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Existentialism as Reflected in the Imagery of William Styron's Work

Sally Yates Wood

EXISTENTIALISM AS REFLECTED IN THE IMAGERY OF WILLIAM STYRON'S WORK

BY

SALLY YATES WOOD

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John C. Boggs, Jr.
Director of Thesis

Edward C Pyle
Dean of the Graduate School

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In Lie Down in Darkness, The Long March and Set This House on Fire, William Styron studies the modern condition of man and his world. Styron describes this situation according to an existential definition of existence. The world of his novels is depicted as a lonely and bleak realm where man finds no external means of support. As a result of these conditions, man flounders aimlessly. The reason for this erratic behavior is that man relies too heavily on finding guidance from the outside world. Styron contends that man will continue to stumble so miserably, until he realizes that he will find no support from any outside source. Man's only alternative is to seek security from within himself. Thus the only positive choice of existence that man can make is to struggle to find personal strength and courage.

In studying these conditions this thesis particularly emphasizes the imagistic development within Styron's novels. Styron graphically describes the grim existential world and man's reactions to such a bleak existence. Styron develops his images even to encompass the more positive aspects of the existential existence.

In the course of this study, many references are made to Sören Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich. Since Styron does echo many of the expressions of these philosophers, it becomes helpful to refer to their works in order to clarify the position of William Styron.

The Horrendous Existential World

According to existential philosophy, man lives in a lonely and devastatingly unstructured world. His isolated plight is commonly described with the depiction of a scene where man is seen being hurled onto the earth by some invisible hand and then being left to shift for himself without the support of any benevolent force. William Styron joins the ranks of many modern novelists when he studies this problem of the existential experience. In his novels Styron portrays such a world of desolate isolation, and then he describes man's reactions to this isolated situation. Unlike the nihilistic or atheistic branch of the existential school, Styron suggests positive ways of dealing with life's dilemmas. He does not agree that life offers a "no exit" alternative or, in other words, that man's life is hopeless and frustrating. Instead, man has a very important choice that he can make, one that would provide him with the strength that he needs to challenge the obliterative forces of the world. He can affirmatively elect to find support and courage from within himself. Paul Tillich labels such an affirmative option "the courage to be." [1]

A basic tenet of existentialism holds that man is deserted by God. Many philosophers debate whether or not God has

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[1] The Courage to Be (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1952.)

abandoned mankind or whether mankind has abandoned God. Of course, the end result of either condition is that man is left alone without any spiritual or divine source of comfort. Without overemphasizing this situation, Styron implicitly notes in his novels that this lack of divine presence is an inherent state of being. His characters obviously suffer traumatically from the loss of such guidance and security. They would possibly not flounder in life if such a base of support was intrinsically present in their world. Unfortunately man must learn to survive in spite of this absence. According to Luigi of Set This House on Fire, man is sentenced to such an isolated existence.

> We are serving our sentence in solitary confinement. . . . Once we were at least able to talk with our Jailer, but now even He has gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable loss.[2]

There are, also, no established institutions in the modern world that can offer man any solace. Styron particularly relies on the fact that formal standards or morals, dictated by society, are nonexistent. American modernization has erased any trace of such a regulated world. Even the Old South, which traditionally represents a world of strict values and customs, has changed. Styron's Virginia can only provide

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[2] William Styron, Set This House on Fire (New York: The New American Library, 1960), p. 473. STHOF and the page numbers of quotations from this source will follow the quotation parenthetically.

its inhabitants with old, decaying values that are useless to modern man. Virginia in turn offers no vital, social substitutes. As Milton Loftis remarks, this culture has fallen into ruin.

> Death was in the air . . . but wasn't autumn the season of death, and all Virginia a land of dying? In the woods strange, somehow rather marvelous fires were burning: across the gray day, the road still shiny with the odor of burned wood and leaves. Ghosts of Rochambeau and McClellan, old campfires of earlier falls, with smoke just as blue as this, just as fatal.[3]

Both the fathers of Peter Leverett and Milton Loftis maintain that there are basic rules that society prescribes for mankind. Milton is continuously haunted by his father's moralistic adages, and he is disturbed because this patriarchal advice does not apply to his life. His father was wrong when he dictated that society demands a certain standard. Milton discovers that life offers no such restricted security. Peter's father, also, clings to the past and to optimistic institutions such as Roosevelt and his New Deal. (STHOF-17) He blames the discontent of modern men on the fact that they do not listen and learn from such sources of wisdom. Peter realizes that his father's standards fail to solve any of his problems. Apparently these values bring no peace to his father, for he is only a bitter and frustrated old man.

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[3] William Styron, Lie Down in Darkness (New York: The American Library, 1951), p. 178. LDID and the page numbers of quotations from this source will follow the quotation parenthetically.

The mechanical age contributes to the destruction of the social standards of Virginia. Old traditions cannot survive in the fast moving age of the machine. Peter Leverett returns to Port Warwick, Styron's mythological Yoknapatawpha County. He sadly discovers that his southern homeland has been altered, and he feels lost and disoriented because of this change.

> Of my sojourn in Virginia, however, there is a little bit more to say. Nothing in America remains fixed for long, but my old home town, Port Warwick had grown vaster and more streamlined and clownish-looking than I thought a decent southern town could ever become. . . . In America our landmarks and our boundaries merge, shift, and change quicker than we can tell: one day we feel rooted, and the carpet of our experience is a familiar thing upon which we securely stand. Then, as if by some conjuring trick, it is all yanked out from beneath us, and when we come down we alight upon — what? The same old street, to be sure. But where it once had the solid resounding of Bankhead Magruder Avenue — dear to all those who remember that soldier who stalemated McClellan — now it is called Buena Vista Terrace (It's the California influence," my father complained, "it's going to get us all in the end."); an all-engulfing billboard across the way tells us to "Listen to Jack Avery, the Tidewater's Favorite Disk Jockey," and though we are obscurely moved by intimations of growth, of advancement, we feel hollow and downcast. (STHOF-14-15)

Because of this modern, mechanical progress, the world becomes impersonal and cold. Inanimate objects, such as illuminated sign boards and powerful automobiles, characterize the modern condition. In Cass Kinsolving's words, the world has been turned into "an ashheap of ignorance and sordid crappy materialism and ugliness." (STHOF- 272)

Mechanization is diametrically opposed to the human situation, for automation is indifferent to man's personal

needs.[4] This point is exemplified in Lie Down in Darkness. The hearse that carries Peyton's body continually breaks down during the trip to the cemetery. In the face of the human emotion of this sad day, such mechanical inconvenience is chillingly awesome. This incident illustrates the fact that the machine can in no way relate to man's life, for the machine is only an insensitive nut and bolt. It is therefore understandable that man finds it difficult to adjust to this cold age of the machine and that he feels lost and alienated in such a mechanistic environment.

Without any kind of divine or social touchstones man's life is frightfully free. Milton's father declares that there are forces that restrict man and consequently eliminate the possibility of self-determination.

> "My son, most people, whether they know it or not," his father had said, "get on through life by a sophomoric fatalism. Only poets and thieves can exercise free will, and most of them die young." (LDID- 91)

When Milton goes out into the world he learns that his father's philosophy is far from being the truth. Milton is provided with so much freedom that it is oppressive. Unfortunately most people, including Milton, are not strong enough to handle such personal license. The majority of individuals would prefer to have some limitations set upon themselves.

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[4] F. H. Heineman, Existentialism and the Modern Predicament (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 34.

Styron develops many metaphors in his novels that describe the disheveled and isolated freedom of life. In The Long March, Captain Mannix is called back into active duty in the Marines. This military service completely separates him from the world of his family and career. After several days on the base he feels that this former existence is all a part of a dreamlike past. This sense of disorientation is exemplified by the use of a metaphor that repeatedly dots the pages of The Long March. Mannix and his confidante in arms, Culver, often feel as though they are lost; lost as if on a lonely sea. Before the march Culver is sitting alone in his tent thinking about his family. He suddenly feels as isolated and lonely as one who is "unhelmed upon a dark and compassless ocean."[5] During the long march this metaphor for loneliness is again used. Mannix and his men are passed on the road by a car, "a slick convertible bound for the North, New York perhaps." The passengers are totally unaware of the grueling march and its participants. These people are "like ocean voyagers oblivious of all those fishy struggles below them in the night, submarine and fathomless." (TLM-83) This incident illustrates the strangeness or unreality of the marcher's situation.[6] On another level of meaning, this episode exemplifies the lonely plight of man in general.

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[5]William Styron, The Long March (New York: Vintage Books, 1952), p. 35. TLM and the page numbers of quotations from this source will follow the quotation parenthetically.

[6]Eugene McNamara, "William Styron's Long March: Absurdity and Authority," WHR, 15 (Summer, 1961), 271.

Man is similarly passed in the night without any recognition from the outside world.

Styron sets the scenes within a wartime framework in Lie Down in Darkness, The Long March, and Set This House on Fire. He creates such a militaristically destructive atmosphere in order to stress the gloomy predicament of modern man. There are no concrete sources of security in life, but there surely are concrete forces of destruction and dread in this world. War is a total experience in The Long March. For the Marines in this story, there is no other form of life. In the other works the characters are not directly involved in war activities, but they are certainly affected by the desolation of war.

Explosions and bombings are particularly prevalent images in these novels. The Long March opens with the horrors of an accidental explosion in the midst of some Marine recruits.

> One noon, in the blaze of a cloudless Carolina summer, what was left of eight dead boys lay strewn about the landscape, among the poison ivy and the pine needles and loblolly saplings. It was not so much as if they had departed this life but as if, sprayed from a hose, they were only shreds of bones, guts, and dangling tissue to which it would have been impossible to impute the quality of life, far less the capacity to relinquish it. (TLM-5)

In these novels the atomic bomb is a dominant image of dread. William Styron is obviously preoccupied with some of the traumatic events which occurred during the late forties and the fifties. The memory of the bombing of Hiroshima and the

threat of atomic attack during the Cold War Crisis were major concerns in America. Styron capitalizes on this mood by portraying this devastating machine of modern warfare in his works. These novels were written during the decades of the fifties, and Styron's reading audience could easily sympathize with the conditions described therein. In Lie Down in Darkness the bombing of Hiroshima is particularly emphasized. This atrocity not only serves as an illustration of a cause of anxiety and fear, but it also reflects the general mood of the characters. For instance Peyton Loftis is literally losing hold of her life. Interestingly enough she commits suicide as an aftermath of hearing about the atomic bombing in Japan. This earth-shattering event did not directly cause her death, for Peyton's problems were much more deeply rooted. This bombing did, however, contribute to the sense of anxiety that she was experiencing at the time. The holocaust in Japan mirrors Peyton's personal holocaust.

One of the most encompassing images that describes the unstable conditions of the world is that which deals with an abysmal cavity. In The Courage to Be, Paul Tillich notes that there are two types of nightmares which confront modern man. One nightmare deals with an entrapping narrowness which threatens to suffocate its victim. The other is concerned with a vast and dark emptiness into which the person falls.[7] William Styron develops the latter image in his

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[7]Tillich, pp. 62-63.

novels. Most of the time such infinite space is verbally pictured by one of the characters. For instance Cass Kinsolving states that he has seen a big vacuum, an absolute blankness, a dark whiteness or a sucking vortex.[8] At another time Cass tells Luigi, the Fascist, humanitarian policeman, of his look into the depths of the abysss.

> I knew that I had come to the end of the road and had found there nothing at all. There was nothing. There was a nullity in the universe so great as to encompass and drown the universe itself. The value of a man's life was nothing, and his destiny nothingness, (STHOF-465-466)

One of the most graphic illustrations of the confrontation with abysmal forces occurs in The Long March. A group of drunken soldiers jokingly decide to hang Mannix from their tenth floor hotel window. Mannix proceeds to tell Culver of his panicky feelings during this suspension in space.

> I just remember the cold wind blowing on my body and that dark, man, infinite darkness all around me, and my ankles b ginning to slip out of their hands. I really saw Death then, and I think that all I could think of was that I was going to fall and smash myself on that hard, hard street below. That those crazy bastards were going to let me fall. I was praying, I guess. I remember the blood rushing to my brain and my ankles slipping, and that awful strange noise. And I was reaching out, man, clutching at thin air. Then I wondered what that noise was, that high loud noise, and then I realized it was me, scream ng at the top of my voice, all over San Francisco. (THM-57-58)

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[8] References of the abyss are on page 189,190,192 and 439 in Set This House on Fire.

Later Culver who is suffering from the pangs of homesickness and estrangement can understand this experience. Culver suddenly feels "like Mannix, upturned drunkenly above the abyss, blood rushing to his head, in terror clutching at the substanceless night." (TLM-59-60)

Such graphic depictions of the loneliness and emptiness of man's exterior world serve as a perfect description of the existential experience. Styron has created in these novels an unpatterned and illogical environment where man finds no external means of support. Having established such conditions, Styron then proceeds to study man's responses to the existential world.

Feelings of Emptiness and Nothingness

As a result of the irrationality of the exterior world, man becomes frustrated. Then man makes a desperate attempt to counterbalance this feeling of insecurity by turning to himself for support. This inward search for security only leads to further despair, for man's first real look at himself is disappointing.[9] This conscious appraisal of the self makes the individual aware of his failures and guilts. In one of his self-oriented monologues, Cass Kinsolving of Set This House on Fire describes this culpable feeling of anxiety.

> 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 sick with whatever sickness men get in prisons or on desert islands or any place where the days stretch forward gray and sunless into flat-assed infinitude and no one ever came with the key or the answer. I was very nearly sick unto death, 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. (STHOF-259-260)

In this passage Cass echoes the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard who can be designated as a Christian existentialist.[10]

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[9] Heineman, p. 36.

[10] The Christian existentialist recognizes the bleak exterior world of man and the loneliness of his life, but according to his philosophy, man can find some enter strength that will afford him with the courage to face boldly life's dilemmas. The Christian existentialist states that man can be aspired with such strength if he only looks to God for support.

Cass voices a Kierkegaardian concept which suggests that man is incomplete and sorrowful because he is separated from God. As a person he has neglected the eternal factor within himself.[11] Cass does note that he has deprived himself of the good within himself, "the good which is very close to God." It is true that Styron does occasionally allude to such a religious factor. The comment of Cass concerning his lack of divine goodness illustrates this point. Either because of a lack of dedication to this point of view, or because of an unconscious deficiency of thematic procedure, Styron does not consistently emphasize this connection between man's personal success and the strength which comes from God. It is more prevalent for his characters to be seen as being independent of any divine power. They determine their lives according to individual strengths or weaknesses.

It is quite vital for man to experience this personal anxiety, for here he takes his first step toward regeneration. It is as if man has to subject himself to a privately introspective hell before he can become a complete and relatively contented human being. As painful as this process may be, it is much more constructive than avoiding a close look at one's self. Kierkegaard states that unconsciousness "may be the most dangerous form of despair. By unconsciousness the

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[11] Søren Kierkegaard, The Sickness Unto Death, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 108.

despairing man is in a way secured in the power of despair."[12] As Kierkegaard notes, some men will try to adjust to the absurd conditions of the world. This behavior is completely futile because man can never be comfortable within such an environment, but in its own peculiar way this type of existence is rather protective. At least man can hide within the world of despair and avoid a confrontation with himself. He then would not be exposed to his own feelings of anxiety and guilt.

Milton Loftis' life pattern illustrates this tendency of man to be lulled within the world of despair. Although he does experience moments of self-awareness, Milton generally lives in a frustrated, fool's paradise. At certain intervals in his life, Milton tries to reform himself, or he makes some definitive gesture of personal awareness. For example, at Peyton's wedding he tries to apologize to his daughter for the mistakes that he has made. Milton is particularly susceptive when he asks his daughter to forgive him for loving her too much. At this moment he apparently recognizes the fact that he is abnormally attached to Peyton, and that many of the family problems are linked with this libidinal relationship. Milton is usually not aroused into such a state of self-awareness; he prefers to live in an unreal world of hopeful optimism and self-deception. Milton con-

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[12]Kierkegaard, pp. 69-70.

tinuously has grand plans for the reuniting of his family circle. It is impossible for him to accept the fact that his household is drastically aliened, nor is he completely willing to recognize the shortcomings of the members of his family, himself included. Instead of realistically facing this situation, Milton repeatedly looks forward to family reunions with the fruitless hope that everyone will miraculously fall into each other's arms and live happily ever after. This pleasant dream never materializes, and then Milton just runs away from the bleak actuality of his life. His favorite escape routes are through alcohol and adolescent sexuality.

Styron develops one image throughout his novels which illustrates the inablity of "the unconscious man"[13] to confront himself with the truth. The characters cannot face themselves in the mirror because they see a reflection there that they cannot bear. In this glass they see themselves as they really are, and since "the unconscious man" refuses to recognize the truth about himself, the image that he sees reflected is that of a stranger. In The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus refers to "the weariness tinged with amazement"[14] when the unconscious individual looks into the mirror and sees this perfect stranger. Needless to say the strange person

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[13] Kierkegaard, p. 69.

[14] The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p. 11.

that he sees is less than attractive to the individual. For instance Milton looks into the glass and sees "a wasted, aging satyr." (LDID-250) For Cass the mirror reflects "the countless faces of [his] own guilt." (STHOF-269) It becomes nightmarish for Cass to face a mirror and be confronted with his own culpable self-image. Cass says, "I am actually scared to look into a mirror for fear of seeing some face there that I have never seen before." (STHOF-345)

Unlike Milton there are characters in Styron's novels who are more sensitive to their personal inadequacies. Peyton Loftis and Cass Kinsolving are able to discern a great deal of truth about themselves. In this process they suffer from an awareness of their weaknesses and consequently feel the effects of guilt-ridden anxiety. They respond differently to their insights, however. Cass's sense of personal awareness is a constructive lesson in being. In the face of self-knowledge Peyton cannot adjust, and she eventually destroys herself.

For most of his life, Cass had lived in a lethargic world of unawareness. He was totally insensitive to his own state of degradation. During this stage Cass very well represents "the unconscious man" that Kierkegaard describes. The main body of Set This House on Fire, however, is dedicated to the study of the new Cass, for here he becomes agonizingly conscious of his actions and particularly of his shortcomings.

One specific incident in Cass's life serves as a personification of his feelings of guilt and failure as a human being. With time Cass begins to recall bits and pieces of a particular occurrence of his boyhood days. For a long time Cass has suppressed the memory of this episode; similarly he had refused at one time to recognize truthfully the condition of his life. At first he is only vaguely aware of some horrendous crime that he had committed, but finally he can recollect all the details. When Cass was a boy, he worked at a hardware store. One day the assistant manager, Lonnie, asked Cass to help him repossess a radio. A Negro farmer had failed to meet any of the payments for this appliance. When they reached the farmhouse, they found it deserted, and after a quick search, they discovered the radio hidden beneath a loose, wooden planking. Lonnie became enraged because a corner of the radio was chipped. He violently started to crash dishes to the floor and destroy the furniture. Besides being frustrated about the damaged radio, Lonnie was known to be vindictive toward the Negro race. So he was not out of character when he decided to ransack the cabin, but for some reason, unexplainable to Cass, he joined Lonnie in this act of destruction. Cass was just a boy at the time and could be easily excused for not having the strength to protest against this malicious crime. Cass, however, cannot forgive himself because this deed betrays his weakness even in his maturity. When he looks back over his life, he discovers that he never has been strong. The sum total of his life has

been as degrading as that disastrous day in his childhood when he helped Lonnie destroy the farmhouse. For this reason, Cass cannot rid himself of a feeling of guilt for this particular episode or for a lifetime of similar, episodic misdeeds. Cass notes that it is difficult to be confronted with such a clear recollection of oneself, and that the memory of this childhood crime makes it harder for him to endure his more mature self.

> The guilt and the shame half-smothering me there, adding such a burden to the guilt and shame I already felt that I knew that, shown one more dirty face, one more foul and unclean image of myself, I would not be able to support it. (STHOF-361)

As Cass becomes more and more aware of his guilt, he also becomes conscious of punishment. It is not that he masochistically craves punitive action, but it seems as if the guilt-ridden individual naturally thinks of disciplinary chastisement. Cass tells Peter Leverett of one dream which repeatedly haunts him. In this dream he is being executed for some anonymous crime. He is aware only of the fact that he has committed a crime which surpasses "rape or murder or kidnapping or treason, some nameless and enormous crime." (STHOF-262) With time Cass realizes that in this dream he is being symbolically punished for a lifetime of personal misdemeanors.

> I woke up beneath the blanket half-smothered and howling bloody murder with the vision in my brain of the dream's last Christ-awful horror:

> which was my uncle, my daddy, standing with a crucible of cyanide at the chamber door, grinning with the slack-lipped grin of Lucifer hisself and black as a crow in his round tight-fitting executioner's shroud. (STHOF-264)

Quite understandably a father figure inflicts the punishment on the wayward child. Lewis Lawson suggests that the uncle represents more than a paternal disciplinarian. Cass is symbolically being judged and punished by God.[15] Styron's portrayal of the uncle, however, is not totally identifiable with a godhead. At the most, Styron describes the uncle as carrying a crucible, but this relic is made of a grim and poisonous substance, cyanide. Then he is clothed in the typical black garb of the executioner. If Cass's uncle is identifiable with God, he certainly is a strange and exotic Old Testament avenger.

Cass's sense of guilt grows to such gigantic proportions that he begins to feel as if the forces of the solar universe embody and reflect his crimes. After the murders at Sambuco, Cass frantically roams the Italian countryside. At this point Cass is agonizingly torn with self-torment. The sun's rays beat down on his head, and he becomes panicky. In Cass's imagination the sun has become a manifestation of his sin; the guilt that boils within him compares with the energetic

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[15] "Cass Kinsolving: Kierkegaardian Man of Despair," WSCL, 3 (Fall, 1962), 60.

swellings of the sun.[16] His initial inclination is to destroy himself, for he cannot endure such a blazing vision of himself. He would then be freed from "this exploding sun of his own guilt. . . . To remove from this earth all mark and sign and stain of himself, his love and his vain hopes and his pathetic creations and his guilt." (STHOF-461)

As Cass fails as a man, a provider and a father, Peyton fails as a woman. This point is emphasized by her excessive sexual activities. Since Peyton's college days, she has overstepped all traditional and moral standards. Most psychologists would agree that such promiscuous behavior signals deep-rooted emotional disturbances. Peyton admits that she tests her husband with her nymphomaniac wanderings. She desperately wants Harry to love her, and in her mind the best way to be sure of his devotion is to hurt him and then have him forgivingly take her back with open arms. Peyton certainly is an insecure woman, for the normal person would not go to such peculiar extremes to satisfy his curiosity.

Peyton becomes intensely aware of her personal weaknesses. She particularly becomes conscious of her sexual sins or what her husband calls "the dirt beneath [her] bed." (LDID-347) Peyton wants to be freed from her own image of guilt: therefore, she longs for lost innocence and the blissful state of such purity.

> I tried to pray: lighten my darkness, I beseech you, oh Lord, and make me clean and pure and without sin: God, give me my Harry back,

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[16] Jonathn Baumback, "Paradise Lost: The Novels of William Styron," South Atlantic Quarterly, 63 (Spring, 1964), 217.

> then, Harry, give me my God back, for somewhere I've lost my way: make me as I was when I was a child, when we walked along the sand and picked up shells. (LDID-342)[17]

Peyton cannot reclaim innocence. She cannot, for example, escape into the clean cavity of the newly purchased alarm-clock. Peyton imagines that within the womb of the clock she would be purified and protected from the reality of her guilt-ridden self. This Benrus clock would be her "womb all jeweled and safe." (LDID-329) Instead, she is constantly haunted by her sense of guilt. During the turmoil of her final day, Peyton is afflicted with acute pains within her womb. These agonizing attacks emphasize the reality of her plight. She cannot rid herself of the actuality of her past or of the painful awareness of her own guilt.

The wingless birds that constantly follow Peyton are visual images of her guilt. These flightless emus, dodos, ostriches and moas serve as symbolic representations of her culpability.[18] Peyton states that "guilt is the thing with feathers, they came back with a secret hustle, preening their flightless wings and I didn't want to think." (LDID-336)

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[17]Peyton wants Harry to reinstate her with her God. The god figure is definitely her father. With her father she would be a child again, running free on the beach. In this passage Peyton is referring to her father because the beach and the company of her father are consistently linked together throughout this novel.

[18]Maxwell Geismer, "William Styron: The End of Innocence," in American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. 245.

Peyton did not want to think because the birds reminded her of her own limitations; she really does not want to think or be confronted with her own self-image of guilt.

Peyton's awareness of her sins is so portentous that she feels as if she is being destroyed. Throughout his novels Styron associates being suffocated, being smothered and sweltering with the torturous condition of awareness. When Cass awakens from one of his guilt-ridden dreams, he is generally entangled within folds of covers.[19] Peyton experiences the inundatory horror of drowning. She feels "as if she were walking undersea, as if she were surrounded by water." (LDID-314)

Peyton wants to be rescued from this sensation of drowning. She cannot bear to flounder in her self-created ocean of guilt. For a long time she relies on the hope that Harry will be her lifeguard, but after too many attempts to preserve Peyton, Harry lets her go. Peyton now has no concrete hold for support, and she does not have the strength to swim. She cannot save herself. As a result Peyton sinks into her watery land of culpability.

Peyton chooses to rid herself of her guilt by sinking into the obliterating waters of death. Suicide is her alternative because she cannot cope with her anxiety. In life Peyton is bound to her guilt. Like the wingless birds that haunt her, she cannot soar from the earth and be free. Thus

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[19]See pages seventeen and eighteen (STHOF-264).

she decides to fly out of a seventh-floor window in order to "be borne away on the wings of katydids." (LDID-345)

Considering the burdens of existence, it might seem understandable that Peyton would elect to end her life. If one is familiar with Styron's work as a whole, however, it is then obvious that Styron differs with this negative philosophy of life. Styron's objective is to portray an existential hero who can function bravely in life. Styron is sympathetic with Peyton's plight; but, according to him, the price she pays for freedom from guilt is too dear. Peyton surrenders life in order to secure this comforting oblivion. Styron finds little consolation in her escapist philosophy. Peyton says. "Myself all shattered, this lovely shell? Perhaps I shall rise at another time, though I lie down in darkness and have my light in ashes." (LDID-368) Peyton's expectations in Styron's opinion are futile; death offers only darkness.

Styron clarifies his position when he portrays Cass Kinsolving as an ideal existential man. Unlike the major characters of Lie Down in Darkness, Cass has experienced despair but has managed to survive. He does not allow himself to be engulfed in his own sorrow and despair; unlike Peyton, Cass does not succumb to the temptation to drown his guilt in the obliterating waters of death. Instead, he chooses to face life with all its intrinsic and extrinsic frustrations. Luckily Cass had the support of Luigi who encouraged him to emerge from the depths of despair.

> Right then I heard Luigi's voice, adamant and outraged. . . . "You sin in this guilt of yours. You sin in your guilt!" And suddenly I ceased trembling and became calm as if like some small boy on the verge of a tantrum I had been halted, the childish fit arrested by some almighty parental voice. I sat back again and gazed out at the dark gulf, and the spell of anxiety vanished, as quickly as it had come. (STHOF-466)

In these novels Styron studies man's attempt to emerge from his inept state of unawareness. It has been shown that in this process man endures the excruciating pangs of guilt and condemnation by becoming so intensely aware of his personal limitations. Such agony in itself, however, is an essential step in achieving the courage to live a successful and productive life. Man cannot redeem himself until he fully accepts the burden of his weaknesses.

Escapism

Man naturally tries to evade a condition that causes him to suffer. Styron is obviously aware of this behavioral tendency, for in his novels he creates a picture of man's attempts to escape from the harsh realities of his world. This avoidance of life is associated with man's unwillingness to face himself and find the courage to tackle personally the bold actualities of existence. Paul Tillich explains in the following passage that man flees in order to rid himself of the vast amount of freedom that life provides him. He also notes that such attempts to escape are futile because they do not relieve man of his frustrating sense of anxiety and guilt.[21]

> Then man tries another way out: Doubt is based on man's separation from the whole of reality, on his lack of universal participation, on the isolation of his individual self. So he tries to break out of this situation, to identify himself with something transindividual, to surrender his separation and self-relatedness. He flees from his freedom of asking and answering for himself to a situation in which no further questions can be asked and the answers to questions are imposed on him authoritatively. In order to avoid the risk of asking and doubting he surrenders the right to ask and to doubt. He surrenders himself

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[21]Tillich refers to man's efforts to preserve his spiritual life. Since this quotation is taken out of context, it is necessary to explain Tillich's use of the word, spiritual. In this instance a man's spiritual life does not allude to a religious state but rather to an aesthetic state of comfort and pleasure.

> in order to save his spiritual life. He "escapes from his freedom" (Fromm) in order to escape the anxiety of meaningless. Now he is no longer lonely, not in existential doubt, not in despair. He "participates" and affirms by participation the contents of his spiritual life. Meaning is saved, but the self is sacrified. And since the conquest of doubt was a matter of sacrifice, the sacrifice of the freedom of the self, it leaves a mark on the regained certitude: a fanatical self-assertiveness. Fanaticism is the correlate to spiritual self-surrender, and it shows the anxiety which it was supposed to conquer.[22]

Continuous intoxication sets the stage for escapism in Lie Down in Darkness and Set This House on Fire. Milton Loftis and Cass Kinsolving use alcohol in order to free themselves from the burdens of their lives. In this self-created drunken world they can hide and find temporary protection. Inebriation shields them particularly from themselves, for in such a hazy state they need not be accountable for their actions. It is hard, for instance, to expect much from Cass when he lives in a continuous stupor. He thus does not function as an artist, a father, a husband or as any kind of human being.

The self-protective shield of intoxication compares with the comforting veil of darkness. In Styron novels darkness repeatedly occurs as a place of refuge. Cass, for example, seeks such an unilluminated protection when he finds himself in the depths of despair in Paris. He "felt that the most precious, the most desirable, the most marvelous

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[22]The Courage to Be, p. 49.

thing on earth would be to be shut up tightly alone—in the darkness of a tiny single room." (STHOF-261)

For Helen Loftis the protection of darkness comes with sleep. Helen says, "All my life I have yearned for sleep." (LDID-24) It is no wonder that she desires such oblivion, for her life has been so traumatically unsuccessful. Her marriage has been a total catastrophe. Helen longs for sleep in order to avoid this unpleasantness, but at the same time the darkness of sleep protects her from her sense of guilt. This guilt is a result of her unwillingness to love or give of herself and is also a result of the role she prefers to play—that of the martyr. The following passage describes Helen's wish for sleep and suggests that she is aware of her guilt. She must apologize to her father for the condition of her life and for the sin she commits in escaping life through sleep.

> When she took the last nembutal, sinking not into death but into what she hoped would be an endless sleep, filled with only the friendliest of dreams, it had been with a prayer on her lips and a mysterious, whispered apology to her father. (LDID-260)

Of course the most encompassing and final darkness is that which comes with death. Since one has to awake from sleep and since one cannot remain in a dark room forever, death becomes a final alternative. Peyton Loftis apparently feels that death would free her from anxiety and cover her dread and sins with a rich veil of darkening obscurity. For

Peyton, escape comes with an act of self-annihilation and the consequential peace of lying down in darkness.

It is important to note that Peyton and Cass have reached a very critical point in the development of the existential man. Both of them are extremely affected by their realization of the absurdities of life, and at this stage their very existence is in jeopardy. A choice has to be made between suicide and life.[23] Cass prefers to challenge the absurdities; thus he chooses to have the courage to survive. Peyton chooses the other alternative.

Cass has repeatedly yearned for a "long, long spell of darkness." (STHOF-232) In his Paris room he tries to commit suicide, but he cannot bring himself to do it. Cass does not kill himself because of a dream.

> I think I would have willingly done myself in in an instant if it hadn't been that the same dream which pushed me toward the edge also pulled me back in a sudden gasp of crazy, stark, riven torture: there wouldn't be any oblivion in death, I knew, but only some eternal penitentiary where I'd tramp endlessly up gray steel ladderways and by my brother-felons be taunted with my own unnameable crime and where at the end there would be waiting the crucible of cyanide and the stink of peach blossoms and the strangled gasp for life and then the delivery, not into merciful darkness, but into a hot room at night, with the blinds drawn down, where I would stand again, as now, in mortal fear and trembling. And so on in endless cycles, like a barbershop mirror reflecting the countless faces of my own guilt, straight into infinity. (STHOF-264-265)

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[23]Baumback, p. 9.

In this dream Cass realizes that death is not a comforting finality, but it is rather a continuation of life. Thus death erases no guilt and delivers no serene darkness. Cass, therefore, does not kill himself because death would not free him from his misery.

Cass looks for another escape route after he realizes that death will offer him no protection from himself or from his cruel existence. Another dream provides him with a possible answer; he might be able to find peace in a sunny wonderland.

> And I saw some southern land with olive trees and orange blossoms, and girls with merry black eyes, and parasols, and the blue shining water . . . there seemed to be a carnival or a fair: I heard the strumming music of a carrousel, which wound through it all like a single thread of rapture, and I heard a liquid babble of tongues and I saw white teeth flashing in laughter and, lord love me, I could even smell it—thissmell of perfume and pines and orange blossoms and girls, all mixed up in one sweet blissful fragrance of peace and repose and joy. (STHOF-266)

Because of this dream Cass decides to relocate his family and himself in Sambucao, Italy. He expects a great deal of Sambuco because it is a seaside retreat where the sun is bright and the land is splendidly green. In essence Cass is looking for an Edenic environment of sweetly sensual bliss, and on the surface Sambuco offers such a cozy refuge.[24] Cass's desire to reattain this ideal condition is of course futile. Man can never recapture such a paradisaical state of bliss. Sambuco's landscape might have Edenic possibilities, but the

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[24]Jerry H. Bryant, "The Hopeful Stoicism of William Styron," South Atlantic Quarterly, 62 (Autumn, 1963), 539-550.

spell is broken because life goes on there with all its imperfection. Such a vital hindrance is dramatically emphasized by the presence in this town of the grotesque "flicker creeps" and Mason Flagg. Styron has overdrawn these figures by making them as appalling as possible, but he does make his point, that there can never be an ideal world freed from all troubles and absurdities.

Cass turns to Francesca when he can find no lovely terrestrial hideaway. This dark-eyed girl becomes an image of quixotic idealism; Cass can serve and worship her just as Don Quixote idolized Dulcinea. Of course this ideal is as transitory as his dream of an escape into an Edenic garden. In this case a rapist's brutality destroys the object of his adoration. Keirkegaard also explains that such a beautiful dream hardly relieves the individual from despair. This dream is only an immediate and false happiness. The original causes of despair still exist behind the serene surface of happiness.

> Even that which, humanly speaking, is the most beautiful and lovable thing of all, a feminine youthfulness which is sheer peace and harmony and joy—even that is despair. For this indeed is happiness, but happiness is not a characteristic of the spirit, and in the remote recesses of happiness, there dwells also the anxious dread which is despair: it would be only too glad to be allowed to remain therein, for the dearest and most attractive dwelling-place of despair is in the very heart of immediate happiness. All immediacy, in spite of its illusory peace and tranquillity, is dread. . . . So even the most beautiful youthfulness and joy, is nevertheless despair, is happiness.[25]

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[25] The Sickness Unto Death, p. 37.

Years later Cass recalls such daydreaming and sees that he was just hiding behind these desired ideals. Cass says, "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." (STHOF-257)

Peyton also seeks the protection of a green land of blissfulness. Both Peyton and Cass associate greenness with a state of pleasant security. For Peyton the Rappahannock River and the rich land that lines its waterways is her perfect Utopia. Here she spent playful summer days in her youth. The twenty-year-old Peyton wishes that she could recapture these lost moments of innocence and peace, for she is now tormented by the sins that she has committed and longs to rid herself of this despair. Albert Berger, a good friend of Peyton's husband, is right when he says that Peyton would prefer to live in her safe "Winnie-the-Pooh lane of arching plum blossoms." (LDID-350)

Peyton envies people who are, in her words, dumb. In other words, she envies their simplicity or their primitive innocence. In Styron's novels the Negroes are representative of this type. They are relatively happy and content, and their simplicity allows them to possess an unquestioning faith in God and the teachings of Jesus. This childlike fundamentalism explains the strong appeal of Daddy Faith. People like Peyton, however, are too sophisticated, and they never will be able to find happiness in such simplicity or in any kind of fundamental religiosity.

Peyton's need for her father suggests longings for innocence. As a child, Peyton and her father chased after butterflies; and, when she hurt herself, Milton took her in his arms and comforted her. All would be safe and secure now if Peyton could be wrapped in her father's arms. Styron suggest that Peyton's attachment for her father and, for that matter, Milton's attachment for his daughter have Freudian implications. Her incestuous love for her father, or her Electra complex, exists because of a psychic immaturity which results in her attempt to cling to the infantile state of her childhood. [26] Styron uses the image of the Electra complex as a direct clue to understanding. It defines Peyton's character and further explicates her desire to escape into the world of innocence.

Toward the end of her life Peyton has nothing to cling to, and she is drowning in her despair. She cannot run to her father; circumstances will not allow it. Her mother certainly will never allow Peyton to come back and enjoy the comforts of the river front or of her father's arms. Also Peyton has come to realize that her father is as weak and confused as she is and that he could actually offer her little protection. As a consequence of this awareness Peyton replaces such means of escape with idealized fantasy. Now Peyton dreams of finding protection with her grandmother who was dead years before Peyton's birth. This euphoric attachment for her

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[26] Ihab Hassan, "Encounter with Necessity," in Radical Innocence (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 126.

grandmother could give her the love and protection of a mother.

> That when I lay down in Richmond in Grandmother's bed I saw her picture on the wall so benignly smiling, even on that day I heard the flower man clipclop along beneath the cedars, moved and peered at in my slumber through half-closed eyes, and I reached out my arms, cried mother mother mother, to that image even then twenty years before turned to bones and dust. (LDID-366)

Peyton's longing to crawl into the smooth and clean works of the alarm clock is associated with her desire to find protection with her grandmother. Both images are concerned with a need to escape into a more secure realm. The interior cavity of the alarm clock offers such safety because it resembles the warm and enveloping space of the womb. The mechanical works of the clock afford the same kind of clean, uniform existence as that provided in the womb.

> Once I'd had a dream: I was inside a clock. Perfect, complete, perpetual, I revolved about on the mainspring forever drowsing, watching the jewels and the rubies, the mechanism clicking ceaselessly, all the screws and parts as big as my head, indestructible, shining, my own invention. Thus would I sleep, forever, yet not really sleep, but remain only half-aware of time, and enclosed by it as in a womb of brass, revolving on that spring like a dead horse on a merry-go-round. (LDID-319)

If Peyton could only get inside the clock she could escape from all the hardships of the outside world, but more than

this, she would then be freed from personal anxiety and its pangs of guilt. Inside this cavity the flightless katydids, which are symbols of her guilt, would not torment her. They would not be able to crawl into the clock after her. Peyton would thus be freed from her own conscience.

Peyton is attracted to the clock because of the clear green light that illuminates its hands and face. When she thinks of the clock, she thinks "of green things suddenly and a far, fantastic lawn." (LDID-339) As with the lawn of the Rappahannock River, greenness again represents a nostalgic color that is as comforting as the bliss of innocence.

Peyton's dream yearnings cannot materialize and offer her any protection. Suicide seems to be her only resort or her final escape. In her mind the fatal leap will cleanse her of all her sins and transport her into a dark world of innocence. Her suicide does possess all the aspects of a purification. Peyton ritualistically strips herself of her clothes which are the vestments of her corruption.[27] In this state she feels as innocent as a child. Now she is free to fly into the arms of her comforting father, but the arms will not be those of Milton but those of God.

Cass also seeks the immunity of the womb. Throughout the novel he refers to his desire to hide in some dark room. This longing for enclosure is particularly emphasized after

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[27]Baumbach, p. 211.

the tragic day in Sambuco. Cass's world has fallen apart; he has murdered Mason, and Francesca lies dead. His initial response is to run away from this disastrous scene with the hopes of finding a secure retreat. He first seeks protection in the dark and hollow chamber of a cave. Such enclosure would be a luxury for Cass, for this confinement would punish him in part for his crimes, but more importantly this incarceration would conceal him from life. He would then be protected from the horrors of the outside world and from the responsibility of functioning in such a world. In the following passage Cass describes his emotions at this time.

> Sheer crazy panic came over me: it was the idea of liberty. For here my only idea had been to give myself up, immure myself, entomb myself for my crime. And the notion of this awful and imminent liberty was as frightening to me as that terror that must overcome people who dread open spaces. The feeling was the same. Yearning for enclosure, for confinement. I was faced with nothing but the vista of freedom like a wide and empty plain. (STHOF-468-469)

Luckily the Italian policeman, Luigi, would not provide Cass with the luxury of confinement. He is very much aware of the crime that Cass has committed, but he chooses not to punish him as he legally should. He realizes that imprisonment would be no punishment. Instead, Luigi removes the manacles from Cass's legs and sets him free.

> Think whether these years in jail, away from your family, will satisfy your guilt and your remorse in a way that is not satisfied by the remorses you will have to live with for the rest of your life. Then consider this,

> too, my friend. Simply consider your guilt itself — your other guilt, the abominable guilt you have carried with you so long, this sinful guilt which has made you a drunkard, and caused you to wallow in your self-pity, and made you fail in your art. Consider this guilt which has poisoned you to your roots. Ask what it was. Ask yourself whether it is not better to go free now, if only so that you may be able to strike down this other guilt of yours and learn to enjoy whatever there is left in life to enjoy. Because if by now, through what you have endured, you have not learned something, then five years, ten years, fifty years in jail will teach you nothing . . . . For the love of God, Cass, consider the good in yourself. Consider hope. Consider joy. . . . That is all I have to say. Now I am going to strike off that manacle. (STHOF-475)

None of these escape routes previously discussed can be completely divorced from the suggestion of the image of the womb. For example, escape that comes with the darkness of sleep or with alcohol creates this type of graphic representation. These channels of escape impose an invisible screen around the indiviual. This screen resembles the oblivious security of the womb which protects one from accessibility. For Culver of The Long March and Cass Kinsolving, music serves this purpose; lovely music creates an aesthetic cosmos that locks out the outside world. None of these images, however, are as implicitly representative of the womb as is the image of the alarm clock in Lie Down in Darkness.

It is rather incongruous that these characters seek protection in caverns and darkness, which are resorts that suggest an oblivious state. The cause of their anxiety has been produced because of the menacing presence of such abyssal

forces in their lives. The attraction comes from the protecting confinement that such escape modes temporarily provide, but actually these retreats are only re-creations of the horrors of the outside world. Of course the only alternative is to find security within. Personal awareness and courage will challenge the abyssal forces and establish a concrete means for facing life.

The Courage to Be

In his novels Styron first describes the unstable and dreadful conditions of the existential world, and then he notes that man's initial reaction is to run from these harsh realities. Man then attempts to create a new reality by searching for some pipe dream world, but it has been shown that escapism offers only temporary protection. Styron then indicates that man has only one constructive alternative; he must make the existential choice of being. In other words, he must be courageous enough to face boldly the problems that life offers. In the following passage Tillich explains that the courageous, self-affirmative action involves a desperate struggle to defeat anxiety and dread by coming to grips with it.

> Anxiety tends to become fear in order to have an object with which courage can deal. Courage does not remove anxiety. Since anxiety is existential, it cannot be removed. But courage takes the anxiety of nonbeing into itself. Courage is self-affirmative "in spite of," namely in spite of nonbeing. He who acts courageously takes, in his self-affirmation, the anxiety of nonbeing upon himself. Both prepositions, "into" and "upon," are metaphoric and point to anxiety as an element which gives self-affirmation the quality of "in spite of" and transforms it into courage. Anxiety turns us toward courage, because the other alternative is despair. Courage resists despair by taking anxiety into itself.[28]

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[28] The Courage to Be, p. 65-66.

According to Styron's philosophy, suffering has its consolation. Man can eventually benefit from experiencing such anguish. It is as if this hellish distress purges the individual. For instance, Cass Kinsolving is shaken and liberated by such an agonizing torment. His soul or very being is set on fire, or, as the title of the book suggests, his house is set on fire.

Man's prior miseries are actually a good guide line for a prosperous life. The memory of this hell serves as a constant reminder of the benefits of living a courageous life. Cass, who finally manages to live in a relatively peaceful fashion, keeps his past in mind and is well aware of the advantages of doing so. Cass tells Peter Leverett that "in order to think straight a man just needed to be dragged every now and then to the edge of the abyss." (STHOF-269) Cass also realizes that his present peace could very well be temporary and that he could easily fall back into despair. The answer for him is to manage his life on a day-to-day basis, thus struggling continuously. Styron introduces one of the chapters of Set This House on Fire with a quote from Theodore Roethke's works. This passage summarizes Cass's new philosophy of life.

> This shaking keeps me steady. I should know,
> What falls away is always. And is near.
> I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
> I learn by going where I have to go. (STHOF-236)

There are few Cass Kinsolvings in this world; few men possess his kind of bravery. Nevertheless, existential

philosophy states that all men possess the potentiality of courage. In Lie Down in Darkness, both Milton and Peyton Loftis show signs of such fortitude. Both make many desperate attempts to reform themselves. Mr. Carr, the Episcopal minister, describes one of Milton's noble efforts in the following passage.

> Loftis, and not Helen, was the one who was achieving the impossible. He had begun to grab hold of himself. It was exhilarating to watch, and from one point of view vaguely disappointing—for what had taken place was not a matter of any mystical faith but apparently involved just guts, the revolt of a man against the pure footlessness which had held him in bondage for half a life time. . . . What had happened? Had his guilt, like something monstrous and hairy and unutterable, prowled about his bed at night, filling his dreams with such thoughts of loss, of death, that he knew, upon awakening, that this ordeal was the only answer? (LDID-235)

It is tragic that Milton came this close to finding a permanent happiness; he almost had it in his hands. For some reason, however, neither Peyton nor Milton could achieve happiness or contentment. Apparently they lacked the extra ounce of drive that would allow them to function as complete human beings.

Cass is more successful than the others because he has an extra ounce of faith. This does not imply that he had found any source of religious strength but instead suggests that he has more faith in himself. Cass recalls that when he was living in a drunken stupor, completely destroying himself, he had no faith at all. "A man cannot live without

a focus," he said. "Without some kind of faith, if you want to call it that. I didn't have any more faith than a tomcat. Nothing. Nothing!" (STHOF-55)

It has been noted that Cass discovers his own personal worth and that this knowledge provides him with the needed impetus to assert himself. In other words, an individual such as Cass has the strength to function decisively. This personal courage allows him to rehabilitate himself and to break through into the realm of being. Such a self-affirmative action is quite rebellious. The hero becomes a rebel because he is aggressive enough to fight the absurdities of his world. Camus notes that the rebel defies any authority and only pays respect to his own individuality.

> Previous to his insurrection, the slave accepted all the demands made upon him. He even very often took orders, without reacting against them, which were considerably more offensive to him than the one at which he balked. He was patient and though, perhaps, he protested inwardly, he was obviously more careful of his own immediate interests—in that he kept quiet—then aware of his own rights. But with loss of patience—with impatience—begins a reaction which can extend to everything that he accepted up to this moment, and which is almost always retroactive. Immediately the slave refuses to obey the humiliating orders of his master, he rejects the condition of slavery. The act of rebellion exceeds the bounds that he established for his antagonist and demands that he should now be treated as an equal. What was, originally, an obstinate resistance on the part of the rebel, becomes the rebel personified. He proceeds to put self-respect above everything else and proclaims that it is preferable to life itself. It becomes, for him, the supreme

> blessing. Having previously been willing to compromise, the slave suddenly adopts an attitude of All or Nothing. Knowledge is born and conscience awakened.[29]

Mannix of The Long March is a perfect example of a rebel. He finds himself in a completely disgusting situation, and he refuses to conform to its restrictions. After years of soft, civilian life he is recalled to active marine duty. It is a ridiculous and degrading arrangement. Mannix and his men are old and out of shape, and as Mannix vehemently points out, none of them are young, eighteen year old "punks" that can be bossed around. Then fuel is added to the flame. Captain Mannix and his H. & S. Company are ordered to make a forced march of thirty-six miles. This order is perfectly irrational; even young men would have a difficult time completing such s march. It is even more incongruous because the brass does not expect the men to make it. Mannix, however, is going to buck this system if he can; so he rebels in the reverse. He decides that he will complete the march, even if it takes the last ounce of energy in him. In part, his reactions imply a desperate effort to defy the military system and its officers. This struggle, however, is more significant. Mannix has never been a conformist and never intends to sacrifice his freedom, especially for any unjust cause. His assertiveness during the long march is just another expression of his courage to be an individual and to

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[29]The Rebel, trans. Anthony Bower. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Co., 1954, 20.

fight the forces that threaten to destroy him.

The rebelliousness of Cass Kinsolving is more violent in nature. In order for Cass to break out of his personal hell, he has to take drastic steps— violent steps which lead to murder. At the time, Cass viewed this crime as being a case of justifiable homicide. He mistakenly believed that Mason Flagg had raped and killed Francesca. In killing Mason, however, Cass was doing more than just acting as an executioner. He was committing a sacrificial slaughter. Cass had to destroy Mason for the sake of his own being and freedom. Mason was the personification of evil, and he proved to have a demonic power over Cass. Understandably Cass could not be so encumbered. Violence was the price he had to pay for freedom.

The trials and tribulations of Styron's heroes are comparable to those of Sisyphus, a legendary king of Corinth. Like Sisyphus, Mannix and Cass have defied the gods.[30] In The Long March, Colonel Templeton exemplifies the strong father figure, and Mannix's defiance is primarily directed against him. Similiarly Cass finally finds the courage to defeat Mason Flagg, who had gained so much control over his life. It must be noted that Templeton and Mason are only concrete figures that the heroes can attack. In actuality Mannix and Cass are striking out at the imposing forces of

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[30]David D. Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1966, p. 65.

their world when they attack these powerful, godlike figures. They have become Sisyphean characters because they choose to challenge life and thus struggle to survive. They also have a passion for life and scorn death. Because of this determination they can never rest. They have thus accepted the punishment or challenge that resembles the plight of Sisyphus. Sisyphus must spend the rest of his life rolling a rock up s steep hill.[31] In a comparable way Mannix and Cass have chosen to figuratively accept and endure their burdens of existence.

In The Long March and Set This House on Fire there are images that in part recall the picture of Sisyphus forcing the rock up the crest of the hill. Mannix, for instance, does not literally have the burden of pushing a rock on the forced march, but he must contend with a nail that pierces his shoe and rips the flesh from his foot. Styron dramatizes the presence of this nail enough for it to serve as a Sisyphean image of burden and pain. Because of this nail Mannix's ambitious attempt to complete the long march is severely hampered.

> Mannix was having trouble, too. This time when he came up, he was limping. He sat down silently and took off his shoe; Culver, gulping avidly at his canteen, watching him. Both of them were too winded to smoke, or to speak. They were sprawled beside some waterway— canal or stream; phospherescent globes made a spooky glow among shaggy Spanish moss, and a rank and fetid odor

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[31] Galloway, p. 66.

> bloomed in the darkness—not the swamp's decay. Culver realized, but Mannix's feet. "Look," the Captain muttered suddenly "that nail's caught me right in the heel." Culver peered down by the glare of Mannix's flashlight to see on his heel a tiny hole, bleeding slightly, bruised about its perimeter and surrounded by a pasty white where the bandaid had been pulled away. "How'm I going to do it with that?" Mannix said. (TLM-64)

When Mannix gets back to the base, he cannot walk; the nail has mutilated his foot. The agony of this episode emphasizes the difficulty of Mannix's trial; not only on this one extensive march but in life in general. It is true that unlike the legendary Sisyphus, Mannix has won a more everlasting victory. There is no indic tion that Mannix must begin his long march over again. In comparison, Sisyphus is condemned to eternally repeat the gruelling torture of pushing the rock up the steep hill. It is a certainty, however, that Mannix will again have to face challenges in life. Therefore, the long march in itself serves as a metaphor of life, and the incident with the nail illustrates the many painful obstacles of existence. Because Mannix has benefitted so positively from his hardships on the long march, it is implied that he will be better qualified to face any future difficulties. Therefore, his struggles are much more beneficial than those of Sisyphus.

In Set This House on Fire the beating of the stray dog is a similar metaphor of existence.[32] Life treats man in the

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[32]Baumbach, 217.

same way. It is as if some ubiquitous hand was continuously striking man over the head with a club. A kindly man with great effort puts the dog out of his misery, and Cass imagines that God functions in the same way, but it is all useless. The only choice that man has is to bear the pain and to struggle to stay on his feet; just like the dog, man must refuse to die.

> "I must put him out of his misery, I must put the poor beast out of his misery!" Furiously he kept pounding at the dog's skull and muttering over and over to himself these stricken words. But the dog refused to die! Oh, it was frightful to watch! To watch this animal in its desperate suffering, whinning and moaning there in the road, his eyes rolling in agony, still trying to rise, while all the time the fellow kept thrashing away at his skull, hoping to free the beast from his torture but with each blow only adding to the pain!"

Then Cass imagines that the dog has turned into a peasant woman who screams for release from her pain.

> "Don't you see!" Cass began to shout, hoarsely and drunkenly. "Liberatemi!" she kept screaming. "Release me! Release me!" And then far aloft I heard the man's voice saying again and again as he laid on with the stick: "I'm trying! I'm trying!" And I heard his terrible sobs of remorse as he kept beating her, and as he kept saying then, "I cannot!" And as in the depths of my dream I realized that this was only He who in His capricious error had created suffering mortal flesh which refused to die, even in its own extremity. Which suffered all the more because even He in His mighty belated compassion could not deliver His creatures from their living pain. (STHOF-341-342)

As harsh as their sufferings have been, Cass and Mannix have reaped many benefits from their pains. They have almost become happy men. Of course it is not a part of the existential

condition for men to be completely happy. Any such contentment is always marred by memories of past sorrows and the horrors that continuously exist in the world. Nevertheless, Cass and Mannix have earned the right to indulge themselves with some kind of relative felicity. Cass's triumphant victory over life is rewarded with the pleasant existence that he now leads in Charleston. Here he finally finds his green, paradisaic garden. Charleston does not represent some idealistic retreat that enables Cass to escape from his problems. This really is a matter of relativity. Cass probably would not have seen the beauty that surrounded him in this seaside town if he had been as degraded as he once was. His inner peace now allows him to accept such bliss graciously. Actually the loveliness of Charleston is just a reflection of Cass's beauty as a human being.

Mannix is jubilant about his personal success. Culver states "that if one did not know he was in agony one might imagine that he was a communicant in rapture." (TLM-114) The last scene of this book explicates Mannix's condition. It is as if the hard march has cleansed him, or as if the sweat that has bathed him during the gruelling march has functioned as baptismal water. Mannix regains a quality of simplicity because of his ordeal. For this reason he can so easily communicate with the Negro woman in the locker room. Styron continuously portrays Negroes as the good, plain folks of the world. The Negroes are also very sympathetic characters

because their past has been so plagued with suffering. Mannix and this woman become communicants because they have both experienced pain and sorrow.

> "Do it hurt?" the maid repeated. "Oh, I bet it does. Deed it does." Mannix looked up at her across the short yards that separated them, silent, blinking. Culver would remember this: the two of them communicating across that chasm one unspoken moment of sympathy and understanding before the woman, spectacled, bandannaed, said again, "Deed it does," and before, almost at precisely the same instant, the towel slipped away slowly from Mannix's waist and fell with a soft plop to the floor; Mannix then, standing there, weaving dizzily and clutching for support at the wall, a mass of scars and naked as the day he emerged from his mother's womb, save for the soap which he held feebly in one hand. He seemed to have neither the strength nor the ability to lean down and retrieve the towel and so he merely stood there huge and naked in the slanting dusty light and blinked and sent toward the woman, finally, a sour, apologetic smile, his words uttered, it seemed to Culver, 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. (TLM-120)

Mannix's nakedness exemplifies his newly acquired simplicity. Just as a newborn baby, Mannix is reborn into this world in a naked state, but unlike the infant, Mannix has a few scars. Peyton loftis tries desperately to free herself in this same way, in an attempt to regain innocence. Before her leap to death, Peyton strips herself of her clothing, which symbolically serves as the vestment of her sin. Peyton, unlike Mannix, does nothing to deserve this state; she imposes this condition upon herself. Unfortunately her nakedness only delivers her into death. Mannix becomes the sadder but wiser American hero who walks on into life.

Mannix and Cass are now strong enough to stand under the sun. The heat of the sun had been such a source of vexatious energy before. For Cass the sun was an oven which threatened to consume him. The sun was such an omnivorous force because it was like his guilt. His guilt also threatened to consume him. In order to escape from this menance Cass thought of destroying himself and his family.

> He might not have slaughtered Poppy and the children and himself, just as he had intended but failed to do in Paris long before. For that was what—to save them from this storm, this exploding sun of his own guilt—he was planning to accomplish. To remove from this earth (as once he said) all mark and sign and stain of himself, his love and his vain hopes and his pathetic creations and his guilt. (STHOF-461)

When Cass is in Charleston, the sun no longer worries him. He is now able to live with himself and his guilt. Quite effectively Styron allows Cass to spend all his time outside fishing and painting. In this section of the novel, Cass is always blissfully basking under the sun.

The heat of the sun added an extra hardship for Mannix and his men during the long march. "The sun rose higher, burning down at their backs so that each felt he bore on his shoulders not the burden of a pack but, almost worse, a portable oven growing hotter and hotter as the sun came up from behind the sheltering pines." (TLM-99) Mannix did bear up under this burden, which compares with the burden that Sisyphus is forced to carry. Futhermore in his triumph

Mannix can stand naked in the light of the sun.[33]

Robert Gorham Davis feels that it is not very realistic for characters, such as Cass, to redeem themselves through self-affirmative action. He contends that it would be more credible if Cass had been destroyed just like Milton and Peyton. According to Davis, Styron's optimistic conclusion in Set This House on Fire and in The Long March is too Victorian and is not representative of the twentieth-century situation.[34] It is true that the general trend of literature is not as hopeful as Styron's work; Styron has not become one of the numerous, modern nihilists. Instead, he prefers to offer some kind of positive answer for existing problems. This is not to say that Styron is a sugary and starry-eyed creator of empty hopes. Styron does not carry his enthusiasm to the extreme. According to Styron, all men ideally could learn to reckon with their world and themselves, but not all men can achieve this ambitious goal. The tragic lives of Peyton and Milton Loftis emphasize this point. In The Long March and Set This House on Fire, Styron does present two characters who successfully find the courage to challenge the existential world. Thus in considering these constrasting aspects, Styron does present a very well balanced picture of life with its restrictions and its hopes.

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[33] See page forty-seven. (TLM-120)

[34] "Styron and the Student," Critique, 3 (Summer, 1960), 44.

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