CHAPTER IV

DRAW NEAR IN FAITH: SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE

In speaking of his latest novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron has said, "I realized that all my work is predicated on revolt in one way or another." In *Set This House on Fire*, written after a long silence of nearly eight years, Styron continues his examination of the rebel figure, but with the marked difference that in this novel his tragic rebel moves definitely and logically towards redemption. If his rebel protagonists like Milton and Fayette end in a pitiful "nothing," and if Mannix must stay content with self-knowledge, Cass, the protagonist of *Set This House on Fire*, moves towards a kind of affirmation that is clearly Christian in texture and tone. The novel however, has received "mixed criticism," being either vastly overrated or roundly denounced.

Richard Foster, in a devastating article, calls it "an

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orgy of commerce." According to Foster, "the spirit of Hollywood looms and hovers over this absurd book like some Unholy Ghost, giving it its vast cineramic shape, its hectic vulgar supercoloration, its hollow belting loudness of tone and its ethos of commercial self-excitation." This is indeed a heavy indictment, and is representative of how numerous critics have received this novel.

Louis J. Rubin has tried to explain why the novel has elicited so much "bad criticism." Styron's first novel *Lie Down in Darkness* was praised largely because critics felt it had been written in the Southern tragic mode. "Styron should have produced in his second book, another 'typical' Southern tragedy. But he did not. He did not write the kind of book he was supposed to write at all. . . . And this, I think, caused a tremendous disappointment." Rubin, elsewhere goes on to say that the novel used none of the trappings of the Southern novel, that there were no Negroes, "no First Families going to seed, no church services, no blood-guilt of generations, no oversexed Southern matrons."
This is perhaps why critics have been unduly harsh in judging this novel.

There are others who have categorically underscored the good things in it. Arthur Mizener, for example, feels that Styron meant to fulfill his publisher’s promise “in the most ambitious and profound way,” to write “a major novel about contemporary America,” 6 Charles Fenton similarly suggests: “It is all here, all the ingredients of the American literary achievement and experiment of the past forty-five years, concealed into this single massive statement which will take its place with the other massive literary statements of our time. It is heartening and electrifying, a signal that the renaissance has been consolidated.” 7 Marc Hatner, while accounting for the large publicity the novel has received from various quarters suggests the following reasons:


The most perceptive criticism of the novel, however, has come from Styron’s French critics. Michel Butor, in his preface to the French translation of *Set This House on Fire* praised the novel highly while relating it to the Oedipus myth. Andre Bonnichon has similarly stressed its allegorical significance, while Jean Baudrillard has perceptively analysed the themes of guilt and responsibility, so dominant in the novel.

Some critics, especially in the reputed quarterlies, have tended to exaggerate what they interpret to be the "existential" element in the novel. Robert Gorham Davis, for example, has felt that the novel is "more or less existential." David Stevenson places it in "an existential world." Inhab Hassan asserts that this novel "reminds us that existential fiction has become as indigenous to America as it is to Europe."

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10 Andre Bonnichon, "William Styron et le Second Oedipe" *Études*, 13 (October 1968), 94-103.


study claims that "the existential frame of reference" of *The House on Fire* is more pervasive than the "psychological" element in *The Down in Darkness.*

Lewis Lawson has made a detailed analysis of the existentialist element in the novel with special reference to Kierkegaard’s *Sickness unto Death.* Lawson asserts that only when "Cass Kinsolving, the protagonist, is viewed as a Kierkegaardian man of despair does his life take on enough significance to justify its very full presentation." Another group of critics have felt that *The House on Fire* is a Christian tragedy with an inner core of meaning that is largely biblical. Hoy Arthur Swanson, for example, feels that this novel indicates a "proclivity towards religious instead of atheistic existentialism." More forcefully, Gunnar Urang asserts that "Cass's experience follows a pattern that is unmistakably Christian. For Cass does not merely 'choose being': instead, he is judged, forgiven, accepted and thereby restored to newness of life." Karl Halkoff

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similarly calls *Eat This House on Fire* a "purgatorial novel," which depicts the "fire of soul, entering and burning clean the human spirit." O'Connor suggests that Styron is not concerned so much with existentialism as with the larger issues of "social break down and universal disorder" and the "exploration of chaotic and ecstatic visions." II

*Eat This House on Fire* is largely southern in spirit although Styron has often emphasized his effort to "break away from all them magnolias." while analyzing just what makes a work of fiction "southern", Rubin has made some pointed observations:

... the so-called "southern quality" in modern American fiction is not at bottom a matter of subject matter or theme, so much as of attitude; it is a way of looking at the nature of human experience, and it includes the assumption that to maintain order and stability the individual must be part of a social community, yet that the ultimate authority that underlies his

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conduct is not social but moral. It is, in short, a religious attitude, though most often it does not involve the dogmas of revealed religion. This attitude, not the presence of the particular institutions and events that customarily embody the attitude, is what has enabled the work of the better Southern novelists to seem so "meaningful" in our time. It is precisely this attitude, too, that has made possible and believable the use of the full, unstinted high rhetorical mode that so marks much of the work of Faulkner, Warren, Wolfe, and others. We will not buy rhetoric unless we believe in the absolutes that justify it, and the Southern writers do believe in them. In many ways Styron's second novel represents a kind of examination into the soundness of such a view, ending in a confirmation. Cass Kinsolving's emotions and ideals are examined and tested in the furnace experience of Rasis and Sambuco, and are finally pronounced sound. Whereupon Cass may come home.22

Despite its very "cosmopolitan" atmosphere and its Italian setting, Styron's novel seems to be an extension of the Southern literary imagination, where he occupies himself as before, with the question and the means of exorcising the oppressiveness of guilt. Styron's role in this novel is frankly that of a moralist, and he is obviously overwhelmed with the enormity of his mission as indicated by the opening dedicatory remark:

"L'ambizione del mio compita non mi impidi di fare molto sbagli."

Jet This House on Fire is an apocalyptic picture of the world, representing men looked up in the fiery house of his own guilt, striving for release. Nathan A. Scott similarly suggests that this novel seems "move toward some large metaphor on the nature of man's dispeaoe and how his house, afire with agues and palsies . . . with fevers . . . and heavy apprehensions, may be put in order."23 The novel becomes a prescription "to contemporary men, from whose lives the graciously secure light of deity has been removed. we are advised to face up to the horror, darkness and mean­inglessness of an existence unrelieved by god and to light our way with the fires of our own suffering."24 Jet This House on Fire is structured as a "novel memoir" and deals with the question of personal quest and regeneration. Styron, however, deftly enlarges this search into a social attack on modern America.

Although the setting of the novel shifts between France, Italy, and Carolina, the background is unmistakably Southern. The introduction of the subject of Southern guilt and degeneracy through Peter and his father at the outset, is vitally important to our understanding of Cass Kinsolving,


Jtyron's tragic protagonist. The tragic guilt that Cass experiences is rooted in the South with its strong sense of morality and guilt. To bring into focus this sense of alienation, so characteristic of the South, Jtyron introduces an angry critic of its degeneracy in Peter's father for whom life is a "search for justice." Old Leverett who has "moved through dooms of love, through griefs of joy, in his lonely seeking," (p. 13) feels that the institution of slavery doomed the South to perpetual guilt:

"That's where they came in, in the year 1619. Right out there. It was one of the saddest days in the history of man, and I mean black or white. We're still paying for that day, and we'll be paying for it from here right on out. And there'll be blood shed, and tears." (p. 14)

Written against the backdrop of a guilt-ridden South, *This House on Fire* focusses on three Americans, Peter, Cass Kinsolving and Mason. We are first introduced to Peter, who functions as an observer-narrator, explicating Mason's past, and filling up the gaps in the narration. Through his love-hate relationship with Mason, he reveals that the debased American from the North has not changed much from the days of St. Andrews into whose pious precincts he had "burst like some debauched cheer in the midst of worship" (p. 73) "Mason represents the American bourgeois dream
come true. 25 Mason symbolizes the evil that Cass must
exorcise in order to free himself from guilt. Styron
presents him as a devil-surrogate:

> 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 out of that nothing sprang this
> creature, committed to nothingness.

(p. 446)

In contrast to Mason, Cass Kinsolving, the would-be painter,
is a man at war with himself. His spiritual regeneration
is the central focus of this novel. The novel opens with
Peter Beverett giving a description of the Italian village
of Dambuco where he had witnessed a few years ago some
awesome and shocking events. These events were a murder
and a rape which had ended, too, in the death of his friend
Mason Flagg. He had returned from this village desperately
stunned and was for quite some time in "a really rather bad
shape." He was being tormented by dreams of treachery and
betrayal. There was, especially, one particular dream
which had the "habit of coming back again and again" (p. 5).

One of them especially I remember; like most
fierce nightmares it had the habit of coming
back again and again. In this one I was in

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25 Marc Ratner, William Styron, p. 76.
a house somewhere, trying to sleep; it was
deep of night, wintry and storming. Suddenly
I heard a noise at the window, a sinister
sound, distinct from the tumult of the rain
and the wind. I looked outside and saw a
shadow—the figure of someone who moved, an
indistinct form, a prowler whose dark form
slunk toward me menacingly. Panicky, I
reached for the telephone, to call the
friend who lived nearby (my best, last,
dearest friend; nightmares deal in super-
lative and magnitudes); but, somehow, I
knew, was the only one dear enough, close
enough, to help me. But there was no answer
to all my frantic ringing. Then, putting
the phone down, I heard a tau-tau-tapping
at the window and turned to see—barely with
the malignity of a friend behind the
streaming glass—the baleful, murderous
face of that self-same friend . . .

(p. 5-6)

Peter, unable to figure out the riddle posed by this night-
mare, decides to visit Cass, one of the major participants
in the tragedy that had taken place in Jambuco. Revealing
those tragic incidents through the recollections of these
two, and through direct narration, Styron brings out the
spiritual significance of the events. The story, as it
unfolds itself during their conversation, runs like this:

Peter Leverett, a lawyer, has lived in Italy working for a
relief agency. Before returning to America, he decides to
visit his old schoolmate, Mason Flagg, the degenerate
millionaire. While driving to Jambuco, an exhausted Peter,
blinded by hunger and lack of sleep, smashes into the one-eyed
and accident-prone di Lieto. When shaken and tired he
finally reaches Jambuco, the secluded, apparently quiet pastoral village, he apprehends an underlayer of violent goings-on. A movie company, with its paraphernalia symbolizing "the age of the slob" is camped there to shoot an absurd movie. Everett also meets Cass and his family, and thus Cass insolving, the would-be painter and alcoholic, verging on the borderline of sanity and neurosis becomes the focal point of the action. Driven by an unhappy and chaotic past, Cass insolving has come to Jambuco to find a haven, a refuge. An unhappy childhood in Carolina, a long spell at the psychiatric ward of a naval hospital, and later marriage to the scatterbrained Roman Catholic Poppy, have contributed to his sense of alienation; and his visit to Jambuco is a search "inward" into the labyrinths of the self. Using whiskey as his crutch, as his substitute for an integrated self, Cass proceeds to annihilate himself in the most agonizing way possible. Mason Flagg, taking advantage of his dilapidated condition seeks to own him, and Cass willingly allows himself to be owned. He is forced to perform disgusting pantomimes and even paints pornographic pictures for Mason.

Luigi, the pseudo-Fascist policeman, and Francesca, the only 'real joy' he has ever known, vainly try to stop his alcoholic annihilation. Luigi exhorts him to recognize
"the good in himself". Cass’s life is devoid of any purpose, and he is completely enslaved by drink and self-hatred. His search for regeneration comes to fruition when he helps the Italian peasant Michele, a victim of rapidly advancing military tuberculosis. He realizes that "hell is not giving" (p. 453). However, when Mason rapes Francesca, the lethargic Cass is stirred to action. He seeks out and murders Flagg, crushing his skull, and hurling the body over the edge of the cliff. This act purges him, and he finally returns to Carolina, sobered and enlightened.

This novel, however, is not only concerned with the self-discovery and guilt exorcism of Cass kinsolving, but is also concerned with modern America’s need for regeneration. In a voice full of gloom like that of the blind firesias, Peter’s father, a Democrat of the old stamp, rages against this era of satiety and silence:

"These are miserable times. . . . They are miserable times. Empty times. Mediocre times. You can almost sniff the rot in the air. And what is more, they are going to get worse. Do you know that? Read Carlyle. Read Gibbon. Jet times like these when men go whoring off after false gods, and the fourth of fifth best is best, and newness and slickness and thrills are all—and what do you come to at last? Moral and spiritual anarchy, that’s what."

(p. 12)

The elder Leverett, Peter’s father, is Styron’s obvious prototype of the saint-prophet. All his life the elder
Leverett has searched for justice, and now vehemently pronounces that only when men have suffered "agony enough and grief they'll be men again." Peter's father rants against the transformations this land (the South) has undergone, and gives us a prescription for combating modern man's spiritual vacuity.

The myth embedded in most pictures of American life is that of a land offering a surfeit of opportunities—a "golden land." But in Styron's novel, America is the country where "the soul gets poisoned out of pure ugliness." Man in Styron's presentation of him in this novel, has not grown "in dignity or wisdom," but has grown only in "his gut and pocket book" (p. 16), contrary to the spirit of the noble dreams of the founding fathers. The common man in America, "spat on his negro (sic) brother and wore out his eyes looking at TV and fornicated with his best friend's wife at the country club," (p. 16). Leverett pronounces the curse that will ultimately seal the fate of this "empty husk."

"Come Judgment Day . . . come Judgment, the good Lord's going to take one look at this empty husk, and He's going to say, 'How do you lay claim to salvation, my friend?' Then he's going to holler him out the back door and he's going to holler after him: 'That's what you get, friend, for selling out to Mammon!'" (p. 16)
Styron therefore directs his social attack on a sick, modern-day America. A hillbilly song echoes the spiritual deadness of this land. "Wha-a-at's the matter with this world?" Styron tragically poses and answers his own question: "Your soul's on sinking sand, the end is drawing near: / That's what's the matter with this world. . . ."

(p. 121)

Cass, finally recognizing what had driven him away from his homeland in the first place, levels a heavy indictment:

"I suppose it's simply that our disease is more—pandemic now, which is why you see such a fantastic going to pot. Especially among Americans, I mean. The disease being . . . what? You tell me. A general wasting away of quality, a kind of sleazy common prostration of the human spirit."

(p. 116)

Luigi, the policeman who is well versed in Croce, Nietzsche, Bergson and the humanist philosophers, is aware of the hollowness of the entire American tradition. He tells Cass very eloquently:

"Some day the Russians will have the refrigerators and the bathrooms that you Americans have. But though it is repressed at the moment, the Russians have a fund of spirituality which you Americans have never developed. They will be educated people with refrigerators and bathrooms. You will be the ignorant people with refrigerators and bathrooms, and the educated people will triumph. Can it be?"

(p. 354)
Thus Jyron advocates a regeneration and restoration of values to a modern America which is lost in the quagmire of its own material development. In his heart the American worships not the true God, but the "almighty" dollar. It is against this perspective that old Leverett fiercely reiterates the need for tragedy in modern times. He feels that only when the tragic vision of life is restored can men become men again:

"What this country needs, . . . what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic, like what happened to Jericho or the cities of the plain--something terrible I mean, son, so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be men again, human beings, not a bunch of smug contented hogs rooting at the trough. Ciphers without mind or soul or heart."

(p. 15)

In much the same way, even Cass in his drunken stupor realizes that America is now ripe for tragedy, for the kind of catharsis and purgation that the tragic spirit alone can effect.

"Hold on! Let me tell you what we'll do. Together you and me we'll pull a Prometheus on 'em. We'll bring back tragedy to the land of the Pepsi-Cola and the peanut brittle and the Modes. Because that's what we'll do, by God! And we'll make the ignorant little buggers like it. No more popcorn, no more dreamboats, no more Donald Ducks, no more wet dreams in
the mesanine. tragedy, by jod, that's what we'll give 'em! something to stiffen their spines and firm up their joints and clean out their tiny little souls. what'll you have? alax? alacita? ingletra. lughedea? hop-boy!" once more his hand plunged into the neck of his t-shirt. "i would not be the murderer of my mother, and of thee too. sufficient is her blood. no, i will share thy fortune, live with thee, or with thee die! to argos i will lead thee . . ."

(pp. 118-19)

In spite of this rather obvious predilection for the tragic, some critics have denied that this novel has tragic possibilities. marc ratner has pointed out, for example, that "jet this house on fire is too hallucinatory and surreal in its violence and too ambiguous in its resolution to be tragic."26 jonathan baumbach is equally dubious about styron's achievement when he says that this novel "attempts the improbable: the alchemical transformation of impotent rage into tragic experience."27 but the same writer insists that cass is a "neo-stoicovkian hero who goes from the death of sin through the purgation of guilt and suffering to the potential resurrection of redemption."28 this progression from guilt, suffering to redemption does indeed

26 ratner, william styron, p. 73.
28 ibid., p. 134.
seem to be the archetypal pattern of tragedy. Junnar Urang makes a valid point when he claims that *Set This House on Fire* is a "story of potentially tragic involvements." Urang insists, quite rightly, that the novel's success as a tragedy depends upon our ability to identify with Cass: "we must be able to suffer with him the sense of being trapped by his history and his culture and of being threatened by the loss of all stable meaning."

The pattern of Cass's tragic involvement with life very nearly fits the one that is worked out by Karl Jaspers in his highly acclaimed book *Tragedy is not Enough*. In Chapter II of this book, Jaspers speaks of the basic characteristics of the tragic which may very profitably be applied to Cass.

In the first place, Jaspers asserts:

> A yearning for deliverance has always gone hand in hand with the knowledge of the tragic. When man encounters the hard fact of tragedy, he faces an inexorable limit. At this limit, he finds no guarantee of general salvation. Rather, it is in acting out his own personality, in realizing his self-hood even unto death, that he finds redemption and deliverance.

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30 Ibid., pp. 206-207.

Cats may be delivered and redeemed only after realizing
himself, after undergoing what Jung has called the 'Indivi-
duation process.'32 This process consists in the creative
evolution of man towards a fulfilled identity; it is a quest
for self-realization through which a human being becomes an
individual. In Ionesco's novels, not all characters complete
the cycle of self-realization. Milton and Helen, for example,
remain dwarfed and childish. Cass's life is dedicated to
achieve this psychological process. This involves for him
first of all the recognition of guilt and then the exorcism
of its oppressiveness. While discussing the problem of
guilt and its relevance to tragedy, Jaspers observes:

32 Violett Staub de Lassio, The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung
33 Karl Jaspers, Tragedy in Hot Enough, p. 52.

Tragedy becomes self-conscious by understand-
ing the fate of its characters as the
consequence of guilt, and as the inner working
out of guilt itself. Destruction is the
atonement of guilt.33

He further makes a distinction between two kinds of guilt:

we must therefore speak of guilt in the wider
sense of a guilt of human existence as such,
and of guilt in the narrower sense of responsi-
bility for any particular action. . . .

... A particular life is guilty through
its origin. True, I did not desire this world
nor any particular existence in it. But I am guilty against my will, simply because it is myself who have this origin. My descent from guilty ancestors causes my own guilt... 

... guilt in the narrower sense is found in any distinct action I carry out freely in the sense that it need not occur and could also occur differently.34 (italics mine.)

Cass must first acknowledge his guilt, both "inherited" and "personal." Cass's southern background, imbued with the guilt of generations, is made subservient to his guilt and sense of "responsibility" for a particular action—his destruction of the Negro Crawfoot's Cabin. In the latter case, his guilt consists in "personal arbitrariness consciously opposing the universal for no other reason than its own arbitrariness."35

Cass is able to exorcise guilt only through "destruction." It is only when he destroys Mason Flagg, the symbol of evil and degeneracy, that he can realize himself. At the end of the novel Cass becomes, to use the words of Jaspers, "the tragic hero—man heightened and intensified, ... fulfilling himself in goodness and canceling out his own identity in evil."36 This pattern, however, is

34Jaspers, *Tragedy in Not Enough*, pp. 53-55
36Ibid., p. 56.
incomplete unless it is connected with the religious and moral implications of this novel.

It is significant that Styron, while prescribing for a malaise that is typical of the twentieth century, has gone back for inspiration to the seventeenth century poet and divine, John Donne. The central theme of this novel is coloured with preoccupations with God, the individual's alienation from God, and his final return to faith. Like St. Augustine, Donne knew of man's weak moral nature; he was aware of the temptations surrounding human kind. The great subject of sin, especially, occupied him. His most celebrated theme was always God, His omnipotence, His mercy, His wrath, and His terrible justice. So real and vivid was his sense of God that to his religious mind, the deprivation of God's love was in itself hell, and no fires and tortures could add to that punishment.

Styron has taken the epigraph for his novel from Sermon LXVI, preached to the Earle of Carlile and his Company at Sion.\(^{37}\) In this impassioned sermon, Donne speaks of eternal damnation—"When all is said and done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God,

and the everlasting impossibility of returning to his presence." While comparing *This House on Fire* with Dante's *Inferno*, Baumbach has suggested that "ultimately, the novel is a symbolic pilgrimage into Hell in search of, of all things, the sight of God."38

Damnation is to be identified with loss of faith, "which consists in the loss of the sight and presence of God."39 It appears to be Styron’s intention that we interpret the protagonist’s experiences in the light of this sermon. In the background, Styron evokes "direful" and "combustible" visions to symbolize upheaval: Storms, direful thunders and volcanoes denote the angry visitations of the Lord:

> The sea was placid, held in momentary abeyance, but the sun had grown hotter still, hung in the sky fiery, huge and, like some dead weight, oppressively heavy and near. The bugger is exploding, Cass thought as he edged back into a shadowed place, it’s going to swell up and swallow us like a bunch of gnats in a flame. (p. 483)

Against this background, Cass ruminates sadly over his lack of faith. He complains of himself as a man who is no more

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38Baumbach, *The Landscape of Nightmare*, p. 135.

than "a stench and a rottenness in the Nostrils of Almighty God" (p. 78). In his journal, Cass makes this pathetic confession:

"Not to believe in some salvation, to have disbelief rolled over on top of one's head like an unremovable stone yet at times like this (soberly, calmly too) to see such splendour and glory writ across the heavens & upon the quiet sand and to see all certitude & sweetness in one's own flesh & seed scampering tireless & timeless on the shore, and then still not believe, is something that sickens me to my heart and center. . . . Meantime I just thirst and my thirst is like the thirst of a dying man who sees streams of cool water flowing down from the high Himalayas thousands & thousands & thousands of miles beyond his maddest dreams, I would sell my soul for one single drop of it."

(p. 294)

Although Cass belonged to a respectable Anglican family; and was married to a devout Roman Catholic, he had given up all pretensions to organized religion quite early in his life. Poppy his wife, in a demented moment of enlightenment once raved at him:

"May be," she said tearfully again, preparing to leave, "may be if you had some of that religion you'd be happier. May be you wouldn't drink so much and could work and wouldn't be in such a torment all the time!"

(p. 284)

This alienation from God torments him so much that all his life he tries to run away. Slotkin, the kindly
old navy brain doctor, once tells Cass just that—"You will be running all your life" (p. 314). While speaking of his experiences at Sambuco, Cass later tells PeterEverett, "You know you can't work without faith, and boy I was as faithless as an alley cat" (p. 260). In a penetrating study of this novel, Frederick J. Hoffman has suggested that "in this context, a lack of faith is like a lack of light and air, a secular 'dark night of the soul'." This lack of faith turns Cass into a kind of neurotic, a shriven, unbalanced individual, and stirs in him the desire to destroy himself completely. He is reminded of old Slotkin's words again:

"... self destruction is the last refuge of the cowardly man. And I remember saying somewhat self-pityingly—not at all, self destruction is the triumph of a man who's (sic) back is to the wall, it is at least one cut above imperishable self-loathing."

(p. 362)

But deep in his heart Cass realises that:

"A man cannot live without a focus... without some kind of faith if you want to call it that, I didn't have anymore faith than a tomcat. Nothing. Nothing!"

(p. 54)

The lack of faith reduces Cass to a state of hopeless despair and self-loathing.

"That was the trouble, see? When I was in Europe I didn't know anything at all. I was half a person, trapped by terror, trapped by booze, trapped by self. I was a regular ambulating biological disaster, a bag full of corruption held together by one single poisonous thought—and that was to destroy myself in the most agonizing way there was."  

(p. 54)

This despair alternates with feelings of euphoria at moments when Cass feels he has the answer to the mystery of the whole universe. But he realises that they are hallucinatory, brought about by booze and starvation:

"Anyway, as I say, the joy was on me, the joy and the calm. It was a real euphoria. And, God, how stupid I was not to realise that the whole thing was a fraud! That I was in real danger. That I was sick, really, sick from booze and abuse of the flesh and semi-starvation. That all this—this vision and insight was the purest hoecake, pleasant may be, pleasant as hell, really, but phony nonetheless, chemically induced, and no more permanent or real than—well, than a dream."

(p. 267)

The cause of this "schism" in his self, of his despair and sickness, can be traced back to his inverted sense of guilt. As he himself puts it, it was kinsolving pitted against kinsolving. Like his Virginian predecessors who suffered from inherited blood guilt, Cass, also a North Carolinian,
has his own list of guilts. These drive him to that despair which Kierkegaard terms "the sickness unto death." Cass is also oppressed with the fact that his debauchery and drink have been possible entirely because of his wife's money. He confesses this guilt to Peter: "You know, the old Anglo-Saxon hellfire which we just can't ever get rid of. I felt goddamn guilty over the lapse, and even guiltier, I reckon, over the fact... that the ten bucks or so that I'd paid to this floozy was actually Poppy's money," (p. 263). However, the main sources of Cass's guilt date back to two incidents in his early life. One was the loss of the "divine spirit," Cass's first encounter with a woman. Between the wars, Cass, aged seventeen, had been seduced by a puritanical nymphomaniac, Vernelle Satterfield. When Cass, young and inexperienced had finally come off against her soft white thigh, the girl had simply looked down and cried:

"Why, you pore silly. Look down there! Look what you done! Why the divine spirit just flowed right out of you." (p. 265)

Since then, Cass had realised the need to revive again the divine spirit in himself, and his later search, his personal quest was to find the image of God in himself. And, when finally he decides to move down South again, he is impelled by the same deep desire.
"... and I lay my head against her shoulder and I thought of the day before, and the long night, and even Vernelle Satterfield and what she said about the divine spirit, which had indeed flowed right on out of me, and which to save my very life I knew I had to recapture."

(p. 278)

Another incident contributing to Cass's overpowering burden of guilt relates to the time he had worked as an assistant in a radio shop. He remembers the day Lonnie, the sharptongued salesman had taken him along to retrieve a radio from the nigger Crowfoot, who had failed to pay for it. The radio was found concealed under the planked floor, after which Lonnie had destroyed the whole cabin, running amuck, half-erased by hatred amidst the pots and pans and furniture. This guilt, this great unforgivable crime in which he had so shamefully taken part, haunts Cass's dreams, recurring again and again to torment him.

"Ever since I'd been in Europe, about half of whatever nightmares I'd had—the ones I remembered anyway—had been tied up with negroes. Negroes in prison, negroes being gassed, me being gassed, negroes watching me while I was being gassed."

(p. 369)

Like Faulkner, Styron relates this experience to coincide with the whole Southern consciousness which is still stained with the guilt arising from its treatment of the Negro. Old Leverett, however, knows that America will have to pay for
the sins of treachery committed against the black man.

Talking to Peter, he says:

"Look out there son," he waved toward the sparkling water. "That's where they came in, in the year 1619. Right out there. It was one of the saddest days in the history of man, and I mean black or white. We're still paying for that day, and we'll be paying for it from here right on out. And there'll be blood shed, and tears."

(p. 14)

Cass's pervading sense of guilt nags him into a deep self-hatred. Even the Montparnasse tart exclaims sympathetically:

"Cass, tu es malade!" (p. 269) Cass later confesses to Peter:

"What I was really sick from was from despair and self-loathing and greed and selfishness and spite. I was sick with a paralysis of the soul, and with self, and with flabbiness. ... and I guess my sickness, if you really want to know, was the sickness of deprivation, and the deprivation was my own doing, because though I didn't know it then I had deprived myself of all belief in the good in myself, the good which is very close to God. That's the bleeding truth."

(p. 269-70)

The overburdening awareness of guilt reduces Cass to the prototypical hero in the modern novel—what Peter Arthelm terms the "confessional hero," the one who is

... afflicted and unbalanced, disillusioned and groping for meaning... He views his condition not with anger but with a deep internal pain; he rejects external rebellion in favor of self-laceration. His suffering originates not in the chaos of the world,
but in the chaos within the self, and for him the only possible order or value must be found in self-understanding.41

It is through just this self-laceration that Gass realizes and diagnoses his malaise, for which he then seeks a remedy. Before he can accept the good in himself, he must recognize and sympathise with the suffering around him. He apprehends the inexorable and all-pervasive presence of suffering all around him. Looking at the Italian landscape dismembered by poverty and disease, staring at the tragic tableau of the woman with the bundle of faggots which she vainly strives to carry, and recalling the vision of the wounded dog being beaten to death, Gass goes beyond his own self to the greater suffering beyond. In his dream about the wounded dog, Gass ruminates,

"And as in the depths of my dream I realized that this was only He who in His capricious error had created suffering mortal flesh which refused to die, even in its own extremity, which suffered all the more because even He in His mighty belated compassion could not deliver His creatures from their living pain."

(p. 358)

Sympathizing with the predicament of Michelet, who has finally abandoned God, gives Gass a spiritual foothold. He realizes

once more the truth of Slotkin's half-remembered words:

"Mozart gives, he thought, giving more in one sweet singing cry than all the politicians since Caesar. A child gives, a shell or a weed that looks like a flower. Michele will die because I have not given. which now explains a lot, Slotkin. Old father, old rabbi, hell is not giving . . . ."

(p. 463)

To expiate for his sinfulness Cass must alleviate Michele's pain and distress. It is significant that unconsciously Cass identifies Michele with the negro whose cabin he had so viciously torn apart. In helping Michele, Cass unconsciously seeks to exorcise his former guilt. Entering Michele's shack one day, he realises:

"Lord God, I know it as well as my own name. and then he had inhaled deeply, almost relishing the sour and repellent smell, then almost choking on it as he filled his lungs with the thick putrescent air, in a hungry effort to dislodge from memory that moment in years forgotten when he had smelled this evil smell before, when suddenly he knew, and thought: It is the smell of a black sharecropper's cabin in Sussex County, Virginia. It is the bleeding stink of wretchedness." (p. 416)

Having realised that to know himself, he must accept the suffering around him, Cass, drunk or sober, devotes himself to the care of Michele. It is at such times that
he grapples with the problem of good and evil. He is confronted with existential nothingness; but each time he strives to regain his sanity by helping Michele, he moves, closer to a condition of freedom:

Somewhere, he knew, there was light but like a shifting phantom it eluded him; voiceless, he strove to give voice to the cry which now, too late, awakening, he knew. "Rise up, Michele, rise up & walk!" He roared. And for the briefest space of time, between dark and light, he thought he saw the man, healed now, cured, staunch and upright, striding toward him. O rise up, Michele, my brother, rise!"

(p. 425)

Cass must close up the void, the schism, by recognizing the good in himself. He must allay his constant urge to flay himself in the most agonizing way for his past sins. He must realize like Jonne, the danger of remembering past sins, "the sinful remembrance of former sins, which is a dangerous rumination, and an unwholesome chewing of the cud." It is Luigi who in the most humane manner saves Cass from a lifetime of guilt. In anger, and in indignation, he finally persuades Cass to salvage the remnants of good in him. He relates to Cass the experiences that had made him a cynic, and which paradoxically enough, had governed

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42 Jonne, Jonne's Sermons, p. xxxiii.
his understanding of the world. During the war, a British bomber had killed his little brother outright. That was one time Luigi had given way to tears. Another incident which had moved him was the sight of a British spinster, cold and forbidding, who had finally committed suicide. Remembering these incidents, Luigi says that he had wept:

"... I wept out of my own understanding. And that understanding was that this existence is itself an imprisonment. Like that Englishwoman we are serving our sentences in solitary confinement, unable to speak. All of us. Once we were at least able to talk with our jailor, but now even he has gone away, leaving us alone with the knowledge of insufferable loss."

(p. 497)

Yet, Styron is not prepared to close on this despairing note. He insists on the possibility of redemption. Luigi, seeking to free Cass at last from his misplaced sense of guilt accuses him: "In occhi nell'avera tanto senso di colpe" (p. 490). Like the Creeks, Luigi is bent upon freeing Cass into the condition of love. Cass begins to understand what Slotkin had failed to get across before discharging him as "unscrewed" from the psychiatric ward:

"But whenever I think of him & maybe that's only because he was about the only person I ever felt I could talk to about what was eating me, I get an extraordinary feeling in my bones, & can recall as clear as the shining air that day when I quoted
that line from Oedipus that hit me so
between the eyes, ... yes we fail
often but it is our birthright no less than
the Greeks to try to free people into
the condition of love."
(p. 362)

Styron goes one step further and speaks about "The
foreswearing of God's love." Old Leverett speaks about the
tortures that will be inflicted on those denying God's love.
Luigi exhorts Cass to reconsider himself in the light of
God's love: "For the love of God, Cass" he says "Consider
the good in yourself! Consider hope! Consider joy!"
(p. 499)

It is symbolic that after this exhortation Luigi strikes
off the manacles shackling Cass, thus freeing him into a
guilt-free existence. Then, freed from the burden of guilt,
Cass the exile, returns cleansed to a sobered America. Cass
later confesses that he had come closer to redemption through
immeasurable suffering:

"Now I suppose I should tell you that
through some sort of suffering I had
reached grace, and how at that moment
I knew it, but this would not be true,
because at that moment I didn't really
know what I had reached or found. I
wish I could tell you that I had found
some belief, some rock, and that here
on this rock anything might prevail—
that here madness might become reason,
and grief joy, and no yes, and even
death itself death no longer, but a
resurrection."

(p. 500)
However, Cass does indicate that he could finally return to the land of the living and that this much "would suffice" (p. 501). Baumbach is quite right when he says that "though Cass achieves a kind of redemption through Mason's death, Styron avoids overstating the obvious allegorical parallels. As Mason is not quite Mephisto and Peter not quite the rock on which the new church is built, Cass is not quite Christ, though these parallels are suggested." It is only after achieving freedom through suffering that Cass is able to think of America. Freed into "Existence" he nostalgically recalls the land he had left behind:

"Then you know, something as I sat there—something about the dawn made me think of America and how the light would come up slowly over the eastern coast, ... I don't believe it was just because of this at all, but all of a sudden I realised that the anxiety and the anguish ... had passed. ... And suddenly I wanted more than anything in my life to go back there. And I knew I WOULD go." (pp. 499-500)

Later, back in America, settling down to life as a painter, Cass writes to Peter commenting on his present situation. He chooses the words of a heroic character to express himself: "who was it in Lear who said ripeness is all. I forget, but he was right" (p. 506). This pattern,

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43Baumbach, The Landscapes of Nightmare, p. 136.
Urang likens Cass's experience to the one that Eliot has described in his *Four Quartets*. The fire of torment, finally becomes the fire of *purification*:

*The only hope, or else despair,*
*Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—*
*To be redeemed from fire by fire.*

At the end of the novel, Peter the narrator, as if to symbolize the end of the maze—the answering of all questions, speaks of *Di Bierto*, who after a silence of many months makes an amazing recovery. The nursing sister writes to Peter, "*Luciano was in the profoundest slumber when, like the phoenix risen from the ashes of his own affliction, he sprang up . . .*" (p. 506). Luciano's resurrection is obviously meant to parallel Cass's spiritual awakening.

III

Cass's tragic catharsis has another and as yet wholly unexplored dimension—the dimension of mythic parallel. No

44 Urang, "The Voices of Tragedy in the Novels of William Styron," p. 197.

analysis of this tragic novel can be complete without an exploration of the mythic pattern, which parallels Cass's tragic experiences. In fact, Cass becomes a tragic figure when juxtaposed with other classical tragic figures such as Orestes and Oedipus.

Although in characterizing Cass, Styron is presenting a unique, particular character, it is also true that he is portraying a type—the prototype of the mythic hero. The experiences of the central figure, Cass, conform to those described in most mythic stories about the travels of the hero. In the novel itself, Styron stresses the need for myth. Peter Leverett ruminates:

"Perhaps one of the reasons we Americans are so 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."

(p. 18)

The central experience of Cass's journeying can be shown as corresponding with myths of the most diverse cultures. Mythology tells us of the "original" state of things—one of eternal bliss and happiness. In most myths, however, this Eden or never-never land exists only in memory. Thus, the elder Leverett speaks of those bygone times. The present is imbued with evil; and it is the task of the hero
to exorcise this evil. These are "miserable times," and the hero must find a way out.

In the second act, following the birth of the hero, most traditional mythologies represent the hero as having committed a crime. The hero transgresses against the normal order of things, and is thus tainted with a certain sinfulness. Cass Kinsolving transgresses against the Christian democratic values, when he abets Lonnie in violating and destroying the Negro Crawford's cabin. This act burdens him with guilt which he has to devote a lifetime to shake off. Cass is also accursed for his unconscious death-wish, for wallowing in his guilt, and for refusing to recognize and to acknowledge the good in himself. The consequence of his "crime" results in the expulsion of the hero from the land of his ancestors; and in his subsequent search for salvation. This leads to his mythic journey. Most mythologies concern themselves with the journey of the hero into forbidden lands. Driven by guilt, Cass leaves the land of his birth to travel to Europe. In mythology the reader is made aware that the wanderer will return victorious and purged. The homecoming of the hero, like the return of the prodigal son, is a welcome one, for it satisfies not only the personal quest of the hero, but it also reaffirms the social values of the group itself. Thus Cass returns,
purified of his neurosis, his spiritual values reaffirmed, to an America, which has symbolically achieved regeneration. At the end of the novel, America is the land which has been purged through tragedy, "through hellfire and brimstone."

More specifically, Styron refers to Greek myth, especially as embodied in two works by Sophocles and Euripides, to emphasize the mythic pattern of the experiences of Cass Kinsolving. Cass readily brings to mind two figures from classical Greek mythology—the Oedipus who figures in the play Oedipus at Colonus and the Orestes of Iphigenia in Tauris.

Although Styron does not use the entire plot of the Euripides play as a parallel to his novel, the themes of the two can be identified. Like the Greek play, the theme of Jet This House on Fire is that of expatriation and the return of the exile to his motherland. Like Iphigenia—who, lured away from Athens in youth spends long, oppressive years, unwillingly performing the holy rites at the altar of Artemis—Cass too, separated early from his homeland, travels to Jambuco, from where, after a long process of purgation, he is finally able to return home.

In so far as Orestes plays the role of an expatriate, he has distinct resemblances to Cass Kinsolving, who is driven out of the land of his forefathers by his guilt.
Urestes' guilt, that of matricide, is no more reprehensible or obnoxious, than the many-faceted guilt which burdens Cass. Accompanied by a faithful companion, Pylades, Urestes finally reaches the place where he can exorcise the tormenting pursuit of the Furies. He does this by carrying away the likeness of the goddess Artemis, and the trio—Pylades, Urestes and Iphigenia sail away to Athens which welcomes them. In so far as Urestes, haunted by the Furies, acts as one possessed, he is not unlike Cass, depraved and depersonalized as he is by the magnitude of his guilt. Like Cass, whose vision is distorted by whiskey and self-hatred, Urestes raves and rants at things which he "sees":

"Look, Pylades! O look at her! O look! There! There! Surely you see her now!—that Fiend From Hell! And on her head look at the snakes Their mouths wide open, writhing for my blood!"

Cass, like Urestes, experiences an "existential" predicament—the threat of nothingness. Cass confesses to Luigi his awareness of an excruciating feeling of nullity, of the sense of the total absence of "value" in the universe:

"And as I sat there, with the hunger growing and blossoming inside me, I knew that I had come to the end of the road and had found there

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nothing at all. There was nothing. There was a nullity in the universe so great as to encompass and drown the universe itself. The value of a man's life was nothing, and his destiny nothingness." (p. 489)

Orestes, harassed by the ever increasing fear of the Furies thirsting for his blood similarly confesses in a moment of dejection to Pylades:

Dreams, lies, lies, dreams—nothing but emptiness!
Even the gods, with all their name for wisdom, Have only dreams and lies and lose their course, Blinded, confused, and ignorant as we. 47

It is evident, as some of Styron's critics have pointed out, that by quoting from the Greek plays, and by making his hero a student of the Greeks, Styron is almost forcing the reader to see the undercurrent of resemblances between his novels and certain Greek plays. L. Hugh Moore in a comparative study of the use of Greek myth by two contemporary writers of the South, A. F. Warren and William Styron, argues: "Both novelists, then, have an ultimate social purpose for their use of Greek myth." 48 According to this critic, Styron, who unlike Warren, is "more concerned with the embodiment of these myths in Greek tragedy, uses them to

47 Puripades Iphigenia in Tauris, p. 367, lines 570-79.
underscore his large theme of the modern American need for the kind of self-awareness and catharsis that only tragedy can provide.  

That Styron has a strong faith in the relevance of the Greek achievements in social philosophy and the arts, is obvious. Slotkin tells Cass in no unmistakable terms:

"Read this when you're down and out. Something like: the fact of the matter is this, you know, we haven't advanced any farther than the Greeks, after all."

(p. 130)

That _jet this House on Fire_ not only recalls two powerful works of art from the past, but is also structured as a Greek tragedy is evident from the many indications which Styron himself gives to the reader. The protagonist speaks in a language very close to that of the Greeks in its use of metaphor. Referring to the crowd of movie makers, the hero loudly shouts, "_Exeunt omnes_, exit the whole lousy bunch of them" (p. 239). Windgasser, the very business-like hotel owner, is moved to exclaim, "_Quelle horreur_, he gasped ... 'Overpowering tragedy, my God, It's like the _Oresteia_, I tell you, but far worse!"" (pp. 219-20). David J. Galloway points out that the tragedy that takes place in Jambuso

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is first noticed by Peter Leverett "through a series of wailing cries similar to those which might be made by the chorus in a Greek play." Various other parallels have been pointed out. The introduction of the observer-chorus in the character of Peter Leverett, the ornate setting reminiscent of the Greek stage, all point to the structuring of the novel as a tragedy. Cass Kinsolving, both drunk or unbalanced, his two usual conditions, compares himself to the traditional Greek mask:

"As a real actor, Helypuzene and Thalia, the sweet goddesses for which—for whom, I should say—Old Uncle Kinsolving would die willingly."

(Alice A. Bensen in her lucid analysis of the methods for relating the universal to the particular in modern literature has pointed out, that *Jet This House on Fire*, like other powerful literary documents of its time, recalls an earlier work, *Odyssey at Columus*, to revitalize its theme and message. According to Bensen, "as Joyce conjures up the Odyssey, Thomas Mann, Kaust, and Faulkner the New Testament, so Styron does *Odyssey at Columus.*"

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the extremity of his distress, chooses to express his despair in the words of the blind and exiled Oedipus. Like the Greek king, Cass starts out on a self-imposed exile, accompanied by two faithful companions who lead him about. Styron's substitutes for Antigone and Ismene are obviously Fogg and their elder daughter Peggy. Cass sets out then, on a journey into the unknown, to find like Oedipus a haven, a refuge from despair:

"A resting place; after long years, in the last country, where I should find home among the sacred Furies: That there I might round out my bitter life; Conferring benefit on those who received me."

In fact, Cass fails to find regeneration in his native land. He must go to Italy before he can effect his tragic catharsis. Nathalia Wright has suggested that Italy has been used as a moral and physical backdrop for the self-discovery and regeneration of American characters, who "often acquire in Italy a sense of direction or a feeling of human brotherhood." Arthur Winner, in his essay "Adjustment, Tragic Humanism and Italy" has similarly


suggested that the "corrupting affluence" and "Romantic naivete" of Cass may be exorcised only in the Arcadian setting of Sambuco. What Cass longs for then, is a haven, a spiritual home, and his prayer echoes the plaintive cry of the blind Oedipus.

There are certain elements of monstrosity in both the old Oedipus and Cass. Wherever they go people shrink away from them. Thus in the Greek play, recalling Oedipus' grievous sins of parricide and incest, the chorus turns away in horror saying, "Ah! / His face is dreadful! / His voice is dreadful!"

Cass's first experience in Sambuco is almost identical. His drunken behaviour offends the inmates of the hotel, and he is thrown out with the words which echo those of the chorus—"Look at him! Who is he, filthy drunken beggar!" (p. 319). Cass is thus no less abhorred in the eyes of men. Yet the guilt of both these protagonists, carries with it a certain degree of innocence, which is finally showered with God's grace. Oedipus and Cass are both cursed and blessed.

Other resemblances in these two works are numerous. Thus while Cass is prefigured as Oedipus, Mason Flagg—the flamboyant, sex-obsessed embodiment of all that is deplorable

55 Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, p. 85, lines 140-41.
in America society—is cast in the role of Creon. Like Creon, Mason endeavours to possess Cass, and takes advantage of his decadent condition. Like Oedipus, who helplessly rages against the abduction of his daughters by Creon, Cass too feels outraged at Francesca's rape by Mason. The dialogue which takes place between Mason Flagg and Cass echoes the one in which the sweet-tongued Creon and the choleric and travel-weary Oedipus participate. Referring to Oedipus' obdurate ways, Creon asks:

Which of us do you consider is more injured by talk like this? You hurt only yourself. 56

Flagg similarly admonishes Cass against his drunken ravings. Again Oedipus, grieved at the abduction of his daughter by the crafty Creon, is moved to pronounce a deadly curse upon the latter:

Not! May the powers hear Not make me silent until I say this curse! You scoundrel, who have cruelly taken her who served my naked eyespits as their eyes! On you and yours forever may the sun God watcher of all the world, confer such days as I have had, and and such an age as mine! 57

56 Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, p. 115, lines 800-801.
57 Ibid., p. 120, lines 864-870.
Cass's feelings are the same upon hearing of Francesca's rape by Mason. He feels defiled as if he himself had been divested of all virtue and godness—as if he had been sullied and violated:

"By raping her, he raped the two of us. That night I felt he had committed some filthy unspeakable violation upon life itself."

Poppy's attitude towards Cass is not exactly that of a wife's. It is rather that of a daughter ministering lovingly to the needs of a sick, aged father. Like Antigone who suffers immeasurable discomforts during the wanderings with her father, Poppy is the faithful companion who willingly suffers life with Cass:

... Often in the wild
Forest going without shoes, and hungry,
Beaten by many rains, tired by the sun;
Yet she rejected the sweet life of home
So that her father should have sustenance. 58

Like her parallel Antigone, Poppy endures all the weaknesses of her errant husband.

Blind in more than one sense (not only spiritually, but blinded by drink, also physically) Cass, like Oedipus, complains of the sorrows of blindness. "How bitter blindness is!"59 the exiled king exclaims, while Cass confesses:

58 Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, p. 95, lines 346-352.
59 Ibid., p. 88, line 202.
So I traveled blindly down across the Continent, full of boose and blind as a bat, abusing my family and abusing myself—tittering on an edge between life and death that wasn't much thicker than a hair you might say... I was blinder than I ever was before or since. (p. 55)

Even Peter Leverett who comes to know Cass fairly intimately, especially during the tragedy at Sambuco, later agrees: "well,—yes, you Cass were blind all right" (p. 125).

Cass exhibits the same overt death-wish, the despair born of "sickness", experienced by Oedipus. Overtaxed by guilt, the blind king describes his state of mind to a sympathetic chorus:

My mind was a boiling caldron; nothing so sweet as death, death by stoning, could have been given me; yet no one there, would grant me that desire. It was only later, when my madness cooled and I had begun to think my rage excessive; My punishment too great for what I had done. 50

Similarly does Cass react to his having killed Mason Flagg. Accounting his experiences after the murder, he says:

"because when I woke up in the police station I had one single thought left in my mind, and that was that I should be punished for what I had done as swiftly as possible. That I should be taken away and clapped in irons and made to serve out the years in retribution for this monstrous thing I had done." (p. 490)

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60 Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, p. 99, lines 434-439.
Cass actually uses the exiled king's exact words to express the depths of his sorrow:

"For the long days lay up full many things nearer unto grief than joy." (p. 117)

The obsession with self-destruction, with the annihilation of self, is not exclusive to Cass. Oedipus prays for deliverance from oppressive existence:

Grant me then, goddesses passage from life at last,
And consummation, as the unearthly voice foretold;
Unless indeed I seem not worth your grace
Slave as I am to such unending pain
As no man had before.61

In more secular fashion, Cass echoes the self-same sentiments:

"Yes, I'll tell you how you can help old Cass," he said somberly. "Now I'll tell you my bleeding dark angel. Fetch him the machine, fetch him the wherewithal—a dagger, see, a dirk, well honed around the edges—and bring it here, and place it on his breastbone, and then with all your muscle drive it to the core. . . . No bullshit Fets. I've got a lust to be gone from this place. Make me up a nice potion, see? Make it up out of all these bitter-tasting, deadly things and pour it down my gullet. Ole Cass has had a hard day. He's gone the full stretch and his head aches and his legs are weary, and there's no more weeping in him. . . . These limbs are plumb wore out. Look at them,

61 Sophocles _Oedipus at Colonus_, p. 84, lines 103-107.
boy. Look how they shake and tremble! What was they made for, I ask you. To wrap lovely ladies about? To make monuments? To enfold within them all the beauty of the world? No, sir! They were made to destroy and now they are plumb wore out and my head aches, and I yearn for a long long spell of darkness."

(p. 238)

Oedipus at Colonus ends with the beautiful choral dialogue exhorting peace and supplication to the divine will:

"Now let the weeping cease;
Let no one mourn again
These things are in the hands of God." 62

Styron’s novel ends on a similar note of hope and faith.

Stet This House on Fire then, with its skilful use of myth, Christian symbolism, and the matrix of tragedy, points a way, unlike its predecessors, to redemption in the Biblical sense of the term. This kind of redemption, it will be seen, comes to its final flowering in The Confessions of Hat Turner.

In the meantime, Stet This House on Fire celebrates, in the most provocative manner, the victory of life over death.

62 Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus, p. 155, lines 1777-1779.
Behold, I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction.

Isaiah 48:10