CHAPTER V

SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE:
THE ABYSS AND AFTER

William Styron’s second full length novel, Set This House On Fire (1960) shows a more overt use of the existentialist mode. The initial response to the novel was far from complementary but the passage of time has made critics see the novel in perspective and it is much better appreciated today. It is seen as a flawed work of art, the flaws arising from, to quote Robert Fossum, "Styron’s determination to grapple with profound moral issues and to express them in currently viable terms. And if the novel sometimes suffers from an over abundance of obtrusive literary contrivances - symbolic, journal entries, parallels to Don Giovanni, The Magic Flute and Oedipus at Colonus, movements back and forth in time - this too results from Styron’s effort to do full justice to the complexity of the issues" (26). Rubin is of the view that the critics turned rabidly on Styron because he had shattered their expectations of a second novel set in the southern mode (William Elliott 227).

However Styron himself regards the book as significant and his French critics agree totally. If Lie Down in Darkness was Hell, here Styron shows the world as purgatory. Man is the tormented creature who has to be burnt in the flames of experience before he achieves redemption. Despite the Christian implications of the story, no theological answers are offered. The nature and sources of evil are examined in existential humanistic terms. Existential agony pervades the novel.
The title from Donne, "Set This House on Fire" captures the magnitude of the theme and the massiveness of its landscape reminds us about Styron's diffidence in fulfilling the task ahead. For Styron, this is nothing less than the stagnation and regeneration of the spirit.

The novel portrays the world as fragmented and man as the tormented inhabitant of a home in which the struggle is to attain redemption. This is by no means an original theme. The Old Man and the Sea and Moby Dick explicate similar themes by the manipulation of symbol and myth. This has been a favourite theme with major literary artists throughout the century. Yet Styron has undertaken an enormous narrative, a twenty year time span, several major characters and a number of minor ones all of this firmly controlled by the techniques which during the past decade have been largely restricted by his contemporaries to tight narratives and nuances of relationships. The result is what we seek from a major literary artist; an adult work without mawkishness and possessed of stylistic force and technical elegance. (Fenton 472)

The appreciation of the novel falls into two categories. One set reads theological significance into the novel. The biblical and Christian have been widely commented on by eminent critics like Gunnar Urang and Lewis Lawson. They have seen the Christian pattern of salvation and the protagonist's movement through the several stages of despair to faith as
On the other hand, another set of critics state that no theological solutions are offered. Louis Rubin and David Galloway both see the novel as representing a humanistic ordering of the universe. Robert Gorham Davies wrote that it was "more or less existentialist" (44) and Ihab Hassan stated recently that it reminds us that existential fiction has become as indigenous to America as it is to Europe (7). Despite several such recognitions of the existential element not much in-depth study has been made of the elements.

The encompassing structure of the novel is that of a detective story. Peter Leverett is the narrator. The novel begins with his narrative and ends with a letter to him. The first part is narrated by Peter Leverett and the second by Cass Kinsolving. Peter describes himself as a Virginian-bred now living in New York and pursuing a decent but mediocre legal career. The novel revolves around the awesome events in an Italian village two years ago. Shortly after this, we find Peter and Cass in Charleston. Cass's present home, where they put together the full story of what happened in Sambuco. "Each is seeking much more than information, for each recognizes in the other a clue to his own past, and has in coming to terms with his own past some progress towards resolving the mysteries of his present self" (Via 129).

Peter and Cass share a mutual fascination for Mason Flagg, a charming, handsome playboy, sexually promiscuous, a pathological liar, demoniacal in his desire to own other people. Peter had known Mason since his school days, while Cass had made his acquaintance recently in Sambuco. The situation is the gruesome event of Mason's rape of Francesca, a peasant girl for whom Cass had nurtured a romantic attachment, and the village idiot's murder of the
same girl. Mistaking Mason to be the murderer, Cass had murdered him. But the general report was that Mason had killed the girl and shortly after committed suicide. Luigi, Cass's policeman-friend had concocted the story as a cover-up for Cass.

As Cass Kinsolving and Peter Leverett reminisce Cass gradually takes on a more important position and he becomes the center of interest. Cass clearly emerges as the protagonist especially in Part Two. He is a highly sensitive artist with a penchant for alcohol. When we first encounter him he is seen as a trapped soul, overcome by despair and guilt, the source of which is unknown. His is an existential guilt and as is usual with Styron's heroes, he evades confronting reality by taking to drink.

Cass Kinsolving is, of all Styron's characters, the most charged with life. Like the Loftises, he is seeking resurrection through self-destruction. He is sick of America and he describes it as ".... the land where the soul gets poisoned out of pure ugliness" (STHF 282), and also as "the land of the Pepsi-cola and the peanut brittle" (STHF 118). As usual with Styron it is the father figures who point the contrast between the age of tradition and the decadence of the modern age. According to him, America has become a nation of children in desperate need of tragedy, so that when they have "suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be new again" (STHF 15).

Kinsolving sets out to do just that. "A world war II veteran, married and living in Europe he has to go through the depths before he can come to sanity and creativity" (Rubin, William Elliott 228). The title from Donne captures the purgatorial nature of human experience. He sums it up
succinctly when he comments the novel is "an apocalyptic picture of the world as purgatory, of man as the tormented inhabitant of a fiery house in which he struggles to attain redemption and a glimpse of God" (26).

According to Jonathan Baumbach Set This House On Fire "attempts the improbable; the alchemical transformation of impotent life into tragic experience" (134). Styron's rage is that of an idealist faced with the corrupt nature of the world. For Styron, Man is Adam, repeatedly violating the terms of existence, falling further and further away from innocence. Cass is presented as a "neo-Dostoevskian hero who goes from the death of sin through the purgation of guilt and suffering to the potential resurrection of redemption" (Baumbach 134). The novel is a nightmare vision of man's life on earth. The picture of the suffering dog where a doctor tries in vain to put him out of his misery with a stick becomes Styron's metaphor for the human condition. The main idea behind the novel seems to be that "man must learn to endure the miseries of this century through a stoicism based upon innocence and simplicity" (Bryant 547).

Cass like the Loftises before him is bent upon self-destruction, and is also guilt-ridden and obsessed. He contemplates suicide several times. He drinks himself to numbness and destroys his own integrity by falling under the influence of Mason Flagg, the machine-man who stands for the empty materialism of a society. It is Cass who forms the dramatic center of this novel. Cass is forced to perform disgusting pantomimes by Mason Flagg before the movie crew for their amusement. Cass feels compelled to carry on his ridiculous acts though a part of him is aware of his degradation. He recalls his
first sexual encounter with a teenaged religious fanatic called Vernelle Satterfield who had referred to his orgasm as a loss of the "divine spirit". Cass later realises the significance of her description and takes it as a metaphor of his condition. He has been running all his life, running after something "which had indeed flowed on right out of me, and which to save my very life I knew I had to recapture" (STHF 278).

Cass had further complicated his life by marriage with a totally irresponsible, disorganized, devout Catholic. Finally he had surrendered to alcohol and Mason Flagg. He is totally dehumanised by the encounter but for the intense love he feels for an Italian peasant and his friendship with a semi-fascist policeman Luigi. Luigi is his mentor and serves to remind him of his responsibilities to himself as a man. Luigi tries to halt Cass' alcoholic annihilation:

I'm not a religious man..., and this you well know. However, I studied among the humanist philosophers - the Frenchman Montaigne, Croce, the Greek Plato, not to speak of course of Gabrielle D'Annunzio - and if there's one thing of the highest value I've discovered, it is simply this: that the primary moral sin is self-destruction - the wish for death which you so painfully and obviously manifest. I exclude madness of course. The single good is respect for the force of life. Have you not pictured to yourself the whole horrible vista of eternity ....? The absolute blackness... stretching out for ever and ever, the pit of darkness which you are hurling yourself into, the nothingness, the void, the oblivion?
Yet are you unable to see that although this in itself is awful, it is nothing to the moral sin you commit by willing yourself out of that life force ... (STHF 195-196)

This argument is very Sisyphian and reminds one of Camus' arguments against suicide and the negation of life. Cass has to go through the fires of purgatory before he can learn to endure. Through his fall he has to learn to live. Later on Cass sees "visions" which transform him into an absurd hero. His diary entries reveal his inner life. He is afraid of looking at the mirror for fear of the stranger he may see in it. Cass has a nightmare where he watches his other self committing suicide. He describes it thus: "Then wonder of wonders - he had withdrawn from himself. Standing aside, clammy and wet with horror, he saw his other self, naked now, step in to shower and, with the numb transfixed look of one already dead, turn on all the faucets full blast" (STHF 368). This dream of self-destruction significantly enough comes to him just before his meeting with Mason Flagg. Cass was later to realize that nightmares and dreams were an integral part of the awakening he was to experience. He is the man whose soul - or in the words of the title taken from Donne, whose house must be set on fire. Through suffering he must be born again, or at least find the way to a reconciliation between himself and the immutable conditions of existence.

Cass has visions which revolve around the existence of God. The irrational nature of life makes him doubt God's existence and he feels if God exists, then he is a malevolent author of human suffering. In his specific dream about the maimed dog which refuses to die, he identifies mankind with the dog
and God as "mercifully" trying to put man out of his misery. Ultimately, even God is helpless to save man from misery.

Lewis Lawson offers an interpretation of Cass' behaviour in the light of Kierkegaardian existentialism. Though very convincingly argued, Cass ultimately finds salvation but not on theistic terms. His belief in "Being" is affirmed but in humanistic terms. The despair that Cass goes through is reminiscent of Kierkegaard's analysis of it. "Despair", "Self loathing", "Selfishness", "Self", "Sick unto death" all suggest that Styron is portraying Cass whose soul goes through various stages of despair till he reaches the faith that saves him from madness. But this faith is not a belief in God as such but in the necessity for human beings to endure despite the misery and meaninglessness of existence.

The conflict between Mason Flagg and Cass is very vivid and eventually ends in the murder of Mason Flagg. But what makes Cass fascinating is not his conflict with Mason; rather it is the conflict with himself. He has the honesty to admit this to Peter Leverett when he says : "How can you ever know where blame lies? What part was Mason's and what part was mine and what part was God's ... It didn't start in either, if you really want to know, it started - a lot of it anyway - in my own heart, on the day I was born" (STHF 248). Cass takes responsibility for his own degradation. He believes that something supernatural forced him to go to Sambuco. Cass is convinced "the guilt is not his" [Mason's] (249). He traces the trouble with himself to his sojourn in Paris. The usual fleas of life were there - poor health, a large family, lack of money but the biggest evil was his own "condition at the time". Cass
explains "You know, you can't work without faith, and I was as faithless as an alley cat" (STHF 250). It was a dreary battle of "Kinsolving pitted against Kinsolving". Cass describes himself as a "regular puddle of self" and he had turned all his festering self-loathing against his wife Poppy and the children. In an alcoholic fog he chased them out into the streets and trapped in that "endless circle of self-loathing, venom and meanness", he experiences a moment of epiphany (STHF 255). Later he calls it mere "hallucination". Gazing at the Paris street from his window he feels "a bone-breaking moment of loveliness" (STHF 256). He goes on to describe it:

Ah! my God, how can I describe it. It wasn't just the scene, you see --- it was the sense, the bleeding essence of the thing. It was as if I had been given for an instant the capacity to understand not just beauty itself by its outward signs, but the other - the elsesness in beauty, this continuity of beauty in the scheme of all life which triumphs even to the point of taking in sordidness and shabiness and ugliness, which goes on and on and on, and of which this was only a moment, I guess, divinely crystallized.... And the strange thing was that it was in the midst of this, in the midst of a time when I was most wrapped up in self and squalor and meanness. I had a presentiment of selflessness. (STHF 257)

Cass experiences release from his own self for once and has an all embracing feeling of oneness with the life around him. It filled him with ecstasy. Cass was to realize, he admits to Leverett, that this moment of insight was associated in his mind with his encounter with Vernelle Satterfield. It was
I kind of euphoria when he felt that his present could all be transformed by such moments of vividness and beauty. He was later to realize that the whole thing was a fraud, "chemically induced" by drink and starvation. He is struck by the realization then that in life, "the higher you climb upward like that the harder you hit the ground when you fall" (STHF 267).

Cass admits that the root of all his problems has been himself. He was sick from "despair and self-loathing, greed and selfishness and spite" (STHF 264). He describes it as a "paralysis of the soul". Echoing Kierkegaard, he says, "I was very nearly sick unto death" (STHF 269). He diagnoses the key to his sickness as stemming from deprivation, "the deprivation was my own doing, because though I didn't know it then I had deprived myself of all belief in the good in myself. The good which is very close to God" (STHF 269-270). The only longing he had then was "to be shut up tightly - alone in the darkness of a tiny single room" (STHF 271). He retreats to infantilism and recreates the safety of the womb by covering himself up in a blanket and drifting off to sleep. In self-deprecation he calls himself "this newt, this hot caterpillar, wrapped up in a woolly slumber" (STHF 272).

His sleep is disturbed by another terrifying dream. In his dream he is betrayed by his uncle who had brought him up after his parents' death. He describes his feelings:

I can remember the feeling of despair I had, because for the life of me I couldn't figure out what my cure was, or anything about it, other than that I had done something unspeakably wicked -

ng rape or murder or kidnapping or treason, some
nameless and enormous crime -and that I had been sentenced not to death or to life but to this indefinite term which might be several hours or might be decades or centuries. (STHF 272-73)

This is followed by the next stage of despair when he tells Leverett he was led into the lethal chamber.

And then I woke up beneath the blanket half smothered and howling bloody murder with the vision in my brain of the dream's last awful horror which was my uncle, my kindly good old bald-headed uncle who'd reared me like a daddy, standing with a crucible of cyanide at the chamber door, grinning with the slack-lipped grin of Lucifer himself and black as a crow in his executioner's shroud. (STHF of 274)

Cass is thoroughly conscious now of the weight of anxiety suffocating him, pressing him down. The next step is when he wills not to be himself - suicide is this desire. "Then for the first time in my life, I guess, I honestly, assionately yearned to die ....." (STHF 274). But the dream which had pushed him to the edge also pushed him back from the abyss. He realises that there would be no oblivion after death but the very same penitentiary where he would be tormented by his unnameable crime. The thought of endless cycles of such a life in infinity prevents him from taking his own life at the moment. His fear is that the instant might turn into eternity.

But he still plans to kill his family and then take his own life. He thinks of himself as a man,
who had dreamed wild Manichean dreams, dreams that told him that God was not even a lie, but worse, that He was weaker even than the evil he created and allowed to reside in the soul of man, that God Himself was doomed and the landscape of heaven was not gold and singing but a space of terror which stretched in darkness from horizon to horizon. (STHF 275-76)

Cass decided then to gas his family to death - before killing himself. Just then the other half of his nightmare vision of water-spouts and storm and volcanoes manifests itself.

And I saw some southern land with olive trees and orange blossoms, and girls with merry black eyes, and parasols and the blue shining water... I could even smell it - this smell of perfume and pines and orange blossoms and girls, all mixed up in one sweet blissful fragrance of peace and repose and joy. And over all of it, somehow, vague and indistinct but possessing the whole scene: a girl's sweet voice calling, some southern Lorelei calling me and beckoning me on. (STHF 276-77)

He knew he had to recapture the divine spirit that he had lost. He decides to force this consciousness of despair from his mind and he embarks upon a regime which he was later to call his period of "dull reasonableness" (STHF 280). Cass is afraid of a recurrence of his despair when he and Poppy have to nurse the children through meningitis but they recover and he puts it down to Penicillin and she to God’s grace. Finally in Rome, Cass is able to maintain his balance for a period of seven months reading Sophocles, or
making entries in his journal or just sitting and pondering as to what was eating him. Then in March during Holy week, Poppy makes the mistake of bringing home an American couple, the McCabes. Cass's attempts at leading the conventional life ends here. He falls a victim to the McCabes' offer of whiskey and cards and ultimately ends up losing everything. Then he realises that they were a couple of "low-brow suburban sharpers". He caught McCabes cheating at cards, and calling him a "bottom - dealing swine" fell upon the horrified McCabes. All he could recall of the disastrous night was the screaming of Poppy and the children and of all the tenants there as he hauled McCabe into the night before he staggered out of the place. Cass wakes up to find himself naked in a filthy hotel room.

For long perplexing minutes he grappled with the question of how came he there, and when, and why; there was a terrifying instant when he could not recall his own name --- All identity had fled him and he lay there quietly breathing. Then after a time, by the slowest of stages, he regained his bearings; memory and reality came slipping back, as did his name, which he spelled out slowly to himself - K-i-n-s-...(STHF-309)

Now Cass moves on to another stage of despair where he wills to be himself. He screams, "Dio non esiste!" and again "Non ce'è Dio!" (STHF-311). "These screams mark his entry into the new state of despair" (Lawson 64). One thing he is sure of now is that he must head South again. He finally lands at Sambuco after a suicidal journey in pouring rain on his motorscooter.
At Sambuco, Cass runs into trouble again, but at the police station he meets two people who were to change his life - Luigi Migliore and Francesca Ricci. Struck by the beauty of the girl, Cass makes the humanistic gesture of paying for the articles she had stolen. Luigi is drawn to Cass precisely because of this gesture. In the conversation that follows, Cass recognises a kindred spirit. Luigi is a "fascist humanist", "a creative pessimist" filled with awe at the terror and mystery of existence. This friendship with Luigi was to have a significant impact on his life later.

Cass shifts to Sambuco with his family and his frequent trips to Tramsati provide his soul with the sustenance he needs. In this pastoral glade, he has an encounter with an old woman carrying fagots and sees a maimed dog writhing with pain. They form the seminal metaphors of the human condition. His familiar nightmare of volcanoes and gulfs is replaced by women carrying burdens and dogs being beaten. His mood is that of the terrible day in Paris when he was close to murder and suicide.

Luigi, like a good friend, remonstrates with him about his excessive drinking and Cass replies that Americans indulge in drinking "because Americans are so wealthy. They have to drink because drinking drowns their guilt over having more money than anybody in the world. My God, Luigi, let them have some pleasure" (345). His comment is ironic as Cass is well aware that he and Poppy are totally destitute. As if on cue, Cass again is an unwilling witness to a painful scene. A senile old woman with only a little girl to help her struggles to carry a heavy load of wood. Every time she tried to carry it, it kept falling down. Finally Cass saw her shouldering her heavy load
"stooped, mis-shapen of another century, she padded bare-soled beneath her tower of wood across the square, trailed by the child with legs like stems of flowers' (STHF 352).

This brings on his dreaded despair and he tries to lose himself in drink. The wine exacerbates his ulcer which he fondly names 'Leopold' and as Luigi tries to get him home, he suddenly recalls his dream of the night before where the peasant woman with fagots becomes the dog that is beaten. And suddenly he has a revelation of the meaning of it all. He says of God, "He who in His capricious error had created suffering mortal flesh which refused to die, even in its own extremity. Which suffered all the more because even He in His mighty belated compassion could not deliver His creatures from their living pain" (STHF 358). After this almost crazed admission to Luigi, Cass is bent on a course of self-destruction, but is saved almost miraculously. And just as he was recovering from certain death, Saverio, the village idiot walks up to him with Francesca. Luigi has arranged for her to work for Cass as a servant girl. Francesca comes to symbolize his vision of happiness. He later tells Leverett, "No, I found some kind of joy in her - you see - not just pleasure - this joy I felt I'd been seeking for all my life, and it was almost enough to preserve my sanity all by itself, Joy, you see - a kind of serenity and repose that I never really knew existed" (STHF 439-440). He also meets her ailing father Michele. Cass's efforts to help Michele get over the disease is the first step which breaks the prison of the self in Cass's quest for meaning.

By the orgy of self-reflections he indulges in, Cass had realized the heart of his problem: "Self, he thought. Merciful Christ. Self. If I don't find a way
out of it soon I'll be over the bleeding edge for sure" (STHF 361). Cass's sense of being two persons is clearly revealed in his journal entries: "At times I am actually scared to look into a mirror for fear of seeing some face there that I have never seen before" (STHF 361). He recalls Captain Slotkin, the psychiatrist who had tried to advice him that, "Self-destruction is the last refuge of the cowardly man" (STHF 362). He had cleverly countered with, "self-destruction is the triumph of a man whose back is to the wall, it is at least one cut above imperishable self-loathing" (STHF 362). But even as Cass said it, he had known Slotkin was right. Cass would always remember how Slotkin had said, "it is our birthright, no less than the Greeks to try to fire people into the condition of love" (STHF 361). Cass knows the only remedy for his condition is to reconcile himself to the Manichean division in himself.

Cass gradually realises that the dreams in which he had always been guilty of some enormous crime had always contained blacks: "Negroes in prison, negroes being gassed, me being gassed, negroes watching me while I was being gassed" (STHF 369). Finally the significance of it all comes back to him. Once as a boy, he had participated in an act of cruelty to a negro slave cropper, so for years he had been plagued by a guilty self-hatred. At his meeting with Mason Flagg, he had betrayed this guilt. As he later says:

And as I said these words and turned around, why so help me God that nightmare I'd had came crashing back like a wave and then those negroes and that ruined cabin so long ago and all of that, which seemed to be the symbol of the no-good bastard I'd been all my life, and I became absolutely twisted and wrenched
with a feeling I'd never before felt - guilt and homesickness and remorse and pity all combined and I felt the tears streaming idiotically down my cheeks. (STHF 398)

He is racked with remorse and feels that there is no forgiveness for one like him.

Cass is torn between his love for Francesca and his need for Mason for the liquor he supplies that helps Cass dull the edges of his despair. It is his visit to Michele's hut that is his first step towards his regeneration. The smell of a black slave cropper's cabin, the smell of poverty is everywhere around in the poor Italian peasant's hut. This provides Cass the opportunity to expiate his old guilt and he now becomes Flagg's slave totally in order to get the drugs to save consumptive Michele. Cass later comments on the paradox of his slavish relationship with Mason which had reduced him to nothing. He describes it thus: "It got so that with Mason I was as helpless as Romulus, sucking on the fat tit of a wolf" (STHF 402). Cass realises that by accepting that bottle of whiskey from Mason, he had succumbed to Mason. But what amazes him even more is how he had managed to get out of that debilitating relationship and salvage something from the wreckage.

The sight of Michele's disease-ridden body had roused a fierce drive upward and outward from his self that had begun to cut like flame through the boozy dreamland. He was now willing to dance to Mason's tunes not for himself but for another and this makes all the difference in the world. He agrees to paint an erotic picture for Mason in return for antibiotics necessary to cure Michele's consumption. Cass spends the day weaving tales about
Americans to buy up Michele's hopes for the future. He struggles to find "the good in myself that authentic and inviolable center which is very close to God" (STHF 270). Cass makes the crucial discovery that "hell is not giving" and this snaps him out of his obsession with self. The quest is for faith without which Cass knows a man cannot live.

Francesca acts as a regenerative force in Cass's life. Bryant makes the following observation:

The key to the question appears in the Italian peasant girl, Francesca. She teaches Cass about love and shows him that life has 'some vestige of meaning'. In a series of pastoral idylls, Cass and Francesca retire to the primitive innocence of the countryside while Cass paints the girl in the nude, the purity of which contrasts with the degeneracy of the pornography he does for Mason. (265)

Cass finds inspiration and faith in the gentleness and devotion with which Francesca attends to her father. This has its root in the character of the Italian peasant woman who accepts the inevitability of a world where heavy loads always fall and must be rehoisted. She stands for endurance and it is this that wakes Cass from his passive submission to despair and self-loathing. The old woman displays a force of life. From this point on Cass's concessions to Mason's demands are no longer made "out of spinelessness" or "whiskey greed and desolation of the spirit but at last out of necessity" (STHF 443). This is how Cass's own integrity begins to emerge and he is able to break out of the prison of self.
Cass's involvement with the Ricci family was to take him through violence that finally shakes him free from despair. Mason discovers that Cass's love for Francesca is a threat to his dominance over him. He decides to rape Francesca and thus pollute that ideal of purity and beauty. Cass in a fit of murderous rage kills Mason. The revenge was in excess of the crime actually committed. For all of Mason's evil, Cass is not without responsibility and finally he admits it. The real murderer was the half-wit Saverio, his crime was without Mason's malice, it was irrational. Jerry Bryant comments on the significance of the irrational in the novel:

Just so are fate and suffering irrational. Why loads fall and must be re-shouldered, why Michele suffered and died from disease, why peasants live in wretchedness, why the lovely Francesca was destroyed. These realities cannot be explained by the logic of our intellect. It is folly for men to become angry when such explanations cannot be discovered, as Cass did when he cried that God is dead, and when he sought to gain retribution for Francesca's death by killing Mason. (266)

Paradoxically, Cass "finds himself only after the murder of Mason. The rebellion against the inescapable pain and chaos of existence brings him close to Camus's Rebel, "Just this far and no farther". The faith that he discovers is not that here in this world,

madness might become reason and grief joy, and no yes. And even death itself death no longer, but a resurrection; but a faith that makes him realize death, consciousness and unconsciousness and
that to choose between them was simply to choose being, not for
the sake of being, or even the love of being, much less the desire
to be forever - but in the hope of being what I could be for a time.
This would be an ecstasy. (STHF 500-501)

It is up to man to give existence meaning and for Cass, endurance is all.
Suffering is a part of life. Bryant's comment sums up the existential thrust of
Cass's discovery: "Cass's hope lies in his faith in the possibilities of his own
being, not as commandments laid down by a rational and meaning-giving deity,
but as openings which he must choose by himself on the basis of no more valid
reasons than that it is he choosing" (267). The faith of Cass Kinsolving is the
affirmation of himself as a human being.

It is Luigi who ultimately points the way to salvation, when Cass
awakens to find himself in the police station with the idea that he ought to be
punished for Mason's murder. Luigi spreads the story that Mason had killed
the girl and then committed suicide. He takes steps to fabricate the evidence
and thus allows Cass to escape. Cass can no longer entomb himself in self-
recrimination. He admits, "And the notion of this awful and imminent liberty
was as frightening to me as that terror that must overcome people who dread
open spaces. Yearning for enclosure, for confinement, I was faced with nothing
but the vista of freedom like a wide and empty plain" (STHF 492). Panic-
stricken Cass rages against the reprieve granted by Luigi and it is then that
Luigi explains his philosophy of life thus:

... this existence itself is an imprisonment... we are serving our
sentences in solitary confinement, unable to speak. All of us once
we were at least able to talk with our Jailer, but now even he has
gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable
loss. Like that woman, we can only leave notes to Him - unread
notes, notes that mean nothing. I do not know why this has
happened, but it has happened, that is our condition. In the
meantime we do what we can. (STHF 497)

Luigi did not wish to let Cass wallow in his guilt but realized he would
find salvation if given the freedom to be himself. Endurance of his
un-nameable guilt all these years should have taught him how to enjoy the rest
of his life. "Consider the good in yourself! Consider hope! Consider Joy!"

Cass then decides to go back home to America, purged of his earlier
guilt, his anxiety and anguish - almost all of it - vanished forever. Cass is
indeed an embodiment of Styron's spiritual vision. His Manichean struggles
finally bring him to a phenomenal rise to grace and salvation, though, of
course, it is the things of this world that he is returned to.

Peter Leverett is a pivotal character in the novel. He is the voice of
Styron. His maturing vision grasps the significance of time --- both past and
present. "For if the past cannot be recaptured, nor the present returned to the
past, the lunar imagination must, like the artistic vision itself, try to reconcile
both phases of irredeemable life" (Morris and Malin 10). In one of his
reflections on the American experience, Peter observes:

Perhaps one of the reasons we Americans are exceptionally
nervous and driven is that our past is effaced almost before it is
made present: in our search for old avatars to contemplate, we find only ghosts, whispers, shadows: almost nothing remains for us to feel or see, or to absorb our longings --- estranged from myself and from my time, dwindling neither in the destroyed past nor in the fantastic and incomprehensible present, I knew that I must find the answer to at least several things before taking hold of myself. (STHF 18-19)

By refusing to be enslaved by the past in the present, Peter fuses the visions of Cass and Mason - and surpasses theirs.

In a self-revelatory statement Peter declares : "I am white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, Virginia bred, just past thirty, in good health, tolerable enough looking though possessing no romantic glint or cast, given to orderly habits, more than commonly inquisitive, and strongly sexed .... I am something of a square" (STHF 4). He represents one of the elements in the conflict of wills. The first half of the book is narrated by Peter and the second by Cass. We get different and complementary points of view on events which lead to the rape and murder of Francesca.

Peter recalls his encounter with Cass and Mason at Sambuco and he like Cass feels deeply that the mystery of happenings there can be cleared up only by meeting Cass and recalling the past and talking things over. Together they try to assemble what they know of Mason. Both realize their understanding of themselves depend on their understanding of Mason. Peter talks of his two years at school with him and a week at New York and that fatal day at Sambuco.
I don’t know how to explain him, I never have known. He was a jerk. A big spoiled baby with too much money and a lot of pretensions. He was the worlds’ worst liar. He hated women. He was a lousy mess and yet ... he was great fun to be with sometimes. He was entertaining as hell. You could see him for twenty four hours and he would reveal more about himself than most people do in a lifetime. (STHF 130-131)

Cass reflects on evil and the two theories concerning it. One he calls 'the Plague theory' where a boy who steals a nickel worth of candy is hanged for it. Evil here is considered as a plague which has to be stamped out - disease and the carrier - both at once. The other theory is where evil is considered a "temporal resident of the brain and even a vicious murderer is given a chance to make good by having him sent to a head doctor". Cass feels both theories are extreme and he hasn’t yet found the golden mean (STHF 128-129).

Peter somehow despite his fascination for Mason, is the only one not corrupted by him. He has a great deal of integrity and is only partially overcome by him. Prior to Sambuco, in New York, Peter had allowed Mason to take over all his nights and days and Mason had almost undermined Leverett’s honor. "If I suspected there was lust for a kind of ownership in these big gestures of Mason’s, I also realized with some shame that my willingness to be owned around was stronger than I ever wanted to admit" (STHF 149).

Peter Leverett looks upon Mason Flagg as a symbol of freedom, not tied down by the ordinary woes of society. The enchantment he feels is what an ordinary man feels for a millionaire. Nevertheless, Leverett is too normal and
square to be drawn into Mason's "full freedom". When faced with the orgy at New York, Peter beats a discreet retreat. He tries to understand the dual role that Mason plays of "daytime squire and night time nihilist" (STHF 158). He wonders how he can turn from his beautiful wife Celia to his mistress Carol.

Peter has a moment of revelation when he watches Cass playing the fool to Mason's orders. He pities Cass as he watches him parading like a clown degrading himself with every song and act until Peter can bear it no longer and is only beaten to it by Cripps who stops him from the ultimate humiliation. He realizes his narrow escape from Mason.

Violence and irrationality pervade Set This House on Fire everywhere. "The novel continuously penetrates the meretricious, physical, social and psychological facade with the senselessly violent irrationality it covers" (Pearce 25). This irrationality is seen in violence everywhere. Peter Leverett's Italian experience begins with a senseless surprise, ambush and accident. Peter smashes into Luciano di Lieto's motor scooter. Luciano has had a history of accidents from the age of twelve but like the proverbial cat, he has always risen phenomenally from near death. Like the good American that he is, Peter has been paying Luciano's hospital bills to assuage his conscience. He writes of another accident he had suffered after his release, when he fell down a flight of stairs and broke his collar bone. The Luciano story is a comic frame to the serious plot of the main story. As Pearce remarks:

Cass is haunted by expressions of violence that are not congruent with mental and physical surfaces. .... And beneath the surface that Americans have created to disguise life also lie the violence
of possessiveness expressed in Mason's manipulation of Cass, the violence of arrogance, expressed by the movie company taking over Sambuco, the violence of class division expressed in the life of the peasant woman with her mountain of fagots, the violence of laissez-faire individualism, expressed in the rape of Francesca, the violence of carelessness expressed by the bus driver running over the dog (34).

The experience of random violence is heightened by the dis-connectedness of events. Cass's dreams of being imprisoned and abandoned and threatened with gassing takes on a Kafkaesque quality. His dreams reinforce this quality of nightmare violence. But the ultimate manifestation of irrational violence is in the melodramatic scene enacted by Mason and Cass over Francesca.

But this comic Luciano has a tragic counterpart, the idiot Saverio. His murder of Francesca is another "surprise, ambush and accident". Saverio is last seen babbling happily and does not seem to have any knowledge or recollection of what he has done. The Cass-Mason story and the Leverett-Luciano line evoke the conditions of life.

Mason Flagg is the macho-man whose "slick, servile, unpenitently youthful, American arrogance makes him the symbol of a materialistic culture. Mason's auto-erotic coupling with the machine is seen by Cass as a fall from innocence associated with the mechanising arts and the urban experience. Just as Peyton's suicide coincides with the destructiveness of the atom bomb, Cass's realization of Mason's destructive nature is seen in the context of the radio
announcement about the more deadly bomb. "Madness! Madness! ... the guilt", reflects Cass. In Cass's mind we see Mason as the symbol of materialistic emptiness opposed to Francesca the symbol of pastoral simplicity. Both Peter and Cass know that Flagg represents much of what they want - sex, money, art. They can get all of it through Mason, "but they will be obtaining them in the wrong way and at the price of inner freedom. Mason stands before them as the constant temptation to misuse that freedom" (Urrang 55).

In Set This House on Fire there is a broadening of this sense of guilt and judgement. Much of the derogatory remarks made by Cass and Laugi about things American and the conversation between Peter and Cripps falls under this category. Peter's father's remarks encompasses social and political criticism couched in Biblical terms. At one point he says : "...At the age of seventy he (the common American) was an empty husk, saddled with a lot of ill-gotten lucre and a pile of guilt, terrified of death and laying down there in the sand at Miami Beach pitying himself. A husk son! .... Come judgment day, come judgment, the good Lord's going to take a look at this empty husk, and He's going to say 'How do you lay claim to salvation my friend?'" (STHF 16).

But the significant device by which Styron suffuses the texture of the novel with a sense of universal judgement is by his symbolic handling of Mason Flagg in his various relationships. Peter had known Mason earlier during their school days at St. Andrews, Virginia. "Mason burst like some debauched cheer in the midst of worship, confounding and fascinating us all" (STHF 73-74). Mason is seen as a perversion right from the start. A blasphemer, a liar, sexually corrupt, he had been expelled because he had
seduced "the weak minded daughter of a local oyster man, both of them clutching bottles of sacramental wine in the Chapel basement" (STHF 78)

Several years later, Peter saw him again in New York where he had made sex a kind of substitute religion. He calls sex "the last frontier" whereby "modern men can find full expression of their individuality". He had also developed the art of gaining control over persons. This need to dominate over others, to oppress them is what Styron considers as the worst of human evils.

The question arises as to who is Mason Flagg? A bad man or the symbol of wickedness itself? Styron makes Cass say of him: "It was as if he was hardly a man at all, but a creature from a different race who had taken on the disguise of a man..." For him there was no history, or if there was, it began on the day he was born. "Before that there was nothing and of that nothing sprang this creature, committed to nothingness" (STHF 446). It is as if he sees him as a symbol. After the murder of Francesca the investigation describes Mason as a devil and Peter replies, "Untrue. He was no devil". Then he adds "But I didn't know" (STHF 228). Uraz suggests that Styron makes Flagg a kind of Satan figure, an anti-Christ or beast of the Revelations.

But Styron also pictures him as a man at the mercy of his bad impulses. He tries to give psychological verisimilitude to the character. Mason's rape of Francesca is seen as his way of getting control over Cass, as he feels threatened by the love Cass and Francesca share. It is his way of getting control over the creatures dependent on him. He is pampered and spoilt by his mother from childhood and as Bryant points out very rightly he "uses his fortune to indulge his corrupt appetite for sex, machines and dominance."
Mason is a representation of an American society which is dehumanized and dehumanizing in its capitulations to technology and materialism" (264).

Mason sets out to degrade Cass right from his first encounter at Sambuco and in exchange for an endless supply of liquor he requests Cass to perform obscene clownish acts before his guests and corrupts his artistic integrity by having him obtain pornographic pictures. But for all of Mason's evil, Cass is not without responsibility. He has to find his own inviolable centre before he can break away from his degrading dependence on Mason Flagg.

Despite Styron's portrayal of the darker aspects of Mason his ultimate stand is that he with all his evil "crap" has an equal right to life as anyone else. Cass has to learn, in his confrontation with Mason, that ultimately it is he and not Mason who is responsible for his life. He has taken Mason's life and though symbolically it may be the triumph of good over evil, ethically it is a great wrong. Cass has to come to terms with his own crime before he can learn to live with dignity. He has to learn that "the life of evil is not the only reality but that the real aesthetic experience is found in creating art out of your life, that the only ecstasy is life itself" (33). He comes to realize that the very fires and fever that shake him are preferable to exile from whatever powers rule the universe.

Cass breaks out of his alcoholic haze and in the name of order and values murders Mason. But ironically this act becomes morally wrong because Cass comes to appreciate Mason's humanness. He recalls that moment when he had brought the stone down on Mason's head. Later Cass realizes the nature of his deed.
When you have killed (a man) you have removed a part of yourself forever.... would he have stayed a swine, unregenerate to the end? Or would he have become a better man ?... you have acted the role of God, you have raped him and condemned him. Only you remain shorn of all knowledge and with as much pain as if somehow you had been dismembered. It is a pain that will stay with you as long as you live. (STHF 446)

This is Cass's moment of recognition. He realizes his own behaviour, his own limitations, and accepts the obligations of his guilt. Later on he adds:

I knew that I had come to the end of the road and had found there nothing at all. There was nothing. What more proof did I need than that I had travelled half way around the earth in search of some kind of salvation and found it, only to have it shattered in my fingertips? What more proof did I need than that in the bargain I had slain a man wrongly, had taken a man's life for a crime he did not commit?. (STHF 489)

Despite this bitterness, Cass still feels the hunger for order in the universe and finally it is Luigi's act of compassion and his reminder of how Oedipus "became a penitent in life" that brings Cass back to his senses. Camus' remarks on Oedipus throw light on the change in Cass. Camus sees Oedipus as an example of the absurd man:

Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness
springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I could conclude that all is well", says Oedipus, and that remark is sacred. (The Myth of Sisyphus 90-91)

Camus says "Oedipus gives the recipe for absurd victory" and he adds, "ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism" (The Myth of Sisyphus 90). Cass has confronted the abyss and emerged from the experience a chastened man with the courage to endure. Although the choice of "Being" in the end has led critics to interpret it in Hellenic, Hebraic and Christian terms, the existential view is predominant. It is in humanistic terms that Cass finds salvation. In very tentative terms Cass assigns value to his experience but it is this tone that lends authenticity to it.

Styron wrestles with the questions of faith, freedom and responsibility. He tries to touch the core of Christianity in his analysis of sin and redemption through love. He explores the meaning of life in a meaningless universe and projects an existential view of man's condition in the world. The symbolic and episodic movements serve to emphasize the tragic view of life. Like Camus' Sisyphus, Styron's hero strives to find grounds for living his life.

Through violence Cass is thrown into a cataclysmic situation. His murder of Mason makes him an outsider. He is brought to the brink of the abyss and confronted with nothingness. Forced to a decision he comes down on the side of "Being". Cass's grieving over Francesca, Michele and Mason helps him to accept the finality of death. It brings him to a kind of stability. Purged