe, Cass has merely stoked the Anglo-Saxon hell-fires which he cannot rid himself of (268).

"Utterly deranged" (478) by the guilt he feels for his own deed, by the loss of the girl he loved, by the death of Michele, and by the complete injustice of life itself, Cass decides that he will kill himself and every member of his family. He will "remove from this earth . . . all

18 Fossum, p. 29.
19 See Gossett, p. 129 and Hoffman, p. 156.
mark and sign and stain of himself, his love and his vain hopes and his pathetic creations and his guilt . . ." (485). After he reaches the house, Cass slips quietly into Poppy's room and stands by her bed. Then he walks to the window and looks out to the black sea. Here is what he tells Peter about his feelings and thoughts at that moment:

I felt drained of strength and will, past thought of grief, past thought of anything except for that old vast gnawing hunger which began to grow and grow in me like a flower. And as I sat there, with the hunger growing and blossoming inside me, I knew that I had come to the end of the road and had found nothing at all. There was nothing. There was a nullity in the universe so great as to encompass and drown the universe itself. The value of a man's life was nothing, and his destiny nothingness. What more proof did I need that I traveled halfway across the earth in search of some kind of salvation, and had found it, only to have it shattered in my fingertips? What more proof did I need than that in the bargain I had slain a man wrongly, had taken a man's life. . . . I thought of being. I thought of nothingness. I put my head into my hands, and for a moment the sharp horror of being seemed so enormous as to make the horror of nothingness less than nothing by its side, and I began to tremble, and for long minutes I sat there, wondering if now at last wasn't the moment to take Poppy and the kids in a single swift hell of blood and butchery, and be done with it forever (489-90).

Cass does not kill himself or any of his family because he remembers what his friend Luigi told him only an hour ago at the police station. After running away from Sambuco and hiding in a cave near the sea, Cass returns to the village so that he can be punished as quickly as possible for murdering Flagg. When Luigi tells Cass that he has lied to the investigators and convinced them that Mason committed suicide, Cass is furious. To be guilty of a crime and then to be punished for it is not, of course, an experience without its own anguish. But to be guilty of a crime and not receive punishment is far worse. In the first case, Cass can at least feel that there is some moral order in the universe whereby evil is eventually punished. In the second case, however, Cass feels that if he is never to be punished for his crimes, then the
universe is either actively malevolent or indifferent to all human acts. To Cass, freedom would mean only that he could return to a chaotic, meaningless existence in a world without God or any moral order. This idea fills him with panic: "the notion of this awful and imminent liberty was frightening to me as that terror that must overcome people who dread open spaces. The feeling was the same. Yearning for enclosure, for confinement, I was faced with nothing but the vista of freedom like a wide and empty plain" (492).

Luigi tells Cass, "'You sin in your guilt!'" (494). What he means is that Cass can see only the evil in his life and in the world around him. He wallows in his "hideous sense of guilt" (497), blaming himself for the fallen state of man. Cass still believes that there is some God he cannot find or some moral code that he is unable to live up to. He does not see that all men are imperfect and consciously or subconsciously consider themselves as prisoners in solitary confinement in a prison where the Jailer has gone away. The only possibility of salvation lies in his understanding and accepting his fate in an absurd world and then enjoying what there is in life to enjoy. "'Consider the good in yourself!'" Luigi tells Cass. "'Consider hope! Consider joy!'" (499).

Luigi's words come back to Cass as he stands ready to remove all trace of himself from the earth. He thinks once more of Francesca and Michele and all that he has lost, but "the grief came back in a wave, then it went away" (499). Even thoughts of Mason cannot stir Cass to anger. In this moment, he understands that he exists in an absurd world where a man's only choice is between being and nothingness. Instead of feeling a suicidal guilt, Cass can now conclude, like his hero Oedipus, that all is well. He will not kill himself. He will accept the absurd
state of the universe and be satisfied with creating what he can create, in being what he can be. He will return to America with his family and start life afresh.

The problem with Cass's sudden reconciliation is that it is unconvincing dramatically. Are we to believe that an hour-long lecture by a policeman on French existentialism is sufficient to overcome the despair Cass feels after Francesca and Michele are dead? Likewise, are we to believe that simply by accepting being over nothingness (which in terms of the action in the novel means only that Cass does not kill his family or himself) Cass suddenly can shed his terrible sense of guilt and his need to explain the origin and nature of evil? And finally, are we to believe that Luigi's speech is convincing enough to make Cass want to return immediately to America? Yet Cass almost instantaneously does overcome his bitterness, lose his paralyzing sense of guilt, simply accept evil as an inextricable force in the universe, and view America not as a "doomed land" but as a country of beauty and promise (499).

In Styron's terms, the difficulty with Cass's attempt to achieve salvation through Christian love and sacrifice is that, with God dead and Heaven only a myth, it is no longer possible. As Richard Pearce says, "The power that energizes the world is . . . the Beast of Revelation."20 The Lonnies, the Saverioes, and the Flaggs of the earth are always lurking just out of sight, emerging when least expected to violate senselessly what is beautiful, good, or pure. But it does not seem probable that Luigi's existential set speech could immediately fill the void created by the failure of Christian love and sacrifice. It therefore

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20 Pearce, p. 35.
seems to me that Styron offers us a rhetorical, not a dramatic, solution to Cass's predicament. Perhaps because he could not resolve himself the many social and moral problems he posed for Cass and Peter, Styron was forced to let the existential language of the novel serve as a deus ex machina.

Whether Cass's redemption is dramatically convincing or not, Peter learns from Cass's story that each man must ultimately be his own redeemer. There is no God who sits in judgment over man and damns or saves him. Likewise, there is no social or moral system which can deliver a man from despair. Man must first have faith in himself; he must find joy, and hope, and goodness in his own being. Only then can he find meaning in the external world. Once Peter has this understanding, he can accept his automobile collision with the peasant, Lucian di Lieto, for what it really was -- an accident that was unavoidable. Like Cass, he now knows that man cannot blame himself for the accident-prone di Lietoes of this world any more than he can the bigoted Lonnies or the half-wit Saverioes. Styron emphasizes this in the letter to Peter that ends the novel. The Sisters of "The International Hospital of the Blessed Redeemer" in Naples write Peter that they will no longer need a check from him to pay for di Lieto's care because the Italian suddenly sprang out of his bed "like a Phoenix risen from the ashes of his own affliction" (506). Nevertheless, the world remains absurd. The Sister informs Peter that in the midst of writing her letter, di Lieto was readmitted to the hospital because he fell down a flight of stairs at his home and broke his collar bone.
CHAPTER IV

THE PROFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

-- "Nigger life ain't worth pig shit . . . mought make a nigger worth somethin' to hisself tryin' to git free, even if he don't." -- Will

In his interview with George Plimpton in the New York Times, Styron indicated that The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) is a "sort of religious parable and a story of exculpation." The novel tries to show, he said, how "Old Testament savagery and revenge [are] redeemed by New Testament charity and brotherhood -- affirmation."1 Though this conflict between Old Testament retribution and New Testament forgiveness is obviously a central one in The Confessions of Nat Turner, the novel cannot be explained simply by opposing theological attitudes. It also tries to show, I think, how Nat's childhood faith in white purity and benevolence is replaced by a faith in a wrathful, Old Testament God of retribution (underlying which is an existential concept of commitment and action) and how this faith is subsequently modified by the spirit of love (expressed metaphorically through New Testament rhetoric).

Nat's is not a quest for faith per se; he always has faith in something. Rather, his is a quest for a truly meaningful, redeeming faith, a faith which will make him a free and complete man instead of a

slave. Throughout the novel, we see Nat being forced by experience to change or modify his perception of self, of the world around him, and ultimately of God. The question that he must answer in the end is, Is my faith now such that it explains and justifies my past and gives me hope for the future?

We have seen in Styron's earlier books how each of the chief figures in the story, after finding himself imprisoned or damned, is forced to consider his actions in time past and pass judgment on his own soul. As Gunnar Urang has pointed out, time present is Judgment Day for each of Styron's heroes. In The Confessions of Nat Turner this is quite literally the case, as the title of Part I ("Judgment Day") indicates. Nat sits in his cell awaiting the hour when he will be brought to trial for his insurrection and summarily sentenced to die. But even though society (at least white society) has already found him guilty, in his own mind he is unconvinced that he has done wrong, despite the fact that his revolt resulted in the deaths of over a hundred people, both black and white, and put to an end any possibility of the emancipation of the black man, a possibility then being debated in Virginia. Therefore, in the quiet of the autumn afternoon, Nat raises his eyes skyward and asks, "Then what I done was wrong, Lord? And if what I done was wrong, is there no redemption?" (115). Receiving no answer from God, he returns in memory to "Old Times Past" in search of the meaning and the morality of his bloody rebellion.

To the young Nat, Turner's Mill is Paradise and "Marse Sam" is a wise and kind deity. "At that time," says Nat, "my regard for him

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2 Urang, Adversity and Grace, pp. 185ff.
is very close to the feeling one should bear only toward the Divinity" (126). Because he has an unquestioning faith in his white masters, he views life and the future with the confidence and the great expectations of any non-slave, well-adjusted twelve-year-old boy. His feeling of absolute well-being is captured on an April evening in a scene involving Nat, the Turner family, and a traveling salesman of farm equipment. "Spring-time," Nat thinks to himself in between trips around the dinner table with the cider pitcher. "Full springtide, spring, spring, spring.... I am filled with inexplicable happiness and a sense of tantalizing promise" (123). His happiness is increased even farther after he successfully spells the word "columbine" for the visiting trader. Thinking of his accomplishment, Nat feels "wildly alive." "I shiver feverishly," he says, "in the glory of self" (125). That night in bed, unaware as yet of the harsh realities of a slave society, he can "sink away into some strange dream filled with inchoate promise and a voiceless, hovering joy" (128).

Nat feels such joy because he is a favorite of all the white Turners, and the Turners to him are almost divine. If Marse Sam is Apollo to young Nat, then his wife Nell is Athena. It is she, along with her oldest daughter, who teaches him to read, write, add and subtract. At Christmas these "glossy-haired seraphs" (156) reward Nat for his diligent study with a gift of a Bible, probably making him "the only black boy in Virginia who possessed a book" (174). The other goddess in the Turner household is Marse Sam's youngest daughter, Miss Emmeline. "I worshiped her," says Nat, "with the chaste, evangelical passion that could only be nurtured in the innocent heart of a boy like myself, reared in surroundings where women (at least white ladies)
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seemed to float like bubbles in an immaculate effulgence of purity and perfection" (176-77).

Spared from the work of the mill and field, and living not in a shanty with other blacks but in the same house with his white gods, Nat begins to think of the field Negroes "as a lower order of people -- ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth. For even as a child," says Nat, "I am contemptuous and aloof, filled with disdain for the black riffraff which dwells beyond the perimeter of the big house" (135-36). This contemptuous attitude toward the field Negroes is also derived in part from that of the other house servants, especially his mother.

"'Us folks in de house is quality!'' says Nat's mother to another house servant. "'And we ain't got no outhouse for our own selves, hit's a cry-ing shame! I vow dem cornfield niggers is de akshul limit... Druther go to de privy settin' 'longside some ole sow dan one dem cornfield nigger womans!'' (136).

Because he can read like the whites, Nat makes a farther distinction between himself and the slaves who work outside the big house. "I begin more and more," says Nat, "to regard the Negroes of the mill and field as creatures beneath contempt, so devoid of the attributes I had come to connect with the sheltered and respectable life that they were not worth even my derision" (169). Nevertheless, on Christmas Eve, the sight of the other Negroes receiving their childish gifts (he had been given a book!) fills him "with a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust, belly sickness" (174).

Nat's education not only separates him from the field Negroes but from the other house servants as well. Superior though they might be to the field Negroes, none of them can read or write. And perhaps more importantly, none (with the exception of Wash) are young.
Therefore, though surrounded by other blacks, Nat is really not a part of the Negro community at Turner's Mill. On the other hand, though he likes to identify himself with the Turners because of his education and his unusual household status, he is not a part of the white community either. Nat may be "the darling, the little black jewel of Turner's Mill" (169), but he is an "'experiment'" (155) to them and not a human being.

Realizing that his experimental creation has too much ability to waste in waiting on tables and polishing silver, Sam Turner makes Nat an apprentice carpenter. This position takes Nat even farther away from the world of the average slave. Working side-by-side with the white, master carpenter named Goat, he can almost forget that he is black and a slave. When he and Goat repair the Negro cabins, however, Nat is made acutely aware of the fact that, though educated and clean of body, he too is somehow a part of the odor that permeates each shanty -- "the stink of sweat and grease and piss and nigger offal, of rancid pork and crotch and armpit and black toil and straw ticks stained with babies' vomit -- an abyssal odor of human defeat revolting and irredeemable" (184). The new immigrant Goat, as one might expect, is highly critical of blacks. "'Ai, Yi, Yi,'" he whispers to himself, "'dese people not animals even.'" "At such moments," Nat says, "despite myself, the blood-shame, the disgrace I felt at being a nigger also, was sharp as a sword through my guts" (184). Nat also senses that something is awry with his view of Turner's Mill as Eden and Samuel Turner as a benevolent deity.

On at least two other occasions during his childhood, Nat witnesses the quite human nature of his white gods and goddesses. When
he is about sixteen years old, he accidentally stumbles one night upon one of the Turner seraphs making love to her cousin. Astonished and fascinated, Nat listens to Emmeline pant and groan in the dark: "'Oh mercy . . . Oh God . . . Oh Jesus!'" (180). He also hears her say to her cousin after they have finished their lovemaking, "'This God damned horrible place. I would even go back to Maryland and become a whore again, and allow the only man I ever loved to sell my body on the streets of Baltimore. Get your God Damned hands off me and don't speak another word to me again!'" (182). Nat is horrified by what he has seen and heard. "In truth," he says, "such an episode had the effect of altering my entire vision of white women. For now the flow of saintliness which had surrounded Miss Emmeline in my mind dimmed, flickered out, disappeared" (183). When he masturbates in the carpenter shop on Saturday, it is Miss Emmeline that he imagines making love to.

An earlier sexual incident that Nat witnesses is perhaps even more disturbing to him, the rape of his mother by the Irish overseer of Turner's Mill. What disturbs Nat as much as the actual violation of his mother is the sudden realization that white people engage in sexual intercourse. As he watches his mother respond to the Irishman's lovemaking, Nat thinks, "In the madness of complete innocence I had thought sex was the pastime, or habit, or obsession, or something of niggers alone" (148). Of course, Nat is also aware that his mother is being treated by the white man, not as a human being, but as an object or a piece of merchandise. When the overseer finally leaves the kitchen, Nat says: "I feel a sense of my weakness, my smallness, my defenselessness, my niggerness invading me like a wind to the marrow of my bones" (150). Here Nat sees that all whites are not benevolent deities who have his welfare in mind.
Despite these white people's feet-of-clay, Nat continues to have absolute faith in his master, Sam Turner. And Turner does, in fact, appear to deserve Nat's worship of him, because he decides to carry his experiment to its logical conclusion and give Nat his freedom. On a ride to Jerusalem one late summer day, Turner promises Nat that he will no longer be a slave when he becomes twenty-five. At first, the idea of freedom is quite unsettling to Nat. "But," he says, "my worst fears began to melt away even that morning as we approached Jerusalem, when like some blessed warmth there slowly crept over me an understanding of this gift of my own salvation, which only one in God knew how many thousands of Negroes could hope ever to receive and was beyond all prizing" (195). Here, Nat's devotion to Samuel Turner knows no bounds. His god has justified his faith with a promise of new life.

Subsequent to this promise of freedom, though, Nat's faith in Marse Sam is severely shaken. The one close childhood friendship that Nat forms is abruptly broken when Samuel Turner sells Nat's friend Willis in order to raise capital. Never does Nat feel closer to anyone than he does to Willis. "It was," he says, "as if I had found a brother" (201-202). Working together in the carpenter shop and afterwards reading the Bible and praying, they were quickly inseparable companions.

Nat and Willis are also knit closely together because of a sexual-religious experience. Fishing at the mill pond one weekend, Willis yells, "'fuckin' Jesus!'" (204), after wounding himself with a fish hook. Without thinking, Nat strikes his friend in the face, an action he is almost immediately sorry for. As he reaches out to comfort Willis, they become tangled together. Masturbation is the end result of this entanglement. Feeling somewhat guilty after this sexual experience,
Nat searches his mind for some justification. As he is to do so often in the future, he sees a precedent for his actions in the Bible: "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul . . . They kissed one another, and wept one with another." (204-205).

The almost sacramental nature of this sexual encounter with Willis makes Nat feel that the spirit of God is flowing through him and the surrounding countryside. "It was almost as if God hovered in the shimmering waves of heat above the trees," Nat thinks, "His tongue and His voice trembling at the edge of speech, ready to make known His actual presence to me as I stood penitent and prayerful with Willis ankle-deep in the muddy waters" (205). Nat waits for God to speak, to give him a sign, but he hears nothing. But then, a verse from the book of Paul on baptism enters his mind, and Nat believes that God is testing his ability to baptize Willis. Willis therefore becomes Nat's first convert and his first disciple. "Loving him so much," says Nat, "loving him as a brother," (207) he will henceforth do everything in his power to educate Willis in both Biblical thought and in reading and writing.

Naturally, when Willis is sold, Nat feels betrayed by God's representative on earth, Sam Turner. He is especially miserable because he himself was the one who delivered his disciple in the dead of night to the slave trader. Thinking that his friend was only to be hired out to another Virginia plantation for two weeks, Nat is crushed when he realizes that Sam Turner only used this ruse to sell slaves without any unpleasant scenes. After sitting in the wagon for more than an hour, Nat starts back to Turner's Mill "with an emptiness" that he had never felt before.
Sam Turner becomes even less of a God in Nat's eyes when the Turners are forced to sell the Mill, and he is placed under the care of the homosexual Reverend Eppes, whose advances he has to resist. This fanatical, backwoods preacher treats Nat not like a pet but as a field Negro. From before sunup to after sundown, seven days a week, Nat hoes, chops, shells corn, empties chamber pots, and generally does for the first time what most of his fellow blacks had done from the time they were teenagers. "I began to sense the world, the true world," Nat says, "in which a Negro moves and breathes. It was like being plunged into freezing water" (240). Nat continues to stay with this crazed preacher only because of "the gloomy comfort of Ecclesiastes" (242) and faith in Sam Turner's promise that he would eventually be taken by Eppes to Richmond and there obtain his freedom.

Eppes, of course, does not free Nat. He sells him to an illiterate small farmer named Tom Moore. Consequently, the promise of freedom, which had so helped to sustain him, is taken away. Like Mannix and Culver, Nat suddenly finds himself in a closed system which denies him the right to be an individual. Nightmare becomes reality on the winter day that he is sold. Nat says: "I experienced a kind of disbelief which verged close upon madness, then a sense of betrayal, then fury such as I had never known before, then finally, to my dismay, hatred so bitter that I grew dizzy and thought I might get sick on the floor" (246). Needless to say, Nat no longer sees Marse Sam as a benevolent deity. From the moment he is sold, Nat banishes his former master from his mind "as one banishes the memory of any disgraced and downfallen prince" (247).

In Part II of The Confessions of Nat Turner, then, Styron shows
Nat's childhood faith in his white master and his dreams of freedom shattered. Time and experience have taught him what it means to be a black man in a slave society. For Nat, the promise of that soft April evening nine years earlier has turned into the hopelessness of an icy winter.

Once he is sold to Thomas Moore, Nat realizes that no other man, especially a white man, will give him his freedom. He himself must seize it. Before the summer of 1825, though, Nat is unable to decide what course of action to take. Through this difficult period as Moore's property, Nat remembers the only words that God seemed to have spoken to him: "'I abide'" (253). These words came to him on that icy day in February after Moore had struck him with a whip. It should be emphasized that Nat takes this command, not in its modern-day sense (that is, "to remain stable or fixed in a state"), but in its original meaning ("to wait for"). Consequently, though he becomes a model slave, he never accepts the loss of freedom. He realizes that if he is to break the bonds of slavery, he will have to devise a plan of action which has some chance of success.

Nat's quest for freedom in the closed system results in one of the deepest ironies of the novel. It is only natural that he should search his own background and his own capabilities to see if there is anything which can be used both to plan his course of action and to justify it. The Bible, of course, is what Nat knows and knows well. Therefore, he turns to the very book the white man had used for years to justify slavery, in order to plan and justify the murder of every white person in Southampton County. George Core states it nicely when he says that even during his rebellion Nat "is a more religious man than
any of his masters . . . and his primitive Christianity is purer, more orthodox, than the Protestantism of the region, taken singly by denomination or as a whole." In this respect, Nat is not unlike Mannix, who also uses his adversary's most sacred doctrine against him when he becomes more of a Marine than Templeton.

It is not long before the Old Testament God of retribution replaces Sam Turner in Nat's reordered world, and as Styron himself indicates, Nat sees himself as an "avenging Old Testament angel."4

Almost all of his free time at Moore's is spent reading the Prophets, "mainly," says Nat, "Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, whose relevance to my own self and future I had only commenced to divine" (251). Each of these books deals in part with the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the return of the Israelites in exile. The parallels between himself and these Biblical prophets obviously fascinate Nat. And like many an Old Testament prophet, he begins to fast "whenever work was slack and the opportunity arose" (275). He occasionally goes without food "for as long as four or five days at a stretch, having been especially moved and troubled," relates Nat, "by those lines from Isaiah which go: Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?" (275).

After being immersed in the prophetic books of the Old Testament for several years and after fasting for days at a time, it is little
wonder that on the fifth day of one of these fasting days, Nat has a vision. In his weakened condition, he sees a white and black angel locked in celestial combat. The white angel strikes the black with his sword, but the sword breaks and the black angel is unharmed. As Nat continues to look skyward, he sees the black angel riding "triumphant among the clouds" (291). Nat takes this vision as a sign from God, but he is unsure if the Lord really intends for him literally to take up the sword against the whites. To his whispered question, "'Hast Thou truly called me to this?'" Nat receives "no answer, no answer at all" (292). He can think only of the passage from Isaiah, which begins, "This is the fast that I have chosen."

It is not long before Nat decides that God indeed wants him to slay his oppressors in Old Testament style. In light of his past experiences, this interpretation seems only logical. As William J. Swanson indicates: "Because Nat Turner has observed so little of Christian charity among the ostensibly Christian whites, it is not surprising that at least one part of his own religion is a militant incendiaryism nurtured by asceticism and omens."5

Because he feels that he has been chosen for a divine mission, Nat becomes even more fanatical in his religious practices. On Saturdays, instead of enjoying the company of fellow blacks in Jerusalem, Nat retires by himself to read and contemplate the Old Testament. "It was my habit," he says, "not to waste time with the other Negroes" (259). Likewise, whenever Moore gives Nat a few days free time for work

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well done, Nat retreats to the woods for prayer and meditation. Also, instead of searching for some woman to love or at least to have sexual intercourse with, Nat attempts to suppress his natural sexual longings through prayer and fasting. This method is, of course, only partially successful. Nat is all too frequently shaken by visions of himself and some woman locked passionately together. But these lascivious visions cause him to pray, to read the Bible, and to fast even more earnestly. Perhaps the most telling evidence that Nat is truly a fanatic comes in a short mental aside while he is working in the Whitehead library. Nat is thinking with pleasure of the next Sunday when he will welcome three new recruits to his planned rebellion and will baptize the oldest of these men. Nat is doubly pleased about this because, as he says without a hint of irony, "It is rare enough that I encounter a Negro with spiritual aspirations, much less one who might also become, potentially, a murderer" (336-37).

One of the major reasons Nat becomes a religious fanatic is that he has always been denied by circumstance, by temperament, and by education the friendships of a normal boy and man. He is never able to share with another human either his early hopes and dreams for the future, nor his later anger and despair at being betrayed by Sam Turner. Except for Willis, we have already seen how contemptuous Nat is of the field Negroes at Turner's Mill. Also, it should be remembered that his father ran away before Nat's birth, and that his mother dies while he is still a young boy.

After he leaves Turner's Mill, Nat remains isolated from others. Certainly, the Reverend Eppes is no bosom companion of Nat's, though they eat, sleep, and frequently work side by side. Likewise, Nat
obviously cannot talk seriously with the illiterate Moore or with his subsequent owner, Joseph Travis. Nor, unfortunately, can he really converse with his fellow worker and only adult friend, Hark. Even when they are alone together in the woods, Hark generally hunts or fishes while Nat reads the Bible. "In certain ways," Nat says of Hark, "he was like a splendid dog, a young, beautiful, heedless, spirited dog who had, nonetheless, to be trained to behave with dignity" (57). Needless to say, Nat cannot fully unburden his troubled soul to a man whose nature "could not long sustain a somber mood" (41).

Louis D. Rubin, Jr. believes that unless we recognize Nat's isolation from both the white and black communities, we can never understand why he becomes a fanatic or why he rebels. Order and stability are maintained, says Rubin, only if the individual is part of a social community. But as we have seen, Nat is denied love and friendship by his society. The whites either hate him, pity him or scorn him, while the blacks either treat him with dumb admiration or ignore him with contempt. He is not, then, a member of either community.

Rubin also points out that Styron shows Nat as cut off from both the white and black communities through the use of multiple narrative voices. Rubin says:

In the very contrast between the complex, subtle diction of Nat's thoughts, and the verbally crude language he must use to express himself aloud, there evolves a tension which grows more and more acute as the narrative develops and as Nat increasingly comes to comprehend the nature of his enforced isolation. The gulf between Nat's private self and his role in time and place builds up toward a point at which language itself will no longer suffice to provide order. There then must be the explosion of action, whereby language

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and deed are unified through violence -- and the tragedy is accomplished.7

Lacking the usual friendships of a boy and, later on, a man, Nat finds solace and companionship in his Bible and in prayer (the only time he can really talk to someone and use his own voice). In effect, the Old Testament and its God become for Nat what drink was for Milton Loftis and drink and music were for Cass Kinsolving -- a way to combat the loneliness and the emptiness of his existence. Constant drink causes Milton and Cass to become alcoholics; a too zealous study of the Old Testament causes Nat to become a religious fanatic.

Loneliness, religion, a hatred of whites, sexual desire, and a hunger for freedom -- all of these play a part in Nat's complex attitude toward and relationship with Margaret Whitehead. Unless we understand Margaret's role in Nat's quest for redemption, it seems to me that it is impossible to understand either Nat's own act of violence during the insurrection or his subsequent thoughts in jail.

On the other hand, Nat hates Margaret simply because she is white. More importantly, however, Nat hates her because she has sympathy for him. Styron makes much of this seeming contradiction throughout the novel. Over and over again, we see that Nat cannot tolerate sympathy, pity, or condescension from a white person. But this feeling is not really paradoxical. When a white person in the story pities Nat or another black, it is obvious that they do so from a decided position of superiority. It is not the concern of one fellow human being for another; it is more like the concern of a human being for an injured animal.

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7Ibid., p. 9.
Margaret, for example, reacts to a half-crushed turtle in the road in much the same way she does to the plight of the "poor darkies" who are mistreated by their masters (370).

Nat, of course, is a man with a great deal of pride, and he wants to be treated accordingly. And though he obviously does not like to be abused or treated with indifference, he can at least combat these attitudes with manly endurance or scorn. Either way, he can act with pride. But when pitied, Nat can only burn inside, believing that the person who pities him refuses to see him as a man with pride, as a man capable of acting with courage and dignity even in a losing cause.

The effects on Nat of a white's pity for a black man are dramatized in a scene involving a rich, beautiful, educated, white woman from the North and "a gaunt grizzle-polled old simpleton black as pitch . . . with an aimless slew-footed gait" (260). The white woman, fiancee to the rich Major Ridley, asks directions of the dim-witted Arnold. So thick is Arnold's answering speech and so groveling and clumsy are his motions toward her, that the white woman clinches her fists in frustration and begins to cry. Nat observes this encounter very closely, and he is quite shaken by his reaction. He wants to throw down the Ridley woman and rape her in the dusty street. "For what I had seen on this white woman's face," says Nat, "was pity -- pity wrenched from the very depths of her soul -- and the sight of that pity, the vision of that tender self so reduced by compassion to this helpless state of sobs and bloodless clenched knuckles and scalding tears, caused me an irresistible, flooding moment of desire. And it was, you see, pity alone that did this" (263-64). Later, as he thinks about this reaction, Nat says, "I was filled with somber feelings that I was unable to banish, deeply
troubled that it was not a white person's abuse or scorn or indifference which could ignite in me this murderous hatred but his pity, maybe even his tenderest moment of charity" (267). Consequently, when Margaret shows sympathy for him, Nat undoubtedly senses a parallel between himself and Arnold. The result of Margaret's pity, of course, is that Nat hates her for it.

Nat likewise hates Margaret because she unthinkingly torments him with intimate glimpses and touches of her body. On one occasion, for example, when Nat is installing bookshelves in the Whitehead's library, Margaret rushes into the room wearing no skirt to conceal her pantalettes. Naturally, Nat is aroused by the sight of a young, attractive girl in her underwear, and at first he cannot keep his eyes off her. Through willpower, however, he averts his eyes as they talk. But when Margaret sees that Nat has hurt his hand while putting up the bookshelves, she and her white pantalettes are suddenly so close to him that he almost loses control of himself. Luckily, she leaves the room quickly thereafter in answer to her mother's call. "'God damn her soul,'" Nat whispers to himself. "'God damn her soul,'" he says again, "hating her even more than seconds before, or maybe less -- thinking of those ruffled white pantalettes -- not knowing which, less or more" (340). Probably unwittingly, Margaret entered the library in her underwear because, as Nat indicates, he is "a Negro and therefore presumably unstirred by such a revealing sight." Had Margaret thought of him as a man," continues Nat, "she would never be so immodest to flaunt thus beneath my nose" (337).

Most importantly, Nat hates Margaret because she is a potential threat to his plans for freedom. For nine years, Nat has prayed, fasted
and eschewed all sexual contact in order to be physically and mentally ready when the time came to act. Now, when he is so close to fulfilling his dream of freedom, Margaret seems to go out of her way to direct his energies toward her. For example, on the Sunday before the assault on Jerusalem is to take place, Nat is sorely tempted to forget his plans for revolt and, instead, trade it and his life for a few hours of sexual satisfaction with Margaret. Nat is taking Margaret in the wagon to a friend's house. As she becomes thirsty along the way, she and Nat stop... and walk together through the woods to a brook. On the path, Margaret seems to be waiting for Nat to look at her and talk to her as a lover instead of a slave. Therefore, when she "accidentally" brushes Nat's arm with her breast, Nat thinks: "Take her here on this bank by this quiet brook. Spend upon her all afternoon a backed-up lifetime of passion. . . . Forget your great mission. Abandon all for these hours of terror and bliss." Though he is finally able to resist the temptation to rape Margaret and forget his plans for freedom, Nat says, "Never could I remember having been so unhinged by desire and hatred" (372). As William J. Swanson says, Margaret presents herself to Nat "as an all-too-willing Desdemona whom Nat hates both because she is unattainable and because his own concept of his mission precludes sexual relations with women."

But if Nat hates Margaret because she is white, has sympathy for him, and torments him sexually, he seems to love her, or at least to be fascinated by her, for much the same reasons. First, though Nat hates Margaret because she is sympathetic towards him, he cannot help but feel

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8 Swanson, p. 61.
a softness in his heart for her, surely because her sympathy for him seems to border on love. Several times, Margaret tells Nat that he is the only one she can talk to and that she will feel lost without his company when he comes back to the Travises. When she and Nat leave the wagon that Sunday and walk to the creek for a drink of water, Margaret almost begs Nat to make love to her. But Nat cannot allow himself to become emotionally or physically involved with Margaret, even assuming that she would actually recognize or allow him to be her lover. He knows that he cannot afford to divide his loyalties if he is to carry out his plan for freedom.

Second, despite his professed hatred of the white man, for years he has ardently wanted to be white. As a child one of his most delightful experiences occurred when he and a boy named Wash smeared mud on themselves and "howled in mad delight" at their resemblance to white boys (140). When Nat would masturbate on Saturday in the carpenter shop, it was always a white girl with golden hair whom Nat envisioned himself with (173). As Nat awaits the arrival of Reverend Eppes after the Turners have abandoned the plantation, he imagines himself to be the white owner of the Mill. "I became white," Nat says, "white as clabber cheese, white, stark white, white as a marble Episcopalian. . . . What a strange, demented ecstasy! How white I was! What wicked joy!" (232). As an adult, Nat perhaps loses his desire to be white, but he evidently is fascinated until the end of his life by the idea of whiteness.

It is no accident, then, that Nat always emphasizes the word "white" when he remembers his contacts with Margaret. When she walks in on Nat as he works in the Whitehead library, it is her white pantalettes
which capture his attention. On the Sunday wagon ride, Nat is conscious of "white drifting clouds" (87); Margaret's "fine white skin milky, transparent" (89); the white bonnet and the white linen dress she wears (89); and "her hand, white as milk glass," which held a "stiff round bone" parasol in it (364). To Nat, Margaret seems to be the epitome of whiteness, and he both hates her and is attracted to her.

Nat's complex, ambivalent attitude toward Margaret Whitehead in particular and whiteness in general manifests itself in the dream of the white building. That this white building is an important symbol in the book appears obvious. We are introduced to it on the first pages of the book, and we see it again at the end. At the very beginning of the novel, Nat is lost in a vision of himself in a small boat, floating out to sea past a square, "stark white," marble structure which stands on a promontory at the mouth of the river. This white building is "like a temple . . . yet a temple in which no one worships, or a sarcophagus in which no one lies buried." It is also characterized by a simplicity of design, "possessing no columns or windows, but rather, in place of them recesses . . . flowing in a series of arches around its two visible sides. The building has no door." Above this mysterious temple or sarcophagus is "a blue and cloudless sky" (4).

Likewise, at the beginning of the very last section of the novel, Nat is again in his small boat studying "the white building standing on its promontory high above the shore." Again, Nat emphasizes its whiteness -- "stark white, glittering pure as alabaster" (422). Again, he indicates that the strange white building suggests both life and death, both temple and sarcophagus. But this time Nat seems to dwell on the fact that the white building seems timeless, a "relic of the ages -- of
all past and all futurity." It sits on a promontory "unravaged by weather or wind"; its marble sides are "tranquil"; and to explore its mysteries would carry one "everlastingly, into the remotest corridors of thought and time" (422).

Archetypally, the idea of life as a river flowing to the sea is, of course, quite familiar, and Styron surely wants us to realize that Nat is thinking deeply about his life and his approaching death. More specifically, the scene of a boat, a river estuary, and the sea could have been imprinted on Nat's mind by Hark's story of his early attempt to gain freedom. Hark found himself in just such a setting when he ran away. Thinking he had reached the Susquehanna River in Maryland, he asked another Negro sitting on a rowboat the way to the Quaker meeting house. Instead of helping him, the other black turned Hark over to the authorities. He had not reached the Susquehanna but "that ancient mother-river of slavery, the James" (286).

In Nat's vision, the river and sea also seem to suggest the ideas of freedom and slavery. First, Nat knows that only white people go to the beach; consequently, the sea has always been associated in his mind with freedom. As Nat himself says, "My desire to see this sight became a kind of fierce, inward, almost physical hunger" (5). Second, the sea is associated in Nat's mind with both freedom and slavery because it and "the free blue air" lead "eastward to Africa" (5 and 421).

Third, the stark white marble structure seems to suggest the whole, monolithic white society (particularly the churchmen and the planters) which keeps his soul locked within the system of slavery. When Nat imagines himself to be the owner of Turner's Mill, for instance, he thinks of himself as "stark white, white as a marble Episcopalian" (232). In
this respect, then, the white building is a sarcophagus that is inside "dark as the darkest tomb" (422).

But the white structure is also like a temple, which seems to represent God or the idea of a peaceful existence beyond the pain and strife of this world. It has a tranquillity, a solidarity, and a timelessness that places it in direct opposition to the temporal world.

Finally, I think that it would not be stretching matters very far to see Margaret Whitehead, and all she means to Nat, in this symbol. We have already seen how Nat dwells on the word "white" when he talks of her. Also, the aptness of her last name was surely not lost on Styron. He frequently chooses the names of his characters in order to emphasize or suggest their significance on a non-literal level (e.g. Daddy Faith, Loftis, Templeton, Kinsolving). By chance, the real Margaret's last name was superbly suited to Styron's purposes in this novel.

Whether one accepts this speculation or not, it is true that in Nat's relationship with Margaret we first see the moral dilemma which he seeks to solve: What to do about her and the few white people that he has some sympathy for? The success of his insurrection demands that they be killed, but something inside Nat recoils at the idea of such a completely heartless slaughter. Nat and the other slaves will be forced to kill, both the cruel, such as Will's owner Francis, and the basically kind, such as Nat's master Travis. Furthermore, in order for the insurrection to succeed, women and children will also have to die. Therefore, despite Nat's hatred of the white man, his obsession with freedom, and the precedents for slaughter he finds in the Old Testament, he has misgivings about taking human life so indiscriminately.

Within a period of twenty-four hours, Nat can feel both ecstasy
and nausea over his murderous plan for freedom. While speaking to his followers, he makes "it plain that murder was an essential act for their freedom" (350). At this time, he has no qualms about murder; in fact, he is "gripped by a sense of exaltation, of mastery and of perfect assurance" (350). The very next day, however, Nat becomes aware that in his mouth is "a sinister taste of death -- a sweetish-sour and corrupt flavor that rose thickly up through the nostrils like tainted pork" (351). Though sure that violent rebellion is the only meaningful alternative to slavery, Nat cannot dislodge the sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach caused by thoughts of all the white people in the country being massacred.

This moral conflict intensifies as the hour to begin the assault draws near. On the very afternoon of the appointed night the revolt is planned, Nelson asks Nat what they will do with the little baby at the Travis house. "I had a sinking sensation deep inside," says Nat, who tells Nelson, '"Maybe we jest let that baby alone, I don't know.'" "I was stung," thinks Nat, "with a sudden inexplicable annoyance" (381). Shortly after this question about killing the Travis baby, Nat feels "a mood of anxiety" steal over him, and he wonders if Saul, Gideon, or David experienced the same "gripping sickness," the same "clammy apprehension" before battle as he does. Nat asks, "Did they too taste the mouth go dry at thought of the coming slaughter, sense a shiver of despair fly through their restless flesh as they conjured up images of bloodied heads and limbs, gouged out eyes, the strangled faces of men they had known, enemy and friend, jaws agape in yawns of eternal slumber?" (382). Obviously, Nat feels this sickening terror partially because he is scared, but more important are his doubts concerning the morality of killing innocent people in cold blood.
Nat's moral aversion to murder is dramatized at the very outset of the rebellion. It is he who is supposed to inaugurate the revolt by killing Travis. But when the time comes to slay his master, Nat misses Travis "by half a foot" with his broadaxe. On his second attempt, the axe blade glances harmlessly off of Travis's shoulder. Before Nat can lift his weapon for the third time, Will bounds into the room and with one blow of his hatchet sends Travis's head rolling on the floor.

Though Nat convinced his followers that murder was essential to their freedom, he himself cannot kill the very man who holds him as chattel. In the seconds before he first raises his axe, Nat actually sees Travis for the first time. As Travis awakes, his eyes and Nat's meet, and Nat is aware that "beneath the perplexity, the film of sleep, his eyes were brown and rather melancholy, acquainted with hard toil, remote perhaps, somewhat inflexible but not at all unkind, and I felt that I knew him at last" (387). Until this moment, Travis has been to Nat a "far-off abstract being" (388). Now Nat realizes that "whatever else he was, he was a man" (388). Nat cannot kill him.

Neither on two other occasions can Nat kill. "I had tried," he says, "to bring death with my sword two times when I had raised the glittering blade over some ashen white face, only to have it glance away with an impotent thud or miss by such an astonishing space that I felt that blow had been deflected by a gigantic, aerial, unseen hand" (403-404). Deeply troubled by both his inability to shed blood and by the sight of Will's axe slicing into the skulls and necks of white men, women, and children, Nat steals off into the woods to vomit. "Nat," states George Core, "is a sensitive man who is wholly possessed by his humanity and by his sacramental way of looking at the world; this in the end leads to
his undoing as a revolutionary leader and to his redemption as a man. Indeed one might say that the tragedy of Nat Turner is caused by his humanity against the general inhumanity of his time, and that in the moment of crisis he was unable to stifle that humanity."

Sickened by the carnage, Nat considers calling a halt to the rebellion, but by this time, he realizes that he could not stop his blood-thirsty band of slaves even if he wanted to. He must regain the respect of his men and carry out his plans for freedom, regardless of how many white people are killed.

Thus resolved, Nat and his followers, as if "by providence" (410), head toward the Whitehead farm. Hark, Henry, and Will quickly slay all the members of the Whitehead family except Margaret, who tries un成功fully to hide in the cellar from Nat's army. Seeing both the girl and Nat at the same time, Will howls to him, "'Dar she is preacher man, dey's one left! . . . An she all you'n! Right by the cellah do'! Go git her, preacher man! . . . Does you want her, preacher man, or she fo' me?" (412-413).

Why does Nat kill Margaret? By his own admission, she was the only white person with whom he had "experienced even one moment of a warm and mysterious and mutual confluence of sympathy" (92). There appear to be four plausible answers to this important question. First, Nat must kill Margaret if he is to maintain control of his followers. Challenged by the fanatic Will either to spill blood or to relinquish his command, Nat decides that the success of his rebellion hinges on slaying Margaret. Second, Nat kills her because of that very sympathy she had for him.

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9Core, p. 129.
We previously have discussed this seeming paradox in some detail. Third, and perhaps most importantly, he murders Margaret because she is an innocent, beautiful, white girl. That the young, white belle was regarded in an almost sacramental light by most white Southerners is open to debate. It is undoubtedly true, however, that most white Southerners would consider any serious mistreatment of a Southern lady by a slave to be the ultimate crime a black could commit. Therefore, when Nat runs his sword into Margaret's body and caves in her skull with a fence post, he is symbolically raping and destroying what Southern, white society holds most dear. "Die, God damn your white soul," shouts Nat. "Die!" (414). Here he is not thinking of Margaret as a person but as an abstraction, as a most treasured and holy part of the white man's imagination which he, a slave all his life to the white man, defiles.

But, of course, Margaret is not simply an abstraction to Nat; she is also a woman who did genuinely respect and perhaps even love him. As she runs from her hiding place in the cellar into the field, Nat realizes this. "Ah, how I want her," he thinks in reply to Will's question, "Does you want her, preacher man, or she fo' me?" (413). In fact, a fourth reason why Nat kills Margaret is that he knows that Will would like nothing better than to rape and then slay Margaret. Because he does love as well as hate her, this violation is something that he cannot allow. He himself must kill her if it is to be done.

In killing Margaret, Nat kills in himself the last remnant of innocence. He is suddenly aware of his evil, evil that heretofore he had suspected was the property of others. Before his murder of Margaret Whitehead, Nat assumed that he was the only righteous man in a sinful world. Now he knows for the first time what it means to be a culpable
human being in a fallen world. Consequently, as he sits on a log after the murder, he finds himself "unaccountably thinking of ancient moments of childhood -- warm rain, leaves, a whippoorwill, rushing mill wheels, jew's-harp strumming -- centuries before" (415). Like all of Styron's major characters before him, Nat as a fallen man tries to recapture his lost innocence through a reverie of childhood days. But this dream of innocence is fleeting; the reality of the present forces Nat to walk back toward Margaret's dead body and to pace in sorrow around and around it as if on "a ceaseless pilgrimage" (415).

After his murder of Margaret Whitehead, Nat loses all desire to continue in his bloody quest for freedom. Styron says that Nat "was suddenly overtaken by his own humanity. It is partially why the revolt fails." This certainly appears to be true, for it is he who lets a young girl escape into the woods at the Harpers Farm and thereby alert the farmers closer to Jerusalem. "I might have reached her in a twinkling," says Nat, "the work of half a minute -- but I suddenly felt dispirited and overcome by fatigue, and was pursued by an obscure, unshakable grief. I shivered in the knowledge of the futility of all ambition. My mouth was sour with the yellow recollection of death and blood-smeared fields and walls. . . . I know nothing any longer, nothing. Did I really wish to vouchsafe a life for one that I had taken?" (417). The answer to Nat's question seems to be, yes.

Stripped of his belief in the absolute righteousness of his rebellion and his personal actions, Nat has nothing to fall back on. His Old Testament God seems to have deserted him. The morning after his rebellion is quashed by both the whites and the blacks loyal to their owners, Nat discovers that contrary to his custom for years, he
cannot pray. He says:

I went back to the border of the woods and knelt there to ask God's
guidance in the coming time of solitude -- to request that He show
me the ways and necessities for my salvation now that my cause in
His name was irrevocably lost -- I found to my terrible distress
that for the first time in my life I was unable even to think. Try
as I might, I could not cause a prayer to pass my lips. The God I
knew was slipping away from me. And I lingered there in the early
morning and felt as alone and as forsaken as I had ever felt since
I had learned God's name (401-402).

Like Cass Kinsolving and many another modern hero, Nat Turner finds him-
self "a miserable, and a banished, and a damned creature" who is secluded
from God.

Unlike Cass Kinsolving, however, Nat's despair is not the result
of a lack of faith in God; rather, it proceeds from a faith in a God
which no longer can exist for him, a God of thunder and retribution.

Humbled and shaken by the failure of his revolt, he thinks:

Maybe in this anguish of mine God is trying to tell me something.
Maybe in His seeming absence He is asking me to consider something
I had not thought of or known before. How can a man be allowed to
feel such emptiness and defeat? For surely God in His wisdom and
majesty would not ordain a mission like mine and then when I was
vanquished allow my soul to be abandoned, to be cast away into some
bottomless pit as if it were a miserable vapor of smoke. Surely
by this silence and absence He is giving me a greater sign than
any I have ever known . . . (402).

Nat never questions God's existence. It is just that, as Louis D.
Rubin, Jr. points out, he is suddenly aware "of the tremendous distance
between human interpretations of divine will and any certain knowledge
of what divine will is."10

It is in jail that Nat tries to rethink and revise his whole
concept of Deity. This, of course, is no easy matter, and at first,

10 "The State of Southern Fiction," in Southern Fiction Today:
Renascence and Beyond, ed. George Core (Athens: University of Georgia
says Nat, "there seemed no way at all to bridge the gulf between myself and God" (8). Even prayer is of no avail to him. "All I could feel," Nat says, "was despair, despair so sickening that I thought it might drive me mad, except that it somehow lay deeper than madness" (28). He feels as if he has been cast by God "beneath the largest rock on earth, there to live in hideous, perpetual dark" (10). As Marc L. Ratner indicates, Nat is in many respects like Milton's Samson, who also never loses his faith in God. Each "seeks redemption, though he has no idea from where it will come."11

As we have seen, in an attempt to escape this terrifying spiritual darkness, Nat returns in memory to time past and reconsiders the moral implications of his motives and his deeds. In effect, Nat professes to himself and to the world (somewhat as St. Augustine did) his several faiths and how each eventually failed him. He is not just confessing in the popular sense of the word. Consequently, when Gray mistakenly assumes that Nat was told by God or his conscience to confess his sins, Nat quickly tells him, "'Not confess your sins, sir... He said confess. Just that. Confess. That is important to relate. There was no your sins at all'" (15).

Therefore, after he "confesses" to himself and to Gray, Nat asks himself two important questions: (1) "Remorse? Is it true that I really have no remorse or contrition or guilt for anything I've done?" (2) "Is it maybe because I have no remorse that I can't pray and that I know myself to be so removed from the sight of God?" (398). Nat

cannot answer the second question immediately. But after careful considera-
tion, he is certain about the answer to the first: "No, Mr. Gray," Nat thinks, "I have no remorse for anything. I would do it all again. Yet even a man without remorse, in the face of death, may have to save one hostage for his soul's ransom, so I say yes, I would destroy them all again, all -- But for one . . ." (403). This "one," of course, is Margaret Whitehead.

Therefore, with the exception of his murder of Margaret Whitehead, Nat believes that what he did was not wrong. Given a choice between slavery and freedom again, he would choose freedom, even if that choice meant others would die. Going beyond Christian concepts of good and evil, Nat assumes here the rationale of the existentialist. Like Orestes in Sartre's The Flies, he chooses freedom at the expense of human life. And also like Orestes, he refuses to submit to the remorse which would doom him. He remains safe from the Furies because in true existential fashion he will not submit to any other man's sense of right and wrong. In this connection, it is interesting to note that he comes to believe in prison that the "ultimate damnation" would be to live as a fly, "without will or choice and against all desire" (27). To brainlessly accept life as a fly does is almost unthinkable to Nat. He cannot imagine "a more monstrous hell than . . . an existence in which there was no act of will, no choice, but a blind and automatic obedience to instinct" (26).

But Nat is not simply a Sartrean existentialist. Despite his lack of remorse, he still feels a sense of loss and incompleteness. But, just before dawn of the day he is to be executed, he begins to understand what it is he lacks and why his attempts to pray were unsuccessful. First,
he is "flooded with swift shifting memories, too sweet to bear, of all distant childhood, of old time past" (425). His thoughts move from childhood innocence to Margaret Whitehead, and he hears her voice whispering, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God." As he turns to search for Margaret in the darkness, he hears her whisper to him again: "Is it not true, Nat? Did He not say, I am the root and offspring of David, and the bright and morning star?" Nat then realizes that in his whole life he has never known real, human love. Isolated from most of his fellow blacks by circumstance, temperament, and education, and denied any meaningful relationships with whites because of convention, Nat never had the chance to give his love to anyone. Denied this opportunity (which Cass Kinsolving defined as "hell"), Nat, as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. indicates, "can only hate, and the result is destruction."¹²

Finally Nat realizes that even if his rebellion had been a tactical success, he would have failed in his attempt to obtain true freedom. Without love, he sees that he would never have become a complete man. He welcomes the dawn with a new sense of awareness. The morning star, a symbol which suggests this new understanding of Christian love, "rides in the heavens radiant and pure, set like crystal amid the still waters of eternity" (428). For Nat, there is the "newborn beauty of the world" (428) because his own spirit has been reborn.

Just before his death, Nat feels that his life has been redeemed. No longer does he feel apart from God. He now understands God and his own existence in a new light, the New Testament light of love. "Yes,"

thinks Nat, "I would have done it all again. I would have destroyed them all. Yet I would have spared one. I would have spared her that showed me Him whose presence I had not fathomed or maybe never even known. Great God, how early it is! Until now I had almost forgotten His name" (428). The "name" that Nat never really knew was Jesus Christ's, for in answer to the voice commanding him to "'Come!" at the end of the book, Nat answers, "'Even so, come, Lord Jesus'" (428). This is the first time that he has approached God through His Son because it is the first time that he has understood the redeeming power of love. As Ratner says, "Nat has affirmed his manhood through rebellion and through his expression of love for Margaret. He has moved from isolation to self-discovery, which ... signifies redemption."\(^\text{13}\)

Nevertheless, as is the case in all of Styron's fiction, the ending, if it is meant to be redemptive, is a little strained. Whereas in Set This House On Fire, Styron gives us an unconvincing existential resolution to Cass's social and moral dilemmas, in The Confessions of Nat Turner he offers us a powerful but rather unconvincing "Christian" solution to Nat's. As Alan Holder says, "Having built such a case against her [Margaret], the book is asking too much of us to accept Margaret as an incarnation of Christly love and the agent of Nat's redemption. We are given a spiritual happy ending that is decidedly forced."\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Ratner, William Styron, p. 118.

\(^{14}\) "Styron's Slave: The Confessions of Nat Turner," The South Atlantic Quarterly, LXVIII (Spring, 1969), 177.
CHAPTER V

THE OLD ORDER AND THE NEW: REDEMPTION IN THE FICTION OF FAULKNER, PERCY, AND STYRON

In an article entitled "William Styron's Divine Comedy," Karl Malkoff indicates that the bitter controversy surrounding The Confessions of Nat Turner has led many critics away from the central issues in the novel to heated debates over the nature of slavery in the Old South and the relationship between a white, Southern author and a black, revolutionary character. Malkoff goes on to say:

As obviously involved with the problems of being a Negro and a revolutionary as Styron in his latest book may be, he is ultimately concerned with the same tensions that have dominated all his work -- between freedom and necessity, master and slave, father and child. Styron has not dealt with this theme -- for it is a single theme with distinct attributes -- statically; its implications have been developed from novel to novel in a manner parallel to, though not necessarily dependent on, Dante's Divine Comedy.¹

This study has attempted to show that Styron has dealt with variations and progressions on a single theme, the theme of redemption (which is very close to what Malkoff calls the themes of "freedom and necessity, master and slave.") In each of his fictional works, Styron depicts at least one character on a metaphysical journey toward the light. In The Confessions of Nat Turner, he perhaps has explored this theme to the fullest extent possible. His first novel, Lie Down in Darkness, ends

with an image of apocalyptic darkness, while his last, The Confessions of Nat Turner, ends with an image of redemptive light.

In each character's quest for redemption, we have seen a common pattern of experience. It is one of faith being destroyed by time, fate, and experience and being renewed through introspection and struggle.

In each novel, a character must learn that he cannot live forever in a Winnie-the-Pooh world. He must come face to face with the absurdity of the world and create value where there seems to be none. He must also learn that there is no fixed, external moral code by which man is to measure his and other's actions; he must find value in his own true self, imperfect though he may be. Nevertheless, a character must realize ultimately that he exists as a member of the human community. Without communication, without love for someone else, a man can never lead a complete and meaningful existence.

Styron's essentially religious attitude toward his material places him squarely in the mainstream of Southern fiction. Louis L. Rubin, Jr. and others have already developed this thesis in considerable detail. My concluding comments will be limited to Styron's concept of redemption, which I will compare briefly with the redemptive experience in the fiction of William Faulkner and Walker Percy. Styron stands somewhere between Faulkner, who places considerable emphasis on Christian (Protestant) sacrifice and suffering, and Percy, who places considerable emphasis on existential awareness.

In certain respects, the redemptive experience in Styron's

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fiction is similar to that we find in Faulkner. Both agree that man
begins in childhood innocence and ends in adult corruptness. Likewise,
both think that a man's life is to a large extent controlled or deter-
mined by circumstance or fate. But both also believe that faith and
strength of will open the possibility that man can surmount circumstance
and forge for himself a meaningful existence.\(^3\)

Despite these similarities, there is a very basic difference
between Styron and Faulkner. Faulkner, unlike Styron, seems to measure
his characters against moral values which are basically Christian.
In Faulkner's novels, one comes to feel that no matter how materialistic,
racist, or dishonest many of his characters may be, there is still a very
real set of traditional and definable values by which a man should live.
Characters such as Dilsey, Ike McCaslin, Byron Bunch, Gavin Stevens,
and Nancy in Requiem for a Nun are not without faults, but they are all
admirable people and all basically Christian in their morality. Each
of these characters accepts the sinful nature of man and evil in the
universe. But none of them ever gives up hope that man can somehow pre-
vail in spite of his shortcomings.

In American Literature and Christian Doctrine, Randall Stewart
says of Faulkner: "There is everywhere in his writings the basic premise
of Original Sin: everywhere the basic conflict between the flesh and the
spirit. One finds also the necessity of discipline, of trial by fire

\(^3\)This is, of course, a gross oversimplification of Faulkner's
complex theological attitudes, but perhaps sufficiently correct for the
purposes of this comparison. For a fuller, but by no means exhaustive
study of Faulkner's religious thought, see Religious Perspectives in
Faulkner's Fiction: Yoknapatawpha and Beyond, ed. J. Robert Barth, S. J.
in the furnace of affliction, of sacrifice and the sacrificial death, of redemption through sacrifice." 4 Cleanth Brooks, who agrees with the part of Stewart's thesis quoted above, goes on to say: "Faulkner is a profoundly religious writer . . . his characters come out of a Christian environment, and represent, whatever their shortcomings and whatever their theological heresies, Christian concerns; and . . . they are finally to be understood only by reference to Christian premises." 5 The same cannot be said, I think, of many of Styron's characters. And his novels do not reflect, as do Faulkner's, a belief in basic Christian morality. In fact, there seems to be no traditional set of moral values which alone will make life meaningful in Styron's world.

However, the major difference between these two writers insofar as the redemptive experience is concerned seems to lie in Faulkner's emphasis on suffering. Whereas Styron appears to believe that suffering is good and necessary only if it purges a man of his illusions and forces him to face up to his and the world's true nature, Faulkner seems to believe that through suffering, man can partially, at least, expiate his sins and the sins of other men. Faulkner is not a Calvinist, but he does have a strong sense of man's corruptibility, if not of his involvement in original sin. Because of his very nature, man cannot help but sin. Consequently, Faulkner seems to believe that suffering is a moral responsibility. The man who refuses to sacrifice and to suffer refuses to accept his responsibility in the human community.

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5 "Faulkner's Vision of Good and Evil," in Religious Perspectives in Faulkner's Fiction, pp. 77-75.
He refuses to atone for his own sins and the sin which he inherited from the past.

Faulkner's concept of redemption through sacrifice and suffering can be seen in such novels as *Light in August* and *Go Down Moses*, particularly in the story of Ike McCaslin. However, perhaps the most direct statement Faulkner makes about redemptive suffering is to be found in *Requiem for a Nun*. In this religious drama, Nancy kills Temple Drake's six-month-old daughter because she cannot let Temple run away again from her sins. But more importantly, Nancy cannot let an innocent child inherit all the sin that Temple refuses to expiate. Nancy sees that Temple's baby would be starting life without a fair chance; the burden of inherited sin would be altogether too much to bear.

Temple, however, cannot understand why people must suffer at all, much less why they must suffer for others. She believes that Nancy's act and her own subsequent confessions to her husband before witnesses caused "just suffering. Not for anything: Just suffering" (211). Gavin Stevens quickly replies to this, "You came here to affirm the very thing which Nancy is going to die tomorrow morning to postulate: that little children, as long as they are little children, shall be intact, unanguished, untorn, unterrified." Faulkner seems to believe, as Stevens says, "that the adults, the fathers, the old and capable of sin, must be ready and willing -- nay, eager -- to suffer at anytime, that the little children shall come unto Him unanguished, unterrified, and undefiled" (163).

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Since all men will not accept this responsibility, there is no end to the suffering required of man. When Stevens asks Nancy if people must suffer only for their own sins or their own children's sins, Nancy answers, "Everybody's . . . All poor sinning man's." Stevens then asks, "The salvation of the world is in man's suffering. Is that it?" and Nancy replies, "Yes, sir" (276). Through sacrifice and suffering, man attempts to make the world a better place for his and other man's children, and for each generation as yet unborn. And through this sacrifice and suffering, man affirms what small nobility he has as a human being.

As we have seen, all of Styron's major characters suffer, but their suffering is not tied directly to redemption. They suffer either physically or mentally because of fate (born into poverty; are accident-prone; fall victim to sickness, etc.) or because they either have no faith at all (Cass Kinsolving in Paris) or no meaningful faith (all the Loftises). Suffering is the price men have to pay simply because they are born into a universe which is chaotic and absurd. Perhaps Styron's attitude toward suffering is reflected best in Set this House on Fire. People such as Michele Ricci and the old woman in Sambuco who sell fagots suffer because they were born poor and unlucky. Their suffering is not ennobling in any way, nor does it redeem them or others. In fact, it causes even more suffering. Cass Kinsolving, who also suffers more than his share of mental, if not physical, anguish, probably expresses Styron's thoughts on suffering most accurately. Mason Flagg has just asked him if all the difficult times a person goes through make him a better man. Cass replies heatedly: "You could keep your goddamn experience and give me back those days when I could have been swimming on the green coast of Carolina, washed over by clean green waves and
left upright and ready for living, instead of half buckled over . . .
with the dirty taste of fear in my mouth. Experience . . . was for the
birds, when it diminished a man. Bugger that kind of experience. Bugger
it. Bugger it forever" (395).

In Walker Percy's fiction, suffering per se also has little
redemptive value. Percy thinks that we all suffer in some degree from
what he calls the malaise. The problem is to recognize the malaise for
what it is, transcend it, and then share one's new consciousness with
another.

Percy's concept of redemption probably touches Styron's most
closely in a general existential sense. Both are concerned about a
meaningful life in a fragmented, abstract, boring world. And both
believe that man ultimately defines himself in concrete action rather
than abstract thought. The major difference between these two writers'
concept of redemption lies in Percy's emphasis on existential communion.
Percy also differs with Styron in that the redemptive experience is
explored within a complex, philosophical rather than an essentially
religious framework.  

In Percy's world, man leads an inauthentic or curtailed life
because he is trapped in "everydayness." He is no longer able to see
the world in meaningful, human terms. This inability to experience life
afresh and with meaning leads to estrangement and despair. Modern man

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7In my discussion of Percy's philosophical thought, I am indebted
to both Richard Lehan, "The Way Back: Redemption In the Novels of Walker
Percy," The Southern Review, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Spring, 1968), 306-19, and
Martin Luschei, The Sovereign Wayfarer (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana
is like the commuter who stares blankly out the window of the train. He is bored by the familiar landscape, but he is also uneasy or scared because he never really knows why he is on the train in the first place or what is going to await him when, alone, he steps off the train.\(^8\)

This condition Percy calls the malaise.

Redemption in Percy's world first of all necessitates an escape from everydayness, an acquiring of the ability to see self and the world in new, authentic terms. This task is accomplished through "rotation" and "repetition." Rotation is "a strategy for defeating everydayness and breaking momentarily into authentic existence."\(^9\) Percy defines it as "the quest for the new as the new, the reposing of all hope in what may be around the bend."\(^10\) In its least complicated form, rotation is equivalent simply to doing new things or seeking variety in one's activities. In his dating habits, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* illustrates this concept on this level. He has one romantic fling after another with his various secretaries in an attempt to defeat the malaise. At its highest level, though, rotation can help a person break through the zone of everydayness by cultivating in him the habit of seeing things from a fresh, authentic perspective. In *The Last Gentleman*, when Bibb Barrett leaves New York and begins his journey to the South and to New Mexico, he is not just seeking a bromide for everydayness but a transcendence which is almost religious in nature.

\(^8\) Lehan, p. 310. Also see Walker Percy, "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes," *Partisan Review*, XXIII (Fall, 1956), 478-94.

\(^9\) Luschei, p. 45.

Another method in Percy's fiction of escaping the despair of everydayness is that of repetition. Repetition is a looking back at one's self in a segment of time "without surrendering self as a locus of experience and possibility."\(^{11}\) In its simplest form, repetition is merely a savoring of a past moment in time, a mere sampling of emotion. But in its most profound aspects, repetition is very close to "Marcel's concept of recollection, the detachment that is a necessary prelude to the return to self."\(^{12}\) In this sense, repetition is a serious attempt to transcend everydayness. One stands detached from himself and simultaneously looks backwards and forwards at the self in time, attempting to answer the question, Who am I?

As Martin Luschei points out, one of the best examples of repetition in Percy's novels occurs in *The Moviegoer* when Binx and Kate travel to Chicago on the train. As soon as he enters the train station, Binx remembers the time ten years ago when he last rode a train. But at the same time, he can see himself in time present moving into the future: "It was ten years ago that I last rode a train, from San Francisco to New Orleans, and so ten years since I last enjoyed the peculiar gnosis of trains, stood on the eminence from which there is revealed both the sorry litter of the past and the future bright and simple as can be, and the going itself, one's privileged progress through the world."\(^{13}\)

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13 Luschei, pp. 48-49.
The ultimate function of rotation and repetition is to free man from his self-conscious, isolated life as an estranged individual so that he may share his true consciousness with another human being. This communion with another person is an essentially religious experience to Percy. It is what gives meaning to life. Failure to achieve this communion "leads to nothingness, an emptiness of mind and soul." In its simplest form, this intersubjectivity can be illustrated by the shared joke or the shared secret. On its highest level, this communion of consciousness "breaks down the barriers between individuals, moves them from an I - It to an I-Thou" relationship." This shared consciousness is at the very heart of Percy's concept of redemption. It is the basis of Binx and Kate's marriage at the end of The Moviegoer and of Barrett and Sutter's relationship at the end of The Last Gentleman.

Styron seems to have been interested in the concept of redemptive communion in all of his novels, though he does not explore or dramatize this idea in any clinical way. Like Percy, Styron appears to believe that man alone is incomplete; he needs to share his consciousness with another human being. In their own limited, pathetic way, for example, Milton and Peyton Loftis want to develop an I-Thou relationship but are incapable of transcending their preconditioned ways of looking at themselves and the world. Neither becomes an authentic human being who is truly aware of his or the world's nature.

Also, one reason that Mannix is unable to carry out a truly

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14 Lehan, p. 311.
15 Luschei, p. 54.
16 Lehen, p. 311.
meaningful rebellion against the Marine Corps is that he becomes more isolated and therefore more fanatical as the march progresses. In his inauthentic role as enslaver, Mannix has no one he can communicate with. He is estranged from his own self as well as the men in his company. This fact is brought home to him at the end of the story when the Negro woman shows true concern for him. Her sympathy, Mannix realizes perhaps too late, is something authentic and human. This one brief communion seems to be worth more than the total sum of his fanatical rebellion.

Again, we can see Styron's interest in redemptive communion in Francesca and Cass's relationship in Set This House on Fire and in Margaret and Nat's relationship in The Confessions of Nat Turner. In the first case, though, Cass simply worships Francesca instead of sharing his consciousness with her. Theirs is more of an understood, unspeaking, sacramental relationship. At the very end of The Confessions of Nat Turner, on the other hand, Styron has Nat move (rather unconvincingly, I think) to an intersubjectivity or shared relationship with Margaret which is quite close to Percy's concept of existential communion. In fact, Nat's whole confession could be considered as a kind of extended repetition. He has looked backward into time while keeping one eye on his impending death. And because of this repetition, Nat develops a new awareness of self and his relationship to the world. He is able to break down the barriers between himself and Margaret and himself and God and fuse his consciousness with theirs. At the end of the novel, Styron surely wants us to see Nat as no longer an isolated, totally self-conscious man but an authentic human being who has transcended the everyday world and is able to share fully his new awareness and his love.
Finally, though Styron's moral and philosophical vision in general is similar in certain respects to both Faulkner's and Percy's, Styron has his own unique concept of the world and of redemption. It is not Christian or Christian humanism but neither is it completely existential. The moral center of Styron's fiction seems to be one of tension between the two. Through both introspection and experience, each of Styron's major characters seeks a faith and a morality which will reconcile the complex nature of his universe and will make him a human being instead of a slave.
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Vita


Also in January 1966, Mr. Cheshire married Carolyn Diane McCoy of Shreveport. After working for a year as a management trainee at Caterpillar Tractor Company, Mr. Cheshire enrolled in the Graduate School at Louisiana State University. He was awarded the M.A. in English in January 1969.

From January 1969 to April 1969, Mr. Cheshire was an Instructor of English at Kentucky State College, a position he was forced to resign because of the draft. For approximately two years afterwards, he served as an electrical engineering assistant in the U.S. Army, White Sands Missile Range, New Mexico. On April 23, 1970, the Cheshire's son, Geoffrey Thomas, was born.

In January 1971, Mr. Cheshire and his family returned to Louisiana State University. In August 1973, he accepted an Instructorship at Louisiana State University. Mr. Cheshire will receive the Ph.D. in English on December 21, 1973.
Candidate: Ardner Randolph Cheshire, Jr.

Major Field: English

Title of Thesis: The Theme of Redemption in the Fiction of William Styron

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

November 30, 1973