The Confessions of Nat Turner Study Guide

The Confessions of Nat Turner by William Styron

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Confessions of Nat Turner tells the story of an actual slave uprising organized by a slave named Nat Turner in the year 1831. The author spent countless hours poring through historical documents to provide a framework for this fictional novel, in which William Styron attempts to imagine what kind of man Nat Turner really was. The book opens with Nat already captured and awaiting trial after the execution of his long-planned uprising. Nat spends his final days reviewing his life and the choices he has made.

In the early part of the book, Nat tells us about his younger years growing up on the Turner plantation. As a slave, Nat was given the last name of the family who owned his parents. His mother, Lou-Ann, was a house slave, which gave Nat a more privileged childhood than he would have had as a field slave. House slaves were permitted to eat their masters' table scraps -a much better diet than that of the field slaves - and although they worked long hours, their duties were usually not so physically exhausting as the intense labor endured by the field slaves. Nat's early years were relatively sheltered, and he didn't learn the harsher realities of slavery firsthand until later; he was even allowed to learn to read and write, and he became something like a household pet. As a child, Nat didn't understand the nature of his status in the household; he thought of himself, quite naturally, as a loved member of the family.

The literacy and carpentry skills that Nat gained in the Turner household would one day help make him a leader of his people; most black slaves were intentionally kept in an ignorant, illiterate state by their white masters. Nat, with his grade school grammar, was one of the most learned black men in the county. In later years, these skills would prove invaluable in helping Nat plan, organize, and execute a successful rebellion. He could read a map, make written notes of his plans, and make a numerical inventory of all of the firearms in the county available for the taking. He also had the advantage of having studied history, including the exploits of famous warriors such as Napoleon Bonaparte.

Although he learned the skills that would one day enable him to lead a rebellion early on, Nat did not begin planning one until years later. When he turned twenty-one, he was sold by the Turners to a Reverend Eppes, who later sold him to a man named Moore. Both Eppes and Moore used Nat as a field slave, ignoring his quick mind and ingenuity with carpentry tools. Nat's existence during this time was both physically and mentally unbearable, with too much physical labor and nothing to challenge his mind. The worst part, for Nat, was that he had never expected to live out his life as a slave. His master and erstwhile father figure, Samuel Turner, had promised to give Nat his freedom when he turned twenty-five. Turner betrayed this promise by selling Nat to Reverend Eppes but lied to Nat at the time of the sale, telling him that Eppes had signed a paper agreeing to free Nat in a few years. The realization that he'd been betrayed by Samuel Turner came gradually to Nat; his initial credulity turned to bitter disappointment as the years went by and Turner's promises proved to be lies.

Fortunately for Nat, the vicious Moore died, and Nat eventually wound up at the Travis residence, where the more kindly Master Travis was eager to put Nat's intelligence and skills to use. For Travis, Nat designed and built several highly ingenious contraptions, which increased Travis' financial wealth. Despite the improvement in his circumstances, though, Nat's misery grew deeper. No longer a naïve child, Nat could not hide from the injustices he saw perpetrated on his fellow slaves every day. Nat had long ago declared himself a Reverend, ordained by God in the church of nature. As a spiritual man, Nat began to see that he had an obligation, as one of the very few literate black men, to help his people.

Nat studied strategy, formed a plan for rebellion, and used his status as a preacher to convert other slaves to his cause. When the day came to execute his plan, Nat was determined to leave no survivors; he knew that in order to make an impact on the long-entrenched institution of slavery, the rebellion would have to be huge and bloody. Nat and his band of seventy-five followers succeeded in executing fifty-five white slave-owners - the largest insurrection of its kind in recorded history. Nat's success came at a steep price, though. In retaliation, the white militia killed over a hundred innocent black people, none of whom were involved in Nat's rebellion, and some of whom were not even slaves. Of the seventy-five slaves actually involved in the rebellion, about a dozen were returned to their masters, fifteen or so were sold down the river to hard labor and certain death, and seventeen, including Nat and his best friend Hark, were hanged.

Introduction

Introduction Summary

The author's introduction consists of an excerpt from an historical document, "The Confessions of Nat Turner," written by T.R. Gray in November of 1831, shortly after the capture of Nathaniel Turner. In the introduction to this document, titled "To the Public," Gray briefly summarizes the capture of Nat Turner on October 30, 1831, after the "band of savages" which he led had already been caught and dealt with by Southern justice. Gray refers to Nat Turner as a "gloomy fanatic" (pg. xiv) and does his best to reassure the slave-owning populace of Virginia that Turner's slave rebellion was an isolated incident, not likely to be repeated. Gray states that his reason for publishing Turner's confession was to educate the public "as to the operations of a mind like his, endeavoring to grapple with things beyond its reach." (pg. xv)

Introduction Analysis

By re-printing a portion of this historical document, William Styron sets the tone for his novel. Not only does he establish that his own novel is based on historical fact, he also gives us a first-hand glimpse of the attitude which the slave-holding public held towards slaves, and toward Nat Turner in particular. The document's dismaying tone of self-righteous contempt for Turner and his deeds reveals the deeply held bias which Southern white slave-owners held and perpetrated against the African-American race. The slave-owners, in their own minds, reduced the slaves to the level of animals in order to rationalize their horrific mistreatment of fellow human beings. Gray writes in a florid, long-winded fashion which Styron mimics to near perfection in the speeches he writes for the fictional character he bases on the real Gray. Gray's historical dissertation on Nat Turner utilizes that flowery prose to mask his shocking contempt for men and women of color, and his self-serving belief that their limited minds would not be capable of planning, much less winning, any future rebellions.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

Styron's novel opens with Nathaniel Turner's recurring vision. Nat recalls that it began as a dream in his childhood, but over the years, he would often see it before his waking eyes. The vision consists of him, alone in a small boat, moving gently down a river to where it meets the sea. A promontory juts out over the ocean, and upon it is a white building, which Nat has decided is a temple of some sort. The temple has no doors, which only adds to the feeling of great mystery which this temple and this vision represent for Nat. He explains to the reader that the inexplicable vision must be connected to his childhood, when he had often heard people speak of the ocean in nearby Norfolk. Nat harbors an intense, aching desire to see the ocean, but he has never been one of the Negroes lucky enough to be taken there by his masters. However, he had met over the years several Negroes who had seen the vast, blue expanse, and their description of it inspired both Nathaniel's frustrated longing to see the ocean, and the recurring vision which is the closest he can come to the actual sight.

As the novel opens, Nat lingers with the peaceful dream for a few moments before opening his eyes on the gray dawn. When he tries to rise, he recalls belatedly that his feet are shackled. A wintry chill suffuses the jail cell which holds him, and his stomach growls with desperate pangs of hunger. From the adjoining cell, he can hear his friend Hark's labored breathing, and although this is Nathaniel's first chance to speak to Hark since his own capture, he decides to let him sleep undisturbed. Nat carefully manipulates his chains to their full extent, which allows him to move about a yard away from the cedar plank which is his bed and to look out the window of his jail cell. He closes his eyes and lets his forehead rest on the windowsill. Accustomed to spending this early morning hour in prayer, Nat misses his Bible, which he has not been allowed to access in his cell. He wishes he could pray, but the power of prayer has deserted him.

Rattling at the bars of his cell announces the arrival of Kitchen, a frightened young white teenager who has come to remind Nat that the lawyer is coming this morning. Nat asks Kitchen for some food, but Kitchen reminds him that breakfast isn't until eight. For a moment, fury overtakes Nat, and he envisions what mad Will would have done to "sweet meat" like Kitchen. Resignation overtakes Nat, though, as he realizes that impotent anger will achieve nothing, but "nigger talk might work" (pg. 9) to convince Kitchen to bring him some food. Nat lays aside his fury and speaks in a wheedling, pleading tone to Kitchen. It is to no avail, and Nat's hunger goes unsatisfied as Kitchen merely repeats his admonishment that breakfast is not until eight; then the terrified youngster hurries away from Nat's cell.

The strong odor of apple-scented cologne announces the lawyer's entrance. Gray is let into the cell by Kitchen, who to Gray's amusement scuttles away in terror the moment the lawyer is inside. After a long pause, Gray greets Nat, calling him "Reverend." (pg.

12) Nat doesn't reply, and watches the lawyer with growing distaste. Nat had disliked Gray's trickery from their first meeting, five days prior, and now Nat has grown tired of talking to him, and tired of masking his true feelings under the politely compliant attitude which his situation requires of him.

Having come to the realization that refusing to cooperate will gain him nothing, Nat nonetheless had wisely held his tongue the first time Gray entered his cell, allowing the lawyer to put his cards on the table. Nat begins to recount that initial meeting: Gray's manner is weary as he tells Nat that silence will only buy him more misery, and he begins to hint at concessions that might be made if Nat confesses his crimes. Before Gray can get too warmed to his speech, Nat interrupts to tell him that he's willing to confess, assuming Gray can get the jailors to take off Nat's manacles. In fact, Nat informs Gray, God himself has instructed Nat to "*Confess, that all nations may know*..." (pg. 15) Gray eagerly begins taking notes and tells Nat that he's made the right decision; the good people of Virginia have a right to know how a dumb darky could possibly have organized and executed a plan such as Nat carried out with his band of followers.

Gray tells Nat that none of the others involved in the plan had talked. Nat asks about his followers. Had they had a trial? Gray informs him that there had been nearly a trial a day throughout September and October, primarily to protect the rights of property. Nat asks what he means by that, and Gray gives him a brief lecture on property rights. He begins with the theoretical example of a wagon, careening out of control and crashing into a house, killing a young girl. In such a case, Gray explains, the farmer who owned the wagon would be held responsible for the death, through his own negligence in caring for his property - because of course the wagon can't be held responsible; it is inanimate chattel (property). Because Nat, according to Gray, is considered *animate chattel*, possessing "moral choice and spiritual volition," (pg. 22) Nat can be held responsible for his own actions, and his owner can therefore be absolved of the deaths caused by his property (i.e., Nat.) That, concludes Gray, is how the law provides that property like Nat can be tried for a felony. He tells Nat that Nat will be tried on Saturday and then hanged by the neck until dead. Nat looks Gray over and privately decides that Gray is no better and no worse than the average white man in Nat's experience.

Gray reads a short list of the names of Nat's cohorts who had been acquitted in their trials. The lawyer believes that these acquittals prove that justice has been fair and merciful. When Nat fails to whole-heartedly agree, Gray shows hostility for the first time, and Nat realizes that he'd better watch what he says more carefully. Gray tells Nat that he's his lawyer and goes on to talk about how fair and impartial Southern justice is, and how wrong the abolitionists are when they say slave-owners are unjust. To prove his point, he rattles off the numbers: out of some sixty culprits, two dozen were acquitted or discharged at trial, another fifteen convicted but not sentenced to death, and only fifteen of Nat's followers convicted and hanged. This, according to Gray, proves how just the system is, and because it is so just, "nigger slavery's going to last a thousand years." (pg. 25) Nat responds to this remarkable statement by asking for a few minutes alone to gather his thoughts before confessing, adding that he'll be in better shape to confess if Gray could arrange to have some food brought to him.

At this point, the story line switches back to the narrator's present-the day of his trial. Once again, Nat's belly is rumbling from hunger, and once again, Nat listens to Gray, who offers to requisition him some winter clothes. Before he does that, though, and before the trial scheduled for that day, Gray wants to review Nat's confession. Gray advises him that the confession will be the prosecution's evidence, and that Nat's defense lawyer is a Mr. W. C. Parker. Nat is stunned; Gray had told him *he* was Nat's lawyer, and now Nat finds out that Gray had taken down the written confession for the prosecution. Gray impatiently asks what difference it makes, as Nat's "goose is cooked already." (pg. 29) It is a foregone conclusion that Nat will be hanged; the trial is a mere formality. Nat accepts the truth of this, and agrees to answer Gray's remaining questions regarding his confession. Gray begins to read from the written confession, pausing occasionally to ask Nat if the wording he uses accurately sums up what Nat has told him.

Gray has written the confession in the first person, from Nat's point of view. It states that Nat had turned thirty-one the previous month, on October 2nd, and that he was born the property of one Benjamin Turner. As far back as Nat's childhood, the seeds of the recent uprising were planted. When Nat had been three or four, the confession reads, he had developed the remarkable ability to relate true stories which had occurred many years before he was even born. The adults around Nat were astonished, and often said to him that he would surely be a prophet. His mother, too, told him that his life must be intended for some great purpose. Nat agrees that so far this is a fair representation of his words. Gray's reading is interrupted by the pleadings of Hark, coming from the next cell. Hark broadcasts his suffering, begging loudly for a blanket to warm his poor bones. Nat's attention wanders from Gray's continued narrative to Hark's cries on the other side of the wall; Nat says, "I knew he had been hurt, and it was cold, but I also knew Hark: this was bogus suffering, Hark at his rarest. The voice of the only Negro in Virginia whose wise flattery could gull a white man out of his very britches." (pg. 31) Presently, Gray calls out for Kitchen to bring Hark a blanket; then he resumes his narrative.

Gray continues reading the confession, summarizing how other men had often used Nat for his superior planning abilities when he was a child. Nat's confidence in his superior intelligence was increased by the respect accorded him by the people he grew up with. He decided that if he was going to be great, he must act great, and began devoting himself to fasting and prayer, always maintaining an air of mystery.

Nat's attention again wanders from the narrative as he stands at the window watching a crowd gather for his trial. Gray calls his attention back; he has reached one of the points in the confession that he has a question about. Nat had told him that his original intention had been to begin the revolt on the previous 4th of July, but that the date had passed without action, and the band of men had waited until Nat was given a sign. Since 1830, the confession went on, Nat's master had been Mr. Joseph Travis, who Nat stated had been a kind master; he'd had confidence in Nat's abilities, and Nat had no cause to complain about his treatment under Travis. Gray reads that passage a second time, getting worked up now, and demanding to know how Nat could butcher in cold blood a man he admits was kind to him. Gray says that maybe people could understand if Travis had been a cruel tyrant who mistreated Nat, but they can't understand how Nat

could have killed such a kind master. Nat declines to answer, thinking privately that some matters should be withheld even from a confession.

Gray skips ahead to the next point in the narrative which puzzles him, and he reads aloud the passages that relate to the crime itself. In his confession, Nat described his killing of Miss Margaret Whitehead, but his description of all the other deaths indicates that he was not personally involved in them. Gray wants to know if it's true that Nat is only personally responsible for one murder. Gray points out that it's not as though Nat hadn't been in the thick of things; he wasn't some field general issuing commands from a distance. Nat had been present at every killing scene. Overcome with a sweaty, nauseous feeling, Nat doesn't answer. His mind flashes back to the killings, and he shudders at the memory of Will's murderous smile. Gray presses the point, returning to the beginning of the killing spree. Several deaths took place before they got to the Whitehead house and Nat killed Miss Margaret. Nat's description of those previous killings has Gray flummoxed. At the Travis place where they started, Nat had attempted to land several killing blows, but each time had failed; it was Will who finished the jobs. How could Nat, as their leader, have gotten so rattled by the killing that he failed to do the job himself? Nat jumps up and yells for Gray to stop. Still yelling, Nat tells Gray that they did it, it's done, and he should stop studying it like this.

Gray says he's legally bound to read Nat the confession, and that Nat must then sign it. He continues, fussing over his grammar and writing style as he reads from the text. Nat tunes out Gray's voice. He thinks of something Hark once said, that Hark could tell a good white person from a bad white person by their smell. Hark described Miss Maria Pope's smell as akin to a dead fish left out for three days in the summer sun. Hark didn't believe all white people were bad, though. Their master, Joseph Travis, had an honest smell, like the smell of a hard working horse. Joel Westbrook, Travis' young white apprentice, sometimes smelled good and sometimes reeked, as he was an uncertain boy who was often nice, but given to fits of temper. Miss Maria Pope, Travis' half-sister, had an evil personality to match her smell. Miss Maria was an unpleasant old maid who read the Bible incessantly and once forced Hark to memorize a passage which she interpreted to be an instruction from God that all Negroes honor their masters.

Nat's thoughts move to his first meeting with Mr. Jeremiah Cobb, the judge who will be sentencing him later in the day, and to the long chain of events that led up to that original meeting. As he'd told Mr. Gray, Nat was born the property of one Benjamin Turner, who died in a lumber accident when Nat was around eight. Benjamin's brother, Samuel Turner, became Nat's new master for the next ten or eleven years - a time period which Nat tells the reader he will return to in greater detail later. For now, suffice it to say that Samuel Turner's fortunes declined, and he was forced to sell the sawmill and all of the other property he'd inherited upon his brother's death, including Nat Turner. Nat was sold to a Mr. Thomas Moore when he was twenty-one. Nine years later, Moore died in a freak accident while birthing a calf. Nat didn't care for Moore, but he did begin to wonder if he was some kind of bad luck charm for his owners. In any case, when Moore died, his fifteen-year-old son Putnam inherited Nat. A year later, just the previous year in fact, Moore's widow Sarah had married Joseph Travis, and through this marriage, Travis had come to be Nat's owner until such time as young Putnam reached

the age of majority. For Nat, who couldn't stand being owned by one person, being owned by two was twice as bad.

Travis was moderately successful, and unlike Moore, did not use Nat as a field hand. Nat became a kind of handyman around Travis' wheel shop, where his skills were put to better use than they had been under Moore. With his new workload, Nat regained a sense of physical well being that he hadn't felt since he had left Samuel Turner's. Joseph Travis had once owned nearly a dozen slaves, but the poor economy had caused most slave-owners to reduce their number of slaves. Travis ("Marse Joe" to his slaves) had sold off all but two, Hark and Moses, before marrying into temporary custody of Nat to make three. At the time when Nat first met Judge Jeremiah Cobb, he was living on the Travis property with Hark and Moses, plus six white people: Travis, his wife Sarah, their new infant son, Travis' half-sister Miss Maria Pope, and the apprentice, Joel Westbrook. For the first time in years, Nat was able to use his ingenuity instead of his muscle in his work. Miss Maria was demanding, but he considered her a small thorn. Instead of the "nigger food" (pg. 48) he'd eaten at Moore's, Nat got to eat white man's food at Travis.' Nat also had more leisure time there, which he used to study the Bible and form his plan to exterminate all of the white people in Southampton County.

Into this setting walked Judge Jeremiah Cobb one gray November Saturday. Cobb arrived in a dogcart. When he got out, he kicked a dog, and then stumbled a bit. Usually Nat would have found this funny, because, as he says, Negroes delight in watching a white man embarrass himself. When Cobb turned around and Nat got a look at his face, though, his laughter died. Cobb's face wore the most sorrowful, grief-stricken expression Nat had ever seen. He was also a little drunk. Miss Sarah called out to Judge Cobb from the porch, inviting him inside. Cobb refused, saying he was in a hurry and just needed to get his wheel fixed. Sarah told him Putnam would take care of it, and invited him to help himself to an alcoholic beverage from their cider press while waiting. Nat went back to his work skinning rabbits in the shed; he kept a line of rabbit traps in the woods which both supplemented Travis' income and allowed Nat some private time in the woods each week. From a knoll in the woods overlooking all of the area houses, Nat did his planning for the coming vengeance. It was this bloody plan that was on his mind as he squatted side by side with Hark, skinning the rabbits. He listened, too, as Hark coined a phrase for the degrading, numbing, dreadful feeling of being a slave - a feeling Hark called being *black-assed*. "Don matter who dey is, Nat, good or bad, even ol' Marse Joe, dey white folks dey gwine make you feel *black-assed*." (pg. 53) As Hark spoke these words, Judge Cobb suddenly loomed over them.

They dropped the rabbits and stood up respectfully, which according to Nat is always the safest course of action around a white man, especially an unknown white man. Cobb told them to go on with their work; he only wanted to know where the cider press was. Hark pointed to it and told Cobb with ingratiating flattery to drink from the red barrel, which Marse Joe reserved for the finest gentlemen. Cobb left to find the cider press, and Nat rounded on Hark with sudden fury, chastising him for being a bootlicker. At Hark's hurt expression, Nat softened his anger, but still told Hark to act like a man, not a fool, and to quit acting like a white man's puppy dog. Nat had not yet told Hark about his plans for rebellion, but he planned to enlist Hark's help. First, though, Nat

would have to teach Hark to leave off trying to please the white men and to nurse his inner anger against them instead. Hark told Nat he was right, but that he couldn't help feeling sorry for someone who looked as sad as Cobb. Nat replied that pitying a white man is wasted pity. As he said this, though, he recalled an overheard conversation between Travis and Sarah concerning all of the terrible things that had happened to Cobb in the last year. Cobb had lost his wife and daughters to typhoid fever, then his stable of prize horses had burned down with his Negro groom inside, after which Cobb began drinking, and while drunk, fell down the stairs, causing irreparable damage to his leg.

Cobb had returned to stand over Nat and Hark, talking about the high quality drinks that Travis' farm produced and demanding to know whether Nat agreed that Travis' brandy was superior. Nat wasn't sure whether or not this was a trick question, and was terrified that Cobb would try to humiliate him. Nat's fear was grounded in the fact that he had recently vowed never to take that kind of trash talk from a white man again, and if Cobb pursued that course, Nat would have to kill him on the spot. Nat didn't want to do that, because it would destroy his chances at pulling off a rebellion. He started shaking with anger, but before he had to answer Cobb's question, Putnam caused a distraction by calling for Hark. Putnam had taken to tormenting Hark, who had accidentally caught young Putnam playing some sex game with Joel Westbrook on the river bank. As Hark left to answer Putnam's call, Cobb looked down at Nat and quoted the Bible scripture that Nat had just a moment before quoted to Hark. Caught gossiping, Nat was ashamed, and angry at himself for his shame. He stood up slowly, facing Cobb. The learned Judge began quoting other Biblical passages to Nat, each one about the obedience of slaves. The Judge revealed that he had figured out who Nat was, for Nat had a reputation as being a slave Reverend - a curiosity of sorts.

Cobb called him a hayseed and asked Nat if he agreed with what Cobb had just quoted from the scriptures. Nat responded with meek and humble agreement, largely to cover up the fear he felt at learning that Cobb knew him by name. It is always safer, Nat tells the reader, for a Negro to remain anonymous than to stand out as an individual. Now Cobb was telling him that he'd heard about Nat, heard a rumor that a local slave could read, write, and quote scripture. Cobb said he had put this rumor in the same category as a spurious rumor he'd heard about the existence of a six-foot tall rat that could play the tambourine while dancing a jig. Cobb averred that Nat could not possibly know how to read or write and demanded that Nat spell the word "cat." Nat begged Cobb not to mock him, knowing that he would have to kill Cobb if he continued. Cobb stopped, though, and instead began a drunken lament about the economic desecration of Virginia, which he blamed on slavery. His surprising words gave Nat a surge of hope, but within moments, Nat found himself hating Cobb for inspiring that hope. Nat suddenly wanted to kill him on the spot, but before he could, Hark's tormentors again distracted him.

Cobb and Nat watched as Putnam and Miss Maria Pope beat Hark with a stick and forced him to climb a ladder into a tall tree. Hark was deathly afraid of heights and moaned in pitiful fear as he ascended the ladder and clung precariously to the tree. Cobb remarked on what a wonderful physical specimen Hark was, and asked about his

background. For reasons Nat couldn't comprehend, he told Cobb the truth: Hark was woefully unhappy since the time a few years back when Joseph Travis had sold off most of his slaves. Hark's wife and three year old son were among those sold. Cobb muttered distractedly in reply, something about that being the *ultimate horror*, and then wandered off without another word. As he watched him go, Nat decided that when the time came to kill all the white men, he would spare Cobb.

Nat's thoughts wander back to the present moment. He is in the courtroom, in the middle of his trial. During the trial, to which he pays scant attention, Nat dozes off for the briefest of moments, and in that moment has a terrifying dream. In the dream, he is wandering through a stormy forest searching for his missing Bible. He stumbles across six black boys up to their necks in quicksand; Nat watches helplessly as they sink to their doom. He hears a voice echo out of the stormy sky: "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..." (pg. 76) He awakens to the sound of a gavel as a man's voice admonishes him to stay awake for his trial. Nat looks up at the judge's bench; it is Jeremiah Cobb who speaks these words. The trial resumes and Nat once again tunes it out. He examines the spectators in the courtroom and tries to pray. But God, feels Nat, has abandoned him. Nat shivers with fear at the thought of his impending death and tunes back into the trial as the prosecution sums up its case. He wants to laugh as he listens to the man equate him to historical villains like Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun; Nat's goal had been to go down in history, and it appears that he's achieved it.

At this point, Gray stands up and delivers a speech. His tone is different from the "sloppy patronizing half-literate white-man-to-a-nigger tones he had used in jail." (pg. 83) Gray makes reference to Nat's confession and tells the court that certain parts of the confession prove that insurrections such as Nat's are doomed to failure because of the moral weakness of the Negro character. He turns and stares at Nat. In the silence, Nat recalls for a moment a girlish poem which Miss Margaret Whitehead had once recited for him. Gray continues to expound on how the crowd should not be afraid that Nat's deeds will inspire other rebellions because, due to the fundamental instability of Negro nature, Negroes are not capable of carrying out successful rebellions.

Meanwhile, Nat's thoughts linger on Miss Margaret, the one individual whom he had personally killed. The poem she'd recited for him was one she'd written for the Governor's visit to her school. Margaret had been written up in the paper for it, and proudly told Nat about this one sunny Sunday as Nat was driving her to church in a carriage. Miss Margaret was so pleased that Nat appreciated her poetry; she told him he was different from her mother and brother, who didn't care about spiritual things or poems. Margaret went on to say that Nat was the only one she could talk to at home, and asked him to recite a Psalm for her. Nat did, and her appreciation caused his heart to pound. Nat never looked white people in the eyes, but he stole glances at Margaret's beautiful face. She was unhappy that Nat, who had been hired out to the Whiteheads, was now returning to the Travis residence. Nat was overwhelmed with a desire to break Margaret's fragile white neck, and he tried to understand why he was in such an uproar

over this girl. He realized that his empathy for her endangered his plan to kill all the white people in the county; Nat simultaneously liked and resented her.

Nat pauses in his recollections to tune back into his trial. Gray is speaking about the late Professor Enoch Mebane of the University of Georgia at Athens, who, according to Gray, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that Negroes are a biologically inferior species. Gray compares the cranium of a Negro to "the skulking baboon of that dark continent from which he springs..." (pg. 93) The lawyer then introduces the German philosopher Leibnitz' theories about monads in the brain, which supposedly determine a human being's learning capacity. Despite the fact that there is no proof or way to measure these self-serving theories, Gray sums up by stating that Nat Turner's insurrection was destined to fail from the beginning due to the biological and spiritual inferiority of the Negro character.

Gray's speech calls to mind the sermon given by Margaret's brother, Richard Whitehead, the day Nat drove her to church in the carriage. It is Richard's day to preach to the darkies, Margaret informs Nat sympathetically. Nat enters the Methodist church behind her and proceeds up to the Negro balcony. Nat surveys the men and women in the balcony. He has been away at the Whitehead's for two months, and now he nods a greeting to Hark. The cheerless words Richard preaches are the same litany Nat has heard for years Negroes in church: Your only salvation is complete obedience to your masters. You do not own your body, and if you want to save your soul, you must not be idle but instead put your body to work for your master's gain. Nat looks around at the other Negroes in the balcony and realizes that many of them have been deeply affected by these words, heard over and over in the name of God. Quietly, so as not to be overheard by the devout, Nat tells Hark that there's a gunroom at the Widow Whitehead's with fifteen guns and plenty of ammunition.

Nat had only revealed his plan to Hark, and three others, a month before leaving for the Whitehead's. Now Hark tells him the other three conspirators are also at church. One of them, Nelson, had convinced his Baptist owner to allow him to go to a Methodist service by saying that he felt sinful and needed the fear of God to help him be a faithful nigger. Hark laughs at Nelson's lie, remarking that if there was ever a black man who wanted to kill some white people, it's Nelson. Nat is proud of the progress Hark has made in the past six months under his tutelage; Nat had focused on Marse Joe's sale of Hark's wife and child to inflame Hark's anger. Hark has shed his obsequious desire to please the white man, and one day Hark even faces down Putnam in the machine shop with a crow bar and a murderous look. Putnam hasn't tried to run Hark up a tree since.

Hark tells Nat that he has arranged a meeting place for the five conspirators after the service. In the mean time, they listen to the minister drone on about how God requires black people to be faithful slaves, and Nat hears someone muttering threateningly under his breath in response to the minister's words. He turns to see Will, another slave who, like Nelson, wants to kill the white tyrants. Nat has no intention of letting Will in on his plans, though; he doesn't trust Will, whose anger simmers out of control and borders on madness. Nat surveys the other Negroes in the gallery, and is overcome with hatred for his own people, for their stupid, blind obedience to the white man. His eyes seek out

Margaret in the white crowd. Later that afternoon, after his strategy meeting, he drives both Margaret and her mother back home. In the carriage, Mother asks Margaret what she thought of the service. When Margaret calls it folderol, her Mother chides her for speaking ill of her brother's sermon.

Nat's attention is brought back to the courtroom when he is commanded to stand. He rises and declines Cobb's offer to let him speak in his defense prior to sentencing. Judge Cobb tells Nat he pities him, and then sentences him to death by hanging on November 11th, the following Friday. Nat and Cobb look each other in the eye, seeming for a moment to share some rare secret. Later that night in his jail cell, Nat finds out from Hark what had happened in the weeks after the attack, when Nat was hiding out in the swamp. Hark tells him the white man's army had rounded up and killed at least a hundred Negroes, none of whom had fought with Nat or been in any way involved with the plan. Nat hugs himself to stop his shivering, and asks about Nelson. Hark tells him Nelson died bravely; he was hanged in September together with Sam. Sam's only regret had been their failure to kill his cruel owner, Nat Francis. Hark tells Nat the awful stories of reprisal he's heard since their attack, about a free black woman being mutilated and killed, and another about two white men who nailed the heads of Negroes they killed to a pole. Nat tells him to hush; he cannot bear to hear more of this.

Gray enters the cell, looking worn out. He has no Bible for Nat and tells him that unfortunately the court refused his request to provide Nat with one. Gray tells him Christianity is finished; not only can it not coexist with science, but it is plain evil, he says. Nat, confused, asks what he means about the Bible being evil. Gray refers him back to his own words. Nat had been quoting the Bible in support of his rebellion and telling Gray that God and the divine spirit commanded him to kill the white people. Gray mocks Nat's sense of Christianity and tries to convince him that his rebellion accomplished nothing and has actually set the cause of abolitionism back by inspiring tougher restrictions on slaves. Gray departs after telling Nat he understands that "a man has to act according to his own lights, even when he's the victim of a delusion." (pg. 114) After he leaves, Nat closes his eyes and asks God if what he did was wrong, and if it was, could there be no redemption? God does not answer.

Part 1 Analysis

William Styron introduces and explores the concept of "nigger talk" in Part 1. The goal of nigger talk is to avoid the enmity or cruelty of the white folks by using flattering speech and subservient tones. Nat hates this kind of talk, because he feels it is degrading to prostrate oneself before the white masters. Although Nat is right, this kind of talk is an essential tool for surviving tyranny. Freedom of speech is one of the many freedoms denied the slaves. Their white masters expected them to speak respectfully and subserviently at all times, or else risk being beaten or worse. Hence this "nigger talk," as Nat calls it, was the only way to address a white person without risking a confrontation. Ironically, white people considered their slaves shifty and dishonest because they would say nice, flattering things which the white folks didn't believe they meant. So from a white slave-owner's perspective, their slaves weren't only expected to *talk* nigger talk,

they were expected to mean it. Ironically, as shown in the church scene, many of the slaves *did* mean it. This allegiance to their white owners troubles Nat deeply, but Nat lived and died years before the psychiatric community came to understand the Stockholm Syndrome, in which hostages, over time, begin to identify with their captors as a survival mechanism.

Gray's style of speech is wholly different. In his long-winded, flowery monologues, Gray reveals and defends his deep-seated bigotry. Slavery, as far as Gray is concerned, is the scientific natural order of things. White men are at the top of the food chain; black men are located somewhere around the level of domestic animals such as dogs or mules - but that's only after being elevated by the institution of slavery. Without the beneficial influence of the more cultured and knowledgeable white race, Gray implies, black people would naturally rank on the food chain at about the same level as a wild baboon. Men like Gray wish to feel justified in their support of slavery, and zealously pursue junk science in hopes of proving their superiority and their entitlement to own and tyrannize a race of people. The best evidence Gray can come up with is a philosophical theory about the existence of "monads," which supposedly gauge our respective intellectual capacities. These non-existent, non-measurable monads supposedly exist in smaller quantities in the Negro brain. This ludicrous argument, presented as scientific fact, is received eagerly by the stacked courtroom. Despite Gray's belief that slavery is governed by justice, the facts are that the outcome of the trial had been decided in advance. Nat is legally defined as property, with no civil rights, so the outcome of this justice is completely stacked against him.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Part 2 begins with Nat's recollection of an incident that occurred when he was twelve and still living at Turner's Mill. One night, a fat white traveling salesman had stopped by and stayed for dinner. He sold farm implements all over the country, and while on the road usually stayed with his clients. This night, Nat is serving at the dinner table. The men carry on the conversation while the women eat silently. When Nat serves the salesman, he calls Nat a cute little nipper. Nat's mistress, Miss Nell, adds that he's smart, too, and asks Nat to spell something for their guest. The guest suggests the word "lady," but Samuel Turner insists on something harder. Nat is given the word "columbine" and eagerly rattles off the correct spelling. Samuel Turner, addressing the salesman, explains his unorthodox view that providing education and religion for a Negro benefits the Negro, his master, and the community at large. The conversation quickly changes topics, but young Nathaniel relives his triumph long into the night as he lies awake beside his sleeping mother.

Lying awake now in his jail cell, awaiting execution in a few short days, Nathaniel passes the time reviewing such memories. He sees again his vision of the river, the sea, and the doorless white temple standing high above on the promontory. Nat is gripped by fever and hardly knows whether his memories are occurring now or in the past.

Nat's grandmother had come from the Coromantee tribe in the Gold Coast of Africa. She was thirteen when she was brought in chains aboard a ship to Yorktown and shortly thereafter was sold at auction to Alpheus Turner, Samuel Turner's father. Nat can imagine her terror, speaking no English and coming from a thoroughly different culture, to find herself inexplicably imprisoned. Nat's mother was conceived on board the slave ship, by an unknown black man; whether this was voluntary or not, Nat does not know, but by the time the baby was born, captivity had driven Nat's grandmother insane, and it was known around Turner Mill that she had tried to rip the baby to pieces. After the birth, his grandmother refused all food and died within a few days. At age thirteen, an untamed part of Nat makes him feel very close to his grandmother, and he often studies her wooden gravestone until the slave cemetery is plowed over and turned into a yam field.

It was because of his grandmother's death that Nat became did not become a field slave; when his mother was orphaned, she was brought into the house and raised as a house slave. His mother's name was Lou-Ann, and she was to die when Nat was fifteen, of a tumor. Before she died, Nat remembers pestering his mother with questions about his absent father, for whom he is named. She tells him about the night Marse Benjamin hit Nathaniel Sr. across the face. Nathaniel marched straight back to the kitchen to the room he'd shared with his wife for a year - the same room that Lou-Ann now shares with her son - and packed his bags. Before he left that night, he'd told her

he was going to Philadelphia, and planned to earn enough money to buy her and their son's freedom. He was never heard from again.

As a house servant, Nat learns to despise the uncouth field slaves. He is the only child in the house, the Turner children being considerably older, and so is petted and coddled by the whole household. Wash, the son of the Turner's Negro driver, Abraham, is Nat's only friend. Wash learned his language from the uneducated field hands, though; in the house, Nat has access to a greater vocabulary and longs to exercise his brain more. One day he steals a book, hoping to teach himself to read. Nat hides behind the house with the contraband volume and studies it, but his studies are interrupted by the arrival of the white overseer, McBride. Nat hides under the house and from there can clearly hear McBride raping his mother in the kitchen. He runs away until McBride leaves, and when he returns, he hears his mother singing again, voice unperturbed and serene. The next time Nat hides behind the house to read, he is caught by Little Morning, an older house Negro who is jealous of Nat because Nat knows how to read the labels on the food in the pantry. Little Morning turns Nat in to Marse Samuel, who decides to experiment by educating Nat.

With Marse Benjamin dead, Marse Samuel is free to indulge his experiment, and he sets Miss Nell to teaching him grammar. She calls him a smart little tar baby, and the whole household is impressed with Nat's progress. This never would have been allowed under Marse Benjamin. Nat recalls serving dinner one night when members of the clergy had come to dine with the Turners with the aim of finding out their position on slavery. Their church's official position was in favor of slavery, and they hoped to hear that the Turners shared that view. Marse Samuel had openly declared that he was against slavery but that he didn't think it would be fair or even possible to free the slaves without providing them education; he also thought it unsafe to free Negroes, because the public was so prejudiced against them. The church men didn't care for this response, but Marse Benjamin put them at ease by stating that he would give up slavery only when they had invented a machine which could perform all the same tasks as slaves. The men laugh at his humor, and Benjamin points to Nat as an example of what happens when you try to educate a slave. Nat is stunned, because this is the first time he's heard himself called a slave. The weighty truth sinks in as he listens to Marse Benjamin laugh at Samuel's efforts to teach him, saying that a darky "is basically as unteachable as a chicken." (pg. 165)

To the good fortune of all the slaves on the Turner property, Marse Benjamin died a few months later when a tree he was cutting fell on him. He was characteristically drunk at the time. Nat went on to become the darling pet of Turner's Mill. When he was sixteen, Marse Samuel took him aside and told him he was too smart to spend his life as a house servant. Samuel had arranged for Nat to apprentice as a carpenter, which Nat, eager to challenge his mind as much as he was allowed, threw himself into with passion. A devoutly religious boy, Nat limited his sexual experience to weekly masturbatory sessions in the privacy of the carpentry studio, usually envisioning himself with a white woman, whom he saw as virginal and pure. One can imagine his surprise, then, when he caught Turner's daughter in sexual congress with her cousin out in the

field one night. Nat was shocked but turned on by the blasphemous phrases she uttered, which echoed in his ears during his private weekly sessions.

At eighteen, he discovered what Marse Samuel had in mind for his future. He was enjoying some private time with Marse Samuel as they drove together in the carriage. Marse Samuel was in most respects like a father to Nat, although Nat wasn't permitted as much time or attention as Samuel's blood relations, and of course Samuel never forgot the color of Nat's skin or that he was a slave. Nonetheless, he had been planning for Nat's future, and as they drive, he triumphantly reveals his plan to Nat. From now until Nat turns twenty-one, he will function in a new capacity at Turner's, Samuel tells him; he will be assistant driver on the plantation, answering only to Samuel. He will assist in running the mill and the fields, and will have additional duties like organizing the library. When he turns twenty-one, Nat will be hired out to a rich man in Richmond who has promised him an apprenticeship to learn architecture and carpentry. Nat will be allowed to keep half of his wages, sending the other half to Samuel. When Nat turns twenty-five, Samuel will draw up the necessary papers to provide him his freedom, and Nat will be permitted to visit the Turners in the future with whatever family he creates along the way. Nat is overjoyed, but the afternoon drive is marked by an unsettling sight: a gang of slaves, being driven in chains on foot across the state to be sold. The failing local economy is causing slave-owners to sell of their slaves in increasing numbers.

Samuel buys a slave named Willis to replace Nat in the carpentry shop, and he becomes Nat's first true friend. Nat begins teaching Willis the alphabet, and the two young men spend many enjoyable weekends together fishing. One day by the river bank, they engage in some fairly innocent sexual exploration together, and Nat's religious scruples inspire him to kneel down with Willis and beg God to forgive two sinners. Nat baptizes himself and Willis in the river that day and declares himself a preacher. Nat regrets his actions with Willis, but feels thankful his transgression did not involve a woman, which would be worse, he thinks, in the eyes of God. Nat begins to plan for Willis' future too, intending to teach him to read and convince Marse Samuel to free his friend as well. Nat imagines the two of them living in the same neighborhood with their families as free men.

Later that year, Nat obtains permission from Marse Samuel to attend a weekend Baptist revival with Willis and some of the other slaves. He packs a wonderful picnic basket for the Negroes and looks forward eagerly to leaving the next morning. However, that night the driver, Abraham, summons Nat. Abraham is sick, and so Nat will have to drive a group of slaves over to the Vaughan property that very night; they are being hired out for two weeks by Marse Samuel, not an uncommon way for slave-owners to make profit off of their slaves. Nat thinks he can make it there and back before it's time to leave for the revival, and sets off in a hurry. He is sorely disappointed to see Willis among the group of men to be hired out and can't understand why Marse Samuel would give Willis permission to attend the revival when he knew all the time he would be unable to go. Nat consoles himself with the thought that there will be other revivals in the future for Willis to attend. Such is not the case, though. After he delivers Willis and the other slaves to a man out in front of the Vaughan property, he sees the man drive off in the

opposite direction of the Vaughans and realizes that his friends have just been permanently sold, not hired out for two weeks.

Two weeks later, Marse Samuel defends his actions to Nat, saying that he didn't know Willis was Nat's friend, or that he was among the group Nat had planned to take to the revival. Samuel says it's too late to get Willis back now, and admonishes Nat for not stating his complaint sooner. Samuel feels sorry that Nat wound up being the driver who took Willis to the slave trader. He apologizes and tells him he had to sell the slaves because he needs the money. Due to the worsening economy, Samuel is desperate, and the sale will allow him to hang on for a few more years at most. He laments the evil deeds men do for money and turns his back on Nat.

Three years later, Nat was not hired out to the rich man in Richmond. He instead passed into the temporary custody of Reverend Alexander Eppes. Nat had watched, over the past three years, as Turner's fortunes declined and he sold off his slaves one by one. Nat saw himself as part of the family, though, and could not fathom that Turner would ever sell him. When he was given to Eppes, Nat believed the fiction that Marse Samuel had told him to ease the guilt of selling him. Samuel had told Nat that the apprenticeship had dried up, and that he couldn't just set Nat free without some form of training to prepare him for freedom. Marse Samuel told Nat that he would be loaned out freely to Eppes in exchange for Eppes providing him with a solid religious grounding until the situation in Richmond improved; Eppes would then find Nat an apprenticeship. Samuel promised Nat he would still go free after the end of his apprenticeship and told him he'd signed papers along these lines with Reverend Eppes to secure Nat's eventual freedom. Nat believed him whole-heartedly.

Nat was the last slave to be sold, and the last person to leave the now abandoned Turner Mill. Eppes had turned up to get Nat a day after Marse Samuel himself left. Nat notices his unclean smell right away, and looking over his new master, realizes he's had his last bite of white bread for some time to come. In the carriage, Eppes asks Nat if he's ever slept with one of the black women. Eppes tells him that to be religious-minded, one must believe that women are whores who will lure a man to the devil, and that the only pure sexual relationship is with a young man. Eppes asks if it's true that black boys are abundantly endowed. Fraught with anxiety, Nat refuses to say another word to the reverend during the drive. Reverend Eppes soon gives up his attempts to seduce Nat, and begins concentrating instead on working him into the ground. Nat is the only slave in the tiny town of Shiloh, and the reverend takes great pleasure in showing him off and hiring him out to everyone in town. For the first time in Nat's life, he considers running away, especially when the daily mail fails to produce any letters from Marse Samuel about Nat's promised freedom. He also despises the overwrought church ceremonies of Reverend Eppes' church. His existence is so miserable that he begins to long for death, and only the thought of freedom sustains him. Instead of freedom, though, Nat is sold at auction by Reverend Eppes. He makes a scene, crying out that he's a skilled carpenter and that Eppes had an agreement with Marse Samuel to free him. Eppes merely tells the bystanders that Nat is touched in the head; he sells him for $460. Nat feels so betrayed that he banishes Marse Samuel from his thoughts for good.

Nat then remembers another day, when Thomas Moore, Nat's new owner, had been driving an ox cart containing his cousin, Wallace Moore, and Nat. The two white men are illiterate, and when they come to a fork in the road, only Nat can read the road sign. The Moores don't like the fact that Nat can read, and when Nat tells them he's hungry, they whip him for the first time in Nat's life. Nat is terror-struck, and raises his eyes to the Lord. While sitting on the back of Thomas Moore's ox cart, Nat hears God speak to him for the first time, words which Nat will hear repeatedly over the years and which launch his plans for insurrection. Quite clearly, he hears the words *I abide*.

Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 tells the story of Nat's betrayals at the hands of white men, beginning with his mother's rape, the sale of Willis, and then finally his own sale at the hands of his beloved Marse Samuel. Born into bondage, Nat did not fully grasp the limitations of his freedom for quite a few years. He believed he was better than the field slaves because of the extra privileges he received in the house. This is an interesting character choice by Styron, because there is no way of knowing how the real Nat Turner felt about his enslaved brethren. This part of the book gives us an indication of why Styron received so much criticism for his interpretation of these events, because, while Part 2 does show an intimate knowledge of Southern race relations, it reads almost like it is written from the white man's point of view. It seems in places to have been written by a white man who has closely observed his African-American brethren but who has never been inside the mind of a black man. William Styron is a Caucasian male descended from slave-owners and raised in the South during some of its most troubling history. He appears in this chapter to be making a sincere attempt to put himself in Nathaniel Turner's shoes, and to some extent he succeeds. However, his cultural conditioning may be revealing itself in young Nat's easy acceptance of his slavery. It's not so bad, according to Nat's character, because he has it relatively easy. Only when Nat's lot gets tougher does he really begin to resent his slave status. While it's possible that house slaves such as Nat would have felt this way to some extent, one wonders if Nat Turner really viewed his enslavement on the Turner Mill with such equanimity. After his mother's rape, for example, Lou-Ann resumes singing peacefully. Styron writes as if he has personally observed such serenity in the face of tyranny, but perhaps he makes a mistake in assuming that such serenity is felt internally, as opposed to being a brave front put on by a strong individual.

The culture of Southern white slave-holders encouraged them to believe that their Negroes were happy. This was a deeply ingrained, self-serving bit of justification for their acts. Without slavery, Southern whites feared their entire way of life would collapse. As slave-owner Benjamin Turner states in this section, he would gladly give up the owning of slaves if there were some clever machine that could do all the farm work and tend to the house; since there is no machine, though, he wouldn't dream of giving up the luxurious leisure that slavery affords him. Rather than see himself as a man cruel and selfish enough to deny another human being his rights for the sole purpose of increasing his profit margin, Benjamin Turner prefers to believe that his slaves are actually sub-human. Slavery was big business, and slave-owners such as Turner

created a culture, an environment, which deemed slavery permissible. The prejudice against African-Americans was so deeply embedded in the culture that no slave had a chance to be seen or valued as a true individual.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

Nat spends the next five years inculcating hatred for white people in his fellow slaves. About three years after becoming Moore's property, Nat recalls a Saturday afternoon in the town of Jerusalem, the town nearest the Moore place. A free Negro named Arnold had been out by the side of the road. The townspeople despise Arnold for being free, as he symbolizes a weakness in the institution of slavery. Arnold is an outcast, and must resort to begging for a living. This day a strange white woman approaches him for directions as Nat secretly watches. The woman is so stunned by Arnold's sorry condition that Nat sees the naked pity in her eyes. This drives him into a frenzy of sexual arousal. He imagines raping her and causing her pain to replace the loathsome pity in her eyes. It is this incident that makes him realize the disturbing fact that a white person's kindness drives him to greater fury than their crueler acts.

Nat is to spend nearly a decade with Thomas Moore. These are the worst years of his life, as he is not allowed to use his brain. He is put to work as a field hand and general slave laborer. After that first day when Moore whipped him, Nat vowed never to give him even the slightest cause to repeat the whipping. He became the most docile, uncomplaining, sweetly obedient slave imaginable in order to protect himself from Moore's wrath. Meanwhile, Nat had continually consulted the Scriptures for guidance to endure his captivity. He realizes he must not panic and lash out in blind fury. Instead, like a Zen master, he schools himself to control his emotions at all times. Therefore, throughout his twenties, Nat was, on the surface, the most pliant slave imaginable. He drove himself hard to avoid being driven by Moore. Also in the household were young Putnam and Miss Sarah, his future owners. Putnam was a tyrant even at the age of six, but Miss Sarah was kind to Nat and occasionally gave him good food to eat. The only thing that made these years endurable to Nat was the solitude he was allowed on Saturdays, which he spent fasting, in prayerful contemplation, in a pine bough shelter that he built for himself in the woods.

During his years at Moore's Nat first met Hark. Hark's former owner had separated Hark from his beloved mother and sisters, and so when Hark was first sold to Samuel Travis, he ran away. Hark had heard at his former home about the route North, which passed through the cities of Petersburg, Richmond, Washington, and Baltimore. Hark guided himself by the north star for six weeks, as he passed through four major cities, which he assumed were Petersburg, Richmond, Washington, and Baltimore. Unfortunately, Hark had never seen a city, and what he thought were major cities were actually small villages dotting the Virginia countryside. Hark had been traveling in circles, never straying more than forty miles from Travis' home. In the end, Hark was betrayed by a fellow Negro whom he asked for directions.

Nat and Hark met because it was common in the area to hire out one's slaves to others in the community. Nat frequently worked for Travis, and Hark was also hired out to

Moore. They became inseparable friends, and because the two plantations were so close, Nat and Hark spent time together in the woods setting trap lines, fishing at the river, and barbecuing deep in the woods the chickens Hark would steal along with a jug of cider for Sundays. One time, five years before Nat launched his insurrection, he and Hark had managed to get five days off together to spend in the woods. Nat wished to fast and pray, and Hark agreed to accompany him, though he had no interest in fasting. Although Nat had taken to fasting often, this five-day fast affected him physically and emotionally. Smoke from the intense forest fires caused by a drought clouded both the day and night skies, and Nat took the fires to be a sign from God. After five days, Hark reluctantly left Nat alone in the woods, where Nat searched the sky while praying to God. He saw a black angel clothed in black armor destroy a white angel after a terrible battle.

That fast-induced vision was swiftly followed by two ugly events which further turned Nat against the white man and caused him to interpret his vision as a mandate to kill them. On the way to town with Hark, Moore, and Wallace, one day, their cart had passed the home of a free Negro named Isham. The home was a hovel to begin with, but because of the drought, Isham, his wife, and their six young children were starving. As the cart lumbers by, the men notice Isham's wife, sitting disconsolately on the curb, clutching her nearly dead infant to her breast. As Moore starts to drive on by, Isham bursts out of the house and confronts Moore. He calls him a string of foul names, and blames Moore for standing by while Isham's children die. Nat had never heard a white man spoken to in this manner, and certainly Moore had never heard such language directed at him by a Negro. Nat expects Moore to lash out at Isham with his whip, but instead, Moore turns pale with fright and lashes the mules to get away from Isham as swiftly as possible. In this instant, Nat realizes that freedom alone won't help his people. He also sees a white man show fear in the face of a black man's anger for the first time.

The second incident that spurs Nat to plan his revolt involves Nathaniel Francis, the cruelest white slave-owner in the county, who is also Miss Sarah's older brother. Francis had the habit of beating his slaves, and even the vicious Moore didn't trust Francis enough to hire Nat out to him. Francis' favorite whipping boys were two slaves named Sam and Will. The beatings scarred them both physically, but the emotional scarring was worse, especially in Will's case. Will's anger left him constantly on the edge of insanity, and he was often heard mumbling threats under his breath. On weekends, the slave-owners would visit the town of Jerusalem, and their slaves were allowed some free time in town. On this particular day, Hark and Nat were loitering with the other slaves around the market. A commotion catches their attention, and Hark goes off to find Francis putting on a show for a group of poor white people gathered nearby. Francis was forcing Sam and Will to beat each other up. The two slaves were friends, and tried to refuse, but Francis whipped them each time they failed to attack each other. When Hark reports this back to Nat, the other Negroes in the vicinity laugh at the amusing way Hark tells the story. Their laughter sets Nat off, though, and he calls out to his brothers to stop laughing and hear him preach. Nat delivers his first sermon that day, exhorting his fellow slaves to stand up and be counted as men. His words scare some of the blacks into leaving, but others surround him after the sermon to show their support.

This first successful sermon inspires Nat to form a Saturday Bible study class comprised of seven or eight slaves, including Hark and Sam. One Saturday after the Bible study, Nat is approached by a poor white man named Ethelred T. Brantley. Brantley begs Nat to save him. Nat is initially suspicious, especially given the inflammatory tone of Nat's recent sermon to his black brothers. He asks why Brantley doesn't go get saved at one of the white churches, and Brantley tells him he's been thrown out of the white church for being a sodomizer. Now Nat feels pity for Brantley and decides it would give him pleasure to fulfill a priestly duty which the white priests had shirked. He tells Brantley to fast for a week and then meet him at Thomas Moore's next Sunday.

Nat makes his way to the nearby Whitehead residence to ask Reverend Richard Whitehead for permission to use his church for the baptism. Whitehead makes Nat go around to the back entrance before he will open the door to him, and when Nat makes his request, Whitehead becomes incensed. He tells Nat he has no business declaring himself a Reverend, as he didn't go to school to get the credentials. Nat insists he is a preacher in God's eyes, but when Whitehead finds out who Nat wants to baptize, he refuses to allow Nat and Brantley to "pollute the sacred altar of a Methodist temple" (pg. 318). Whitehead sends Nat away, promising to tell his master about this incident.

Nat decides Persons' millpond is a better spot for the baptism, but by the next Sunday, word has spread, and a crowd of jeering, poor white people lines the riverbank. Brantley is oblivious to them, grateful beyond measure for his newfound salvation; he doesn't even seem to notice when the crowd begins pelting them with stones. After the ceremony, Nat advises Brantley to leave the county because the white people are going to be destroyed, but the joyful Brantley is also oblivious to this warning.

As Nat approaches the age of thirty, the region begins to recover some of its former prosperity. The drought had finally ended, and the locals had also begun selling their apple cider brandy to eager buyers. The renewed prosperity causes a building boom, and Nat suddenly finds his long-neglected carpentry skills in great demand. Moore is thrilled, because he's able to hire Nat out at considerable profit, and Nat is thrilled because he spends virtually no time working for Moore directly. His drudgework is replaced by the skilled carpentry work that he relishes. He designs several ingenious contraptions for neighboring landowners and gains valuable intelligence about the region from working in so many places. Nat has the chance to work at the armory and at the Whiteheads, and he discovers where the guns are kept in both locations. He finds himself straddling a strange line of duality; his popularity increases amongst the whites in the region even as he begins planning in earnest to slaughter them. One day at the Whiteheads, he finds a surveyor's map, and closets himself in the library to trace a copy. As he leaves that night, the widow Whitehead pays Nat what she believes to be a compliment when she tells him that she once offered Moore a thousand dollars to buy him.

Now that he has the surveyor's map, Nat creates a written plan for his insurrection; it includes ten objectives. The first is to take over the Whitehead place early in the struggle, so that his men can use the firearms, which he inventories from memory. The

second major objective is to reach the armory at Jerusalem, after destroying the neighboring plantations. The third objective is to reach the Dismal Swamp safely; his men can hide out there until it's safe to make a break for the North. Item four is the necessity of surprise; Nat cannot afford to reveal his plan even to his own men until the last minute to avoid security leaks. The fifth point to consider is who and how many to recruit. Nat's sixth item calls for patience and trust in God. Item seven is to wait for God's next sign before acting. Objective number eight is to prevent his men from raping any white females: "We shall not do to their women what they have done to ours." (pg. 330) Objective number nine is to kill every white person, without exception. This is the only way to stop survivors from going for help. His final objective is strength and timing:

"Let Thy hand be upon the man of Thy right hand, upon the Son of man whom Thou madest strong for Thyself. Turn us again, O Lord God of hosts, cause Thy face to shine, and we shall be saved. Amen.

When O Lord?" (pg. 330)

By this time, Nat has about twelve followers at his Bible class, and he works hard to instill in them a sense of black militancy. He educates them on history, but twists the facts to provide them with role models of black generals. He tells them Napoleon was black, and so were Joshua and David from the Bible. Even as he strives to put them in the right mindset, though, he does not reveal his plans. All of his followers have reason to hate, and he carefully nurtures that hatred. Nelson had a series of cruel owners, and seems supportive of any plan Nat might suggest. Henry contains his rage well, but it exists patiently under the surface, birthed by the blow of a drunken overseer that had made Henry deaf when he was just a boy. Sam hates his master, Nathaniel Francis, and Nat believes he will likely follow any plan that provides for his tormentor's death. Hark's hatred is the hardest to nurture, as he has a huge heart, but the sale of his wife and child and his friendship with Nat make Nat confident that he will go along with the plan, too, once revealed. These five men meet often to go over the map Nat traced at the Whiteheads; Nat has told them that he plans a mass escape to Dismal Swamp, and in this manner is able to begin strategizing with his friends.

One day, Nat carelessly cuts himself installing shelves in the Whitehead library while his mind is engrossed in his planning. As he bandages his hand, he hears Miss Margaret approach. She tells her mother she must look up a poem in order to prove her friend wrong about a quote they're disputing. The pretty teenager bursts into the library wearing no skirt, just the white pantalets that go under a lady's skirt. Although the pantalets cover her to her ankles, the thin white cotton is revealing, and Nat knows Margaret would never enter a white man's presence half-undressed. As Nat panics, unsure whether he should leave the library, close his eyes, or what, Margaret pays him no attention as she finds and recites the poem that proves her right and her friend wrong. Nat is turned on by Miss Margaret, and furious with her for carelessly teasing him as if he weren't a real man capable of sexual arousal. Margaret finally turns to Nat and asks for his help with another literary dispute with the same friend. Nat looks at the floor and quotes her the appropriate line. She notices his cut and touches his hand. He

yanks his hand away, and she leaves after making him promise to take care of it. Nat is left alone in the library hating her and wanting her all at once.

Eventually, Moore is killed in a freak accident as he births a calf from its mother. Nat worries about what will happen to him and his plans as he is inherited by young Putnam. Soon after, though, Samuel Travis courts and weds Miss Sarah, thereby gaining joint custody of Nat until Putnam comes of age. He moves to the Travis property with Putnam and Miss Sarah, which is much nicer and cozier than Moore's place had been. Travis immediately puts him to work full time doing carpentry around the mill. Nat has more leisure time, much better food and lodgings, and work which challenges his ingenuity; he rigs up several clever contraptions for Travis. Life is much more pleasant for everybody. Travis is not rich, but over the years, he's made a decent profit and now enjoys the pleasant company of his laughing wife Sarah. Travis appreciates Nat's gifted craftsmanship and treats him well. Despite all of the improvements in his circumstances, though, Nat finds himself burning with rage as never before to be free. He receives what he believes is the final sign, calling him to action: a solar eclipse.

On Sunday, Nat gathers his four most loyal followers - Henry, Sam, Hark, and Nelson - and reveals the full scope of his plan. None of his followers object to the idea of killing. The Reverend Nat swears them to secrecy before dismissing them that night. He establishes a password of sorts, which becomes both their greeting and benediction: "'The first shall be the last.''An' the last shall be the first,' they replied." (pg. 350) They originally choose Independence Day to strike, both for its symbolic value and because most of the town of Jerusalem would be off celebrating, making the armory and the town easier to capture. Nat doubts God's support when he learns that for the first time in the town's history, the Fourth of July celebration will be held within the town instead of outside it. Nat's faith is restored, though, when he hears of a Baptist revival planned for late August, which means half the town of Jerusalem will leave to attend it. This leaves Nat only two months to complete his preparations. The group of friends quickly and quietly begins recruiting more men.

Nat and his four generals plan an S-shaped route on the map, intending to attack all twenty-three plantations in the surrounding area, beginning with a small group of men at the Turner place, and gathering more Negroes as they go. By starting small, Nat hopes to avoid discovery until such time as his force has grown in size and strength to be able to attack the town of Jerusalem. If they kill every white person at all twenty-three plantations, there will be no one to warn the town. The Whitehead place will be hit midway through the plantation killings, to allow the growing band to add the Whitehead firearms to their stash. Nat hopes to accomplish the capture of the armory in Jerusalem within thirty-six hours of launching the attack.

Nat's plans are complicated by Will, who one night strikes Francis and escapes into the woods. Although Will is not a part of Nat's plan, Nat is afraid his action will call down heat on all of the area slaves. Nat is at the Whiteheads when this news comes, and Reverend Whitehead grabs his gun to join the hunting posse. After he leaves, Margaret expresses her disgust for their intention of gunning Will down in the swamps. She says she can't blame Will for hitting Francis, knowing the way Francis beats his darkies. She

looks to Nat for confirmation: Wouldn't he, Nat, also have hit Francis back in a similar circumstance? Her question, although sincerely and sympathetically intended, puts Nat in an impossible position. No slave can admit to wanting to hit a white man and live, Nat knows, but Margaret, in her youthful, lily-white innocence, can't understand that Nat is not free to speak his mind even with her.

Margaret tells Nat how she had recently stood up for the darkies at school, by telling another girl that in her opinion the darkies should be free. Further, Margaret tells the girl, she knows a "'darky slave who is almost as intelligent and refined and clean and religious and profoundly understanding of the Bible as Dr. Simpson'-Dr. Simpson is the principal of the Seminary, Nat-'and not only that, my *erstwhile* friend'-I was positively almost screaming-'if you want my humble opinion, and I'm *certain* that I'm the only girl in school who thinks so, but *my* humble opinion is that the darkies in Virginia should be *free!*'" (pg. 366) She tells Nat that the darky she was referring to is him. Nat doesn't reply; he feels claustrophobic in her presence. They are squeezed together tightly on the seat of the carriage, and he can't get away from her. It occurs to him that he could stop the carriage right here on this deserted road and rape her. His arousal is obvious under his trousers as Margaret speaks close to his ear in a whispery voice. Her childish prattle about theories of freedom, Christ, and love, which she had learned in her brother's church, both angers and bores Nat. He turns his mind to a weightier matter: the disposition of Miss Sarah. Although Nat's plan calls for killing every single white person, he is inclined to spare Miss Sarah, who has been nothing but kind to him from the start.

While Nat is thinking this over, Margaret clutches his arm and insists that he stop the carriage. She'd seen an injured turtle lying in the road. Its shell is cracked and survival seems unlikely, so Nat offers to end its suffering. He finds a hickory branch at the side of the road and clubs it once over the head. Margaret composes herself and says she needs a drink of water. Nat leads her to a brook behind the trees. As they walk, Margaret remarks that she's sorry she spoke so harshly about her friend about the slavery issue. She goes on to describe a play she and that friend had written together. Nat ignores her prattle; he holds her eyes with his. She stumbles and her breast brushes his arm. A voice in Nat's head tells him to take her, to release years of unspent passion in one afternoon. Spend his anger here, now, on her. She stumbles again, into his arms. Their eyes meet again. Nat abandons his plan to ravage her and is filled with a desolate emptiness.

Sunday, the 21st of August is the date Nat chooses for his rebellion; it is during the revival, and on Sundays most of the area Negroes are allowed to take some time off, so they will not be missed. That afternoon he and his four generals gather in the woods for a final barbecue. Nat calculates that they'll have gathered twenty men by the time they hit the Whitehead residence, and he expects to have hundreds by the time they hit Jerusalem. Nat steps away from the barbecue to pray in solitude, and moments later Will appears from the woods. Will is still on the run from his recent escape attempt, and had overheard them planning to kill the white folks. He insists on joining the group, despite Nat's protests. Nat doesn't think he can control Will, but he realizes that Will's anger will make him a powerful weapon. Nat lays down the rules: brandy and raping

white women are both out of the question. He and Will rejoin the others, and Nat asks his four generals to report on their preparation status. Nat instructs them all to use only cold steel during the night; they don't want to lose the element of surprise with gunfire just yet. The only unanswered question is whether to spare Samuel and Sarah's baby boy. Nat tells them he'll decide that on the fly, and sends them off to their posts.

At ten o'clock, Nat joins his men at the ravine. The time has come. They head straight for the Travis place, and Hark, who is friendly with the dogs, goes ahead to quiet them down. Nat leaves a few men outside to saddle up horses and prepare their getaway. Then they enter the house and head up the stairs. Nat directs Nelson, Hark and Jack up to the attic to kill Travis' grown sons, while he, Sam and Henry head for Samuel and Sarah's bedroom. The couple rises up in bed, taking in the situation instantly. Nat looks into Samuel's eyes for the very first time and feels he knows him at last. But this kinship doesn't alter Nat's plans. He takes a hatchet and aims it at Samuel. He hits the headboard instead. Marse Samuel tries to run but is cornered by the other men as Nat struggles to free the axe from the headboard. Nat keeps trying to kill Samuel, but his blows keep missing. From nowhere, Will appears and buries a hatchet in Marse Samuel. Will cries out that if Nat can't do it, he can. He asks if Nat wants to kill Sarah, or if he should do it himself. Nat doesn't answer, and Will takes his hatchet to her, finishing her off easily. Hark descends the stairs with a new look in his eyes. He has become a killer. With all the whites in the household dead, Nat orders his men to move on.

Nat recalls a conversation he had with Gray in his jail cell shortly before his trial. Gray had been demanding to know how Nat could possibly justify taking innocent lives. "You tell me you *was* goin' to spare the child but suddenly you have a second thought about it. So you say out loud, 'Nits breed lice!'-there's a delicate sentiment, I'll vow, Reverend, for a man of the cloth-and you send Henry and Will back to the house an' they take that pore pitiful little babe and dash its brains out agin the wall" (pg. 392). Gray had demanded to know why Nat didn't feel remorse for killing the Travis' baby boy. Nat simply insists he feels no remorse and reminds Gray that he couldn't afford survivors. In fact, Nat tells him, it was because of one fourteen year old girl who had managed to flee into the woods that the mounted troops had been alerted and blockaded the city of Jerusalem before Nat's men could attempt to take it.

Gray admits that Nat's plan was successful up to a point, but reminds Nat that it was doomed to fail because of the weak Negro character. For example, Gray points out, Nat had expected hundreds of Negroes to join up with him along the way, but only seventy-five men had actually done so. In fact, many more black slaves had chosen to fight alongside their masters against Nat. Also, Gray reminds him, Nat's troops couldn't avoid getting drunk despite Nat's orders to the contrary. "*But, Mr. Gray*, I found myself wanting to say, *what else could you expect from mostly young men deaf, dumb, blind, crippled, shackled, and hamstrung from the moment of their first baby-squall on a bare clay floor? It was prodigious that we come as far as we did, that we nearly took Jerusalem...*But I said nothing." (pg. 396) Gray declares that Nat's race caused the downfall of his plan and cites this as further evidence "'that nigger slavery's goin' to last for a thousand years.'" (pg. 397)

Gray leaves Nat alone to brood in his cell, and Nat wonders if it's true that he has no remorse. Nat feels the most pain over the Negroes who took up arms against his men, although he forgives them because he knows they were raised as slaves without hope or options. The final stand had taken place at the Ridley plantation, where black and white men with guns had attacked Nat's troops. Will was killed in a brave dash to break through enemy lines, and Hark was shot and dragged off toward the house to be beaten. Nat's troops were decimated by gunfire, and the remaining men escaped to the bushes. Some of them returned to their houses, hoping their participation would go unnoticed. Nat managed to avoid capture, but lingered near the devastation the next day, seeking solace in prayer. That was when he discovered that God had abandoned him, and that he was unable to pray. Now in his solitary jail cell, Nat considers the question of remorse and realizes he would do all of it again. He would destroy every single life, except one...

Upon leaving the Travis place, Nat had already become involved in a power struggle with Will. Nat tries twice more, in view of his men, to kill at some of the subsequent plantations they hit, but on both occasions his aim is off, and he finds himself incapable of delivering a single death blow. Will tells him to step aside and goes in for the kills himself and then provokes a leadership showdown when he takes a large mirror. Nat hadn't forbidden all looting, recognizing the poverty of his men and the futility of trying to prevent it, but he had given them strict orders to not pick up any large items that might hamper their movement. Will loots a full-size mirror, and Nat knows he must get Will to toe the line now or lose control. Will refuses to drop the mirror, telling Nat that he's running the show now. Nat gathers his courage and tells the madman Will that Nat is the only one running things. His voice cracks with fear, and Will stares down at him contemptuously. Only when Nelson comes to Nat's defense and gives Will a tongue-lashing does Will back down. Nat realizes that if he cannot prove himself to his men by killing, Will will take over sooner or later. Their next stop is the Whitehead residence.

When they arrive there, Richard Whitehead is killed on the spot by Hark and Henry. Nat orders his troops to secure the woods, where the overseer and his men are trying to escape, but then is overcome with dizziness, and dismounts his horse. His men notice he's sick, but Nat can only stand there helplessly and watch the action. Finally, he sees Will decapitate Margaret's mother a few scant yards from where Nat stands. Will had seen Nat too. "Dar she is, preacher man, dey's one left!' he howled. 'An' she all your'n! Right by de cellah do'! Go git her, preacher man!' he taunted [Nat] in his wild rage. 'If'n you cain't make de *red juice* run you cain't run de *army!*'" (pg. 412) Silently, Margaret Whitehead rises from her hiding place by the cellar door and runs for her life. Nat realizes who she is when he sees her hair ribbon fall to the earth. "*Ah, how I want her*, [he] thought, and unsheathed [his] sword." (pg. 413)

Nat rounds the corner after Margaret and gains on her quickly in the field. She stumbles and falls, and Nat plunges his sword into her side. She finally breaks her silence with a scream. He stabs her a second time, in the same place below her left breast. Nat walks away, but her voice calls him back as if in hallucination. He turns to find her looking at him; she's in terrible pain and begs him to finish the job of killing her. Nat tells her to close her eyes, and then he delivers the final death blow with a wooden rail. Nat guards

her body for a seemingly endless space of time, until he thinks he sees her soul rise from her body and vanish. Then he finally rejoins his men.

The killings continue throughout the day. To everyone's dismay, the cruel master Nathaniel Francis is away when they reach his house. Nat feels more in control now that he's proven he can kill, though, and the rebellion seems to progress well. The killings did not go completely according to plan, though. Everyone was to die at each house so that no one would be left to raise the alarm, but in fact, a fourteen year old girl had escaped into the woods, and it was her warning that became the undoing of Nat's band. At this point in the story, Nat admits that he was the only one who saw her slip off into the woods. Perhaps as atonement for killing young Margaret, Nat had let this other girl go without even trying to give chase.

Part 3 Analysis

Part 3 opens with a seemingly unrelated story: the white woman who looks upon the free Negro, Arnold, with pity. Her pity arouses in Nat an unspeakable anger. This is something Nat claims not to understand. Shouldn't it be cruelty which arouses his anger? Why does his fury reach a fever pitch only when confronted with pity, kindness, or empathy from the whites? That is the key to understanding Nat's ruthless rebellion. Never in the history of slavery had the slaves gotten together and rebelled. And why not? Why didn't the slaves fight back? There were several reasons. First, the white man denied the black man an education. Without the ability to read or write, communication between slaves - essential to any rebellion - was effectively blocked off. Then came the mental conditioning. Being raised in an environment that taught blacks to believe they were inferior to whites prevented many slaves from even realizing they were entitled to freedom. Finally, there is again the Stockholm Syndrome, which describes a basic human survival mechanism: please your captor; it's the best way to survive another day. The Stockholm Syndrome is particularly effective when the captor holds the power of life and death and demonstrates occasional "kindnesses" to the captive. The slavery system in the South was designed with the effects of this Syndrome in mind (even though the Syndrome itself was not formally categorized until 1973). By showing occasional kindness to their slaves, the white population was able to subtly reinforce their mental control over them, to lull them into complacency and acceptance of their slave status. Although Nat was not a psychologist, he understood on a visceral level that the white man's kindness was every bit as dangerous as cruelty.

Perhaps Nat was afraid he would slip into complacency if life as a slave became tolerable. When he was given more fulfilling work under Marse Samuel, his anger increased, because he saw that as a threat to his plans. How much easier would it have been for him to knuckle under, to accept occasional kindnesses from his master and work hard for his approval? When the whole world is telling you to accept your lot, that it's not so bad, from where do you get the courage to stand up and fight? Nat found that courage in his anger, and so felt threatened by any kindness that might undermine his rage. The lawyer Gray could not understand how Nat could have killed the white people who showed kindness to their slaves, but Nat knew in his heart that they were the most

dangerous. The kindly slave-owners were the ones who could use their sporadic acts of kindness to justify a tyrannical system. And the self-esteem of the black slaves was so fragile that even the smallest pittance of kindness could be enough to dissuade them from claiming their freedom. Blacks were taught from the cradle that they had no right to freedom, and so to forcibly wrest that freedom from the white man required a huge leap of faith - a belief that they were indeed worthy of more than the scraps of kindness allowed them by their masters. It was this battle for the hearts and minds of his fellow slaves that most challenged Nat; convincing them that their lives should not be traded for a few extra scraps of food or some kind words was his toughest job. Nat was forced to invent black heroes; he convinced his followers, for example, that Napoleon was black, because there was no historical precedent in the white man's written history to prove to the slaves that black people could be strong and free.

History has proven the validity of Nat's cause, but at the time, he was nearly alone in his belief that black men deserved freedom. Not even his fellow slaves believed in their own rights. As a man of God, it was nearly impossible for Nat to justify any killings, and yet he felt in his heart that the white man's oppression deserved an equal and opposite reaction.

Gray's reference to the killing of innocent whites is ironic. Certainly one can understand that he saw the women and children as being innocent, but Gray did not see the white slave-owners as criminals either. From Nat's point of view, though, by choosing to own other human beings, these white men committed a crime, and put their wives and children at risk. By tolerating their husband's choices, the women accepted that risk for themselves and their babies. Gray's lamentations over the innocent lives lost show his strong sense of denial that slavery was a crime.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

Nat is lost in his vision again, of the boat in the river leading to the sea, with the white temple on the promontory high above. He wakes with a start. It is the day of his execution. He taps on the wall of Hark's jail cell, waking his friend. Hark asks how much longer they must wait. He has been living with severe injuries sustained in the rebellion; they have gone untreated in jail, and Hark is impatient to get on with his fate. He tells Nat that due to his injuries, he can't stand and will have to be tied into a chair to be hung. Nat sits in silence; he tries to pray but feels abandoned by God. He begs God for a sign. In the distance, a dog barks. Hark, who doesn't know Nat had just prayed for a sign, says that the dog barking must be a sign of something. The men spend the gray hours of their last remaining morning on earth dozing fitfully.

At last, Nat hears Kitchen's keys rattling in the lock. He has brought Gray to see Nat. Gray, against the wishes of the court, has brought Nat a Bible. Gray shakes his hand, and Nat is struck by the realization that his is the first black hand Gray has ever shaken. Gray departs, and Nat sets the Bible down. He will not open it, but Nat nonetheless feels better for its presence in his jail cell. He thinks of Margaret again, and now that his life is beyond fear, he allows himself to feel love and desire for her.

There are footsteps again in the corridor. This time they come for Hark. Nat listens as they carelessly manhandle the injured Hark into a chair. Hark's cries of pain cause Nat to yell out: "'Don't hurt him, you white sons of bitches! You've done hurt him enough! All his life! Now God damn you don't hurt him no more!'" (pg. 427) As they carry Hark away in the chair, Hark calls out to Nat, telling him not to worry. "'Ev'ythin' gwine be all right! Dis yere ain't nothin,' Nat, nothin' atall! Good-bye, ole Nat, good-bye!'" (pg. 427)

Nat takes his place at the window one last time; he holds his Bible for comfort. Finally he hears the footsteps coming for him. A voice calls for him to come. He thinks of Margaret again. He knows he would have done it all again; except her death, only that he would undo. The voice calls again. He turns in surrender.

Part 4 Analysis

Only now, when Nat is beyond the reach of fear, can he feel the emotion of love. It is clear that Nat has loved Margaret from the start, but his love manifested itself as hatred. She symbolized to him everything that he could not have - everything which had been denied him by slavery. Here at the hour of his death, he can imagine loving her in Heaven, where color will not matter. Nat turns to greet his fate, feeling pity for those who must live on in this evil world.

Characters

Nat Turner

Nathaniel Turner was born into slavery in the American South in the year 1800. The author, William Styron, grew up near one of the plantations where Turner lived, and became fascinated from a young age by this "Black Spartacus" who fought for freedom and the end of white dominion over people of color in this country. Nat Turner is seen as a hero by many people today, but at the time of the uprising, he was viewed as an evil lunatic by the horrified white Southerners.

Part of the criticism that Styron faced for writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* stems from his depiction of Nat as a man who believed God spoke to him and called upon him to kill the white slave-owners. Naturally, many people of faith think that the idea of God promoting violence is insane and that Styron's depiction of Turner is a portrait of a Bible-toting maniac. The portrait Styron paints can be viewed in a different light as well, though. For who are we to say that God didn't speak to Nathaniel Turner? Why would we assume Nat *wasn't* God's right arm in putting a halt to slavery? Whether or not God spoke to Nat Turner, Nat was definitely exposed to the ideal of freedom through his reading of the Christian Bible. Why wouldn't a downtrodden slave such as Nat apply that ideal to his own life? With the benefit of historical hindsight, the reader need not assume that Styron's portrait of this famous leader in any way implies that he was insane. Styron's portrait of Nat is fundamentally sympathetic, and Styron does his best to show Nat as a human being capable of a broad range of complex emotions, and capable of sacrificing his innocence and inner peace for the greater good.

Hark

Hark was Nat's best friend. He was a strapping man with a magnificent physique, which made him particularly valuable both to his white owners and to Nat's plans for revolution. The other quality the slave-owners valued about Hark was his complacent servility. It is ironic that Hark and Nat became friends, because before Hark fell under Nat's influence, he was the type of slave Nat despised. Hark was kind and affable to his masters and frequently indulged in what Nat called "nigger talk." This kind of talk was an obsequious form of flattery that many slaves developed as a survival mechanism. Having no power over their own lives, the slaves were completely dependent on their owners for survival, and so it was natural for many men like Hark to try their best to get along with and please the white men who owned them. A good relationship with one's owner was the best, and only, form of security for a slave, and so Hark's flattery, his "nigger talk," was a common method of adapting to and surviving the institution of slavery.

As he became friends with Nat, though, Hark learned self-respect. He came to realize that kissing up to the white masters was a betrayal of self. Nat worked hard to stoke the

anger buried deep within Hark over the sale of his wife and little boy by a greedy white master. The master had convinced Hark that he had no choice but to sell off his family, because times were hard. It was Nat who finally got Hark to see the spurious logic of that decision. Hark ultimately becomes Nat's most loyal follower, and through a twist of circumstance, he and Nat are the last two rebels to be hung, so Hark remains with Nat until his dying day.

Samuel Turner (Marse Samuel)

Samuel Turner was Nat's first owner. Their relationship was emotionally complex. Nat viewed Marse Samuel as a father figure; he loved him, and was frequently loved in return. Turner's real priorities, though, were the members of his own white flesh and blood family. Turner only sporadically indulged his love for Nat, and he often benignly ignored him. The relationship meant much more to Nat, who grew up without a father in the Turner household. As a child, Nat did not of course see himself as a sub-human slave, and he had no idea that the family did see him that way. Nat thought he was part of the Turner family, and since the family indulged him as a kind of domestic pet, Nat felt loved and accepted by them at first. As he came of age, though, he began to learn that the color of his skin separated him from truly being a part of the family. When he came to realize, at about the age of twelve, that he was owned property, Nat felt hurt and betrayed by his so-called family.

In spite of his hurt, Nat still loved Marse Samuel, and Marse Samuel, in turn, cared about Nat, but only as far as his underlying racism allowed. Samuel came up with a plan to free Nat which included hiring him out as an apprentice for several years. This apprenticeship would have paid Samuel back for the loss of valuable "property" he would incur by freeing a slave. Sam never explained to Nat that he was only willing to free him if it made economic sense to do so, though, and in the end, Marse Samuel sold Nat off to recoup the financial losses that the failing economy had inflicted on the Turner Mill. Samuel did not have the courage to tell Nat to his face that he was being sold, and instead came up with a convoluted lie which left Nat with the futile hope that he would still be freed one day. Nat himself never seems to consciously realize that Marse Samuel lied to him. As a loving son, he justifies Turner's behavior, believing that Turner's hand was forced due to economic necessity. Part of Nat must have realized that economics do not justify the sale or betrayal of a human being, though. Unable to deal with Samuel's betrayal of him, Nat simply put the man out of his mind and refused to give him another thought. However, Nat's feelings about the sale of Hark's wife and child later in the book seem to express Nat's own anger at Marse Samuel for selling him.

Miss Margaret Whitehead

The teenage daughter of a nearby plantation owner, Miss Margaret was probably the love of Nat's life. Had she lived in the North, she would most likely have been an abolitionist. Margaret detests slavery, and truly cares for Nat. However, she is the only

girl at her school who doesn't support slavery, and so has little hope that the slaves will be freed. Despite his feelings for Margaret, she enrages Nat more than any other human being does. What he most hates about her is the fact that she prattles on about the evils of slavery as if it were some theoretical problem. One moment she's moved by the plight of the slaves, and the next moment she's rattling on about a school play. Margaret feels no sense of responsibility for the practice of slavery, and considers herself big-hearted and humane just because she occasionally disagrees with the prevailing views about it; as Nat watches his precious life slip away day by day to a slave existence, Margaret feels no urgency to act on her convictions. As far as she's concerned, it is a theoretical problem, and she doesn't truly consider that Nat, along with every other slave, is tormented by that 'theoretical problem' every moment of every day. Nat also hates her, despite his love, because she represents everything which he, as a slave, cannot have. She is affluent, and free to enjoy life. She has education, respect, and hope for the future - all things denied to the slaves who worked so hard to provide her family with prosperity.

Joseph Travis (Marse Joe)

Joseph Travis is Nat's final owner. Apart from the fact that he owns slaves, Nat finds Marse Joe to be a decent man. At the Travis property, Nat's life improves somewhat, because he is allowed to use his ingenuity instead of just his brawn. Joseph Travis respects Nat's skills, and considers him a very valuable piece of property. However, by the time he knows Travis, Nat has learned the hard way that kindness from a white man is harder to bear than cruelty, and so every kindness that Marse Joe bestows upon him only feeds Nat's rage.

Sarah Travis

Joseph's wife, and by all accounts, a kindly, motherly sort of woman whom Nat regretted having to kill.

Judge Jeremiah Cobb

The man who sentenced Nat to death at his trial. Nat first met him at Marse Joe's house during the initial planning phase of his rebellion. Nat used his first meeting with Judge Cobb as a tool to teach Hark to stop debasing himself by flattering white men.

Nelson

One of Nat's lieutenants. Nelson was in his mid-fifties and carried an S-shaped scar from the once common practice of branding slaves. According to Hark, if there was ever a black man who wanted to revenge himself on the white man, it was Nelson.

Reverend Alexander Eppes

The Baptist preacher who takes possession of Nat when Nat is twenty-one. Instead of hiring him out for an apprenticeship as promised, Marse Samuel betrayed Nat by selling him to Reverend Eppes. Eppes made improper advances to Nat, but was too weak to force his will on the unwilling slave. Although Samuel had promised Nat that Eppes would free him when he turned twenty-five, either no such agreement existed, or Eppes simply disregarded it; he certainly did not free Nat Turner.

T.R. Gray

Based on the real man who took down Nat Turner's confession, Gray is the last white man Turner will get to know. His repugnant views symbolize everything Nat hates about white slave-holders. Gray believes that black people are inherently inferior to all human beings; he considers them highly trainable animals. Sadly, these views were not Gray's alone. He serves as a mouthpiece in the story for the prevailing attitudes held by slave-owners. His long-winded, flowery speeches echo Margaret Whitehead's naïve prattling about the relative merits of slavery, and the very fact that people like Gray and Margaret would waste time and breath discussing whether slavery was justifiable or not was an affront to human dignity. By unconsciously echoing this ridiculous debate with his own flowery prose style, William Styron engendered a lot of anger from the African-American community for writing this book.

Objects/Places

The Turner Mill

The plantation where Nat grew into manhood. Here he was taught to read by the Turner family, and later, as a carpentry apprentice, he became useful and valued for his work at the mill.

Dismal Swamp

This vast, wild swamp was to be the hideout for Nat's men after the insurrection. Food, water, and hiding places were in abundance in the swamp, and Nat believed that his men would be able to hide out there for as long as it took for the heat to die down, before eventually making their way up North to freedom.

The North Star

The faithful star in the night sky that runaway slaves hoped would guide them toward freedom.

Person's Millpond

The small body of water that Nat uses to baptize Ethelred Brantley, after having been refused the use of the church by Reverend Whitehead.

Social Sensitivity

Since Styron grew up in the Tidewater region in Virginia, where Nat Turn er's 1831 slave rebellion took place, and came from a family who at one time owned slaves, he was always aware that someday he would write about the all-engulfing issues of race, slavery, and the polarized society they produced. In the 1960s issues of racism and civil rights nearly monopolized and enflamed the public and political debate at the time which produced such laws as the Voting Rights Act of 1964. Styron has always been aware of the violent relationship between history and the individual and saw Nat Turner as one more victim of social repression and systematic bondage.

Techniques

Styron's wrote this novel backwards, beginning with Nat Turner's incarceration in his cell long after his capture and leading up to the rebellion at the end. Such a strategy focuses on Turner's own meditative consciousness and recollections as he tries to reconsider the events and thoughts that led him to his present impasse. Because Styron wrote the novel with a first-person narrator, the reader is totally confined to Turner's way of looking at, judging, and justifying his own actions. Consequently we see him in his various disguises, forever playing a role for an intended audience, a perspective that often blurs the "essential" Turner who has led a violent rebellion. Such a perspective at times threatens to undermine the righteousness of the very rebellion itself, a position not lost on several critics of the novel. Styron deepens Turner's confessions with dreams, visions, hallucinations, haunting images, and the Biblical rhetoric he had mastered. At times the very languages that Turner uses reveal the various roles he is trapped in from submissive slave to active leader. Such fragmentation itself reveals the awful power of the slave system to create a person who can neither complete and experience fully his own self-identity nor entirely fathom his own mercurial and mysterious motives. Styron's identification with Turner is so complete that the redemption at the end seems to be both the slave leader's and the writer's own.

Themes

Freedom

Freedom is an intangible concept; there are many who are never technically enslaved, and yet are not free. There are also degrees of freedom, as Nat learned throughout his life, serving under several different masters at various plantations. Under Marse Sam (Samuel Travis), for example, Nat was *allowed* much more freedom than he'd had under the cruel Moore. The very idea of allowing someone freedom is a false concept, though. If freedom is a fundamental human right, then no one has the right to decide how much freedom another person should have. This concept of allowing freedom is actually a subtle, insidious way of denying someone's right to it;. one must claim power over another in order to allow him anything. Nat's rage was more often stirred up by such allowances than by outright cruelty or denial of freedom. In the book, Nat doesn't understand why the kind permissiveness of white people angers him more than their cruelty. He is right to be more angered by this kind of behavior, though, because it is more dangerous to his civil rights in the long run. By allowing a man a half-measure of freedom, one not only denies him the other half, but denies his right to be angry about losing half of the freedom to which he is entitled. The types of allowances made by the slave-holders were designed to substitute for actual freedom, to mollify and pacify the slaves' fundamental desire for the real thing. Since many a man will take half of something over nothing at all, such half-freedoms were a powerful tool in controlling the slaves. The message being sent was this: If you accept your slavery, we will allow you a little freedom, but if you deny our right to own you as property, you will have no freedom at all. Such allowances can be seen in every civil rights struggle throughout human history.

Moral Choice

Nat struggles with moral choice throughout the novel. Although he becomes the architect of the bloodiest massacre in slave history, Nat is also a deeply spiritual man who abhors violence. Given the horrible circumstances into which he and all slaves had been thrust by the tides of history, Nat must make his moral choices on a sliding scale. His options as an enslaved man - bound to a system that runs like a vast, well-oiled machine - are extremely limited. Nat doesn't have the luxury of discussing slavery theoretically, like young Miss Margaret. Slavery dominates and controls his very existence, and Nat must often choose between the lesser of two evils when determining his actions. He wonders: Is it more evil to do nothing? To let his fellow slaves down by wasting the education he had lucked into receiving? If he doesn't act to free his fellows, who will? By the same token, how can a moral man justify murder? Nat wonders if his plan constitutes a civil war or a murder spree, and if there is even a difference. He tries to maintain his moral code by strictly forbidding his followers to rape the women they kill, and yet Nat himself struggles with the desire to rape Miss Margaret before he kills her.

Nat struggles long and hard during the planning phase of his revolt to decide if he's taking the right course of action. He witnesses the brutal oppression of his brethren time and again, and ultimately decides that the best moral choice is to end the oppression regardless of the cost. Once Nat has finally decided, he remains strong in his resolve. Despite the physical revulsion he feels at the sight of the bloody massacre, he remains strong in his choice and steels himself to surrender all remorse. It seems he's successful, as at the end of his life he can honestly tell Gray that he feels no remorse for his actions. Of course he does feel some guilt, but he believes that his actions had been morally justified, and so feels no responsibility to repent of his deeds. Throughout the massacre, Nat's heart begged him to stop, but Nat's moral resolve was such that he could not afford to weaken his position by tempering it with mercy.

Justice

Justice is a concept much belabored but little seen in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The white slave-owning populace, as represented by the lawyer Gray, believes that the institution of slavery can be justified so long as it is tempered with mercy. Gray believes that slavery is just, and he twists justice to suit that twisted belief. The slave-owners have made up rules and laws that enable crimes against humanity, and they believe that so long as they follow their own rules, they are being just. That's why Gray can tell Nat with a straight face that Nat is *animate chattel*, or property, and therefore basic property law will assure that justice is served in Nat's case. The facts that slavery is inherently unjust, and that human beings are not meant to be property, seem to elude Gray. This brand of justice is nothing more than a set of legal machinations devised to ensure that the outcome always favors the slave-owners. Gray's pontifications on justice are without merit, a fact made clear when Gray tells Nat, several days before his trial, that the outcome of the trial is a foregone conclusion.

The concept of justice is something that Nat Turner struggles with as well, as he's conceiving his plan to kill every white man, woman, and child in the county. Murder seems unlikely as a route to justice, and Nat, who abhors violence, has a difficult time believing in the justice of his own cause. In fact, the justice he metes out is Biblical in scope, condemning the otherwise innocent flesh and blood of the guilty parties. Ultimately, Nat decides that the good of the many outweighs the needs of the few. If by leading a successful revolt, he can teach the whites that their crime of slavery carries consequences, then Nat believes justice will have been served. Although the reader may have trouble believing that such violence could be just for any reason, certainly Nat's view of justice stands up through the ages better than Gray's self-serving concept of it.

An overarching theme in Styron's fiction has always been that of the individual person confronting social forms of systematic domination — racial, cultural, and historical — whether it be in the form of military organization, suburban life-styles, black slavery, or Nazi tyranny. He has always pitted the individual self against the unmediated chaos of history and life itself, and in Nat Turner he found the perfect victim and rebel, a character from his own racist past.

How the self grapples with historical circumstance and tries to transcend it has long fascinated Styron.

Styron depicts the ways in which a slave system can demean and degrade the individual. He is careful to note that such a system degrades everyone who comes in contact with it whether they be white or black, master or slave, man or woman, preacher or slave-owner. Everything is tainted by such a system, whether it be religion, sexuality, personal psychology, language, or individual perspective. At times it is difficult in the novel to distinguish between "genuine" racist epithets and those remarks burdened by the system's deformation of character, an issue which several black and white readers have reacted to differently.

Style

Point of View

William Styron received a great deal of literary backlash for choosing to write *The Confessions of Nat Turner* from Nat Turner's point of view. The narrative is written in the first person and reflects Styron's attempt to put himself in the famous slave's shoes. Styron's intent was admirable, and in many cases he does seem to succeed in speaking from Nat Turner's point of view, particularly in his insightful passages about the rage Nat experiences in response to the occasional kindness of white people. Nat's questioning of himself and his motives also rings true, though this may well have inspired some of the criticism Styron faced. Nat continually tries to justify his hatred and rage at being enslaved, and has a difficult time doing it. As a Godly man, he deplores violence, and uses it only because he sees no other option for ending the despicable practice of slavery. As a slave beaten down his entire life, Nat has difficulty justifying the idea that his freedom is important enough to kill for. This is something he knows intuitively, but his self worth is understandably low, and the idea of killing whites to obtain black freedom means that Nat must accept that black lives are as important as white lives. Given this low self-esteem, rooted in generations of slavery, Nat vacillates frequently over his decision to move forward with his plans. This internal debate rings true from a human perspective, but because Styron doesn't intrude with an author's voice in support of Nat's rebellion, this literary vacillation may have led to the sharp criticism he received.

Setting

The story is set in Virginia during the 1800's. At this time in American history, Virginia and the other Southern states were slave states, where the buying and selling of human beings was legal, so long as the human being who was being sold had dark skin. The entire economy of the South was dependent upon slave labor. Southern plantation owners prospered and led privileged lives thanks to the efforts of their black slaves. The rest of the country had long turned a blind eye, but by the time Nat's narrative begins, the Northern states were calling for an end to such inhumane practices. The South, however, considered abolitionism an attack on their way of life and their only means of prosperity. Southern whites feared that they would lose their entire economy if the slaves were freed, and so, as is evidenced primarily by Gray's character in the book, they spent a lot of time and effort defending and justifying slavery, primarily by attempting to prove that African-Americans were not full-fledged human beings deserving of basic human rights. Even those Southerners, like Miss Margaret, who were against slavery on principle, felt that the logistics of freeing the slaves were too complicated to address. By overcomplicating a morally simple issue, the slave-owners were able to stall for time; it wasn't until some years after the end of this story that they were finally forced to free their slaves. The irony apparent in Styron's novel is that, had the slave-owners put their effort into building a stronger, non-slave based economy, the

South would have had a much better chance of remaining prosperous. By clinging to their unsupportable way of life, they suffered the very poverty they had hoped to avoid.

Language and Meaning

William Styron's writing style is not dissimilar to Gray's, with his flowery prose and penchant for speech-making. Dialogue scarcely exists in the novel, and most of the words uttered by Styron's characters are written in the form of speeches. Monologue, not dialogue, is the author's preferred method of giving voice to his characters. However, when his characters do engage in dialogue, Styron writes it as it might truly have sounded in Nat Turner's day, using the intonations and inflections characteristic of the poorly educated slaves as well as the more refined Southern drawl of the plantation owners.

Another characteristic of Styron's use of language is the almost circular way in which he writes. He introduces all of his main points in cryptic overview, then gradually returns, over and over, to the same events, revealing them each time in more detail. The flow of his words, then, is rather like a circular scrubbing motion. Each time he takes a pass at a given plot point, it becomes a little clearer, and as he circles back, again and again, his message eventually shines through.

Structure

The Confessions of Nat Turner is divided into four distinct parts. Part 1, "Judgment Day," opens with Nat in prison awaiting trial. Having already committed his violent deeds, he is being called to answer for his crimes by a corrupt justice system. Part 2, "Old Times Past," details Nat's life leading up to his decision to fight for freedom. In this section, we learn more about Nat's life as a slave and the events that accumulated to cause him great pain. Part 3, "Study War," is the phase in which Nat makes his plans. Given that he was the first man to organize and execute a well-planned slave revolt, the mechanics of how he planned it are historically important. Part 1V, "It is Done..." is the shortest section by far; it merely recaps Nat's situation and brings him back to where the novel began, with Nat going to meet his fate. Despite the structural logic of these four separate parts, the story is not cleanly divided by them. Nat's reminiscing is by no means limited to Part 2, and similarly, his war plans are not limited to being discussed in Part 3. Styron's structural style is to roughly give an overview of the entire plot up front, and then gradually return to discuss the different aspects in more detail. His prose tends to cycle back over the same events as he gradually reveals additional details from which a deeper portrait eventually emerges. The novel is neatly book-ended at the very beginning and very end by a dream-like vision of Nat's, which expresses an enslaved man's yearning to see the ocean - to experience the freedom represented by its vast blue expanse. This vision of freedom sets the tone at the beginning of the novel, because it contrasts so sharply with the tiny prison cell of Nat's reality, and alludes to the imprisonment of slavery which he had hoped to escape. At the end of the novel, the vision implies the spiritual freedom and release which Nat may finally find in death.

Quotes

"I was worn out from talking to him and seeing him, and for the first time-perhaps it was my hunger or the cold or a combination of both, or my general frustration about prayer-I felt my dislike of him begin to dominate my better nature, my equanimity." Part 1, pg. 12

"'The point is that *you* are *animate* chattel and animate chattel is capable of craft and connivery and wily stealth. You ain't a wagon, Reverend, but chattel that possesses moral choice and spiritual volition. Remember that well. Because that's how come the law provides that animate chattel like you can be tried for a felony, and that's how come you're goin' to be tried next Sattidy.'

He paused, then said softly without emotion: 'And hung by the neck until dead.'" Part 1, pp. 21-22

"'Dad-burned mealy-mouthed abolitionists say we don't show justice. Well, we do. Justice! That's how come nigger slavery's going to last a thousand years.'" Part 1, pg. 25

"'I humbly submit to this court and your Honors the inescapable fact that the qualities of irresolution, instability, spiritual backwardness, and plain habits of docility are so deeply imbedded in the Negro nature that any insurgent action on the part of this race is doomed to failure; and for this reason it is my sincere plea that the good people of our Southland yield not, succumb not to the twin demons of terror and panic...'" Part 1, pg. 88

"'If you wish my belief to take back to the Bishop, you can tell him that my belief is that a darky is an animal with the brain of a human child and his only value is the work you can get out of him by intimidation, cajolery, and threat.'" Part 2, pg. 161

"That something *different* might befall my lot had never occurred to me. I do not know what I was about to reply when he slapped me gently on the shoulder, exclaiming in an eager, hearty voice: 'I have grander plans for this young darky.'" Part 2, pg. 171

"'Lord, I am a sinner,' I called, 'let me be saved by these redeeming waters. Let me henceforth be dedicated to Thy service. Let me be a preacher of Thy holy word. In Jesus' name, amen.'" Part 2, pg. 207

"But although my voice was compliant and good-natured it took all the self-restraint I had not to retort with something raw and surly, dangerously more than insolent; a quick flash of rage, blood-red, bloomed behind my eyes, and for an instant my hand tightened on a log and I measured the space between it and the back of Moore's shaggy dirt-crusted red neck, my arm tensed as if to knock the little white weevil from his perch." Part 3, pg. 294

"'They is a time for ev'ything. This is no time fo' singin,' fo' laughter. Look aroun' you, my brothers, look into each others eyes! You jest 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 cur dog. You is men! You is *men*, my dear brothers, look at yo'selves, look to yo' *pride*!'" Part 3, pg. 310

"Minutes passed and they said nothing, then Henry's voice broke the silence, his deaf man's bleat hoarse and cracked, a shock in the stillness: 'Us gotta *kill* all dem white sonsabitches. Ain't dat what de Lawd done told you? Ain't dat right, Nat?'" Part 3, pg. 350

"'I should hardly blame Will for striking him back like that. Wouldn't you have struck Nathaniel Francis back if he'd abused you so much like that? Just wouldn't you, Nat?'

Now I sensed her eyes full upon me even as I escaped looking back at her, and connived in my mind at a way to answer that question which she alone among all the white people I had ever talked to would have been artless enough to ask. Such a question no Negro should be forced into a position to answer, and because it was asked in such a spirit of sympathy and innocence I resented her for it, now, somehow all the more." Part 3, pg. 364

"After a long hesitation, during which I carefully considered my words, I said: 'That's right, Mr. Gray. I fear I would have to plead not guilty to everything, because I don't feel guilty. And try as I might I simply can't feel-as you put it, sir-a pang of remorse." Part 3, pg. 392

"I find myself hammering at the walls. '*Don't hurt him!*' I rage. 'Don't hurt him, you white sons of bitches! You've done hurt him enough! All his life! Now God damn you don't hurt him no more!'" Part 1V, pg. 427

Adaptations

Wolper Pictures purchased the film rights for the novel in 1968, but no film has yet been made.

Key Questions

Styron's novel clearly wrestles with the enormous fact and function of slavery in the American South. He produces instances and images of racism, degradation, humiliation, and discord throughout. The system itself produces the disruptions in people's lives, and Styron focuses on them from every angle. The topic of slavery is enough to stimulate a long and fruitful discussion in terms of its lasting effects on human beings, both the white masters and the black slaves.

1. Nat Turner was a real character in history. How does Styron embody him in more personal terms to render him more human and understandable instead of in "cardboard" heroic terms?

Are there contradictions here?

2. The role of the Bible speaks directly to our own age in terms of Christian fundamentalism and rightwing politics. Does Nat Turner use the Bible in ways that seem similar to our own age? Is his a "justifiable" use of it?

How does it affect his entire enterprise and both support and undercut it?

3. Look very carefully at Thomas Gray's opinion of Nat Turner and at Styron's. What differences can you discern? What overlappings or similarities can you find? Are they significantly different in terms of the way a writer of fiction creates his character and the way a historical person like Gray describes him? Can Gray's account also be seen as a fictionalized construct, rooted in a definite historical context?

4. The strongest influences on Turner's upbringing comes from his white masters. Can this be seen as a verifiable part of the system of slavery? Or can it in any way be considered a possible "racist" point of view? How does the master-slave relationship function here? And what does it reveal about the slave system?

5. Do you think Styron is in any way criticizing a capitalist system which by its very nature demands buying and selling? Does he link the system of slavery to American capitalism in any way? Can you have one without the other?

6. Nat Turner speaks in many "tongues" or languages from a black dialect to a Biblical, orotund rhetoric.

How are these languages connected to the roles he is forced to play in a slave society? Does he ever discover his own language that is significantly different from the others he has heard?

7. The relationship between black and white sexuality is a touchy and complex issue. How well do you think it is presented here? Does it justify many of Nat Turner's actions? Does it in any way lead to or undercut his rebellion?

8. Nat Turner experiences personal redemption at the end of the novel. He has learned to rebel against his own rebellion. Are there seeds of this conversion earlier in the text? Does it seem logical, given his relationship with the Bible and his experience of hypocritical preachers and masters?

9. Does Styron's seeming reliance on Freudian psychology in any way add to or undercut the historical "rightness" of Nat Turner's revolt? What are the relationships here between personal psychology and historical or fictional events? How does each interrelate with the other? Or do they?

10. What happens when a novelist chooses to write a novel from the firstperson perspective? How do we as readers receive different opinions about Nat Turner if we are continually "trapped" in his own consciousness?

Does that help the reader to empathize with the character? Or do we find him too self-centered and too self-absorbed to like him much?

Topics for Discussion

Do you think Margaret Whitehead had romantic feelings for Nat Turner? Defend your position with specific examples from the story.

William Styron was criticized for writing this fictionalized account of Nat Turner's life. After reading the novel, do you believe his critics were correct in labeling it racist? Why or why not?

What does Nat's vision of the temple above the sea mean in the context of the story?

Imagine that Nat's case is being tried today, and you are his defense attorney. How would you defend his actions?

Now imagine that you are prosecuting Nat's case. Summarize the evidence and arguments you would make to convince a jury to convict him.

Do you believe Nat's repression of his own sexuality contributed to the violence he later perpetrated? Would he have been better off if he had taken a wife and abandoned his war-like urges? Why or why not?

Of all the privations that Nat suffered as a slave - physical, mental, and emotional - which do you think was the worst? Why?

Literary Precedents

Styron has admitted that he borrowed the structure of beginning his novel with Nat Turner's awaiting his execution and recollecting his entire life and mission in his cell from Albert Camus' The Stranger (1942), but the strategy of a white man writing as a black slave has never been accomplished before. The confessional mode, however, does link Styron to several contemporary writers of the 1960s and after, such as Norman Mailer, Joan Didion and E. L. Doctorow, who have also written first-person narratives that involve actual historical events.

Related Titles

The collection of critical essays Ten Black Writers Respond (1968) is invaluable in a consideration of the rage and outrage that greeted Styron's novel from black critics in the 1960s. The fiery rhetoric of the essays often undercuts the critical positions of them, but a systematic review of many of the most substantial charges — the role of Turner's wife, the nature of the revolt and of the heroic leader in charge of it, the elimination of any positive black values from Turner's family, the attitudes toward both the system itself and the individual slaves within it — helps to generate many interesting approaches, however doubtful, to the novel.

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