“For a while they felt better”: Negation in *A Flag for Sunrise*

Brady Harrison

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9396>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9396

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Brady Harrison, “For a while they felt better”: Negation in *A Flag for Sunrise*, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 6-1 | 2011, document 7, Online since 07 October 2011, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9396> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9396>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

"For a while they felt better": Negation in *A Flag for Sunrise*

Brady Harrison

- 1 In *Dog Soldiers* (1974), Robert Stone began to take the long view of empire, linking the American venture in Southeast Asia with the Spanish conquest of the New World and the U.S. conquest of Mexico. In his next novel, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), he continues his meditation on the long history of Western and American imperialism, but dives deeper into the motive forces of empire. If *Soldiers* sounds the effects of imperialism upon the individual and collective psyche, *Flag* explores the metaphysics of empire, attempting to understand what fears, desires and ontological conditions impel imperialism. He wants to know where massive, catastrophic violence comes from: what is it about the American - or the Westerner in general - that makes him or her wish to conquer someone else? What goes on inside of us that makes us desire the land, wealth, and even the lives of less powerful peoples? A long and complex novel about U.S. involvement in Central America following the Vietnam War, *Flag* maintains currents of Stone's literary naturalism, but insists that brute forces have less to do with the characters' ruin than do their self-indulgent longings and fears.
- 2 Stone suggests that the desire for wealth, women, land, domination, or even good works cannot account for the viciousness or the fervency with which Americans and Europeans have pursued the subjugation of others. Rather, he locates a gnawing absence within both the official agents of empire and those who, adrift in their professional or personal lives, find themselves caught up in third world revolutions and wars. Whether a policy maker, soldier, spook, thwarted intellectual, missionary or junkie, this absence within propels the individual to seek death, either the death of another or the death of the self. Beneath the stories our leaders tell us to justify U.S. interventionism, Stone contends, dwell deep-seated, but over-indulged fears that have twisted many Americans into black-souled, vicious empire-builders and seekers - after-death. Fear eats away at the self: fear of death, fear of the void within, fear of human meaninglessness, fear of groundlessness in a Godless universe impel the agents of empire forward. Charges into the jungles of the third world arise from these

intertwining fears, from the ache within that can only be briefly quieted through acts of brutality, appropriation, conquest. Imperialism grows from a need to fill this void within, or at least to shut one's eyes to it through ferocious activities and desires. This same endless ache within, Stone also implies, drive us toward self - annihilation. If we kill someone else, maybe we will abate—if temporarily - the desire to erase ourselves. Or, we will finally get our way, and die a horrible death.

- 3 Stone posits a void within his characters, but he also suggests that the Western tradition of understanding imperialism through the fear of an absence within amounts to, in the American context, a willful extravagance, a taking - on of old European attitudes and worn - out metaphysics. The American, nearly a century after Kurtz's journey up the Congo, seems determined to take his or her god - is - dead, hollow - man, heart - of - darkness death trips; in *Flag*, Stone uses his three primary characters—Holliswell, Sister Justin, and Pablo - as a means to interrogate the intellectual traditions, legacies, and histories of European and American empire. Although Stone cannot finally say if a void within exists in the American consciousness, he does assert that even if it does, it does not constitute an adequate explanation for all the interventions, acts of gun - boat diplomacy, police actions, and wars. For Stone, the heart - of - darkness routine has become too easy, too convenient a way to account for American ventures. What we need, he implies, is a new metaphysics, a new ontological order, a new ethics, and he implies this through the vast trajectory of his novel: by the end, Stone has destroyed, either physically or spiritually or psychologically, each of the main characters and, in effect, has eviscerated not only their bodies, souls, and minds, but their excuses as well. We can either, Stone implies, continue to stumble along, murderous and foolish, like Holliswell, or we can reject our Western legacy and start from a metaphysical ground zero and construct less harrowing ways of being - in - the - world, develop less murderous relations between self and other. A deeply pessimistic, naturalist fiction, *Flag* does not tell us what this new world will look like; spent from the massive undertaking of metaphysical evisceration—and determined not to let us off the hook with anything like a happy ending or easy answers—it leaves the world to us.

1. Negation

- 4 In *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), David Spurr outlines the imperial trope of "Negation," or the desire for violence in order to temporarily soothe the howling within. In this fine study, Spurr analyzes the languages and tropes of "colonial discourse" in British, French, and American journalism, travel writing, and fiction. Among explorations of such tropes as "Appropriation," where the European or American surveys the land or body of the African or Asian or Central American and deems it his own, or "Insubstantialization," where the colonialist or imperialist ventures abroad in order to explore "the boundaries of consciousness" (146) and to flirt "with the possibilities of enslavement, madness, and self - annihilation" (144), Spurr offers an analysis of "Negation," or "the rhetorical strategy [. . .] by which Western writing conceives of the Other as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death" (92). He goes on: "negation acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire" (93). In his or her journeys to the third world wilderness, the American gives himself or herself over to the old and dangerous tropes - or ways of acting and seeing - of "insubstantialization" and "negation."

- 5 If negation serves as a political act designed to deny "a people's historical or cultural existence, in order to open a space for colonial expansion" (107), Spurr also argues that "negation combines elements of the psychological and the metaphysical" (107):
the representation of non - Western reality as nothingness in various forms actually serves as the projection of a more radical absence in Western consciousness. As the work of Conrad so eloquently demonstrates, there is a void at the center of consciousness that must be named or given an image in order that it be contained. The terror of this void produces the fugitive inauthenticity that Heidegger ascribes to modern existence, a constant fleeing in the face of death. Derrida as well has written that the image, or the imagination, "is at bottom the relationship with death" - death as the abyss at the center of representation which is spanned by the structures of imagination in the most precarious way. (107)
- 6 In Spurr's analysis, a void within the individual and a fear of death or nothingness propel the imperial self abroad in an effort to deny the absence within. He or she sees the terrain of Asia, Africa, or Latin America as a wasteland, projecting the void within as a void without. Stone, as a writer concerned with the possibility of a void within and with the Western practice of casting the zone of the other as a wasteland, stands in a long philosophical and literary tradition that, as Spurr suggests, can be used to understand imperialism as a massive form of negation. This tradition does not (necessarily) defend imperialism, but looks at Western actions and the Western consciousness, and posits this void within as a means to account for the assertion of the will. Spurr's analysis of this tradition as a means to understand imperialism as an extreme form of self - assertion merits unpacking.
- 7 In *Being and Time* (1927), for example, Heidegger describes the modern condition of "fugitive inauthenticity." The existentialist asserts that "entangled, everyday being - toward - death is a constant *flight from death*. Being *toward* the end has the mode of *evading that end* - reinterpreting it, understanding it inauthentically, and veiling it" (235). As "Da - sein," or beings variously aware of our own beingness, our own possibilities to lead our lives or have them led for us, we are also aware, Heidegger argues, of the possibility of our demise. This "being - toward - death" should have the effect of making us realize that just as we have only our own death to die, we have only our life to lead. In existential terms, we must consciously decide how we will be in the world, even if we live in a universe without meaning.
- 8 For Heidegger, this would be to lead an authentic life, not a life filled with fear of death or of an absence within stemming from the absence without. As Da - sein, we experience dread, or *angst* over the meaninglessness of life, but because we can determine our own being - in - the - world, we understand our death not as something to be feared excessively. Death constitutes a condition of our being. Although Heidegger does not discuss imperialism in *Being and Time*, if we take his formulations and apply them to the imperial self, then we could argue that to live inauthentically would be to fear death and react violently against that fear by projecting one's death outward. Gripped with a morbid fear of death, the inauthentic, imperial self lashes out, punishing someone else for the inevitability of the self's demise. In Heidegger, the void exists - it lurks within and without - but we have a choice in how we react to this emptiness, to our existential predicament.
- 9 Spurr also cites Derrida as a philosopher who has identified the void within as a motive force in human activity. In *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida reads Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and "Essay on the Origins of Language" (1781), and notes the stream of

paradoxes in Rousseau's attempts to privilege speech over writing. Derrida quotes Rousseau: "Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech" (qtd. in Derrida 144). But supplements, as the poststructuralist argues, suggest a basic lack or absence in speech; writing can be a supplement to speech only if speech is itself incomplete or lacking what Derrida identifies as "presence." In his postructuralism, nothing is ever fully present; we lack the ground of *telos*, or *logos*, or the transcendental signified upon which to guarantee presence. As he remarks, "the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in - the - place - of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void" (145). The use of "if" and "as if" communicates the impossibility of ever achieving full presence, of ever filling the "void."

- 10 In Spurr's analysis of the trope of negation, the lack of presence denotes a void within, an irreparable absence. We are not, as Derrida would have it, fully present to ourselves. Although we might quibble with Spurr's description of "death as the abyss at the center of representation" - where are the "centers" in the philosophies of dispersion? - the point remains clear: this absence, or lack of presence, works away at us, gnaws at us, compels us to act against it. It infuriates, cannot be gotten at; we cannot push our hands into our chests and somehow tear out a hole, or even reach in and stuff it with a balm. We fear this void, and we fear death, the ultimate void. As Derrida remarks, "If one moves along the course of the supplementary series, he sees that imagination belongs to the same chain of significations as the anticipation of death. Imagination is at bottom the relationship with death. The image is death" (184). Against the lack of presence, against the impossibility of the right supplement to make us whole, we have human endeavor, we have the imagination. We have, in other words, the assertion of the self. The imperial self, particularly infuriated at his or her final powerlessness, possesses only his or her actions. Imperialism constitutes an aggressive and violent act against death, against the void that trembles within the Western consciousness. As Spurr would have it, the imperialist takes arms against the void; to paraphrase *Dog Soldiers'* Hicks, what a bummer for others.
- 11 Nietzsche, of course, stands as the culprit in this tradition of Western philosophy. Heideggerian existentialism, like Derridean poststructuralism, draw inspiration from Nietzschean skepticism and anti-logocentrism. Unlike Emerson or Hegel, Nietzsche rejects a melioristic or teleological force at work in human history, and denies the ultimate referent. In the "Prologue" to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), Nietzsche has Zarathustra, the new prophet, strike the perfect note of mock incredulity. After parting from a hermit he has met during his descent from the mountain, Zarathustra remarks, "Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead!*" (12). For Nietzsche, we stand on no ground except for the ground we claim for ourselves through the exercise of the will. We must follow our own morality, our own thoughts. We can see easily how one could twist Nietzsche's view into an argument for imperialism - the *Übermensch*, through the assertion of his will, masters the herd - but the more important claim in Nietzsche's work identifies the universe as an alien place: no Old Testament God the Father, no New Testament Figure of Love, to give meaning to our lives, just an empty, cold universe. Once again, in the trope of negation, the imperialist takes arms against this realization, against his or her meaninglessness and death.

- 12 The effort to understand the violence of imperialism as an expression of the void within and the void without finds its most famous literary expression in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad's modernist masterpiece of atmosphere, indirection, and narrative layering. When Kurtz goes to the jungle, he transforms from an efficient European engaged in an economic venture into a warlord with heads on stakes in his front yard. The question Conrad raises - and the question critics have pursued in depth - is where does his violence come from: is European colonialism the source of his depravity, or does the jungle destroy the cultivation and civilization of the agent of empire and turn him into a monster? Does the heart of darkness dwell in London - Paris - Berlin - Brussels or along the Congo - Amazon - Mekong? Conrad suggests that it dwells in both.
- 13 The void, the fear of annihilation, festers in Kurtz's Western, imperialist soul. But it also lurks, in Conrad's racist economy, in the uncivilized and decidedly bestial wastelands of Africa. When Kurtz mutters, "The horror! The horror!" (86), he does not say the same thing twice, but sees two horrors, one within and one without. Kurtz seeks to quiet the howling absence within through acts of violence, and the jungle, a lawless, barbaric place, contributes its violence to his already predisposed nature. Kurtz cannot contain or control the voids within and without, and they destroy him even as he wishes to destroy all the "brutes." Like Nietzsche and his descendants, Conrad holds a sometimes dismal, foreboding sense of existence, sees human activity as dangerous folly, as bizarre and murderous confusion.
- 14 We could find dozens of examples more of poets and novelists describing a void within the Western consciousness - we could indeed cite any of the dozens of American rewrites of *Heart of Darkness*, beginning with *Apocalypse Now* - but I will offer only a couple more. In *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a long, bitter, and haunting critique of European and American imperialism in the Americas, Leslie Marmon Silko suggests that Euro-Americans operate from a terror of death. Clinton, one of the army of the homeless and dispossessed, transmits his views via "Liberation Radio":

Europe got fabulously wealthy off slave power in the Americas. Where does the greed of the European originate? Greed arises out of terror of death. People of snow and ice are haunted by freezing and starving. The wood on the fire never lasts long (428).
- 15 Negation, Silko suggests, motivates Western violence; rapacity, rape, murder, imperialism, she tells us throughout the many complex, interwoven strands of the novel, arise in whites from fear, from the certain knowledge that the food and fire cannot protect one forever. Most of the white characters - or those of color who "act" like whites - kill if they get the chance, or steal, or take the lives, land, and sacred objects of Indians or other people of color. As she puts it in *Ceremony* (1977),

the lies devoured white hearts, and for more than two hundred years white people had worked to fill their emptiness: they tried to glut the hollowness with patriotic wars and with great technology and the wealth it brought. And always they had been fooling themselves, and they knew it (191).
- 16 Whatever we think of Silko's politics, she at the very least makes plain her views on Euro-American culture and its well-springs of violence and avarice. Stone writes in this literary and intellectual tradition, but questions the notion of the void within and the void without as an explanation for American violence and empire-building.

2. Hollow Man Holliwell

- 17 Like Hicks in *Dog Soldiers*, Holliwell, Justin, and Pablo move inexorably toward death. They seek their own annihilation, or will put it off for a while if they can find someone else to kill. All lost, all adrift in their personal and professional lives, they attempt to find some meaning, attempt to do something or find some answer that will justify their existences. They stumble about looking for solace, but they wish more to humiliate themselves, punish themselves, destroy themselves. All three hate themselves, think they would be better off dead. They move in darkness, estranged from their families, from others, from God. Two of the three – Justin and Pablo – get their wish and die painful, bloody deaths; Holliwell puts off his own demise for a time and enjoys the obverse wish: he kills Pablo. All three suffer from the void within and Stone presents Central America as a wasteland, as a zone of radical negation. The universe, it seems, holds no meaning; human life does not matter, ideals do not matter, nothing matters. Or so the characters believe. Stone, in contrast, implies that nothing matters only if you believe nothing matters.
- 18 Stone offers the three as variations on a theme: with differing levels of self-awareness and self-reflexive sensitivity to their existential predicament – Pablo the least, Holliwell the most – each acts on his or her despair too willingly, pursues his or her heart-of-darkness trip because it is easier to do so than not. Holliwell in particular indulges himself; he might be able to reason his way out of his predicament – his desolation and estrangement – but he goes along, drunk, foolish, not caring, pursuing his lubricious interest in a nun. With these three representations Stone suggests that post-Vietnam Americans have too easily accepted the old European ways of acting and seeing; they take up negation, however unconsciously or consciously, because they do not try to think, see, or act otherwise. They have refused to learn from history, refused to examine the metaphysics underlying their actions. Peripheral agents of empire, they continue on, following in the footsteps of earlier European and American imperial selves. The void may or may not exist within, but even if it does, Stone insists that his characters should know better by now, should confront and then abandon negation and the dread within as a motive force for their conduct.
- 19 We can begin with Pablo, the least self-conscious of the three primary characters. At the beginning of the novel, he deserts his post, kills his dogs, and abandons his young son and wife, but not without first threatening her life: "You want to go out on a meat trip, Kathy?" (68). When she fouls their bed, his desire to kill abates, and he throws a wad of bills at her, "That there's for all the good times [. . .]" (69). At a loss, he decides to head south, and once embarked with the Callahans, indulges in a fantasy of adventure, women, and conquest:

He was out where it mattered; out here, he thought, you made it big or you went under. He would go under or go back and let them put the irons on him and do the time. But if he made it big, he might go back and no one could touch him. Or he might settle down, on some island, a better island than this one – and be like the men you read about in *Soldier of Fortune*, men who had lived the life of adventure in hot countries and by their strength and cunning made it big, gotten rich, and who lived exquisitely in plantation houses high above the harbor with beautiful native wives. (238 – 39)
- 20 The sparky fantasizes about "making it big," but he drifts toward violence as one absolutely lost in his professional and personal lives (if he ever had much of either). He

can never recover his career, never go home again, but must instead move steadily toward death. As he realizes early on, "his line was playing out, there was a poison in his blood" (124).

- 21 Speed has turned Pablo into a paranoid sociopath, but his anger comes from more than just the dope. Barely able to articulate his resentments, he wonders why he exists:

What if the world got it different? If it was different it wouldn't have me in it, I'm nothing anybody wants and that's for sure. I damn sure ain't anything I want, he thought, so what the hell is the use of me? No use at all. (125 - 26)

- 22 Pablo hates himself, calls himself a "son of a whore" (124), "Mex mestizo mulatto nigger spic" (125), and "gypsy mongrel" (125). He does not know his heritage, never knew his father, has no family, religion, or philosophy to sustain him. Wired, not that bright in the first place, he cannot quite say what eats away at him, but he tries to understand his existential condition in the terms available to him:

If I were God, Pablo Tabor thought, I wouldn't have mornings like this. The sun up on a swamp, two worthless dogs, a sparky with his blood full of speed and gasoline. No such morning could have a God over it (62).

- 23 Unlike Holliwell, Pablo cannot explain or account for his condition. Without God overhead, he feels but cannot name the void within. He aches, feels worthless, and wishes for annihilation: "If I were God, he thought, if I made mornings I wouldn't have no Pablo Tabor and his dogs in 'em" (63). A hollow man, he pours out self-loathing, desires negation, and drifts toward a wasteland in search of it.

- 24 As a negated American, even as he seeks his own destruction, he lashes out at others. He barely knows in what direction to vent his hatred and pain. Although he does not murder his wife and child, he wants to kill almost everyone else he meets: when he arrives in Compostela, an imaginary Central American republic, he falls into a scam to rip off Tony and Bill, "two *maricones*": "This is it, he thought, I'm gonna kill these fuckers" (93); as he looks at Deedee Callahan aboard the boat, he realizes that he wants "to fuck and to kill her" (312); when he's adrift in the boat with Holliwell, he confesses, "I was gonna kill you, Holliwell. No shit" (427). Consumed by the void within, but unable to articulate or understand his fear, Pablo wants to destroy others for the pain he feels inside. Aboard the *Cloud*, he gets his wish, but the temporary relief he draws from killing someone else and thereby salving the abyss within only leads him to a more profound recognition of his absolute aloneness: "His work done, Pablo became afraid. An unfamiliar emotion oppressed him which he came to recognize as loneliness; a loneliness deeper than he had ever experienced" (329). The murders bring him up against his absolute isolation and against the certainty of his own death. No amount of speed will ever carry him past his abiding dread.

- 25 Of the three characters, Pablo can least grasp the forces at work against him, and he stumbles forward, wounded, hoping that somehow he will come to some truth, some relief from his dark frustrations. He never gets that relief. After Holliwell stabs him and tosses him from the boat, he looks down at the dying man:

The stricken features were like a child's, distorted with pain and fear yet still marked with that inexplicable flicker of expectation. It was a brother's face, a son's, one's own. Anybody's face, just another victim of ignorance and fear. Just another one of us, Holliwell thought. (431)

- 26 Pablo, though a jangling addict and sociopath, at that moment has our sympathy. He never stood a chance. Born the "son of a whore," abandoned, alone in an alien universe,

he becomes vicious, but lacks the ability to pierce his hollowness. He drifts, a child-victim, into the abyss, but even in his last moments holds onto a wavering hope that he might yet understand his existence and know some peace.

- 27 Like Pablo, Justin cannot relieve the ache within. Although she sets out for Tecan with her professional life seemingly in good order and performs her job well - "Justin had soldiered on for six years, cheerful and strong, the wisest of catechists, a cool competent nurse. A little too good to be true in the end" (36) - dread and self-loathing have gnawed at her from childhood. As she thinks about the failure of the mission, the abiding anguish returns, and she hates herself and her body:

A storm broke inside her, leaving her feeling for all the world as she had felt sometimes as a child - ashamed of her own body and its gross necessities, its rankness, its sinfulness, its carnality. She had stopped eating then, hoping to die. (335)

- 28 The longing for negation, for death, returns, and with the revolution closing in, she grasps at another chance to push away the dread within:

The blank soulless world she had confronted at twenty lay again before her like the limitless unmoving sea; she would have to reconcile herself to it again, as she had then, to find in it meaning and self - transcendence, to make the leap of faith. Again. (131).

- 29 Weary of the struggle to believe in the face of the "blank soulless world," she does not really hold out much hope that she will find any transcendence. Instead, she becomes caught up in violence she cannot control. Like Pablo, Justin feels the void within, but comes equipped to articulate it in much fuller terms. As she stares at the sea, contemplating her faith, she sees Father Egan, the mission, and her existence as "utter total foolishness":

Her soul extended along this meditation as it might in prayer. There was nothing. Only the sea, shadowed deeps, predatory eyes. Her heart beat quietly alone, its panicked quickening like a signal to the void, unanswered, uncomfirmed. It beat only for her, to no larger measure, a futile rounding of blood. The desire for death made her dizzy; it felt almost like joy. (41)

- 30 Stone repeatedly offers the ocean as a metaphor for the void, and Justin looks into it as deeply as she can. If less certainly than Pip in Melville's *Moby - Dick* (1851) - another long and searching American novel about the individual's place in the universe - she senses the "strange shapes of the unwarped primal world" (453), but unlike Pip does not see "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom" (453 - 54). Instead, Justin finds "nothing." Adept in arguments of faith, she also possesses an existential understanding and has the conceptual means to express the alienness of the universe as she finds it. This understanding, however, leads not to a profound sense of being-in-the-world, but rather to a dreadful elation at the prospect of death.

- 31 Unlike the men around her, she does not try to lash out at others for the void within and the void without, but seeks to punish herself. She pours out self-loathing in vitriolic streams:

I am unworthy, she thought. You are. We are. They are. We are all fucked flat - unworthy, unworthy beyond belief, unworthy as a pile of shit. Help us there, you - help us crush ourselves out of recognition, help us to be without eyes without pudenda without any of those things. Most of all make us without childish feelings. Because it's that kid inside that makes us so damnably unworthy. We'll scourge ourselves, we'll walk in the fiery furnace, we'll turn ourselves around. (264)

- 32 Incredibly hard on herself, she loathes her body, wants to be crushed out of existence, and as with Pablo, Stone describes her as a child inside, as one with few defenses against the world. Justin meditates on her condition, understands it better than Pablo understands his, but her faith fails her and she cannot love, reason, or push her way beyond the desire for death. In the end, she gets her wish as Campos brutally beats and subjects her to electric shocks. Spitting teeth and blood, and about to die, she tells Campos: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" (416).
- 33 How we are to read her final words remains a subject of debate among scholars. Richard Poirier concludes that Justin's pronouncement "is meant not as a rediscovery of her faith but as a retaliation on the killer" (39). If she wants to strike against her tormentor, her words have the desired effect as Campos comes to Egan after the torture, demanding penance: "He was pointing his service revolver at the priest; it was a sacramental hijacking. He had not made it to Miami like the President, so he was forcing Jacob's ladder" (433). Robert Solotaroff, in *Robert Stone* (1994), offers a different interpretation:

Given Stone's prevailing position about the inaccessibility of God, this crucial and climatic scene in Justin's life works best for me if I read it in the light of Holliwell's response, during the debacle at the Autonomous University, to a query about whether there is "a place for God in all this": "There's always a place for God, señora. There is some question as to whether He's in it." Whether Christ is where Justin finds Him is, in the terms of the novel, an unanswered question. (103)
- 34 While Solotaroff notes that "Stone has, in his comments about Justin, left no doubt about his intention that the reader feel [Justin] has found Christ" (102), if we read her dying words in terms of negation, we can grasp them as a final attempt at faith, but one that leads only to the void. Justin, however strong and decent a person, set out looking for a wasteland without to match the chasm within, and however good her intentions in supporting the revolution, her decision - she must realize at some level - will put her in harm's way. However much she struggles against it, she embraces the abyss, and takes her bitter, no-god-above trip to its painful conclusion.
- 35 In Holliwell, Stone looks hard at American politics and culture in the late 1970's and early 1980's. As John McClure argues, the novelist offers the Holliwell sections as a critique of American liberalism:

Stone attacks Carter-era liberalism, through Holliwell, for its ultimate capitulation to entrenched interests and their policies of systematic exploitation and brutal repression. But he also emphasizes, through the story of Holliwell's adventures in Tecan, the intellectual and moral laziness of the position he calls liberal: the self-serving substitution of good intentions for serious analysis, and moral posturing for the inevitable compromises of commitment. (108)
- 36 A political novelist, Stone attacks what he takes to be the failure of the left to stem renewed interest in Central America after the fall of Saigon. With the empire on the retreat, he suggests, policy makers turned their energies on the backyard in an effort to prevent further erosion. But even as he explores the Carter era, he dives much deeper into the history and metaphysics of American imperialism. Just as he casts Holliwell as a failure of post-Vietnam liberalism, he also presents him as an example of the American failure to learn from history or to explore the metaphysics underlying imperialism.
- 37 Like Pablo and Justin, Holliwell journeys into negation. Adrift in his career and marriage - he thinks constantly of sleeping with other women and knows little of his

wife's and daughter's lives - much of his aimlessness must be attributed to the war in Vietnam. As with other characters in the novel, he had his ideals and faith smashed in Southeast Asia. After his disastrous lecture in Compostela - his imperial, sneering ineloquence earns him death-threats - Holliwell accepts a ride back to his hotel from Tom and Marie Zecca, both of whom served in Vietnam:

The three of them sat in a charged silence that filled the car. In the instant they were bound, in excuses and evasions, in lost dreams and death. If any of them were to speak it would come forth, the place names of that alien language, the mutual friends, and betrayals and crazy laughter. (118 - 19)

- 38 They come to Tecan already defeated; the war has stripped their generation of their "dreams" and Kennedy-inspired surety, and Stone always brings the novel back to *the* overwhelming fact of war and imperialism: death. A leering death-face squats inside the history of the empire, and the crazy laughter comes, he implies, from wondering how one could have become caught up in a venture so bizarre and murderous.
- 39 The war hangs over Holliwell, and as he travels through Tecan, it becomes for him a heterotopian zone, a place that is both itself and another world at the same time. Vietnam, the not so repressed site of personal and national defeat, intrudes on his perceptions of the isthmus. As he drives with Justin, "smaller breezes stirred against the sea wind's breast, carrying an iodine smell, a smell of jacaranda, of flowers he knew by half-forgotten, six-toned names from across the world - *me - iang, ving, ba* - the smell of villes in Ban Me Thuot, cooking oil, excrement, incense, death" (338). Holliwell always thinks of death, and the tense mood in Tecan reminds him of Saigon: "once again Holliwell caught the saffron taste of Vietnam. The green places of the world were swarming with strong-arm philosophers and armed prophets" (271). He cannot get past Vietnam, cannot escape its failures and ghosts, and he stumbles around the isthmus hoping, in some vague way, to undo defeat or to make up for the compromises and ethical wrong-turns of those years. He ventures abroad to redeem past defeats and to achieve a new sense of self. Yet for Holliwell, there will be no such luck; he once again becomes enmeshed in violence he cannot control.
- 40 Like Pablo and Justin, Holliwell suffers from profound existential dread. After his dinner with Marty Nolan, a fellow spook in Vietnam, he realizes his isolation from himself and others:

A chill touched his inward loneliness. He was, he knew at that moment, really without beliefs, without hope - either for himself or the world. Almost without friends, certainly without allies. Alone. (26)
- 41 Well-off, educated, intelligent, the anthropologist nonetheless pities himself, and drinks heavily while in Tecan in an effort to douse his feelings of estrangement. When drinking fails, he lusts after a nun, and jokes about the fear he feels inside. During a conversation with Justin, he riffs that if the revolution succeeds, Americans will experience "a sense of existential dread" (298): "If you don't eat your bananas, you don't get enough potassium. If you don't get your potassium, you experience a sense of existential dread" (298). He mocks what he fears most: his own meaninglessness.
- 42 Stone's most dramatic instance of the void without as a projection of the void within can be found in Holliwell's dive at the "Twixt," a black coral reef off the Tecanecan coast. As he pushes himself deeper, he finds that "it had been years since he had taken so much pleasure in the living world" (226). He feels elation, but as with Justin, it is a giddy delight at the possibility of death: "At about ninety feet, he confronted the drop.

The last coral terrace fell away and beyond it there was nothing; an immensity of shadowy blue, an abyss" (226). Holliwell sees the abyss, finds the correlative to the emptiness within, knows he lives in an alien universe. The deeper he goes, the more delighted he becomes: "At a hundred and twenty, his exhilaration was still with him and he was unable to suppress the impulse to turn a somersault. He was at the borders of narcosis" (226). On a trip of insubstantialization and negation, he flirts with annihilation but pulls back, sensing a shark, or the actual possibility of his death: "Turning full circle, he saw the shudder pass over all the living things around him - a terror had struck the sea, an invisible shadow, a silence within a silence" (227). Stone reifies the void, makes it tangible before Holliwell's frightened gaze.

- 43 As the negated American, Holliwell turns his thanatotic desire away from himself and against others. As he gazes upon Justin before they have sex, he regards her as Pablo regards Deedee Callahan just before he kills her. The narrator, however, offers the urge "to fuck and to kill" in a less brusque, more intellectual language:

In this aspect, she was a challenge and a provocation to the likes of Holliwell. The impulse stripped down was to love her or destroy her. Stripped further it was toward both those ends, to subsume her in flesh and spirit. It was predatory. (377)

- 44 As a defense against the hollowness within, he wants to strike out at Justin. He wants her to suffer as he suffers, and he punishes her for her weakness and fear. Stone, through the reference to the ocean, links Holliwell's sexual act to negation:

Once inside her he was free. For a moment he could make himself believe that the walls of self were melted and identity overthrown. It was all lyric for him, bloody, lubricious. Her heart kept beating faster and faster. They finished as a process of ocean. (379)

- 45 He wants - as she wants - to be free of himself, to be erased, and he persuades himself that their joining signifies the melting of the self. In actuality, his being with her seals her fate, puts her officially at Campos' mercy. In his dive into the black depths of negation, Stone hints that Holliwell wants Campos to do what fears to do himself: murder the object of sexual desire.

- 46 When Holliwell murders Pablo, he once again turns his emptiness outward, attempting to ease the ache within through violence. On the ocean alone in the boat with Pablo, he faces death and, much to his dismay, Pablo's speed-induced ramblings:

The prospect was death now, sudden or slow, neither earned nor undeserved. And he would have to face it listening to the voice of this pill-brained jackdaw, this jabbering shitbird with his pig sticker and his foul little eyes. (425).

- 47 He comes up against the same dread he experienced at the Twixt - "he felt the force he had encountered over the reef" (428) - and he decides to put off death for a while longer by killing the sparky. He gives the junkie a lecture on "the abridgement of hope" (430), and as Pablo mulls over the phrase, Holliwell stabs him. The "abridgement of hope" says it all: against his own abridgement of hope, his fear of death, the hollow man lashes out against someone weaker. The great, ironic phrase shows the anthropologist to be a professorial "jabbering shitbird," and even as we feel sorrow for Pablo, we feel contempt for Holliwell.

- 48 For all of his advantages, Holliwell ends up sun-blasted in a boat in the middle of nowhere putting the last vestiges of his strength into destroying a wigged-out kid. Looking upon his character's situation from above, Stone mocks him in the last lines of the novel. As Holliwell looks upon his rescuers, he congratulates himself on surviving:

"Holliwel knew that he was home; he had nothing to fear from the sun. A man has nothing to fear, he thought to himself, who understands history" (439). Delirious from heat and exhaustion, he believes, somehow, that he understands history and his place in it. The way of the world, he asserts, cannot be put upon him; he is not to blame. He has done his best: "As though I should be something else. Because it's not as if I haven't tried" (439). He has kept death at bay, and that, he believes, gives him the right to claim a greater understanding. Stone, ever the ironist, suggests that in fact, Holliwel could understand history, but that he fails to do so. He fails because he refuses to learn from history, refuses to analyze his situation critically.

- 49 In perhaps the most crucial passage in the novel, Holliwel explains - once again in his own language - what Spurr calls the trope of negation. He met it firsthand in Vietnam. In Saigon, he smokes opium with an "officer of airborne troops," a young Nietzschean doing his best to win the war. Over dope, the officer explains to Holliwel that "if you oppose me[. . .] I will win. You will lose" (244). Holliwel dubs the unimposing man - "he wore eyeglasses so thick that one wondered how he had come to be in the Army at all" (244) - a "positive thinker," but as he reflects on the conversation, he ponders how such men could "convince themselves that in this whirling tidal pool of existence, providence was sending them a message?" (244). As an explanation, he describes the process of negation:

And *they* were the vampires. The world paid in blood for their articulate delusions, but it was all right because for a while they felt better. And presently they could put their consciences on automatic. They were beyond good and evil in five easy steps - it had to be O.K. because it was them after all. It was good old us, Those Who Are, Those Who See, the gang. Inevitably they grew bored with being contradicted. Inevitably they discovered the fundamental act of communication, they discovered murder. Murder was salutary, it provided reinforcement when they felt impotent or unworthy. It was something real, it made them folks and the reference to death reminded everyone that time was short and that there would be no crapping around. For the less forceful, the acceptance of murder was enough. (244 - 45)

- 50 When the imperial selves - "good old us, Those Who Are, Those Who See, the gang" - feels "impotent or unworthy," they make someone else pay with their lives. Against the shortness of time - against pending annihilation - they discover "the fundamental act of communication." Murder, temporarily, makes them feel better. It eases their feelings of worthlessness - the condition that plagues Pablo, Justin, and, to a lesser extent, Holliwel - and assures them of their inherent superiority to others. Against "the whirling tidal pool of existence," the imperialists take up arms, and gloss it all over with idealism and bright arguments, "their articulate delusions." The vampires live off the death of others, but never quite happily.
- 51 As Holliwel considers the young Nietzschean, he identifies a crucial failing in himself: "Despair was also a foolish indulgence, less lethal than vain faith, but demeaning. One could not oppose the armies of delusion with petulance" (245). In near epigrammatical language, he names "despair" - the condition he most suffers from - as "a foolish indulgence." He knows that one cannot face "the armies of delusion" - those who believe in the false ideals, who think they know best - armed with peevishness. Ironically, he thinks he knows better than those who think they know best, yet he acts like them, if with less self-awareness. Men like Campos and Heath take their struggles seriously, have long ago dispensed with such trivialities as the general good, human rights, and self-determination. Holliwel names his condition, sees negation in others, but nonetheless indulges hopelessness and sets out on a hollow-man trip to Tecan. He

does not cut off heads or stuff the bodies of young girls into his freezer - as Campos does - but he wants to love or destroy Justin, and he kills Pablo. He could, on the experience of Vietnam, reason his way out of his dangerous to-ings and fro-ings, but instead, like Kurtz, finds a wasteland without to match the wasteland within and loses himself in the destruction of others.

- 52 Holliwell fails to learn from Vietnam and he fails to learn from the longer history of Western imperialism. As the Zeccas drive with Holliwell and Bob Cole - Robert Stone? - toward Tecan, Cole tells them about "Martínez Trujillo, one of Alvarado's captains" (143). The conquistador, he explains,

would gather the Indian leaders and give them until dawn on a certain day to produce the weight of his horse and armor in gold. If they didn't he burned them alive. He never got any, of course, because there isn't any up here. Never got a nugget but he kept on burning Indians. (143 - 44)

- 53 Cole then turns to a story about "Lago Azul Lodge, Global Fishfinders, Houston, Texas," (144), linking ugly Americans who import bass that kill "every native species in the lake" (145) with the conquistadors: the Americans constitute the latest invaders of Central America, the latest seekers of gold. Stone gives the Americans-as-conquistadors one further historical spin as Holliwell looks around the office of the Tecanecan consulate: "On the wall behind the desk were a crucifix, a portrait of Tecan's celebrated President and a tintype of William Walker's last defeat" (149). In Stone's economy, the glance says it all: the old missionary and filibustering impulses to conquer have given way to support for the "celebrated" beneficiaries of imperialism-by-proxy. Holliwell has before him the long history of Western imperialism, but he follows - however unthinkingly - in Walker's footsteps.

- 54 The failure to learn from history amounts to a failure to examine the metaphysics of empire. Holliwell has before him stories of conquistadors and filibusters and young Nietzscheans, and he knows that despair amounts to a foolish luxury, yet he continues to indulge himself. He sees through history to the dread at work in the imperial self, understands why men like Trujillo, Walker, and the airborne officer want to kill others. He knows the desire for gold does not account for the slaughter of the Indians: at some point even the Spaniard must have realized there was no gold, but he was not killing for profit. He was trying to fill the abyss within with the blood of others. In a similar manner, Walker's desire for an empire does not quite explain his persistence in floating small armies to conquer nations that had grown savvy to his schemes. Wealth, land, and power, the tintype of his last defeat suggests, cannot quite account for his determination to capture Central America. Stone implies that for Walker, it came down to the impulse he posits in his characters: kill or be killed. Holliwell sees into the heart of darkness, knows what it means to indulge despondency and to see others as things to be destroyed in order to push away the fear inside. He has all the pieces, stands poised to work his way toward a new metaphysics, a new ontological order between the self and other. But he cannot arrive at a new ethics, and the other continues to stand well apart from the self, hunkered in a jungle wasteland. Same old story, same vicious ways.

- 55 For Stone, Americans have followed too readily in the wake of the European imperialists. He contextualizes U.S. interventions in Central America and Vietnam in terms of the first imperial missions in the New World and finds that in addition to inheriting the imperial mantle, we have also inherited the old European metaphysics of empire. The agents of empire have acted out the same old fears, but have not examined

the well-springs of their actions. Stone mounts a scathing critique of American policies and beliefs: beneath the rhetoric of the good neighbor and U.S. anti-imperialism, he finds the darkest impulses, and suggests that the imperial selves have compounded negation with hypocrisy. In the figure of Holliwell, he implies that the imperial self really does know better than to account for violence against Central Americans, or Filipinos, or Southeast Asians with explanations of the void within, but that to act in any other manner would require too much effort. To continue to indulge the old fears displaces responsibility from the self and puts it onto a posited hollowness stemming from a fear of death, a fear of meaninglessness, a fear of an alien universe. The imperialists continue to act from the old fears because it suits them, because, Stone insinuates, they take pleasure from dread and from rationalizing theft and murder; as Holliwell reasons, "presently they could put their consciences on automatic. They were beyond good and evil in five easy steps" (244). The mock phrasing - "beyond good and evil in five easy steps" - immediately suggests Nietzsche, and ironizes the existential lament: so what if God is dead? Even if the void howls without and within, Stone suggests we need new ways of being-in-the-world.

- 56 Yet Stone does not point the way, except, perhaps, in a backhanded fashion. As a writer in the tradition of literary naturalism - as a descendant, that is, of Rebecca Harding Davis, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Edith Wharton, Ann Petry, Norman Mailer, and others - Stone offers a deeply bleak and pessimistic view of human affairs, and true to form, two of his three major characters meet terrible ends while the third drifts further into giddy self-justifications and, finally, we can suppose, incoherence. Stone dissects his characters and their failings, and analyzes the workings of power and corruption, but despite the vastness of his canvas, he does not - as indeed Dreiser does not by the end of *Sister Carrie* (1900; 1907) or Wharton by the end of *House of Mirth* (1905), and so on - reason his way past his characters' predicaments. Naturalist fictions most often end in dissolution or death; they most often do not hinge in the middle and climb their way toward new vistas of being or transcendence. Stone, in keeping with his literary forebears, coldly (and even cruelly) dissects his era and leaves us, at the end of *Flag*, with no visible rays of light or hope. Nevertheless, he has sounded the depths of the late Western heart-of-darkness trip as thoroughly as any other American writer; he has scoured the old Western metaphysics of imperialism and the American adoption of them, and lays them bare. He has done both narrative and philosophical work and, fair enough, he leaves the immense challenge of the next steps to all of us. Stone may be pessimistic, and he may hold out little hope for change, but in the process of showing us, in detail, where we have come from, he warns us against continuing in the old ways. If not negation, then what? Ethics? If not a fear of and desire for death, he implies, then perhaps a recognition of the life and worth of others. Perhaps.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness. Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. 2nd ed. Ed. Ross C Murfin. Boston: Bedford Books, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Corrected ed. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State Univ. of New York P, 1996.
- McClure, John. *Late Imperial Romance*. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby - Dick, or, The Whale*. New York: Penguin, 1988.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Walker Kaufmann. New York: Penguin, 1966.
- Poirier, Richard. "Intruders." Rev. of *A Flag for Sunrise*. *New York Review of Books* 3 Dec. 1981: 37 - 39.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Almanac of the Dead*. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- . *Ceremony*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
- Solotaroff, Robert. *Robert Stone*. New York: Twayne, 1994.
- Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.
- Stone, Robert. *A Flag for Sunrise*. New York: Vintage, 1981.

ABSTRACTS

In *A Flag for Sunrise*, American novelist Robert Stone explores the metaphysics of empire, attempting to understand what fears, desires, and ontological conditions impel imperialism. Beneath the stories our leaders tell us to justify interventionism, Stone contends, dwell deep-seated, but over-indulged fears that have twisted many into vicious empire-builders and seekers - after-death. Fear eats away at the self: fear of death, fear of the void within, fear of human meaninglessness, fear of groundlessness in a Godless universe impel the agents of empire forward. Charges into the third world arise from these intertwining fears, from the ache within that can only be briefly quieted through acts of brutality, appropriation, conquest. Imperialism, he suggests, grows from a need to fill this void within, or at least to shut one's eyes to it through ferocious activities and desires.

AUTHOR

BRADY HARRISON

Department of English, University of Montana, Missoula