CHAPTER – III

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Fiction is a great secular force of man. He expresses his views about important things of human life and even his reactions to its bitter part. A writer translates human life into print and claims truth to it. About the truth to life represented by a writer, an unknown poet has rightly said:

Friends, this is not a book, but a man

If you read this, you read a man. Henry James also has expressed similar view about a writer as a representative of human life in a society:

“The only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent like. When it relinquishes this attempt, the same attempt that we see on the camas of the painter, it will have arrived at a very strange pass. It is not expected of the picture that it will make itself humble in order to be forgiven, and the analogy between the art
of the painter and the art of the novelist, is so far as I can see, complete.¹

A writer describes manifest facts of like. Such a writer is William Styron.

Like James Baldwin, Styron may be called an angry black writer. But he is also an elegantly accomplished novelist who in a novel entitled The Confessions of Nat Turner has represented himself as a Virginian who left himself intensely involved with the contemporary Negro struggle and has written a historical novel that reflects the racial conflict between the blacks and the whites and ultimately brings them together. Through this novel he has asserted the integrity of fiction. Indeed his strong feelings as a liberal Southerner has not overridden his novel, which far from being declamatory in the evangelical style of Harriet Beecher Stowe (who also wrote a novel about Nat Turner) turned Nat Turnver into an extraordinary sensitive and dreamy audidact who once petted with another slave boy but died a bachelor, who organized an insurrection

but could kill no one but the white woman he loved, whom he could possess only by standing guard over her corpse with a sword.

Styron’s novel is full of sensitive landscapes that could apply to any Southern boys’ growing up. They do not make the connection between slavery and insurrection that must have existed in Nat Turner’s mind for him to organize the “only effective, sustained,” the only significant slave revolt in American history. Styron’s idea was to dispel the strangeness of the “Negro” -- especially in bondage, where ever the most concerned Southern defender cannot now imagine his individual feelings – by showing him to be as complicated as oneself. But though many Southern white writers were deeply moved by Nat Turner, the novel was violently attacked by black nationalists. Styron’s Turner was too sensitive for them. Harriet Beecher Stowe had answered the angry Southern Critics of Uncle Tom’s Cabin by providing documentation for every horror she described in her novel.

But Mrs. Stowe was not worried about “fiction” but about the violation of Christianity in a slave society. Styron was relevant to too many things at once; to the art of the novel, to the original
twenty-page confession, and above all, to his contemporary belief that our psychology can illuminate the mind and heart of a Negro slave in 1931. Entering into Nat Turner’s “dreams” as confidently as we do, we reorganize that what our contemporary wanted most to do in this book was to become a Negro mind, to make “human” and “clear” what makes us afraid in the shadows we still occupy.

In 1967 Styron wanted to dispel the strangeness by dramatizing Turner’s “feelings” that the blacks and the whites are kin. Styron has always been a novelist of feelings – elegiac in Lie Down in Drakness, historically “wild” in Set This House On Fire. Nat Turner waiting for death talks about his dreams that he becomes our alter ego --- another Southerner, Styron, wants and needs for the sake of Justice and civil peace. From this understanding of Nat Turner, we cannot believe that this man has been a slave and the schemer of so many killings. The sense of violence in Styron’s novel is missing Nat Turner’s 1967 introspectiveness does not prepare us for it. The link between a tortured self and a violent self is not present in The Confessions of Nat Turnver. Styron himself called the novel “a meditation on history”. As Nat Turnver was a “real person”. So there is no end to the many meditations on history we can weave around him.

As a prominent novelist of America, William Styron has addressed himself simultaneously to some of the fundamental
issues of his own life and to a central dilemma of the history of the
twentieth century. He is a southern writer who has chosen southern settings for his fiction. His novels has been like for their artistic mastery, their structural craft, their creation of multidimensional characters, and their realistic depiction of private griefs as well as public dilemmas. A Pulitzer-prize winner as an American novelist and a short story writer, he has given a place beside Faulkner because of his imagery and rhetorical style in his novels.

In The Confessions of Nat Turner, Styron has launched a rebel-hero, who, from his infancy, lives, suffers and reacts in the racist society of America and raises his violent voice against the system of chattel slavery in America. Styron has made Nat fully-developed character who accepts the challenge of the dehumanized system and makes his attempt to eradicate it even through killings of some adversaries. He encourages some other slave friends and makes them a party in the bloody act, the murders of the white people who are responsible for slavery of the blacks. So, in his action, Nat is a unique creation in American fiction.

We do not know much about Turner. We have only a twenty-page confession dictated to Thomas Gray, the which lawyer, who
served both the defense and the prosecution and who edited what he heard for the white, jury and the white press. As a hero Nat Turner may be regarded as a product of creative imagination, which the white southern historian, C. Vann Woodward Claims, is “informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling for the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time.”\(^1\) It is, as most black writers claim, in its selection of data and distortion of black psychology.

To understand the impelling motive of Nat Turner, Styrom has kept in his mind the time of racial conflicts in the contemporary American society. The act of violence, the murder of the Whitehead, is much much in tune with the time of black rebellion. It was the time when in America the racial conflicts between the blacks and the whites were very much visible in the society; the blacks were not ready to work under the system of slavery and were growing violent against the segregation and discrimination in the spheres of employment, housing, education, voting and citizenship. Nat Turnver, one of the slaves and a sufferer at the hands of the white masters, felt bereft of God, breft of his faith in social justice and bereft of hope and optimism. The story of the novel is the story of his redemption which he seeks in his own way. The redemptive pattern

conflicts with an obscures the pattern of social and psychological insights.

In this novel Styron deals with the callous system of chattel slavery. The issue of racial conflict has been explored fully. The story of Nat Turner had remained in his mind since he read the original confessions in the late forties, and he made a plan to write on Nat Turner’s like as a subject of his second novel. Years later, having finally started to write the confessions he even went to the scene of the rebellion, and as he approached the house of Mrs. Catherine Whitehead, he tried to reflect its particular role in Nat’s destiny. Then he remembered:

“There was something baffling, secret, irrational about Nat’s own participation in the uprising. He was unable to kill. Time and time again in his confession one discovers him saying: “I could not give the death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head,” or “I struck her several blows over the head, but I was unable to kill her as the sword was dull……” It is too much to believe, over the over again: glancing hatchet, the dull sword. It smack rather, as in Hamlet, of rationalization, ghastly fear, an access of guilt, a shrinking from violence, and fatal irresolution. Alone here at this house, turned now
into a huge corncrile around which pigs rooted and snorted in the silence of a spring afternoon, here alone was Nat finally able—or was he forced? --- to commit a murder, and this upon a girl of eighteen named Margaret Whitehead, described by Drewry … as “the belle of the country.” The scene is apocalyptic-afternoon bedlam in the wild harsh sunlight and August head.”

A Comparison of Nat Turner may be made with the anonymous character of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, who also seeks his identity in revolutionary action. The novel is a fictional account of Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. This subject is Southern, historical and racial. It has inspired Styron for several years and the basis of the novel is the accounts of the rebellion led by an educated slave preacher. Styron himself confirms this fact in the introduction to the novel:

During the narrative that follows I have rarely departed from the known facts about Nat Turnver and the revolt of which he was the leader. However, in those areas where there is little knowledge in regard to Nat his early life, and the motivations for the revolt (and knowledge is lacking most of the time), I have allowed myself the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events—yet I trust

1. Pearce, William Styron, pp. 40-41
remaining within the bounds of what meager enlightenment history has left us about the institution of slavery. The relativity of time allows elastic definitions: the year 1831, simultaneously, a long time ago and only yesterday. Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that it less an “historical novel” in conventional terms than a meditation of history.”

The historical rebellion of Negro slaves against their white masters which took place under the leadership of Nat Turnver in the late summer of 1831, in a remote section of South-eastern Virginia, provided the material for ‘Styron’s novel. The short-lived rebellion took a toll of sixty white people. The rebel slaves were arrested, tried and executed. About two hundred Negroes were brutally killed by the whites during the reprisals that followed. Nat Turnver, captured on Oct 30, 1831, was taken to the jail in Jerusalem, County seat of Southampton County. The next day a white court-appointed lawyer named Thomas R. Gray, eager to know as much as he could about the rebellion, visited Nat Turnver in the prison dcell and found him ready

1. Introduction in The Confessions of Nat Turnver, p. III.
for talk. Gray recorded Nat’s statements and consequently published a 5000-word pamphlet titled “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” together with a list of the white victims and the blacks who were charged with participation in rebellion. This transcript informs us of Nat’s early life, his religious convictions, and the reasons when impelled him to rise up against the whites of Southampton County. When Styron read this pamphlet in the late 40s, he readily perceived “a tremendous theme” that lay concealed in “the violent aspects of the revolts, the bloodiness, the massacre itself, which appealed to me as a kind of melodrama.”

In the novel Styron has created Nat Turnver as an introspective hero who rebels against slavery. His rebellion brought about severe repercussions and led to severe laws in Southern states regarding slavery.

The real revolt lies in Nat’s assertions of self. He is an individual who represents the aspirations of all men held in slavery

who conceived of freedom. What made Nat rebel against the
whites? This question leads us to trace the system of slavery that
resulted in Nat’s insurrection. Marse Samuel in the novel
comments upon slavery in the following manner:

“I have long and do still steadfastly believe that slavery is the
great cause of all the chief evils of our land. It is a cancer eating at
our bowels, the source of all our misery, individual, political and
economic. It is the greatest curse a supposed free and enlightened
society has been saddled with in modern times, or any other time. I
am not, as you may have perceived, the most religious of men, yet I
am not without faith and I pray nightly for the miracle, for the
divine guidance which will somehow show us the way out of this
terrible condition. It is evil to keep these people in bondage, yet
they cannot be freed. They must be educated.”

The story of the novel starts with the fact that the Negroes
were not regarded as human beings. To the white people they had
no sense, no character, no morality, Nat explains this fact in his
speech: “….. every Negro possesses when, dating from the age of
twelve or ten even earlier, he becomes aware that he is only
merchandise, goods, in

the eyes of all white people devoid of character or moral sense or soul."

The Negroes were sold like animals and goods. Chained and loaded in ships they were brought from Africa to America for sale. Nat’s family also was sold as slaves in America. Nat says:

“My mother’s mother was girl of the Coromantee….. from the Gold Coast, thirteen years old when she was brought in chains to York town abroad a schooner sailing out of Newport, Rhode Island, and only a few month’s older when she was sold at auction beneath a huge live oak tree in the harborside town of Hampton, to Alpheus Turner, who was Samuel Turner’s father.”

Nat’s father died when he was a child of 8 or 9 years. He was then in possession of Samuel Turner. When Samuel Turner’s fortunes declined, he sold Nat to the Rev Eppes, a homosexual, who tried to “ravish” him. Ultimately sold by the Rev Eppes for 460 to Evans and Blanding, two illiterate white auctioneers. Nat appears in the last scene lying in a wagon driven by Evans and Blanding on his way to

2. Ibid; p. 129
Southampton country. Then they sold him to Mr. Thomas Moore of Southampton county. After the death of Mr. Moore Nat becomes the property of his son, Putnam and Mrs. Moore called Miss. Sarah. Miss Sarah married Joseph Travis, a childless widower of 56 and moderately prosperous. The sale of Negroes was quite common. It was made to a trade specializing in labour for the Mississippi delta. Travis had purchased two slaves. One is Hark. Born on a vast tobacco plantation in Sussex Country, he was sold to Travis at the age of fifteen after the tobacco sucked the soil dry and the land went to rack and ruin. The other Negro, acquired through the Mississippi sale, was Moses, a husky, tar-black, wild-eyed boy of twelve or thereabouts, whom Travis, finding himself belatedly short-handed, had purchased at the Richmond market several months before the arrival of Nat Turner. He was strong and strapping for his age and bright enough. But he never forgot the separation from his mother and “it left him bereft, stuporous, and he cried a lot and keed in his pants, sometimes even when he was at work.”

Nat’s rebellion took place in the South. He was a slave, and the system of slavery regarded him as “animal chattel”. His problem was to establish meaningful relationship with the society which did not accept him on human terms. Being a slave he had no legal existence beyond that of a chattel. The names of slaves were mentioned in plantation account books, in the notice of slave auctions or in newspaper advertisements offering slaves for hire or rewards for runaways. There was hardly any glimpse of humanity beneath these statistical records. Gray, the white lawyer, reminds Nat of his precarious existence as a chattel in a white-dominated society:

“The point is that you are animate chattel and animate chattel is capable of craft and connivery and wily stealth. You ain’t a wagon, Reverend, but chattel that possesses moral choice and spiritual volition. Remember that. Because that’s how come the law provides that animate Chattel like you can be tried for a felony, and that’s how come you’re going to be tried next Sattidy.”

1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, pp. 21-22
Nat was literate preacher and a slave of the Upper South. He was highly religious and was inspired by “visions” in his action: “I’ll swear that the Lord came to me in a vision. And the Lord said this to me. The Lord said: Confess, that all the nations may know Confess, that my acts may be known to all men.”

The novel begins with the Judgement Day on which Nat is sentenced to die on the gallows. It then goes back in narration by visions, dreams, recollections to the “old times part” of Nat’s childhood and youth; it moves on to “study war”, the description of the massacre, and it ends with Nat’s execution in “It is done”. Styron has made language a fit medium to express the tangled emotions and meet the many needs related to a slave’s condition. Nat was temperamentally different from other black boys. Like most boys of sixteen or thereabouts he started feeling the pressures of his new manhood. He was unusual in comparison with other boys “who found an easy outlet for their hunger with the available and willing little black girls whom they took during some quick stolen instant at the

edge of a cornfield or amid the cool concealing grass of a stand of sorghum down at the edge of the woods. Isolated as I was from the cabins and such activity, I grew-up in almost total ignorance of these fleshly pleasures…..”¹ Nat was a “vigorous and healthy boy,” able to resist such temptations.

The sense of self has been cultivated in Nat from his earliest days and was reinforced throughout his life. He refused to look at the line of Negroes going off to field work in the morning. He was a “house nigger” “Contemptuous and aloof, filled with disdain for the black riffraff which dwells beyond the close perimeter of the big house,”². He had “soft the close perimeter of the big houses.” He had “soft pink palms” that never experienced” the grimy feel of the hoe handle and the sickle and the ax.”³ He was “the little black Jewel of Turner’s Mill.”⁴ In a particularly meaningful scene he compares the

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 172
². Ibid, p. 136
³. Ibid, p. 167
⁴. Ibid, p. 169
Christmas gift he received—a book—to those other slaves happily hauling in for themselves.

“Muffled up against the cold in the coarse and shapeless yet decent winter garments Marse Samuel provided for them, they straggled along in a single line, men, women, pcikaninnies, prepared to receive their gifts—a beanbag or a hunk of rock candy for the children, a yard of calico, for the women, a plug of tobacco or a cheap Jacknife for the men. They were a disheveled, ragged lot, and as they clumped past on the frozen ground near the window I could hear the babble of their voices, filled with Christmas anticipation, and heedless, and loutish nigger cheer. The sight of them suddenly touched me with a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust….”

Sensitive and self-respectful Nat has compassion for Negroes. He is moved by their sorry plight and has taken up the mission “to free my people”. Even the deep concern for the fellow Negroes cannot bring him total identification with them. He has staked ailing order to free the slaves, though some of them have taken up arms in their defense when Gray, an abolitionist narrator of Nat’s statement, has left him alone in his cell, Nat ponders the pitiable plight of the

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1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 174
Negroes and holds that the life of a Negro in white racist society is worse than that of a fly:

“For a long moment, I pondered the condition of a fly, the only half listening to the uproar outside the jail which rose and fell like summer thunder, hovering near yet remote. In many ways, I thought, a fly must be one of the most fortunate of God’s creatures. Brainless born, brainlessly seeking its sustenance from anything wet and warm, it found its brainless mate, reproduced, and died grainless, unacquainted with misery of grief…. if someone, well meaning but mistaken, wished himself out of human misery and into a fly’s estate, he would only find himself in a more monstrous hell than he had even imagined – an existence in which there was no act of will, on choice but a blind and automatic obedience to instinct which caused him to feast endlessly and gluttonously and revoltingly upon the guts of a rotting fox or bucket of a prisoner’s slops. Surely then, that would be the ultimate damnation; to exist in the world of a fly, eating thus, without will or choice and against all desire.”

This deep reflection brings to his mind the existence of a Negro entirely ignorant of his human worth; “…. I had never known of a Negro who had killed himself……. It seemed rather that my black shit-eating people were surely like flies, God’s mindless outcasts,

1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 27
lacking even that will do destroy by their own hand their unending anguish.”¹ A Negro livesw “in the world of a fly” without he knowledge of life”. He is totally unconscious of his own existence as man. Nat wants to make the slaves realize the importance as man. Nat is a witness to the unspeakable misery of Negroes. He is overwhelmed by anguish and questions the purpose of life:

“.... I saw two of her Negroes, Andrews and Toni, struggling across the field with aburden of saw horses between them, the crude oaken timbers piled up on top of each other painfully cumbersome and heavy, all askew now and ready to fall to earth. As, They fell as I wanted, tumbling down with a lumpist clatter. Then slowly the blessed nincompoops rearranged the sawhorses into a stack, again, hoisted them up and continued their hunched lead – footed pilgrimage across the field, two ruggedy silhouettes against a frieze of pinewoods and wintry sky, bound as if for nowhere on to the uttermost limits of the earth-black faceless paradigms of an absurd and immemorial futility. I have a quick shiever in the chill and thought: why do men live at ali? For the briefest instant I was overcome by a terriable anguish.”²

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1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 27
2. Ibid; p. 327
The tradition of slavery made the slave owners the most callous taskmasters. The Negroes were starved, whipped and chained. The novelist explains the oppression of the Negroes as follows:

“….. beat a nigger, starve him, leave him wallowing in his own shit, and he will be yours for life. A we him by some unforeseen hint of philanthropy, tickle him with the idea of hope, and he will want to slice your thoat.”¹

The Negro slaves were more downtrodden than other human beings. Nat himself explains this truth when he says later: “I do not believe that I had ever thought of the future; it is not in the mood of a Negro, once aware of the incoverable fact of his bondage, todwell on the future at all…. That something different might be fall my lot had never occurred to me.”²

The Negro slaves, the white masters hold, were inert, sluggish and cowardly; they meekly submitted to the miserable conditions of slavery and never tried to rise up in their lives:

1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 70
2. Ibid, pp. 170-171
“War it not fact, known even to the humblest yeoman farmer and white-trash squatter and vagabond, that there was something stupidly inert about there people, something abject and sluggish and emasculate that would forever prevent them from so dangerous, so bold and intrepid a course, as it had kept them in meek submission for two centuries and move? …. these people in the long-recorded annals of the land had never risen up, they never would rise up….”

The Negroes were put to hard field work, whipped by the white master, given half food for months together and sold like animals at auctions in pouring rain. The novelist has depicted the miserable life of the Negroes in the white racist society:

“A poor field Negro may once in a while be struck by the whip of an overseer riding on a tall white house, that same Negro may be forced onto short rations for a month and feel his stomach rumble daily in the tight cramps of near-starvation, again this Negro might someday be thron into a cart and sold like a mule at auction in pouring to hate white man, he will come to understand that he is hating imperfectly, without that calm and intelligent and unrepenting purity of hatred….. which is so necessary in order to murder.”

1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 387
2. Ibid, p. 258.
Owing to poverty and segregation in and deprivation of education, the Negroes were not able to get good education and technical training required for certain jobs and employments. The life of American Negro was mechanical and miserable. When Nat thinks of Hark, his associate in the rebellion, who is now lodged in the cell next to his, he pities Hark for his imprisonment. Hark is about to die on the gallows with Nat. Had Hark been an educated man, his life would have been something else. Nat reflects:

“…. had he been able to read and write, been white, free, living in some Elysion time when he was anything but negotiable property worth sit hundred dollars in a depressed market, he might have been a lawyer; to my disappointment Christian teaching (my own mainly) had made only the shallowest imprint upon his spirit, so that being fee of spiritual rules and restrains he responded to the mad side of life and could laugh with abandon, thrilling to each days new absurdity.”1

The slave workers were very much oppressed and tortured by the white masters, the job conditions were not conductive to their health, and they were not given even proper food. This is the reason

1. *The confessions of Nat Turner*, p. 53
that slave—workers used to run away from their work. Nat verifies this fact:

“Well, under these circumstances I would doubtless have been an ordinary run—of the mill house nigger, midly efficient at some stupid task like wringing chicken’s necks for smoking I am or polishing silver, a malinger wherever possible yet withal too jealous of my security to risk real censure or trouble and thus cautions in my tine thefts, circumpact in the secrecy of my afternoon naps, furtive in my anxious lectures with the plump yellow, spinned cleaning maids upstairs in the dark attic, growing ever more servile and unctuous as I became older, always the crafty flatterer on the lookout for some bouns of flannel or stew-beef or tobacco, yet behind my stately paunch and fancy bile and waistcoat developing, as I aqvanced into old age, a kind of purse lippeal dignity, known as uncle Nat, well-loved and adoring in return, a palsied stroker of the silbon pates or little while grand children, rhematic, illiterate, and filled with sleepiness, half yearning for that lonely death which at long last would lead me to rest in some tumbledown graveyard tangled with chokeberry and Jinson weed. It would not have been, to be sure, much of an existence, but can I honestly say that I might no have been happier.”

The white masters hold that the Negroes could be put to any kind of work, without taking into consideration their likes or dislikes, their merits or demerits in it. The Negroes felt forced to do

the work. This callous attitude of the whites to the blacks has been expressed by Benjamin Turner in the novel:

“He (the white man) believes the slaves are capable of all kinds of improvement. That you can take a bunch of darkies and turn them into shopowners and sea captains and opera impresarios and army generals and Christ knows what all. I say differently. I do not believe in beating a darky. I do not believe, either, in beating a dog or a horse. If you wish my belief to take back to the Bishop, you can tell him that my belief is that a darky is an animal with the brain of a human child and his only value is the work you can get out of him by intimidation, cajolery, and threat.”

Nat was taught to read by his mistress, and he learned by heart great parts of the Bible. He was, in fact, better than white preachers of the parish. His intelligence and ability won him love from all sides. He became by his own admission “a poet, the darling, the little black Jewel of Turner’s Mill.” His master, Samuel Turner, gave him encouragement, careful training and even promise of freedom. He was given food- the food which the white people used to eat: “Instead of the nigger food…. fat pork and corn pone, I got house good like

the white people – a lot of bean becon and red—meat, occasionally even the leavings from a roast of beef, and often white bread made of wheat…."

Samueal Turner, Nat’s white master, gave him a chance to read and become a good man like the white. He made a promise to him to free him: “I shall draw up the papers for your emancipation. You will than at age of twenty five be a free man. I shall only stipulate that you return of Turner’s Mill for a visit every blue moon or two – with whichever young darky girl you have taken for a wife.” Samuel has not promised to free his slaves. But he makes a promise to free Nat. Nat can come back when he cares to shoot the breeze with those still in bondage. Nat is special to himself and to Samuel and is willing to reap the benefits of that, Nat feels very happy at the idea of his freedom and tells other slaves: “My mastah’s going set me free in Richmond”. But the other Negro replies sarcastically: “‘yo’ shit stink

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1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 48
2. Ibid, p. 193
too, such. Yo’ ass black Jes’ like mine, honey chile.”¹  Sam,uel Turner was sympathetic with Negroes and against the institution of slavery. He places his opinion before Dr. Ballard: “I have long and do still steadfastly believe that slavery is the great cause of all the chief evils of our land. It is a cancer eating at our bowels, the source of all our misery, individual, political and economic. It is greatest cause a supposed free and enlightened society has been saddled with in modern times.”²

Natg was given good facilities to sleep in a good bed with his follow – worker, Hark. He was given more time to “fish and trap” and make religious reading of the Bible. He explains his position in the house of his master, Samual Turner: “I could fish and trap and do considerable Scriptural reading. I had for going on to several years now considered the necessity of exterminating all the white people in Southampton country and as far beyond as destiny carried me, and there was thus available to me more time than I had een bad before

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, pp. 200-201
². Ibid, p. 159
to ponder the Bible and its exhortations, and to think over the complexities of the bloody mission that was set out before me.”¹

He developed a disdain for the field hand Negroes, regarding them as “lower order of people, a rag tag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth. “But this contempt of the blacks could not bring him near the whites. His position was like that of a mere pet. But this comfortable life of Nat could not last long as Samuel Turner went bankrupt and sold him to the Rev Eppes. Nat was condemned to “nigger work” by Eppes. Nat was twenty when he was denied the freedom promised for earlier. He then realized what slavery meant: “the true world in which a Negro moves an breathes. It was like being plunged in freezing water.”²

After his sale by Samuel Turner, his life became miserable, torturous and painful like that of other Negroes. All his comforts and sense of pride were gone. He himself reflects on his life:

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 48
“During most of those years I slept on a corn-shuck tick on the floor of a dark little cupboard off the kitchen, sharing the space with some emaciated mice and several burst-ling and friendly spiders for whom I have trapped flies and lived with on the most genial terms.”¹

As a slave of Rev. Eppes Nat thought of getting long-anticipated freedom but in vain. Nat explains his feeling after his sale to Rev. Eppes: “I think that in handing me over to the Rev. Eppes he (Samuel) envisioned a charming, benign and mutually satisfying relationship between an adorable old bachelor preacher and his black acolyte – the two of us dwelling in perfect Christian concord as I celebrated with perfect labour the spiritual harvest that his age and wisdom might shower upon me.”² Nat’s dream of and benign relationship was thwarted. He was treated as an ordinary Negro worker. He throws light on the situation: “As the only two – logged chattel in Shiloh, then, it befell my lot not only to do the chores for the Rev. Eppes – to chop kindling and haul spring water and feed Beauty – the sway – backed mare, and shell corn and slop the three pigs and build the

². Ibid; p. 239
morning fires, acting both as a sort of grotesque valet to the fires, acting both as a sort of grotesque valet to the preacher in the shack he called a parsonage and as a sexton at the rickety church – but to be of service to the rest of the congregation as well.”

During the span of life with the Rev. Eppes, Nat felt “transformed into a different living creature altogether – half-man, half-mule, exhausted and without speech, given over to dumb and reasonless toil from the hours before dawn until the dead of night.”

Even the living conditions in the house of the Rev. Eppes were not proper, as Nat explains: “In the tiny three – room parsonage I slept in what was called the kitchen, on a starw tick covered with rags near the back door; Bitter winds moaned through all the cracks in the house; even stoked to the limit the fireplace gave scant warmth; when banked at night it gave no heat …… and I lay shivering on the floor in the dim light I could see ice congealing on the surface of the

2. Ibid; p. 241
preacher’s chamber pot.”¹ The life under the Rev. Eppes became intolerable to Nat, as he described: “Lord, what a time! How I yearned for the days and months to pass and for the winter to end; how I waited for the moment to come when I would be delivered from this pesthole, to Richmond and to freedom.”²

Nat’s life with the Rev. Eppes gives him an experience of pitiable and pricking life of Negro slaves: “….. for the first time in my life I began to sense the world, the true world, in which a Negro moves and breathes. It was like being plunged into freezing water.”³ Soon the Rev. Eppes sold him to Evans and Blanding, the incorporated engineers, and they also sold him to Mr. Thomas Moore. Marking cruel behaviour of the white masters everywhere, Nat makes a plan to kill such kind of the masters and make a search for those Negroes who may participate in his plan of killing. He generated

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 241
². Ibid; p. 241
hatered in Negroes against the whites: “During four a five years approaching 1831, when it had become first my obsession and then my acceptance of a divine mission to kill all the white people in Southampton, and as far beyond as destiny might take me, it was this matter of hatred – of discovering those Negroes in whom hatred was already ablaze, of cultivating hatred in the few remaining and vulnerable, of testing and probing, warily discarding those in whom pure hatred could not be nurtured and whom therefore I could not trust – that became one of my primary concerns.”1

Nat’s most important problem is a hindrance in the assertion of his self as a human being in a society which refuses to accept him on human grounds. Hence the discounts the comfortable life of an obedient Negro slave – a state where a modicum of comfort is brought by the surrender of human dignity. He realizes that even as a skilled man he can never enter into a meaningful relationship with the whites. Nat rebels in order to protest against the predicament of a Negro “all

1. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 258
unknowing doomed and hopeless.” His protest is the positive stance which gives him human worth denied by the white society. He proves once for all that he is out of “the world of a fly” and can think and act.

Nat’s rage is the product of the social conditions. It is two fold. He expresses his anger at the whites for making the Negroes into something less than a man and at the Negroes for their obsequiousness before the whites. His anger is justifiable against the white racist society which does not accept him as a human being like the whites. His rage has its source in his individual feeling as a man, not in any ideology or religious belief.

The seeds of Nat’s revolt are in the promise of freedom. The promise of freedom fills him with religious fervor and affects his attitude toward his fellow slaves. But again events presage Nat’s own situation when Willis is sold by Turner. Despite his bitterness about Willis’ sale, Nat remains optimistic about his own future. But in the end Turner cannot keep his promise and Nat remains a slave. He is sold to the Rev. Eppes. This behaviour of Turner makes him jealous of the white community.
White working for the Whiteheads, Nat’s hatred becomes so intensified that he regard it as a private cause of his rebellion. Margaret Whithead represents white community and becomes a victim of Nat’s hatred. His hatred against the whites is “so pure and obdurate that no sympathy, no human warmth, no flicker of compassion can make the faintest nick or scratch upon the story surface of its being.”¹

Nat’s hatred against the whites has been enhanced by Hark’s oppression by the white community. Hark represents the blacks who suffered greatly at the hands of his white masters. He was “quick-witted, resourceful and a strong as a bear”. He was so much demoralized by physical torture and callous behaviour that “the very sight of white skin cowed him, humbled him, diminished him to the

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 57
most fawning and service abasement…”¹ Miss Maria finds pleasure in Hark’s “crying and moaning and swaying”. Joseph Travis sold Hark’s wife named Tiny and his son to some slave trader in the South and did “unpardonable act”. Hark’s separation from his wife and son broke him utterly, Hark told Nat that when Joseph Travis was in misery, he sold his niggers, his property:

“Well, amongst these niggers was Hark’s wife and Hark’s child-little boy about three or four years old he was then. Hark cared for that little boy almost more than anything.”²

Hark could not forget his wife and his dear little boy. His separation from his family made his life miserable and tearful. He was in great anguish over missing his family. The impact of separation on him was so intense that he understood only that he had been separated from the all the family he had ever had and from the only home he had ever known. After a week at Travis’s his misery and home – sickness and his general sense of loss became insupportable. Nat throws light on the miserable position of Hark without his wife and child whom he loved deeply: “Hark’s all forlorn now …. heartsick and forlorn. On the outside he’s very cheery, but inside he’s very all torn up. He can’t keep his mind on anything. That’s how he

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 72
². Ibid, p. 72
forgets his chores, and how come he gets punished. Poor old Hark…..”¹

The contemporary white society was so much replete with black oppression that events of black suffering and torture were frequent. Not only black men but also moaning black women were made victim to the white cruelties and sexual exploitation. They were shipped and forced for sex by the whites. Mc. Bridge, an Irishman, who was a drunkard, usually whipped Negroes. He beat even Nat’s own mother and forced her for sex with him. Nat saw this oppression of black ladies with his own eyes and developed very briter hatred against the whites, as he says: “…. I felt a brief fleeting spasm of rage and I longed for the day to arrive when I might get my hands on him (the white man).²

To fulfil his hatred against the white and execute this plan of killing callous white masters, Nat takes with him two other Negro slaves who were severly oppressed and punished by Travis and

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 72.
². Ibid; p. 63.
his wife – Willis and Hark. They kill Mrs. Sarah and Travis. Nat explains the scene of killing in his own words.

“….. I raised the broadax above my head and felt and weapon shiver there like a seed in a savage wind. “Thus art thou slain”.¹ I cried, and the ax descended with a whisper and missed by half a foot, striking not Travis’ skull but the headboard between him and his wife. And at that moment Miss Sarah’s soft moan bloomed into a shriek.

In this way I inaugurated my great mission – Ab Lord --- I who was to strike the first blow. It seemed as if all strength had left me, my limbs were like Jelly, and for the life of me I could not pry the blade of the broadax from the imprisoning timber.” Thus Nat misses two times to kill Travis. In that state of agitation he bears two times the voice of Samuel Turner, encouraging him to kill Travis: “Shit Kill dot firkin basted.” Seeing this position of Nat, Willis comes forward and takes axe from Nat’s hand and kills Travis and Nat then kills his

¹. The Confessions of Nat Turner, p. 388.
wife, Miss Sarah, by turns. Thus the mission of Nat is fulfilled. It was, thus, an attempt to get events back on right track. In this way Travis gets due punishment for his failed promises to free Nat. We come to know that Nat’s revolutionary interition was long-time in the brewing, his rebellion was a reaction to the emasculation of himself and his people. One question arises here: his people were of central importance or merely tools to help him. To get an answer to this question, we come to the point that Nat stoked the hatred in the hearts of his people. He says this of Hark:

“It was not easy to make of Hark a potential killer, to generate true hatred in that large – hearted breast. Without causing him, as I did, to brood on the sale of his wife and child. I might have failed. But of all the Negroes, Hark was the most surely and firmly under my domination.”

Considering the phrase “my domination”, we come to the conclusion that Nat is more important in his own mind than any one else. But this is not case with Willis. He is a true rebel who acted

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on his own, as Nat says: “I could in no way control or govern him.”

Nat started the “ruction” but he himself could not kill due to his mental construct. As Nat and band stood over Travis and his wife in bed, Nat’s axe poised to split their skulls, he, for the first time, has an entirely different reaction to his owner:

“Now I saw that beneath the perplexity, the film of the sleep, his eyes, were brown and rather melancholy, acquainted with hard toil, remote perhaps, somewhat inflexible but not at all unkind, and I felt that, I knew him at last – may be even now not well but far better than one knows another man by a pair of muddy trousers viewed from the level of the ground, or bare arms and hands, or a disembodied voice…… I had a final glimpse of who he truly might be. Whatever else he was, he was a man.”

Nat calls Travis a man. And one of the causes of the hatred of the blacks against the white was that they did not grant their human chattel full dignity as man. If they had admitted their humanity, they could not have enslaved them in the first place. Many slave holders, instead, fought back the awareness of the blacks as men. It

is true that brutalized by the system, Willis, Hark and others have had their humanity repressed and consequently underdeveloped, and hence they felt forced to “make their axes sing”. They find their victims as killable as mosquitoes for the slaveholders. Yet in this scene we see Nat—better educated, more aware of God, permitted to become more human – unable to strike the blow with accuracy. After repeated failures he later kills Miss Sarah but with consummate inefficiency. He plunges a sword into her, missing the vitals entirely and finally must club her to death with a fence rail to put her out of her misery.

Nat is a human being and proves his humanity even after killing Miss Sarah. Shortly thereafter, as the carnage reaches a crescendo around him, Nat sees “a young girl of fourteen or so” run screaming out of the Harris farmhouse and turn toward the Williams farm to warn them. “I might have reached her in a twinkling….. but I suddenly felt dispirited and overcome by fatigue, and was pursued by an obscure, unshakable grief. I shivered in the knowledge of the futility of ambition….. Did I really wish to vouchsafe a like for the one that I had taken.”
Nat represents black militancy which emerged in the nineteen sixties in America. He is the “New Negro”. He too believes in bloody black revolution. The crime depicted in the novel symbolizes the race riots which took place in the 1960s in America. Nat, Willis and Hark were arrested and put in the Jail. Jeremiah Cobb, the Judge, gave them death sentence. About to die on the gallows, Nat tells Gray in revelation that “the spirit” wished him to take on the yoke of Christ to liberated black community. Nat reveals himself as a heroic man deeply religious wedded to the struggle. He has struggled in order to be accepted as an equal on human terms. He has vindicated by death that human dignity is a value which should be won even at the expense of life itself. He has found a meaning in the rebellion which

proved his human worth. He has no regrets and clearly affirms his meaningful existence joyfully. He does not plead guilty. In the cell he retrieves the Bible from the cedar plank just as he hears the executioner’s ‘unrelenting footsteps.:

“Yet steadfast the morning star rides in the heavens radiant and pure, set like crystal amid the still waters of eternity. Morning blooms softly upon the rutted streets of Jerusalem…. I feel the approach of gigantic, unrelenting footfalls. I turn and retrieve the Bible from the cedar plank and for one last time take my station by the window, breathing deeply in the apple-sweet air…. The footsteps draw near, suddenly cease. There is a rattle of bolts and keys. A voice says: “Nat”. And when I do not answer, the same voice calls out: “Come”!

We’ll love one another …. we’ll love one another by the light of heaven above. I feel the nearness of flowing waters, tumultuous waves, rushing winds. The voice calls again: “Come”.

“Come!” the voice booming, but commanding me now!

Come, my son! I turn in surrender.

Surely I come quickly, A men.
Even so, come, Lord Jesus
Ho how bright and fair the morning star….”¹