CHAPTER XI

THE MYSTIC TEXTURE OF THE UNIVERSE IN A PLACE TO COME TO
A Place to Come To is a well-made novel in the sense it has a technical finish - the craftsmanship of a fiction writer. In Band of Angels, we have the life of a typical Southern lady. Most of the problems she faces, spring from the Southern milieu and also from the historical and national issues associated with the Civil War. In this novel also there is a lot about the South, especially its strong sense of individual freedom. But the protagonist is not very much inclined to the South, though he is a Southerner. It recalls the proposition of Brad in Flood that the South has no referent.

If we follow the Jamesean principles of fiction writing, which were carefully codified in Percy Lubbock's The Craft of Fiction, we know the first person narration is the least privileged mode of narration. Warren seems to achieve a remarkable success in making the protagonist Jed Tewksbury, a middleaged professor of medieval history of the university of Chicago, tell his story. The narrative

preoccupation of Amantha Starr of Band of Angels is an attempt
to escape from the historical context to establish her
identity. Manty's failure to establish an identity of her own
is the result of her view of history in the collective sense.
History lives your life for you. You are enmeshed in history
over which you have no control. In this novel also we have
a similar play on individual history and history as a social
movement. Jed's presentation of himself starts with certain
events which make an indelible impression on his plastic
mind. The most significant event that moulds the life of Jed
is narrated in the very first paragraph in the most arresting
way possible. The protagonist-narrator says:

I was the only boy, or girl either, in the
Public school of the town of Dugton,
Claxford County; Alabama, whose father had
ever got killed in the middle of the night
standing up in the front of his wagon to
piss on the hindquarters of one of a span of
mules and, being drunk, pitching forward on
his head, still hanging on to his dong, and
hitting the pike in such a position and
condition that both the left front and the
left rear wheels of the wagon rolled, with
perfect precision, over his unconscious neck,
his having passed out being, no doubt, the
reason he took the fatal plunge in the first

place. Throughout, he was still holding on to his dong.³

This event by itself does not emotionalize Jed. When the body is brought home and people comment on the way he died, Jed starts weeping. He becomes aware of its significance when boys at school mock at him, enacting his father's ignominious death. Their Yelling with laughter and their wildest merriment make him weep and hate his father. After leaving Dugton, he tries to deny any connection between himself and his past. His unconscious will "to deny any sense of identity with the weeping child and the whole reality of the scene" (10) remains long. But contrary to his wish his past haunts him and for a long time he fails to forget "the faces all had enormous eyes that seemed to whirl in their sockets, and great mouths, too big for the faces, with great rubbery lips that were twisting and slickly convolving in laughter, and fingers that pointed at me and were swelling enormously at the thrusting tips like clubs — at least, that was what the scene became in my nightmares (20). Paradoxically he exploits the image of his father's death to become popular among students of whom many are not Southerners. Under the influence of drink, he enacts

the death of his "booze-bit" father turning the ignominious incident into a "hilarious episode" (22). The instant "social success" leads to his "sexual success" with Dauphine Finkel, a rich Jewish girl. Jed's indifference attracts the attention of "The Beauty Queen of Dugton High" (30). Though she is engaged to the richest guy, Chester Burton, she tries to win Jed to her side. But her attempts to lift him up fail. In her company he takes more licence and freedom than his mother would permit. He comes home drunk for the first time and his bewildered mother beats him and breaks his nose in an impotent rage. His embittered mother's hatred for her wayward husband and her constant reminder to him to work hard and her threat that failure to do so would stick him to "this here durn hellhole" (24), a "valley of humiliation and delusive vanities" (25), work on him and he hates his father and the place too. Taking it for granted that she had used him, he feels, "Rozelle was definitely not for me. Nothing in Dugton was for me" (32). But he does not know that her sway over him has already started. As a successful football player he secures a scholarship and joins Blackwell College. He makes an unexpected visit to Dugton in the middle of a night. Instead of surprising his mother, he receives the first shock of his life. The whiskey bottle, the lipstick, her silk robes make her appear crazy. In a great confusion he flees
into darkness, paying no attention to her words, little knowing that he will never see her again. Professor Pillsbun's advice takes him to Chicago. Refused admission, he thinks bitterly that he has no place to go. He feels "reality flooding away from me on all sides, like a retreating tide that left me stranded like a jellyfish to rot on a rock in the sun. I lay on my cot and felt a light-headed nausea of blankness - of placelessness, timelessness, of ultimate loneliness" (54).

Blankness, and loneliness have preoccupied Warren's protagonists. But it may be said that they have not completely succeeded in removing blankness in acquiring a place and an identity and understood the significance of time and the timeless and conquered loneliness. Considered from the point of view of the human frame, the partial success they achieve, they achieve at a great expense, maybe by death. In the later novels, especially in The Cave, Flood and Meet Me in the Green Glen, they are trying to evolve a metaphysic of life that would cope with their destiny, symbolically speaking, the destiny of man and his place in the modern world. Thanks to their willingness to submit themselves to the onrushing movement of life, they survive and earn the dignity of being human. In the following paragraphs an attempt is made to analyse the ways and means by which Jed tries to overcome his own limitations.
Without yielding to despair, Jed waits for an opportunity to meet Dr. Stahlmann Hans and succeeds. His two and half years life with the renowned scholar proves fruitful and he tries to assess himself. "I had had no aim in my earlier endeavors, no picture in my head of what I might do or be. I had no conception of gain or praise or fame. I was too uncertain of myself, too contemptuous of myself, if the truth be told, for that, I was, quite literally, without ambition. I had only the blind need: blind—without image" (62). The blind need that he feels or is made to feel by his mother is to get out of Claxford county and make himself a man. The realization of one's own mistakes may make one a better person. He finds the sad blunderings of his past existence, "...the aimless and narcotic labors, the self-contempt, the raw and angry pleasures with the little black girls behind and Dugton depot or the moments of ... undefinable significance with Dauphine Finkel ... the voice of Rozelle ... the cackling laughter of the schoolyard ... all these things, like iron filings that, scattered on a sheet of paper, jerk into a polarized pattern, when the magnet is passed beneath, were being redeemed into a perfected meaning of life" (70).
In the preceding citation the image of iron filings scattered on a sheet of paper jerking into a polarized pattern is suggestive and clear enough. But the image of magnet does not clearly suggest to which aspect of reality the magnet refers to. From the context of the passage, the inference is that his mentor helps Jed to achieve a sort of clarity of consciousness, which could make the past meaningful. With the help of his mentor, Jed endeavors to find joy — joy which has a certain spiritual connotation, not joy in the normal sense of the word. We see the slow process of disorientation in Jed. His supervisor Dr. Stahlmann, who believes in Kultur, the German mission and who dreams... of a world not of the nations. Of a timeless and placeless, sunlit lawn, like that of Dante's vision, where the poets and philosophers and sages sit, and where we who are none of those things may come to make obeisance and listen" (69), escapes Hitler's regime with his dying Jewish wife to America. His failure to go back to Germany and claim his 'patrimony of honor' (71) gives rise to a feeling of having betrayed his country and being betrayed by his country. It results in an awful sense of guilt that leads him to suicide on the day of taking oath as an American citizen. Jed enlists himself in the army after Stahlmann's death. While working as an intelligence officer in World War II, he kills an
Italian out of sheer envy. He tries to explore the world on which he stumbles and tries to understand why he is in it. His reading *Divina Commedia* and its "...vision of all-embracing meaningfulness, in the midst of the incessant violence and perfidy" (84), stands in an ironic contrast with the blankness of his spirit. After the horrors of war, he goes to Chicago to experience the horrors of peace.

Jed's marriage with a brilliant research scholar, Agnes Andresen who is certain to obtain her Ph.D., proves successful. Their devotion to each other and to scholarship make them envisage a"...floating island of bliss, cut off from the world" (92). The bliss proves short-lived as Agnes dies of cancer. When Agnes suffers from the pangs of death, Jed serves her patiently. His experiences of death and suffering contribute to his understanding of Dante. He makes a study of the theories of death, which according to Dante, define the meaning of life. His essay "Dante and the Metaphysics of Death" wins universal acclaim and it secures him a job as assistant professor. He realizes that "... in the mystic texture of the universe, my success would have been impossible except for the protracted agony and lingering death of Agnes Andresen. It was as though the essay had been, in the deepest sense of the word, her death warrant" (117). It
leads him to the understanding that although he truly loved Agnes after her death, he would not have loved her, had she lived. He fails to perceive the physical and spiritual manifestations of love and he would not have discovered it, but for her death. "Her death had been the birth of love and her life would have been its death" (120). As his reputation in the world of medieval scholarship is mainly based on the observations he makes of his dying wife and the conclusions about Dante's vision of life and death, he feels guilty of his success. He quits his job and leaves for Nashville in the capacity of an associate professor. He is a success in terms of his professional outlook and professional commitment. As a student of history and as a student of *Divina Commedia* what attracted the notice of Jed is the mystic aspect of the Universe. The point here is whether in life what Amantha Starr calls joy and what Jed calls happiness are possible in the context of the Cartesian split between body and mind. In the protagonist's narration there are two poles. One is sheer animality, one's participation in the erotics of the body, which at one level appears to be not an adequate view of life. At the other end is the Dantean preoccupation with death both in its physical and metaphorical sense, which leads to a sort of rebirth. In *Meet in the Green Glen*, the devitalized body can be rejuvenated so that it becomes rich in terms of love,
charity, and sacrifice of which it is capable. Here in _A Place to Come To_ we do not have that suggestion. Brad Tolliver says that place is not important and ultimately the heart is important, if one knows what it means. In this novel most of the characters are exiles and suffer from rootlessness. They are drifters. Jed comes into contact with a number of exiles. It is here we have everything out of dimension — the demoniac act of the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. Rozelle, who seems to represent this, exercises an evil influence on Jed. Deprivation of parental love and orphaned childhood with an ugly aunt whose "...stored-up spite, social condition childlessness, time-tested wisdom and iron will" (33) exercise unhealthy influence and control over the tender girl. Brought up by an aunt who values love little in life and marriage, Rozelle seems never to think of love seriously. When her engagement with Chester Burton breaks, she tries to snare Jed. In spite of all her assertions, Rozelle seems to be a symbol of loveless sexuality. This complicates her life, making her very existence meaningless. Rozelle's true nature makes Jed break his ties with her. Jed's mother, who exorcises her influence on her son through letters till her death, tries to save him from "Miss Pritty - pants the characteristic temptation to her son and the natural threat to her deepest plans" (374). Failing to marry Chester Burton, she marries
Michael Butler, "a well-known real estate and construction operator" (78), very rich but old. She is believed to have an adulterous affair with Lawford Carrington, a sculptor and socialite, though she enjoys marital status with Butler. When the old man dies in a boating accident, under suspicious circumstances, she marries Lawford. Her social status does not prevent her from longing for a sensual and extra-marital life with Jed. Her philosophy is to "...live by the minute, what you can take in that minute is what's worth living for" (134). "The clasping of bodies was the only thing in the world that could matter" (296) to her. Rozelle's tears and her assertion "... you're all I've got" (200) to Jed results in an adulterous affair with her. Caught in the snares of sensuous life, he indulges in self-deception. At this stage to him "The past, the future, all values, vengeances, costs and pangs of conscience lay far beyond, and irrelevant to the, shadowy sanctuary of the timelessness where I had my refuge" (204). He tries to help Rozelle out of her marriage into the bliss of true union with him, which ought to have been a union of body and soul. He would try to develop the theory of love affairs. Even when he is in the thick of sensual blindness, intellectually he is not dull. Somehow he fails to participate in the communal joy of Nashville people and their gracious living. He says, "In this world I discovered a now
responsiveness to the people about me, a new ease and a new warmth, and I might catch a new timbre in my own voice, deeper and more open, a new pleasure in the existence of the creatures around me. For, as a corollary of that diminishment of the world, I recognized, for the first time, the essential gallantry of the creatures in that world as they strove and suffered in total ignorance of the precariousness of the illusions by which they existed at all. And sometimes my heart was touched by a strange generosity or a fleeting tenderness, like a moth wing that brushes the cheek in the dusk" (212). These disconnected cogitations do not polarize into a pattern. On the other hand they pull him down personally and professionally. He feels as though he "... was discovering something, but I did not know what.... Maybe I — whatever the I was — was nothing but a dream the body was having" (217). Rozelle, who has an almost "... clinical detachment in her researches into the capacities of the body of her collaborator for sensation" (218), does not seem to take Jed's advice of divorce seriously. Moreover, she states that she loves her husband to distract herself. After living in "unspecifiable sensuality" and after experiencing "a wild sense of liberation into meaninglessness" (197), he wakes up to reality. His dishonest life, self-deception, and lies make him think
that there is no pleasure in the pleasures. He feels as though he is devoured by the past. He decides to resign and shake the dust off his feet and feels at once "... free, reborn, redeemed" (262), A longing to be respectable, "... to have position more than anything in the world" (309), seizes him, and he leaves Nashville. The details of Butler's death present before him the naked mind of Rozelle, which results in assessing his own self. It shows "...the intensities, lies, self-divisions, dubieties, duplicities, and blind and variously devised plummetings into timeless sexuality" (317). In search of meaning in life full of irregularities and violent dislocation, he enters on a long-range research and critical project in Chicago related to his work on Dante. The awareness that he never had "...the slightest notion of what happiness is — that what I had thought of all my life as happiness was only excitement. Of one kind or another" (361), leads him to moral regeneration. Though he loses the last dregs of his professional ambition and lust for fame, he takes to research and writing to "fill up time."

In Chicago he feels a new kind of happiness. "It was a happiness based on a sense of pastlessness. If nothing has ever happened to you, then you can be happy. And tomorrow will be happy, too, for nothing has happened to you
today, except, of course, the blank fact of your survival. You might, I supposed, say that this happiness springs from the discovery of the essence of selfhood: when before you the dark waters boom in with the driving, snow-laden wind, and behind you the tundra stretches, then selfhood is the moment of perception between pastlessness and futurelessness" (320). This new found happiness based on pastlessness, and his assertion that selfhood is the moment of perception between pastlessness and futurelessness initiate him into a new life. Settling into the joy of his "... romantic and stoical loneliness" (335), he longs to join the human race. He marries the lady photographer, his old acquaintance, Dauphine Finkel, who yearns for significance in life after feeling the pangs of loneliness. For five years they enjoy marital bliss, but Finkel's feeling of anguish of guilt and self-recrimination and her uneasiness at their failure "... to do everything right. To make every thing mean something" (344) results in a rational and friendly divorce. Even their parenthood fails to save their marriage.

At one point the protagonist says that he is exploring the world to understand his position in it and the meaning of life. His exploration brings the knowledge that "... every man has to lead his own life and has little chance
of knowing what it means" (356). He reluctantly accepts it. He finds "... something is going on and will not stop. You are outside the going on, and you are, at the same time, inside the going on. In fact, the going on is what you are. Until you can understand that these things are different but are the same, you know nothing about the nature of life" (5). He feels as though he is stuck up trying to find the meaning of his life. This, in fact, is the obsession of most protagonists of Warren. Can there be meaning without the past — past as a futureless present? This can be a question of life and death. The happiness that the protagonist finds in the pastless present proves transcient, when his marriage breaks. Jed says "... hating the South, I had fled it, and ever afterwards blamed my solitude on that fact. I had fled but had found nowhere to flee to" (347). In spite of his professed hatred for his father and the South, he fails either to feel at home anywhere else or forget his wicked father. He deliberately wills to detach himself from the place and to deny any sense of identity with the nine-year old weeping child. But the past looms behind him in the form of an "undifferentiated mass," with a few specific recollections. Never does he forget his father as his occasional references to his father's death testify to it. His ecstasy in his fatherhood and his deep love for his dear son, Ephraim, fill him with the thoughts of his
infancy, and the love his father may have felt moves him to tears. Though he says he "... had found nowhere to flee to" (347), he has a place reserved by the side of Agnes in Ripley city, South Dakota, a place intellectually narrow and conventional but self-contained, self-fulfilling and complete" (95), unlike Dugton. Warren says "I do attach significance to the way a man deals with the place God drops him in. His reasons for going or staying. And his piety or impiety."

When the protagonist says that he has no place to flee to, perhaps, he considers his native place to be the only place he loves to flee to and it shows his attachment to Dugton, though circumstances force him to quit it. Even the German scholar Dr. Stahlmann, who loses his place in his homeland by betraying his country commits suicide, unable to accept a place in a different country. Of course there are people like Stephan Mostoski who have no country of their own and who still try to learn to be happy in that condition. To "deserved individuals" like Rozelle, place or history is not important.

This novel has three parts. There is a contrast between the first and second sections of the novel. We have a very detailed description of sex in the first, and in the second we don't find anything of that sort and life is smooth and peaceful. Part III appears to be very significant as the

protagonist narrates his journey towards self-knowledge—knowledge of the self, which is supposed to be happiness—happiness in the sense of a cessation of conflict between flesh and spirit, body and soul, when the two are one.

Jed's susceptibility to sexual temptation and the self-loathing that generates out of it makes him analyse his detachment and the consequences. After a hectic and stormy life, he undergoes a change. The news of his mother's death takes him to Dugton. His reunion with his mother is evident in his acceptance of an unknown dying woman as his mother. He admires the boy who stabs him and runs away with the woman's purse, as he looks like his son. His hospitalization and re-examination of his own past act as a resurrection and he accepts Simms, his step father. In Dugton every object asserts an "indestructible and absolute identity, the fullness of being and possibility" (390). Whatever his past may be, it is that which shapes his life. He finds truth in his mother's words "... that if something in yore past time was good even a little time, it deserves you not to spit on it" (395). He accepts his past and decides to come back to stay in Dugton after his retirement. Accepting human community, he writes to his divorced wife requesting her to rejoin him. He looks forward to the day when he "... could point out to him
(Ephraim) all the spots that I had dreamed of pointing out to him" (401) in Dugton.

Unlike the other novels, here the metaphysical frame stems largely from Dante. The protagonist's traumatic experience leads him to a tumultuous, meaningless life. His research in the metaphysic of truth, his quest leads to despair. As is suggested by the epigraph, there is nothing like a desperate situation. Ironically enough, despair is the result of purely childhood memories. Memory plays a large part in the development of Jed's consciousness. Since it is a first person narration, especially of a limited focus, in this novel we do not have lot of self reflection but self-analysis. The very fact that the protagonist narrates his own life story, and in the process of narration, analyses his experience from a distance with some sort of creative detachment, it gives us the feeling that it is the liberating perspective which helps the reader see the various stages of Jed's expanding consciousness. Not only narration but any vision of life that is deeply rooted in memory has a mystic quality in the sense that the narration or vision is delinked from what is purely personal and material. Since the word "happiness" gains spiritual quality as the narration proceeds, we notice that the universe of discourse we have in the novel has a mystic texture which makes time and place a part of "happiness" an essence of being.