CHAPTER III

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS:
A VIEW OF CHAOS

William Styron shot to fame with the publication of his first novel *Lie Down In Darkness*. Perceptive critics like John W. Aldridge and Louis Rubin hailed it as a continuation of the southern literary mode as established by William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Wolfe. The surface similarities between *Lie Down in Darkness* and *The Sound and the Fury* misled the critics into labelling it as a novel of place. They saw it as primarily historical and social. John W. Aldridge in 1956 commented on the "southern elements of the novel, particularly the elements of fundamentalist religion, regional guilt and the contrast of races" (as quoted by Rubin in *The Far Away Country* 79). But Louis Rubin, though he too saw the novel in its southern setting, did point out that the central problem of the Loftises - was that they lacked a reason for being, and he thus sensed the existential ambience of the novel.

It is true that the novel criticises the pre-world war II society. The characters are trapped in a family and social situation from which there is no escape. Styron himself pointed out that the greatest difficulty he had in writing the novel was in getting out from under Faulkner's influence. He had to rewrite the earlier parts of the novel to avoid echoes of *The Sound and the Fury*. The landscape and rhetorical resonance of the southern imagination as conjured up by Faulkner is fully visible in the novel.
Here we find that "the ground is bloody and full of guilt" (LDD 69), and that the South was "benighted ... and the people filled with guilt" but this was "the very tragic essence of the land ... (LDD 315-16). It is a land that "produces the dissolving family ... with its cancerous religiosity, its exhausting need to put manners before morals, ... call it a husk of a culture (LDD 346). But though Styron deals with the past, it is the immediate past and not a dynastic past as in a Faulkner novel. A decade after its publication Rubin observed that "the Southerness" only appeared to be important and the book was in vital respects quite another kind of novel.

In retrospect Styron's novel reveals that his is a different vision of the human experience. Styron grew up in a greatly changed South and his attitudes are necessarily different from Faulkner and his generation. In Styron's South of the 1920's and 1930's there was a growing realization of the failure of spiritual institutions, of the disintegration of traditional societies. His fiction grew out of the need to find order in this chaos. The need for the authority of religious conviction, the need for the individual to belong to a community is everywhere. But these are attitudes and not embodied as such in particular institutions. Rubin remarks very perceptively "Only the general attitudes, the general ways of looking at human experience, remain real; the institutions themselves were no longer there. Styron explores the validity of faith, when it is no longer a reality. In other words Styron like all good writers used his tradition, rather than let himself be used by it" (The Far Away Country 104).
The contrast between the Compson family of *The Sound and the Fury* and the Loftises of *Lie Down In Darkness* points the difference in approach. The Compsons carry the burden of the past which ultimately results in the disintegration of that family, whereas the Loftises exist entirely in the present. Milton is the drunken sod that he is because of his own moral weakness. Helen Loftis is what she is because of her own twisted nature. Peyton becomes the victim of her parents' failure. As Rubin remarks "in *The Sound and the Fury* a dynasty collapses, in *Lie Down in Darkness* a family breaks up" (*The Far Away Country* 204).

But this family break up is symptomatic of the times and the artist has to capture this effectively. Maxwell Geismar in a review comments on the difficulties the contemporary artist faces:

Pity the poor artist! The retreat either to the modes of personal sensibility, or those of religious and social authoritarianism may be a refuge for him. But it is hardly a source of great art anymore. The real drama and content of this period lie directly at the center of the chaos, that surrounds him. It is there he must turn to come close to the spirit of the age. If he can only catch it. And surely no literary subject matter could offer him so many opportunities along with so many dangers. (60)

*Lie Down in Darkness* is just such a plunge into chaos - emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Styron explores the conditions of man in a fragmented society and the need for man to discover his own values and responsibilities. This is a continuing concern in all his novels. His protagonists
vary in their capacity to cope with the situation. They all tend to rebel against the existing order. This depiction of the human situation reveals his existentialist sensibility: Anxiety, anguish, guilt and despair mark the world of the Loftises.

Styron admitted at an interview that the greatest problem he had with *Lie Down in Darkness* was "with the progression of time" (West 13). This is yet another central concern of existentialism. He felt a chronological narration would not capture the chaotic aspects of his characters' experience. So he overcame the problem by skilful manipulation of dramatic episodes revolving around Peyton. "I'm all for the complexity of Faulkner but not for the confusion. That goes for Joyce too" (West 13). It speaks much for Styron's craftsmanship that he could so successfully avoid the confusion of Faulkner. This is so because he is not given to experimenting boldly with the genre as such. He is more traditional than his forbears in this respect. He believes in fully "rounded characters'. "Story and Character should grow together", he feels (West 14). It is this focus on characterization that makes for continuity in his novels. It is character that decides fate in his fiction. The psychological validity of his key characters in *Lie Down in Darkness* is remarkable. The central tension arises out of an Oedipal situation. But this theme is handled with such subtlety that it all seems part of the lived experience of the characters, and does not read like a mechanical psychoanalytic case history. It is his brilliant use of interior monologues and shuttling back and forth in time by use of flashbacks that makes for the immediacy and lucidity of his style. Here he starts with the closing situation and then looks back to the past to throw light on the present. Time in this novel is a bare three hour ritual devoted to
Peyton's funeral procession. Within this span of time we peer into the minds of the characters to arrive at the reason for Peyton's suicide.

The reality of time is evoked effectively by this technique. It proves Barrett's view that "the temporal is the horizon of modern man, as the eternal was the horizon of the Middle Ages" (56). The Loftises are firmly enclosed in the here and now and there is no escape for Milton or Helen from the actual presence of death which is the prelude to the confrontation of Nothingness. Styron's use of interior monologue effectively exposes the spiritual malaise of the characters. Only humanistic values can combat the senseless violence and purposelessness of most of their lives.

The title from Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial* aptly fits the absurdity of the modern condition. The epigraph has symbolic significance:

And since death must be the *Lucina* of life, and even Pagans could doubt, whether thus to live were to die; since our longest sun sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes; since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying mementos, and time that grows old in itself, bids us hope no long duration; - diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation. (167-168)

The epigraph captures the essence of spiritual desiccation in *Lie Down in Darkness*. The landscape of the novel is one of despair and dying. Port Warwick stands for the Tidewater country in Virginia and right at the
beginning the scene communicates something agelessly dissolute. "Here bordering the street .... there are great mounds of garbage"; It is a veritable waste land that captures the essence of the novel. The novel begins with a train journey and we follow the course of the train from Richmond to Port Warwick drowsily enough, lulled by the casual rhythm of Styron's prose, till we are brought up with a jerk when he turns to "a black shiny hearse" waiting at the station. Then we know it is no ordinary train but one which spells doom for Milton Loftis, the anti-hero of the book. This is his moment of truth, when he is forced to confront the mortal remains of his daughter Peyton Loftis. She has committed suicide in New York after desperate attempts to find some meaning in life. The death of Peyton is Milton's first taste of tragedy. He seems confounded beyond all hope. He realizes this is "the result of all his errors, of all his love" (LDD 36). As Marc L. Ratner points out, Milton "has never progressed beyond the emotional center of his youth" (37). He is truly the "hanging man", "a case of arrested development" (37). All his life has been like a hangover, when he had successfully dodged facing up to his own limitations. He is given to rationalizing his actions by a kind of sophomoric fatalism. "Life tends towards a moment. Not just the flesh, not a poet or a thief, I could never exercise free will" he muses (LDD 12). He is full of self-pity and blames the circumstances that have brought him to the present moment. He accepts no responsibility for his life.

Milton until that catastrophic moment had not felt any compelling need to face reality. Things had come his way too easily. His father had loved him well but not too wisely. He had sent him to the university at the age of seventeen. Freedom had come too early "away from his father, he found the
sudden freedom oppressive" (LDD 13) he had taken to alcohol and living the
good life. His father had made a further mistake in getting him a commission
in the legal wing of the army and had thus saved him from active combat
during the war. Success had come his way too easily and at the end of the war
he emerged with the rank of captain and marriage "with the colonel's
daughter" (LDD 13). This seeming good fortune was to be is undoing.

The first flash back takes us to Milton's past and his father's warning
that his youth would betray him if he didn't grow up to confront the reality of
existence as an adult. His father tries to make him feel guilty over certain acts,
for instance his dodging active service in the army. He gives him news of his
childhood friend who had got killed in action. Milton is resentful that his
father should bring this up on his wedding day. It is only in retrospect, after
the news of Peyton's suicide that he realizes the error of his ways and that he
had clung to props all his life. When Helen rejected him, he had Peyton to
lavish his affections on and when his feelings for her grew too strong he had
turned to Dolly Bonner. Marriage to a rich wife had robbed him of all his early
ambitions to become a successful lawyer. He had succumbed to the lure of
money and led the life of a leisured gentleman, indulging in a conventional
love affair when he could find no satisfaction in his relationship with his wife.
He has dimly perceived what his wife's neurotic behavior was doing to Peyton
but he had taken the easy way out and not rebelled. The sheer vacuity of
existence comes home to him when he hears Dolly Bonner raising the question
"where are we going?" (LDD 97) as the funeral procession takes a detour to
avoid Daddy Faith's religious procession.
Does she have to ask that? he ponders. "His deposit, it seemed, on all of life's happiness had been withdrawn in full and his heart had shriveled within him like a collapsed balloon. He was not philosophical, ... Emergencies had been things to get shut of quickly and to forget. (LDD 96)

He had always been able to create some gratuitous hope and he continues to blind himself to the situation and hopes to win back Helen's love. He hopes to tell her "Our love never went away at all" (LDD 97).

Geismar comments with great insight on the relationship between Milton and Helen:

Lie Down in Darkness is a narrative of a tragic marriage. Milton and Helen Loftis still love each other, or at least they still continue to try to love each other, as they have tried disastrously, during the whole course of their relationship. The tension of their story is maintained by an alternation of hope and despair. (240)

Because they have shared happiness in the past, during the early years of their marriage, a bond still exists between them. But everytime they try to draw close together, their personal differences and antagonisms drive them apart. Peyton's sixteenth birthday party illustrates this clearly. Helen Loftis insists on Peyton leaving the party early as she had caught her drinking whisky. Peyton is outraged and appeals to Milton. For once Milton puts down his foot and insists on Peyton continuing the celebrations. In cold fury Helen
leaves with Maudie but instead of feeling triumphant Milton experiences guilt. She had crushed him with her show of moral superiority:

There are a whole lot of things that no matter how long I lived with you I could never forgive you for. We've been building up to this, I love my God and you don't, that's one thing. You betrayed us when you stopped going to church... "I love my God", she repeated, drawing herself up proudly, "and you", she whispered, with a toss of her head, "you don't have any God at all"... I know what sin is and in knowing that I'll always be superior to you.

(LDD 89)

Her condemnatory judgmental approach to life finally drives Milton and Peyton away from her.

It is then that Milton decides to take up with Dolly Bonner and make place in his life for "love and contentment in place of that huge void which had served in the absence of both these things" (LDD 91). Peyton discovers Dolly and Milton together and is thoroughly disconsolate. She turns to Dick for comfort but she does not allow their friendship to go any further for the moment. Milton muses over the years he had shared with Helen. "For what seemed ages he had lived with her not so much in a state of matrimony as in a state of gentle irritation; together like the negative poles of a magnet, gradually but firmly repelling each other" (LDD 87). But Milton can never really hate Helen as he sees the other side of her. Just before this tempestuous scene when Helen tries to persuade him to let Peyton leave the party with her, he sees her in his mind's eye riding a horse in Central Park as they had done
during their honeymoon. It is this ambivalence in his attitude to her that prevents him from making a clean break with her. When he sees her in distress over Maudie he wants to comfort her a little, but he can't bring himself to do it. He feels guilty over the kiss he shared with Dolly and he reflects: "Their paths, diverging in the woods, had gone limitless astray, and nothing could bring them together again. Both of them had lost the way" (LDD 90). He is left pondering, "If she knew what was true, if I knew what truth was too, we could love each other". But this is the Sartrean world where "Hell is other people". Each of Styron's protagonists in Lie Down in Darkness live in isolation, haunted and alienated and unable to reach out/to love.

Milton Loftis is truly an absurd hero. He had hoped to look upon a beatitude but instead is left peering into the horror of nothingness. Morris' and Malin's comments on Milton are most enlightening: In Milton Loftis one finds something

Other than the merely fallen, aging, middle-class male at climacteric who seeks but never finds salvation in adultery and alcohol. Beyond the stereotype looms an archetype: that of the failed quester who has hoped to transform a common mistress into a divine Beatrice, and drink the ambrosia that preserves to the last the dregs of mortality, shields him against age, despair, loss, inadequacy, pain, failure and impotence. (4)

Milton Loftis is at the center of a destructive three cornered relationship. The novel is remarkable for its structural complexity. Styron achieves this partly by setting up a pattern of relationships. Milton, Helen and Peyton form a
triangular relationship. The forces of attraction and repulsion makes for the tension in the novel. Centrifugal forces work and each falls back on props outside the triangle. Milton reaches to Dolly Bonner, Helen to Carey Carr and Peyton to Dick and then Harry. But they realise all too soon that hell is not other people but themselves. Styron gives an insight into the consciousness of each of his characters through flashback and flashbacks within flashbacks. The first mind we encounter in the narrative is Milton's and events are filtered through his guilt-ridden, alcoholic consciousness. According to Jonathan Baumbach, "He is a romantic without romance" (125). He had acknowledged long ago that his marriage was "a perverse, heartless business. As long as he screened his affair with Dolly from Helen, she was almost pleasant again to live with. But on certain days Dolly would loom large in Helen's consciousness and she would withdraw to her own self and disappear at night to see Carey Carr. These times were agonizing for Loftis. But the events that really drove him to the inevitable thoughts of divorce were the times of confusion with Peyton.

Milton recalled the Christmas reunion when Peyton returned from Sweet Briar for the holidays. Helen had actually put herself out to decorate the home for Peyton though Loftis had an uneasy feeling about it all along. The party was in full swing when Dolly telephoned and broke the spell of conviviality. Helen withdrew to the room upstairs. Milton and she share a moment of tenderness but just when they seem to find some common ground there is the sound of Peyton's arrival and Helen declares "She hates me". Milton holds Helen's hand and for a moment it was like old times again. But it was only for the moment. He was later to recall:
how that moment had expressed for the last time the tenderness that existed between them "... why hadn’t something important happened then? It was as if he - yes, she too; how could he tell? - had just tried too hard. No one knows when the heart’s eye opens; theirs had opened wide for a moment and had gazed each at the other, then blinked shut as quickly. It was too late now, he knew. (LDD 150-151)

Helen continues to blame Peyton for everything that goes wrong in the family and her refrain is "she hates me" (LDD 150). Milton tries to set the record straight saying, "It's you who hate things around here" (LDD 151) and then he realises in a sudden bitter flash that it was Helen's way of expressing her anger over his affair with Dolly. He promises to end his affair with Dolly if she treats Peyton right. But Peyton and Helen have the inevitable row over Peyton joining her friends for the night. Peyton's regret is clear when she says, "It's too bad, isn't it, that everything has to be like this?" (LDD 153). But Milton is unable to change things. "Pity had him shackled in frail impotence: "... but even then he knew "that his vast pity for Helen was only a form of self-pity, and he cursed himself for an unmerry Christmas, for Peyton's unhappiness and his own bleak inertia" (LDD 154). Milton suffers from existential nausea and like Roquentin in Nausea feels that he himself does not really exist at all, that only inanimate objects possess life and have the "power to drive one witless with anxiety". Milton prays for a miraculous transformation, "Ah, for a man to arise in me" he cries, "that the man I am should cease to be" (LDD 199).
"In such small dramas of frustration there comes a moment when something must give, Loftis knew that Helen was spoiling for a breakdown" (LDD 160). The dinner on Christmas day was eaten "under a fog of hostility". Milton thinks "God help her, wasn't she aware of what she was doing? What crazy furied winds bearing the debris of what wicked imaginings, sour suspicions, balked hopes, had swept her mind" (LDD 160). Helen takes on the role of a martyr and prepares an impeccable Christmas dinner. But before her neurotic silence the rest of the family is cowed down. Peyton is unable to take it any longer and white with fury she walks out of the charade of a Christmas dinner. Milton is left to console Peyton as she sobs "She's crazy. Absolutely, Bunny, Absolutely off her head!" Finally Peyton cries "I've tried to do what's right. Do you think everything will turn out okay someday? ... I'm a good girl, I think. All I've done is just what's normal" (LDD 162). This was Peyton's bewildered cry, yearning for some understanding.

Peyton never came home after that Christmas, but spent her holidays with friends. And the memory of that Christmas drove Milton away from any contact with Helen. "They lived like shadows together, indeed like boarders" --- in some city rooming house who pass each other stiffly on the stairs ---" (LDD 163). After Helen and Maudie leave for Charlottesville for a medical check up, Milton confides in Dolly Bonner about himself in a fit of alcoholic bonhomie - "It's a shame when you don't have the guts to let loose from an honest-to-God, dyed-in-the-wool, foursquare gospel succubus. A real holy one at that. Oh God, what have I done to deserve this? (LDD 173) It is the memory of Helen's cruelty to Peyton that brings on this outburst. Then drunkenness brought on another memory of his father:
"My son", my father used to say, 'we stand at the back door of glory. Now in this setting part of time we are only relics of vanquished grandeur more sweet than God himself might have imagined: we are the driblet turds of angels, not men but a race of toads, vile mutations who have lost our love words ...' (LDD 174)

This recollection points the contrast between the graciousness of a previous age and the chaos and decadence of the present. It is true the generation has lost its love words. Milton sees more clearly when he is drunk and he realizes that everything is perverted - himself, Helen, religion and in a vengeful frenzy he tries to make love to Dolly in Helen's bed but even that is a failure. That evening he gets the news of Maudie's final illness. Unable to think straight he takes to drinking again and arrives at the hospital. When Helen sees him this way she is thoroughly disgusted. "Don't say anything. Just don't say anything. Your own daughter, as sick as she is and you aren't even sane - yes, sane enough to know what's happening. You -" (LDD 181) is her despairing response to his drunken state.

Milton behaves true to his character. Unable to bear the misery at the hospital, he keeps losing himself in drink and in that state he suddenly recalls that Peyton was supposed to be in Charlottesville attending some university football celebrations. Forgetting his promise to his wife he goes on a mad hunt for Peyton. His search for Peyton would be hilarious, if it weren't so pathetic. The drunken search for Peyton symbolises the fruitlessness of his quest, the nightmare of his failure. He runs into football fans everywhere and sits
through part of the game. Amidst all the jubilation and fanfare he has a sudden moment of clarity.

... his conscience, reviving from the brown depths of the day, told him that it was true: sitting here evading all, hiding his very identity among people for whom that fact, at least, was of no importance, he has committed the unpardonable crime. It was neither one of commission nor of omission, but the worst combination of both — of apathy, of a sottish criminal inertia.

(198)

But instead of facing up to his weakness Milton lets the moment slip and sinks back into comfortable inertia.

Ironically, by an effort of will, he becomes sober again and it is at this point that he falls into a ditch and gets hurt. An African American helps him out and he finally runs into Peyton. Peyton is shocked by Milton's behavior. "Why didn't you stay with mother?", is her cry. "No, not for her sake ... But on account of Maudie ... oh Bunny you are a mess, a perfect mess". "This whole family's nuts - Absolutely nuts" (LDD 205).

The scene with Helen at the hospital is tortuous for both Milton and Peyton. It is a kind of replay of the scene when Peyton as a child had innocently tied up Maudie. She had been duly punished by Helen. Helen had dealt her a vicious slap across the cheek and called her a little devil. It was then that Peyton had begun to shrink away. Styron's prose captures the undercurrent of somber trouble here. In terms reminiscent of Eliot's
description of the drawing room of the middle-class lady in "The Wasteland" Styron describes Helen's room.

The door of the room where they stood, he and Peyton together, her hand in his, confronted the edge of darkness, like a shore at night facing on the sea. Beyond them in the shadows arose swollen, mysterious scents, powders and perfumes, which though familiar to both of them, never lost the odor of strangeness and secrecy .... The alarm clock went click click click. So sick, so sick, so sick (LDD 59).

The final monologue of Peyton's before her suicide is replete with the images we find here - the click-clock of the alarm-clock and the image of birds.

The scene ends in some sort of reconciliation between mother and daughter but Helen's cold and unforgiving nature is evident here. Her heart is shut to Peyton. The key word in this passage is the word "gropes". Both Milton and Peyton are groping for a way of understanding Helen, of establishing relationships with her. Milton is aware of Helen's neurosis and wants to shout "Keep your hands off my daughter" (LDD 62). At the same time he wants to hold her hand and soothe her because he feels there was something wrong with her. Finally he merely gropes his way out of the room.

Similarly, Peyton and Milton now find themselves in the hospital waiting outside Maudie's room. Helen is not silent with bitterness now. She gives vent to all her feelings, now that Maudie is actually at death's door. "Love" --- Neither of you will ever know what that means", is her scornful
comment. But "Maudie knows" is Helen's only consolation (LDD 206). Maudie had got interested in a man called Bennie who was part colored part Indian. Maudie knew what love was. Once when it was about to rain, Helen saw him doing tricks for Maudie.

There was some unspoken communication between them. Helen saw it all. There was something in him that understood love and death entwined forever", ---. (LDD 212)

She describes afternoons with Maudie in lyrical terms. This pastoral reminiscence however has a wistful feeling of inevitable loss. Mutability is everywhere. The departure of Bennie brings on a sort of sadness in Maudie and she just fades away after that.

Helen's love for Maudie makes her almost human and both Milton and Peyton are drawn to her visions "of endless afternoon and soaring clouds, of mimosas that swayed and trembled, of a frieze of seagulls strung out immobile against the sky (LDD 213). It was as if the magic circle had enclosed Milton and Peyton too and "the shattered family, were home again" (LDD 213). But it was only an illusion. Helen's vituperative anger shatters the magic moment and unmindful of their anguish and sorrow she accuses Peyton of being the cause of all the disasters in the family.

Helen turned on the two vengefully:

"She's going to die ... why don't you go home? ... You've had your fun. I've waited all day for you and now I'm through waiting and
That too bad? Than you'll never... (1DD 224)

that but just because I don’t love and I can’t love and isn’t that
love you and I never have. Not because of you or anything like
... And if you want to know why I’m like this, it’s because I don’t

Dick proposes marriage, she replies

married anyone else but Helen, they would have made out all right. So when

(1DD 225) Peyton in a flash of self-knowledge realizes that if her father had

lost, they were crazy. They weren’t lost. What they were doing was losing us.

people back in the last generation, Daddy! I guess... They thought they were

commemorative and offensive. Generation. They thought that they had it. "Those

Peyton in despair finds comfort in Dick’s arms and in alcohol. Peyton then

But Helen spoils it all by accusing Peyton of “drinking and whoring.”

(1DD 213)

beyond memory. (1DD 213)

the rest... For the memory of all that was now irretrievable and

passed among them that had been proper and good, in spite of all

Maude, but for other things, too—for the memory of whatever had

sorrow, but mainly by a heartless winnowing love. For Helen and for

without a sound. Million and Peyton are “moved by guilt... by

raised her hands to her face and bent over sobbing tearlessly.

loving? Just try to get that look. Just try... (1DD 213) Helen

dearies. You can get some at all the parties. Do you want your

now I’m gone to Maude. Do you want some more whiskey, my
Peyton knows she has a Freudian attachment to her father. This imposes a burden of guilt on her and this along with the mother's neurotic hatred of her proves too much for her. In her despair she decides to quit school and move to New York. This is her last desperate quest for wholeness. Peyton's recognition of her own condition is tragic. She gives in to Dick but it is only a futile bid to quench the longing for love. She knows that the Freudian attachment to her father, has dwarfed her soul for ever.

It is through Carey Carr's mind that we get a further view of Helen's nature. As her spiritual confidant she has revealed aspects of her feelings to him that we otherwise wouldn't know. He thinks that the death of Maudie has really driven her mad. He is shattered by the knowledge of how this family had so effortesely destroyed itself after Maudie's death.

Carey Carr attempts to bring the couple together again. Then Milton tells him of his own efforts after Maudie's death. For a while everything had worked out fine between Helen and himself. Carey feels that that was the time "a breath of divine grace had blown upon the family" (LDD 234). Loftis, it seemed, was accomplishing a miracle. He had rescued Helen from suicidal despair or so it seemed. In total abasement he had offered her everything, assured her of his undying love. Months later she had cried "Darling, darling, darling you have learned, haven't you? You have learned what I need, haven't you? ... together we can never die" (LDD 244). Milton is grateful for the harmony between him and Helen and reflects "You know this man's fall: do you know his wrassling?" (LDD 247). He had broken the bondage of footlessness and committed himself to Helen. All seemed well but Carr knows
the price Milton had to pay --- his own emasculation. This is where we see Milton exerting his will through a superhuman effort and however short-lived his efforts, we admire the man and understand his "wrassling".

The next Carey Carr hears about Peyton is reassuring. She is to get married at her home town to an artist she had fallen in love with in New York. While driving to the church he muses aloud that "It is the symbolic affirmation of a moral order in the world". Ironically enough that is the last time he was to see Peyton alive.

On her wedding day Peyton makes the fatal mistake of asking Milton for a drink and that brings on all the trouble. In a drunken fit Milton caresses Peyton in a most unfatherly way. She begs him not to smother her with love - "Just don't smother me Bunny!" (LDD 255).

Don't you see Bunny I've got my own reasons for coming home. I've wanted to be normal, I've wanted to be like everybody else. These old folks wouldn't believe that there are children who'd just throw back their heads and howl, who'd just die, to be able to say, 'Well now my rebellion's over, home is where I want to be, home is where Daddy and Mother want me'. (LDD 255)

Then Peyton diagnoses the whole problem. She blames her parents for it all. "If she'd had a soul and you'd had some guts ..." (LDD 256). Peyton is indeed the victim of her parents' inadequacies.
Milton has a moment of recognition during Peyton's wedding and he thinks, "Forgive me, forgive us all. Forgive your mother too. She saw, but she just couldn't understand. It's all my fault. Forgive me for loving you so". ... If he himself could love so much, only Helen could love so little" (LDD 277). This in fact is the crux of the matter. Baumbach remarks, "They are like Sartre's trinity in "No Exit", one another's inescapable Hell" (126).

Helen on the other hand uses vengeance and self-righteousness as defenses against life and others. She is "an incarnate No-reasonless and mute" (LDD 243). She states she loved her father but her dreams tell us another tale. She professes love for Milton but only wants his emasculation. She insists that she loves God, yet ultimately declares that he is a "silly old ass". Even her love for Maudie is a twisted thing. She loves her only because she is totally submissive and she hates Peyton because she sees her as all that she cannot be --- vibrant, youthful and beautiful. She is aware that with one word she could have affirmed all, made Peyton part of the family circle and saved Milton. But she refuses the word choosing instead to nurture the demons within her bosom and to play the role of serpent.

Styron uses outer landscape to reveal the inner mindscape of his characters. Helen is always confined to narrow existential space. We see her in the dim light of her bedroom under the influence of tranquilizers. At other times she is seen by the dim light in the country club or the faint light of the moon during the talks with Carey Carr. She is always presented in refracted light either of the mirror or of cocktail parties. In fact the only time she is seen in bright light is on the day of Peyton's funeral and she is "blinded" by the sunlight. She is a creature of the night and grows in ugliness as the novel progresses.
Although Milton is the anti-hero of the novel Peyton is the center around whom the action revolves. Fossum remarks: "She is the catalyst of her parents' conflicts" (14). Styron structures the novel around events which are important to Peyton - her sixteenth birthday party, the day of her departure to college, the day of her wedding. All these occasions are marked by the usual high expectations followed by despair.

It is only on the day of her death described in the novel's last but one chapter that we are taken into Peyton's mind. We see at first hand partly the rumblings of her unconscious and partly a kind of anguished meditation. Her monologue cries out for Freudian and religious interpretations. We get to understand the forces in the family that have reduced her to a neurotic, irresponsible, sexually promiscuous yet guilt-ridden girl who seeks in death the peace and purification she cannot find in life.

Like her parents, she also associates the past with innocence and longs for the secure land of childhood where "a whimpering Jesus gently leads Winnie-the-pooh down a lane of arching plum blossoms" (LDD 350). Her prayer is always to be a child again where she walked hand in hand with a father who is also lost to her now. Ironically in her marriage she repeats the same pattern as that of her parents. Any suspicion of betrayal on Harry's part turns her into an unforgiving termagant like Helen. She even goes to some other man's bed then "to sin out of vengeance to say, so he doesn't love me, there is one that will" (LDD 351). She rationalizes her misconduct by stating they were all attempts to find a new father and a home to replace the one she had lost. At other times she insists she has lain down in darkness only to
punish herself for punishing Harry. Whatever the reason for her promiscuity, one realizes it is compulsive behavior on her part associated with her past. It has its source in her ambivalent relationship with her father. Many a time we see her pushing away her father as she senses the latent passion underlying her father's playful kisses. This along with her mother's obvious hatred and suspicion of her affection for her father turns her into a guilt-ridden creature. Peyton is filled with self-hatred for desiring her father and for having denied him. The hallucinatory birds that haunt Peyton like pursuing Furies are also emblems of guilt. "The flightless birds" are as Maxwell Geismar points out, "those lonely souls which have suffered on this earth without soaring" (243) "an image", as Fossum points out, "which at the last Peyton tries to transform into that of an ascending and self-resurrecting Phoenix" (17).

Peyton removes all her clothes, in order to be clean, neat as a child and responding to the memory of her mother's warnings with a childish "Oh Pooh" she leaps from a loft in Harlem, this is her attempt at re-creation. "She hopes to find in death the all-powerful father she could not find in life (LDD 364). Further she hopes to find by her faithless leap whether her redeemer does really exist. For, like Faulkner's Quentin Compson who commits suicide for much the same reason, Peyton is torn between belief and disbelief, between the feeling that God exists but (as Heidegger would say) is "withholding" himself and the feeling that God is nothing but a "gaseous vertebrate" (Fossum 18). Peyton is indeed a spiritual orphan who feels that she is drowning in a sea of despair. The chaos of her temporal existence is the direct result of the Freudian involvement with her father and the calculated hatred of her mother. In Freudian terms, Peyton takes her own life because she is convinced that "all
hope lies beyond memory back in the slick, dark womb", and that "undivorced from guilt", she must divorce herself from life.

Paradoxically it is the loving and protective parent with whom Peyton associates her time of innocence who is also the force behind its loss. When she feels "betrayed" by the discovery of her father's affair with Dolly Bonner and his debauch during the time of Maudie's illness she surrenders to Dick Cartwright. But this betrayal does not really push her into Dick's arms. It is her mother's continued hostility that finally breaks her. The disastrous Christmas dinner proves the last straw and Peyton then surrenders to Dick.

The act of love had exhausted them but they slept restlessly, dreaming loveless dreams. ... Sleeping, he took her in his arms; she drew away. ... Then evening came. Arms and legs asprawl, they stirred and turned. Twilight fell over their bodies. They were painted with fire, like those fallen children who live and breathe and soundlessly scream, and whose souls blaze forever. (LDD 224-225)

Their fall from innocence is described in apocalyptic terms. The act of love does not bring them any closer. In fact it reveals the hellish loneliness of the human condition.

Under the influence of drink Milton tries to embrace Peyton. She rejects him and Helen seizes the opportunity to attack her. This leads to a series of explosive revelations. Peyton infuriated by her mother's comments confronts Helen with her hatred of men:
You're like all the rest of the sad neurotics everywhere who huddle over their misery and take their vile, mean little hatreds out on anybody they envy. ... you hate men ... you hate yourself so much that you just don't hate men or Daddy but you hate everything, animal, vegetable and mineral. Especially you hate me. (LDD 297-298)

What Peyton fails to realize then is that she is not free either. She is equally trapped as Helen is by incestuous love. Helen's repression and Peyton's promiscuity all stem from the same source an inability to go beyond the love of their own fathers. Ultimately Peyton is goaded by Helen's strictures against her and her husband and she finally gouges out Helen's cheeks with her fingernails. Milton's only response to his wife is "God help you, you monshter" (LDD 298) because of his "Whisky-thick tongue".

The despair is indeed at its extreme here, at the very center of Styron's inferno. With the death of their two children, Milton and Helen are thrown together. But there is no reprieve here. Helen turns to Carey Carr for comfort and Milton is accompanied by Dolly Bonner to the funeral. Milton the hopeless romantic that he is, still hopes for reconciliation with Helen at the grave of Peyton. "Why have I wanted you?" he shouted. "Because you're the only thing left! That's why. My God, don't you see? We're both sick, we need to make each other ----" (LDD 369).

Her only response was to rush up to Carey Carr and take his arm "Can't we go Carey?". "Milton", she said over her shoulder, "don't make a scene. Please don't make a scene." "Scene! Scene!" Loftis echoed, "Why, God damn
you, don't you see what you're doing? With nothing left! Nothing! Nothing! (LDD 369). In extreme anger and frustration he tries to choke Helen. "If I can't have ... then you ... nothing!" "... Die damn you, die! (LDD 370)". Then it was over, Milton relaxed his grasp and stood there weeping brokenly. "Loftis lifted as if he were striking himself in the eyes with his fists" (LDD 370). Then he turned and ran into the rain towards the highway. That is the last we see of him. Helen, meanwhile slumps against Carey : then she steadied herself against Carey and pressed her head next to the wall crying "Peyton"! "oh, God, Peyton. My child. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! Nothing! (LDD 370). The moment of violence ends abruptly in despair and Helen's words echo the meaninglessness and emptiness of their lives.

The one consistent failure in all the Loftises is the failure to assume responsibility. The guilt is always blamed on someone else. Thus Helen blames God, "God deserted me" (LDD 38). And Peyton says about Milton, "He lost me, and doesn't know it!". But Milton as he confronts the abyss at Peyton's grave "rubs his eyes Oedipal fashion". It is a gesture that reveals he is not self-blinded any more. Unlike Jay Gatsby Milton does experience awareness. Styron rescues him from self-blindness at the end. Milton is forced to recognise reality. Styron illustrates the incongruity of clinging to "the childhood world of illusion", when his characters have long outgrown their childhood. Geismar is of the view that "the true theme of this novel--all its tenderness and tragedy, lies in the evocation of that childhood world of illusion where all our feelings were direct and open and full and complete" (249). But this is only one side of the picture. The novel's real thrust is towards portraying the self-destructiveness that is the inevitable result of clinging to illusions. As Ratner...
has pointed out quite rightly, "If Styron has evoked the childhood world of illusions it is only to indicate the incongruity of clinging to that world when his characters are no longer children" (56). The Loftises are trapped in a world of illusions and they are to liberate themselves "from childishness and from a system which keeps them children" (Ratner 56). The final insight in *Lie Down in Darkness* is not that Peyton wanted to sleep with her father but that she could not leave the protective, infantile, smothering orbit of affections in which she had always been submerged.

Ratner points out very aptly that "*Lie Down in Darkness* is a still point from which action begins. In this novel Styron attacks individual and social illusions by presenting them in their failures and in the evil they generate in the Loftises and their society" (56). *The Long March, Set This House on Fire, The Confessions of Nat Turner,* and *Sophie's Choice* all present heroes struggling to liberate themselves from childishness and from a system which keeps them children. His heroes generally feel trapped and their quest essentially is for freedom. Galloway has also commented that in "*Lie Down In Darkness* there is a continuous stress on the return to childhood itself" (87). He feels it is a kind of escape mechanism to avoid confronting the evils of the present. For Helen, Milton and Peyton it is an obvious attempt to avoid facing up to the lack of love in an absurd universe. In fact Christopher Lasch's description of the narcissistic self is very illuminating in this connection: ... "a self threatened with disintegration and a sense of inner emptiness" (57). This aptly sums up the world of the Loftises.
The Loftises present an effective picture of the disintegrating family. Styron's brilliant use of form and content projects this disintegration effectively. The disjunctive recollections form a continually shifting perspective. The final outcome of such a strategy is a sense of the fragmented self. The source of alienation is the need for love. Peyton like her parents has the narcissistic need for protection. Love for her is "need" and her words to Harry after the wedding echo Helen's words to Milton after his attempt at reconciliation, "You have learnt what? need haven't you?" Harry sees the fatal resemblance between Helen and Peyton, once the scales fall from his eyes. "You're a Helen with her obsessions directed in a different way" (LDD 337). Like Milton, Peyton alienates herself from Harry with her nymphomaniacal appetite and excessive drinking. Her inexplicable masochistic urge to experience self-defilement drive her to these affairs. Peyton is a true victim of her parents obsessions. But she alone of all the Loftises manages to get rid of the prison of existence through suicide. In this sense Peyton does achieve freedom from the torturous prison of consciousness. While Milton and Helen are left with spiritual death, Peyton escapes an impossible situation. There is dignity in the sense that she refuses to live in bondage any longer.

One is reminded of Camus' observations:

The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need (for happiness and for reasons) and the unreasonable silence of the world. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of a life can depend on it. The irrational, the human nostalgia and the absurd is born of their encounter and these are the three characters in the drama that must necessarily end with all the logic of which an existence is capable (The Myth of Sisyphus 21).
Milton Loftis feels this longing and is baffled by the unreasonable silence of the world. But he is no absurd hero like Sisyphus because he lacks the strength to remain "awake" in the face of the absurdity of existence. He can only make occasional gestures against a life of chaos but is incapable of a sustained commitment.

Peyton however, achieves an awakening and she is faced with the choice of suicide or recovery. She has come to realise the futility of sex or alcohol as escape routes and weakened by her confrontation with the irrationality of the universe, decides to commit suicide. She longs for a smooth, clean world like the inside of the clock which she has bought recently and has come to worship.

I went back to the windowsill and got the clock. I cupped my palms around it, looking at the dots and the hands, which shone with a clear green light in the darkness: we have not been brought up right, I thought, peering down into the alarm hole: there in the sunny grotto we could coast among the bolts and springs and ordered ticking wheels riveted to peace forever. Harry would like to know: rubies he'd love and cherish, in that light they'd glow to the red hats of Breughel dancers. I could hear the serene and steady whir, held it closer to my ear for the ticking, an unfitful, accomplished harmony, perfect, ordered, whole". (LDD 328)

What Styron has portrayed here to quote Galloway "is not a picture of an absurd man but rather a group of absurd situations; absurd marriage, absurd love, absurd death, brought into conjunction only through the passage of time" (87).
The only figure in the novel who offers some hope for the future is Peyton's Jewish husband Harry Miller. Significantly he is an artist and he creates his most successful painting in the midst of Peyton's unfaithfulness and the news of the atomic destruction of Nagasaki.

He was painting an old man. In grays, deep blues, an ancient monk of a rabbi lined and weathered, lifting proud, tragic eyes toward heaven; behind him were the ruins of a city, shattered, devastated, crumbled piles of concrete and stone that glowed from some half-hidden, rusty light, like the earth's last warning dusk. It was a landscape dead and forlorn yet retentive of some glowing vagrant majesty, and against it the old man's eyes looked proudly upward, toward God, perhaps, or perhaps just the dying sun.

(LDD 357)

Peyton pleads with Harry for another chance as she watches him paint but Harry cannot understand the birds of guilt that torment Peyton. We are not given a complete picture of Harry but his speech to Peyton represents a major thematic climax:

There are a lot of things I'd like to talk about. Do you realize what the world's come to? Do you realize that the great American commonwealth just snuffed out one hundred thousand innocent lives this week? There was a time, you know, when I thought for some reason - maybe just to preserve your incomparable beauty - that I could spend my life catering to your needs, endure your suspicions and your mistrusts and all the rest, plus having to see
you get laid in a fit of pique I have other things to do. Remember that line you used to quote from the Bible, "How long Lord?" or something - "Remember how short my time is. I said "Yes", he said. "Well, that's the way I feel. With your help I used to think I could go a long way, but you didn't help me. Now I'm on it alone. I don't know what good it'll do anyone but me but I want to paint and paint because I think that some agony is upon us. Call me a disillusioned innocent, a renegade, Red or whatever, I want to crush in my hands all that agony and make beauty come out, because that's all that is left, and I don't have much time. (LDD 360)

Harry is almost heroic here. It is his affirmation of life. But he appears too infrequently in the novel to be a hero. Harry is the first of Styron's artists to hold out a ray of hope, for mankind. In Set This House on Fire and in Sophie's Choice Styron's artists would go on to take center stage. But in this first novel, Harry's offer of hope is too subdued, too fragile to overcome the despairing words which Milton and Helen have uttered.

At a deeper level, much of Peyton's guilt is traceable to an illicitly Oedipal relationship of father and daughter. "The Electra complex is narrated with such brilliant and intuitive and natural Freudian insights as to be completely non-Freudian (Geismar 242). Peyton's guilt slowly emerges and once she is fully conscious she is impelled to the final act by the guilt" past memory of dreaming". The devastating final reverie reveals all.
I pray but my prayer climbs up like a broken wisp of smoke: *Oh my Lord, I am dying*, is all I know, and oh my father, Oh my darling, longingly lonesomely, I fly into your arms! Peyton you must be proper nice girls don't. Peyton. Me? Myself all shattered, this lonely shell? Perhaps I shall rise at another time, though I lie down in darkness and have my light in ashes. I turn in the room, see them come across the tiles, dimly prancing, fluffing, up their..., .. I think: My Pooh flightless birds, have you suffered without soaring on this earth? Come then and fly ... I am dying, Bunny, dying. But you must be proper. I say, Oh pooh, Oh pooh. Must be proper. Oh most.. Powerful. *(LDD 368)*

The birds are indeed symbols of her sexual guilt. In death she is purged of the existential dross of experience. In a sense Peyton alone escapes the prison of self by embracing suicide. Pizer comments:

The basic nature of each of the major characters is fully revealed in specific scenes what can be called "Negative epiphany" scenes in which the self discovers in a moment of insight not the order and beauty and unity of life but rather the emptiness of existence and the isolation of the spirit *(117)*.

Peyton's monologue is a masterly piece of writing and we get the whole story as to the real cause of her suicide "in a single gossamer web of time, action and character" *(Geismar 240)*.
In this first novel we are given a bleak picture of the human situation. Nothingness is everywhere. Man continues to aspire despite inevitable frustration of human expectation. Religion, art, and alcohol all offer only the illusion of escape from despair. There is no redemption as such in Lie Down in Darkness. Styron’s vision is indeed dark here. Unnatural family relationships create nightmarish reality. There is the sense of the imminence of death and of the nothingness underlying all life. Each of the Loftises reaches out for understanding, for comfort but they fail to connect. The abyss yawns at their feet and while Helen and Milton continue to live death-in-life existences Peyton chooses to end it all with suicide. In this novel Styron presents a bleak despairing picture of the human condition. There is no room for hope. But this is in keeping with his vision at that point in time.

In his next novel The Long March Styron holds out hope for man in a Godless universe. Rebellow is the only effective means by which the individual can overcome oppressive systems. This is the recurrent theme in the rest of Styron’s fiction.