

ANALYSIS

Set This House on Fire (1960)

William Styron

(1925-2006)

“Although Styron hoped to gain Gothic breadth in *Set This House on Fire* (1960), it, also, is characterized by stereotypes, in characters, scenes, and narrative development. Every gesture appears in what was, by 1960, an exhausted form. Mason Flagg, whose murder remains the mysterious core that the narrator, Peter Leverett, must get at, fits Fitzgerald dimensions. His name, his Long Island background, his lovely but alcoholic mother, Wendy, his tycoon father all yield no new meanings.

Flagg has been a typical dissolute youth: expelled from boarding schools, seducer of young girls, mighty drinker, hater of women even as he pursues them compulsively. To seek mystery in him is to look for diamonds in a swamp. The narrator is himself like Nick Carraway in *Gatsby*: laid back, a lawyer (although how he achieved the discipline for that is a better mystery than Flagg), a footloose young man for whom nubile women are always available. The name of the game, for all, is surface cool, while below destructiveness looms. Another character who sets out to destroy himself is Cass Kinsolving, a Southerner like Peter, a painter who never appears to paint; but, withal, a prodigious drinker while he lives in Sambuco, not far from Salerno.

The novel moves from New York to Sambuco and then relocates in and around Cass's place in South Carolina. The conflict is old world versus new, and in this format, while Sambuco appears like the new Eden, it proves to be more evil than paradisiacal. Styron uses Italy for its great beauty, but a grandness that only barely disguises a terrible corruption, like Rappaccini's Garden. We are, already, entering that dispossessed Garden which looks ahead to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Along the way, Peter meets lovely women; of course, it helps that Flagg is involved with the making of films—his father became a film distributor and left Mason a fortune. The young ladies have marvelously developed bodies, as well as expressionless faces, and for depth they have all been hurt. Flagg's latest companion, whom he knocks around when he feels threatened, is a gorgeous blonde, who begins to confide in Peter. She recalls Flagg's mother, Wendy, herself a replay of Zelda Fitzgerald.

Given such materials, Styron can only generate further clichés. He tries innovation with frequent flashbacks, but they are perfunctory gestures swinging mechanically between Sambuco and, mainly, Cass's South Carolina refuge. What is remarkable about Styron's treatment is his unawareness, as he fills in backgrounds, of how that material had been exhausted well before he got to it, or how his characters themselves undermine his claims for them. Early on, Flagg says: 'Petesy, there's more twat up on this mountaintop [Sambuco] than a wise man could possibly handle.' *That* is the man whose mystery remains at the center of the novel. His level of discourse hardly reinforces what Peter claims for him, his charm, intellectual abilities, his conversational talent, his interest in the arts. When Flagg speaks, it is platitudes: 'Sex is the last frontier... In art as in life, Peter, sex is the only area left where men can find full expression of their individuality, full freedom.' Compared with this, the discussions of sex in Mailer's novels are metaphysical dialogues.

Potentially, we have compelling conflicts, the drifting, laid-back Peter Leverett (a hare of sorts, passive, yet filled with fifties Beat possibilities) forced to confront someone of tremendous evil charm in Mason Flagg, a man with qualities of a Dostoyevsky protagonist in his quest for perversion and self-destruction. At this level, the confrontation—alternating attraction and withdrawal—could be played out in several dimensions: individual, social, even political. In this scenario, Flagg would be a wealthier and more with-it Neal Cassady, attempting to flee internal demons. Peter Leverett would be a more established Sal Paradise. The novel would confront several of the issues we find in *On the Road*, which Styron in any event seems to replay. An implied political situation would emerge: the politics of individual behavior, the politics of

varying ideologies, the politics of public and private, what we associate with the irresolvable conflicts of the 1950s.

Styron, however, dissipates these or similar opportunities, by confronting his characters with stereotypes and, even more, with a prose style that draws on platitudes. The language is stale—people are silent for a moment, specks of sadness predominate, scenes are dreary or marvelous, voices are modulated, mouths are foul or sweet, breasts are hard or luxurious like melons, butts are bouncy; the very verbs are tired—people gaze, or wonder, or reflect. Dulled by language and perceptions, the reader cannot possibly respond to the depths Styron is leading him into. And yet his aim is to be a modern-day Vergil leading us, the readers, into the Inferno of Italy; not the Italy of travel posters or even of Rossellini movies, but an Italy of Dante's subterranean regions. Mason Flagg may have a palace set on a hill in Sambuco, but he is a man of depths. In *The Recognitions*, Gaddis has a somewhat similar young man in Wyatt Gwyon, although his painting ability provides a focus to his life, lacking in Flagg. Wyatt was far more likely to 'set this house on fire,' Styron's pretentious use of Donne's phrase, than is Flagg.

Another key in this triangular arrangement is the painter Cass Kinsolving, an extremely unstable young man, with a loving (Catholic) wife and several small children, all of whom appear angelic. He is self-educated, a terrible drinker, and a man who is drawn to scrapes. He gambles away the family's last money, or tries to, spends nights in the police station, and yet appears endearing to his immediate family and to Peter. Part II of the novel works out what happened. Styron tells us from the start that Cass has killed Flagg, and that creates the mystery not of killer but of why and how. The shift now is to Cass, whose life has several sides, and these unresolved aspects will provide the narrative substance. We do know Flagg has humiliated Cass, making him perform obscenely and demeaningly in front of gathered guests. Why does Cass do this? What is his relationship to Mason Flagg?

Cass is filled with guilt—as a teenager he was involved with a man who punished a black family severely for having fallen behind on radio payments—and he is, as noted, a drunk, unable to function as a husband or father. Having entered the valley of hell, he must rise through Purgatorio to some glimpse of redemption. Appropriately, his ascent comes by way of temptation, a young and very appealing peasant girl named Francesca Ricci (riches). Cass takes Francesca into his household—although he does not sleep with her—and sells his soul to Flagg in exchange for medication for her dying father. Flagg now holds Cass's soul, and he squeezes by way of humiliation. Also, he indicates an interest in Francesca. As Styron presents the dramatic conflict, there are several crossing patterns: Cass and Francesca, who poses for him and offers herself; Cass and Flagg, who is interested in a 'sexual circus,' including Cass's wife; Flagg and Francesca, who eludes him until he corners and rapes her.

Cass's relationship with Francesca is, for him, a form of salvation, especially since he resists sex. It must be through her that he can reach beyond the nullity that defines him. And yet, once again, the prose fails. Language turns the unfamiliar to the familiar, and breeds contempt. In the reduction, she is his angel; he is the devil. Yet he must not defile her. The demonic Flagg does, and Cass vows to kill him. But Cass also believes Flagg has murdered her, which was untrue; that the village idiot accomplished. Nevertheless, Cass kills Mason and reaches the end of the road 'and had found there nothing at all. There was nothing.' An Italian policeman lies for Cass—his deep guilt will be his punishment—and Flagg's death is recorded as suicide after his murder of Francesca.

Cass is released; the Furies are appeased and he can free himself. He returns with his family to South Carolina, gives up booze, paints successfully, and tells his story to Peter. The latter is himself relieved of his guilt when a motorcyclist he had struck on his way to Sambuco miraculously comes out of his coma. Peter's guilt over striking the motorcyclist, Cass's guilt over his past as well as his inability to handle his life, Mason Flagg's demonry—all must be exorcised or resolved. Francesca is the innocent means by which the demons are driven out, her destruction the precipitant. Angel and temptress, the peasant girl represents the part of Italy that is both saved and damned.

A political fable lies here: Francesca ruined by the aristocratic Flagg, almost saved by the lower-class Cass; her fate somehow intertwined with the middle-class Peter. Flagg destroys her, Cass avenges her, and Peter is allowed to free himself of Italian-based guilt. Standing outside the two 'great powers,' Peter can

avoid the destructiveness of each, working through in personal terms cold war choices. Salvation lies not in Europe, but in the healing life of a South Carolina Eden.”

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