CHAPTER V

JUKELY I CAME QUICKLY: THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

In Styron's ultimate vision of man, as developed in his latest novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* there is suffering, death, and peace bought at the cost of immense pain. There is in the end an almost Christ-like victory, affirming the belief that man will ultimately defeat the forces of destruction. Like his predecessor and preceptor, William Faulkner, Styron reaffirms in this novel his faith in man's ability to "prevail". The confessions of a Negro slave who rises up in rebellion against his white masters, "in the only carefully planned and effective slave revolt in American history," speak of this faith through the use of a poetics that is essentially Christian. Styron uses the powerful biblical rhetoric of the South to bring


2 The idea of a Christian "poetics" has been the subject of much debate, cf., Nathan A. Scott, Jr., ed., *The New Gramsci: Essays Toward a Christian Poetics* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964)
out this affirmation. The novel, it will be seen, moves towards a kind of affirmation which the earlier novels failed to emphasize.

_The Confessions of Nat Turner_ has called forth such a great variety of approaches and evaluations, that it is almost impossible to come to a final conclusion about the import of the novel through the welter of varied critical opinion. Critics have focussed on a single tool of analysis at a time; historians have aimed at scrutinizing Styron's historical facts (Styron has added to the confusion by calling his novel "a meditation on history"); sociologists have commented on Styron's presentation of the slave system, and religious commentators have stressed on Nat Turner's role as a black messiah or a Christian hero.

That the book has received tremendous applause from the white community cannot be denied. Alfred Kazin has called it "a wonderfully evocative portrait of a gifted, proud, long-suppressed human being." 3 C. Vann Woodward, writing in the _New Republic_, calls it "the most profound treatment of slavery in our literature." 4 Raymond Sokolov speaks of


it as "One of those novels that is an act of revelation to a whole society."5

The most vociferous comment, however, has come from the Blacks themselves. Ten black writers have responded with the feeling "that the distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate. The motive for this distortion could be William Styron's reaction to the racial climate that has prevailed in the United States in the last fifteen years. Nat Turner, a nineteenth century figure, seems to have been used to make a comment on a twentieth century situation."6 It has been alleged that Styron has been grossly guilty of historical falsification. In a well reasoned article entitled "A Note on the History," Herbert Aptheker speaks of "discrepancies between the realities of the Turner rebellion and Mr. Styron's renditions thereof" which are "numerous, often quite serious" and form, as Aptheker believes, "a pattern amounting to consequential distortion, a distortion widespread in the United States at the present time."7


Aptheker points out many historical discrepancies. The real Hat Turner, he tells us, was taught to read by his parents. In the novel, Styron would like us to believe that a benevolent master, Samuel Turner taught Hat to write to fulfil an "experiment". The historical Turner had a wife. Styron implies that Hat was a virgin, at best a homosexual tending towards impotency, racked by visions of white flesh. Vincent Harding has commented on Styron’s inability to "eat and digest the blackness, the fierce religious conviction, the power of the man," and further adds that "the whitened appropriation of our history by those who have neither eaten nor mourned goes on, tragic because it is not recognized for what it is: a total negation of our power and our truth."8 Styron has been accused of impinging upon the "cultural prerogatives as he has always encroached upon their political and moral prerogatives."9

The attitude of psychologists has been equally damaging. in a review published soon after the publication of the novel, Dr. Lloyd I. Delany warns readers that "these are the confessions of Styron, not Hat Turner, for there exist

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significant historical discrepancies, and goes on to say that the book's views regarding human nature contain "not only serious error, but subtly support certain stereotype views of the most ardent racists." In the face of this adverse critical opinion, two black writers have been overwhelmingly sympathetic towards Styron's motives in writing this novel about the Turner insurrection. Commenting on the book's relevance to the present day, James Baldwin has felt that perhaps Styron "has begun the common history: ours, black and white." Jimmie L. Franklin has denounced the black response to the novel which he feels had "a close correlation with the movement for black history." He feels that although the blacks "may willingly accept some fictional accounts about historical characters of their own race, they are quick to reject those which tend to sustain stereotypes which for years made them the mudsills of society." The white response to Styron's black critics has in turn tended to be rather defensive and voluble. Time and again, the whites have defended Styron's right to "take


13 Ibid., p. 1.
on the lineaments of a negro slave." Philip Hahv, in an impressive analysis of the novel asserts that "I think that only a white Southern writer could have brought it off. A Northerner would have been too much 'outside' the experience to manage it effectively; and a negro writer, because of a very complex anxiety not only personal but social and political, would have probably stacked the cards, producing in a mood of unnerving rage and indignation, a melodrama of saints and sinners."14

The novel, then, has had the dubious success of polarizing literary opinion along racial lines. Perhaps James Baldwin was being realistic when he said: "Bill's going to catch it from black and white. The book'll be called effrontery, but it isn't that. It's a very courageous attempt to fuse the two points of view, the master's and the slave's. In that sense the book is hopeful. It's important for the black reader to see what Bill is trying to do and to recognize its validity."15 Styron has spoken along the same lines in an interview with Yale Mag:

I think that my book will have its place as part of this consciousness that we all share,


black and white. Ralph Ellison’s next novel which has been a long time in preparation, shows a daring boldness on his part to penetrate into the white consciousness. Without such efforts, I visualize an America where we will not be able to exist, unless we exist together. I fully believe this, I don’t believe we can exist apart. The awareness of this, I think, will only come through literature which allows both black and white to courageously venture into each other’s consciousness. I think it’s a denial of humanity, of our mutual humanity, to assume that it is pretentious and arrogant and wrong for a white man to attempt to get into a black man’s skin.16

Styron had been preoccupied with the theme of the insurrection, ever since he decided to become a writer. In fact, it was the first novel he had wanted to write. But he was made to realize, especially by Hiram Haydn, his mentor and guide, that his attempt to understand and recreate Nat Turner required a kind of virtuosity he did not then possess. As a Southerner Styron has always been haunted by the evil of segregation:

a truth about Southern life which has been too often taken for granted, and which has therefore been overlooked or misinterpreted . . . the white man so often goes cranky, fanciful, freakish, loony, violent; how else respond to a paradox which requires, with the full majesty of law behind it, that he deny the very reality of a people whose multitude approaches and often exceeds his own. . . . But to break down

the old law, to come to know the Negro has become the moral imperative of every white Southerner.17

Styron suspects that his search for Nat Turner, his "private attempt as a novelist to re-create and bring alive that dim and prodigious black man, has been at least a partial fulfillment of this mandate."18

II

Following the technique used in The Down in Darkness, Styron has broken up the time of the story in The Confessions, and has then "disarranged the fragments."19 The reader is tempted to look for points of reference and to re-establish the chronology to himself. The novel begins with "Judgment Day," the day Nat is to receive a death sentence. From this situation in the present, Styron invokes many invasions into the past. Recurring memories are used in an attempt to recapture lost times, and it may be said that the novel, in this sense, is truly a "meditation." Turning back into the grim past, Nat's mind slowly focusses itself on "Visions, dreams, recollections," back to "Old Times Past" of his

17 William Styron, "This Quiet Just," Harper's, 230 (April 1965), 135-146.
18 Styron, "This Quiet Just," p. 138.
childhood. It travels through time to "Study War," the preparations for the insurrection, and finally ends on a positive note, "It is Done." The novel ends in time present with Nat's death.

The central tableau, which Styron time and again uses as a point of departure into the past, is of course the figure of Nat awaiting death. In fact what jogged Styron into beginning the novel was a reading of Camus' *L'Étranger*:

Then along about 1962, a couple of years after *Set This House on Fire* was published, I was up on Martha's Vineyard and I had just read for the first time Camus' *The Stranger*. It is a brilliant book, the best of Camus, and it impressed me enormously. There was something about the poignancy of the condemned man sitting in his jail cell on the day of his execution—the essential predicament of the man—that hit me. And so did the use of the first person, the book being told through the eye of the condemned. The effect of all this was so strong that I suddenly realized that my Nat Turner could be done the same way: that, like Camus, I would center the novel around a man facing his own death in a jail cell, which of course was true of Turner and how his life ended, and so there, suddenly provided, was the architecture of the book, its framework, along with the idea of telling the story in the first person.20

The novel has been written against the decadent and declining society of the Virginia tidewater. The land, ruined through a mindless cultivation of tobacco had caused the

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gradual breakup of many big plantations. Samuel Turner's voice is pathetically prophetic as he speaks of the wasteland Virginia was gradually turning into:

"Well, soon all of them will be gone—everything—not just the land now utterly consumed by that terrible weed, not just the wagons and the pigs and the oxen and the mules but the men too, the white men and the women and the black books—the billies and the Jims and the Shadrachs and the Todds—all gone south, leaving Virginia to the thorn bushes and the dandelions. And all this we see here will be gone too, and the mill wheel will crumble away and the wind will whistle at night through these deserted halls. Mark my word. It is coming soon."

(p. 220)

Robert Fossum has pointed out that the use of metaphorical descriptions of nineteenth century Virginia recalls "a technique common to Styron's earlier books. As Judge Cobb puts it, the state that was once the cradle of the nation is in his time rapidly becoming a wasteland, an empire converted into a breeding farm for the cotton kings of the deep south. This is the ruined land that produces Nat Turner."21 Like the elder Leverett in *Set This House on Fire*, Judge Cobb speaks of the blight caused by the coming of the Negro. Clutching a brandy bottle in one hand, in a half-demented, snarling fashion, Judge Cobb curses that damned

day the poor black man, wearing chains, was brought to America:

"Almighty God," he groaned, "this everlasting mortal ache! If a man live many years and rejoice in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they shall be many. O, God, my poor Virginia, blighted domain! . . . A wasteland! A plump and virginal principality, a cornucopia of riches the like of which the world has never seen, transformed within the space of a century to a withering, defeated hag! . . . Oh, Virginia, woe betide thee! woe, thrice woe, and ever damned in memory be the day when poor black men in chains first trod upon thy sacred strand!

(pp. 68-69)

against this backdrop of failing economic conditions amidst "the modest farms and even more modest homesteads," Nat is inspired to play his apocalyptic role.

In the first few pages of the book, Styron focusses on Nat in prison—a revolutionary who has failed, and who now awaits execution. As a rebel, Nat not only faces the criticism of society, but is also tormented by doubt, apprehending at last the chasm between himself and God which he vainly tries to close. His scheme had been fostered and inspired by the Lord, and at this moment, God seemed to have deserted him. His feelings, then, as he ruminates over the past are of utter despair, loneliness, and longing. A sense of the deepest and most crippling failure pervades him.
When what I done was wrong, Lord?
I said. And if what I done was wrong,
is there no redemption?

I raised my eyes upwards but there
was no answer, only the grey impermeable
sky and night falling fast over Jerusalem.

(p. 115)

Thus Styron presents the religious dilemma in which Nat finds himself—his utter desolation, and his desertion by God.

Whereas the first section of the novel presents this crisis, the second section, mellower in tone and execution, analyses the origins and development of Nat's religious fervour, and his determination to exterminate the whites. In this section Styron evocatively presents Nat's childhood on the idyllic plantation in Virginia—a world of peace, joy and belonging.

The next section shows Nat betrayed by Nat. He goes into the most severe and depressing kind of slavery. Nat gradually develops from an obedient slave into a leader of the most disastrous slave uprising in the history of the American negro. It is here that Nat sees himself as a prophet—as Elijah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel from the Old Testament. His imagination turns slowly apocalyptic as he moves towards the final execution of his plans. The last section, which depicts the actual rebellion and the slaying of numerous whites, rarely departs from the facts as shown in the original confessions. The despair that follows the insurrection ultimately leads Nat to a spiritual awakening that he
experiences in the most bitter moment of his defeat. The spirit of Margaret Whitehead, the one woman he ever loved, and the only person Nat was able to kill in the insurrection, comes hauntingly alive. Nat realizes the promise of the Revelation as the voice whispers: "Beloved, let us love one another" (p. 428). Nat "comes", finally symbolizing, like the Revelation, the coming of Jesus. The morning star is "fair and bright."

The **Confessions**, then, is an attempt to answer the question that Jay puts to Nat in the jail cell—"How come you started a calamity like you done. . . ? How could the darkies get organized . . . and carry out such a plan?" (p. 17) Styron effectively reveals the internal forces behind the Turner revolt through a perceptive study of Nat's character. In fact it is Nat's peculiar position in society—his alienation from the blacks on account of his education and his awareness of his own "niggerness"—that finally drives him to lead the insurrection. The causes of the revolt then, lie in the depths of the mind and personality of a single character—Nat.

From early childhood, Nat is made to feel by everyone around him that he is different from other Negroes. His mother adds strength to this feeling by making him believe that he is born to fulfill a great purpose. Besides, she
instills in him a sense of pride by telling him time and again about his father, a proud and rebellious soul, who had successfully managed to run away from bondage.

Oh yes, dat black man had pride, awright, warn't many black mens aroun' like him!

(p. 135)

Like his mother, Lou-ann, Nat too begins to feel that "Us house folks is quality" (p. 136). He thinks of the Negroes as a "lower order of people—a ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth" (p. 136). This contempt for his own kind is carefully satirised in the scene where Nat and Samuelurner, on their way home from Richmond, confront the Ryder Negroes being transported to Georgia. Raymond, the Negro in chains disdainfully looks at Nat, making him aware for the first time of his own blackness. This incident occurs directly after Samuel Turner has revealed his plans for liberating Nat. Styron deftly contrasts the promise made to Nat, and his inevitable blackness, which belies the promise:

Now moving again down the long line of Negroes, I was aware that the Jews-harp had stopped playing; we came by the place where Raymond sat in his chains and I heard him call to me as we trotted past—the voice sweet and slow, high-pitched, not unkind, as ever knowing and prophetic and profound: 'Yo' shit stink too, sugah. Yo' ass black jes' like mine, honey chile.'

(p. 201)
In the meantime, however, the "smart little tar baby" is busy absorbing the life style of the whites:

So near to the white people, I absorb their language daily. I am a tireless eavesdropper, and their talk and comment, even their style of laughter, vibrates endlessly in my imagination. Already my mother teases me for the way I parrot white folk's talk—teases me with pride. Wash is molded by different sounds—even now I am aware of this—nigger voices striving clumsily to grapple with a language never taught, never really learned, still alien and unknown.

(p. 141-42)

As the Turner family carry on with their little experiment in training the little nigger, Nat slowly takes on the lineaments of a white Christian. He is admonished—"No more darky talk" (p. 157). As he learns to quote from the Bible, it becomes clear to Nat that there is a vast contradiction between God's vision of man and the lot of the slaves. Thus Nat learns:

what is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? ... for thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

(p. 157)

The black man in slavery belies the notion of man as "little lower" only to the angels. Nat's belief in the white man's moral superiority slowly erodes, till he comes to a gradual contempt of the white man's religion. Miss immeline's nocturnal sexual escapade with her cousin Lewis, to which Nat
is an unwilling witness, shocks his sensibility, leaving his
spirits a "shambles from chagrin and shock and fear" (p. 181).

It was not the loud whisper of her voice
that shocked me so much—though I instantly
distinguished it—but the Lord's name in
her mouth, uttered in a frenzy, the first time
in my life I had heard blasphemy on a woman's
tongue. And so astonished was I by the words
that as I stood there rooted in the dark it
did not just then occur to me to consider the
event which occasioned them, and I thought she
was in some great and nameless peril: "Oh mercy
... Oh God ... oh Jesus ... "wait! ... oh
Jesus ... now wait! ... quick ... put it
back ... now then ... slowly ... oh Jesus
Christ ... slowly! ... wait!

A man's soft groan from the lawn behind the
hedge now made me aware of the other presence,
and I remained half-paralysed, fascinated yet
suddenly sick nearly unto death at the sound of
the Saviour's name spoken thus, as if he had
been stripped shamelessly naked by the hot
urgency of her lips. "Wait, wait!" she again
implored, and a gentle sigh came from the man's
throat, and once more she continued her rhythmic
whispering, "Oh mercy ... mercy ... wait
now, slowly! ... Oh Jesus ... Oh Christ ... .
Oh Christ ... oh yes, now! Oh mercy ... .
mercy ... mercy ...

(p. 181)

The realization that he can never identify with the
whites leads Nat to a complete alienation; and this estrange-
ment from everything around him gives rise to a deep sense
of anguish in him. On one level, Nat's alienation may be
viewed "as a protest against the negation of integral man,"22

22 Edward H. Arskian, Sociology and Existentialism
and on another as an estrangement of his individual self from the oppressive social system. Thus Nat experiences that "invisibility" so wonderfully dramatised by Ralph Ellison, about the negro in our own times. Styron's underlying metaphor while depicting Nat's character is the "invisibility of Nat," forsaken by black and white alike. Nat desperately gropes for an identity; but the traumatic experiences he undergoes at the Rev. Epps' and later as a slave in the Moore homestead, impair his very capacity for achieving an integrated personality and self-definition. What Nat protests against is not the suppression of his negro personality but the restriction of it in such a way as to make it virtually impossible for him to participate in social processes with any degree of self-respect. The feeling of anger and resentment which mark Nat's outburst against white domination is traceable to an unresolved identity crisis. Styron insists on the importance of human love as a prime condition of meaningful human relationships; and Nat is denied this love. Thus, the insurrection is at the very least, a gesture which is meant to help Nat overcome his unbearable sense of alienation and lost identity.

Later, as Nat comes closer to Mark, he begins to identify himself with his people. However, as he realizes that Negroes, like the fly, are God's supreme outcasts unable ever to make an existential choice, he finds it difficult to identify
himself with the negro mind. This helplessness finally 
motivates him to strive for their upliftment.

In many ways, I thought, a fly must be one of the most fortunate of God's creatures. Brainless born, brainlessly seeking its sustenance from anything wet and warm, it found its brainless mate, reproduced, and died brainless, unacquainted with misery or grief. But then I asked myself: How could I be sure? Who could say that flies were not instead God's supreme outcasts, buzzing eternally between heaven and oblivion in a pure agony of mindless twitching, forced by instinct to dine off sweat and slime and offal, their very brainlessness an everlasting torment? So that even if someone, well-meaning but mistaken, wished himself out of human misery and into a fly's estate, he would only find himself in a more monstrous hell than he had ever imagined—an existence in which there was no act of will, no choice, but a blind and automatic obedience to instinct which caused him to feast endlessly and glutonously and revoltingly upon the guts of a rotting fox or a bucket of prisoner's slops. Surely then, that would be the ultimate damnation: to exist in the world of a fly, eating thus, without will or choice and against all desire.

(p. 26)

The fly, here, symbolizes the prototypical negro slave—living in a damned, mindless state, impervious to humiliation, to repression, and even to sexual assault by the whites. The traumatic experience of having witnessed his mother being raped by the white overseer Scouride, and her subsequent, urgent and willing, acquiescence had completed Nat's contempt for both black and white alike. What had shocked him most then, was the attitude of his mother, who a few minutes after
the rape, had sung in a lonesome and gentle voice, totally unaffected by the brutality of McBride.

"For Jesus came and look de do
an' carry the keys away . . ."

(p. 150)

The song is typical of Negro spirituals of the time, and gives us an insight into the philosophy of the Negro mind, of the Negro attitude towards Joe, and the people around him—an attitude that Nat, transformed as he is by his white Christian education, can never share.

The southern Negro of Nat's time invariably believed that Joe is omnipotent, that he is also revengeful, and that he fights the battles of his Chosen people; the Chosen people being the downtrodden Negroes. These ideas, perhaps, enabled the Negro to endure pain, hardship, unending cruelty, and humiliation. J.W. Johnson makes a similar point when he speaks of Negro spirituals:

At the psychic moment there was at hand the precise religion for the condition in which he (the Negro) found himself thrust. Far from his native land and custom, despised by those among whom he lived, experiencing the pang of the separation of loved ones on the auction block, knowing the hard taskmaster feeling the lash, the Negro seized Christianity, the religion of compensations in the life to come for the ills suffered in the present existence, the religion which implied the hope that in the next world there would be a reversal of conditions of rich man and poor man, of proud and meek, of master and slave. The result was a body of songs
voicing all the cardinal virtues of Christianity, patience—forbearance—love—faith—and hope. . . . It is not possible to estimate the sustaining influence that the story of the trials and tribulations of the Jews as related in the Old Testament exerted upon the Negro. This story at once caught and fired the imagination of Negro bards, and they sang, sang their hungry listeners into a firm faith that as God saved Daniel in the Lion’s Den, so would He save them, as God preserved the Hebrew children in the Fiery Furnace, so would He preserve them, as God delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt, so would He deliver them.23

Nat’s religion, however, is far removed from the compensatory kind of religion shared by other Negroes of his time. Nat, with his superior education, realizes that it is futile to look to Heaven to a life hereafter to right the wrongs suffered by his race. This realization finally persuades him to identify himself with the role of a Messiah, a liberator, destined to free his people from the yoke of oppression. There is then, no doubt that the wellsprings of Nat’s revolt were largely religious. “His actual dream was two-pronged in a sense—one apocalyptic, that he was divinely ordained to destroy all the white people he could lay hands on because they were evil; the other, the practical one, that he would capture the armory in the county seat, Jerusalem, and outfitted with weapons march the thirty miles

or so to the dismal swamp, where he would set up an empire, an enclave, and live there out of sight of the detested white people."  

In a review published in *The Yale Literary Magazine* soon after the publication of the novel, it was suggested that there was a similarity between the Nat Turner revolt and Malcolm X and his involvement with the Black Muslims; and that both Nat Turner and Malcolm X were attempting to find some religious foundation for their rebellious impulses. Styron's response to this suggested similarity is conclusive. He feels that "there is a continuity involving Nat Turner and Martin Luther King!" Turner's plan, as one interviewer has suggested, was "not unlike Elijah Muhammad's plan for a separate state for Negroes." In a similar vein, Sheed has affirmed that "Nat Turner may have been the first of the great Negro preacher-reformers, a line that has fanned out since in such different directions as Martin Luther King, Adam Clayton Powell and James Baldwin." The Turner incident has perhaps become part of that slender store of black myth

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that today's Black militants could fall back on. Sheed makes a valid point when he says that Nat Turner "gave the Negro a legend which has not yet lost its potency. Turner was for instance a big influence on Marcus Garvey, the daddy of the Black Nationalist movement. Garvey's disciples include Malcolm X's father. And so on through how many bloodlines to today's Negro leaders."28 "Black Power," although a twentieth century phenomenon, obviously has roots in the not-so-recent past of Negro slavery.

Christianity, which was originally forced upon the slaves later became an indispensable and integral part of the Negro's existence. In the Confessions of Nat Turner, Christianity as preached by the whites is symbolized by whitehead, yale and watered down like its preacher.

If therefore you would be God's free men in paradise, you must strive to be good, and serve him here on earth. Your bodies, you know, are not your own; they are at the disposal of those you belong to, but your precious souls are still your own, which nothing can take from you if it is not your own fault. Figure well then that if you lose your souls by leading idle, wicked lives here, you have gained nothing by it in this world and you have lost your all in the next. For your idleness and wickedness are generally found out and your bodies suffer for it here, and what is far worse, if you do not repent and alter your ways, your unhappy souls will suffer for it hereafter. . . .

(p. 97)

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what Nat Turner wants to achieve through his insurrection is not only the establishment of a separate state for Negroes, but also the rejection of a type of Christianity essentially White, and hence detrimental to the welfare of the Blacks.

The rejection of the Son of God represented as a white man—born of a white mother, and sent down to earth also by a God imagined as white—is quite clearly apparent in the novel.

Because Christianity, a religion imbibed and ingrained through years of preaching and indoctrination could never be given up, the black man would find ways to alter the image of whiteness as synonymous with good, or as "denoting purity". This is, perhaps, the spirit behind most new black faiths, which have been mushrooming all over the United States in the present century.

Dr. Albert Cleage, in a recent study entitled the *The Black Messiah*, says that as early as the nineteenth century Bishop Henry M. Turner asserted "God is a Negro!"

In the early twentieth century, of course, this movement has taken a tangible form with the organization of a Black Church, with a "Black God, a black Jesus, a black Madonna and black angels."29 In the introduction to his book, *The Black Messiah*, Dr. Cleage asserts that

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For nearly 500 years the illusion that Jesus was white dominated the world only because white Europeans dominated the world. Now, with the emergence of the nationalist movements of the world's coloured majority, the historic truth is finally beginning to emerge—that Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation.

Dr. Cleage makes some pointed observations based on Biblical myth to validate his thesis. The main points of his argument are that the Egyptians, among whom the Israelis lived in slavery, were non-white. Moses, who was half-Jewish and half-Aegyptian, was also obviously non-white. Freed from Egyptian bondage, the Israelis later wandered even into Africa, and therefore, the nation of Israel in the biblical days was unquestionably black. Jesus too, therefore, was no more than a revolutionary black leader, with the avowed aim of leading a Black nation to freedom.

It is interesting to note that Nat Turner, unconsciously perhaps, is subscribing to a similar view when he invokes tales of people in bondage while preaching to his black audience.

"My brothers," I said in a gentler tone, "many of you has been to church with yo' mistahs and mist'esses at the Whitehead church or up Jilich way or down at Hebo or Mount Moriah. Most of you hasn't got no religion. That's awright. White man's religion don't teach

nothin' to black folk except to obey ole mastah and live humble—walk light and talk small. That's awright. But then of you that recollects they Bible teachin' knows about Israel in Egypt an' the peoples that was kept in bondage. They people was Jewish peoples an' they had names just like us black folk—like you right there, Nathan, an' you, Joe—Joe is a Jewish name—an' you there, Daniel. Them Jews was just like the black folk. They had to sweat they foolasses off fo' ole Pharaoh. What white man had them Jews haulin' wood an' pullin' rock and thrashin' corn an' makin' bricks until they was near 'bout dead an' didn't git any penny for none of it neither, like ev'y livin' mothah's son of us, them Jews was in bondage. They didn't have enough to eat neither, just some miserable cornmeal with weevils in it an' sour milk an' a little fatback that done got so high it would turn a buzzard's stomach. Drought an' hunger run throughout the land, just like now. Oh, my brothers, that was a sad time in Egypt fo' them Jews! It was a time fo' weepin' an' lamentation, a time of toil an' hunger, a time of pain! Pharaoh he whupped them Jews until they had red welts on 'em from head to toe an' ev'ry night they went to bed cryin', 'Lord, Lord, when is you goin' to make that white man set us free?' . . .

"That there is the smoke of pestilence, brothers," I went on, "the smoke of pestilence an' death. The same smoke that hanged over the Jews in bondage down there in Egypt land. The same smoke of pestilence an' death that hanged over them Jews in Egypt hangs over all black folk, all men whose skin is black, yo' skin and mine. an' we got a tougher row to hoe even than them Jews. Joseph he was at least a man, no not a four-legged dog. My brothers, laughter is good, laughter is bread and salt and buttermilk and a balm for pain. But they is a time for ev'rything. They is a time for weepin' too. A time for rage! And in bondage black folk like you an' me must weep in they rage. Heaves off from such dumb laughter like just now." I cried, my voice rising. "When a white man he lift a hand
against one of us'ns we must not laugh but rage and weep! 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, wept when we remembered Zion!' That's right!' ("Mm-huh, dat's right!") came the voice again, joined by another. "We hanged our harps upon the willows, for they that carried us away captive required of us a song. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

That's right!' I said, the words bitter on my tongue. "White man make you sing an' dance, make you shuffle, do you buck-an'-wing, play 'Ole Zip Coon' on the banjo and the fiddle. 'They that carried us away captive required of us a song.' Yes! Leave off from that singin', leave off from that banjo, leave off from that buck-an'-wing! They is a time for ev'rything. This is no time fo' singin', fo' laughter. Look aroun' you, my brothers, look into each other's eyes! You just seen a white man pit brother'gainst brother! Ain't none of you no four-legged beasts what can be whupped an' hurt like some flea-bit our dog. You is men! You is men, my dear brothers, look at yo'selves, look to yo' aridil!'

"In the visions of the night, brothers," I continued, "God spoke to Jacob an' He said, 'I am God, the God of thy father; fear not to go down into Egypt, for I will there make of thee a great nation.' An' Jacob went down into Egypt an' the peoples of Israel multiplied an' Moses was born. Moses he was born in the bulrushers an' he delivered the Jews out of Egypt an' into the Promised Land. well, there they had a powerful lot of troubles too. But in the Promised Land them Jewish peoples they could stand up an' live like men. They become a great nation. No more fatback, no more pint of salt, no more pack of corn fo' them Jews; no more overseers, no more auction blocks; no more born blow at sunrise fo' them mothers' sons. They had chicken with pot likker an' spoonbread an' sweet cider to drink in the shade. They done got paid an honest dollar. Then Jews become men. But oh, my brothers, black folk ain't never goin' to be let from bondage without they has urida!"
Black folk ain't goin' to be free, they ain't goin' to have no spoonbread an' sweet cider less'n they studies to love they own selves. Only then will the first be last, and the last first. Black folk ain't never goin' to be no great nation until they studies to love they own black skin an' the beauty of that skin an' the beauty of them black hands that toils so hard and black feet that trods so weary on God's earth. And when white men in they hate an' wrath an' meanness fetches blood from that beautiful black skin then, oh then, my brothers, it is time not fo' laughin' but fo' weeping an' rage an' lamentation! Pride! I cried after a pause, and let my arms descend. "Pride, pride, everlasting pride, pride will make you free!"

I ceased speaking and gazed at the rapt black faces. Then I finished slowly and in a soft voice: "Rise, shine; for thy light is come, an' the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. Amen."

The negroes were silent. Far off in Jerusalem, through the hot afternoon, a church bell let fall a single chime, striking the half-hour. Then the negroes one by one struggled away across the gallery, some with troubled looks, some stupid and uncomprehending, some fearful. Others drew toward me, radiant; and Henry, who was deaf, who had read my lips, came up close to me and silently clasped my arm. I heard Nelson say, "You done spoke de truth," and he too drew near, and I felt their warmth and their brotherhood and hope and knew then what Jesus must have known when upon the shores of Galilee he said: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

( pp. 308-311)
the white man, as much an outcast as the blacks. Later, he takes to withdrawing into himself, fasting and praying for long hours. Praying to God for a sign, for a reaffirmation of God's purpose for him, Nat sees apocalyptic visions. The original Nat Turner's vision was also brought on by communion with the Spirit. In the original confessions, as told to Thomas Gray, the historical Nat Turner speaks of this vision:

... I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams... I wondered greatly at these miracles, and prayed to be informed of a certainty of the meaning thereof—and shortly afterwards, while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew... And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosed, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of man, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. . . .

The fictional account that Styron gives of Nat's vision, on the other hand, most readily points to a view of Christianity having turned "black". It strengthens the view put forth

by some critics of Styron that the novel may well be entitled "Black Power 1831", because Nat's vision suggests a Black nationalist view which is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon. The Turner movement then becomes a parallel to the Civil Rights movement of our own times, as the apocalyptic vision of Nat amply suggests:

"Lord," I said aloud, "give me a sign. Give me the first sign." . . .

... Then swiftly in the very midst of the rent in the clouds I saw a black angel clothed in black armor with black wings outspread from east to west; gigantic, hovering, he spoke in a thunderous voice louder than anything I had ever heard: "Fear you and give glory to him for the hour of his judgment is come, and worship him that made heaven and earth and the sea and the fountains of waters." Then there appeared in the midst of the rent in the clouds another angel, also black, armored like the first, and his wings too compassed the heavens from east to west as he called out: "If any man worship the beast and his image and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the vine of the wrath of God, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the lamb, and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever."

I started to cry out in terror, but at this moment the second black angel seemed to pour back into the clouds, faded, vanished, and in his place came still another angel—this angel white yet strangely faceless and resembling no living white being I had ever known. Silent, in glittering silver armor, he smote the remaining black angel with his sword, yet as in a dream I saw the sword noiselessly shatter and break in two; now the black angel raised his shield to face down his white foe, and the two spirits were locked in celestial battle high above the forest. The sun suddenly
became dark and the blood ran in streams against the churning firmament. For a long time, or no time—what time?—the two angels struggled on high amid the blood-streaked billows and the noise of their battle mingled with the roaring sound within my senses like a hot wind until, half fainting, I felt as if I were about to be blown heavenward like a twig. Yet so quickly that it seemed but a heartbeat in space, the white angel was vanquished and his body was cast down through the outermost edges of the sky. Still I gazed upward where the black angel rode triumphant among the clouds, saying aloud now, and to me:

"Therefore didst thou marvel? These shall make war with the Lamb and the Lamb shall overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful. Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth you must surely bear it."

(pp. 290-92)

Thus the truth that man creates his gods in his own image, rather than the other way round, seems to have been amply proven by hat's vision of the avenging angel as Black, and the subsequent victory of the black angel over the white.

in America, blacks are oppressed because of their blackness. It would seem, then, that emancipation could only be realized by Christ and his Church becoming black.

Dr. James E. Cone, a distinguished theologian, similarly feels that the blackness of Christ is a theological concept. He suggests, not unlike hat Turner, that

if the Gospel is a Gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the
oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. . . . Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power."32

Nat ultimately comes to visualize himself as Christ—a black Christ destined to liberate his black people from bondage. C. Vann Woodward has pointed out that "Nat conforms to a Christ kind of figure: the age, the trade as a carpenter, the trip to Jerusalem, the martyrdom are all parallels."33 He is eventually "fully transformed from a black Christ into a black angel of vengeance."34 His vision suggests that as the white man must be exterminated, so must the white Christ die in order to "undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free" (p. 292).

III

In Styron's philosophy, as posited in The Confessions of Nat Turner, religion and tragedy seem to be inextricably and permanently joined. The novel puts forth a view of

tragedy in terms of religious disillusionment. As a drama between man and God, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* has a chance for tragic stature.

Styron insists that he wants "the book to exist on its own terms as an American tragedy." He would like us to view Nat Turner as an archetypal tragic hero. The novel, however, is imbued with a tragic sense of life which is essentially Christian, glorifying the message of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Commenting upon reviewers who had entirely missed or overlooked the religious framework of the novel, Styron tells the Yale Literary Magazine reviewer:

Ideally, if the book has succeeded it should contain elements of both. That is, it should faithfully transmit a sense of the era and also achieve an entirely different, separate sense of the allegorical. I was pleased to note that one critic pointed out that the book is a religious allegory; it is a story of man's quest for faith and certitude in a pandemonious world, symbolized by bondage, oppression and so on.

In the same interview, Styron goes on to say that among other things, the book "is a kind of symbolic representation of the conflict between the vengeance and bloodshed of the

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Old Testament and the redemption, the sense of peace and renewal of the New Testament. 37

The Confessions of Nat Turner is, or purports to be, a tragedy which presents a religious conflict. In this context, the term "religion" would necessitate an explication. If the word religion properly refers—as eminent thinkers say it should—to man's ultimate concerns, and if the word tragedy is properly descriptive of man's most profound agitations, his most poignant suffering, then it seems clear that religion, despite what philosophers may say to the contrary, is not a denial of tragedy. It is rather the matrix in which alone tragedy could be written. In an article entitled, "Tragedy as Religious Paradox" Parley A. Christensen clarifies this view. He asserts that, "Man's most profound agitations, his most poignant sufferings as effects can be ascribed only to his ultimate concerns, his deepest solicitudes as causes. The ultimate in human suffering can have its origin only in the ultimate human concern or soliciude. Tragedy as man's supreme suffering can exist only in co-existence with religion as the embodiment or expression of man's most precious values." 38


Christensen further points out that in the course of man's life there can be only two kinds of preoccupations. One of them is with the world around him and with fellow human beings; and the other with the universe and with supra-human creatures. Thus, his relationships crystallize into those with the microcosm on the one hand and the macrocosm on the other. Both these relationships cause suffering, conflict and disillusionment. But ultimately it is in man's "affair with the gods," in the religious affair, that his suffering attains tragic dimensions.

In The Confessions of Nat Turner, Nat, nurtured in a god-centered, religion-oriented universe, utters the tragic sigh of one who has been cosmically dispossessed:

Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; when his candle shined upon my head, and when by his light I walked through darkness . . .

(p. 79)

His cry echoes that of Oedipus, "God of Heaven, what wouldst thou do unto me?" This cry is the authentic voice of tragedy geared to an idiom which is essentially religious—Christian in Nat Turner's case. However, some have argued that Christianity and tragedy do not go together. To them the term Christian tragedy seems a contradiction in terms. "Christianity is intrasient to tragedy. Tragedy bucks and bulks under Christianity," writes Laurence Michel, and further
adds that for any one who takes the reality of the Incarna-
tion seriously, "the incompatibility of tragedy and
Christianity is inescapable." 39 The argument against the
idea of a Christian tragedy is that a redemptive and obviously
optimistic religion like Christianity cannot accommodate
"the essentially tragic." Geoffrey Brereton points out that
"there is only one assumption on which the Crucifixion could
appear tragic. That is, if it were ineffectual. For the
protagonist it would be typified by the exclamation of the
dying Jesus as recorded in the first two gospels: "My God,
My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" 40

Nat plumbs tragic depths not when he is disillusioned in
his relationships with the people around him—Samuel Turner
and the Reverend Tyler—but when he discovers that "the
objects or values of his ultimate concerns," 41 have no place
in reality. God, the being Nat has thought of as the source,
sponsor, and guardian of all that he has considered to be good,
finally deserts him: "He suffers the tragic paradox, the
tragic irony, the peripetia of religion, when he fully

39 quoted in Richard V. Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy
40 Geoffrey Brereton, Principles of Tragedy (London:
realizes that he has unwittingly built into the structure of his religious security no security at all but only the potential of bitter disillusionment and supreme suffering.  

Nat experiences total desertion by God, made evident by his inability to pray. Even the Lord's morning prayer sounds harsh and stiff on his lips. It is through this inability to communicate with God that Nat realizes the failure of the vision to which his whole life had been dedicated. As a prototypical tragic figure, Nat moves against the religious beliefs of the whites, the dominant society. He is a tragic hero in the sense that he is an "imperfect Christian"—a man who is aware of the religious virtues, but who seeks to reinterpret them in a more unorthodox way. Nat assumes tragic dimensions when his idea of God, his interpretation of Christian faith, go unaccepted. He is then, at the end of the novel, a heretic who is morally damned not only by society, but also by God. Like Job, he looks back to the days when the Lord favoured him. Instead, Nat is haunted by nightmares in which he searches desperately for a Bible he has left behind in the swamp. Panic stricken, he sees in his dream two black boys sinking deeper and deeper into the mire:

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... screaming their mortal fright, black arms and faces sinking beneath the slime, the boys began to vanish one by one before my eyes while the noise of a prodigious guilt overwhelmed me like a thunderclap ... 

(p. 76)

Nat is haunted by the guilt of having betrayed the very people he had set out to liberate. Gray brings home this point rather crudely when he sums up exactly what the insurrection achieved: "It got you a pissy-assed record of total futility, the likes of which are hard to equal" (p. 112). The very men Nat had sought to liberate suffer terrible reprisals at the hands of the whites. The insurrection led to even harsher repressive laws for the slaves. He hears a dream-like voice pronouncing a vaguely ominous prophecy:

"Thy sons shall be given unto another people and thine eyes shall look, and fail with longing for them all the day long, so that thou shalt be mad for the sight of thine eyes."

(p. 76)

He thrusts his face in his hands and reminded once again of the "burning visions of the night," echoes Daniel's cry: "O, my Lord, what shall be the end of these things?" (p. 41). The Lord does not answer. Instead he hears Gray's admonition, "Justice, Justice! That's how come nigger slavery's going to last a thousand years!" (p. 41).
On another level, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* moves towards the peace of the Revelation. Propounding a Christian theory of dramatic tragedy, Preston T. Roberts has put forward the view that while for both the Greeks and the modern skeptic life remains merely tragic, in the light of the Christian faith and revelation, life is much more than merely tragic.

To quote him:

*For those who have faith to trust in the revelation that is the Christ, evil, sin, the devil, death—in short all that is cursed, wretched, and miserable about this life—becomes redeemable in principle and redeemed at certain points and moments in fact. . . . The essential movement is from the despair of the Cross to the fulfillment of the Resurrection that is Easter, from tragedy to peace, from sin to grace, and from judgment to forgiveness.*

In the first place, Nat is threatened with a disaster that not only involves physical death, but also entails eternal damnation—a permanent casting-out from God, from love, and from happiness. If there is a redemption, as Styron has rightly pointed out, it comes only at the end of the novel. *The Confession,* thus posits a Christian view of the tragic human condition.

As Roberts has rightly pointed out, the traditional view of tragedy implies intense despair and doom. Most Greek

tragedies for example, are stories of man's doom at the hands of fate. A Christian tragedy, like *The Confessions*, however, moves "from fate to freedom, from defeat to victory, from doom to grace and from tragedy to peace. This is the whole Christian point and meaning of Hamlet's "readiness is all," of Edgar's "Ripeness is all!" of Finnegan's 'Look, look the mist is rising!' and of Jesus Christ's 'Forgive them, Father'. . . ."44

Unlike Oedipus, the typical Greek hero, Nat is capable of freedom, and consequently he is also capable of guilt and sin. Nat is judged because he has identified his own worldly purposes with God's purposes. He reflects later, that most of his apocalyptic visions were self-induced—resulting perhaps from his long periods of fasting and prayer:

> Beyond my maddest imaginings I had never known it possible to feel so removed from God—a separation which had nothing to do with faith or desire, for both of these I still possessed, but with a forsaken solitary apartness so beyond hope that I could not have felt more sundered from the divine spirit had I been cast alive like some wriggling insect beneath the largest rock on earth, there to live in hideous, perpetual dark.

(p. 10)

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Finally Nat is forgiven, because he arrives at some kind of a transcendent knowledge through suffering, and because, God, immanent and omnipotent, provides him with the basis for a new life. It is finally God's mercy which redeems Nat, despite his guilt and sin.

David Eggenschwiler has felt that "Styron has created a tragic hero who struggles through error toward a psychological and spiritual salvation that he glimpses only in his defeat." Eggenschwiler further adds that "like most tragic heroes, his greatness is inseparable from the causes of his errors and destruction: acute consciousness, a religious and symbolic imagination, and a passionate sense of social and metaphysical absurdities." Louis D. Rubin expresses a similar view when he says that Nat "represents and is, the strong man in bondage, a human caught in a situation not originally of his making but ultimately requiring his total commitment. Faced with evil, Nat cannot hide from it, but his appealing attempt to right matters only brings defeat and greater suffering. In other words, it is a tragic situation, and the resolution of it

46 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
is Tragedy. It would be valid, therefore, to consider *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a Christian tragedy.

The book is framed on one end by the controlling image of the white temple of Nat's dream, signifying a great mystery, and at the other by the fair and bright morning star mentioned in the Revelation. Between these two points, the sad history of the negro slave is stretched.

Nat, as a typical rebellious figure, takes on the lineaments of one of the prophets of the Old Testament in order to liberate his people from bondage. Ezekiel, who Styron quotes extensively is the prophet with whom Nat may be identified most closely. Nat's vision of the New Jerusalem is not unlike Prophet Ezekiel's vision. Further, Nat's dream of the avenging angels engaged in battle upon a great cloud has overtones of the vision seen by Ezekiel, when "the hand of the LORD was there upon him" (Ezekiel 1:3)

And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it, and out of the midst thereof as the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire. (Ezekiel 1:4)

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Nat is similarly visited by the vision of direful thunder and whirlwinds, symbolizing the visitations of the Lord:

... the sky began to whirl and spots of fire like minute blossoms danced before my eyes. Suddenly a calamitous roaring sound filled the heavens, touching me with awe and fright, and I slid to the earth... A vast rent appeared in the boiling clouds above the treetops... I was unable to turn away from the great fissure yawning in the sky, seeming to throb now in rhythm to the roaring noise overwhelming all...

(p. 290)

Nat, like Ezekiel, realizes that "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake" (Ezekiel 1:28). Nat is similarly visited by God in the form of a white angel who admonishes him: "If any man worship the beast and his image and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the lamb, and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever" (p. 291). Ezekiel falls to his feet in the presence of the Lord, who then discloses plans for the extermination of the Children of Israel,—"a rebellious nation":

... the said unto me, Son of man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee.
and the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me.

And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day. (Ezekiel 2:1-3)

Nat is similarly asked to exterminate the whites who are "impudent children and stiffhearted" (Ezekiel 2:4). He assumes that he is divinely ordained to exterminate the whites: "This is the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke" (p. 292).

The desolation of Virginia, "my poor blighted domain," is like the desolation described by Ezekiel—"In all your dwelling places the cities shall be laid waste, and the high places shall be desolate" (Ezekiel 6:6). Nat's Jerusalem is a city of sinners who have refused the statutes and judgments of the Lord God, and it is his mission to destroy it and found a new Jerusalem. His vision, it follows, is the blood-thirsty, wrathful and rebellious vision of Ezekiel. Nat's mission is to exterminate all the inhabitants, the polluted godless whites of tidewater. The voice of the Lord echoes again the admonitions from Ezekiel:

"And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me."

"And he said unto me, Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me: they and their fathers have transgressed against me, even unto this very day."

(Ezekiel 2:1-3)
And to the others he said in mine hearing, 'Do ye after him through the city, and slaye. let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity:

Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women; but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house.

(Ezekiel 9:5-6)

And again, like the prophet he parallels, Nat feels persuaded to spare one man, the man with the mark upon his forehead, Jeremiah Cobb. Judge Cobb, even in his state of drunkeness, pronounces the wise words of the Father, spoken through Paul the Jew—"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (p. 63). He asks Nat man to man, "is not the handwriting on the wall for this beloved and foolish and tragic Old Dominion?" (p. 64). Cobb is convinced that the brutal system of slavery is "like living in a dream!" (p. 74). Immediately afterwards, Nat finds himself thinking that "when I succeed in my great mission, and Jerusalem is destroyed, this man Cobb will be among those few spared the sword . . ." (p. 75).

Nat, however, gradually moves from the rebellious vision of Ezekiel, to the peace of the revelation. Although this message comes at the very end of the novel, Styron uses
In this vision, Nat invariably moves along a river which merges with the sea. Like Ezekiel, he always imagines himself travelling east. Styron traces back this fascination for the sea to Nat's early childhood. The sea was near Norfolk, only forty miles "eastward" from Southampton. Nat longed to see the "infinite vastness of blue water stretching out to the limit of the eye" (p. 5). But as he was denied the chance of ever visiting the sea-side, he had to content himself with the vision, which existed in his imagination,—a vision moreover that strongly echoes
And he said unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen this? Then he brought me, and caused me to return to the brink of the river.

Now when I had returned, behold, at the bank of the river were very many trees on the one side and on the other.

Then said he unto me, These waters issue out toward the east country, and go down into the desert, and go into the sea; which being brought forth into the sea, the waters shall be healed.

(Ezekiel 47:6-8)

The white temple of Nat's dreams then, is the New Jerusalem, where all conflicts are finally resolved. "The waters are made holy," as it were, lending God's benificence to the prophet, Nat. The voyage symbolizes the journey towards peace, where all arbitrary distinctions between black and white are cancelled out. Here Nat's diverse feelings are integrated, as he eventually pours out his love for Margaret; "She arches against me, cries out, and the twain—black and white—are one" (p. 426). Margaret's voice whispers, "Is it not true, Nat? Did He not say, I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star?" (p. 426). This contrasts with the earlier images of the devouring beast, which had haunted Nat:

After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron
Nat escapes these dreadful visions of the night; he escapes from longing, sickness, and despair when he repents for Margaret's death. Only then can he become truly a vessel for God's grace:

Mastet, which is the great commandment in the law?

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

(Matthew 22:36-40)

It is when Nat expresses his love for Margaret that he fulfills the "great commandment," and comes closer to spiritual awareness. J. Tyron, while commenting on the spiritual significance of the novel says that it is when Nat realizes...
that "he would have spared one," that he is suddenly over-
come "by his own humanity." Nat affirms that he would
"have spared her that showed me him whose presence I had
not fathomed or maybe never even known. Great God, how
early it is! Until now I had almost forgotten his name"
(p. 428). To emphasize Nat's spiritual awakening, Styron
contrasts the earlier visions of the devouring beast with
the images of peace and fulfillment projected at the end
of the novel:

The edge of dawn pales, brightens;
stars wink away like dying sparks as the
night fades and dusty sunrise begins to
streak the far sky. Yet steadfast the
morning star rides in the heavens radiant
and pure, set like crystal amid the still
waters of eternity. Morning blooms softly
upon the rutted streets of Jerusalem.

(pp. 427-28)

The novel then, projects Styron as a sanguine mind,
suggesting through appropriate myth and evocation that
ultimately man will prevail against the forces of evil.
if the novel is relevant to our times, it is not because
it is concerned so much with Black Power, as much as with
a universal spiritual experience, leading from apocalyptic
destruction to Christian fulfillment.

48William Styron, "A Shared Ordeal," interview
conducted by George Plimpton, p. 32.
Son, you don't have to be a campfollower of reaction but always remember where you come from. The ground is bloody and full of guilt where you were born and you must tread a long, narrow path toward your destiny.

William Styron