

Student Work

5-1-1968

The Christian vision of William Styron.

Gloria C. Kaslow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork>

Recommended Citation

Kaslow, Gloria C., "The Christian vision of William Styron." (1968). *Student Work*. 3506.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/3506>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF WILLIAM STYRON

A Thesis 556

Presented to the
Department of English
and the

Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Gloria C. Kaslow

May 1968

UMI Number: EP74703

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP74703

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code



ProQuest LLC.
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate
Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfill-
ment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

R. W. Harper English
Chairman Department

Graduate Committee Richard McLellan, English
Name Department

Richard Lane, English
Paul L. Beck, History

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS	20
THE LONG MARCH	50
SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE	61
THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER	93
CONCLUSION	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY	125

INTRODUCTION

In 1951 a 25 year old Virginian, William Styron, published his first novel, entitled Lie Down in Darkness. Seemingly a story of the degeneracy of a Southern family in the manner and tradition of William Faulkner, Styron's first novel won him the Prix de Rome, much critical acclaim and attention, and a significant position among The Most Promising Young Novelists of Our Generation. A year later in 1952 Styron followed with a novella, The Long March, a tightly controlled symbolic account of a forced march in a reservist Marine camp. This novella seemed to reinforce the critics' opinions of Styron's promise and caliber, and the success of the novella is indicated by its selection as a Modern Library paperback.

Then Styron's literary career took a strange turn. For nine years he published nothing; but, surprisingly, his silence did not disturb his high ranking among The Promising Young Novelists. As Rubin points out, on the strength of one novel and a novella Styron came to enjoy the kind of literary prestige that few other writers commanded. Critics continued to discuss and interpret his work and habitually referred to him as one of a handful of really distinguished novelists of his generation. For the better part of ten

years Styron possessed a reputation that the author of a half-dozen good novels might well envy.¹

When Styron's second novel, Set This House on Fire, finally appeared in 1960, it was greeted with substantially conflicting reactions. From one group of critics the new work evoked a torrent of critical abuse. It was perjoratively characterized as melodramatic, sentimental, maggoty, chaotic and hopped-up metaphysically. Yet, by other critics it was highly praised as a more ambitious, more deeply perceptive work than Lie Down in Darkness. Granville Hicks saw Set This House on Fire as the fulfillment of Styron's promise, and Charles Fenton saw it as the American novel which completely delivers the 50's to us.

In Set This House on Fire Styron made a complete break with the Southern tradition. The story is set mainly in Italy; and in a completely un-Faulknerian fashion the novel deals with expatriate artists, Italian peasants, Greenwich Village cocktail parties, pornographic orgies, movie-making, Army PX's, and long, probing psychological analyses. The murder-mystery plot of the novel is no more than a surface, for the real concern of the novel lies with Cass Kinsolving,

¹ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Faraway Country (Seattle, 1963), p. 187.

an expatriate artist, and his struggle to rise from the depths of despair. Rubin suggests that it was in part Styron's break with the Southern tradition which provoked the partially hostile reception given to Set This House on Fire. Readers and reviewers had read Lie Down in Darkness as if it were automatically a novel in the Faulkerian mode and had lavished high praise for that accomplishment alone. They read Set This House on Fire with the same expectation, and since it did not remotely fit the mode at all they denounced it.² The actual presence and the significance of this unconscious reaction are impossible to determine. More important is that the critics, no matter what their reaction to this controversial book, did not dismiss it. On the contrary, since it was published Set This House on Fire has been continually re-evaluated and subjected to a surprising number of diverse interpretations.³

On the basis of but two novels -- controversial ones at that -- Styron's name has been linked with others such as Saul

² Ibid., p. 215.

³ One critic links Styron's thought with Kierkegaard's The Sickness Unto Death; another says the philosophy of the novel is based on an obscure 17th Century document by Henri Estienne; still another sees connections with Sophocles' play Oedipus at Colonus, and another with Don Giovanni.

Bellow, Herbert Gold, Bernard Malamud, and Norman Mailer as one of the important contemporary American novelists. Friedman points out that Styron has been taken seriously both in and out of the university. Robert Gorham Davis, Charles Fenton, and Howard Mumford Jones have applauded him as fervently as Malcolm Cowley, Maxwell Geismar and Granville Hicks. He has been linked with almost every movement from Naturalism through Existentialism.⁴ Friedman sees Styron as a kind of messianic figure who has made a miraculous appearance before the literary world offering new hope for the novel form.⁵

Thus, Styron had established a sound literary reputation before the publication of his highly successful best-seller, The Confessions of Nat Turner. On the basis of that reputation and the anticipated public interest in the topical subject matter of the novel, Styron sold the paperback rights to the book for \$100,000 three years before he started writing it. The Book-of-the-Month Club advanced a record \$150,000 for publication rights, while Harper's in its 117-year history had never paid more than Styron received for a 50,000-word excerpt. Much in advance of the book's official publication,

⁴ Melvin J. Friedman, "William Styron: An Interim Appraisal," English Journal, L (1961), 149.

⁵ Ibid.

Random House began its press run with 200,000 copies.⁶ Styron did not disappoint his backers. The Confessions of Nat Turner has met with resounding success among both readers and reviewers to the extent of winning him a Pulitzer Prize.

Born and raised in the tidewater country of southern Virginia where Nat Turner staged his rebellion in 1831, the only Negro rebellion in the history of American slavery, Styron has been fascinated with Nat Turner for twenty years. He brooded over the subject and delayed writing Nat's story until he felt he could accomplish the task without being melodramatic.⁷ The important decision Styron made in telling the story was to use a first-person narrative; to put himself in Nat's place as a Negro slave and to let Nat tell his own story. To do this, to become Nat, Styron admits that he had to overcome whatever white Southern prejudices he still harbored despite his removal from the South. Styron seems to feel that having James Baldwin live with him for five months made possible the creation of Nat.

I think Jimmy -- this is the confessions of William Styron now -- I think that Jimmy broke down the last shred of whatever final hangup of Southern prejudice I might have had which

⁶ These figures are from Newsweek, LXX, 16 (October 16, 1967), 65.

⁷ Time, 90, 15 (October 13, 1967), 113.

was trying to tell me that a Negro was never really intelligent -- a black Negro, not a, you know, white Negro, but a black, black homely Negro. Perhaps it was his diamond-bright intelligence which allowed me to say, "When I plunge into Nat Turner, it will be with no holds barred, and he will respond with as much intelligence as I can bring to his voice."⁸

Styron has said that "to come to know the Negro has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner."⁹ Styron has met that challenge and his success with Nat lies in making his reader believe in this tortured spirit as much as he himself did.

Clearly William Styron is a novelist who has achieved both critical and popular success. He has established a solid literary reputation as one of America's highly serious, intellectual novelists of the post-World War II generation. Why, however, is Styron an important contemporary author? On the answer to this question no two critics seem to agree. Some critics point to Styron as a stylist, others see him carrying on the tradition of Southern literature, and still others consider him an existentialist. With deference to such diversity of critical comment, this study will seek to

⁸ Quoted in Newsweek, LXX, 16 (October 16, 1967), 67.

⁹ William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," Harper's, 230 (April, 1965), 138.

establish that Styron's vision of life, as it emerges and develops in his novels, is the fundamental element of his significance.

Before examining Styron's vision of life it is important to note the concerns of serious modern novelists and to observe how Styron's unique treatment of these concerns makes his work worthy of examination.

The novel has always been concerned with basic and permanent human relationships: man's relationship to himself, to other men, to the society in which he lives, to the natural universe and perhaps to God.¹⁰ Although admittedly an over simplification, one can state with reasonable validity that the pre-World War II novelists dealt with and took man already shaped and even defined by the Western, historical tradition of Christianity; such a man was essentially a responsible individual, capable of good or evil, and inhabiting an orderly universe whose moral laws are fixed obligations to his God. If the premises of this tradition were accepted, then the nature of man and the meaning and purpose of his existence were not in question. Man might

¹⁰ Hiram Haydn, "What's Wrong with the American Novel?" American Scholar, 24 (Autumn, 1955), 478.

be "lost" or fall from grace or isolate himself from society by some private action; but there was an accepted frame of reference by which to judge him, and there were accepted values, norms and goals towards which he could strive.

The new fiction, however, reflecting post-World War II attitudes, called all in doubt. The Christian tradition was no longer a "given"; religious primacies were subject to question and challenge, and the role of traditional Christianity as a unifying force in life was felt to have lost its force. The post-World War II generation of novelists, having experienced the grim events of the war and having returned to an elaborate technological and materialistic society which seemed adrift in purposelessness, felt that modern life had alienated the individual from himself and the universe. Saul Bellow aptly expressed the sense of meaninglessness produced by the war:

Just what the reduction of millions of human beings into heaps of bone and mounds of hair or clouds of smoke betokens, there is no one who can plainly tell us, but it is at least plain that something was being done to put in question the meaning of survival, the meaning of pity, the meaning of justice and of the importance of being oneself, the individual's consciousness of his own existence.¹¹

¹¹ Saul Bellow, "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction," Encounter, XXI (November, 1963), 22-23.

Modern life and warfare had dehumanized man to the point where he lost the feeling and passion for his own personal existence and identity. It became increasingly difficult for man not only to accept traditional patterns of belief but to make any affirmations at all. The felt-sense of a loss of values and meaning in life led to the personal experience of alienation, isolation, despair and randomness. Man became faced with the threat of nothingness. Thus, the serious literary novelist was no longer faced with moral problems whose solutions could be worked out within an accepted frame of reference and belief. Nor could he feel, like some novelists of the 30's, that correction of social evils would solve man's problems. These evils were merely symptoms of a disease and not the disease itself, which was disintegration of the individual and a neurosis of the spirit.

Faced with the possible meaninglessness of human existence, the thoughtful novelists writing after World War II, who spoke to the newly felt if not newly existent problems of their age, concerned themselves with fundamental questions relating to the nature of man's existence, his search for love, freedom and identity, and his possibilities for making affirmations. The serious novelists faced the ultimate dilemmas of life, and their themes expressed the intense search

of modern man for a soul, for comradeship, for inner peace, for a "place in the cosmos", for creative satisfaction and for hope.¹²

Concerning themselves with the ultimate and the unconditional of existence modern writers of fiction, as Herbert Gold has pointed out, have been taking on the role traditionally played by religious leaders, philosophers and metaphysicians. They have returned in deep need to the most primitive poetic purpose: to know. They have been driven to asking the ultimate questions: For whom do I live? For what? What is the relation between freedom and isolation? Why do I live, struggle, love, defy age and history? Why must I die and for what? Who am I?¹³

The nature of these questions necessarily leads novelists away from an examination of social man to, as Baumbach phrases it, "the landscape of the psyche",¹⁴ the confrontation of man with the objectification of his primordial self.

¹² Stanley Romaine Hopper ed., Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature (New York, 1952), p. xi.

¹³ Herbert Gold, "Fiction of the Fifties," in Recent American Fiction, ed. Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 38.

¹⁴ Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare (New York, 1965), p. 5.

The prevalent theme in modern literature is the self seeking the self. The search is for identity, freedom, human dignity and relevant values.¹⁵ The quest involves a terrifying loneliness, for as Waldmeir notes: "The search begins and ends with the individual; it is he alone who must beat his way toward order hoping only that he will know it when he finds it."¹⁶ The modern hero's quest leads him through the "dark undersides of experience."¹⁷ On his journey he must encounter all of the "dragons of the inner life, including those let loose by breaking the chain of custom."¹⁸ The search, then, is not an outward one, but is turned inward; it involves a descent into the void of contemporary lostness in search of meaning. The novelist's calling is thus one of alienation and return -- if he can make it.¹⁹ Most novelists

15 The quest theme is a traditional one in American literature, found in such works as Huckleberry Finn, Moby Dick and As I Lay Dying. However, in contemporary literature it has taken on a new urgency.

16 Joseph J. Waldmeir, "Quest Without Faith," in Recent American Fiction, p. 56.

17 Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence (Princeton, 1961), p. 59.

18 Hopper, "The Problem of Moral Isolation in Contemporary Literature," in Spiritual Problems of Contemporary Literature, p. 153.

19 Ibid.

of the past two decades have not been able to make the return. Their preponderant message has not been an affirmation of the meaning of life and a rediscovery of values but one of constant negation and nihilism and a sense of absurdity.

Writers such as Malamud, Bellow and Styron, who have been able to make some affirmations, albeit tentative ones, bring, as Galloway phrases it, "a believable promise of rain to the fashionable wasteland."²⁰ The value of their work lies in the fact that they confront modern man's dilemma of the possible meaninglessness of life and yet seem to surmount it. That denial and nihilism are not their conclusions in itself makes their work of acute significance to this generation. These writers offer the hope that man can find a way "to exist with dignity and self-respect within an enigmatic universe".²¹ Thus, their novels express a new attitude and a new approach which are important to an understanding of the contemporary milieu, making such works worthy of critical attention. Although this paper is not

²⁰ David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, Salinger (Austin, 1966), p. viii.

²¹ Waldmeir, "Quest Without Faith", p. 62.

intended as a comparative study of Styron and his contemporaries, it is nevertheless necessary to consider briefly the nature of the affirmations that are made in the novels of his contemporaries in order to establish the uniqueness of Styron's vision.

Generally, in the fiction of Styron, Saul Bellow, Herbert Gold, James Baldwin, Philip Roth and Ralph Ellison, to name a few, the value of love has taken on a special character and urgency. Love is felt to be the only safeguard against total disaster, the only recourse against radical isolation and a terrifying sense of meaninglessness.²² Without love, the actions of the characters are likely to be purely destructive and murderous.²³ Ralph Ellison's invisible man, for example, as he writes about his experience, begins to defend and affirm

. . . because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I have to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man -- but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate.²⁴

22 Hassan, p. 65.

23 Robert Gorham Davis, "In a Ravelled World Love Endures," NYTBR (December 26, 1954), p. 13.

24 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), pp. 437-438.

This suggestion that meaning and psychic self-preservation are attainable only through love is characteristic of the serious post war fiction.

However, love as realized in this fiction, with the exception of Styron's, is not the Christian love of man and God with its concomitant moral commitments and responsibilities. On the contrary, the hero functions in a moral vacuum, a law unto himself. One critic, Stevenson, has labeled this fiction "activist".²⁵ As Stevenson explains it, the activist hero is an intrepid opportunist of the self. He is involved in a more nearly aimless search through the endless clutter of everyday existence for a sense of a privately satisfying identity or self.²⁶

The Augie Marches, the S. Levins, the Burr Fullers of activist fiction have moved beyond the confines of a post-lapsarian view. They exist in the broad daylight of the post-Freudian world, sinless, guiltless, wholly concerned with their special and private irritations . . . anxious, frantic as to the meaning for themselves alone of their adventures in love.²⁷

²⁵ David L. Stevenson, "The Activists," Daedalus, 92 (Spring, 1963), 238-249.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 240.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

William Styron's fiction stands apart from that of the activist novelists. Although sharing the same concerns in his fiction as the activists -- man's search for identity, freedom, purpose and values in a seemingly chaotic universe -- Styron remains within the Christian tradition in his view of the nature of man and the virtue of love. Styron's main characters, Peyton Loftis, Cass Kinsolving and Nat Turner, are studies in moral responsibility. They are people conceived in the Christian image of man: as human beings having an actual or potential relationship with their Creator and hence as individual, responsible, guilty, but redeemable. This traditional view of man contrasts with the view of man most often found in contemporary novels such as the activists', of man as collective, irresponsible, morally neuter and beyond help. In other words, Styron, unlike his contemporaries, does not proceed on the premise that God is dead. Rather, he affirms man's need for order and stability and his desire for the love and responsibility that come from the authority of religious conviction, while at the same time he exposes the fragile and impotent nature of the dogmatic and institutionalized values of our culture. Man needs religious belief, but our traditional institutions can no longer sustain and guide him. Hence, in Styron's vision modern man's

dilemma is a personal spiritual one demanding a personal spiritual solution.

This study will seek to establish that William Styron is a profound Christian writer. Although divorced from systematic theology and institutionalized religion, Styron's interpretation of man's condition is a Christian one couched in terms of sin, guilt, despair, repentance, faith and regeneration. The heart of Styron's fiction reflects the spiritual crises of man: the struggle between light and darkness, affirmation and denial, God and nothingness. That modern man, though adrift in negation and despair, can still struggle with uncompromising intensity for a spiritual rebirth attests to the highly serious moral and religious vision of William Styron. No modern novelist can find absolutes; thus, Styron's affirmation of faith is indeed a qualified and tentative one. But in an age where faith is hard won it is all the more significant that a modern intellectual novelist can wring hope for faith and salvation out of the modern nightmare of existence. This hope sets Styron apart from his contemporaries. What makes Styron a challenging and unique contemporary writer is that he deals with contemporary realities while affirming traditional beliefs.

A cursory examination of Styron's fiction reveals no apparent connection or development of theme in his novels. Each of his books seems totally unrelated to the others. Lie Down in Darkness is a Faulknerian-type story of a Southern family; The Long March is a war novella; Set This House on Fire is the story of an expatriate artist in Italy; and The Confessions of Nat Turner is a "meditation on history". It is the purpose of this paper to show that these novels do indeed bear an important relationship to one another and that they form a thematically unified body of fiction. A vision of life develops in Styron's work, one which is complex, formidable and important. This paper will examine that vision as it develops in Styron's fiction.

A significant connecting theme in Styron's fiction is that of human bondage. All of Styron's heroes are enslaved men and women held in some sort of bondage: Milton, Helen and Peyton Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness by guilts and inadequacies; Cass Kinsolving in Set This House on Fire by an engulfing sense of guilt; Mannix in The Long March by a military system; and Nat Turner by an actual system of slavery. Each is physically or psychologically enslaved, and each can assert his humanity in a search for freedom, identity and purpose only through rebellion.

Thus, all Styron's work is predicated on revolt in one way or another. Man's dilemma is that he has lost his sense of self, of freedom, and of purposefulness; through rebellion Styron's characters seek to rediscover that which is lost. Rebellion, then, is significantly an act of affirmation. The rebel finding his situation intolerable, rebels upon the faith of a better order, a higher value. The call to revolt is a call to humanize.²⁸ As Camus wrote: "Rebellion though apparently negative, since it creates nothing, is profoundly positive in that it reveals the part of man which must always be defended."²⁹ Speaking of Camus' rebel Glicksberg notes that the rebel's dedication to life, not death, to love, not hate, to affirmation, not denial, marks the beginning of a religious reintegration however paradoxical its formulation turns out to be.³⁰

The revolt of Styron's characters takes on the form of a search for freedom. The successive stages of this search form the plots of Styron's novels. The quest necessarily

²⁸ Galloway, p. 19.

²⁹ Albert Camus, The Rebel (New York, 1958), p. 19

³⁰ Charles I. Glicksberg, Literature and Religion (Dallas, 1960), p. 214.

involves desperate struggle, a deep probing of the psyche, and even a confrontation of the essential choice between being and non-being. For Styron's characters the journey towards freedom involves a descent into the hell of racking experience and of evil. Those who can return are purged, purified and reborn. What Baumbach said of Set This House on Fire holds true for all of Styron's novels: his characters make a symbolic pilgrimage into Hell in search of, of all things, the sight of God.³¹

In Styron's vision of life, freedom from whatever bondage his characters rebel against can come only with faith or at least a glimpse of God and His redeeming love. The organization of this study will follow the development of Styron's vision from disintegration and death in Lie Down in Darkness through reintegration and regeneration in Set This House on Fire to redemption in The Confessions of Nat Turner.

31

Baumbach, p. 135.

CHAPTER I

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS

Styron's first novel Lie Down in Darkness will be examined in this chapter as the initial entry in the diary of his search for an ethic by which men might live. This first novel exposes men and women desperately struggling for an identity, freedom and meaningfulness without "either the support of a definable personal philosophy or the codes and admonitions of institutionalized culture or religion."¹ Such men and women fail in their struggle as a result of their inability to love either self, others or God. Without love and the belief which accompanies love, says Styron, men lead fragmented, chaotic lives, often ending in self-destruction. The novel ends in disintegration, but the formula for the spiritual antibodies to overcome such a life of despair is to be found in the lesson of this novel.

Lie Down in Darkness begins and ends on the funeral day of a beautiful, intelligent young Southern girl, Peyton Loftis, who committed suicide in New York and whose body has been returned to her home, Port Warwick, Virginia, for burial. Peyton confessed in her last letter to her father, "Oh, Daddy,

¹ David L. Stevenson, "William Styron and the Fiction of the Fifties," in Recent American Fiction, p. 271.

I don't know what's wrong. I've tried to grow up -- to be a good little girl . . . but everywhere I turn I seem to walk deeper and deeper into some terrible despair. What's wrong Daddy? What's wrong?"² This novel is concerned with the discovery of an answer to Peyton's question of "What's wrong?" Pursuing this inquiry, Styron makes use of two simultaneous time sequences. The time present of the novel covers less than three hours as the reader follows the hearse and limousine from the railroad station to the cemetery; at the same time Styron reconstructs the important events of the past through the recollections of five narrators: Milton and Helen Loftis, Milton's mistress, Dolly Bonner, the minister Carey Carr, and Peyton herself. Thus, the story moves backwards and forwards in time. Styron must delay revelation of the past so that each discovery further illuminates the present.³ The complexity of the structure is temporal, for as Hassan points out,

time . . . is a function of man's urge to experience and to understand. Time is consciousness -- and consciousness in our time has cracked and splintered. Time in the novel, consequently, is cracked, too; the story is

² (New York: New American Library Signet Book, 1967). All quotations are from this edition.

³ Baumbach, p. 124.

revealed in flashback and flashbacks within flashbacks.⁴

An understanding of the full significance of "what's wrong" with the Loftises and the causes of their disintegration requires an analysis of their story within three circles of meaning, each of which illuminates the others and lends religious and moral significance to the story. Their disintegration will be examined first as a domestic tragedy: the failure of a family to love; second, as a consequence of the seeming moral void created by modern society; and third, in terms of man's universal struggle for salvation and a spiritual rebirth.

The story of the Loftises is on one level a domestic tragedy. It is the tale of love unstrung; all forms of love -- conjugal, parental, sibling and sexual -- are undisciplined and destructive. The failure of the Loftises to love one another properly, thus causing each other pain and a sense of failing one another, creates unbearable guilt feelings in each of them. The theme of sin and guilt which runs through the novel in large part explains the Loftises' disintegration and also gives the novel its significance by

⁴ Radical Innocence, p. 131.

making the Loftises doom a moral fact.

The domestic situation of the Loftises, as it emerges through the recollection of the narrators spanning the twenty years before Peyton's suicide, is one of destructive passions. Milton Loftis made his daughter Peyton the beneficiary of all his affection, causing his wife, Helen, to turn away from both of them and to channel all her love and motherly concern towards her mentally defective daughter Maudie. As Geismar points out:

the two passions of these two parents both separate them more deeply and render them even more dependent upon each other. For Helen Loftis takes out her marital frustrations upon her daughter Peyton, whom she accuses of trying to destroy the little Maudie. And part of Milton's further dependence on Helen -- and his underground hatred of her -- is that even while he thinks she is destroying the daughter whom he loves, she alone, Helen, has the power to keep Peyton in the family, or to drive her out.⁵

Through Milton Loftis' mind the reader first sees this family, past and present. He seeks to discover through his memories how and why he failed Peyton; he feels that his weaknesses and sins make him responsible.

⁵ Maxwell Geismar, American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity (New York, 1958), p. 241.

Loftis is a man without drive or purpose. Through his marriage to Helen he acquired money, property and an assured social position. Having such security, he never makes an effort to expand his law practice, or to fulfill his dreams of political achievement. For the price of comfort he sold his manhood and the possibility of personal achievement.⁶ Loftis knows he is a failure, and he turns to Dolly Bonner, whose adoration for him feeds his ego, to alcohol and to an obsessive love for Peyton to support him "against the unthinkable notion that life was not rich and purposeful and full of rewards." (40) With these props and crutches Lotfis escapes temporarily from the reality of his failure. Yet he has his moments of awakening:

At the age of fifty he was beginning to discover, with a sense of panic, that his whole life had been in the nature of a hangover, with faintly unpleasant pleasures being atoned for by the dull unalleviated pain of guilt. (144)

Loftis' most devastating feelings of guilt come from the failure of his marriage, his unfaithfulness to his wife, and his financial dependence upon her. As Loftis says to himself: "the greatest single burden of your life was not merely the loss of love for your wife, but the constant guilty knowledge

⁶ Baumbach, p. 125.

of your debt to her -- and your dependence." (168) He makes serious attempts to atone for this guilt, by giving up Dolly and alcohol and by trying to rebuild his marriage. After the death of his daughter Maudie, Loftis rebels against his weaknesses, returns to the torture of Helen and attempts to accomplish what the minister Carr called "the revolt of a man against the pure footlessness which had held him in bondage for half a lifetime." (235)

However, Loftis' attempts to rebel against his own weaknesses are not sustained. He lacks the strength to remain "awake". His occasional isolated gestures against a life of chaos never involve a thorough or continued commitment.⁷ When things go wrong for Loftis at the family reunions, Christmas and birthday parties which begin with high hopes and end with Helen driving Peyton out of the family circle -- Loftis retreats clumsily and despairingly, lulling himself back into oblivion through alcohol and Dolly, refusing to recognize or face up to the conflicts in his life.

The chaotic and nightmarish quality of Loftis' existence is epitomized in his drunken search for Peyton at a football game. While his daughter lies dying in a hospital, Loftis

⁷ Galloway, p. 58.

leaves her and the wife who needs him to find Peyton, who is unaware of Maudie's illness and her father's search for her. Everywhere Loftis goes -- to the fraternity house, to the drug store -- Peyton has just left. In his increasing drunkenness he continually forgets his mission and gets side-tracked. Sitting at a football game, drinking with a stranger, he suddenly realizes he's 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 . . . his enormous sin would be advertised to the sky like a banner. (198)

Loftis struggles for an awakening from this nightmare of existence: "Ah, for a man to arise in me, that the man I am should cease to be." (199) Yet, wandering away from the football game to collapse in a ditch, he is only "possessed by the belief that all this was only a dream: his search, Peyton, even his fear and agony, were all part of an impossible illusion." (201)

The impossible illusion lies in the dream of pure love he has created about his daughter Peyton, a love which in reality is obsessive, smothering, almost incestuous. Loftis always indulged Peyton, protected her from life's disappointments and in so doing, made it impossible for Peyton to become

mature enough to live outside the orbit of his protective love. At Peyton's carefully arranged wedding Loftis in his drunkenness mauls Peyton, triggering Helen's insane jealousy of Peyton and bringing the unsteady structure of all their lives crashing down. He, in part, is the cause of Peyton's destruction, as he understands in a moment of realization: "Forgive me, forgive all of us . . . Forgive me for loving you so . . ." (277) "I killed with kindness the only thing I cared for, really." (296) Loftis' realization of his obsessive and destructive love for Peyton comes years too late; he can only lapse into a drugged stupor with the conclusion that "they should have never put the idea of love in the mind of an animal." (296)

In this chronicle of the failure of love, Milton loves too much. Helen, on the other hand, loves too little. Milton's attachment to Peyton and her young flirtatious body create an obsessive jealousy in Helen which develops into a passionate hatred of her daughter. Helen is a cold, proud, puritanical woman with an unflinching moral sense of what is proper. She recalls a stiff, obedient childhood under a stern, militant father. By such standards does she measure Milton's and Peyton's fall.⁸ Helen channels all her love

⁸ Shaun O'Connell, "Expense of Spirit: The Vision of William Styron," Critique, VIII, ii (1966), 23.

towards her retarded daughter Maudie who, in her perpetual childhood, is the perfect, sinless, obedient child. ("Yes, Pappadaddy, Yes, Mamadear.") Helen's love for Maudie is the only kind of which she is capable. It is, as Baumbach points out, a perverted self-love. Maudie is the personification of Helen's crippled spirit; Helen can love only the broken image of herself.⁹

Helen's firmness toward Peyton, a hypocritical mask for her hostility, leads Peyton to grow up thinking she is a "bad girl". Such resoluteness likewise drives Milton to Dolly and drink and an ever increasing protectiveness towards Peyton. Wanting and needing Milton's love, Helen is nevertheless too proud to forgive his offenses. She knows her power to hold the family together: ". . . she collapsed . . . into absolute darkness, knowing that by one word -- Yes or Forgive or Love -- she might have affirmed all. . . ." (77) But instead of affirming she revels in her suffering, her pride becoming a masochistic self-indulgence.¹⁰

However, Helen, although most often self-righteous in her hatred, knows guilt too. As she says to her minister in

⁹ Baumbach, p. 127.

¹⁰ Ibid.

speaking of the sins of Milton and Peyton: "But sin. Haven't I sinned, too? God, what is sin?" (109) Helen has a repeated vision of destruction in which first Dolly and then Peyton are horribly mutilated. Not being able to cope with the consciousness of this guilt, Helen tries to escape it through insanity, as Milton escapes his guilt through drink and adultery. Existence is a nightmare for Helen, and her guilt is too great a burden: ". . . I will fold up my mind like a leaf and drift on this stream over the Brink. Which will be soon, and then the dark, and then be done with this ugliness. . . ." (141)

Peyton, the object of her father's obsessive, selfish love and her mother's hatred and jealousy, grows up unable to know and share a mature love. She cries out "I don't love and I can't love and isn't that too bad." (224) She is destroyed by her parents even though she sees their weaknesses: "If just she had a soul and you'd had some guts." (256)

Through the prejudiced narratives of Milton and Helen and also through the omniscient author the reader is given an external view of Peyton's life. Only in the closing section of the novel, before Peyton, having lost her equilibrium, goes to her death, does one enter her mind through a stream-of-consciousness monologue.

Through the narratives of the other characters we are aware of Peyton's constant struggle to "grow up", to achieve some kind of personal identity. After the death of her sister Maudie, when her mother insanely accuses her of being "half the cause . . . You don't care. About anything. You with your whoring around and your drinking . . ." (214), Peyton realizes that the family is destroying itself and she carries her share of guilt, deservedly or not. Significantly, it is after this scene that Peyton, without love, surrenders herself sexually to her boyfriend. In a sense it is Peyton's first suicide -- a moral death that is an endless retribution for her endless guilt.¹¹ Styron evokes her surrender as the Fall from innocence: "Twilight fell over their bodies. They were painted with fire, like those fallen children who live and breathe and soundlessly scream, and whose souls blaze forever." (225)

Peyton is a fallen innocent, and once she has sinned she keeps sinning compulsively in a never-ending cycle of self-punishment for her ever-growing guilt. After the debacle of her wedding day, when Milton's incestuous attachment to Peyton becomes obvious and Helen accuses Peyton of being a slut

11

Baumbach, p. 128.

and using her sexuality to extort gratuities from her father, Peyton is forever cut off from the kind of social and family life which might conceivably have saved her from self-punishing abasement.¹² She can never return home again; in effect she has lost the father who had always protected her from life. Peyton thus begins a frantic search to find "somewhere in the net of dreams a new father, a new home".

(362) Through her marriage she repeats the only kind of love she has ever known: indulgence and jealousy. She constantly tests her husband's love and forgiveness with reprehensible acts of adultery, while at the same time becoming insanely jealous of him for small faults she has magnified. Harry, however, is unwilling to assume the role of Peyton's father and he leaves her. Fatherless again, unable to "grow up" and face the real world, Peyton's only hope for freedom is through death.

Peyton's problem, unlike those of Milton and Helen, is intensified by the fact that she fully comprehends her inner self. She recognizes that she has an incestuous attachment to her father and that she can not cope with her guilt feelings.

12

Robert Gorham Davis, "The American Individualist Tradition," in The Creative Present, eds. Nona Balakian, Charles Simmons (New York, 1963), p. 132.

She sins and tortures herself in an effort to expiate that guilt.

I have not fornicated in the darkness because I wanted to but because I was punishing myself for punishing you Harry. Yet something far past dreaming or memory, and darker than either, impels me. (359)

The guilt "past dreaming or memory" is her electra complex, and the guilt feelings are those instilled in her by her mother: "you mustn't mustn't can't you be proper. God punishes improper children. . . ."(349) "shame, shame, shame."

(351) Peyton understands but lacks the strength to cope with her predicament. She too, like Milton and Helen, must escape her guilt, and her only escape is through suicide: "Bunny Milton would understand that, perhaps he would understand my going: undivorced from guilt I must divorce myself from life." (364) Peyton's final thoughts as she goes to her death represent a response to her mother's stern morality: "But you must be proper. I say, oh pooh. Oh pooh." (368)

A young girl takes her life, and her parents realize on her funeral day that their differences can never again be reconciled. Hope is gone from their lives, and all that remains is escape from the reality of their nightmare through insanity and alcohol. After they bury their daughter, after

Milton's frantic attempt to strangle Helen, both husband and wife are left with "Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing!"

(370)

The relationships and problems of the Loftises, as seen above, explain the disintegration and failure of their family within one circle of meaning, their domestic life. Lie Down in Darkness is, however, more than a domestic tragedy; it is, as well, both a contemporary and a universal statement of man's struggle for a meaningful existence. Thus, an understanding of the Loftises and a discussion of Styron's hope for man must include an examination of the contemporary and universal circles of meaning in which the drama of their lives are enacted.

Some critics see Styron's novel as particularly Southern, as the tragedy of a family which could have taken place only in the South. Aldridge says:

The domestic tensions of misunderstanding and jealousy are only the ostensible cause of the disintegration of the Loftis family. Behind them are larger and more insidious disorders. Behind Milton's father-guilt and incest guilt is the whole Southern blood guilt. Behind Helen's jealousy and Puritanism is the timeless Southern gentlewoman madness . . . Behind Peyton's father-complex is a century of paternalism and man-hatred and sexual masochism.¹³

¹³ John W. Aldridge, In Search of Heresy (New York, 1956), p. 146.

But the sense of a massively decadent family past is, unlike Faulkner, absent in Styron. Styron's story is a private tragedy, not a community one. Nor is there any truth in the argument made by Aldridge that Peyton's tragedy consists of her isolation from the South¹⁴ as does Quentin's in The Sound and the Fury. Peyton's flight from the South is her one last chance to retrieve her life, rather than the cause of her breakdown.¹⁵ Styron himself said of the Southern aspects of his novel:

I wanted to write a novel that has more than regional implications. I wanted to avoid the ancestral theme, too -- the peculiar, inbred and perverse types that Faulkner, Caldwell and other Southern writers have dealt in. At the same time I didn't want to exploit the old idea of wreckage and defeat as a peculiarly Southern phenomenon. Elements of this are in the book, but they're part of the people rather than the place. I like to think my story could have happened in Massachusetts just as well as in Virginia.¹⁶

And indeed the Loftises' story could have taken place anywhere. It is not just the South, but a nation, a time, a

14 Ibid., p. 148.

15 Rubin, The Faraway Country, p. 203.

16 David Dempsey, "Talk with William Styron," NYTBR (September 9, 1951), p. 27.

human condition that is awry.¹⁷ Milton believes: ". . . we are the dribble turds of angels, not men but a race of toads. . . ." (174) "We lost our lovewords, Not the South or the North . . . 'S the U.S.A. We've gone to pot." (175) And Peyton says: ". . . the race is headed for destruction . . . It's time and remembrance." (290) Peyton sees herself as lost, not because she is Southern, but because of her father's generation: "Those people back in the Lost Generation . . . They thought they were lost . . . They weren't lost. What they were doing was losing us." (224) The generations have no message to pass on to their progeny; they are unable to give validity through their lives to Christian morality and faith.¹⁸ The story of the Loftises' disintegration involves the problems of value and belief peculiar to our modern society, a society which has lost its moral orientation and coherence. The progress of negation in this novel reflecting the moral conditions of modern society, leads to the historical event which casts its shadow over the concluding pages and is the symbol of contem-

¹⁷ O'Connell, p. 22.

¹⁸ William Van O'Connor, "John Updike and William Styron: The Burden of Talent," in Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale, Illinois, 1964), p. 217.

porary moral disintegration -- the explosion of the Bomb.

Peyton commits suicide on the day the United States explodes an atomic bomb over Hiroshima: "such destruction, the radio said, has never before been seen on earth." (336)

Peyton comes to her husband Harry in her desperate need and he says, "Do you realize what the world's come to? Do you realize that the great American commonwealth just snuffed out one hundred thousand innocent lives this week?" (360)

The explosion of the Bomb can be interpreted as the national correlative of Peyton's disease.¹⁹ The Bomb, however, is only abstractly relevant as a symbol; its reference is not intended to overshadow Peyton's personal needs, which are universal and not just the product of the overpowering despair of the current age. Styron himself said in reference to the bomb symbol:

That was just gilding the lily. If I were writing the same thing now I'd leave that out and have her jump on the Fourth of July. Really, I'm not trying to be rosy about things like the atom bomb and war and the failure of the Presbyterian Church. Those things are awful. All I'm trying to say is that those things don't alter one bit a writer's fundamental problems, which are

¹⁹ Baumbach, p. 130.

Love, Requited and Unrequited, Insult, et
cetera.²⁰

Through the Loftises Styron exemplifies the universal struggle of man for love, joy and hope; yet, it is a struggle which cannot be and in this novel, is not divorced from the trials of faith and belief which are unique in modern society. The plight of the Loftises, who unquestionably live in today's world, forcefully dramatizes the contemporary failure of institutionalized religion to provide genuine and meaningful social or spiritual salvation. The failure and inadequacy of formalized religion to meet the spiritual problems of modern man are expressed through Helen's search for order in the church.

Helen believes herself to be a good Christian, a regular churchgoer, who feels that her husband betrayed her when he ceased to attend church. She professes her love for God, deriving therefrom a sense of superiority in that she knows "right from wrong". Helen's religiosity, however, is merely a manifestation of her revulsion against instinct and life;²¹

²⁰ Peter Matthiessen and George Plimpton, "William Styron" (an interview), in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York, 1958), p. 281.

²¹ Hassan, p. 128.

her professed code of Christian morality is, as Peyton realizes, "phony". (298)

Nevertheless, Helen struggles against the sinfulness of her hatreds and jealousies and turns to the Reverend Carey Carr for help and guidance. After years of counseling and meditation with Helen, Carr assumes the roles of confidant, psychiatrist and spiritual lover.²² He is a gentle and intelligent man who once had a vision of God and "through a life of hard work and prayer" (100) strives to recapture that vision. Yet, Carr's benevolent brand of modern theology is so lacking in force that it cannot help or persuade Helen to overcome her jealousy and hatred. Carr's failure, Styron implies, is the failure of modern men of the cloth to give their constituents the faith and power to endure:

. . . he had failed; all those years he had known her she had gradually become a sort of symbol to him, of every lost person who seeks Christ, no matter how fitfully, and is salvageable. But he had not saved her, he had not taught her faith enough to endure disaster. (228)

Helen rejects Carr and his teachings, telling him, in a moment of personal insight and truth, "Your God is a silly

²² Baumbach, p. 126.

old ass . . . and my God . . . my God is the devil!" (286)

Contrasted with Helen's failure to gain spiritual strength from her minister is the subplot involving the Negro evangelist Daddy Faith and his fervent followers. On the day of Peyton's funeral Daddy Faith makes his annual appearance before his flock. The life-long servants of the Loftises, Ella and LaRuth, see Daddy Faith as God's Apostle, as the "King of Glory, Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." (137) He has the power to meet the needs of his people, as Carey Carr cannot, and to direct their lives towards paths of belief, peace and grace.

As the funeral procession moves towards the cemetery, toward the West and a storm, carloads and busloads of Negroes travel toward the East, toward Daddy Faith, the beach and baptism.²³ In the final scene of the book Daddy Faith preaches about destruction and the atom bomb, about war and persecution and suffering, and yet finds comfort for his people:

²³ Jerry H. Bryant, "The Hopeful Stoicism of William Styron," South Atlantic Quarterly, LXII (1963), 543.

Do you not know dat I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean, and a new heart also will I give you and a new spirit will I put widin you? (380)

Ella, the Loftis' servant, who had taken Peyton's death as a personal tragedy and whose "face wore the passive look of one who has seen all, borne all, known all and expects little more, of either joy or suffering" (371), is transported by Daddy Faith's sermon and has a vision of Jesus. Shouting above the tumult of a roaring train and against Loftis' cry of "Nothing!", Ella ends the novel with cries of "Yes, Jesus! I seen Him! Yeah! Yeah!" (382)

Many critics interpret the scene of the Negro revival meeting as Styron's solution to the problems posed by the Loftises.²⁴ The Negroes are stable because they are believing Christians, goes the argument; on the foundations of their belief they are able to conduct a satisfying life. Baumbach says: "The source of the Negro's strength is his unquestioning faith in God, as opposed to the gentry's religion which has formalized God out of existence."²⁵ However, those who interpret this scene as a proposal for

²⁴ A few of the critics are O'Connor, p. 217; Bryant, p. 543; Baumbach, p. 133.

²⁵ Baumbach, p. 133.

salvation through the simplistic faith of the Negroes are thinking too much of Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury and paying too little attention to the scene Styron creates.

Daddy Faith is a faker, a false prophet, a money-grubbing opportunist who drives a Cadillac, flashes diamond rings and lives well on the money thrown at him by his followers. His "religious service" is flashy showmanship. The raft on the water which serves as his altar, is described as follows:

. . . 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. (374)

Styron is certainly not proposing as his "solution" the kind of primitive fundamentalism and hocus-pocus displayed by Daddy Faith. The contrast between the revival meeting and the final negation of the Loftises is far more complicated and ironic. This contrast further reinforces the proposition that men of God and organized religion have no relevant role to play in modern life, for only the ignorant and superstitious could find in Daddy Faith the father and lover that Peyton searches for. ("Who loves you, my people? You,

Daddy! Daddy Faith! You loves us!" (378)). If ignorance is required to enable religion to give strength, purpose and meaning to life's struggles, then what can save the sophisticated and intelligent people like Peyton Loftis?

Styron suggests that man can be saved, that he does have the capacity to endure and even to believe, in spite of the inefficacy of traditional religion in modern life. Indeed, he shows how man may acquire the belief which leads to inner peace and wholeness. Yet, a weakness in this novel is that the characters' helplessness and failure to acquire that belief and to find their salvation seems to stem from a preordained doom which hovers over their lives. The characters themselves express the feeling that their fate is inevitable. Peyton says in her mad search for a father and lover, "But it's decreed. It's decreed that I shall never find him." (338) Perhaps the best statement of the characters' lack of free will to escape their destiny is expressed by Peyton: "I thought, oh Christ, have mercy on your Peyton. this evening not because she hasn't believed but because she. No one, had a chance to, ever." (367) They do not have a chance to escape, they are destined to fail -- not because of some divine plan but by the decree of their author. Hence, before discussing Styron's vision of hope as it appears in

this novel, one must consider some of the novel's themes which help to illuminate the meaning of the Loftises' struggle and by their nature lead Styron to doom his characters to failure.

Perhaps the central theme of the book, upon which the chronicle of the Loftises is a meditation, is that of human mortality. Its importance is evidenced by the title of the book, which is taken from Sir Thomas Browne's Urn Burial.

The novel's epigraph warns us:

And since death must be the Lucina of life, and even Pagans could doubt, whether thus to live were to die; since our longest sun sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes; since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying mementos, and time that grows old in itself, bids us hope no long duration; -- diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation.

A sense of death hovering over life, of life as a preparation for death and of man precipitating his own destruction is constantly felt in the presence of the funeral procession and Peyton's coffin. In one sense, then, the story of the Loftises is a meditation on the themes of time, everfading beauty, and death.²⁶ Styron's theme and concern involves

²⁶ O'Connell, p. 21.

more, however, than the ultimate fact of physical death. At the core of the novel's meaning is spiritual death and the struggle for a spiritual rebirth. All of the characters have fallen from innocence, know guilt and try to renew and redeem themselves, to resurrect the innocent child in themselves.²⁷ It is this struggle for spiritual rebirth -- the central mystery of Christianity -- which is at the heart of Peyton's quest.

Peyton, pursued by wingless birds who are the symbol of her guilt, dreams in her madness of escaping from the world and her guilt into the interior of her clock: "we lay there together, Harry and I, in the safety of springs and the order of precisely moving wheels, like sleeping to exist in some land where we were young again" (353) She dreams of resurrecting the innocent child within herself: "I tried to pray: lighten my darkness, I beseech you, Oh, Lord, and make me clean and pure and without sin . . . make me as I was when I was a child." (342)

²⁷ Critics, notably Geismar, have commented on the lost childhood theme of the novel, the innumerable instances of regression and symbols from the world of childhood. However, they see in this theme proof that the Loftises are perpetual children rather than a manifestation of their struggle for spiritual rebirth.

But Peyton is without a redeeming love of God; she has lost her father, her God, and her faith, and thereby has committed herself to a chaotic universe: "my life hath known no father, any road to any end may run." (325) For her there is no hope for a spiritual rebirth in life; she can only hope for a rebirth after death:

. . . Oh my God, why have I forsaken You? Have I through some evil inherited in a sad century cut myself off from You forever, and thus only by dying must take the fatal chance: to walk into a dark closet and lie down there and dream away my sins, hoping to wake in another land, in a far, fantastic dawn? (365)

Peyton's suicide has the ritual aspects of a purification.²⁸

She removes all her clothes before jumping to her death:

"I was naked, clean if sweating, just as I had come." (368)

Thinking "Perhaps I shall rise at another time, though I lie down in darkness and have my light in ashes" (368),

Peyton is at last purified of her sins and momentarily free:

"my poor flightless birds, have you suffered without soaring on this earth? Come then and fly . . . and so I see them go -- Oh my Christ! one by one ascending . . . toward paradise." (368)

Juxtaposed with Peyton's death, the baptismal scene of

28 Baumbach, p. 129.

Daddy Faith and his followers which ends the book perhaps can be seen as a symbolizing of the continuity of the life cycle -- a return to the starting point of existence, the renewal of life through baptism. However, no true spiritual rebirth or redemption is achieved through death, as critics such as Baumbach suggest.²⁹ Peyton's death brings no new life, no new religious consciousness or knowledge. On the contrary, it achieves only the final negation of her parents.

Peyton's struggle for spiritual rebirth is a reflection of her deep sense of moral responsibility. She may have forsaken God, she may live in an amoral society, but God's moral laws still live in her conscience. She is not merely a victim of a decaying world; she is and feels responsible for her feelings and actions. One never senses that Peyton functions in a moral vacuum and is a law unto herself, or that it is enough, as it is for the existentialist "activists", for her to live on a moment-to-moment basis, ordering her sensations in such a way that each moment says no to death. On the contrary, the emphasis on Peyton's moral responsibility gives the novel its final importance, even though the

²⁹ Baumbach, p. 133.

book is flawed by an overriding sense of inevitable doom which seems the only way Styron was capable of effectively treating the themes of human mortality and the impossible quest for resurrection.

Nevertheless, the question still remains, does Peyton, does modern man, have the possibility of finding identity, freedom and faith? Styron answers affirmatively and in Lie Down in Darkness touches upon the "solution" which he is to develop more fully in his later books. Stated very simply, Styron's faith in man's possibilities rests upon the fundamental Christian belief that God is love.

The Loftises' love is blighted, and this is the cause of their personal failures. The most important kind of love at which the Loftises fail and which is the foundation of all love, is self-love, the love of one's own humanity. The Reverend Carr realizes this, and he tells Helen that it may seem odd to talk about faith in the modern age but:

. . . our age is only a moment in that time we can perceive as the timeless love of God. The devil . . . rises with greater strength each time to try our faith . . . it is our joy and exaltation to seek combat: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith . . ." there's nothing stupid or arrogant in such an affirmation . . . it's a tribute to the faith and strength and love of one's self, which becomes the love of others, and which is the timeless love of God. (120)

Here indeed is Styron's vision. To lead a purposeful life one must first learn self-love. Carr wants to tell Helen: "get down on your knees to that image you hate . . . ask forgiveness for despising yourself. And pray, pray hard (to yourself . . . love yourself)." (134) Peyton, too, has lost self-love: "I would not pray to a polyp or a jellyfish, nor to Jesus Christ, but only to that part of me that was pure and lost now." (351)

Peyton does not have the experience which can teach her self-love. Had she, then she would have been able to learn love of others and love of God. For in Styron's vision the fulfillment of love is the realization that God is love. Peyton knows this when she says: "God, give me my Harry back, then, Harry, give me my God back; for somewhere I've lost my way." (342) In the ever widening circle of love, love of others can lead to love of God. Once one realizes that love is of God, the next and ultimate step to belief is a simple one: Christ said "Love me because I love you." Love, then, is the permanent and true value after which man must seek. Love begets belief which brings commitment and meaning to life.

Harry Miller, Peyton's husband, is Styron's symbol of hope for a complete meaningful life. Harry, unlike the

Loftises, has faith in himself. Peyton, trying to describe Harry to her father, tells him that what is important to Harry is "being true to yourself inside. That's what he is, he's right inside." (251) Terrorized by the news of atomic destruction, Harry, a painter, can still paint a picture of an old man standing among ruins "lifting proud, tragic eyes toward heaven". (357) "It's got belief," Peyton says. "In the dim light the tragic face still looked heavenward, amid the junk and rubble, through the final, extinguishing dusk, proud and unafraid, my Harry." (360) Peyton's despair leads to self-destruction, but Harry who can love and does believe, is able to rise above despair: "I want to paint and paint and paint . . . I want to crush in my hands all that agony and make beauty come out, because that's all that's left." (360)

While Harry symbolizes the possibility that man can endure, his role in the novel is minor and, hence, his promise of hope cannot lighten the shadow of despair that darkens the lives of the Loftises. The novel, in the last analysis, ends in disintegration.

CHAPTER II

THE LONG MARCH

Styron's second publication, a novella, The Long March, is the story of a passionate man, enslaved by a military system, who rebels in the name of human dignity and freedom. Although this story does not have the religious dimensions of Lie Down in Darkness and Styron's later novels, it nevertheless provides a valuable insight into the themes of human bondage and rebellion which play substantially more important roles in Set This House on Fire and The Confessions of Nat Turner. An examination of these themes will reveal that for Styron man's success in his search for a meaningful relationship with himself, his society and God is dependent upon his success in rebelling against whatever holds him in bondage. Milton Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness made tentative, half-hearted attempts at rebellion but never rose above his apathy and, as we have seen, was reduced to despair and disintegration. However, Cass Kinsolving in the later Set This House On Fire breaks the chain that enslaves him through the drastic action of murder; and Nat Turner, the ultimate of rebels, executes a mass rebellion against slavery. The rebel, as one observes in The Long March, is a man of passion; for Styron passion is a necessary quality, one which makes

possible the assertion of the self and the insistence upon freedom, individuality and justice. Styron would agree with Kierkegaard:

. . . times . . . are petty because they lack passion . . . my soul always hearkens back to Shakespeare and the Old Testament. There one feels that those who speak are men; there they hate; there they love; there they kill the enemy, curse their descendents for generations to come, there they sin.¹

Without passion men are merely empty husks without will, without souls and, hence, without the possibilities of salvation. The Long March demonstrates the necessity of a passionate assertion of the self against whatever bondage dehumanizes man.

The Long March is a war novella which grew out of Styron's personal experience of recall into the Marines during the Korean War. The story is on its surface a protest against the authoritarianism of military life and the "never-endingness of war",² although through the use of images and symbols it tells several tales. The principal theme deals

¹ Quoted in William Barrett, "Existentialism as a Symptom of Man's Contemporary Crisis," in Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature, p. 144.

² The Long March (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 118. All quotations are from this edition.

with the individual's frustrating relationship with modern American society: the great difficulty in maintaining one's personal freedom and identity in a society which is consistently demanding the sacrifice of both.³ The protagonists of the story, the narrator Lieutenant Culver and his friend Captain Mannix, are marine reserves who have been called back to service after six years of "freedom, growth and serenity." (7) They protest their "renewed bondage" (45) and struggle against the society, of which the Southern training camp is a working model, which threatens their freedom.

Two major events occur in the story, both of which exemplify the frustrating absurdity of this world: the accidental deaths of eight young recruits and the maiming of fifteen more when two mortar shells misfire alongside the lunch line, and the thirty-six mile, thirteen-hour forced march of unfit, unrested troops solely to make Marines out of the boys.

The senseless deaths which open the story establish an atmosphere of questioning, purposelessness and waste. The reaction of Culver and Mannix to the "senseless slaughter" (63)

³ August Nigro, "The Long March: The Expansive Hero in a Closed World," Critique, IX, 3 (1967), 104.

is one of horror and sickness. Mannix, a hulking Jew, a proud and stubborn man, sobs helplessly; Culver observes that the "explosion seemed to have stripped off layers of skin from the Captain, leaving only raw nerves exposed."

(66) In contrast with their reaction is that of Colonel Templeton, the commanding officer of the camp. The Colonel, a veritable embodiment of the military life, receives the news of the deaths "as if he were receiving the most routine of messages." (13) He gave orders in "the cool and leisurely, almost bored, tones of a man to whom the greatest embarrassment would be a show of emotion." (18) A man without emotion, the Colonel represents the dehumanization of life in this society. He was not himself "evil or unjust" (30); he is, as Culver realizes, "hardly a man at all -- just a quantity of attitudes." (117)

It is exactly this quality of dehumanization that Mannix is referring to when he calls life in the Marine Camp "degrading". (54) Receiving the Colonel's orders for the forced march Mannix's face showed a "quick look of both fury and suffering, like the tragic Greek mask, or a shackled slave." (30-31) The essential matters of freedom and human dignity thus lead Mannix to rebel against the Colonel's forced march. He has been driven to the point where his most

important loyalty -- to himself -- has been challenged.⁴

And his own particular suffering had made him angry, had given him an acute, if cynical, perception about his renewed bondage . . . His discontent was not merely peevish; it was rocklike and rebellious and thus the discontent seemed to Culver to be at once brave and somehow full of peril. (45)

Mannix had known suffering in World War II, his body a mass of scars as proof. More than suffering, however, Mannix had known fear. He is haunted by the memory of a night when, drunk and naked, he was dangled upside down out of a tenth-story window. He remembers "that dark, man, infinite darkness all around me . . . I really saw Death then." (57-58) Mannix saw the naked death which Peyton Loftis experienced and learned from his vision of Death the meaning and value of his life and freedom.

Mannix's rebellion is, then, a necessary and noble assertion of his freedom as an individual human being. Styron gives this rebellion further dignity and significance through symbolic parallels between Mannix and Christ. Mannix is constantly invoking Christ and, in his passion, is himself pierced by a nail through his foot during the course of the march.

⁴ Galloway, p. 63.

Mannix attempts a "rebellion in reverse" through the march. He ruthlessly drives himself with a crippled foot, his voice that

of a man wildly frantic with one idea: to last . . . Not 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)

However nobly intended, Mannix's rebellion is not noble in its execution. In his determination to spite the Colonel he relentlessly drives not only himself but his entire company, becoming the tyrant and enslaver that he is rebelling against. Mannix is corrupted by military life, and his pride as a Marine ("They were marines . . . they could no more not be determined to walk the thirty-six miles than they could . . . turn themselves into beautiful nymphs." (69-70)) compels his tyrannical behavior. Culver realizes, although Mannix does not, that "far down, profoundly, Mannix was so much a marine that it could make him casually demented. The corruption begun years ago in his drill-feet had climbed up, overtaken him and begun to rot his brain." (103) For man, corrupted by military life and, even more, by Western society as a whole, true heroism has become, if not impossible, extremely difficult.

Mannix's furious pride, making of him an enslaver, brings him a court martial and defeat. Styron, however, makes the point that defeat was inevitable.

Born into a generation of conformists, even Mannix (so Culver sensed) was aware that his gestures were not symbolic, but individual, therefore hopeless, maybe even absurd and that he was trapped like all of them in a predicament which one personal insurrection could, if anything, make worse. (55-56)

His rebellion is indeed hopeless because the Colonel, like the mechanized society he represents, cannot be spited:

. . . the Colonel didn't care . . . with him the hike had had nothing to do with courage or sacrifice or suffering, but was only a task to be performed . . . he was as far removed from the vulgar battle, the competition, which Mannix had tried to promote as the frozen, remotest stars. He just didn't care. (111)

If hopeless and corrupted, have Mannix and his rebellion any significance? Described as a "bear" and a caged animal (97), his suffering and enslavement juxtaposed with the ultimate symbol of American bondage -- the Negro (62), Mannix represents that which is primitivistically and innately free, noble and grand in America.⁵ His rebellion is, for Styron, a necessary though futile attempt to assert those qualities. The march is a symbolic initiation into the

⁵ Nigro, p. 108.

realities of Twentieth Century American life: dreams of innocence, freedom and Christian democracy become instead experiences of evil, bondage, and the violation of Christian and democratic principles.⁶ Culver becomes an initiate to that reality; and his recurrent vision of "vanished simplicity and charm" (8) -- of a dozen notes from a Haydn passage and two lovely little girls playing tennis -- is replaced during the course of the march by a picture of mangled bodies and shattered youth. The initiation involves the numbing, desensitizing and dehumanization of the marchers. The professional soldiers, like O'Leary, whose conversion to this sterile society is complete, even ". . . in the midst of pain, yield up still only words of accord and respect and even admiration for the creator of such a wild and lunatic punishment." (101) O'Leary exemplifies "a man so firmly cemented to the system that all doubts were beyond countenance." (101) The initiates, the recruits, during the course of the march become "robots" (100), devoid of sensation.

One possible way to resist the conversion and resultant dehumanization, as Culver realizes, is through indifference.

⁶ Nigro, p. 112.

Culver wishes he were man enough to disavow his determination and pride, to quit the march and ride back with the Marines who could not make it,

and by that act flaunt his contempt of the march, the Colonel, the whole bloody Marine Corps. But he was not man enough, he knew, far less simply a free man: he was just a marine -- as was Mannix, . . . and they had been marines, it seemed all their lives, would go on being marines forever. (102-103)

Indifference, disaffiliation, alienation from public values offers one means of preserving individuality. Styron, however, points out through the example of Culver and Mannix that indifference is often impossible. Mannix is a Marine, a product and member of his society; all he can and must do is assert and, thus, affirm his humanity by resisting the powerful tendencies of his culture to make of him a mere thing. Mannix does succeed in resisting the initiation into dehumanization. The reader's last view of him underscores the humanity of his suffering. Dragging his crippled leg on his agonized way towards the shower, his face one of "tortured and gigantic suffering" (119), Mannix meets a compassionate Negro maid. The two of them share a moment of sympathy and understanding. "Do it hurt?" (119) she asks. Mannix, standing there "a mass of scars and naked" (120), answered "not with self-pity but only 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', he said."

(120)

Inevitable and self-inflicted as Mannix's defeat may be, one is nevertheless touched by the humanity and dignity of his rebellion. Mannix won a singular victory in his defeat: he held on to his vision of himself. This paradox of victory in defeat, even more pronounced in the case of Nat Turner, is not unlike the paradox of Christ's message to his disciples: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."⁷

Mannix struggles outwardly for freedom against the society which threatens that freedom; the Loftises in Lie Down in Darkness and Cass Kinsolving in Set This House on Fire struggle internally with their own guilts and inadequacies, created in part by the society in which they live. In either case the threat of meaninglessness and disintegration comes not from a chaotic and irrational universe, which would negate the existence of God and the possibilities of regeneration and redemption, but from the danger of an

⁷ Matthew 16:25.

enslavement which destroys one's sense of self and one's passion for his own personal existence. In Styron's next novel, Set This House on Fire, Cass Kinsolving is a man in bondage whose loss of self has deprived his existence of any meaning and has extinguished his ability to love himself, others and God. He begins with the "Nothing!" of the Loftises, is moved to the rebellious passion of a Mannix, and through his rebellion finds freedom. Freedom for Cass, as for the Loftises and Nat Turner, means being freed into the condition of love. Once he is thus liberated, Cass climbs from disintegration to regeneration, demonstrating how in Styron's vision freedom, love and meaningfulness can come only through an active assertion of the will and, if not through belief in God, then through at least a glimpse of His redeeming love.

CHAPTER III

SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE

Set This House on Fire bears many structural resemblances to Styron's first novel. As Peyton's death and the question of "what's wrong" posed a mystery to be unravelled, so too is the structure of Set This House on Fire informed by a mystery. The narrator, Peter Leverett, before "taking hold of myself and getting on with the job"¹, must establish to his own satisfaction the moral responsibility for several acts of violence which he witnessed in Sambuco, Italy. Returning to the United States from Italy, Peter had stopped in the coastal town of Sambuco to visit his Virginian schoolmate, Mason Flagg. Within twenty-four hours after Peter's arrival, Flagg apparently raped and murdered an Italian peasant girl and then killed himself by jumping from a high cliff. Peter attempts to reconstruct the actual events; but he cannot do so without the help of Cass Kinsolving, an artist who lived in Sambuco and was apparently Flagg's chief antagonist. In the present action of the novel, Peter visits Cass at his home in Charleston, South Carolina, and

¹ Set This House on Fire (New York: New American Library Signet Book, 1961), p. 22. All quotations are from this edition.

the two men piece together from their separate memories what actually occurred in Sambuco.

To understand the events at Sambuco, one must know the backgrounds of the people involved. Once again Styron, as he did in Lie Down in Darkness, displays great virtuosity in his handling of both the element of time and a complex narrative structure. As in Styron's first novel, the action of this story focuses upon the events of a single day. However, whereas the day described in Lie Down in Darkness, the day of Peyton's funeral, is the time present of that novel and gives coherence to its otherwise chaotic action, the day described in Set This House on Fire is of the past and is the time during which the central action of the book occurs.² Although there is only one narrator in Set This House on Fire, compared with five in the first novel, Styron nonetheless offers a rich variety of narrative method. Peter tells part of the story from his point of view, part by way of Cass's first person narrative, part as Cass's story retold by Peter, and part as a representation of events perceived through Cass's drunken consciousness of them.

The murder mystery theme of who killed whom, while superficially important, is less significant than the mystery

² Galloway, p. 66.

of why the events themselves took place. The solution of the latter mystery is found in the life of Cass Kinsolving, who was in fact Mason Flagg's murderer. The dramatic focus of the novel is upon Cass: why he flew blindly across the continent abusing himself and his family, drinking himself into sickness and hysteria, unable to function or to paint; why this "half a person, trapped by terror, trapped by booze, trapped by self" (55), and bent upon self-destruction when becoming trapped and enslaved by Mason Flagg, nevertheless struggled to free himself and to rebel. Put another way the real mystery of this novel is why Cass was so long a man in bondage and why and how he rebelled. Cass's story begins with his disintegration, in effect where the Lie Down in Darkness ended, and traces his regeneration through the relationships and the events in which he becomes involved.

The story of Cass Kinsolving in its movement from disintegration to regeneration is explicitly the story of a man undergoing a spiritual crisis, a man reduced to the depths of despair who must choose between God or nothingness. Primarily on the basis of one passage in the novel in which Cass denies grace and faith and talks of choosing being over nothingness, most critics see Cass as a modern existentialist

hero.³ However, this chapter will seek to show that Cass's spiritual crisis and regeneration follow a definite Christian pattern of redemption⁴ and thus demonstrate that, in Styron's view, the success of man's struggle to overcome despair and disintegration and to find freedom is dependent upon his recognition of the redemptive love of God. This chapter will trace in some detail the redemptive movement of the novel in order to demonstrate its Christian pattern. Moreover, this chapter will consider how the development of the themes of sin and guilt, first introduced in Lie Down in Darkness, and the themes of human bondage and rebellion, which appeared in The Long March, evidences Styron's increasing reliance upon a religious solution to the problems of value and belief in modern life.

³ Some of these critics are Jerry H. Bryant, "The Hopeful Stoicism of William Styron," South Atlantic Quarterly, LXII (1963), 539-550; Robert Gorham Davis, "The American Individualist Tradition," in The Creative Present; Robert Detweiler, Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction (Gainesville, Florida, 1963); David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction; Louis D. Rubin, The Faraway Country, and David L. Stevenson, "William Styron and the Fiction of the Fifties," in Recent American Fiction.

⁴ The discussion of the redemptive movement was suggested by Gunnar Urang, "The Broader Vision: William Styron's Set This House on Fire," Critique VIII, ii (1966), 47-69.

Cass Kinsolving, a Southern preacher's son orphaned at an early age, is a man with a history of psychoses. He was treated in the Navy by a psychiatrist whom he admired; but like all Styron characters he is "chary with his daemons" (347) and feels that he alone, without the aid of doctors or ministers, must solve his problems. An intense, self-obsessed, highly sensitive man, Cass is outsized, driven, often hysterical, a "magnificent wreck of a man."⁵ He frequently quotes from Greek drama, responding to that "spirit in Greek tragedy which welcomes the darkness of death as the only release from the intolerable sufferings of existence."⁶ Unlike any existentialist, Cass, who often refers to himself as a "preacher", is constantly invoking God and crying out in biblical images and preacher's rhythms his sense of imminent judgment and his raging thirst for salvation.⁷

Cass's spiritual condition is amusedly summed up by the young girl, a fanatical Jehovah's Witness, with whom Cass attempts to have his first sexual relations. She

⁵ O'Connell, p. 30.

⁶ Urang, p. 57.

⁷ Urang, p. 68.

prophetically says of his premature orgasm: "Why, you pore silly. Look down there! . . . Why the divine spirit just flowed right on out of you." (255) Years later Cass, in the depths of despair, realizes that the "divine spirit . . . had indeed flowed right on out of me, and which to save my very life I knew I had to recapture." (268) For Cass the loss of divine spirit, a life without faith, imposes upon him the sense of damnation described in John Donne's sermon, the epigraph of the novel:

. . . what gnashing is not a comfort, what gnawing of the worme is not a tickling, what torment is not a marriage bed to this damnation, to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally, from the sight of God?

Cass cannot live secluded from the sight of God, but as in Donne's sermon, he cannot recapture the divine spirit by ordinary means:

. . . that God, who, when he could not get into me, by standing, and knocking, by his ordinary meanes of entring, by his Word, his mercies, hath applied his judgements, and shaken the house, this body, with agues and palsies, and set this house on fire with fevers and calentures and frightened the Master of the house, my soule . . . and so made entrance into me.

God must apply his judgments and "set this house on fire" in order to shake man into spiritual awareness.

Judgment, which presupposes guilt, is one of the first steps in the process of salvation. Whereas the themes of

sin and guilt gave expression to the disintegration of the Loftises, the themes of guilt and judgment, so pervasive in this later novel, prepare the reader for the regeneration of Cass. Styron, however, intends the themes of guilt and judgment to apply not only to Cass but to all modern society; and he gives to these themes a cosmic dimension by the continued use of biblical-Christian images, symbols and allusions. In a sense, then, Cass's salvation is allegorical; his guilt, judgment and regeneration -- but not redemption, since Cass is not brought full circle to faith in God -- become an exemplary spiritual passage for all mankind.

Early in the book Styron establishes the same lack of "divine spirit" in modern society as in Cass: the pervasiveness of guilt in the modern world and the need for judgment, that is, for drastic measures, to shake mankind into spiritual being. As the novel opens, Peter Leverett, on his way to visit Cass, stops to see his father in Peter's home town of Port Warwick, Virginia, the setting of Lie Down in Darkness. The older Mr. Leverett, a pious man, a "true liberal" (16) who "thirsted for understanding, for wisdom" (16), tells Peter in a speech that sounds the keynote of the novel:

These are miserable times . . . Empty times.

Mediocre times. Get times like these when
men go whoring off after false gods . . .
and what do you come to at last? Moral and
spiritual anarchy, that's what. (16)

Mr. Leverett, like many other characters in the novel, makes concrete social and political criticisms of America in order to establish the guilt of modern society and, hence, the necessity for judgment. He laments the materialism of modern society in which man worships "with all his heart nothing but the almighty dollar." (19) He speaks of the dictatorship in Virginia; of the "ignorant general with a baby-faced smile, who acquires religion and reads cowboy stories" (17) and is elected president; of the plundering of natural resources; and of the unfair treatment of the Negro. Similarly, Cass, who continually criticizes America, at one point refers to his country as a "smart-Alex, soft-headed, baby-faced, predigested, cellophane wrapped, doomed, beauty-hating land." (347) The worst of this society is represented in Sambuco by Mason Flagg and also by a Hollywood movie company, filming in Sambuco and living in Mason Flagg's palace. The "flicker creeps", empty, perverted, childish and constantly searching for "kicks", offer a harsh and continual reminder of society's lack of spirituality. When tragedy strikes Sambuco in the form of rape,

murder and apparent suicide, the movie people flee, their "escape . . . hasty and frantic" (225) suggesting the panic of the faithless in the face of God's impending judgments on Doomsday.

Mr. Leverett, as the book opens, prescribes a remedy for the emptiness and lack of "divine spirit" in modern society; indeed, it is a cure strikingly similar to God's drastic measures described in Donne's sermon. Mr. Leverett says:

What this country needs . . . what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic . . . something terrible I mean, son, so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be men again, human beings . . . (18)

Asserting that this country needs "something ferocious and tragic", Mr. Leverett implies that God must "apply his judgments" and "set this house on fire". Not just Cass but the entire modern world needs to be judged; the theme of universal judgment continually appears in the novel through apocalyptic imagery and symbols and is explicitly introduced through the biblical language of Peter's father:

Come Judgment Day . . . come Judgment, the good Lord's going to take one look at this empty husk, and He's going to say, "How do you lay claim to salvation, My friend?"

Then He's going to heave him out the back door . . . "That's what you get for trading your soul for a sawbuck, and forswearing My love!" (19-20)

To underscore the theme of universal judgment, Styron employs some symbol or image of divine judgment in connection with nearly every major event in the novel. For example, on his motor trip to Sambuco Peter Leverett is involved in an accident with an Italian motorcyclist, Luciano di Lieto. Although Peter did not cause the accident, the maiming of di Lieto symbolizes Peter's share of a universal guilt. As di Lieto lay prostrate in the road "asprawl in sacrificial repose" (35), Peter "sensed the heights of Vesuvius looming oppressive at my back." (33) The victim's grandmother appears on the scene, sees the assailant is a foreigner, and rants and raves about the unforgiven guilt arising from the rape and destruction which occurred during wartime. As she recalls her oath of how "they shall suffer and be punished for their sins before God!" (38), Peter hears down the road a "trumpeting noise . . . louder and louder with the sound of some Gabriel's horn." (38)

In addition to the repeated use of horns and whistle blasts announcing the coming of Judgment Day, Styron employs scenes symbolic of imminent judgment. One of the most

effective of these is the scene in which Cass blasts a hillbilly record through the night, just a few hours before the tragedy at Sambuco. The song "erupted on the night, athrob with shrill messianic voices" (120), causing the "flicker creeps" to stop all activity and attend to "the horrendous noise". (120) "Wild apocalyptic voices joined in a long throbbing lament":

This question we daily hear, no one seems to know

. . .

Wha-a-at's the matter with this world . . .
Now this rumor we hear; another war we fear,
Revelations is being fulfilled . . .
Your soul's on sinking sand, the end is
drawing near:

That's what's the matter with this world . . .
The precious ol' Bahble says: Sin will have
to go -- (120)

Through the use of symbolism, then, Styron extends his themes of guilt and judgment to include generally the entire modern world. However, he develops those themes most fully in the case of one particular individual -- Cass Kinsolving. One must, therefore, examine with care Cass's spiritual regeneration, bearing in mind the far-reaching symbolic and allegorical meanings attributable to the characters and events involved in that regeneration.

Before Peter and the reader can understand why the tragic events at Sambuco occurred, each must understand the spiritual condition of Cass before he met Mason Flagg.

As Cass tells Peter: "It didn't start in Sambuco . . . it really started in Paris the year before, when I was sick and these here nightmares began to come upon me."

(239) Although he suffered from ulcers, alcoholism, lack of money, and an inability to paint, Cass frankly admits that these were merely symptoms of his real disease:

What I was really sick from was from despair and self-loathing and greed and selfishness and spite. I was sick with a paralysis of the soul, and with self, and with flabbiness . . . I was very nearly sick unto death, and I guess my sickness . . . was the sickness of deprivation, and the deprivation was my own doing, because though I didn't know it then I had deprived myself of all belief in the good in myself. The good which is very close to God. (259-260)

Cass's self-hatred, which deprives him of belief in the good in himself and thereby robs him of the divine spirit, stems from an engulfing sense of guilt. The roots of Cass's guilt are too entwined to be traced; however, in his nightmares Cass is partly awakened to one of the deep sources of his guilt. Most of Cass's nightmares involve Negroes; and, as Aldridge points out, the suffering of the Negro provides "the framework of guilt so essential to our peculiar brand of modern tragedy."⁸ Cass's particular guilt stems from

⁸ John W. Aldridge, In Search of Heresy (New York, 1956), p. 143.

his participation in the malicious destruction of a Negro farmer's cabin when he was fifteen years old. Cass knew at the time "it was wrong . . . awful, monstrous, abominable" (359); indeed, though his conscious mind rejected any memory of the episode, subliminally his guilt seethed inside him.

Cass's guilt-ridden self-loathing found outward expression in his relationships with his scatter-brained but loving wife Poppy, his four young children, the world at large, and even God. Cass's hatred of and his rantings at God, to whom he at one point refers as "that black, baleful and depraved Deity" (402), express his frustrated longing for belief in a divine being. The guilt which separates Cass from God creates a despondency in which Cass has thoughts of murdering himself and his family; and it leads to unbearable nightmare visions of judgment, including recurring dreams of "waterspouts and storms and volcanoes boiling." (265) Cass's despair, so intensified that the burden of his guilt becomes intolerable, represents the first stage in the process of Christian salvation.

Cass makes various attempts to repent. Realizing that he is self-obsessed, nothing but a "puddle of self" (245), Cass tries to turn from egocentricity to selflessness, a

condition which is crucial to the concept of Christian salvation. Cass realizes this when he says: "To triumph over self is to triumph over Death. It is to triumph over that beast which one's self interposes between one's soul and one's God." (245) Cass seeks selflessness through visions of "eliveness", believing that the crystalization of a moment of beauty could conquer his own sordidness and the world's.⁹ However, Cass is able to produce these visions not by selflessness but by self-destructiveness, for he attains them only with the proper combination of intoxication and malnutrition. Cass soon realizes that his visions are "hokum . . . phony . . . chemically induced and no more permanent or real than . . . a dream." (257) Cass next tries to extricate himself by sheer will power, but "whatever blocked him still blocked him." (269) The failure of Cass through his own efforts to find freedom from the bondage of guilt is Styron's way of demonstrating Cass's need for "outside" help. Cass, like all other human beings, cannot save himself; for Christian salvation requires not only an act of commitment on the part of man but also an act of grace on the part of God. Salvation must happen for

⁹ O'Connell, p. 32.

man as well as in man; divine initiative and man's cooperation are indispensable concomitants. Cass, who cries out "How will I ever forgive myself, for all the things I've done?" (379), thus expresses his deep religious need. He cannot forgive himself; he needs God to perform the acts of forgiveness and acceptance which will free him into spiritual being.

Meeting with failure after failure, Cass is finally drawn south to Sambuco by a dream; a vision of perfect goodness, beauty and peace. Several times he tells Peter that he was "forced" (239) to go south; the dream was "no longer just a promise and a hope, but a command." (270) The idea that Cass feels commanded to go south suggests the Christian doctrine of election, in which man, through the revelation in Christ, knows himself to be chosen and chosen to be. This parallel between Cass's vision and the doctrine of election is further suggested by a girl's voice in Cass's dream which cries "Love me, and I shall be all salvation." (298) However, before salvation must come judgment. Cass's judgment, the "something ferocious and tragic" which sets Cass on fire and makes God's entrance possible, occurs in Sambuco.

Cass settles in Sambuco with his family, determined once

again to reform, overcome his problems and paint. However, shortly after Cass arrives, Mason Flagg, a rich Mephistophelean playboy and professed playwright, who purports to be looking for a scenic place to write, rents the palace apartment above Cass on the false assumption that Cass is the famous expatriate artist, Kasz. Mason flatters and praises Cass and his work; but Cass, soon aware of the case of mistaken identity, becomes enraged by Mason's phoniness. He unleashes his "bile and poison" (370) in a tirade against Mason and the United States, once again in terms of judgment:

What is your line, my friend? . . . You'd better prepare for doom. Because when the great trump blows and the roll is called up yonder and the nations are arranged for judgment you and all your breed are going to be shit out of luck. (378)

Mason's breed is the sort that cannot stand to be caught in a lie. When Cass reveals Mason for the phony that he is, Mason retaliates. He hands Cass a bottle of whisky, and soon he "owned" Cass. As Cass tells Peter: "What with the booze and the weird condition I was in he began to stomp me -- I mean really stomped me, and I let him -- and it got so bad I was paying him for the time of day." (125) Mason ruthlessly forces Cass to degrade himself to earn the price of whisky; Cass is compelled to prostrate his talent by

painting pornographic pictures for Mason and to debase himself through the performance of a "trained-seal act" for the amusement of Mason and his Hollywood cohorts.

To a certain extent, Cass's sufferings under Mason are a judgment levied upon his own failure.¹⁰ Even Cass himself, after Sambuco, cannot place the full blame for his degradation upon Mason. He asks of the blame that someone must bear: "What part was Mason's and what part was mine and what part was God's." (239) Mason and his tortures, however, represent more than judgment for Cass. Mason Flagg, as he is depicted in Sambuco and in Peter's memories of him, is more than human "scum", more than an instrument for torturing Cass. Rather, he is a worthy antagonist, in many respects more a symbol of evil and wickedness than a human being. Mason, who devotes his energies to lies and lechery, leads a soft, corrupt, pointless life. With his "slick, arrogant, sensual, impenitently youthful, American and vainglorious face" (185), he is a symbol of the empty materialism and the social and moral anarchy of modern society so lamented by the elder Mr. Leverett. Indeed, Mason Flagg represents the same forces in society as did Colonel

¹⁰ Urang, p. 57.

Templeton in The Long March: the forces which dehumanize and corrupt and which stand as obstacles to man's attainment of freedom. As Urang points out, Mason has much that Peter and Cass want -- sex, money and art -- but he represents a distortion of each of these. Peter and Cass can obtain all of them through Mason, but only hedonistically, self-indulgently and at the price of their inner freedom.¹¹ Here, then, is the reappearance of an idea first presented in The Long March: that one can submit to the temptations of society and comfortably survive, but the price is one's soul. Mason, like the society he represents, was a man "who knew he could own you, if you'd only let him." (383)

Not only does Styron portray Mason as a symbol of the forces in society which must be overcome before man can find freedom, but he also colors Mason with a biblical symbolism. Mason thus appears as a kind of Satan-figure, the antichrist, or the Beast of Revelation.¹² Peter's comment that "something about Mason makes you feel you've known him forever" (114) is a reference to Mason as the incarnation of evil. Peter's first encounter with Mason,

11 Urang, p. 55.

12 Urang, p. 56.

years ago in a church-affiliated boys school, suggests the figure of the antichrist: "Into this dutiful Christian atmosphere Mason burst like some debauched cheer in the midst of worship." (74) Mason was quickly expelled when he intoxicated a retarded thirteen year old girl on sacramental wine and seduced her "in plain sight of God . . . in His holy temple." (89) As the personification of moral evil, Mason represents the embodiment of Cass's sins and evil, the very sins and evil which enslave him and which he must overthrow and destroy in order to achieve his freedom. Mason, as evil, is the beast that Cass says "one's self interposes between one's soul and one's God" (245); he must, therefore, be subdued.

Before Cass can rebel against Mason and free himself from the bondage of evil and guilt, he must acquire the will to rebel by learning to value the "good" in himself and in life, by learning love and selflessness. The seeds of Cass's regeneration are planted through his relationships with three Italians: the beautiful peasant girl Francesca, her dying father Michele, and a Fascist-humanist policeman Luigi. Cass's relationships with these persons may be seen as that element of salvation representative of the initiative

of God. The three form a "composite" Christ,¹³ opening Cass's eyes to the meaning of love, selflessness and forgiveness and making possible his own subsequent act of commitment.

Francesca, a poor peasant girl who works as a servant for Mason, is the girl in Cass's vision, the voice who promised salvation, the incarnation of goodness and beauty. Seeing Francesca's smile and convinced she is "an angel, by God . . . an angel" (396), Cass thinks: ". . . was it not then that he had come to his own awakening?" (395) In his lyrical, never-consummated love for Francesca Cass finds "some kind of joy . . . not just pleasure -- this joy I felt I'd been searching for all my life . . . a kind of serenity and repose that I never really knew existed." (417-418) Through his relationship with Francesca Cass learns what it means to love.

Through his relationship with Michele Cass approaches a condition of selflessness. Visiting Michele for the first time, Cass found that his

nostrils were suddenly filled with a warmly sour and corrupt odor that bore him swiftly into some mysterious, nameless, and for the

13 Urang, p. 60.

moment irretrievable portion of his own past
 . . . suddenly he knew, and thought: It is
 niggers . . . It is the bleeding stink of
 wretchedness. (396)

Cass "at last awakened" (397) knew: "I've got to do some-
 thing." (397) Helping Michele becomes an act of repent-
 ance and expiation for his involvement long ago in the
 destruction of the Negro farmer's cabin. Pouring all his
 energies into helping Michele, Cass, although still drunk
 most of the time, goes without sleep to make the long trek
 at least six times a day to Michele's cabin to be by his
 side and to give him an injection of medicine which Cass
 obtained through Mason. Cass tells Peter:

. . . 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 . . . (422)

Through his relationship with Michele, Cass gained insight
 into the destructiveness of his selfishness:

Mozart gives . . . more in one sweet singing
 cry than all the politicians since Caesar.
 A child gives, a shell or a weed that looks
 like a flower. Michele will die because I
 have not given. Which now explains a lot
 . . . hell is not giving . . . (431)

Luigi, Cass's policeman friend, is both his soul-mate
 and his "shield and defender". (191) Luigi understands

Cass's terrifying loneliness, his feelings of despair and the experiences of "il niente" which result from his spiritual crisis. However, Luigi strives to prevent Cass from abusing and annihilating himself. Luigi tells Cass:

I'm not a religious man . . . However . . .
 if there's one thing of the highest value
 I've discovered, it is simply this: that
 the primary moral sin is self-destruction
 -- the wish for death . . . The single
 good is respect for the force of life
 . . . (190)

Indeed, it is Luigi, one later learns, who enables Cass to learn "respect for the force of life".

His relationships with Francesca, Michele and Luigi begin the process of regeneration in Cass, a regeneration which ultimately enables him to rebel against his bondage when Mason performs a "violation upon life itself".(422) On the night of the tragic events in Sambuco, Cass is in his lowest, most drunken state. He hears from Francesca that Mason had raped her; and he knows that, for the sake of his manhood, he must retaliate in some way, but his plan is not yet formed. Later, however, Cass learns that Francesca has been raped again and horribly and fatally mutilated; this time, without for a moment doubting Mason's guilt, Cass determines to destroy such evil. In his typically hysterical, preacher-like tones, he appeals to God:

"Oh Jesus give me strength! Jesus! Is there no justice? Must I be deprived of wealth and wit and sanity and pride, and then be deprived of guts! Jesus love me!" (193)

The violation of "good", which Francesca symbolized, has set Cass on fire, "as if dynamite had gone off inside me."

(418) Peter observes Cass struggle to shake off the chains which enslave him and free himself at last:

I sensed the urgent interior struggle: out of sheer power of will, right before me eyes, he seemed to be casting off the layers of drunkenness and obfuscation that encompassed him, much in the manner of a dog, rising from the mud, who by successive violent shakes becomes purified and cleansed. (195)

Cass at last "in basic command . . . after months and days of limp and ineffectual bondage" (436) tracks down Mason to a steep precipice, and there he beats open his head with a stone while the deep-throated roar of a ship's whistle pronounces sounds of judgment. Ironically, not Mason, but the village idiot, is guilty of the crime of fatally mutilating Francesca. Cass somehow realizes his error even as he realizes Mason's elemental humanity; and the enormity of his moral sin is suddenly thrust before him. Looking down at Mason, Cass sees that "the pale dead face . . . was not the face of a killer. Children! he thought, standing erect over the twitching body. Children! My Christ! All

of us!" (442) Cass picks up the body, holds it "for a moment close to his breast" (442), then hurls it into the void.

Cass's sudden awareness of his fundamental human bond with Mason, as children of Christ, leads him once again to plan to kill himself and his family, to "save them from this storm, this exploding sun of his own guilt." (461) Cass is convinced that "The value of a man's life was nothing and his destiny nothingness" (466); yet "the hunger persisted" (466), the hunger for salvation. When Cass hears of the horrible death to which Michele brought himself, he wants to surrender himself to the authorities so that he might pay for all of the horrible deaths. Surrender is not possible, however. On the strength of false evidence given by Luigi, the police believe that Mason committed suicide after attacking Francesca; only Cass and Luigi know the truth, and Luigi has put his own career and freedom in jeopardy by concealing the damning evidence against Cass. Hence, if Cass admits the truth, his words will condemn Luigi as well as himself. Luigi's act acquires the dimensions of an act of mercy and grace, the final stage in the process of salvation. Luigi has in the Christian sense pronounced forgiveness, not out of pity but as a "correction"

(470), to preclude Cass from the luxury of further guilt. Luigi cries out to Cass: "You sin in this guilt of yours! You sin in your guilt!" (466) Cass finally understands Luigi's meaning: that Cass's worse sin is not murder but his "other guilt" which deprived him of belief in the good in himself and thereby estranged him from himself, the "life force", and God. Luigi's act of grace is an act of forgiveness for this sin of guilt, and it frees Cass into a state of reconciliation with himself and the universe. Cass tells Peter that, upon hearing Luigi's words of forgiveness, ". . . suddenly I ceased trembling and became calm as if like some small boy on the verge of a tantrum I had been halted . . . by some almighty parental voice." (466) Cass understands that he must go free so that he will not continue to sin by wallowing in his guilt. Once forgiven and accepted, Cass can and must, as Luigi puts it: "For the love of God . . . Consider the good in yourself! Consider hope! Consider joy!" (475)

Cass had once told Mason: "The only true experience, by God, is the one where a man learns to love himself."

(379) This statement of Cass echoes the sentiments of Carey Carr in Lie Down in Darkness. Carr believed that man must learn first to love himself; for self-loathing, such as

the Loftises and Cass knew, estranges man from life, from Being. Learning to love and accept oneself, as Cass did through Francesca, Michele and Luigi, that is, through experiencing the love and forgiveness of God, frees man into the condition of love, in which the love of oneself makes possible the love of others and the love of God. Cass's experience supports the Christian belief in the ever-widening circles of love; for once Cass has learned to accept himself, he is released into selfless love and service of others. His regeneration is evidenced, first, by his return to a life with his wife and children, in which he accepts the responsibility of loving and supporting them. Second, Cass returns to America. Having at last come to terms with Mason and thus, symbolically with the greedy, empty, materialistic aspects of American society, Cass is free to love his country. Living in the South, in addition to painting, and teaching, Cass even makes an effort to promote political reform by political cartoons. As Brooks points out, re-entering the community is an essential part of redemption. Unless the controlling purposes of the individual are related to those that other men share and in which the individual can participate, he is isolated.¹⁴

14

Cleanth Brooks, The Hidden God (New Haven, 1963), p. 39.

As a life of love the truly Christian life must essentially be social. Cass's return to a satisfying life in America also demonstrates Styron's belief that, although modern society tends to dehumanize and enslave man, once man has resisted such enslavement and has achieved order and purpose within himself he can realize a purposeful life within society.

The last sign of Cass's regeneration is that he no longer drinks; and it symbolizes his liberation from bondage to self and his regained ability to face others and himself.¹⁵ Thus, the process of regeneration not only follows the pattern of Christian redemption, but the regeneration manifests itself as a release into a life which depicts the Christian virtue of love as self-sacrificing and outgoing. Cass's acceptance of responsibility for himself and his love of self expand into an acceptance of responsibility and a love for others.

Cass had told Peter that: "A man cannot live without a focus . . . without some kind of faith . . . I didn't have any more faith than a tomcat. Nothing! Nothing!" (55) One may infer from this statement that Cass, regenerated,

15

Urang, p. 61.

has found "some kind of faith". However, Cass denies this:
 ". . . I suppose I should tell you that through some sort of suffering I had reached grace . . . I wish I could tell you that I had found some belief, some rock" (476)
 Styron has not brought Cass the full way to redemption, to an acknowledged faith in God. He does, however, end the book with a suggestion of resurrection, although not involving Cass directly. Luciano di Lieto, Peter Leverett's accident victim, who was in a coma for two years, suddenly recovers "like the Phoenix risen from the ashes of his own affliction." (479)

One significant weakness in Styron's handling of Cass's regeneration is the inconsistency between that which is dramatized in the novel and that which is articulated by Cass in his final statement. Cass expresses in stilted rhetoric an existentialist answer to despair:

. . . that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire to be forever -- but in the hope of being what I could be for a time. This would be an ecstasy. (476-477)

However, nothing in Cass's experience or character logically would have brought him to this conclusion; it is merely articulated. Cass did not "choose" between being and

nothingness; he comes into being through Christ, that is, through his relationships with Francesca, Michele and Luigi, relationships which free him into the condition of love and enable him to grow in righteousness and the Christian virtues of love, selflessness and responsibility. It is through God, symbolically acting through Luigi, that Cass is forgiven, accepted and "justified" by Being. Although the existentialist passages confuse, cloud and qualify Styron's fundamentally Christian solution to man's despair and his estrangement from himself and the universe, this novel strongly develops in terms of a Christian vision the themes introduced in Lie Down in Darkness and The Long March. Guilt, such as that of the Loftises in Lie Down in Darkness, becomes instrumental to expiation in Set This House on Fire. Freedom from bondage is possible if man forthrightly confronts the obstacles which bar his freedom and if he undergoes an experience which frees him into the condition of love, an experience which in Styron's vision is dependent upon man's recognition of the redeeming love of God. Cass, although he will not admit it, has dramatically denied the "Nothing" of the Loftises. He does so by asserting his belief in the "life force" through his rebellion against Mason and even more so by evidencing a

regeneration achieved through an experience of the loving forgiveness of God.

If, however, Styron truly believes in Christian virtues and if his novels are studies in moral responsibility, one must surely ask how Styron can justify the regeneration of a man which is accomplished partly through his slaying of an innocent person. This moral paradox results in part from Styron's portrayal of Mason Flagg as both a human being and a symbol of evil. The murder of Mason is in one sense the symbolic destruction of moral evil; it is, therefore, necessary and justifiable. The murder of an innocent human being is, however, unjustifiable by any standards. Therefore, Styron must show Luigi's act of forgiveness, which frees Cass from secular punishment, to be justifiable in terms of a transcendent moral law. Luigi sentenced Cass to be a penitent in life, for only through living can Cass overcome his deeper guilt of self-estrangement. However, Cass still must endure powerful feeling of guilt and remorse for his crime of murder. Speaking of his crime, Cass tells Peter: "I got enough guilt about it to equip a regiment of sinners." (238) He says:

. . . to kill a man, even in hatred, even in revenge, is like an amputation, Though this man may have done you the foulest injustice in the world, when you have killed

him you have removed a part of yourself
 forever . . . It is a pain that will stay
 with you as long as you live . . .
 (423-424)

It is Styron who seems to be talking when Luigi says:
 "Is not my notion of justice as good as that of some judge
 . . . I think true justice must always somehow live in the
 heart, locked away from politics, and governments and even
 the law." (474) Cass accepts and lives with the burden
 of his sin of murder; yet he bears it not as a guilt which
 expresses itself as a feeling of separation from God, but
 rather as a discipline designed to bring about closer union
 with God. Had Cass gone to prison for his crime, had he
 not been "forgiven", he could not truly have repented by
 turning to an existence that was more "like to God".

Although Cass does not recognize his freedom to love
 as an act of grace, the Christian pattern of salvation
 which Styron gives to Cass's regeneration supports the
 thesis of this study that Styron does not merely affirm
 man's possibilities for finding personal identity, freedom
 and a meaningful life but makes that affirmation within the
 framework of religious -- indeed, Christian -- values.
 Through his affirmation of these values Styron is affirming
 not only the significance of man as an individual; but also,

and importantly, the moral order of the universe.

As one has seen, Styron does not bring Cass to a full realization of the significance of Christ. However, Nat Turner, in Styron's next novel, is to complete the journey -- begun by Peyton Loftis and continued by Cass Kinsolving -- towards redemption.

CHAPTER IV

THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

Styron's first three novels deal with today's men and women struggling for freedom and identity in a world which has made the achievement of those goals increasingly difficult. These novels speak directly to modern man in their reflections upon the failures of institutionalized religion, the dehumanization and purposelessness of a materialistic society, the horrors of hydrogen bomb reality, and the "never-endingness of war". However, although these books do contain contemporary social criticism, the concerns and struggles of Styron's characters are not unique to the modern world. In their search for freedom and a meaningful life, in their desperate battle with guilt, and in their struggle for a rebirth of the spirit, Styron's characters are universal.

Nat Turner, the subject of Styron's latest novel, is not a contemporary man. He is an historical figure, a Negro slave who in 1831 organized and executed "the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of Negro slavery."¹ Yet,

¹ William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner (New York, 1967), author's note. All quotations are from this edition.

the Nat Turner recreated by Styron shares and is burdened by problems similar to those of Peyton Loftis, Captain Mannix and Cass Kinsolving: he is enslaved and through rebellion seeks meaning in life, self-identification and freedom. The time and type of Nat's enslavement, as well as its racial quality, are rendered insignificant by Styron, who creates Nat Turner as "first and last a man".² He is a universal character, whose tortured spirit and interior struggles speak across all barriers of time, place and race.

Readers and critics might naturally conclude that Styron is commenting on the contemporary, so-called, Negro revolution through the historical example of Nat Turner. Granville Hicks has done so when he calls The Confessions of Nat Turner ". . . one of the best novels that have grown out of the constantly heightening racial tensions."³ One of the book's great distinctions is that it does probe to the sources of the kind of unrest that American society is today undergoing, and in that sense it does deal with a generality

² Shaun O'Connell, "Styron's Nat Turner," Nation, 205, 12 (October 16, 1967), 374.

³ Granville Hicks, "Race Riot, 1831," Saturday Review, 50 (October 7, 1967), 29.

of history.⁴ However, although Nat's story does to some extent parallel certain of today's happenings, Styron does not use Nat Turner merely to comment upon the present mood of Negro rebellion.

Styron became interested in the figure of Nat Turner long before the advent of race riots in Newark, Detroit and Chicago. Styron says: "I toyed with Nat Turner and this rebellion as the idea for the first book I wanted to write. That was around twenty years ago" ⁵ Nat Turner's rebellion was staged in Southhampton County, Virginia, not far from where Styron grew up. Living near the scene of the uprising, Styron became perplexed with the enigma of Nat Turner, who is strangely disregarded by historians. Nat raised many questions in Styron's mind: What was it like to be a slave? What motivated Nat, and not other slaves, to attempt armed rebellion? How did a slave manage to plan and organize as carefully as Nat did? Why was his slaughter of white people so brutal and indiscriminate?

⁴ R.W.B. Lewis and C. Vann Woodward, "Slavery in the First Person" (an interview with William Styron), Yale Alumni Magazine, XXXI, 2 (November, 1967), 38.

⁵ Phyllis Meras, interview with William Styron, Saturday Review, 50 (October 7, 1967), 30.

Fundamentally, what did Nat accomplish in terms of his personal struggle for identity and meaningfulness?

Styron felt he must "become" Nat Turner in order to answer these questions. Styron says: "I wanted . . . to take on the lineaments as well as I could of a slave, and using that persona, walk myself through a time and a place in a manner of self-discovery."⁶ In becoming a Negro and a slave, Styron is attempting to better understand himself and his country.⁷ Moreover, he is fulfilling what he feels is his moral obligation as a white Southerner -- to come to know the Negro.⁸ Styron's transformation into Nat Turner is in a sense his own act of expiation for his share of the white man's guilt for the sufferings of the Negro.

It is not surprising that Styron would choose to take on the garb of Nat Turner, rather than any other slave or any other Negro. Nat Turner with his rebellious nature and his search for identity would appeal to the man who created Peyton Loftis, Captain Mannix and Cass Kinsolving. Moreover, since he had meager historical materials to draw upon -- only

⁶ Yale Alumni Magazine, p. 35.

⁷ O'Connell, p. 373.

⁸ William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," Harper's, 230 (April, 1965), 138.

a twenty-page pamphlet of Nat's confessions dictated by Nat to lawyer Thomas Gray -- Styron had a free hand as a novelist to portray Nat in a manner consistent with his vision. Nat Turner becomes for Styron not only the ultimate fulfillment of Styron's theme of rebellion from bondage but also a man who must learn that to be truly free is to recognize the redemptive love of God.

The structure of the book reveals Styron's focus upon Nat first and foremost as a man undergoing a spiritual crisis, rather than upon Nat as a slave who executed a bloody rebellion. The initial chapter of the book, significantly entitled "Judgment Day", comprises approximately one-fourth of the novel and presents Nat in jail on the day of his trial. Raymond Sokolov in his review for Newsweek calls this first chapter "a bit to the side of the book's true pulse",⁹ which he believes to be Nat's autobiography. On the contrary, the book's true pulse is Nat in the present, in jail where his fragmentary recollections evoked by Gray's questions and his anguished meditations present him as a man undergoing a spiritual crisis. Styron begins with Nat in jail and through the rest of the book frequently returns to Nat in jail,

⁹ Raymond A. Sokolov, "Into the Mind of Nat Turner," Newsweek, LXX, 16 (October 16, 1967), 68.

thereby making the focus of the novel Nat's ongoing process of meditation and soul-searching. Indeed, to assure that the rebellion is not the focal point and climax of his story, Styron provides all the important facts of the revolt in the early pages of the book: that fifty-five white people were killed; who the rebels were and how they met their punishment; that Nat killed only one person, an eighteen year old girl, Margaret Whitehead, and so on. Styron clearly does not want to emphasize the melodrama of the rebellion by withholding facts but wishes instead to center his attention upon Nat, meditating upon the adventure while waiting to be hanged.

Nat broods over the failure of his rebellion, but significantly it is not the failure of the rebellion per se that distresses him. Rather, Nat is distressed by his failure to make contact with God who ordered his life and who in Nat's apocalyptic visions dictated the revolt. Nat -- who always had deemed himself close to God, who thought of God and prayed to Him continually through every day -- is anguished by his inability to pray and his feeling of separation from God since the conclusion of the rebellion.

Beyond my maddest imaginings I had never known
it possible to feel so removed from God -- a
separation which had nothing to do with faith

or desire, for both of these I still possessed, but with a forsaken solitary apartness so beyond hope, that I could not have felt more sundered from the divine spirit had I been cast alive like some wriggling insect beneath the largest rock on earth . . . (10)

It is not God's absence alone which creates in Nat the sense of sickening despair; but, as Nat says, "instead it was a sense of repudiation I felt, of denial, as if He had turned His back on me once and for all." (78) Nat cannot comprehend this sense of repudiation, for he had always felt that God had chosen and prepared him for his great mission -- to liberate his people. The destruction of white people, the enemies of righteousness, had come to Nat in a vision as a dictate from God.

The Spirit had informed me that the Serpent was loosened and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men . . . the Spirit had commanded that I should take on the yoke and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when "the first shall be last and the last shall be first." (349)

Far from feeling that he was violating God's law by destroying life, Nat felt he was executing God's will. Thus, his sense of God's repudiation perplexes Nat and fills him with doubts and despair. Nat thinks:

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 . . . Surely by this silence and absence He is

giving me a greater sign than any I have
ever known . . . (402)

It dawns upon Nat that "maybe all was for nothing, worse than nothing and all I've done was evil in the sight of God." (115) Styron ends the first chapter with a question, the answer to which comprises the thematic heart of this novel: "Then what I done was wrong Lord? . . . And if what I done was wrong, is there no redemption?" (115)

Styron's first two major novels are informed with mysteries, whose unravellings are intended to reveal some essential truth of existence. Styron does not deviate from this pattern in The Confessions of Nat Turner. The mystery of this novel does not, as noted earlier, pertain to the facts of the rebellion itself; rather, the mystery involves the religious and spiritual themes that are central to the book. As the story begins, lawyer Thomas Gray first poses the mystery when he asks Nat: "'How come you only slew one? How come, of all them people, this here particular young girl?'" (37) The solution to this mystery, found in the relationship between Nat and Margaret, provides both the religious truth of this novel and the key to Nat's redemption -- the means by which he can bridge the gap between himself and God.

Meditating upon his failure while awaiting execution,

Nat reviews his life. Styron, using the form of a conventional autobiography, causes Nat to explain his uniqueness as a literate slave and his psychological and religious motivation for large-scale revolt.

Nat grew up as a "house nigger" under the benevolent tutelage of his master, Samuel Turner. Seeing Nat's interest in learning to read, Turner experiments with Nat to prove that Negroes have the ability to learn. He gives young Nat a rudimentary education, encourages him, entrusts him with important responsibilities, apprentices him in the carpentry trade, and eventually makes him the promise of freedom. Nat thus becomes "a pet, the darling, the little black jewel of Turner's Mill." (169) More importantly, however, Nat develops a sense of individuality, a sense of his own significance that a mere field hand could never know.¹⁰ He learns self-respect and pride in his own being. As a young boy, overhearing his master praise his abilities to a distinguished visitor, Nat feels the joy of self: "I feel wildly alive. I shiver feverishly in the glory of self." (125)

¹⁰ O'Connell, p. 373.

When Nat is twenty and on the threshold of freedom, Samuel Turner goes bankrupt and is compelled to put Nat in the care of a Baptist preacher who is under legal obligation to free Nat in a stated time. The preacher, Reverend Eppes, is a caricature of ecclesiastic evil; he subjects Nat to all sorts of humiliations and works him like an animal. For Nat "It was like being plunged into freezing water." (240) He says: ". . . for the first time in my life I began to sense the world, the true world, in which a Negro moves and breathes." (240) Yet, Nat can endure his slavery, for he lives with the dream and in anticipation of the moment Reverend Eppes will keep his bargain and free him.

The turning point in Nat's life comes at the age of twenty-one when ironically, rather than being freed, he is sold by Eppes to an illiterate farmer for \$460. For an educated, mature, rather intelligent person who had learned to value his own humanity, the sudden awareness that he is a mere chattel and that he has lost all hope for freedom causes Nat to snap:

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 . . . (246)

Nat's hatred is directed primarily against Samuel Turner, the

man who fed him "that half loaf of learning" (156), and who invited him to dream. Although Samuel Turner was not responsible for Eppes deed, the trauma of having his body sold naturally leads Nat to a violent and total rejection of the white world, a rejection which must in its totality include the white man he had loved and worshipped and who had become a father symbol to him. At the moment of being sold, Nat, robbed of all further possibilities of identifying with the white world which he had previously emulated, allows the ultimate paternal symbol - God - to embrace him.¹¹ From then on, religious fanaticism dominates Nat's life.

Treated kindly by his new master Moore and his subsequent master Travis, Nat becomes "a paragon of rectitude, of alacrity, of lively industriousness, of sweet equanimity and uncomplaining obedience." (268) Yet all the while he devotes his energies to communion with God and to study of the Bible, feeding on the vengeful rantings of the Old Testament prophets. "Of all the prophets it was Ezekiel with his divine fury to whom I felt closest by kinship . . . it was through his words that the wishes of the Lord concerning my destiny . . . seemed most clearly to be revealed." (52)

¹¹ Styron, Yale Alumni Magazine, p. 37.

Nat comes to see himself as "black as the blackest vengeance, the illimitable, devastating instrument of God's wrath." (52) Nat undertakes long fasts, moved by the words of Isaiah: "Is 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)

Thus it is that Nat comes to believe himself involved in some grand, divinely ordained mission. For nine years, convinced that he is receiving signs from God in apocalyptic visions, Nat steels himself with adamant hatred for the ultimate act of destruction. As Nat explains it, the kind of "calm and intelligent and unrepenting purity of hatred" (258) which he developed for white men was rare among Negroes. Its fruition was dependent upon an intimacy with the white man, a knowledge of the "white man's wiles, his duplicity, his greediness, and his ultimate depravity."

(258) Nat admits: ". . . it was not a white person's abuse or scorn or even indifference which could ignite in me this murderous hatred but his pity, maybe even his tenderest moment of charity." (267) This murderous rage evoked by the white man's kindness reveals Nat's sense of social betrayal which always balances and offsets the religious

impulse. His own experience of betrayal epitomizes

. . . the central madness of nigger existence:
beat a nigger, starve him, leave him wallow-
ing in his own shit and he'll be yours for
life. Awe him by some unforeseen hint of
philanthropy, tickle him with the idea of
hope, and he will want to slice your throat.
(70)

In spite of his personal hatred, however, Nat's rebel-
lion is motivated primarily by his religious fanaticism
rather than by personal revenge. Significantly, for Nat
freedom does not mean simple flight from slavery or the
murder of a few whites. Freedom means deliverance of all
his people, and deliverance was not possible as long as
white men lived. One particular episode in which Nat learns
that even the freed Negro is dependent upon the mercy of
white men, causes him to realize "with an intensity I had
never known before that, chattel or unchained, slave or
free, people whose skins were black would never find true
liberty" (298) as long as white men, like his master, lived
on earth.

Nat carefully maps his plans. He aims at seizure of
nearby Jerusalem, hoping that Negroes throughout the South
will rise up and join his band. He carefully selects his
lieutenants, teaching them, together with his best friend
Hark, to believe in themselves, to overcome "dat black-assed

feeling". (53) Nat preaches to his black brothers the central fact of freedom reiterated through Styron's novels: the necessity for self-love. Nat tells his people ". . . black folk ain't never goin' to be led from bondage without they has pride! Black folk ain't going to be free . . . less'n they studies to love they own selves . . . Pride, pride, everlasting pride, pride will make you free!" (311)

At the age of thirty, after nine years of feeding on the harsh words of the prophets and their promise of vengeance, Nat is convinced by a vision that the time for God's judgment has come; and he exhorts his lieutenants to slaughter. Yet, when the long-awaited moment comes, Nat himself cannot kill. Looking for the first time straight into the eyes of his master, the rebellion's first victim, Nat sees that: "whatever else he was, he was a man." (388) Nat's intelligence, which enabled him to organize such a rebellion, also created in him a sensibility which prevented him from carrying it through.¹² As O'Connell says, Nat's burden of intelligence creates in him an ambivalence -- hatred and understanding. Nat is both cursed and enobled through his inability to wholly do unto the white man what

¹² Styron, Yale Alumni Magazine, p. 39.

the white man has done unto him. He cannot reduce the white man to a caricature of the Oppressor, whose lack of human characteristics justifies any retributive horror.¹³ Nat's sensibility, with his consequent inability to kill, eventually undermines the rebellion.

The revolt would have failed at the outset had it not been for Will. Seizing the initiative when Nat fails to kill, Will hacks off heads with a "lust so voracious as to be past all fathoming." (390) A demented monster, Will hates and kills in a frenzied way, driven to such madness by years of savage mistreatment. Even Nat himself fears Will's undirected hatred of the universe; and he is tortured after the rebellion by visions of the mad Will, whom he pictures as Daniel's beast:

After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a beast, dreadful and terrible, and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and broke in pieces. I beheld then because of the voice of the great words: I beheld even till the beast was slain, and his body destroyed, and given to the burning flame. (38)

Nat must learn the "truth of this beast" (39), the truth of wrathful revenge and hatred, before he can find redemption.

Sickened by the bloody slaughter of his master's family,

13

O'Connell, pp. 373-374.

Nat thinks, "'Ah my God! Hast Thou truly called me to this?'"

(391) Yet, so strong is his conviction that he is doing God's work, he carries on the slaughter for three days. When his leadership is jeopardized by Will, Nat realizes that he must kill someone if he is to retain the faith of his followers. Indeed, had he himself not told them: "To draw blood of white men is holy in God's eyes"? (410); Nat is thus "by providence hurried toward Margaret Whitehead." (410)

Styron continually returns to the central mystery of the novel, Nat's relationship with Margaret Whitehead, which is slowly revealed through Nat's fragmented recollections. Margaret is a beautiful, innocent young girl whom Nat encounters when he is "farmed out" to work for her mother. Margaret endlessly prattles to Nat in her whispery girlish voice, innocently flirts with him, and unknowingly arouses his deepest passions. Yet, Margaret is a "first-rate sensibility."¹⁴ She feels that Nat alone can understand her: ". . . when I tell the girls at school they just don't believe me when I say I go home on weekends and the only person I can talk to is a -- is a darky." (91) Disgusted with

¹⁴ O'Connell, p. 374.

the treatment of Negroes and with her friends' and family's belief in the Negro's inferiority and sickened by her preacher brother's smug, irreligious attitudes, Margaret, in her own way, though with less awareness, is as isolated as Nat.¹⁵ Thus, it is natural that she should unconsciously see her own human condition reflected in Nat.

For Nat, Margaret is, apart from Samuel Turner, "the only white person with whom I have experienced even one moment of a warm and mysterious and mutual confluence of sympathy." (92) Nevertheless, his feelings for her incite in him "sudden rage and confusion." (29) He hates her for arousing his sympathy, for such an emotion, if allowed to grow, would disturb his great plan. Indeed, in his deep passion for Margaret, part hate, part love -- he dreams of possessing her, of raping her. He knows, however, that he can never have her, and this knowledge stirs within him emotions he cannot understand. Walking with him one afternoon, Margaret slips and for an instant falls against Nat. He thinks:

Could it be, too, that I felt her relax, go the faintest bit limp, as she slumped against me? . . . The flicker of an instant then, no

15 Ibid.

more . . . I was suddenly -- without reason -- inconsolable with an emptiness such as I have never known. (374)

Margaret, full of religious fervor, continually quotes Scripture to Nat and discusses the Bible with him. Nat observes that she is "filled with Christian love, Christian virtue, Christ-obsessed." (29) Although Nat, the rebel and martyr, might naturally have been conceived as a Christ symbol, Margaret is the true Christ figure in this novel: the person who shows Nat the meaning of God's forgiving love and whose death brings Nat to a new religious understanding. In certain respects Nat does fit the pattern of a Christ figure: his trade as a carpenter, his trip to Jerusalem, his martyrdom, his age at death. Styron, however, stresses Nat's identification with the Old Testament prophets Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah. He is depicted as an avenging Old Testament angel; and the God who, in Nat's mind, ordains his mission is the Old Testament God of wrath. The biblical language which reverberates throughout the novel and weaves in and out of Nat's thoughts is the rhetoric of the Prophets: the promise of vengeance and blood-stained righteousness. Christ almost never is mentioned in the novel, particularly by Nat. That Styron did not want to identify Nat with Christ is manifested by a significant

omission from Nat's real confessions. As it is recorded in Nat's actual confessions, but never mentioned in Styron's book, the interrogator asks Nat as he awaits execution: "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?" And Nat replies: "Was not Christ crucified."¹⁶

In Styron's version it is Margaret who refers to Christ and who quotes from the New Testament. Speaking to Nat of the un-Christian attitude of white people toward Negroes, Margaret articulates Styron's vision of the redeeming life-stance of love. Quoting from John, she says:

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. Oh, it is the simplest thing in the world, is it not, Nat -- the perfect Christian love of God, and of one another, yet how many people shun that blessed grace and live in fear and torment? God is love, John said, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him . . . (368)

The relationship between Nat and Margaret is presented symbolically by the characters in a masque that Margaret has written at her girls' seminary. The heroine of the masque is a young girl, Celia, who is a very devout Christian; the hero, Philemon, is a pagan. Margaret tells Nat:

¹⁶ Thomas R. Gray, "The Confessions of Nat Turner," in Roy F. Johnson, The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection (Murfreesboro, North Carolina, 1966), p. 235.

Philemon is converted to Christianity by Celia and in the very last scene you see them as they plight their troth . . . Philemon holds his sword up in front of Celia and says: We'll love one another by the light of heaven above . . . Then Celia says: Oh, I would fain swoon into an eternity of love! (373)

The significance of Margaret's story and of the words she quotes from John does not come to Nat until after he has killed her -- indeed, until moments before his own death. Ironically, Nat must kill Margaret to realize her true worth, just as Christ had to die for man to realize God's love. Nat is driven to murder Margaret by a number of motives: to prove his leadership, to spare her from the merciless hatchet of the mad Will, and to satisfy his desire for her. If he could not have her in life, then she would be his in death. Styron powerfully depicts Nat's murder of Margaret as both an act of Christian sacrifice on the part of Margaret and as an almost tender act of love between Nat and Margaret. Though she flees from Nat, Margaret seems to understand what he must do and what she must suffer for him. "She made no sound, uttered no word, did not turn to plead or contend or resist or even wonder." (413) She trips and falls "bare arms still outthrust as if to welcome someone beloved." (413) Nat plunges the sword in her side, not

unlike Christ's wound, and her scream echoes in Nat's ears "like a far angelic cry." (414) His breathing wells up in sobs as he hears her tenderly calling him, "Oh Nat I hurt so. Please kill me Nat I hurt so." (414) "Shut your eyes," he tells her as he lifts a fence rail sensing "once more her close girl-smell and the fragrance of lavender, bitter in my nostrils and sweet." (414) Then Nat says:

. . . when I raised the rail above her head she gazed at me, as if past the imponderable vista of her anguish, with a grave and drowsy tenderness such as I had never known . . .
(414-415)

Margaret's look of tenderness makes her death an act of love, understanding and forgiveness; through Margaret's willing sacrifice Nat will later come to understand the significance of Christ, of love.

Aimlessly circling her body, "not near it yet ever within sight as if that crumpled blue were the center of an orbit around whose path I must make a ceaseless pilgrimage" (415), Nat momentarily sees her resurrected. "And once in my strange journey I thought I heard again her whispery voice, thought I saw her rise from the blazing field with arms outstretched" (415), crying, "Oh, I would fain swoon into an eternity of love!" (415)

That very day Nat performs an act of expiation for the

murder of Margaret. Seeing a young white girl flee from the rebels into the woods, and knowing that it took "but a single soul to raise the alarm" (416), Nat allows her to go, although he could easily have overtaken her. Indeed, it was this girl who spread the alarm, thus bringing about the rebellion's ultimate defeat and Nat's eventual punishment of death. Although he later says he feels no remorse for the white people slain, Nat in a sense had already performed an act of repentance by permitting the girl to escape. This act, his "wish to vouchsafe a life" (417) for the one he had taken, saves him from more murders while ensuring his own ultimate defeat and death.

After he murdered Margaret, Nat, unable to pray, says: "The God I knew was slipping away from me . . . Maybe in His seeming absence He is asking me to consider something I had not thought of or known before." (402) Significantly, at one point in his story Nat admits that during the course of his life God had only spoken two words to him, the words "I abide". (253) For Nat these words were a source of strength which enabled him to execute God's will, as he conceived it; yet these words are equally suggestive of the idea that God in His infinite patience will wait for Nat to recognize His truth: not wrath and vengeance, but love and

forgiveness.

On the morning of his execution, Nat once again asks himself the question he posed before beginning his recollections: "Was what I done wrong in His sight? And if what I done was wrong is there no redemption?" (423)

However, moments before his death, a death which he fears only because of God's absence, Nat is flooded with memories of Margaret as he thinks of her words: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God." (426)

And now beyond my fear, beyond my dread and emptiness, I feel the warmth flow into my loins and my legs tingle with desire. I tremble and I search for her face in my mind, seek her young body, yearning for her suddenly with a rage that racks me with a craving beyond pain; with tender stroking motions I pour out my love within her; pulsing flood; she arches against me, cries out, and the twain -- black and white -- are one. (426)

Nat, at last, if only in his mind, has achieved a kind of union with Margaret. In that union Nat recognizes his love for Margaret, a love which at last enables him to comprehend the words "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God." Through love, through Margaret, Nat realizes that God is love; and thus he is brought to a new religious knowledge and consciousness. Willingly he goes to his

death, no longer feeling forsaken: "We'll love one another, she seems to be entreating me, very close now, we'll love one another by the light of heaven above." (428) Thus, his last thoughts:

I would have done it all again. I would have destroyed them all. Yet 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.

Come My son! I turn in surrender.

Surely I come quickly. Amen.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus. (428)

Nat feels himself adopted as a son with Christ into the life of God. For Nat, at last, there is reconciliation with God; there is redemption. Through Margaret, the Christ figure, God is revealed to Nat. Thus, in his realization that God is love -- not savagery and rage -- Nat discovers God anew; and God, who "abides", ". . . will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God and he shall be my son."¹⁷ Through his discovery of God, who awaits man to come to Him, Nat in the Christian

¹⁷ Quoted by Styron as a postscript to the novel.

sense is delivered from his bondage; for a brief moment before he dies, he is free.

Nevertheless, Nat's redemption is qualified, for he admits no guilt, saying he would kill them all again. Such a qualification is in two respects both necessary and important to Styron. First, were Nat to regret his fight for freedom, he would in effect deny a central part of Styron's vision. In his devotion to the ideals of freedom and justice and in his willingness and ability to act upon those ideals, Nat is a sympathetic and noble character. Like Mannix and Cass, Nat must assert his self and "act according to his own lights, even when he's the victim of a delusion." (114) Only by actively seeking freedom could Nat discover that true freedom -- from fear and torment -- lies in the heart: in the acceptance of love as the culminating quality of human existence.

Second, to have Nat admit guilt and regret his mission would be to reduce the virtue of Christian love to a plea for passiveness and the acceptance of bondage, injustice and loss of individuality. Styron does indeed show that Nat, by devoting his whole being to hatred, was not really "living", not "becoming". Only through love could Nat discover his

true humanity and achieve a full realization of his being and of God. However, although God is love and love is the means by which man discovers self and freedom, hatred can in certain circumstances be justified. Man, in the Christian conception, is created free to choose between good and evil. Without will or choice men are, as Nat observes, like flies -- God's mindless outcasts. (26-27) Man, as a responsible individual, must hate evil and ever be ready to do battle against the principalities and powers of darkness.

Styron cannot and does not try to deny the evil of the white people who enslaved their fellow human beings. He therefore accepts his share of guilt and wants his readers to accept theirs, rather than to feel exonerated by an apology from Nat. True moral responsibility for Nat's violence lies within the entire community. By permitting Nat to remain without remorse for the deaths his rebellion caused, Styron is attempting to awaken the religious consciousness of America. Only in a community of people committed to love can the individual realize genuine and unqualified salvation, for Christian love is a community of people devoted to love of and service to one another. Nat Turner learned that self, purpose and freedom can be realized only through the

recognition and acceptance of God's redeeming love, revealed through Christ. Yet, as a responsible human being, devoted to God and to righteousness, Nat Turner was justified, Styron seems to say, in putting on the whole armor of God in an attempt to transform his world.

CONCLUSION

Peyton Loftis could do no more than hesitatingly take the first steps towards spiritual rebirth and redemption. Cass Kinsolving advanced somewhat more surely along the route. Only Nat Turner successfully reached journey's end. Disintegration, regeneration, redemption: the milestones provide the pattern and the substance of Styron's vision, a vision whose realization opens the door to Christian life.

The initial stage of salvation -- despair and the recognition of disorder in existence -- is fully explored in Styron's first novel. Lie Down in Darkness exposes the meaninglessness of a God-forsaken existence; the impotence of religious institutions, unless accompanied by charlatantry; and the disintegration of a society bent on self-destruction through modern warfare. The tensions, absurdities and frustrations of such a world are epitomized in the suicide of a young girl. Yet, significantly, the alienation of Peyton Loftis from herself and, hence, from the universe at large does not result primarily from a sense of social or cosmic chaos but from the dark, destructive forces of personal sin and guilt. Peyton, having fallen from innocence, knows guilt; and unless she can be shriven of that guilt,

she cannot be reconciled with herself and with human existence. Cut off from human fellowship and from God by an inability to love, Peyton is cast inward upon her own resources. She strives for a rebirth of the spirit; but, as Styron shows, man cannot transcend his guilt in isolation from humanity and God. For Peyton, thus isolated, the only avenue to freedom is death.

Styron's first novel, exploring man's inability to free himself from the bondage of guilt, suggests that one must look beyond humanity itself for a solution to man's problems. Thus, Styron in his second major novel acknowledges -- through the pattern of Christian redemption which he gives to Cass's regeneration -- man's dependence, in his quest for freedom, upon a power superior to himself.

Cass Kinsolving is typically modern in his rejection of religion; yet, he apprehends his alienation from self and the universe as a loss of the divine spirit, a separation from God. Implicit in Cass's quest for selfhood, integrity, and freedom is the assumption that the success of his search is dependent upon a reconciliation with God. Styron stresses, however, that such a reconciliation is not merely something accomplished for man; rather, man must perform an act of commitment to life by rebelling against bondage and the

external forces which threaten his freedom; moreover, man must personally and directly experience the forgiving love of God.

For Styron's characters the quest for freedom from bondage is a quest for self. As Cass learns, the only way to find self is to transcend self through love. Love, then, becomes the key to freedom: freedom is being freed into the condition of love. Most significantly, for both Cass Kinsolving and Nat Turner, being freed into love is unmistakably the work of God's grace, as revealed through the symbolic Christ figures which appear in these novels. The ramifications of such a religious solution to the problem of man's bondage are far-reaching. The Christian solution carries with it a belief in a meaningful and ordered universe, in which man can find his proper cosmic place. Moreover, it affirms a morality which is neither personally derived nor a mere choice between competing absurdities. Such a moral code rests upon an obligation to God and a commitment to love and life itself.

Love, then, becomes the sanctifying power of life, the permanent and true value, the ultimate commitment. For Styron the freedom to love cannot be separated from God, for it is God who makes that freedom possible. Thus, essential

to the completion of man's journey to spiritual rebirth and to a reconciliation with his own being is man's return to God and to an understanding that "love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God."

Threatened externally by the forces of dehumanization and social injustice and inwardly by feelings of sin, guilt, alienation and disintegration, man must either surrender to despair and death or look beyond himself and his society for the way to freedom and meaning. The uniqueness of Styron's vision is that he turns away from despair and with an unusual religious intensity rediscovers and embraces, in the exemplary spiritual journey of his novels, the Christian virtue of love, with its concomitant moral responsibilities.

The spiritual journey is not an easy one, nor is it morally uncomplicated. Both Cass and Nat are subjected to the tortures of despair and the threat of meaninglessness; indeed, both have become murderers before they discover in love their true bond with humanity and with God. Styron certainly does not suggest that men must murder in order to be redeemed; he is demonstrating, however, that in a sterile, corrupt world affirmations are not easily made and moral choices are not clear-cut. Styron's fundamental point is that man must comprehend and accept his individual obligation

to make moral choices and -- at the risk of everything, including his life -- to follow his deepest moral instincts. Only then can man discover the forgiving love of God and be liberated from his bondage. During the course of this hard journey, man may be compelled to descend into the hell of violence and of suffering before he is able to discern the awesome judgment and love of God. Even then, however, his affirmation may be tentative, his redemption qualified. For Styron shows that, although man's spiritual problems must find a personal spiritual solution apart from the institutions of religion and society, man still lives in a world where faith cannot completely be purged of doubt and where the malevolent forces of society often prevent the full realization of Christian principles. Indeed, that Styron can, while confronting the realities of modern life, nevertheless affirm the traditional Christian view of man and the universe sets him distinctly apart from his contemporaries and marks him as a novelist with a unique and intensely religious vision.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. PRIMARY SOURCES

Styron, William. The Confessions of Nat Turner.
New York, 1967.

_____. Lie Down in Darkness. New York,
1967. (originally published in 1951)

_____. The Long March. New York, 1962.
(originally published in 1952)

_____. Set This House on Fire. New York,
1961. (originally published in 1960)

4.

B. SECONDARY SOURCES: Books and Articles

Aldridge, John W. In Search³ of Heresy. New York, 1956.

Baumbach, Jonathan. The Landscape of Nightmare. New
York, 1965.

Bellow, Saul. "Some Notes on Recent American Fiction,"
Encounter, XXI (November 1963), 22-29.

Brooks, Cleanth. The Hidden God. New Haven, 1963.

Brown, William Adams. Christian Theology in Outline. New
York, 1906.

Bryant, Jerry H. "The Hopeful Stoicism of William Styron,"
South Atlantic Quarterly, LXII (1963), 539-550.

Chase, Richard. The American Novel and Its Tradition.
Garden City, 1957.

Davis, Robert Gorham. "The American Individualist Tradition,"
in The Creative Present, eds. Nona Balakian, Charles
Simon. Garden City, 1963, 109-141.

- _____. "In a Ravelled World Love Endures," NYTBR (December 26, 1954), 1, 13.
- _____. "Styron and the Students," Critique, III, iii (1960), 37-46.
- Demsey, David. "Talk with William Styron," NYTBR (September 9, 1951), 27.
- Detweiler, Robert. Four Spiritual Crises in Mid-Century American Fiction. University of Florida Monographs, Humanities No. 14, Gainesville, 1963.
- Fenton, Charles A. "William Styron and The Age of the Slob," South Atlantic Quarterly, LIX (1960), 469-476.
- Foster, Richard. "An Orgy of Commerce: William Styron's Set This House on Fire," Critique, III, iii (1960), 59-70.
- Friedman, Melvin J. "William Styron: An Interim Appraisal," English Journal, L (1961), 149-158, 192.
- Fuller, Edmund. Man in Modern Fiction: Some Minority Opinions on Contemporary American Writing. New York, 1958.
- Galloway, David D. The Absurd Hero in American Fiction: Updike, Styron, Bellow, Salinger. Austin, 1966.
- Geismar, Maxwell. American Moderns. New York, 1958.
- Glicksberg, Charles I. Literature and Religion. Dallas, 1960.
- Gray, Thomas R. "The Confessions of Nat Turner," in Roy F. Johnson, The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection. Murfreesboro, North Carolina, 1966, 225-248.
- Hartt, Julian N. The Lost Image of Man. Baton Rouge, 1963.
- Hassan, Ihab. "The Novel of Outrage: A Minority Voice in Postwar American Fiction," American Scholar, 34 (Spring 1965), 239-253.

- _____. Radical Innocence: Studies in The Contemporary American Novel. Princeton, 1961.
- Hays, Peter L. "The Nature of Rebellion in The Long March," Critique, VIII, ii (1966), 70-74.
- Hicks, Granville. "Race Riot, 1831," Saturday Review, 50 (October 7, 1967), 29-30.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. The Art of Southern Fiction. Carbondale, 1967.
- Hopper, Stanley Romaine, ed. Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature. New York, 1952.
- "The Idea of Hope" (review of The Confessions of Nat Turner), Time, 90, 15 (October 13, 1967), 110, 113.
- Kazin, Alfred. "The Alone Generation," Harper's, CCIX (October 1959), 131.
- Lewis, R.W.B. The Picaresque Saint. New York, 1959.
- _____, C. Vann Woodward. "Slavery in the First Person" (an interview with William Styron), Yale Alumni Magazine, XXXI, 2 (November 1967), 33-39.
- Ludwig, Jack. Recent American Novelists. University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers No. 22, Minneapolis, 1962.
- Macquarrie, John. Principles of Christian Theology. New York, 1966.
- Matthiessen, Peter, George Plimpton. "William Styron" (an interview), in Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, ed. Malcolm Cowley. New York, 1958, 267-283.
- McElroy, Davis Dunbar. Existentialism and Modern Literature. New York, 1963.
- McNamara, Eugene. "William Styron's The Long March: Absurdity and Authority," Western Humanities Review, XV (1961), 267-272.

- Meeker, Richard K. "The Youngest Generation of Southern Fiction Writers," in Southern Writers: Appraisals in Our Time, ed. R.C. Simonini, Jr. Charlottesville, 1964, 162-191.
- Moore, L. Hugh. "Robert Penn Warren, William Styron and the Use of Greek Myth," Critique, VIII, ii (1966), 75-87.
- Mudrick, Marvin. "Mailer and Styron: Guests of the Establishment," Hudson Review, XVII (1964), 346-366.
- Nigro, August. "The Long March: The Expansive Hero in a Closed World," Critique, IX, iii (1967), 103-112.
- O'Connell, Shaun. "Expense of Spirit: The Vision of William Styron," Critique, VII, ii (1966), 20-33.
- _____. "Styron's Nat Turner," Nation, 205, 12 (October 16, 1967), 373-374.
- O'Connor, William Van. "John Updike and William Styron: The Burden of Talent," in Contemporary American Novelists, ed. Harry T. Moore. Carbondale, 1964, 205-221.
- Robb, Kenneth A. "William Styron's Don Juan," Critique, VII, ii (1966), 34-46.
- Rubin, Louis D., Jr. "An Artist in Bonds," Sewanee Review, LXIX (1961), 174-179.
- _____. The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South. Seattle, 1963.
- _____. "Notes on The Literary Scene: Their Own Language," Harpers, CCXXX, No. 1379 (1965), 173-175.
- Sokolov, Raymond A. "Into the Mind of Nat Turner," Newsweek, LXX, 16 (October 16, 1967), 65-69.
- Stevenson, David L. "The Activists," Daedalus, 92 (Spring 1963), 238-249.
- _____. "Fiction's Unfamiliar Face," Nation, 187 (November 1, 1958), 307-309.

- _____. "Styron and the Fiction of the Fifties," Critique, III, iii (1960), 47-58.
- Stewart, Randall. American Literature and Christian Doctrine. Baton Rouge, 1958.
- Styron, William. "A Prevalence of Wonders," Nation, CLXXVI (May 2, 1953), 370-371.
- _____. "This Quiet Dust," Harper's, 230 (April 1965), 134-146.
- _____, Hiram Haydn, et al. "What's Wrong With the American Novel?" (a panel discussion), American Scholar, 24 (Autumn 1955), 464-503.
- Urang, Gunnar. "The Broader Vision: William Styron's Set This House on Fire," Critique, VIII, ii (1966), 47-69.
- Waldmeir, Joseph J., ed. Recent American Fiction. Boston, 1963.
- Woodward, C. Van. "Confessions of a Rebel: 1831," The New Republic, 157, 15 (October 7, 1967), 25-28.