When Bertram Wyatt-Brown published *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* in 1982, he established honor as a key to understanding the culture of the antebellum South, and created a new anthropological framework for analyzing Southern patterns of conduct. This essay describes, through the lens of honor, the attempts of Nat Turner and Margaret Whitehead to rebel against the patriarchal code of Southern honor, and explores their failures to subvert the rigid assumptions of the prevailing system. Disrespected, mistreated, and enslaved, Nat wishes to disrupt the perpetual social system of white honor and black deference; he uses his literacy and the patriarchal models of the Old Testament and his father to rebel against his social condition and to sustain his plan for insurrection and eventual liberation. Emotionally distant from the patriarchal authority of her brother and the influence of her mother, unable to communicate freely with her peers or family, and distraught and torn by her socially unacceptable belief that slavery should be abolished, Margaret rebels against these socially imposed controls and ideologically commits herself to her convictions about equality, tolerance, and Christian love. Though both Nat and Margaret actively rebel against the existing honor system, they fail to consider the influence of the public sphere. This failure to identify the public perceptions of various social communities results in the collapse of Nat’s and Margaret’s rebellions, and it contributes to their eventual deaths.
“It’s an honorable choice:” Rebellions Against Southern Honor in William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner

by

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INTRODUCTION

On August 21, 1831, another Sunday drew to a close in rural Southampton County, Virginia. Families, returning from church or late suppers with friends, retired for the evening; wives settled exhausted children to bed while husbands secured horses and closed barn doors. The night was hot and humid, like many late summer evenings in southeastern Virginia. Joseph Travis, a poor local farmer, and his wife were asleep on the second floor of their modest home; their infant son slept in a cradle beside their bed. In the next room, Travis’s stepson, Putnam Moore, and his apprentice, Joel Westbrook, were also sleeping. A few hours after midnight, five escaped slaves entered the home through the front door. Using axes and hatchets, they killed all five occupants of the home, and then left, heading northeast to an adjacent farm. Thus began the most successful, and violent, slave revolt in American history.¹

Nat Turner, a local slave preacher renowned for his literacy and purported prophetic abilities, orchestrated this slave rebellion, which became known as “The Southampton Insurrection” or “Nat Turner’s Rebellion.” Born into slavery on October 2, 1800, to a Virginia slave of West Africa descent, Nat probably lived within the borders of Southampton County his entire life. As a child, he set himself apart from other slaves, through his impassioned spirituality and his impression that he was “intended for some great purpose” (Gray 7). In 1828, Nat experienced an “apocalyptic vision” that stimulated his plans for revolt. He described the scene to his court-appointed lawyer,

Thomas Gray: “the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent” (Gray 11). From this date forth, Nat gathered fellow slaves, whom he thought of as trusted lieutenants, and prepared for a slave revolt that he hoped would begin in Southampton County and extend northward through Virginia.

On August 13, 1831, Nat witnessed what historians now believe to have been a solar eclipse. He interpreted the green, blue, and white effects in the sky as a divine signal, and, along with his “lieutenants” Hark, Nelson, Sam, and Henry, he launched the insurrection on August 21. By noon on Monday, August 22, over fifty white men, women, and children were dead, and the insurgents, amounting to approximately sixty men and boys, were moving towards Jerusalem, the county seat. Though initially armed only with axes, the insurgents reinforced their band with rifles, swords, and additional slave men from each home they attacked. Soon local white farmers began mobilizing for retaliation; the cry of alarm had extended as far south as Murfreesboro, North Carolina.

Two days later, the revolt was over. The white victims of the initial assault were buried quickly, many in unmarked mass graves. Angry mobs of locals, supplemented by militias from northern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, searched the woods for insurgents. Many of the women and young children of the county, afraid to return to their homes, gathered at a jailhouse at Cross Keys. Seeking revenge, white men tortured and murdered many innocent black men and women they suspected were involved in the
revolt. Black corpses, decapitated and unburied, remained in fields and ditch banks for weeks.

In the days and weeks following the initial insurrection, whites captured many of the alleged insurgents; the county court gave these accused slaves farcical “trials,” which often resulted in death by hanging or removal to the sweltering, disease-ridden plantations of Louisiana and Mississippi. By October, Nat Turner had been captured and hanged, his body “delivered to the doctors, who skinned it and made grease of the flesh” (Drewry 102). In the aftermath of the insurrection, panic resonated throughout many slaveholding states; many communities adopted stricter regulations governing both free and enslaved blacks.²

Most information about the Southampton Insurrection originates from two primary sources. One is the minute book of the Southampton County courthouse, which offers a scant two pages of details about the insurrection trials. The more widely read narrative of the insurrection is Nat Turner’s own jail-bed “confession,” which he dictated to his court-appointed lawyer, Thomas R. Gray. Gray published The Confessions of Nat Turner as a twenty-three-page pamphlet in November 1831. Historians typically regard Confessions as a collaboration of Turner and Gray’s voices, since Gray more than likely edited Turner’s account as he transcribed the original version.

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² Historical information regarding the 1831 Insurrection derived from William Drewry’s The Southampton Insurrection.
William Styron’s “mediation on history”³

In the decades after the insurrection, the press continued to mention the insurrection, as slaveholders and abolitionists used the case of Nat Turner as an argument for, or against, slavery. However during the turmoil of the Civil War and in the years following it, the insurrection, relegated to brief mentions in history textbooks, remained largely forgotten. The first historical treatment of the insurrection occurred in 1900, when Johns Hopkins Ph.D. candidate William S. Drewry published his dissertation, The Southampton Insurrection. While valuable for its first-hand accounts, the book is problematic in its bias (Drewry had familial ties to the area) and its racism (critics recognize Drewry’s sympathy toward the institution of slavery). A few authors attempted to fictionalize the event, most notably Pauline Carrington Rust Bouvé in Their Shadows Before (1899) and Daniel Panger in Ol’ Prophet Nat (1965).

Then, in 1966, novelist William Styron published The Confessions of Nat Turner. Styron, a Virginian who received critical acclaim for his first novel Lie Down in Darkness (1951), had been fascinated by the Southampton Insurrection since his childhood in the Tidewater. The Confessions of Nat Turner, narrated in the first person from Nat’s perspective, follows the framework of Nat’s conversations with the lawyer Gray. The novel ends as the executioners lead Nat from his cell to be hanged.

Styron began writing the book in 1962; in his memoir This Quiet Dust, he recalls visiting Southampton County in 1965:

I recognized a house standing perhaps a quarter of a mile off the road, from this distance only a lopsided oblong sheltered by an enormous oak, but the whole tableau – the house and the glorious hovering tree and the stretch of woods beyond – so familiar to me that it might have been some house I passed every day. (27)

The house Styron recognized was the home of Catherine Whitehead; insurrectionists murdered Catherine, her son Richard, her infant grandchild, and four of her five daughters there during the insurrection. One of these daughters, seventeen-year-old Margaret, was the only person Nat Turner himself killed during the insurrection, though, according to his confession, he tried to kill three other people as well. Nat recounted Margaret’s murder in detail to Thomas Gray: “Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner, formed by the projection of the cellar cap from the house; on my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head with a fence rail” (13).

Styron, as he developed his initial concept of the novel, became fascinated with this peculiar passage in the original *Confessions*. Nat’s only murder, and his victim, intrigued Styron: “what happened to Nat in this place [the Whitehead home]? Did he discover his humanity here, or did he lose it?” (29). Styron incorporated these questions into his plot by creating a charged, pre-insurrection “relationship” between Nat and Margaret. Styron’s fictional Nat becomes a hired hand at the Whitehead farm, where he can observe (and be observed by) Margaret daily. Nat’s emotions toward Margaret range
from hatred to lust; Margaret, intrigued by Nat’s knowledge of the Bible, is drawn to his religious enthusiasm.

**Critical Reception and Outrage**

Initially, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* received mostly favorable reviews. But, during the 1960s in the United States, racial tensions and the controversies surrounding the Civil Rights Movement characterized the cultural climate. Literary tastes also reflected these trends and, in the months following the publication of the novel, the initially positive reception became complicated by loud and outraged cries of dissent from African-American critics, who charged Styron with perpetuating white stereotypes about black character. They cited the fictional Nat Turner’s obsessive lust for white women, his homosexual encounter with a fellow slave, and his religious fervor as examples of Styron’s prejudice, ignorance, or intentional misrepresentation of history. Others pointed to Styron’s omission of historical details, such as the purported fact that Nat had a wife, another slave named Cherry, who lived on an adjoining plantation. Several well known black literary critics, along with other black intellectuals, gathered their objections and criticisms into the essay-compilation *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968). These critics revered Nat Turner as a hero who had fought against the oppression of slavery, and who therefore exemplified black

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rebellion and defiance in antebellum America. The novel, they argued, tarnished his name and cheapened his legacy.

For the first twenty years after Confessions was published, interpretations of the text focused mainly on Styron’s “mischaracterization” of Nat Turner and his alleged manipulation of “known” facts. In the early 1980s, however, interest in the novel took a more literary turn, and many critics came to focus on its dense religious images and psychoanalytic characterizations. Analysis of the character of Nat frequently focused upon his relationship with Margaret Whitehead, the seventeen-year-old white “debutante.” From the moment Styron’s Nat first encounters her at the farm where he is working, Nat and Margaret begin a platonic relationship that affords her an opportunity to express her views on slavery, religion, and her family. Her fascination with Nat, in addition to their sexually charged encounters, also allows Nat to reveal his complex feelings about white slaveholders and the true course of the insurrection. Their relationship and conversations illuminate a larger theme within the novel, the notion of honor as a behavioral code crucial to Southern society.

**Honor in the Antebellum South: “the ordered ranks of society”**

In the opening chapter of The Confessions of Nat Turner, Thomas Gray, during his first meeting with Nat, tries to cajole Nat into recounting the events surrounding the insurrection; Gray tells Nat that none of the other captured insurgents have admitted to

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anything. Nat, in an effort to manipulate Gray, tells him that a divine vision has prompted him to confess. “The Lord said to me,” Nat explains, “Confess, that all the nations may know. Confess, that thy acts may be known to all men” (15). Gray believes Nat’s deception, and tells him, “I can’t honestly tell you what a splendid – what a really splendid decision you’ve made. It’s what I call an honorable choice” (16). Many white Southerners in Nat Turner’s Southampton County strove to adhere to a high standard of honorable conduct which they regarded as the backbone of their social structure. Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his influential *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, describes honor as “the inner conviction of self-worth” (14) which was fully dependent on the “opinion of others” (45). Southern men carried a heavy burden of tradition; the honor of family past and therefore all of one’s public actions -- commerce, courtship, worship -- were tailored to influence the perceptions of others within their social circles.

Wyatt-Brown realized that few differences existed within the American South between the public and private spheres of honor. “Family values differed not at all from public ones” (34), he asserted, and he used this realization to create a catalogue of elements that helped formulate “Southern evaluations” (34) of conduct:

1. honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familiar and community enemies;
2. opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit;
3. physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit;
4. defense of male
integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances. (34)

Wyatt-Brown’s blueprint of Southern honor emphasizes the idea that a person is no more, and no less, than what he or she appears to be. In Southern communities, conduct in the private sphere was expected to be identical with that in the public sphere, and men and women feared condemnation and exclusion from real, or perceived, infractions of honor.

Southern, white males regarded their female counterparts with a mixture of fear and awe. Though protected and cherished by their male relatives and partners, women of the antebellum South, “heroines and arbiters of male honor” (173), assumed responsibility for maintaining their own honor. Southern society expected honorable women, especially those who were members of slaveholding households, to adhere to a strict code of behavior that reflected the Biblical and classical foundations of Southern honor. Furthermore, women were to employ restraint, policing their own actions so as not to bring dishonor upon themselves or their families. In Within the Plantation Household, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that, “prevailing southern ideology emphasized the ideal of the southern lady as gracious, fragile, and deferential to the men upon whose protection she depended” (109). Catherine Clinton, author of Plantation Mistress, argues that women’s honor was closely linked to their family loyalties, as “females spent their lives confined to the domestic sphere, and therefore their happiness

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was more closely connected with family relations” (38). Though female honor was largely connected with domestic duties, Southern females still observed strict rules of decorum while in public. Since, as Fox-Genovese notes, “the slaveholders, women and men, were bound together in a web of belief and behavior by schools, churches, watering places or resorts, and villages” (45), community perception of a woman’s honor was paramount.

White men had expectations for their slaves as well: slaves, unable to avenge wrongdoings or enter into legally recognized marriages, had to treat whites with deference. Whites thought of slaves as living property; as property slaves had no capacity for honorable conduct. Kenneth Greenberg, in *Honor and Slavery*, focuses specifically upon the relationship between white honor and slavery. Honor, Greenberg argues, is synonymous with power; slaveholders distinguished themselves from their slaves because the masters held all the power in the relationship. “Slaves,” Greenberg writes, “were deprived by masters of all the elements necessary for the formal duels of gentlemen of honor” (34). For white Southern males, public confrontations and retaliations were significant acts of social power and honorable behavior. An additional reason whites considered slaves dishonorable was that they felt slaves had chosen their situations. White men and women of the antebellum South thought that slaves were naturally lazy and genetically inferior. In Styron’s *Confessions* Nat’s lawyer Thomas Gray remarks on the “innate and inbred, indeed the predestined deficiency of the Negro in the areas of moral choice and Christian ethics,” arguing during the trial “that the Negro
is a biologically inferior species” (93). Greenberg asserts that men of honor “believed that one of the distinguishing features of slaves was their inability to confront death without fear of submission. Men of honor believed that every slave had chosen a life of humiliation over an honorable death” (98). To whites, slaves remained a dishonorable lot, unable to defend themselves with actions or words.

In the eyes of antebellum Southern whites, Nat is beneath respect and trust, since the word of a slave is little better than a lie. Ostracized from this system of social conduct, Nat rebels against the existing social framework of honor. Taught to read by his first master, Samuel Turner, Nat is a unique and highly intelligent slave; he is literate in a county where most slaves and many poor whites cannot read. He finds, through his readings of the Bible, an escape from the horrors of life as a slave. He devotes himself to a regimented and pure lifestyle, which he hopes will ensure him the mercy and refuge of God. Never having known his father, Nat looks to readings in the Old Testament as a substitute for the patriarchal authority absent from his own life. For Nat, the stories of an authoritative, stern, and vengeful God validate his plans for rebellion and escape. The Old Testament lessons comfort and encourage him as he rebels against his prescribed social role and assumes the mantle of a capable, honorable leader with a righteous cause.

Styron’s Margaret Whitehead is a young, unmarried woman whose identity is defined by her honorable (or dishonorable) behavior and whose public reputation is contingent upon the perceived authenticity of her purity. With her father dead, she is subject to the patriarchal authority of her older brother Richard. But Margaret feels
isolated from her brother and mother; she accuses them of being ignorant of spiritual emotions beyond the realm of the practical. In a school program performed with the Virginia governor in attendance, Margaret recites a pastoral poem laced with images of loyalty and deference to authority; however, in a masque with her friends, she plays a pagan lord who converts to Christianity and vows to love “by the light of heaven above” (373). She also shocks her classmates by declaring that slaves are capable and intelligent, and that she supports the abolition of slavery. Therefore, Margaret, exposed through her education to religious narratives and British Romantic poetry, reaches beyond the control of her brother’s household and rebels against the conventions imposed upon her by an honorable society. She resists her social responsibilities as a silent and stoic slaveholding woman, and instead commits herself to her personal beliefs concerning Christian tolerance and racial harmony.

**Honor and Narrative Voice**

The narrative structure of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* prompts considerations of the veracity and legitimacy of the black slave’s voice in the world of white Southern honor. Styron divided the novel into four sections, titled “Judgment Day,” “Old Times Past,” “Study War,” and “It is Done….,” The first and last sections describe Nat’s trial and the hours before his execution; these sections frame the middle sections, which outline in rough chronological order the events prior to and during the insurrection. The reader joins the story already in progress; at the beginning of the novel, Nat has already dictated
his entire confession to Thomas Gray, and portions of that confession are being read aloud in open court. Readers do not witness Nat retelling his story to Gray; instead they travel through the memories of Nat’s past as he recalls the years leading up to the insurrection. Similarly, the citizens of Southampton County and the people inside the courtroom do not actually see Nat relating his story. Styron requires that these people (the reader included), in order to believe Nat’s version of his childhood, intellectual development, revolutionary growth, and account of the rebellion, must credit the words of a condemned slave as both honest and accurate.

The legitimacy of a black narrator is problematic within a novel based, in part, on antebellum Southern perceptions of honor. White Southerners considered slaves legally voiceless, as Kenneth Greenberg observes:

The words of the master had to be accorded respect and accepted as true simply because they were the words of a man of honor. The words of a slave could never become objects of honor. Whites assumed that slaves lied all the time – and that their lies were intimately connected to their positions as slaves (11).

Slaves lacked the legal authority to speak in their own defense or to testify against others, and slave owners routinely sold and traded slaves without their advice or consent. During Nat’s trial, the judge prevents him from reading his own confession; however, the document becomes admissible when filtered through the socially acceptable persona of
Thomas Gray. The court refuses to accept Nat’s spoken testimony as fact, but they readily admit his dictated confession.

In an investigation of the legal precedents behind the delivery of the historical Nat Turner’s November 1831 confession to Thomas Gray, Daniel Fabricant offers an insightful analysis of the introductory exchange between Styron’s versions of Nat Turner and Thomas Gray. Fabricant, like Wyatt-Brown and Greenberg, elaborates upon the denial of legal rights to blacks, and the means through which the “law was used in the nineteenth century for political purposes to disadvantage an entire race” (334). Fabricant identifies a “predator-victim motif” (357) connecting Styron’s characters of Nat and Gray. He argues that Styron attempts to reinforce this pattern, by “undercutting history through the use of the Faulknerian technique of skipping backward and forward within Nat’s consciousness to avoid any depiction of Nat giving Gray a confession” (356). Styron’s Gray admits to Nat that he is altering Nat’s confession when he tells him, “this ain’t supposed to represent your exact words as you said them to me” (30). Nat lacks narrative control of his story; yet readers, and the members of the courtroom, are expected to trust the word of a slave who has committed unforgivable atrocities in his rebellion. Daniel Fabricant suggests that Styron highlights this contradiction to “signal a distrust toward both the Southern legal system and the ‘history’ the lawyer [Gray] created and, by implication, the history whites have created for and about blacks” (356).
The Argument

When Wyatt-Brown published *Southern Honor* in 1982, he called attention to an essential context for the interpretation of Southern culture. “Honor” became a key to understanding the culture of the antebellum South, and a new anthropological formula for analyzing “patterns of Southern behavior.” Current literary scholarship assumes the applicability of the concept of honor to any work of Southern literature; yet no analysis of honor has been applied to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In this essay, I will describe Nat and Margaret’s attempts to rebel against the patriarchal code of Southern honor, and explore the reasons behind their failure to subvert the rigid assumptions of the prevailing honor system.

In the first chapter, I will elaborate on Nat’s education and its role in his rebellion against the established social system. Also, I will trace the evolution of Nat’s identity, through religious faith and through a vocation to readership, into an instrument for subverting traditional social constructs. The second chapter attends to the impact of Margaret’s education on her growing sense of self-empowerment, and outlines her rebellion against slavery, patriarchal authority, and “the female role.” The third chapter examines the role of public opinion in the regime of honor, and the role of specific community groups in regulating certain honorable conditions. I will pay specific attention to reactions to Nat and Margaret’s rebelliousness by their peers, such as the response to Margaret’s flirtation with public dishonor and the challenge to Nat’s artificial “honor” from his own slave community. Finally, my conclusion will address the
significance of slave insurrection to an honor-based society, and the catastrophic consequences of Nat and Margaret’s disregard of the social constraints of Southern honor.

In defending Southern Honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown addressed those scholars who were “reluctant” to allow the “entry of the South into the moral assumptions of the nation as a whole” (xxvii). “Better to call the manifestations of honor,” he wrote, “the ‘cavalier legend,’ the ‘plantation myth,’ the ‘patriarchal dream’ than to see how and why an American people fought to the death for principles no longer deemed valid” (xxvii). “Manifestations of honor” is perhaps an appropriate phrase to apply to Nat and Margaret’s attempts to rebel against their positions within the male-based honor system. Both able to recognize the tenets of the patriarchal order, Nat and Margaret mimic behaviors of white, Southern males; they look to literature for precedents of honor, they adhere to the teachings of the Bible, and they seek to become leaders and voices for their individual causes. Yet they remain powerless against the ruling white patriarchy, failing to understand fully the public component of Southern honor, and underestimating the influence of the community on matters of personal honor or dishonor. Margaret’s death and Nat’s approaching execution appear all the more tragic when interpreted against the rigid social constraints of Southern honor.
As Kenneth Greenberg observes, “honor and dishonor, like mastery and slavery, were total conditions” (62), and slaves, with their reputation for inherent deceitfulness and insubordination, were on the fringe of the social fabric. For, according to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “over the course of a parallel and mutually sustaining existence, white man’s honor and black man’s slavery became in the public mind of the South practically indistinguishable” (16). Disrespected, mistreated, and enslaved, Nat attempts to disrupt this social system of white honor and perpetual black servitude by using his literacy and the patriarchal models of the Old Testament and his father to rebel against his social condition and to sustain his plan for insurrection and eventual liberation.

The social principle of “white man’s honor and black man’s slavery” encouraged slave-owning whites to prevent slaves from becoming literate. Honor, in the South, hinged on social power, both individual power in private affairs and public power in non-familial interactions; the ability to read would certainly shift the dynamics of power in a slave’s favor. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that “slave codes rigorously prohibited teaching slaves to read and write, and well over 90 percent of slaves remained illiterate” (156). Whites thought slaves with specific trade skills (i.e. carpentry, blacksmithing) or basic educations were more likely to resent bondage and attempt escape. Throughout the rest of the United States, Wyatt-Brown observes, “learning, especially of the venerable

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kind, marked the possessor as a gentleman. Yet in the South at least, too much of it allegedly spoiled the result. There was a strongly anti-intellectual streak in Southern society” (94). Southampton County, Virginia, in the 1800s was largely rural and poor; many whites could not read or write, others could do so only barely. If the general white population regarded excessive book learning as unnecessary, or emasculating, and therefore incompatible with public norms, they could have little motivation to educate slaves. Thomas Moore, Nat’s third master in the novel, echoes the feelings of many whites in Southampton County when he opines that “hit don’t do no good for a nigger to git learning… a nigger with a busy head is idle with the hoe” (251).

**Slave Education and Southern Honor**

Despite his youth, Nat is able to recognize the significance of literacy in the white society he observes daily from his post as a house slave. Nat steals a copy of John Bunyan’s *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman* from the family library; “its ant-swarm of words,” he recalls, “is like an enemy, malevolent, wearisome, incomprehensible.” Nat recognizes, “I know I am in the presence of a treasure; lacking the key to unlock it, I possess that treasure nonetheless” (151). Samuel Turner rewards Nat’s initial act of rebellion and defiance by teaching Nat how to read. Turner and his wife and daughters are intrigued by Nat’s curiosity and boldness, and they adopt Nat’s education as their pet
project. This exposure to sympathetic, intelligent, and gentle white females perhaps prepares Nat for the tentative relationship he develops with Margaret Whitehead when he is in his twenties.

In Styron’s telling, Samuel Turner’s instruction of Nat provides an opportunity, late one night on the Turner porch, for a forum among several Southampton County men, two of whom are preachers, on the potential merits of educating slaves. Their discussion provides insight into their views on the relationship between slavery and honor, and their conversation also sheds light on disagreements about slavery within the white community. The brothers Samuel and Benjamin Turner exemplify conflicting Southern opinions on slavery. Samuel Turner, from the moment he discovered Nat attempting to read, becomes convinced that slaves possess intellectual faculties. Samuel tells his brother Benjamin, “They will try! They will try! And we shall teach him then!” (154). Nat’s actions support Turner’s view that slaves not only could be educated, but also that they wanted to be educated. Benjamin disagrees, and, on the porch, Samuel shares with the other gentlemen his disapproval of slavery, and his low estimation of the state of the South:

I have long and do still steadfastly believe that slavery is the great cause of all the chief evils of our land…. It is evil to keep these people [slaves] in

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bondage, yet they cannot be freed. They must be educated! To free these people without education and with the prejudice that presently exists against them would be a ghastly crime. (159-60)

His convictions parallel some of the views Margaret Whitehead shares with Nat during her carriage rides. But Turner’s beliefs contrast sharply with the prevailing “basic rule” for men of honor: “neither the rich masters nor the poor nonslaveholders had the authority to identify their interest with that of the slave or free black” (Wyatt-Brown 378). Though slave ownership fell largely under the umbrella of “personal discretion” (Wyatt-Brown 377), “planters were deeply divided on the issues of black literacy” (Clinton 184).

Benjamin Turner responds to his brother’s proclamation with his own interpretation of slavery: “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” (161). Most white characters in the novel hold this view, that the slave is a living piece of property who lacks the intellectual capacity for self-awareness.

Nat, listening in to the conversation on the porch, realizes that he is a slave, and that the course of his life has been irrevocably preordained: “I felt awkward and naked, stripped down to bare black flesh, and a wicked chill like cold water filled the hollow of my gut as the thought crashed in upon me: Yes, I am a slave” (164).

Nat’s realization contrasts sharply with the conversation among the white men, who argue about whether, for biological and religious reasons, slaves lack the capacity
for abstract thoughts such as the one Nat is experiencing. The Episcopal priest, Dr. Ballard, disagreeing with Samuel Turner, cites Genesis to support his view of slavery: “perhaps the Negro lags so far behind the rest of us – I mean, the white race – in moral development that, well, for his own welfare it might be best that he – well, be kept in a kind of benevolent subjection…. ‘Cursed be Canaan. A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren’” (163). Yet Nat’s own past contradicts Dr. Ballard’s assertion. When Nat is only ten years old, he becomes self-aware, already cognizant of the division between himself, as a literate slave, and his fellow illiterate slaves. He regards the field slaves as “a lower order of people… for even now as a child I am contemptuous and aloof, filled with disdain for the black riffraff which dwells beyond the close perimeter of the big house” (136). One member of the Turner workforce, Little Morning, spies on Nat and constantly attempts to sabotage him because he is jealous of Nat’s ability to read. Nat’s own mother proudly teases him for the way he “parrot[s] white folks’s talk” (141-42). Nat is only a boy, but he already inspires in his fellow slaves a fearful respect due to his ability to penetrate, through reading, a world of white power unknown to slaves.

As a result, Nat’s literacy both liberates him and condemns him to the static life of an educated and prideful, but enslaved, man. Literacy is the spark that helps ignite the fire of rebellion in his young mind. Inspired by his Bible readings Nat develops his plan to produce redemption not just for himself but all slaves. He focuses his interest primarily on the Psalms and the Old Testament, and the depiction of an all-powerful and punitive God. Literary critics of the novel almost universally agree that Nat is fascinated
with the Old Testament, and that he is generally not interested, or only belatedly so, in the New. Bernhard Reitz elaborates on Nat’s pursuit of “divine guidance.” For Nat, he argues, “the Bible, or, more precisely, the vengeful prophecies of the Old Testament shape Nat’s dreams of rebellion and the hope for a New Jerusalem” (477). In the Bible, Reitz concludes, “Nat does not look for consolation. What he seeks is the justification of his ideas” (478).

White slaveholders, the Turners included, hope Biblical lessons about obedience, punishment, and the rewards of the afterlife might impart to their slaves a respect for the Christian service inherent in their bondage. Slaveholders wanted slaves to obey all masters, both divine and mortal; but Nat’s sense of injustice and retribution awakens as he contemplates stories of Old Testament retribution. Louis Rubin describes both the historical and the fictional Nat Turner as cursed: “it was precisely because Nat Turner himself was treated well and had so distinguished himself in education and intelligence that he was prompted to lead his revolt; as Styron shows, his superior attainments and status only made more clear to him the hopelessness of servile bondage” (11).

**Literacy, Religious Influence, and the Absence of the Father**

Literacy, especially readings from the Old Testament, also represents patriarchal authority for Nat because he is raised in a home without familial male leadership. Nat’s father, also named Nathaniel, worked as a butler for Benjamin Turner until the two men

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3 Samuel Coale, Jean Cash, Denise Askin, John Lang, James Huffman, and David Eggenschwiler.
had an altercation in the family dining room. Turner verbally reprimanded Nat’s father regarding dirty cutlery, and then slapped him in the mouth for lacking sufficient remorse. Nat’s father walked from the room, left the farm, and was never seen again. As he left, Nat’s father said, “he couldn’ stand to be hit in de face by nobody” (135), and promised to return from the North with enough money to buy Nat and his mother’s freedom. Nat’s father’s departure represents the elder Nathaniel’s refusal to be physically disciplined by his white master, and therefore represents Nathaniel’s concern with his own personal honor, fragmented though it may be. Lou-Ann, Nat’s mother, in response to Nat’s numerous childhood inquiries about finding his father, tells Nat, “I don’ know where yo’ daddy ever went,” adding, “that black man had pride, awright, warn’t many black mens aroun’ like him” (135).

Nat’s knowledge of his father, as both a man and a slave, is limited to this singular event, and is coupled with his mother’s frequent assertions that his father was “too smart for dat kind of low nigger work [at the timber mill]” (133). This characterization of Nathaniel Turner as prideful and intelligent is an ideal that Nat pursues his entire life, as he attempts to educate himself and remain prideful and dignified despite the horrible conditions of his enslavement. James Huffman concludes that “Nat’s father is used to stress strong masculine pride in black men, the refusal to be slapped or disciplined in public by a white man, master or no master. Thus Nat’s only knowledge of his father reinforces a sense of pride and dignity in black manhood, not a weak stereotype” (286). In developing his plan for insurrection, Nat is following the
example set by his father, recognizing both the injustice of slavery and the sacrifice required for freedom. Nat’s father left his pregnant wife and unborn child for an unknown fate, as there was no guarantee of his safety in traveling to the North, or of his success when he arrived there. Before Nat was born, his father abandoned his family in order to redeem his pride, and his absence has forced Nat to absorb the enormity of this sacrifice. Nat remembers the weight of his father’s sacrifice, and of similar sacrifices in the name of freedom, throughout the bloody insurrection, and during his subsequent capture and execution. The revolt, in part, honors Nat’s memory of his father: Nat is engineering his own escape, just as his father had done thirty years before.

As a slave with no socially acknowledged public identity, Nat has no father, no family or past, to which to look for guidance and instruction. He clings to the one narrative regarding his father that he knows, and uses it as a catalyst for his personal conduct and for his bid for freedom. Due to his enslavement, Nat does not receive the sense of identity that white men derived from their families. Nat’s surname is “Turner” not because of any biological connection, but simply because that is the family name of his original masters. After the death of his mother, Nat laments, “the name on that headstone was not a nigger woman’s forlorn though honest ‘Lou-Ann’ but the captured, possessed, owned ‘Lou-Ann Turner’” (185). Lou-Ann’s, and Nat’s, identities are intimately tied to their owners; they are merely material extensions of the Turner farming apparatus. In Wyatt-Brown’s terms, Nat lacks the “identification of moral worth by blood and name” (123).
Except for his absent father, Nat has no paternal model of authority, except for Samuel Turner, or “Marse Turner.” Though Turner taught Nat to read and to do basic mathematics, and allowed him a somewhat protected existence as a “house slave,” Turner could not impart to him “the ideals of hierarchy and honor” (118) that Wyatt-Brown argues are fundamental components of child-rearing in the South. Slave owners were sources of patriarchal authority due to their role as masters, and the plantation “was a prime center of group loyalty” (Wyatt-Brown 378). But Nat’s loyalty, even in the early days of his youth, remained with his father’s memory. Nat uses his literacy to find substitute parental guidance in the Psalms and stories of the Bible; he transfers his allegiance from the plantation family to the larger family of the children of God.

Nat’s literacy, along with his emulation of his father’s example, helps him to develop a purpose beyond the confines of his enslavement. As a young man, Nat “acquired… such a reverence and a sense of majesty in the presence of the Psalms and in the teachings of the great Prophets that I resolved that no matter where my destiny took me, no matter what humdrum tasks befell my lot in later years, I would become first and foremost a preacher of the Word” (173). Nat finds honor in this role of the slave preacher; though many in the white community strongly believed that slave preachers could not effectively and truthfully convey the messages of the Bible. Yet Nat respects

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4 Many black critics were infuriated at Styron’s decision to make Nat a “house slave.” A “house nigger,” writes Dr. Alvin Poussaint, possesses “the full range of currently popular and usually overgeneralized feelings of self-hatred, anti-Negro attitudes and a desire to be white” (19). No historical evidence suggests that the historical Nat Turner ever worked as anything other than a field hand. See Poussaint, Alvin F. “The Confessions of Nat Turner and the Dilemma of William Styron.” William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond. Boston: Beacon P, 1968. 17-22.
the occupational commitment to the truth of Scripture, and also recognizes the inherent
honor in a vocation dedicated to righteousness and Christian fulfillment. The first
sermon Nat delivers, an impromptu address to a group of slaves laughing about the
forced combat of two fellow slaves, echoes both the teachings he has learned from the
Bible and the lesson imparted by his absent father. Nat tells the group of awestruck
slaves, “you is men, brothers, men not beasts of the field! You ain’t no four-legged dogs!
You is men, I say! Where oh where, my brothers, is yo’ pride?” (307). He laments that
his fellow slaves laugh at the sorrowfulness of their plight as opposed to “weep[ing] in
rage” (309). Nat draws comparisons between the abjection of the slaves and the suffering
of the Israelites under the Pharaoh in order to help his audience identify with his message
of defiant pride and absolute faith. In his closing remarks he incorporates the voice of his
biological father with the words of his Biblical father: “Pride, pride, everlasting pride,
pride will make you free…. Arise, shine; for thy light is come, an’ the glory of the Lord
is risen upon thee. Amen” (311). Some of the crowd disperse, but others approach Nat
with reverence and interest; he has received the respectful attention of the slave
community as a knowledgeable leader. Nat feels “their warmth and their brotherhood
and hope” (311) and realizes that, like his father, he has begun his prideful, and
honorable, path toward freedom.
Sex, Religion, Escapism, and Honor

For Nat the act of reading is escapist in both a corporeal and an intellectual sense. Confined to the mundane labors of the plantation, excluded from a community of honor he longs to enter, and condemned to a life of captivity, Nat seeks refuge, solace, and psychological freedom in the instructive tales of his Bible. Within the pages of the Old Testament, Nat assumes control of his own intellectual development and he seeks, and finds, divine validation for his insurrectionary plot. Furthermore, some critics argue his religiosity allows him to “escape” from the internal conflict of his suppressed, and/or repressed, sexual urges. Nat’s first attempt to peruse the stolen book is interrupted when he witnesses a sexual encounter between his mother and the white overseer. Nat feels powerless and confused as he hides and watches, trying to determine the degree of his mother’s ambiguous consent to the act. Daniel Ross relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory to connect Nat’s primal scene of literacy with his “fractured masculine identity” (80):

Nat’s attempt to read is also his initial act of voyeurism, his first illicit “seeing,” and as such it promotes an association of reading and sexuality…. Nat later adopts reading, especially the Bible, as a means of sublimating sexual desire and of seeking the most forbidden kind of knowledge: the voice of the Old Testament God. (81)

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5 See Richard Betts, James Huffman, Donald Markos, and Daniel Ross.
Nat’s reaction to the scene seems more consistent with the development of his self-awareness as a slave -- “my weakness, my smallness, my defenselessness, my niggerness” (150) -- preceding his earlier revelation on the porch and advancing his later choice to seek honor and redemption through liberation. Nat identifies his powerlessness at the intrusion of a white presence during his “reading,” which would otherwise have been a private act involving only man and text. The interruption is a small example of the lack of privacy afforded slaves in Southern society. Slaves enjoyed no separation between public and private, between “being seen” and “being.” White men of honor saw slaves as having no legitimate private life; therefore, Nat’s only sphere of behavior that whites recognized was his social role as an obedient slave.

Just as in the situation between Nat’s mother and the overseer, sex often bridged the boundaries of privacy between the slaveholding system and its slaves. Wyatt-Brown writes that it was not uncommon in the antebellum South for slaveholding men to engage in consensual and nonconsensual sex with their female slaves: “miscegenation between a white male and a black female posed almost no ethical problems for the antebellum Southern community” (307). Though virility was an important component of community honor, Nat maintains his virginity and avoids sexual temptation; when confronted with an enticing slave prostitute at the local market, he turns away, filled with lust and pity. The “Ten Black Writers” and other critics cite Nat’s homosexual dalliance with a fellow slave, his fantasies involving white women, and his monkish lifestyle as evidence of

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Nat’s fear and avoidance of the physical act of intercourse; they argue his chastity compromises his legitimacy as the novel’s male protagonist. Ross echoes these sentiments and suggests that Nat’s studiousness is his attempt to justify his escape from carnal pleasure. But when Nat rebels against the social system of honor, his masculinity, determination, and self-conviction solidify as he escapes into a textual world. Lost in study within the pages of his Bible, Nat is not defined by his blackness or his enslavement; he is free to control his mental environment, to structure his own intellectual growth and to prepare for a future he once could not imagine. Nat’s ability to read, and to “free’ himself within the world of print is a blessing of contradictions; while he is able to access all the power that literacy affords him, he is unable to use literacy to emancipate himself.

Nat uses his knowledge of Biblical teachings to validate his social rebellion within the framework of the honorable men (Moses, David, Solomon) he encounters in the Old Testament. Therefore, Nat does not read to suppress his sexual urges; he suppresses his sexual urges because of what he has learned from his readings. Nat interprets the Bible literally, as did many contemporary whites. For him the instructions are simple: devout Christians must follow the teachings of the Bible and the dictates of God. Nat regrets his occasional masturbatory indiscretions as embarrassing, but forgivable, offenses, and he is careful to “make my penitent prayers… all the more forceful and devout” (173). Nat admits, “I grew up in almost total ignorance of these fleshly pleasures, and whatever further knowledge I might have gained was confounded
by the fear… that adventures in this sphere were unholy and obnoxious in the sight of the Lord” (172). His readings from the Bible shape Nat into a man who wants to apply his life to the pursuit of a devout life and the pursuit of liberation for himself and his fellow slaves.

**Leadership, Literacy, and Self-Identification**

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* contains myriad Biblical quotations and allusions, many coming from the mouth of Nat, and through these quotations he allows a glimpse into his motivations and self-justifications. Finding validation in the Bible, Nat interprets his plan for retribution and escape as the honorable, and the only, choice he can make as an educated, Christian slave. During the summer of 1825, as Southampton County suffers from a crippling drought, Nat spends five days in the woods, fasting and searching for answers to both the drought, a communal plight, and his stifling enslavement, an individual plight. Seeking patriarchal guidance from his divine father, Nat again escapes to the word of the Bible to find the honorable, righteous “key” to what he describes as “a chill, a feeling of sickness, fright, an apprehension” (288). The visions Nat experiences on his final day of fasting are all apocalyptic – “the sun suddenly became dark and the blood ran in streams” (291) – and the directives Nat hears from “a black angel clothed in black armor with black wings” (291) are all from passages in Revelations 14 and 17. The dictates of the spiritual presence reinforce Nat’s belief in the righteousness of his rebellion against the socially imposed constraints of honor: respect for the patriarchal
authority (“fear God and give glory to Him”), adherence to a devout and chaste life (“if any man worship the beast…he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone”), and sacrifice in the name of justifiable retribution for evildoers (“these shall make war…let it come rough or smooth you must surely bear it”) (291-92).

Nat does recognize his faith as an internal symbol of authority, and during his fasting, prayer, and vision quests he searches for guidance and direction. On a carriage ride with Margaret, Nat reveals that his favorite Psalm is the Fifty-Seventh, much of which he recites from memory as they travel through the woods. The psalm, which David authored, expresses many of the strong behavioral and religious beliefs that Nat follows in his daily conduct. The lines also reveal Nat’s tendency to look to the Bible, and his religion, as a realm of escape and private contemplation. As David looks for divine consolation and sanctuary, he tells the Lord, “yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge” (91). As a slave, Nat has little privacy; within the pages of his Bible, and within the frame of his faith, Nat is able to engage in solitary contemplation and spiritual investigation of the meaning behind the Old Testament parables. In the psalm, David takes solace in the knowledge that God will provide for him, and will receive him at the difficult hour; Nat too regards God as the patriarchal symbol of authority and influence. Constantly, Nat reverts to his extensive inner dialogue with scripture in order to find guidance and assistance in his times of doubt. Nat has memorized much of the Old Testament, and his recitations from memory comfort him when he is without his Bible. During the insurrection, Nat, like David, calls to God; while fasting in the late
spring of 1831, Nat pleads, “O God to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself” (348). Nat’s dialogue with God gives him both strength to endure the horrors of his life as a slave, and direction to formulate the revolt.

On the eve of the insurrection, Nat uses the psalm, and the story of David, as a source of comfort and strength when he begins to regret the bloodiness of his own mission. From his Biblical studies, he knows that even great leaders have moments of doubt, and he relishes his uncertainty because it provides an opportunity for him to recommit himself to his honorable rebellion. Nat asks himself, “Did Saul and Gideon and David, armed and waiting on the eve of battle, feel their blood change to water in everlasting fright and then long to sheath their swords and turn their backs upon the strife?” (382). However, Nat spends time alone in quiet prayer and, recognizing that it is his duty to begin the insurrection for freedom, knows he must acknowledge the visions that he believes are the will of God. Previous to his visions, Nat identified himself first as a slave, and second as a man. However, vestiges of his old slave identity fall away as he adopts his new attitude of commander and righteous liberator. He prepares himself psychologically for the moment of the “first blow” because he wants to assume the position of a respected and capable leader. His religious visions and intimate knowledge of Scripture bring him comfort and strength in his moments of doubt. For Nat, the insurrection is a mission he must undertake in order to uphold his rebellion against the dishonor of slavery; the honorable “General Nat,” he hopes, supercedes his other identities as a black, as a slave, or as a preacher.
Conclusion

Nat recognizes the role of fate in his education. Throughout the novel he frequently wonders “what may have befallen my lot had I not been so unfortunate as to have become the beneficiary (or perhaps the victim) of my owner’s zeal to tamper with a nigger’s destiny” (154). He knows that his unique status as a literate slave is both a blessing and a curse: “for the Preacher was right: *He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow*… what sorrow [Samuel Turner] was guilty of creating by feeding me that half-loaf of learning: far more bearable no loaf at all” (156). Literacy helped to create and sustain Nat’s commitment to social rebellion, and empowered him to resist his socially prescribed role within the Southern framework of community honor. Nat sheds his identity as a deferential slave and becomes a prideful revolutionary and a leader among his fellow slaves, respected for his intelligence and capability. However, one of Nat’s fatal flaws is his failure to identify the significance of his public perception of himself, for in the South, the prevailing code of white honor is tied closely with the public assessment and acceptance.
CHAPTER TWO

Margaret and the Influence of Education:
“I’m only a female, I know”

The role of a woman in the antebellum South is characterized by a strict sense of tradition and patriarchal authority. Catherine Clinton, in The Plantation Mistress, writes, “myth, ideal, and duty weighed heavily on plantation women” (109). Women were to behave deferentially, both inside and outside the home. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in Within the Plantation Household, asserts that “a young woman’s purity merged with her racial and class status; her own honor merged with that of her kin, especially her male kin; and her behavior reflected upon the reputation of the other members of her family, household, and class” (210). Margaret Whitehead, navigating this delicate role of familial duty and self-policing, is engaged in a psychological war between who she truly is and what she is expected to be. Emotionally distant from the patriarchal authority of her brother and the influence of her mother, unable to communicate freely with her peers or family, and distraught and torn by her socially unacceptable belief that slavery should be abolished, Margaret rebels against these controls and commits herself to equality, tolerance, and Christian love.

William S. Drewry, in Southampton Insurrection, describes Margaret as “the belle of the county” (43); Styron adopts a similar tone in his characterization of her as beautiful and captivating, “the glossy tumbling mass of chesnut-brown hair… the freckled young

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shoulders… the slim waist” (337). Styron’s physical description of Margaret characterizes her as a stereotypical beauty whom her male peers would both covet and fear. But Margaret finds herself incapable of confining herself within the narrow role of the Southern woman. She uses her education as a platform for developing her “radical” political views on slavery. She resists the authority of both her mother and her brother; and her closest confidant, the person with whom she most closely identifies, is a black slave. While Margaret is not enslaved, she, like Nat, is restricted by society; as a woman of honor, she must adhere to prescribed rules of behavior or suffer severe consequences. Therefore, frustrated and discontent, Margaret employs the tools at her disposal -- her faith, her education, her intelligence -- to rebel against the communal code of honor.

**Rebellion, Honor and Familial Authority**

Margaret, within the power structure of her own family, witnesses a non-stereotypical example of family control and patriarchal authority. Her mother Catherine Whitehead, a widow with six children, oversees the daily operations of the farm, including slave trades and business transactions. Catherine is consistently a stoical, capable, and authoritative figure; Nat refers to her as a “gentlewoman, a lady of some wealth” (316) who “never once removed herself from the realm of ledgers, accounts, tallies, receipts, balance sheets, purse strings, profits” (327). In her mother, Margaret sees a woman who pushes the social boundaries of the female role in Southern society; Catherine descends from the pedestal to manage her family’s affairs without
compromising her reputation. Fox-Genovese notes the rarity of female involvement in financial negotiations: “a lack of business knowledge constituted only part of the problem [for Southern women]…. romance aside – they could not exercise mastery of their own slaves” (204). But Catherine does exercise mastery, at least within the privacy of her family, over the financial concerns of the farm, and the future of her slaves. Margaret’s mother is a model of quiet defiance, perhaps an influence on Margaret’s assertions of ideological independence.

Yet in the male-based honor system of the antebellum South, widowhood did not afford women any extra power or influence. Consistent with social norms, Richard, Catherine’s eldest child and only son, assumes the role of de facto head of household. According to Wyatt-Brown, “everyone knew forceful women, stern in rectitude, commanding in personality, but by no means were such formidable matrons recognized as part of a formal matriarchy. They held power by virtue of willfulness, not prescriptive right” (227). Catherine must submit herself to the authority of her son Richard, a Methodist preacher; her honor and the honor of her daughters is contingent upon the public’s perception of his honor. “Within plantation society, as in most patriarchal cultures,” Clinton notes, “the father represented ‘real,’ and the mother ‘false’ power. Although a mother had direct, daily supervision of her children, the father clearly ruled the household” (40). Therefore, the Whiteheads’ situation was not unique, as children look to a male, not a female, as the ultimate arbiter of discipline and reward. With his father deceased, Richard becomes the figurative “father,” maintaining the honor of his
female relatives, his mother included. Margaret, a perceptive and intelligent young lady, recognizes this tension; the example of her powerful mother’s lack of social power further confuses her ideas about the traditional boundaries of the female social role. At home, Margaret witnesses her mother keeping ledgers, engaging in business relationships, and managing the daily work of the slaves. But Margaret also recognizes her mother’s submission to Richard’s authority; for example, Richard overrides his mother to join the search party hunting for a runaway slave.

Margaret rebels against the power structure of the patriarchy in her family. Wyatt-Brown notes that young, unmarried women typically submitted, without question, to the male authorities of their households: “women undertook their own inner policing to avoid unseemly rebelliousness” (230). Margaret lacks the stronger elements of this internal policing, instead answering to the higher authority of religion and her sentimental attachment to Christian love and tolerance. She befriends a male slave (an act that most white Southerners would have considered indecent) and with him enters into an unconsummated but (at least in Margaret’s opinion) close and genuine relationship. Ironically, during her conversations with Nat, Margaret speaks more openly than she has done with her classmates or family. With Nat, she feels comfortable enough, and powerful enough, to express her opinions honestly without fearing any social consequences. Had Margaret acted in accordance with widely held beliefs about black males, she should have been quiet and withdrawn, fearful and concerned about her vulnerability and her virtue while alone with a slave. Torn between her inner convictions
and the pressures of society, Margaret certainly recognizes the futility of her actions and the inescapability of her responsibility to act honorably. A Southern woman, Clinton writes, lacked “freedom of choice; her options were severely curtailed by her gender” (46).

**Miscegenation and the Threat to Female Honor**

Styron imagined the relationship between Margaret and Nat to generate “charged” tension; therefore critical interpretations of their shared scenes -- three carriage rides and their encounter in the library of the Whitehead plantation -- typically focus on the sexual subtext. 2 During these carriage rides Nat and Margaret grow closer, and soon Margaret reveals her fascination with scripture and her conviction that slavery should be abolished. But Nat and Margaret’s first encounter occurs when Nat visits the Whitehead plantation to ask about using Richard’s church for a baptism and Margaret answers the door. Nat remembers two details from this brief, initial meeting -- Margaret’s beauty, “a dim pretty pale girl’s face;” and her indifference to his race, “as if my skin had been alabaster-white” (316). Throughout the novel, Margaret remains unthreatened by Nat, though most Southern women remained aloof from male slaves. Margaret not only confides in Nat, but admits to him that he is her closest companion: “it’s funny, you know, when I tell the girls at school they just don’t believe me when I say I go home on weekends and the only person I can talk to is a – is a darky” (91).

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2 See Richard Betts, James Huffman, Donald Markos, and Daniel Ross.
Margaret’s relationship with Nat is more significant to her than adhering to what she considers the unnecessarily strict rules about contact between blacks and whites, between those who are slaves and those who are free. Margaret must certainly be aware of the social risks inherent in her friendship with Nat. Clinton emphasizes, “the ban on sexual relations between white women and black men and the southern lady’s elevation to a pedestal were socially enforced and strictly observed” (88). But Margaret disregards this “requirement” of honorable behavior and instead acts according to her feelings toward Nat. Several times she indicates that she prefers his companionship to that of her siblings, her mother, or even her school peers. During one of their last carriages rides, in the summer before the insurrection, Margaret confides to Nat that she has defended his intelligence and refinement to her former friend, Charlotte Tyler Saunders (a daughter of a Virginia congressman, and therefore a young lady with considerable social capital), and has called him her “erstwhile friend” (366).

Margaret’s kinship with Nat over their religious passions is more valuable to her than the socially accepted friendships she has forged with classmates or suitors. She does not see the inequalities in her relationship -- as a hired slave Nat is not in a position to contradict or silence her -- but instead focuses on their common interests and enjoyable (at least for her) exchanges. Margaret risks becoming ostracized at her school to defend her position on slaves and her relationship with Nat, thereby honoring her personal loyalties over her social expectations. To indicate confusion and frustration, Margaret frequently uses the expression “I just don’t know” -- a phrase that aptly represents her
internal conflict about her duties as a Southern woman of honor and her desire to follow her own moral beliefs.

**Education, Literature and the Development of Female Honor**

Margaret, like her sisters, attends a boarding school. Typically, Southern women were educated in the hope that appropriate study would help to reinforce their ideas about chastity, obedience, and socially acceptable behavior. Clinton, Fox-Genovese, and Wyatt-Brown all confirm that “through reading they [Southern women] extended the implications of their everyday lives and sought models of personal excellence, sources of personal consolation, and standards of social and political good” (Fox-Genovese 242).

However, as Wyatt-Brown states, “educational advancement threatened the patriarch’s authority” (195), resulting in the placement of limits upon female education. Therefore, Nat becomes an appropriate audience with whom Margaret can share her religious and literary ideas; he is knowledgeable in discussions about scripture, and a captive audience (so to speak) to her narratives about her scholastic accomplishments. Margaret, who readily acknowledges Richard and Catherine’s more practical approach to the Bible, finds Nat a perfect alternative to their indifference.

Like Nat, Margaret escapes into books, especially religious texts. In the Bible, and in the poetry and prose she reads at the seminary, she validates her ideas about love, and the simplicity inherent in a peaceful life. Margaret is like many other young, slave-holding women in the South, who, according to Fox-Genovese, read “primarily religious
literature in their continuing efforts to improve themselves as Christians” (259) but also looked to “escapist” (260) texts to influence their imaginations. In her daily existence, Margaret is subject to various social authorities; however, within the confines of literature, Margaret feels empowered, and liberated from the constraints of her social roles.

Nat and Margaret’s first encounter of any length occurs in the library of the Whitehead plantation; the library is a symbol of the influence of literature on the life of these central characters. As a child Nat steals a book from the Turner library and is ultimately rewarded with reading lessons; as an adult, he finds maps of Southampton County and southeastern Virginia in the Whitehead library. He interprets these maps as a divine sign supporting the insurrection; he copies them carefully and hides them in his shirt, intending to use them to advance his quest for freedom. For Nat, reading is a private act that involves evading whites (he reads under porches, in library corners, in empty barn stalls), whereas Margaret seeks to publicize and share her literary pursuits. Except for their first encounter, in 1826, all of Nat and Margaret’s interactions are marked by reading and by the recitation of quotations.

In their initial encounter in the library, Margaret recites to Nat a portion of a Wordsworth poem; “She was a Phantom of delight” is relevant to Margaret’s struggle to subvert society’s expectation about her behavior. Margaret, whom Nat regards at first as a “Godless white bitch” (339), reads aloud to Nat the following lines:

The reason firm, the temperate will
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill.

A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light. (338)

The final lines of Wordsworth’s poem perfectly echo the contradictions inherent in the role of the Southern woman -- a “perfect” woman practically devoted to managing the logistics of a plantation household and caring for her husband and offspring, but also angelic and chaste. Wordsworth, responding to the horrors of the French Revolution by expressing an interest in domestic cares, lauds the ideal female companion, while outlining the traits to which Margaret should aspire. The poem, written in 1804, expresses both socially admissible honor and the frailty of the female condition.

Even more significant than this poem, which Margaret has learned in school, is a confusion over the word *endurance*. Margaret’s friend Anne Eliza Vaughan insists that the word is *forbearance*; while Margaret assurs her that the correct word is *endurance*. “Forbearance,” Anne Eliza’s choice, is synonymous with abstinence and patience, connoting inaction. Anne Eliza’s preference echoes her interpretation of the female role and her conventional belief in the passivity and subservience of the appropriately behaved young woman. However, Margaret’s choice, “endurance,” which proves to be the correct word, connotes a more active and empowered response, such as withstanding
hardships. Margaret “endures” the confines of Southern female honor by actively managing her frustration within the limitations imposed upon her by society.

While Margaret seeks to escape the confines of the “honorable” Southern woman, she does not fully comprehend the position of herself and Nat within a slave-holding society. Louis Rubin asserts that, “in her romantic, naïve way Margaret Whitehead means only the best for Nat, and genuinely likes and admires him, yet she fails utterly to comprehend the nature of Nat’s position and cannot for a moment grasp what torture is involved for Nat” (8-9). Her obliviousness is apparent when she asks Nat for his opinion about the fate of a runaway slave. Will, the violent slave who later joins the insurrection, has struck his master and escaped, and the entire county is involved in the manhunt. Upset by all the “stupid folderol” (364), Margaret says, “I should hardly blame Will for striking him [his master] 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?” (364). Nat, in contemplating a response, thinks that it is “such a question [that] 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” (364).

Nat’s honesty is limited by the restrictive system of white, patriarchal honor in the South. He must be vocally deceitful to a white person because, if he were to be honest, Nat would violate social rules governing slave conduct. Nat must display deference and submissive agreeability to Margaret; therefore he cannot honestly share his opinion on Will’s attack and escape. Nat eventually chooses a “tone of humility” (365) when
answering that he’d be “mighty careful about retaliating against a white mastah” (362); Margaret’s sincere proposal of the question reveals that she truly does not understand the distinctions between herself and Nat. Even though they share an intense interest in religion -- Nat refers to it as “Christ-obsessed young awe” (92) -- Margaret cannot achieve a relationship based on simple Christian love, at least not with Nat, a slave in the temporary employ of her mother. While her emotions prompt her to treat Nat as an equal, Margaret fails to recognize that, regardless of her religious readings, her tolerance, and her purported closeness to Nat, social pressures still constrain their behavior.

**Religious Influence and Honor**

One of the primary reasons for Margaret’s attraction to Nat is his encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible and his comprehension of what she calls “spiritual things” (90). She identifies Richard as the authoritative head of her household -- “he’s a preacher and all” (90) -- and regards her mother as the administrative leader of the plantation. Nat fills an emotional gap created by Richard’s unsentimental view of religion and her mother’s concerns with the logistics of their farm. “Every weekend I’ve come over from school you’ve been the only one I could talk to,” she tells Nat; “all Mama cares about is the crops – I mean the timber and the corn and those oxen and all – and making money” (90).

Nat prefers to focus on the vengeful teachings of the Old Testament, while Margaret prefers the “sublime” Psalms and the teachings of love, forgiveness, and tolerance in the New Testament. Religious instruction becomes the basis for Margaret’s support of the controversial abolitionist movement, an anathema in the South. Margaret
describes to Nat in detail how she has bucked tradition and social expectation and has argued against a classmate who believes “darkies are irresponsible and have no morals and are bestial and lazy and how you can’t teach them” (366): “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!’” (366).

Not only is the content of Margaret’s outburst controversial, but the very act itself is provocative and threatening to the prevailing social code. For Margaret, personal values supercede socially prescribed responsibilities, and she remains committed to the literal interpretation of the Bible: that Christians should practice charity and love for all of God’s creatures, whether black or white, human or animal. Margaret adheres to what she considers the essential importance of all-encompassing love:

Oh, it is the simplest thing in the world, is it not, Nat – the perfect Christian love of God, and of one another, yet how many people shun that blessed grace and live in fear and torment? *God is love*, John said… could anything be more simple or easy or plain? (368)

Part of the connection she feels with Nat stems from this idea of (platonic) love; she senses in him a love and deeper understanding of Scripture. She also sympathizes with Nat’s predicament as a slave, recognizing the inhumanity of the institution and the brutality that slaves suffer at the hands of cruel masters.
Resistance to the Patriarchy: Margaret as Author of her Own Honor

Margaret’s interest in her academic studies, literary readings, and religious verse is evident in her enthusiasm at being appointed class poet. When the governor, perhaps the ultimate symbol in Virginia of patriarchal authority, visits the school, Margaret is on her best (and most socially acceptable) behavior as she delivers a song and an ode to honor him. During her performance, she adopts all the socially accepted mannerisms of a young Southern lady; she is deferential to the governor, humble in her delivery, and appropriate in her choice of a poetic theme.

Her song is titled “Buds and Flowers” and is rife with images of deference, obedience, and virginity. Throughout the song, she repeats the title, recalling images of innocence and pastoral beauty. Her submission to and recognition of patriarchal authority is evident in her use of “sir,” a term of respect for the governor. Other words, like “dew,” “tender,” and “fragrant,” all connote the fragility and chastity of the idealized female condition. “Stem” and “stalk,” in a novel replete with phallic objects, signify masculine authority. That the “buds and flowers” are “tied,” and bound for the governor’s pleasure represents female constraints and servitude as ideals. The newspaper review of Margaret’s performance praises her embodiment of “the highest principles of Christian female education” (90). Through her song, Margaret embodies all the attributes required of the stereotypical Southern belle, including adherence to ideals of beauty, virginity, and deference to patriarchy.
However, Margaret also uses her literary talent to convey less socially acceptable messages, when she writes a “masque” with her friend at school. The masque is a true representation of Margaret’s feelings about love and feminine power. Margaret herself describes the masque as dealing with “elevated themes – oh, I mean things of the spirit and philosophy and poetical matters and such like” (371). The masque is titled *The Melancholy Sheperdess*, and the central characters are a devout Christian heroine named Celia and a young pagan lord named Philemon. Margaret plays Philemon, a typical hero of classical drama, slaying villains with handsome ease. At the end of the play, Philemon abandons his “animalistic” (371) religion and learns the redemptive power of Christian love. Margaret recounts the final moments of the play: “Philemon holds his sword up in front of Celia like a cross and says: ‘we’ll love one another by the light of heaven above’…. [T]hen Celia says, ‘Oh, I would fain swoon into an eternity of love!’” (373).

The masque is an artistic actualization of Margaret’s true ideals; for her, honor is equated with the power of love, not the masked emotions of the ideal Southern woman. She, like Nat, must mislead her audience in order to embrace her rebellion against the existing honor system. Margaret shrouds herself in the character of Philemon in order to disguise her personal beliefs in the themes of the masque. Therefore, Margaret’s subversive masque is dishonorable since, by deceiving her peers, Margaret publicly represents herself in a false manner, a serious infraction of Southern honor. Margaret and Nat, in their resistance against the unfairness of the prevailing honor system, are required -- paradoxically -- to act dishonorably in order to adhere to their personal perceptions of
loyalty, religious devotion, and honor. Even in their rebellion, the social honor code they try to upend ultimately discredits and excludes them; Margaret, socially marginalized as a female, acts “dishonorably” in her attempt to find a place for her own honor. She reflects her frustrations in her masque. Though Philemon wins the heart of his beloved, and saves his soul through a series of brash actions that result in his conversion to Christianity, he is doomed to a life bereft of love unless he abandons his pagan faith. Philemon’s failure to accept Celia’s teachings about Christ would have resulted in his spiritual suicide, echoed by the literal suicide of the evil witch Fidessa.

In Margaret’s interpretation, honor and love are synonymous. She recognizes Christian love as a most honorable character attribute; therefore she is willing to sacrifice everything in order to reveal her platonic love for Nat. The play prefigures Margaret’s eventual death; Philemon’s sacrifice, made in order to achieve redemption and Christian love, mirrors Margaret’s own end. As Philemon surrenders his previously held principles in order to kill the pagan threat, Margaret surrenders her social reputation to support her rebellion against the system of honorable conduct.

Conclusion

In creating the characterization of Margaret Whitehead, Styron initially found difficulty in dissecting her motivations and in establishing her relevance to the novel. In a 1966 interview with Per Se magazine, he stated, “[Margaret is] an eighteen-year-old nubile, religious nut very similar to [Nat] himself… she’s quite unconsciously flirtatious,
and she’s a little dish – a little sweetheart, you know” (Markos 53). Later in the same article, Styron adopts a more serious tone:

… at the moment of her death at his hands she regards him [Nat Turner] with a look of compassion and love, and this is his revelation…. [I]t’s too late for his mortal salvation [but] it’s the answer for him, and it’s the answer for the book. (Markos 53)

Styron’s conflict over Margaret’s character reflects complex questions about the nature of her motivations. Margaret is engaged in her own internal conflict, and is confused about whether she should behave in a manner that would bring honor to herself and her family, or whether she should pursue her own belief that only through love, and love alone, will humans find salvation and a peaceful mortal life. Like Nat, Margaret masks her resistance to the patriarchy, and reverts to subversive tactics when revealing her desires to dismantle the overarching control of the prevailing honor system. This deceitfulness compromises her honor, and makes her death appear inevitable when examined through the lens of white Southern society.
CHAPTER THREE
Honor and Public Perception: “two acting out their final tableau”¹

In the antebellum South, the values of the community determined the values of the private household; so white Southern families strove to create a public appearance of honor, success, and morality. For young, unmarried, women like Margaret Whitehead, this appearance “included a strong emphasis on purity and chastity” (Fox-Genovese 235). Any manifestation of impropriety or immodesty could corrupt a young woman’s honor and also her family’s. Slave conduct also figured into a slaveholding family’s public identity. Slaves who behaved insubordinately or addressed their masters with disrespect reflected poorly upon their masters’ authority. Bertram Wyatt-Brown states, “obedience and even the semblance of affection were the first requirements of slave conduct; impudence was thought a prelude to insurgency” (406). Though both Nat and Margaret actively rebel against the existing honor system, they fail to anticipate the reaction of the public sphere. This failure to consider public perceptions results in the collapse of their rebellions and contributes to their deaths.

Nat’s Role as a Slave: Perceptions of the White Community

White males and females in the antebellum South demanded that slaves wear expressions of submission and behave in ways that reflected obedience and passivity. Styron’s Thomas Gray, in his opening arguments at Nat’s trial, blames Nat’s murder of

Margaret on the “malingering nature” of “the Negro character” (85). “Certainly,” he tells the judge, “pure Negro cowardice would find its quintessential expression in this base crime” (86). Slave obedience factored into an owner’s public image, which was a “persona” that Greenberg calls “a superficial mask.” “Southern men of honor,” he states, “were ‘superficial.’ They were concerned, to a degree we would consider unusual, with the surface of things – with the world of appearances” (3). Part of this superficiality, Greenberg explains, was their public mask:

The words of the master had to be accorded respect and accepted as true simply because they were the words of a man of honor. The words of a slave could never become objects of honor. Whites assumed that slaves lied all the time – and that their lies were intimately connected to their positions as slaves. (11)

Men of honor wanted to appear honorable and powerful to their communities.

Similarly, these Southern white men expected their slaves to wear “a mask of obedience” (48), which Greenberg notes included “a look of contentment, a gesture of subservience, a change in a name – and all the other ‘superficial’ features of obedience” (48). These masks, worn by males and females, blacks and whites, in Southern society reinforce the significance of public perception in the creation, or dismantling, of honor. More specifically, the masks worn by slaves and masters alike served to distinguish between the oppressed and the oppressors. Thomas Gray plays to this division when he refers to the public reputation of slaves in Nat’s trial; he cites Nat as an example of the “typical…
evasiveness which the Negro perennially employs to cloak and disguise the base quality of his nature” (85). For whites in Southampton County, Nat is not only guilty of leading a bloody slave insurrection, but he is also guilty of feigning subservience.

As Nat grows into manhood, his value as a slave increases due to his strength, his above-average intelligence, and his previous training as both a “house slave” and a carpenter apprentice. In the winter of 1822 he is sold for $460; the man who sells him notes, “he jest a bully worker. Got right smart strength for one so slender, and a good mind on him – can actual spell out some words, and has a God-fearin’ spirit. Reckon he might be a likely stud, too” (246). In 1829 Catherine Whitehead tells Nat that she has offered Thomas Moore, Nat’s master, one thousand dollars for his purchase, but that Moore would not agree to the exchange. “One does not pay that type of money for something one does not really value, or treasure,” she tells Nat, “I expect you will go far, for a darky” (328). Therefore, the public perception of Nat within the white, slave-holding community includes the recognition of his value as a commodity and an interest in his employable skills.

Throughout the novel Nat often feigns passive obedience while secretly plotting his rebellion. For instance, during the conversation with Catherine Whitehead in 1829, Nat is relishing his stolen copies of the Tidewater Virginia maps: “suddenly I thought of the documents beneath my shirt and again the hatred swept over me. I was seized with awe, and a realization: Truly that white flesh will soon be dead” (328). One of the reasons the white community was wary of slaves was that whites knew, regardless of
their mastery of the slaves, that they would never truly understand the slave mind. “A consequence,” Greenberg writes, “of the inability of masters to ‘know’ their slaves – a variation of the inability of powerful groups to ‘know’ the people they dominate – was that it prevented masters from intruding even more deeply into slave life” (48). Louis Rubin also acknowledges “the difficulty, the impossibility even, of the white man knowing what Negroes really thought and felt” (6). These white fears about the psychological impenetrability of the slave mind indicated the prevailing white perception of slaves as dishonest and untrustworthy. Slaves were dishonorable, and therefore whites could never assume slaves were as they appeared to be.

But even before the insurrection, some slaveholders in Southampton County already saw Nat as a potentially deceitful slave and therefore, by definition, a dishonorable threat. In the eyes of the white community, Nat’s status as a preacher made him appear all the more devious and untrustworthy. Whites worried about the autonomy black preachers received from their masters, and also about the deference and respect that slave preachers received from their peers. Also, the “word” of a slave carried no legal or social credence; therefore white society considered slaves incapable of accurately or devoutly professing the “Word” of the Bible. These slave preachers could incite religious fervor and spontaneous emotion in their followers, and the thought of uncontrollable slaves was a great fear in slaveholding communities. Richard Whitehead mocks Nat when Nat asks Richard if he can use the church to baptize a degenerate white pedophile, Ethelred Brantley. “How can a darky claim to be an ordained minister of the gospel?”
Richard asks Nat, “pray tell me where you acquired your background in divinity” (317). Richard dismisses Nat by telling him to “get your devilish black self off of this property” (318), and he is obviously irritated by his conversation with Nat. Whites recognized the power that slave preachers held within slave communities; similarly, Nat recognizes that his status as a preacher can serve as a platform for his revolutionary rhetoric.

**Nat’s Role as Insurrectionist Leader and the Perceptions of the Slave Community**

At the time of the insurrection, Styron’s Nat is a well-recognized figure within Southampton’s slave community. Known by blacks throughout the county for his oratorical skills as a preacher, Nat enjoys local recognition irrelevant to his secret mission, and he is also regarded as a spiritual leader. Nat views his development as a preacher as a natural progression for his intelligence, charisma, and encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible. Being a preacher is synonymous with being a leader in the slave community, and this helps Nat to further his goal of becoming an inspired master of a slave insurrection. Part of the reason Nat values his trusted lieutenants, to whom he confides his plans of insurrection, is that these slaves “profoundly respect my superior intelligence and my powers to lead and to enthrall” (332).

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* is based upon the premise that the reader will accept Nat as an honorable, and truthful, narrator; though contemporary legal theory dismisses the validity of slave testimony, the entirety of *Confessions* centers upon the credibility of Nat as a narrator. Therefore the structure of the novel, and other narrative
evidence, suggests that Nat does embody a form of alternately constructed “honor.” Through his status as a preacher, Nat endeavors to achieve honor among his slave peers; he shrouds himself in a cloak of religious devotion and spirituality because he feels they are attributes that an honorable leader should have. By undertaking the task of insurrection, and assuming the leadership of his followers, Nat attempts to create honor for himself within the context of slave rebellion. For the whites in Nat’s Southampton County, the conception of “honor” within the slave community did not exist during antebellum times, due to the prevailing system of honor and that system’s rejection of slaves as appropriate recipients of honor. However, Nat, in his ideological rebellion, desires the respect of his peers, and searches for honor, though socially diluted, in any form.

Even though many whites remain wary of Nat because he is a slave preacher, Nat’s vocation enables him to take command of his “inner circle” of confidants and become the “general” of the insurrection. Nat uses his literacy and his knowledge of Old Testament stories to justify the insurrection -- “to draw the blood of white men is holy in God’s eyes” (410) -- and to instill honor and pride in his troops -- “Lord, how I strove to drive the idea of a nigger Napoleon into their ignorant minds” (331). The interaction and conflicts that occur among Nat’s confidants before and during the insurrection indicate the presence of an “underground” honor system within the slave community. Though whites were convinced slaves were incapable of honor, an alternative honor structure existed within the social circle of Nat’s innermost lieutenants. Tensions are present
within this “false” honor system, as not all of Nat’s followers respect him as a leader. One slave, Will, constantly dishonors Nat and threatens his role as insurrectionary leader.

Will, who strikes his master and runs away to live in the swamps in the weeks before the insurrection, is consumed with thoughts of murdering white men and defiling white women. Nat feels threatened by Will’s mania and uncontrollable anger, and he is “seized by reasonless fear” (376) when Will attempts to join the group. In Nat’s eyes, Will represents a challenge to his authority as leader and a liability to the disposition of the slave rebellion. While revenge and retribution are reasons for the insurrection, Nat believes that his mission is sacred and sanctioned by God. Will’s unpredictability and “madness” (377) make him an outcast within the slave community. Just as the whites call him a “mad dog” (363), Nat refers to him as “a shaggy brute heaving beneath a carapace of scarred black skin” (377). Nat knows the likelihood that Will will disregard his commands. Though Nat is afraid that he “could not control him or bend him to my will” (378), he allows Will to join the insurrection when Will threatens him: “an’ I fix you’ preacher ass! I knock you to yo fuckin’ black knees… preacher man, you better figger dat Will done jined de ruction! You maybe is some fancy talker but you isn’t gwine talk Will out’n dat” (377). Will’s outburst highlights not only his bloodthirsty rage but also Nat’s distinct black identity as a preacher and “fancy talker.”

Since Nat is the visionary behind the plot, he is “to strike the first blow” (388). Yet Nat becomes indecisive, withdrawn, and ill once the insurrection commences, as he questions whether his mission was truly God’s will, asking, “Lord, has Thou truly called
me to this?” (292). Nat fails not once but twice to strike the first blow, missing Joseph Travis twice with his axe, and he is unable to fulfill his duty as leader and catalyst of the black revolt. He is preparing to try again “when there now took place that unforeseen act which would linger in my mind during whatever remaining days I was granted the power of memory” (389). Will kills Travis and his wife, thus becoming the powerful black creature that Nat witnessed in his divine vision of a black angel overpowering a white angel. Before the eyes of his closest allies, Nat fails to slay the Travises and even tries, in panic, to escape the bloodshed, as Will taunts him: “if’n you cain’t do it, I do it!” (390). Nat immediately realizes that he has compromised his authority as leader: “Will’s crazy, deafening rivalry for leadership was something I could not dismiss any more than I could fight down my panic over my own inability to kill” (403). Nat’s capacity as a leader is in jeopardy, and his inability to lead precipitates a later confrontation with Will that takes a more serious turn.

Nat’s subsequent altercation with Will, in the woods near the Whitehead farm, indirectly causes Nat to murder Margaret. Will accuses Nat of being unable to kill and thus unfit to lead the insurrection. Before his followers Nat desires to appear strong, capable, and honorable; watching Will, Nat recognizes that his role as leader is being usurped: “I could tell that Will had made himself both hero and cynosure of the mission…. To them [the other insurgents], Will, not I, was the black avatar of their deliverance” (406-07). Nat wants to maintain control over his troops to sustain the integrity of the insurrection. But Will challenges Nat because he has yet to kill anyone.
Will expresses contempt for Nat’s status as an educated preacher, and questions Nat’s masculinity: “preacher man, less’n you can handle de ax you cain’t handle de army” (408). The struggle between the two men, each wanting to lead the army, is borne of the innate competitiveness of males, and implies that the desire for honorable status occurs regardless of skin tone.

**Margaret and the Perceptions of the Slaveholding Community**

Margaret, as a young, unmarried woman from a locally prominent slaveholding family, bears a social responsibility to conform her behavior to public expectations. The Whiteheads’ social status is linked to her brother Richard’s leadership in the church and their relative wealth as farmers. Though Richard is the patriarchal head of the Whitehead household, Catherine’s involvement in the traditionally male-dominated business world makes her an unintentional model of defiance for Margaret. She witnesses her mother’s quiet power within the family, and sees that Catherine’s performance determines the financial success or failure of the family’s farm. Catherine’s influence, like the influence of Nat’s absent father, helps Margaret develop her own empowered plan of rebellion against the system of honor.

Margaret’s emotional outburst at “Mission Sunday” reveals that she is frustrated by the limitations of her subversive rebellion, and that she recognizes she will never be able to escape the constraints of her social role. Mission Sunday is the occasion at Richard’s Methodist church when he delivers to the slaves a special sermon recommending their obedience to God and master alike:
If therefore you would be God’s free men in paradise, you must strive to be good, and serve him here on earth…. I say, that what faults you are guilty of towards your masters and mistresses are faults done against God Himself, who has set your masters and mistresses over you in His own stead… (91-101)

The sermon reflects the agenda the white community imposed on slaves: rejection of any trace of defiance, insistence upon obedience, and deference to white power. Richard’s sermon also evokes the Old Testament’s imagery of God’s wrath, and alludes to punishment awaiting sinners in the afterlife.

As Nat delivers Margaret to this church service, she worries about his impending absence from the Whitehead farm; he is being traded back to the Travis farm because he has completed his work for the Whiteheads. She is upset that she cannot spend time with Nat and tells him, “I’ll just feel lost without your society” (91). Nat too is upset by his bafflement over the “warm and mysterious and mutual confluence of sympathy “ he feels for “this innocent and sweet and quivering young girl” (92). Though, according to social standards of the day, Margaret should not be conversing so openly with Nat, she is expressing real regret about the loss of his company, and is sincerely convinced of the depth of their friendship. When she realizes that Richard is to preach the Mission Sermon, she tells Nat with pure honesty: “oh me oh my, Nat, too bad for you… poor Nat” (95); Margaret acknowledges the church’s hypocrisy as Richard uses religion to justify slavery.
Margaret, like Nat, feels the sermon is a contrived attempt to manipulate religion to excuse and support slavery. She is more interested in the true message of Christian salvation, and starts listening to the service only when the congregation begins singing hymns. Nat watches Margaret as she “carols heavenward, a radiance like daybreak on her serene young face” (104); he is moved to tears as she sings a hymn to salvation.

Margaret and Nat experience strong emotions because they identify with the Christian hope of salvation. Nat believes his honorable duty is to lead his people away from slavery and to salvation as free men and women. In accordance with her beliefs about honor, Margaret believes she must speak against the immorality of slavery.

At the conclusion of the service, Margaret loses her composure, and confides to her mother that she loathes the hypocritical and false message her brother delivered. “Oh, Mother,” Margaret laments, “it’s the same old folderol, every year! Just folderol for the darkies!” (104). Her mother immediately tries to silence her, and evokes the memory of Margaret’s deceased father as an added element of paternal control: “if your sainted father were here, to hear you talk like that about your brother. Shame!” (104). Catherine mentions Margaret’s father in order to remind Margaret of the weight of his patriarchal authority; though he is dead, the family must still conduct themselves in a manner that brings honor to the Whitehead name. Margaret is overcome with shame at her helplessness and overcome with frustration by the failure of her rebellion. Sobbing, she apologizes to her mother and uses her favorite expression of confusion: “I just don’t know. I just don’t know…” (104). Mission Sunday marks Margaret’s realization that
the white community of which she is a member will never tolerate her deviation from acceptable belief and behavior.

**Nat’s Murder of Margaret: “our last meeting”**

Styron considered Nat’s murder of Margaret the climax of both his novel and the 1831 *Confessions* of the historical Nat Turner. Several critics focus primarily upon the sexual nature of the confrontation, and they emphasize its relevance to Nat’s fractured revolutionary psychology. However, within the greater context of an honorable society, Nat and Margaret’s final confrontation illustrates the collapse of their rebellion against the prevailing honor system. Margaret, confronted by society’s rejection of her radical ideas about Christian love and abolition, finds herself trapped in the violent rebellion against the slaveholding society to which she belongs. Confronted with the doubts and jeers of his lieutenants and followers, Nat must literally take up the sword of the insurrection and strike a blow against oppression and his own fears about the validity of his leadership. Their confrontation with the unforgiving honor structure of the white South highlights Nat and Margaret’s misunderstanding of the importance of public opinion as a component of honor.

Watching the massacre at the Whitehead farm, Nat again becomes overcome with weakness and nausea. Richard, Catherine, and the other Whitehead daughters have already been slain when Nat approaches the house, as once again he fails to kill. Will,

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3 See Richard Betts, James Huffman, Donald Markos, and Daniel Ross.
who has just killed Catherine, offers Nat an ultimatum; pointing to Margaret fleeing across the field behind the house, Will tells Nat, “if’n you cain’t make the red juice run you cain’t run de army!” (412). Nat knows that he must kill in order to maintain the respect of his men, and recognizes that his honorable duty as general of the insurrection is to take at least one life. To prove his honor Nat “unsheathe[s] his sword” (413) and “plunge[s] it into her side” (414) twice, and then bludgeons her with a fencepost when she begs him to end the pain.

The language of the scene and “the phallic imagery of the murder weapons” (Betts 433) suggest the consummation of a sexual act. “[Margaret] is the source of [Nat’s] greatest torment,” David Markos notes, “and she must be struck down – even symbolically raped, pierced with a sword – before the hatred in him can be released and his manhood felt” (58). Nat had previously rejected the thought of raping Margaret; in the month before the insurrection he felt he had an opportunity as he led Margaret down a bank so that she could drink from a creek. When Margaret fell against him “for the briefest instant… clasping my arms with her still-wet hands” (373), he thought, “could it be, too, that I felt her relax, go the faintest bit limp, as she slumped against me” (374). In that moment, Nat realized his deeper attraction for Margaret, and felt that Margaret might share that attraction as well.

However, the murder paradoxically enforces stereotypical role-playing upon the characters rather than affording them a sublimated sexual encounter. Nat becomes the threatening black predator that antebellum society feared, while Margaret becomes the
victimized, weak female passively submitting to her death. Margaret submits to Nat’s authority -- the control reversing from the slaveholder to the slave -- and begs him, “please kill me Nat I hurt so” (414). Nat complies, so upset he profanes the Lord’s name, “die, God damn your white soul” (414) and then imagines that he hears Margaret’s earlier words, from her masque, echoing in the fields: “oh, I would fain swoon into an eternity of love” (415). Though he entertains Margaret’s pleas for mercy, Nat recognizes the collapse of his rebellion. Nat finds himself lost in the field behind the Whitehead farm, circling Margaret’s body and “calling out to myself like one bereft of mind” (414).

Margaret’s role requires her to submit, with grace and acceptance, to her death; Nat’s role as commander means he must sacrifice all in the name of his mission. Nat and Margaret share an intimate moment in the only way that is socially acceptable in the honor code of the antebellum South; they must act as foes rather than friends. Margaret’s passive acceptance of her fate, and Nat’s reluctance to deliver it, signify their reversion to the conventional code of honor and their abandonment of their rebellion against societal constraints.

Conclusion

Nat’s murder of Margaret serves its larger purpose in the eyes of Nat’s slave public; Will becomes calmer and more manageable, and Nat’s control of his troops is restored. By killing Margaret, Nat has earned the respect and admiration of his followers and become their honorable “General Nat” once again. But the murder changes Nat;
after Margaret dies, the insurrection falls into disarray and Nat becomes disheartened by the clash with the militia, the attacks by fellow slaves, and the drunken disorder that overtakes the slaves who join the revolt. Nat’s once clear vision of the insurrection as a rebellion of black pride and freedom has become muddied by Margaret’s death. Nat ponders Margaret’s final message of the “eternity of love” as he begins to understand the ramifications of his sacrifice of Margaret in the name of the insurrection. Margaret’s death inadvertently precipitates the failure of the insurrection; Nat, distraught over Margaret’s murder, allows a young girl to escape unharmed. He lies to Thomas Gray about the incident, compromising the honor of his confession, by testifying that he and his troops witnessed the young girl’s escape. In reality, Nat alone watched the girl flee:

I heard her faint frantic cry, saw a flicker of color as she vanished into the darkening thicket of trees. I might have reached her… but I suddenly felt dispirited and overcome by fatigue, and was pursued by an obscure, unshakeable grief. (416-17)

Gray tells him this was the girl who warned others, allowing the whites to spread the alarm, regroup, and counterattack the insurrectionists. ‘If Nat were fully rational,’” James Huffman argues, “he could justify killing Margaret as an unavoidable necessity if the rebellion were to succeed; no one who might warn others could be spared” (301). But at the Whitehead farm Nat is not rational; months later, awaiting his execution, he recognizes his unfocused and distraught demeanor as he contemplates his emotional state at the time of Margaret’s murder. Nat sacrifices everything to gain the respect of his
peers, understanding too late the impact of public perception on the individual honor and self-worth. Margaret sacrifices herself because she knows she cannot escape the message of the insurrection -- black freedom -- and because she realizes her individual beliefs -- the abolition of slavery, the love of mankind, the empowerment of the female voice -- will never be accepted by society.
CONCLUSION

Regardless of the failure of the overall purpose of the insurrection, and in spite of Nat’s emotional turmoil following his murder of Margaret, Nat still believes in the validity and honor of his mission; for him, the insurrection remains as he originally intended it:

I knew that my course was just and, being just, would in its strength overcome all obstacles, all hardships, all inclement turns of fortune. I knew too that because of the noble purpose of my mission even the most cowed and humbled of Negroes would divine its justice (361).

Nat’s commitment to his rebellion is sincere, but his statement holds a hidden truth. Nat expects that “Negroes would divine” the justice of his cause; through that admission, Nat acknowledges that a social system based upon white power and white honor would reject his “noble purpose.”

The narrative structure of The Confessions of Nat Turner centers upon Nat’s recollections as he awaits his execution; therefore, throughout the course of the novel, Margaret’s voice exists only in his memory. But despite her death, Margaret’s genuine voice is still foremost in Nat’s memory, and her beliefs are tightly interwoven into his own account. Margaret, like Nat, is engaged in a struggle against the role prescribed to her by a male-dominated white society. She remains dissatisfied with her marginalized voice and her social restrictions, and is frustrated at the hypocrisy of the slaveholder’s religious self-justifications regarding slavery. Margaret, above all, answers to her own
interpretations of New Testament love, salvation, and redemption, regardless of the social
control of her brother, her mother, or her educators. During moments of spiritual self-
interrogation, Nat often repeats Margaret’s closing lines from her masque, The
Melancholy Shepherdess: “we’ll love one another by the light of heaven above” (428).
Those lines contain the essence of Margaret’s rebellion against the pre-existing honor
system; her philosophy is one of Christian love above all the socially prescribed barriers
of race and class.

Slave Insurrections and Southern Honor

Southern white men of honor reacted to the threat of slave uprising by
discrediting and rationalizing black violence as the work of fanatics, rather than
acknowledging the justice of slaves’ impulses towards freedom. Yet white Southerners
considered slave insurrection, such as the 1822 Denmark Vesey plot in South Carolina or
the 1831 Nat Turner Revolt, as “the white South’s most dreaded crime” (402). Though
Nat thought of his insurrection as an honorable and noble cause, most whites viewed
slave insurrections as just the opposite; they felt insurrections were the result of
misguided, cowardly lunatics who lacked the capacity to die honorably for their cause.
Greenberg theorizes that men of honor believed slaves would never be “willing to risk
their lives in a bid for freedom” (100) because acknowledging their sacrifice would allow
them to have died with “mastery and control rather than fear and submission” (91).
All Southern men of honor respected and valued those who gave their lives in war, for a noble cause, or in some other honorable altercation; white men believed “free and honorable gentlemen, unlike the slaves they governed, were not afraid to die” (88). White Southerners saw slaves as biologically lacking the capacity for honor; a slave’s naturally degenerate state prevented him from having the courage or moral character to devote and sacrifice his life for an abstraction. Greenberg stresses, “the belief that slaves and others with no honor preferred their lives to their liberty made it likely that men of honor would come to understand Nat Turner as a coward or a madman. To have seen him otherwise would have been to ‘emancipate’ him” (107). To acknowledge that slaves would die for freedom would be an acknowledgement that slaves valued freedom above all else, above their masters, above their duties, and even above their lives.

If white Southerners were to recognize Nat’s devotion to his mission and his sacrifice for his cause, they would have to admit he was brave, fearless, and honorable -- attributes that they could never apply to a slave. Greenberg found that “newspapers described [the historical] Turner as a trickster who manipulated and fooled all the slaves around him” (100). Nat acted dishonorably by intentionally deceiving slaveholders, and he violated Southern codes of behavior by fraudulently feigning obedience to white authority. By discrediting the true cause of the rebellion – slavery – and by dismissing the participants as deluded and ignorant victims of a charismatic madman, whites could “deny the agency of Nat Turner” (102) and therefore reject the growing threat of unrest within the slave community. Since much of Southern honor depended upon “masks” of
civility, authority, and respect, slave rebellions unmasked the shaky power that
slaveholding whites held in their communities, especially in regions like Tidewater
Virginia where slaves and free blacks outnumbered whites. Reinforcing the white
debunking of slave insurrections, the judge tells Nat, “they [his fellow insurrectionists]
were your bosom associates, and the blood of all cries aloud, and calls upon you as the
author of their misfortune. Yes. You forced them unprepared from time to eternity…. Borne
down by this load of guilt, your only justification is that you were led away by
fanaticism” (106). White antebellum Southerners, due to their adherence to a social
system bound by honor, could not extend insurrectionists anything but discredit and
dismissal. Nat’s failure to recognize this fact is one of the reasons for the failure of his
rebellion against the established system of Southern honor.

The Failures of Nat’s and Margaret’s Rebellions

The pre-insurrection rebellion in which Nat and Margaret engage is based upon
the same constructs of Southern honor that informed the white man’s honor system. Both
Nat and Margaret model their resistance upon social models of white patriarchs. Nat
wants to mimic the authority of his white masters and the tales of a vengeful God in the
Old Testament. Margaret publicly defers to patriarchal control, lavishing deference upon
the governor, while secretly acting out her fantasies of social control by creating a
fictional world based upon her dictates. Recognizing the influence of tradition in the
world of white honor, Nat and Margaret internalize behavioral traits of the patriarch and

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employ these traits whenever possible. Among her friends Margaret assumes a confrontational and competitive role, arguing in support of abolitionism and discussing interpretations of religious and poetic texts. Likewise, Nat, as both preacher and “general” of the insurrection, assumes a position of leadership and instructs his followers on moral conduct, Biblical history, and religious devotion.

Like many Southern males of honor, Nat and Margaret also draw honorable lessons from their readings. Nat, unusual as a literate slave, pores over his Bible and assimilates many of its stories into his own philosophy of leadership. Margaret, like Nat, turns to religion for instruction and comfort; like many women of her time, she finds solace in religious study and poetry. And both harbor a serious commitment to their religious education, memorizing Psalms and other verses that reflect their individual philosophies. Nat focuses primarily on passages concerning leadership and retribution, while Margaret’s interests center upon tolerance, redemption, and the forgiveness inherent in Christian love.

Despite relying upon the traditional constructs of the white male-based honor system -- religion, education, and the traditions of the patriarchy -- Nat and Margaret do not acknowledge the impenetrability of the white social hierarchy. They lack a fundamental understanding of the complex nature of honor in antebellum Southern society. They do not realize that social distinctions -- between black and white, man and woman, slave and free -- are unalterable facets of public life that cannot be reshaped by
individuals. Underestimating the indispensability of public role-playing in a society based upon honor, Nat and Margaret’s attempts at rebellion are doomed to failure.

Margaret must answer to the social authority of her brother, her mother, her teachers, and even, to an extent, her peers. Her outbursts in school and outside the church on Mission Sunday provoke shock and disapproval (by her classmates and her mother, respectively). Though Margaret publicly shares her opinion, she lacks the social authority to make an impact; despite her strong belief in the intelligence of slaves and in their right to be free, she has no social capital with which to enact her abolitionist views. Emboldened by her readings of poetry and scripture, Margaret believes she owes her allegiance and obedience to God, not to the hypocritical authority of her brother and mother. She regards both her mother and Richard, despite his position as a minister, as spiritually empty and interprets their practicality and submission to the social status quo as a failure to recognize the beauty, poetry, and meaning behind the messages of love and tolerance in the Psalms.

Margaret’s prescribed social role is to listen and not be heard, but those are restraints she cannot abide. She appears to realize this only weeks before the insurrection. Confronted with the blasphemous religious defense of slavery on Mission Sunday and aware that Nat will soon be traded back to the Travis farm, Margaret recognizes the isolation and despair implicit in her social role. Unlike The Melancholy Shepherdess, for which Margaret could write a suitable ending, she is unable to shape her social responsibilities to a satisfying conclusion. Dying in the field behind her home, she
tells Nat, “I hurt so” (414); her statement has a double meaning signifying both her physical pain from the two stab wounds and her spiritual pain over the failure of her social rebellion.

Similarly, Nat recognizes, but refuses to accept, the immobility of his social status. Despite Nat’s superior intelligence and his ability to read, write, and do basic math, he is ostracized by slaves and whites alike. Though Nat does develop strong bonds with other slaves, such as his fellow insurrectionist Hark, he remains largely isolated from the slave community. Much of Nat’s separation is self-inflicted, as he views most slaves as lacking self-respect and religious devotion. Committing himself to a monkish life, Nat ritually fasts, isolates himself on spiritual quests, and avoids sexual contact with whites and blacks alike. These efforts only distance him further from his fellow slaves.

Louis Rubin identifies Nat’s isolation from his peers and his masters:

The world he inhabits is such that at best he can expect from whites only pity, and at worse outright hatred, while from his fellow slaves he can expect only inarticulate admiration at best, and at worst envy and contempt…. No one wants him for what he is. For everyone, white and black, friend and foe, he must play a role. (10)

Role-playing supports the world of white honor, and the order of an honorable society is contingent upon all participants behaving according to their social stations. Nat’s attempt to thwart slaveholding control and to assert patriarchal authority in a society that
marginalizes him disrupts the balance of power. Nat’s failure is preordained as soon as he attempts to extend his resistance to the prevailing honor code to his fellow slaves.

**An Unresolved Rebellion**

In the months before the insurrection, Nat envisions himself raping Margaret; by objectifying her and violating her, he can distance himself from the unwanted emotion he feels for her. The Margaret in his fantasies is desecrated, humiliated, and treated as an outlet for release. Nat’s vision of rape reverses the conventions of white honor that require slave deference to white, female virtue. One day, while driving Margaret to a neighboring farm, Nat realizes, “I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration. And let her scream until the empty pinewoods echoed her cries” (367). Yet after the insurrection, Nat’s emotions toward her soften and he comes to regard her with tenderness and a timid respect. In Nat’s jail-bed fantasy, Margaret becomes a willing participant in the sexual encounter, and the act itself becomes an expression of love rather than of violence. Nat is “stirred by a longing so great” (426) at the memory of her voice that he fantasizes: “yearning for her suddenly with a rage that racks me with a craving beyond pain; with tender stroking motions I pour out my love within her; pulsing flood; she arches against me, cries out, and the twain – black and white – are one” (426). Their union symbolizes Nat’s spiritual movement away from the vengeful philosophy of the Old Testament. He realizes that, by abandoning all notions of mortal love, he has forgone an essential facet of the human experience; while remaining committed to the
idea of insurrection, Nat acknowledges and accepts his unresolved feelings toward Margaret.

Writing about the character of Nat, twenty-five years after the publication of The Confessions of Nat Turner, Styron defended his most controversial character: “a careful reading, I insisted, would show that Nat’s motivation was complex, flowing from a relationship containing hatred as well as love, but not the simple-minded lust claimed by the critics” (451). Nat’s sexual fantasy reflects the complexity of his relationship with Margaret and the inherent failure of his rebellion against rigid social assumptions about honor. In the hours before his execution, Nat does not regret his decision to revolt; he interprets the insurrection as the culmination of his honorable rebellion, the ultimate act in which he sacrifices himself, honorably, for a great cause. “I would have done it [the insurrection] all again,” Nat vows, “I would have destroyed them all” (428). The insurrection and public sacrifice emulate, for Nat, the selflessness of Old Testament heroes and the traditions of his father’s defiance.

While imprisoned, Nat continuously recalls a verse Margaret shared during their final carriage ride: “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God” ¹ (368). In his final hours Nat interprets this verse as an indication that he should have pursued a consensual, sexual relationship with Margaret instead of murdering her. While such relationships did exist in the antebellum South, Nat does not understand the social difficulties of such a union. If they had entered into an illicit affair, Nat’s insurrection

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¹ I John 4:7
could have never occurred, because white males, seeking revenge and upholding public rules of honor, would have killed him. Margaret would have become ostracized socially, or worse. Also, their union would have failed to resolve the issues that initially prompted their rebellion. Nat began his insurrection as an attempt to end the dishonorable institution of slavery and to appropriate honor and pride for black people; these goals would have become unfeasible were he simultaneously to pursue Margaret.

Therefore corporeal love remains an implausible solution; Nat’s vision of love cannot be achieved, since Margaret is murdered and slaveholders are already dismissing the social ramifications of the thwarted rebellion. “Yet I would have spared one,” Nat states, “I would have spared her that showed me Him whose presence I had not fathomed or maybe never even known” (428). Nat’s desire for a successful insurrection, his regret at killing Margaret, and his hope of penetrating the male-based honor of the white system are all misguided and doomed because they do not account for the overwhelming public significance of communal perceptions of honor and dishonor.

The white male governs the prevailing honor system of the South; Nat and Margaret represent marginalized factions of that framework. Their failure to understand the fundamental role of public perception in antebellum honor contributes to the failure of their rebellions against social honor codes. Honor is a vital component of public life, and Nat and Margaret’s roles in that public life are subservient to the dictates of the white patriarchy. Their inability to understand the true weight of the public nature of honor
contributes to the collapse of their resisting moral orders, and reflects the impenetrability of the South’s overarching social structure.
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APPENDIX ONE

Psalm 57
“The Cry of the Soul among Lions”

Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

I will cry unto God most high; unto God that performeth all things for me.

He shall send from heaven, and save me from the reproach of him that would swallow me up. Selah. God shall send forth his mercy and his truth.

My soul is among lions: and I lie even among them that are set on fire, even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.

Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens; let thy glory be above all the earth.

They have prepared a net for my steps; my soul is bowed down: they have digged a pit before me, into the midst whereof they are fallen themselves. Selah.

My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise.

Awake up, my glory, awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early.

I will praise thee, O Lord, among the people: I will sing unto thee among the nations.

For thy mercy is great unto the heavens, and thy truth unto the clouds.

Be thou exalted, O God, above the heavens: let thy glory be above all the earth.


APPENDIX TWO

“She was a phantom of delight”

She was a phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight;
A lovely Apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of Twilight fair;
Like Twilight's, too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful Dawn;
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.

I saw her upon a nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin liberty;
A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;
A Creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles.

And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A Being breathing thoughtful breath,
A Traveler between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength, and skill;
A perfect Woman, nobly planned,
To war, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright,
With something of angelic light.

APPENDIX THREE

“Buds and Flowers”
An Ode by Margaret Whitehead

We’ll pull a bunch of buds and flowers,
And tie a ribbon round them;
If you’ll but think, in your lonely hours,
Of the sweet little girls that bound them.
We’ll cull the earliest that put forth,
And those that last the longest,
And the bud that boasts the fairest birth,
Shall cling to the stem the strongest.
We’ve run about the garden walks
And searched among the dew, Sir.
These fragrant flowers, these tender stalks,
We’ve plucked them all for you, Sir.
Pray, take this bunch of buds and flowers;
Pray, take the ribbon round them;
And sometimes think, in your lonely hours,
Of the sweet little girls that bound them.