

TRAGEDY AS REMEDY: A STUDY OF WILLIAM STYRON'S *SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE*

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William Styron's third novel, *Set This House on Fire*, is episodic and voluminous in clear contrast to his previous work, *The Long March*. Due to its complex structure, many critics misinterpreted *Set This House on Fire*, as author's ambitious effort in vain. *Set This House on Fire* received bitter criticism, almost at the point of vituperation, during the first few months of its publication. Critics accused Styron of celebrating crude violence without artistic justification for many outrageous themes in it. Richard Foster criticizing this novel in one of his articles writes:

The spirit of Hollywood looms and hovers over this absurd book like some unholy Ghost, giving it its vast Cineramic shape, its hectic vulgar super coloration, its hollow belting loudness of tune, and its ethos of commercial self-excitation. (69)

Arthur Mizener, who is admirer of Styron's skill, talent and sophistication, describes the characters of this novel as "the stock figures of romantic melodrama" (5). S. Laxmana Murthy tries to reveal the mystery of adverse criticism received by *Set This House on Fire*:

The sort of adverse criticism is due to the fact that *Set This House on Fire* is cast in a mould that goes beyond the beaten track of recent fiction, and thematically probes into the nature of good and evil in the regeneration of spirit from utter degradation, through violence and suffering. The impatience with the theme of the novel, explains much of the criticism that goes off tangentially. (103)

Like in Styron's other novels, in *Set This House on Fire* also, once again we come across the fact strongly that Styron is nostalgically imbued with the American South. The novel clearly reveals its Southern traits and Southern setting, though they remain in the background of the story. Styron is found in this novel following the advice which he gave to other Southern novelists to break away a little from all the magnolias. In this novel, the major characters are Southerners. The story offers the glimpses of Virginia and South Carolina that reflect the Southern life of the United States. The remarks of Rubin again are very vital in this regard:

The so called "Southern quality" in modern American fiction is not at bottom a matter of subject matter or theme, so much as of attitude; it is a way of looking at the nature of human experience, and it includes the assumption that to maintain order and stability the individual must be a part of a social community, yet that the ultimate authority that underlies

his conduct is not social but moral. It is, in short, a religious attitude, though most often it does not involve the dogmas of revealed religion. This attitude not the presence of the particular institutions and events that customarily embody the attitude, is what has enabled the work of the better Southern novelists to seem so “meaningful” in our time. It is precisely this attitude, too, that has made possible and believable the use of the full, unstinted high rhetorical mode that so marks much of the work of Faulkner, Warren, Wolf and others. We will not buy rhetoric unless we believe in the absolutes that justify it, and the Southern writers do believe in them. In many ways, Styron’s second novel represents kind of examination into the soundness of such a view, ending in a confirmation. Cass Kinsolving’s emotions and ideals are examined and tested in the furnace experience of Paris and Sambuco, and are finally pronounced sound. Whereupon Cass may come home. (“William Styron” 4)

In this novel, Cass Kinsolving the real protagonist, as a Southerner does not fail to notice the evil influence of the North which for him is symbolized by New York. Mason Flagg, the dark villain in the novel, the flamboyant millionaire represents the American North. Cass symbolizing the American South struggles to escape the corruption that has seeped into him in his association with Mason, the North. Simultaneously as a true Southerner, just like his ancestors he has to confront the evil within, born out of his dealings with the Negroes. The evil conscious Cass leaves the South for Europe, where under the corrupting influence of the North represented by Mason, he ultimately learns through suffering, the good in himself and returns home. Arthur Mizener feels that Styron meant to fulfill his publisher’s promise “in the most ambitious and profound way,” to write “a major novel about contemporary America” (26). Right from the inception of *Set This House on Fire*, setting has been significant to Styron’s theme of the novel.

The plot of the novel revolves around the three Americans namely Peter Leverette, Cass Kinsolving and Mason Flagg, who collectively form the pivot of the novel in the background of the guilt-ridden South. Just like Culver in *The Long March*, Peter in *Set This House on Fire*, performs the role of the narrator as well as chorus, and introduces the story of the novel. He reveals the past life of Mason to Cass of which Cass is unaware. He tells Cass, how Mason was expelled from St. Andrews for seducing the simple-minded daughter of an oyster fisherman in the church-basement. Mason is portrayed as a symbol of evil, symbolizing the evil that Cass must get rid of in order to redeem himself from his own evil and sense of guilt. The fact that Mason is the devil, is the heart of the matter. The dramatic opening of *Set This House on Fire*, resembles with its predecessors *Lie Down in Darkness* and *The Long March* where the chief incidents and events of the plot have already taken place before it opens. Flashback technique is very aptly used by Styron in order to acknowledge readers with the story. The main explorers who endeavour to solve the riddles and mysteries of the novel are Peter and Cass. They both try to probe and expose the causes which lead to the murder of Mason followed by the rape and murder of Francesca Ricci. Peter highlights the landscape of the Italian village Sambuco where the whole drama of the novel takes place. Peter had to leave the place after the murders of Mason and Francesca hurriedly and has been haunted by these stunning events happened in Sambuco. The dreams and nightmares which always haunt him indicate treachery and betrayal on his part. The painful tortures of these recurring haunting dreams motivate him to explore the causes which have led to the catastrophe in the form of murders. In order to solve the riddle and redeem

himself of the torture of these nightmares he seeks the help of Cass. Thus the whole story of the novel is revealed through Peter and Cass and is pieced together successfully.

Cass Kinsolving is portrayed skillfully by Styron as a depressed, melancholic person. Due to his unhappy and chaotic past, he prefers to settle in Sambuco in order to find haven. His disdained behaviour is caused by three reasons. First, in Carolina, he had a very sad childhood. Second, he spent a long time in Naval hospital's psychiatric ward, and, third and the last reason is that he has married a 'scatter-brained' Roman Catholic Poppy who made him an alienated person in life. Cass follows the footsteps of Milton Loftis in *Lie Down in Darkness* and fruitlessly takes refuge in alcohol to find happiness and to forget the pain. In order to keep his support of the crutch of alcohol he further degrades himself under the sway of Mason Flagg who exploits him to such an extent that he becomes a mere clown for his master Mason, and performs for amusing Mason's guests. Mason also exploits and insults his art of painting by making him portray a pornographic picture for him on the exchange of wine. In this manner Mason selfishly, flamboyantly and heartlessly exploits Cass for his own amusement and pleasure. This exploitation of Cass in the hands of Mason is suggestive of institution of slavery of the South of the United States of America. Cass's life is a symbol of that of the Negroes who were compelled to work like slaves. Mason on the other hand, symbolizes the master class, who exploits the slave just without any purpose and denies any human existence to them. Gunar Urang defines the helplessness of Cass, "As a result of his sense of failure and guilt along with his heavy intake of liquor, Cass had lost almost all command of himself and was appreciably helpless in Mason's power" (206-07).

Other characters in the novel, Luigi, an Italian police officer and Francesca, an Italian poor peasant girl try to stop Cass from indulging in alcohol and slavery to Mason. Luigi endeavours to make Cass realize the good in himself, which Cass has ignored and thus has made his life miserable. Cass associates himself with other Americans and argues; "They have to drink because drink drowns their guilt of having more money than anyone in the world" (389). Cass finds his redemption from the evil through the help which he renders to the peasant, Michele, a victim of tuberculosis and father of Francesca. Cass ultimately gets reinforced to act when he realizes Mason as a murderer and rapist of Francesca. Redemption is achieved by him, through the murder of Mason, the evil incarnated. We will see in the further analyses of the novel that Cass returns home to Carolina with new awareness and enlightenment received through the final teachings of Luigi.

The setting of the novel swings between France, Italy and Carolina, the background of the novel is undoubtedly Southern. The introduction of the subject of Southern guilt and degeneracy through Peter and his father at the outset of the novel is vitally important in order to understand Cass Kinsolving, Styron's tragic protagonist of *Set This House on Fire*. The tragic guilt and the evil that Cass experiences, is rooted in the South of the United States of America, with its strong sense of alienation so characteristic of the South. Styron launches an angry critic of its degeneracy in the person of Peter's father, old Laverette, at the very outset of the novel, for whom life is a search for justice. Old Leverette who has "moved through dooms of love, through griefs of joy, in his lovely seeking," (14) believes strongly that the institution of slavery damned the American South to unending guilt. According to him Negro should get a fair deal for his long years of bondage. For him, the institution of slavery has put the American South in the eternal guilt. Waving towards the sparkling waters old Laverette tells Peter:

That's where they came in, in the year 1619. Right out there. It was one of the saddest days in the history of man, and I mean black or white. We're still paying, for it from here right on out. And there'll be blood shed, and tears. (14)

Peter's father tells that in addition to the guilt and evil associated with the Negro, the South has come under the California influence "which has made it a slave to gadgets. Man in South has not grown "in dignity or wisdom" but grew only in "his gut and his pocketbook"(17). The common man in the South, contrary to the spirit of the noble dreams of the founding fathers, "spat on his negro (sic) brother and wore out his eyes looking at T.V"(17). He may prolong his living with "wonder drugs" but it is futile and worthless life.

Peter Levertte, the narrator, who introduces himself as a Virginian, now living in New York and pursuing a decent but mediocre legal career, is a participant in the events of the novel and functions as a central consciousness, but he is not its central character or the real protagonist. As the novel unravels itself we come to know that the role of the central character is played by Cass Kinsolving, who is an amateur painter and who spends the great part of each day drinking and playing the fool to Mason Flagg, a wealthy expatriate American, a charming and handsome manor-born playboy, sexually promiscuous, a pathological liar, demonical in his desire to own other people. Mason represents the evil that Cass must get rid of in order to free himself from the torturing evil of guilt. Styron portrays Mason as a devil-surrogate:

It was as if he was hardly a man at all, but a creature from a different race who had taken on the guise of man. . . . For him there was no history, of, if there was, it began on the day he was born. Before that there was nothing, and out of that nothing sprung this creature, committed to nothingness.
(502)

Mason has the mutual acquaintance with Cass and Peter, and it is because of him that Peter and Cass have been brought together in Sambuco, Italy, where Peter has gone to visit Mason, his prep school friend. The lives of these three men mingle for a brief period and then all of a sudden separate following Mason's death. The pivotal events of this novel take place in a single twenty-four hour period sometime in the 1950s. Peter Leverett, has been working in Italy. Mason Flagg, his school friend sends him an invitation to visit him in Sambuco, which Leverett accepts with interest. On the way from Rome to Sambuco, Peter collides with an Italian named Luciano di Lieto on a Motor scooter, and instead of being innocent in the accident Peter suffers through a police interrogation and imprecations by the Italian's family. He finally arrives in Sambuco troubled and exhausted and immediately stumbles onto Poppy Kinsolving, Cass's wife, her numerous children, and, ultimately, her slightly besotted husband, Cass. After a brief sleep Peter comes across a series of confusing events. He finds a party at Mason's, full of phony Hollywood types who are making a movie at the palazzo, Mason appears distraught and bloody after chasing a young woman down the corridors; he then proceeds to make fun of Cass as entertainment for his guests, and Cass is too drunk to demur or perhaps even to care. After intervening to dismiss the disgusting spectacle, Peter is convinced by Cass to join him in bringing stolen medicine to a dying Italian peasant named Michele many miles away. The hike exhausts Peter further, and upon returning, he falls into a deep sleep. He awakens to learn that the girl he saw in the corridors of the palazzo has been raped and murdered. Mason, the assumed criminal has committed suicide after the rape and murder.

These are the facts, or the supposed facts at the beginning of the novel which haunt Peter. Styron, into this gothic tale, has brilliantly stuffed a lovely, ravished maiden and a dark villain, and has woven questions about the human condition that successfully lift the story out of the realm of tawdry melodrama. Nature of evil is one of the issues raised by Styron artistically. Distinctively, both Cass and Peter are anxious to determine whether Mason was evil or sick or simply reprehensible. Cass has a huge personal stake in the answer, since, as he progressively unravels to Peter that Mason did not commit suicide but Cass himself had thrown him off a cliff. Peter is restless to affix a label to Mason, because he has also participated in Mason's misdeeds to the extent of observing or hearing about certain contemptible practices but not endeavouring to stop them and this is Peter's guilt and his burden of evil. Cass is a murderer if Mason was not starkly evil. If Mason was evil, then Peter cannot justify himself for failing to react more negatively. Cass and Peter both struggle to understand Mason in order to understand themselves and achieve their respective redemption.

About two years later, in Charleston America, Peter and Cass meet again to try to piece together the reasons for what happened that summer night in Sambuco, each contributing information the other does not have. But they are seeking much more than the information, for each recognizes in the other the clue to his own past, and sees in coming to terms with his own past some progress towards resolving the mysteries of his present self. This echo from Dante's *Inferno* reinforces the notion of ascending towards redemption by first descending into the pit. In the novel, Peter plays Virgil to Cass's Dante, directing him towards awareness of what happened during those hellish days when Cass was too drunk to know. In the same manner, Cass's confessions to Peter allow him to glimpse dark recesses and disorders of his own self that he had never before completely glimpsed.

Jonathan Baumbach highlights that Styron's Cass is a "neo-Dostoevskian hero who goes from the death of sin through the purgation of guilt and suffering to the potential resurrection of redemption" (*Landscape* 130). This progress of Cass from evil, Guilt and suffering to redemption does undeniably seem to be the classic pattern of tragedy. Gunar Urang stresses that the novel's achievement as a tragedy depends upon our ability to identify with Cass, "We must be able to suffer with him the sense of being trapped by his history and his culture and of being threatened by the loss of all stable meaning" (188).

In order to explain his involvement in Mason's death, Cass finds it necessary to begin his story much earlier in Paris, probing certain facets of his past dating back to adolescence. As the dialogue and mutual recounting between Cass and Peter evolves, Cass emerges more important character of the two, clearly emerging as a true protagonist. He appears to be a vibrant, intellectual, intense, receptive, unpretentious, poorly educated and highly intelligent South American belonging to North Carolina. When we find him in Paris with his catholic wife, Poppy and a number of children, his situation is desperate. He feels trapped by his family circumstances and is overcome by the evil of guilt and despair the source of which he cannot at first probe. He has an uncontrollable drinking problem and cannot discipline himself to do the painting which he very much wants to do and believes he has the talent to do. The lack of faith reduces Cass to a state of evil, hopeless despair and self-loathing:

That was the trouble, see? When I was in Europe I didn't know anything at all. I was half a person trapped by terror, trapped by booze, trapped by self I was a regular ambulating biological disaster, a bag full of corruption

held together by one single poisonous thought—and that was to destroy myself in the most agonizing way there was. (60)

This despair of Cass swaps with feelings of euphoria at moments when he feels he has response to the mystery of the whole universe. But he realizes that they are hallucinatory, brought about by booze and starvation:

Anyway, as I say, the joy was on me, the joy and the calm. It was a real euphoria. And, God, how stupid I was not to realize that the whole thing was a fraud. That I was in real danger. That I was really sick, really, sick from booze and abuse of the flesh and semi-starvation. That all this—this vision and insight was the purest hocus-pokus, pleasant—may be, pleasant as hell, really, but phony nonetheless, chemically induced, and no more permanent or real than—well, than a dream. (302)

Through his discussions with Peter about his past life we come to know the cause of this “schism” in his self, of his evil, despair and sickness, which can be traced back to his invested sense of guilt which is indeed an original source of his sense of evil. Like his Virginian ancestors, who suffered from inborn blood guilt, Cass, who is also a North Carolinian, has his own list of guilts contributing to the burden of evil which he is constantly tortured with. These force him to that despair which Kierkegaard terms “The sickness unto death” Cass is also demoralized with the fact that his debauchery and drink have been possible entirely because of his wife’s money. He confesses that guilt to Peter:

You know, the old Anglo-Saxon hellfire which we just can’t even get rid of. I felt god dam guilty over the laps, and even guiltier, I seek on, over the fact . . . that the ten bucks or that I’d pay to this floozy was actually Poppy’s money. (303-04)

This account helps Peter to tie certain events together, and to draw them to a fitting conclusion and to finally know what he witnessed in Sambuco.

The model of Cass’s tragic connection with life very nearly fits the one that is worked out by Karl Jaspers in his decidedly commended book, *Tragedy is not Enough*, in which Jaspers deals with the basic characteristics of the tragic in chapter II of this book which may very advantageously, be applied to Cass. Jaspers stresses:

A yearning for deliverance has always gone hand in hand with the knowledge of the tragic. When man encounters the hard fact of tragedy, he faces an inexorable limit. At this limit, he finds no guarantee of general salvation. Rather, it is in acting out his own personality, in realizing his self-hood even unto death, that he finds redemption and deliverance. (42)

Cass may be redeemed and delivered from his tormenting evil, only after realizing himself, after going through what Jung has termed the “Individual process”. This process deals with the creative progression of man towards a contented identity; it is a chase for self-realization through which a human being becomes an individual. In *Set This House on Fire*, Cass’s life is devoted to realize this psychological process. This makes him first of all to detect the guilt, the source of evil and then the exorcism of its suffocating oppressiveness. While asserting about the problem of guilt and its significance to tragedy Karl Jaspers observes, “Tragedy becomes self-conscious by understanding the fate of its characters as the consequence of guilt, and as the inner working out of guilt itself. Destruction is the atonement of the guilt” (52). Jaspers subsequently makes the distinction between two kinds of guilt:

We must therefore speak of guilt in the wider sense of guilt of human existence as such, and of guilt in the narrower sense of responsibility or any particular action . . . a particular life is guilty through its origin. True, I did not desire this world nor my particular existence in it. But I am guilty against my will. Simply because it is I myself who have this origin. My descent from guilty ancestors causes my own guilty . . . guilt in the narrower sense is found in any distinct action I carry out freely in the sense that it need not occur and could also occur differently. (53-33)

As a solution of the problem, in order to redeem himself, Cass must first of all recognize evil resulting from guilt, both “inherited” and “personal”. Cass’s Southern background, filled with the guilt of generations against the Negro, is made subservient to his guilt and sense of “responsibility” for a particular action—his devastation of the Negro Crawfoot’s cabin, along with his sharp tongued manager Lonnie. In the latter case as Jasper asserts his guilt consists in, “personal arbitrariness consciously apposing the universal for no other reason than its own arbitrariness” (55).

Cass is able to escape his evil of guilt only through “destruction”. It is only when he murders Mason Flagg, the symbol of evil and immorality that he can realize himself. At the end of the novel Cass becomes, in the words of Jaspers, “the tragic hero—man heightened and intensified . . . fulfilling himself in goodness and concealing out his own identity in evil” (56). It is vital to acknowledge that, in this particular novel Styron has gone back for inspiration to the seventeenth century poet John Donne, while prescribing for malaise that is typical of the twentieth century. The major theme of this novel is coloured with concerns with God, the individual’s estrangement and alienation from God, and his ultimate arrival to faith. Like St. Augustine, John Donne knew man’s nature; he was aware of enticement surrounding human race. He was especially engaged by the great subject of sin. His most notable theme was constantly God, His omnipotence, His mercy, His wrath and His terrible justice. So genuine and vivid was his sense of God that to his devout mind, the scarcity of God’s love was in itself hell, and no fires and tortures could add to that punishment. And as Cass unfolds to Peter he was suffering from the loss of faith also. Styron has taken the epigraph for this novel from Donne’s Sermon LXXVI, preached to the Earl of Carlile and his Company at Sion. In this passionate sermon, Donne speaks of eternal damnation—“when all is said and done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments, is everlasting absence of God and the everlasting impossibility of returning to His presence.” Baumbach while comparing *Set This House on Fire* with Dante’s *Inferno*, has suggested that, “ultimately the novel is a symbolic pilgrimage into hell in search of, of all things, the sight of God” (*Landscape* 135).

Damnation is to be identified with the slaughter of faith which consists in the loss of the sight and presence of God. It emerges to be Styron’s objective that we construe the protagonist’s experiences in the background of this sermon. In the background, Styron evokes direful and combustible visions to symbolic upheaval: Storms, direful thunders and volcanoes denote the angry visitations of the Lord:

The sea was placid, held in momentary abeyance, but the sun had grown hotter still, hung in the sky fiery, huge and, like some dead weight, oppressively heavy and near. The bugger is exploding, Cass thought as he edged back into a shadowed place, its going to swell up and shrivel us like a bunch of gnats in a flame. (544)

The novel then unravels, to tell different stories at once. It seems an allegory of a dark night of the soul or a pilgrim's progress, in which Cass comes to understand, and then to cast off, the evil part of his nature and attain redemption.

Styron supports a regeneration and restitution of values to contemporary America which is lost in the quandary of its own material development. For an American, God is not to be worshipped but the Almighty dollar is to be. It is against this perception that Alfred Leverette, severely reiterates the need of tragedy in modern America. He feels that men can become men again only when the tragic vision of life is reinstated.

What this country needs . . . what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic, like what happened to Jericho or the cities of the plain—something terrible I mean, son, so that when the people have been through hell fire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be men again, human beings not a bunch of smug contented hogs rooted at the trough. Ciphers without mind or soul or heart. (16)

In almost the same manner, even Cass in his drunken trance feels that America is now seasoned for tragedy, for the tragic spirit alone can affect the kind of catharsis and purgation:

Hold on! Let me tell you what we'll do. Together you and me we'll pull a Prometheus on 'em. We'll bring back tragedy to the land of the Pepsi-Cola and the peanut brittle and the Nodess Because. That's what we'll do, by God! And we'll make the ignorant little buggers like it. No more popcorn, no more dream boats, no more Donald Ducks, no more wet dreams in the mezzanine. Tragedy by God, that's what we'll give 'em! Something to stiffen their spines and firm up their joints and clean out their tiny little souls. What 'll you have? Ajax? Alcestic? Electra Iphigenia? Hoo-boy? Once more his hand plunged into the neck of his T-shirt. "I would not be the murderer of my mother, and of thee too. Sufficient is her blood. No, I will share my fortune, live with thee, or with thee die: to Argos I will lead thee. . . . (134)

What we learn from Cass Kinsolving is that he himself has been his own worst enemy, not Mason Flagg: "Kinsolving pitted against Kinsolving, what a dreary battle!" (283). Although Cass belonged to a reputable Anglican family; and was wedded to a devout Roman Catholic, he had given up all pretensions to organized religion quite early in his life. Poppy his wife, in an uncontrolled moment of enlightenment once raved at him: "May be," she said tearfully again, preparing to leave, "may be if you had some of that religion you'd be happier. May be you wouldn't be in such a torment all the time!" (320).

This alienation from God distresses him so much that all his life he tries to run away. Slotkin, the kindly old navy brain doctor, once tells Cass just that—"you will be running all your life" (353). While speaking of his experiences at Sambuco, Cass later tells Peter, "You know you can't work without faith, and boy I was as faithless as an alley cat" (282). This lack of faith is real evil for Cass, which turns him into a kind of neurotic, a shriven, unbalanced individual, and stirs in him the desire to destroy himself completely. He is reminded of old Slotkin's words again:

[S]elf destruction is the last refuge of the cowardly man. And I remember saying somewhat self-pityingly—not at all, self destruction is the triumph

of a man whose back is to the wall, it is at least one above imperishable self-loathing. (407)

But unfathomable in his heart, Cass realizes that, "man cannot live without a focus . . . without some kind of faith if you want to call it that. I didn't have anymore faith than a tomcat. Nothing. Nothing!" (61). He has consciously married a Catholic, and then, as she gives birth to a succession of babies, he holds her Catholicism against her out of a feeling of his own failure as husband and provider. He becomes a slave to the bottle ignoring the fact that liquor makes his ulcer flare. Cass is physically, emotionally and spiritually a mess because he is a man without faith, and a man without faith cannot create good art or live a pleasing life. He narrates to Peter that the major source of his guilt dates back to two incidents in his early life. One was the loss of the "divine spirit" Cass's first experience with a woman. Between the wars, Cass aged seventeen had been seduced by a puritanical nymphomaniac, Vernelle Satterfield. When Cass, young and inexperienced had as a final point come off against her soft white thigh, the girl had simply looked down and cried; "Why, you pore silly. Look down there! Look what you done! Why the divine spirit just flowed right on out of you" (300).

Cass has always kept in mind that remark and recognized the fact of it. He has all his life been in search of redemption that remains out of his reach, and to save his life he needs an infusion of the divine spirit. But he is incarcerated in the house of self with no one neither human nor God, coming with the key and this key is the means of his redemption which he achieves with the course of time. And when as a final point he comes to a decision to move down South, again, he is encouraged by the same deep desire:

[A]nd I lay my head against her shoulder and I thought of the day before, and the long night, and ever Vernelle Satterfield and what she said about the divine spirit, which had indeed flowed on out of me, and which to save my very life I know I had to recapture. (314)

Another incident leading to Cass's overwhelming burden of evil and guilt relates to the time he was working as an assistant in the radio shop which he describes to Peter Leverett during his visit in Charleston. Working in a Western Auto Store in a backwoods Virginia town, at the age of fifteen or sixteen, Cass goes with Lonnie, the assistant manager, to the cabin of a Negro farmer who has failed to pay his costs for a small radio. Lonnie searches the dilapidated house and finds the cheap plastic radio hidden under a floorboard, while the farmer is out in the fields. The break in the case of the radio stimulates Lonnie's fury, and he begins to devastate the farmer's scanty belongings. The young Cass looks on with shock, but with enthusiasm too, and not only does he fail to give voice to Lonnie's condemnation but he also joins in the destruction when commanded by his manager. So bottomless is his guilt at doing what he knows is immoral that Cass puts the confrontation out of his mind for another fifteen years. It surfaces in Sambuco, however, when Cass's feeling of self-worth is dangerously low, adding to the burden of evil, guilt, shame and remorse that he already bears for innumerable other misdeed. This guilt, this great unforgivable crime of Cass in which he had so shamefully taken part, leads to his sense of evil, haunts his dreams, recurring again and again to torment him:

Ever since I'd been in Europe, about half of whatever nightmares I'd had—the one I remembered any way—had been tied up with negroes. Negroes in prison, negroes being gassed, me being gassed, negroes watching me while I was being gassed. (415)

Cass's pervasive sense of evil and guilt harasses him into a deep self-hatred. Cass later confesses to Peter:

What I was really sick from despair and self-loathing and greed and selfishness and spite. I was sick with a paralyses of the soul, and with self, and with flabbiness . . . and I guess my sickness, if you really want to know, 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. That's the bleeding truth. (305)

A dream that Cass has in Paris during one of his dark nights of the soul when he flings Poppy and the children out of the house, presents a hint to the foundation of his despair and self-loathing. Dreams are especially significant in this novel: as major sources of information that can partially circumvent the conscious mind with its rationalizations and suppressions, they provide a way for the characters to find out who they really are. Cass dreams that he is imprisoned in the state prison, but he is ignorant of the charge. So atrocious is his crime that the other inmates call for him to be gassed, but still he cannot find out the nature of his deed; in dream terms, perhaps it is something unspeakable to him. Clearly, Cass is weighed down with an evil of guilt and wants to die because he feels that he is worthy of this fate, so he indulges in self-destructive dealings. Cass is certain that he is being chastised by God for his sins, when three of his children come down with scarlet fever on the train to Toulon, to him in some deep sense, he, a useless derelict, has destroyed his own children and added to his evil. While he gives credit of their ultimate recuperation to penicillin, Poppy attributes the wonder to God, for she is a woman of incredible faith, and he thirsts for God with a spiritual need so deep that no artificial liquid remedy can quench it. The over encumbering realization of evil dealing with the guilt reduces Cass to the archetypal hero in the modern novel—what Peter Axthelm terms the “Confessional hero,” the one who is:

[Undoubtedly] afflicted and unbalanced, disillusioned and groping for meaning . . . He views his condition not with danger but with a deep internal pain; he rejects external rebellion in favor of the self-laceration. His suffering originates not in the chaos of the world, only possible order or value must be found in self-understanding. (9)

Styron does not seem prepared to close the novel on this hopeless note. He very skillfully insists on Cass's possibility of redemption. Luigi, seeking to free Cass at the end from his misplaced sense of evil and guilt accuses him, “*Tu pechi nell 'avere tanto senso di colpa!* You sin in this guilt of yourself!” (556) (emphasis original). Just like the Greek; Luigi is bent upon emancipating Cass into the condition of love, the real good in him. Cass commences to comprehend what Slotkin had not been successful to get across before discharging him as uncured from the psychiatric ward:

But however I think of him & may be that's only because he was about the only person I ever felt I could talk to about what was eating me, I get an extraordinary feeling in my bones, & can recall as clear as the shining air that day when I quoted that line from Oedipus that hit me so between the eyes . . . yes we fail often but it is our birthright no less than the Greeks to try to free people into the condition of love. (408)

Styron even goes one step ahead, when he speaks about the foreswearing of God's love. Alfred Leverette talks about the torments that will be inflicted on those denying God's love. Luigi urges Cass to reassess himself in the light of God's love: "For the love of God, Cass" he says "consider the *good* in your self: consider hope! Consider Joy!" (562) (emphasis original).

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