Morality and Redemption in the Novels of Sigrid Undset

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MORALITY AND REDEMPTION IN THE NOVELS OF SIGRID UNDSET

BY

MARIRUTH L. RENESCH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LOYOLA UNIVERSITY

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Much of the criticism directed against Sigrid Undset has been based on prejudices rather than on literary tenets. The attacks have come from both non-Catholics and Catholics; the former object to the influence of Catholicism which permeates her books, the latter object to her realistic and vivid portrayal of passion.

Many Catholics frequently have difficulty when passing judgment on the moral qualities of fiction. This is no unfavorable reflection on them, for the subject of art and morality has never been satisfactorily settled and probably never will be. It will continue to be a problem baffling even great minds, unless an Aquinas again stands among us.

In this thesis some attempt has been made to deal with the aspect of art and morality. The ways and extent in which literature violates morals are viewed in so far as the portrayal would constitute a source of sin to the average reader. Even this aspect is not treated in full. This thesis merely attempts to formulate some simple rules for the judging of the morality of a piece of literature. These are used as a working basis in analyzing the criticism directed against Sigrid Undset's vivid portrayals of her characters in their violations of the Sixth Commandment.
An attempt has also been made to discover the possible influences operative in Americans, both non-Catholic and Catholic, who find literature distasteful when it deals over-realistically with sexual sins. Possible solutions have been presented as an aid to help those who have difficulty in judging literature in an unprejudiced manner when it deals with man's carnality.

Sigrid Undset's novels are then analyzed for essential qualities. From this analysis it is apparent that her works are based on the Aristotelian concepts of tragedy enlightened by Christian concepts of redemption. Her themes, while treating of man's sinful nature, his repentance and atonement have their emphasis on this redemptive quality.

With regard to the vivid depiction of eroticism against which some Catholics revolt, it is admitted that such portrayals do exist; but that Sigrid Undset consciously depicts carnality with the intention of appealing to the lower passions of man is denied. Her aim is to show the dis-integrating effects that sin has on man and on society.

Her medieval novels, in which her genius is more apparent, do not give a one-sided representation of Catholicism. The crudities of the age and of the early Church in the Scandinavian countries, the laxness of its ecclesiastics, and the superstitions of the people are depicted along with the Church's splendor and spirituality.
Thoughtful readers will find in her delineations a deeper appreciation of the spiritualizing and civilizing influences of Christianity, and will view these as such, rather than as something to be censured.

Matrimony is a subject which has great interest for Sigrid Undset. Her depictions of marriage are based on the wisdom of the Church and the tradition that the welfare of the race lies in its adherence to the inviolability of the home. Its sacramental nature is shown and its indissolubility. Her novels dealing with medieval life show this indissolubility in a positive way. The modern novels show it in a negative way in that they stress social aspects. The latter approach was necessitated by the trend of the day, in which the home has lost its dominant position in man's life and mankind is reaping the effects of the disintegration of home life.

In analyzing the viewpoints of Sigrid Undset, this thesis presents some of the most prevalent attitudes among Catholics and non-Catholics in order to account for the prejudices found in criticisms of her work. While the emphasis is on the Catholic viewpoint and the evaluation of Sigrid Undset's novels in the light of Catholic principles, the non-Catholics' position is also taken into consideration. Objections to the permeation of Catholicism in the novels are examined and an appraisement is made.
CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

The quarrel of morality with literature has been a long and endless one. It is one which has frequently troubled Catholics because of the rather widespread belief that any literature that would prove an occasion of sin should be avoided. A distinction, however, should be made between an immoral act and the immoral telling of that act. The Catechism with its exposition of man's sins is not a source of sin because these sins are not immorally told.

With the intention of analyzing the works of Sigrid Undset because of the controversy that has risen over her treatment of sin and in particular of sexual sin, this thesis examines certain aspects regarding the legitimate portrayal of sin.

Literature is concerned with man. Any view of him should be presented in his entirety. This includes both his physical and his spiritual nature. Literature portrays man's conflicts. These arise out of his love of virtue and his inclination toward evil. Both aspects must be depicted if the novelist's portrayal is to be a true one. Therefore, literature's subject is man, sinful or otherwise. The emphasis is not on man's repeated sin, but his
conflict with sin. Literature is concerned with man as a moral being when his spiritual nature seeks dominance over his lower passions. Frequently the latter conquers. Man's story is then ended unless he tries to redeem himself. Therefore, a legitimate theme in literature is sinful man, the struggle ensuing to avert his tragic fall, and the means to overcome this.

However, a true artist does not deliberately deal with man's sins and temptations without a good purpose. He is motivated neither by the desire of presenting sin in all its harrowing details, nor by the desire of glorifying it.

But knowing as he must the extent to which the sinfulness of man throws his greatness into strong relief the true artist, unhesitatingly and by a kind of inspired instinct, chooses this subject as one of the noblest vindications of beauty.¹

Is there any aspect of man which may not be depicted? In general there is no ground on which the novelist may not venture. Nevertheless, the novelist's verbal, imaginative, and emotional material and attitude, must be governed by decency, by the conventions of his times, by inherent good taste and by the reticence that is closely linked to morality. For

example, there is inherent in civilized man a reticence and secrecy attending certain things, such as the sacredness and honorableness with which he surrounds the subject of courtship and marriage.

The question now arises: How may the novelist treat of sex, its temptations and sins? Love, passion, and their allied sins are an integral part of the drama of life. As such they are legitimate material for the novelist. Shelving this side of man gives rise to a false portrayal in its violation of reality. It is common knowledge that:

...the animal side of man, its activities and its effects in human life, constitute an element of reality. In particular man's sexual life is a fact that must be reckoned with, an all but universal fact. 'It would,' says a writer in the Catholic Review America, 'be altogether false not to admit that the human personality is most frequently torn in the conflict that rages between brute passion and the white sense of duty. And just as passion is the most frequent human temptation, so the record of its struggle in the soul of man is the most readily accessible material of the writer.'

Although the artist is granted complete freedom in choosing his material, there is, nevertheless, imposed upon him an obligation. He assumes the grave responsibility of handling his material properly. The principle of right

morality must be applied indirectly or directly so that the right influence may dominate. The emphasis is not on man's sin but on the inevitable discord resulting. The portrayal of the appetites of the flesh has always been a vexing problem because of its deep effects. The important consideration is the altitude from which the writer views his material, and the manner in which he exposes his theme. Maritain aptly sums the situation in the following.

As for the freedom of the artist with regard to the subject he is to represent, the problem seems to be as a rule badly stated, because it is forgotten that the subject is merely the matter of the work of art. The essential question is not to know whether a novelist can or cannot depict such an aspect of evil. The essential question is from what altitude he depicts it and whether his art and mind are strong enough to depict it without connivance. The more deeply the modern novel probes human misery, the more it requires super-human virtues in the novelist.3

Moreover, the artist must have the added ability to portray this difficult aspect of man with supreme skill and perfect craftsmanship.

His sole problem is not to be a weakling; to be in possession of an art strong enough and direct enough to be always master of its subject without losing anything of its loftiness and purity; and in the very act of working to have in view the good of the work and that only, without being distracted or disturbed by the human ends pursued.4

If the writer is unable to keep his material in hand, then he should avoid this particular aspect of sin. He also has the added responsibility of examining his motives for introducing evil. Does he violate the spirit of the Ten Commandments? Is evil sanctioned by the use of evil means in pursuit of a laudable end? Is evil depicted merely for the monetary reward which often attends decadent literature? If such be the writer's vicious intention, then he is to be condemned not only on moral grounds but also on artistic grounds.

Because the writer and critic are moral beings they are subject to ethical norms and epistemological criteria, which take precedence over the apparent autonomy of art even when its content is thoroughly concerned with evil. The judgment of the artist dealing with evil must always be, at least implicitly, one of disapprobation. For the error in the contrary is easily perceived. Were the artist to approve in any way of the evil portrayed, he would vitiate the process

4 Ibid., 77.
as well as the literary work itself.

Moreover:

He has not acted in conformity with the canons governing his human nature,—even supposing that he were unaware of its supernatural origin and destiny, and has striven to express himself on a merely natural plane in pursuance of a merely natural satisfaction. In any event, he has used a human faculty for a distorted purpose, on the other hand, he may be oblivious of, or may wilfully desire to negate man's supernatural destiny and by his approval of evil would even thereby frustrate a hypothetical natural beatitude; or on the other hand, cognizant of human nature's propensities to varied wrong ends, not because it is depraved but rather deprived of its original integrity, he would render it correspondingly more difficult to achieve that right end.  

Therefore, in so far as the artist expresses moral judgments in the use and interpretation of his theme, and in the extent to which these are moral, his work acquires ethical meaning and influence. By his portrayal the novelist judges the character in the light of the denouement which overtakes him, and the reader's reaction corroborates the novelist's judgment. Thus if the author portrays temptation and sin in a novel in such a manner that the reader will naturally disapprove and reject the act, then the novel on this score cannot be called an immoral book.

The characters need not necessarily be portrayed as cognizant of the sinfulness of their acts. It is true that most men are aware of the rightness or wrongness of their actions. However, some men are not. These men are those whose souls are disturbed and confused and their sensibilities are so blunted that they have little moral sense. Literary aesthetics demand as a bare minimum some conception of wrong in the characters' reactions. If this intimation of wrong is wholly lacking the conflict would be meaningless. A book whose protagonist in no way perceives the evil in his action or the consequences and thereby commits one moral lapse after another must be condemned. 6

How must the artist depict sin? If sin is to be portrayed in a novel the artist must recognize sin for what it is. Now sin can be viewed in its lesser aspect or in its higher aspect. In the first sense, the artist sees sin as an element of confusion, discord, and the basis of conflict. In the second sense, the artist perceives it as an offense against God with a consequent loss of His friendship. If the artist adheres to this principle he has gone a long way in the correct portrayal of sin.

6 Cf. Harold C. Gardiner, "Tenets for Reviewers," America 70: (Nov. 27, 1943), 214, for a fuller consideration of this point.
The principle stands:

This sense of sin, then, at the very least in the realization that it is a wrong and a source of conflict, if not in the higher sense that it is a loss of God's friendship, must color the portrayal or discussion of it.7

Must sin be punished in a novel? No, it need not be punished for this would not necessarily be true to life. "However, if your novel is well written it will not incite anyone to break the laws of nature."8

May sin and crime be admired in a novel? No, because the novel which ends with admiration for sin and crime is perverting truth. Authors frequently portray criminals happy in the temporal gains acquired. This is only half the truth. Any step that man takes away from his predestined end makes him unhappy. Therefore, any portrayal of crime as admirable and sin as smart is a violation of truth.9

May sin be portrayed as pleasant? No, because sin is not pleasant. There is a dangerous and perverse attractiveness about sin, else it never would be committed, but as a complete entity it is always negative and saddening.10

7 Ibid.
8 Henri Massis, "A Point or Two About Novelists," Commonweal 9: (April 17, 1942), 672.
9 Kobel, op. cit., 334.
10 Eirik von Kuehnelt-leddihn, "Catholic Novelists Have a Task," America 64: (Mar. 8, 1941), 608.
May the author make exceptions to a principle or law without qualifying these as exceptions? No, for this would be a corruption of truth. For example, in portraying abnormal types he must designate these as such. They may not masquerade as typical of men in general. His indictment may slant toward pessimism and he might tend to show a caustic disapprobation of the evil of which his character was the embodiment, but he may not violate truth by an unfounded generalization.¹¹

The importance of truth is not to be underestimated in a novel.

...it must be in a novel, but it does not make a novel; it is essential, but artistically secondary, subordinate to and presupposed by the fact that the aim of art is to please. But it is so important that if untruth is portrayed in the story, it fails as art, no matter what the specious pleasure derived, for though the end of art be to please, it must please legitimately and rationally.¹²

There is another aspect of sin to be considered. This is the explicitness in which the artist may describe man's temptations and ultimate fall or triumph. Here aesthetic principles and moral principles work together. Immorality is rejected by art because it is in poor taste.

¹¹ Kobel, op. cit., 333.
¹² Gardiner, op. cit., 382.
and by ethics because it is an offense against God. Thus if the novel presents sin and temptations with undue vividness it violates aesthetic standards. Instead of contemplating the work of art, the reader directly identifies himself with the experience. That is to say:

Some realities, some of the details of the original character, event, or situation which the writer has transmuted into art would cause too keen or too vivid an emotion in the reader if they were not blurred or ignored. The representation and its emotional appeal should be by virtue of distancing and selecting process be separated from the writer's practical needs, and especially from his immoral proclivities or passions. 13

Therefore, the principle stands:

Sin may never be so treated, whether explicitly or by suggestion, as to be a source of temptation to the normally discriminating reader. 14

This is a rule which is very difficult to apply because of the differences in men's imaginations. A vivid description which is disturbing to one reader may have no effect on another. "This is the source of the controversy that raged over such books, for example, as Sigrid Undset's: both sides were equally moral and equally zealous in upholding moral standards; it was a question of

13 Kobel, op. cit., 336.
14 Gardiner, op. cit., 214.
responsiveness and bent of their imaginations.\textsuperscript{15}

The degree of dramatization differs with individuals, with ages, and with peoples. The degree to which the adolescent, the single person, the married person, the Latin, and the Frenchman are influenced all vary. It is apparent that:

The problem of how much of a temptation can or should be dramatized must be answered differently for different times, and climes, and individuals. What constitutes an overpowering stimulus to sin in one generation can be effective and even necessary conditioner against sinning in another.\textsuperscript{16}

For this reason, in the judging of the moral qualities of a book, one's own conscience is the best criterion in the end. Each reader is his own best judge, because this is a matter of subjectivity and the susceptibilities of readers differ.

This thesis has considered the foregoing aspects of literature's depiction of sin in so far as they might act as tentative guides in the analysis of Sigrid Undset's treatment of sin. It proposes now to analyze the criticism of those readers who believe that in treatment and in theme her works violate Catholic principles. It also

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 269.

considers the contrary view of those who believe that she has put undue emphasis on sin and Catholic ethics. It likewise attempts to evaluate both her medieval and modern novels, and to synthesize the various critical interpretations of her works in order to demonstrate that they are essentially Catholic.

The modern novel in its refusal to regard sin as sin, in its emphasis on social and environmental factors as the result of man's conflicts, in its rejection of all philosophy as promoting a cause, has resulted in the deterioration of the substance of the novel. Sigrid Undset, however, has gone back to man and his main concerns in life. Therefore of necessity she deals with sin. She has a true conception of man and takes in not only his fallen nature but his spiritual nature as well.

Of primary importance in the analysis of a literary work is the object of the depicted act, its circumstances, and above all its motivation or the intention of the writer. Miss Evans uses Aristotle's precepts and concludes that Sigrid Undset leans heavily on the arm of virtue.

As for the question whether something said or done in a poem is morally right or not in dealing with that one should consider not only the intrinsic quality of the person to whom he says or does it, but the time, the means, and the motive of the agent,
whether he does it to avoid a greater evil, Aristotle wrote. And one should consider the recreation—the author in the same way: whether he reports it to attain a greater good or to avoid a greater evil. Sigrid Undset's bias in favor of morality is so well postulated as to absolve her from the faintest implication of pornography—even though her method of asserting her bias on occasion proves a boomerang. That is beyond her control. All Sigrid Undset asks of her readers is possession of an adult mentality, a sense of values, a critical function, and a power of intellect unimpaired. The reader with such equipment has no difficulty discovering her point. Indeed for that sort of reader almost any novel of any pretensions can be considered a Catholic novel—by indirection or abstraction.

Sigrid Undset belongs to the "be honest school," of thought in modern literature. This school places its emphasis on the evil existing in this world with the motive of awakening man to a repugnance of himself when under the domination of his animal passions. Writers of this school believe in fighting fire with fire and in using rough language and violent incidents in order that man may be forced to see the inherent vileness of evil through literature's mirror. They present life honestly and the reader supplies his own values, in contrast to the "be prudent school," whose tendency is to predigest the plot.

17 Mary Ellen Evans, "Contemporary Catholic Authors: Sigrid Undset and the Saga of Salvation," The Catholic World 13: (Jan. 1942), 104-105.

18 Francis X. Connolly, "Catholic Fiction 4: Two Reactions," America 65: (Sept. 13, 1941), 635.
When asked if it were her intention to depict a particular sin and its consequences Sigrid Undset replied: "Of course no author would ever say to oneself he wanted to depict this or that sin and its consequences, but wanting to make people live they would of their own accord run into the temptations that are most common and considered not disgraceful in the society they live in." This is her answer to those who charge her with being unduly preoccupied with sin, either as a vehicle for propagating Catholicism or as a modern technique wherein man's erotic nature is over-emphasized.

It is her belief that truth should be adhered to at all costs. Her creed is to:

Tell the truths you have to even if they are grim, preposterous, shocking. After all, we Catholics ought to acknowledge what a shocking business human life is. Our race has been revolting against its Creator since the beginning of time. Revolt, betrayal, denial, or indifference, sloth, laziness—which of us has not been guilty in one or more or all of these sins some time or other? But remember you have to tell other or more cheerful truths, too; of the Grace of God, and the endeavor of strong and loyal, or weak but trusting souls, and also of the natural virtues of man created in the Image of God, an image it is very hard to efface entirely. Even in times of genuine paganism in the times before the Incarnation of Our Saviour, when

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mankind in perfectly good faith wove their creeds and myths about the Divinity they were aware of, and the power they sensed behind the pageantry of spring and summer and autumn and winter, behind the procession of living things from the womb of the mother to the grave, through health and illness, passions noble and evil, through joys and griefs, even in those times the hands that fumbled honestly for the truths of the Beyond succeeded in touching them, as was afterwards revealed in the daylight of Our Lord. 20

How does Sigrid Undset regard sin? Her partiality in viewing sin as sin cannot be doubted. In her medieval novels sin is viewed in its higher aspect, as an offense against God. True, some of the characters, particularly Inguun and Erlend, do not have the same awareness of the true conception of sin as do Kristin and Olav. This is true in real life. The realization of the awfulness of sin differs with the individual. We cannot expect all our fictional characters to have the same perception of morality. However, once the repulsiveness of sin is perceived by the characters and consequently by the reader, the factor of immoral influence is greatly lessened. The reader's emotions have been purged and so counter balanced the possible incititory effects of the sin portrayed.

In her modern novels, sin is viewed in its lesser aspect, either as an element of confusion, discord, or as a basis of conflict. The modern novel necessitates this
approach because its characters have lost their perception of sin and regard it as an old-fashioned belief of their forefathers.

With reference to the Catholic reading public, Miss Evans acknowledges the existence of the two classes of Catholic readers—namely, those who view Sigrid Undset's novels favorably and those who object to her portrayal of sin, especially sins of the flesh.

It is because Sigrid Undset has been so factorial in bringing about some degree of rapport between Catholicism and the modern world, has pounded the Church's ethical doctrines so indefatigably into the ear of her public, has rolled her truths around and turned them inside out and upside down to draw attention to them that the generality of Catholic opinion is lined up in her favor. But Catholic opinion, like certain people according to Gilbert and Sullivan, is apt to be a 'little liberal or a little conservative.' No less distinguished a critic than Blanche Mary Kelly has all but called the Lavransdatter books an occasion of sin. And considered from one angle, they are, to a definitely typed reader. But that is one of the unfortunate consequences of universal instruction in A B C's.21

The review is that of The Snake Pit. It is given below in order that it may be examined and the validity of its stand estimated.

No one rejoices more than this reviewer when by the providence of God any soul comes into the Fold of Christ, but she finds her-

21 Evans, op. cit., 104.
self unable to join in the acclamation of Sigrid Undset as a Catholic novelist, because none of her works seem born of a Catholic spirit. It is immaterial, (though depressing) that they invariably recount stories of moral transgression, that amounts to no more than recognizing the facts of life. What is material is that these transgressions are either casually referred to as unimportant matters of course or they are recounted with a multiplicity of detail, a vividness of portrayal, a stimulation of the imagination and the fleshly appetites, a preoccupation with sensual sensations that to a normal-minded person would constitute what Catholic theology calls "an occasion of sin". With amazing insight the author takes into account every human quality except concupiscence. It does not dispose of the matter to say that this frankness is not for immature minds. Immature minds are the last to recognize their immaturity, and mature minds are not confirmed in grace.

Neither is the matter mended (it might even be said to be made worse) by the fact that this vividness in the portrayal of lust and its consequences is matched by an equally vivid portrayal of the externals of the Catholic Church. It is still not the Catholic religion that is portrayed, for into every sin whether it be murder or adultery, the Undset characters stroll without as much as one slight wriggle of resistance, and there they recline, repining but not repentant. It is true that in The Snake Pit the hero has some slight conception of what sin means in the sight of God. This warrants the hope that the great Norwegian writer who has become a Catholic will yet enrich the world with great Catholic novels, but it does not warrant us in condoning in her what we should decry in a pagan novelist. 22

The Snake Pit covers the period from the time Olav is at last able to bring Inguun to Hestvikkan until her

death. The incident referred to by the above mentioned critic is merely stated. Brief references to Olav's and Torhild Bjornsdatter's lapse are mentioned. It is covered in less than twenty pages. We first learn of Olav's transgression by the bald statement that: "Torhild had to leave Hestviken suddenly because she was to have a child by Olav Audunsson." Related briefly are the incidents concerning Olav's perception of his neighbor's condemnation, his knowledge of the deeds and unjustified suspicions which the countryside now gleefully attributed to him, and Olav's sorrow over his infidelity to Inguun. This is followed by one paragraph wherein Olav reviews his thoughts previous to his act.

And then there arose in him a desire for her—to know for once in his life what it was like to hold a sound and healthy woman in his arms, one he need not be afraid of touching. But for all that, it was as though he had never willed it—even that morning when he reached out and took hold of her, he had expected her to thrust him back, perhaps in anger. But she yielded to him, without a sigh. 24

Olav's remorse for his deed, his temptation to drown Torhild in order to spare Inguun, the knowledge that Inguun at last knows, and Olav's provision for Torhild are all related. Sin is treated in these pages for what it is; namely, the sin of adultery. It is perceived by the characters as such and also by the readers. The actual act itself

is not portrayed by the author; rather is it related, in retrospect, and this account lacks vividness, and as a consequence, cannot prove to be a source of temptation to the general run of readers. Therefore, in this instance, accusation that Olav's transgression contains the definite possibility of being "an occasion of sin" appears somewhat harsh.

Kelly again voices her disapproval. This time it is Sigrid Undset's The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush.

Objection is based on the general ruling of the Congregation of the Index, in the light of which it seemed that while the novelist herself was an exemplary and illustrious Catholic, her genius was not yet baptized. For example, in writing of Catholics, Madame Undset did not depict them as being influenced by their religion to the avoidance of sin. God knows we are sinners; indeed there are those who regard it as the fifth mark of the Church that it is the "Church of Scoundrels," but holiness is a mark of the Church too, and it does not seem too much to ask a Catholic novelist that she show forth the sacraments as a "means of grace."

/With this rebuke Kelly concludes/ This is what Madame Undset has finally done in the Paul Selmer series as set forth in the two volumes listed above.

Criticism such as this, in which the reviewer objects to the portrayal of the sinning of a Catholic character, and insists on the reverse depiction, namely that of holiness, is, in Gardiner's estimation, a flaw in the art of some Catholic critics. This attitude arises from the confusion of

characterization with classification, for it operates on the principle that every character in a book is supposed to represent a class.

The reader of *The Wild Orchid* and *The Burning Bush* perceives Paul's gradual spiritual growth which has resulted from his conflicts. In *The Burning Bush*, when Paul takes Bjorg back, one discerns Paul's awareness of the unity of the family, which has its basis in the children's need for both parents. This is the particular point which the Church has always emphasized.

The Paul and Lucy interlude, it is to be noted, took place prior to his conversion. From then on, Paul's actions were dominated by Catholic teaching. Resumption of Lucy's friendship later on provides no difficulty for the reader. The question of sin does not enter. Certainly Paul's spiritual growth prevented him from returning to the only woman he had ever loved. It is from this viewpoint that these two books should be considered.

Another reviewer passes censure on Sigrid Undset's *Madame Dorthea*.

But as it stands, *Madame Dorthea* cannot be recommended. We might excuse the distasteful frankness of the story of the abortion performed but we deplore unreservedly one scene of adolescent passion run amuck. Once again we are puzzled by the inconsistency of this great literary artist so Catholic in her philosophy of life, yet apparently unable to catch the mind of the Church in the matter
of depicting sins against the Sixth Commandment.26

The incident objected to does lack reticence and its portrayal is vivid. However, to condemn the book on this ground is unwarranted. One cannot conclude that a single passage or even a number of passages necessarily makes a book objectionable. "You cannot, without distinction and reservations, apply the metaphysical principle of bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu to moral and cultural matters."27

It is of interest that, whereas some Catholics censure Sigrid Undset for her frank speaking, they in turn are condemned for their lack of it. With reference to these, Sigrid Undset has made the following accusation:

The Catholics of America have been infected by the puritanical system of suppression--which is entirely un-Catholic. The system, that is, which assumes that Christian virtues are best protected if we pretend to know nothing of the dangers that threaten them, or that in any case we ought not to assume that they can be threatened by temptations against which there is no help but the will to rely on supernatural grace.28

This charge is a very challenging one, because it grew


27 Gardiner, op. cit., 186.

out of Sigrid Undset's own experience as a novelist. This particularly stultifying germ of Puritanism, in Katherine Brégy's opinion, began to take heavy toll of Catholic readers just about the time it was losing hold on the emancipated Puritan grandchildren. She offers, as a possible reason for the grafting of this particular aspect of Protestantism, the reactionary effect of many Catholics from the creeds of those too indulgent apostles of "naturalism" and literary liberty.

While this criticism generally falls on Catholics, the puritanical system of suppression is not endemic to them alone. American literature has seldom reached its true stature because it has been dwarfed by a strong strain of Puritanism and Jansenism. This resulted because early American culture was located in Puritan New England. Here originated the germinal source of such ideals and institutions regarded as traditionally American. Most Puritans rejected all in the arts that appealed to the senses. This does not mean that they were totally lacking in sensuality, merely that mentally they refused to acknowledge it. This Puritan influence left its mark on our American literary culture, so that for the most part we are unable to view either our own literature or the literature of

other nations objectively. The subjective element of morality is ever present.

Sigrid Undset, herself, comments upon the Puritan tradition as being the strongest undercurrent in American literature. This, she feels, is particularly apparent even when writers speak frankly about sex relations. American love stories, as well as those devoid of love, strike her as lacking in the sensuous delight and leisurely satisfaction so apparent in French and Danish literature.

Is it just a fancy of mine, and a mistake when I seem to feel the Puritan tradition is still the strongest undercurrent in American literature? Not least in that part of it that is termed outspoken, hardboiled, emancipated from the taboos of the past. The "outspokenness" usually would concern sex relations; that's what human beings always and everywhere have enjoyed to be outspoken about, whatever their moral attitude toward sex. However, it often did strike me how American love stories, as well as stories devoid of love, usually moved in an atmosphere empty of that sensuous delight and leisurely satisfaction which is so conspicuous, for instance, in the French or Danish literature and poetry from the Middle Ages until yesterday. ...From whatever angle American writers regard sexual desire—as a main driving force toward social and cultural progress, when it hitches man and woman into a team of helpmates, facing together all the big and small tasks of living (in hundreds of pioneer tales for instance), or as an insidious or brutal disruptive element making rich and poor, educated and ignorant alike frittering away whatever gifts they might have had for making life a satisfactory job--the desire always seems to be focused on the person or the persons, mind and body or body-minus mind,
with next to nothing of the sensuous ruminating that means so much in the erotic design of most Europeans.\textsuperscript{30}

To Sigrid Undset the American novelist's treatment of love and marriage seems very unrealistic because of its lack of passion, and for this reason, aspects of puritanism seem natural to the American novel. It is her belief that:

...marriage--or love-life outside marriage--play a greater role to me, a European, than to Americans, whose treatment of love and sex very often seem unrealistic--not least when they try to be hardboiled and sexy. In the American novels I have read and found convincing, puritanism seems a natural thing, and the most convincing young women in American fiction are the cool ones--either kind, good, and intelligent helpmates, or gold-diggers. But, of course, in both cases love as a passion is ruled out. ...\textsuperscript{31}

American writers, she also believes, are oblivious to the beauty of nature for they never go into rapturous outbursts about the beauty of their countryside. It is American literature's absorption in purely human affairs that again marks it mainly puritanical. She writes on this particular point:

One of the things that stunned me, when I first came to America, was how utterly unprepared I was to find the

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country beautiful. ... The vastness and variety of beautiful countryside, the charm (to a spectator at least) of small towns with lawns and lovely trees in the streets making even the ugliest little houses look attractive, the breath-taking first view of the Hudson—nothing had prepared me for that. The hemlock and the flowering dogwood,—I had seen them mentioned but never any eulogies about their beauty. Now if the hemlock, or the dogwood, had been native of Denmark, a hundred poets in prose or verse would have praised their loveliness at every season, with the fervor of a Frenchman praising a pretty woman in every stage of dress or undress. And Hans Andersen would have written the fairy tale of the dogwood for all the world to read. This is what I mean when I think of American literature as mainly puritan, puritanically preoccupied with purely human affairs, unsensual even when it fights the taboos on sensual pleasure.

The underlying causes of the puritan characteristics in American Catholics are deeply imbedded. The explanation lies both in the influences of Puritan New England and in the far reaching and still operative influences of the Protestant Reformation. Catholic thought in the United States could hardly remain indifferent to the standardizations of American intellect. This latter is predominantly puritan, that is, pharisaical in the observance of religious requirements and in the manner of living.

Boland contends that this excessive Puritanical atti-

Attitude is still prevalent today and has intimidated our Catholic authors to such an extent as to make them inarticulate in regard to the actual conditions of modern life. These writers find themselves in the position of being able to depict man unblemished and saintly, but not with the human weaknesses to which all men are subject. As a result, this refusal to speak of sin and its temptations is the most characteristic attitude in American Catholic literature. Such an attitude was necessary in the beginning because the whole purpose of the age was to instruct and to use every means available for keeping and extending the Faith in America.

Account should also be taken of the Jansenistic influence which was felt by the first American Catholic immigrants. This trend was brought to America possibly through the French and Irish clergy, who, trained in France, had come under a rather dormant puritanism. Having imbibed this too severe moral training, they in turn gave it to the Catholics under their guidance. Both of these spiritual monitors did much for American Catholic beginnings. It is this influence of Jansenism that has made

33 Allen Boland, "English Literature in America," Franciscan Educational Conference 22: (Dec. 1940), 140.
some American Catholic readers hypersensitive to the portrayal of eroticism in literature.

Both Puritanism and Jansenism are outgrowths of the old age Manichean heresy. Its outmoded doctrine of supreme evil and good is neither consciously nor openly adhered to in its present day form. Rather it is linked to it by its tendency to exaggerate evil in human nature. Thus, it stamps as intrinsically wicked all references in literature to them. The effects of these indulgences are particularly manifested in present day literature.

Like American, Scandinavian literature too, has its distinct characteristics.

Slav and Scandinavian fiction is at once more simple, more deeply rooted in primitive instincts, with a more powerful creative genius, and with more imagination and less irony in psychological interpretation. In the Scandinavian group where Iceland and Finland naturally take their place, there prevails a deep sense of the tragic course of human destiny, a fundamental and spiritual force in the inner life, and a constant mingling of the physical with the introspective. Vigor, independence, and self-sufficiency are strong elements of life reflected in this fiction.

34 Gardiner, "Personal Letter," July 12, 1944.
In the Scandinavian countries Christianity appeared late. Furthermore, it was not until the end of the 11th century that the Catholic medieval literature superseded the heroic Scalic poetry of the Norse tradition. At first Christ was conceived as a heroic warrior, and later as a suffering saint. With the veneration of the Virgin Mary, the "feminine" virtues of charity, humility, and self-surrender came into vogue. Despite many Christian influences, the Nordic character retained some of its pagan heritage. Norway was converted through the wisdom of the early fathers in adapting some of the heathen mythology to Catholicism. This is apparent in Norway's veneration of its favorite saint, St. Olav, who was a Norse knight, and pictured in legend as a descendent from Frey, the pagan demi-god.

Unlike the West, Norway of the 12th century possessed its own mysticism and philosophy. Its kinship lay with German, Scotch, and Irish thought and it had no contact with Latin influences. The people were still heathenish. Love of fighting, quarreling, and the avenging of the smallest wrongs became almost proverbial. Norway's conversion was brought about by several means; namely, the

German missionaries, the Norwegians themselves, who had made pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and the influence of the Irish and English with whom they came in contact.

Differences of customs are reflected in the manner of life of the northern priests, who, unlike the Latins, were permitted to marry. The basis for this lay in the priests' necessity of obtaining their livelihood from their farms, on which the need of a woman's husbandry was an important factor. Even after celibacy of the priesthood was established some priests continued to live in a kind of civil marriage with their housekeepers. Such an instance is depicted in Kristin Lavransdatter and it showed the people's acceptance of it.

In these far-away country parishes folk held it was not reason that priests should live like monks, for they might need a woman to look after things for them, seeing what long and toilsome journeys they must make round the parishes, and that too, in all kinds of weather; besides folk had not forgotten that it was not so long since priests in Norway had been wedded men. Thus no one blamed Sira Eirik overmuch that he had three children by the woman who tended his house, while he was yet young.


Foreign travelers, complaining that the priests were excessive drinkers, failed to take into account the old tradition of *samdrinkkelag*. This was a religious festival wherein people ate and drank in honor of Christ and His Saints, in much the same manner as they had done in honoring Todin and Tor in pagan times. Ordinarily, the priests led a sober and laborious life in the service of their parishioners.

It is undoubtedly difficult to evaluate the literature of another country because of the particular national practices and the importance attached to them. Without a proper understanding of these factors, no true judgment can be reached. It is easy to understand that for an American it is doubly difficult, because "American criticism has seldom been primarily literary, and only a small part of it is so today. It has been ethical and moral, social and regional, political and religious. The special claims of art have, in fact, been obliged to put up a struggle for recognition."

41 Kieland, *op. cit.*, 338.

However, if the reader will bear in mind the differences of cultural backgrounds in the Scandinavian and American literatures, together with the tenets set up for guidance, an analysis of the works of Sigrid Undset can now begin.
CHAPTER II

THE EMPHASIS ON REDEMPTION

Great literature portrays man as an eternal figure having not only a spiritual nature but an animal nature, and because of this dual nature man's conflicts are great. The Greek tragedies portrayed man at war against fate which was always heavily weighted against him. In the Greek tragedies man was destined for a tragic end. Christian tragedy modified this form. Christianity portrayed man in conflict with his human passions. It illuminated his conflict with the light of faith and the perception that man's free will made him master of his destiny. The novels of Sigrid Undset are particularly interesting because of these two factors. They are built on concepts of Greek tragedy and illuminated by the Christian doctrine of redemption.

The theme of both Kristin Lavransdatter and The Master of Hestviken concerns the moral conflicts arising from a concealed sin and its consequent adversities. The development of the theme in the two novels may be summarized as follows:

The serenity and innocence of Kristin Lavransdatter's childhood and young girlhood comes to an end with her accidental meeting of Erlend when she is temporarily housed in a convent at Oslo. Between them
arises a tenderly impassioned love which leads to Kristin's yielding to Erlend.

Unwillingly and only after much grieving and deliberation, does Lavrans consent to the couple's marriage. Between the date set and the ceremony, Kristin again yields to Erlend and becomes pregnant.

The marriage is solemnized with this sin concealed. This sin stands between Kristin and Erlend throughout their entire life. Kristin's harboring of this wrong brings about their separation and Erlend's violent death.

With her children grown and no longer needing her, Kristin's life work is over. She ends her last days in a convent where she seeks to come closer to God through prayer and sacrifice. Thus her story closes on the dominant note of redemption.

In The Master of Hestviken, Inguun's guardians refuse to sanction the childhood betrothal of Olav and Inguun, despite their admission of having come together. Olav seeks the bishop's help, but unfortunately is goaded into killing a man. This results in his fleeing the country. Some years later he returns, only to find Inguun with child by Teit, an Icelander. Olav kills her seducer, concealing this act however, because of the position it places Inguun whom he still loves.

Marriage with Inguun brings nothing but sorrow and misfortune. To Olav's first unacknowledged sin he adds another by bringing Eirik, Inguun's son, into his home as his illegitimate child. By this act he deprives Cecilia of her birthright and true heritage.

Cecilia marries Jorund and is ill-treated by him. She conceals his maliciousness but it makes her bitter toward her father. Jorund is murdered. Olav believes Cecilia guilty. His hardness toward her almost drives Eirik to kill Olav. Cecilia prevents this act which would have been Eirik's unconscious avengement of Teit, his true father. Olav is at last determined to confess his sins. A stroke, however, pre-
vents him. Although there is an overtone of redemption in this story, the dominant theme is that vengeance belongs to God alone.

Sigrid Undset has built her medieval novels on concepts of Greek drama. It is probably this resemblance to the Greek tragedies that gives special significance to these novels. Her treatment of Kristin and Erlend in their unlawful co-habitation is done with a seriousness that is lacking in such acts as depicted in modern literature.

As in the Greek tragedies many of the events are foreshadowed. It is this characteristic trait that gives a somber dignity to the story. These intimations have the effect of a prophetic overtone and prepare the reader for further tragedy. In the opening chapters the reader senses that the tragic nature of Ragnfrid, Kristin's mother, is the result of some secret sorrow. This feeling grows into certainty in an incident connected with Ulvhild's accident. Lavrans tries to comfort his wife, but she moans out that it is she who has brought misfortune into his house and will bring more.

"Touch me not, touch me not! Jesus, Jesus-- 'twere liker you should strike me dead-- never will it end, the ill-fortune I bring upon you--"

"You! Dear my wife, 'tis not you that have brought this on us," said Lavrans, and laid a hand upon her shoulder. She shuddered at that, and
her light grey eyes shone in her lean, sallow face.

"Doubtless she means that 'twas my doing," said Trond Ivarson roughly. His sister looked at him with hate in her eyes, and answered:

"Trond knows what I mean."  

We are therefore, prepared for further tragedy in this household, which will probably fall on the favorite daughter, Kristin.

Again we are prepared for tragedy in the presentiment that Kristin's married life will not be without strife. It is Lavrans who perceives this. He finds no solace in his wife's thoughts that Kristin and Erlend's great love will outweigh the weakness of Erlend's character.

"See you not-- he has her now wholly in his power-- he that has never been man enough to rule himself. ...'Twill go hard with her before she finds courage to set herself against aught her husband wills-- and should she one day be forced to it, 'twill be bitter grief to her-- my own gentle child--"

"...Now am I come so far I scarce can understand why God hath laid so many and such heavy sorrows upon me-- for I have striven faithfully to do His will. Why hath He taken our children from us, Ragnfrid, one by one-- first our son-- then our little Ulvhild-- and now have I given her that I loved dearest, honourless, to an untrustey and witless man. Now is there none left to us but the little one-- and unwise must I deem it to take

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1 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, I, 37.
joy in her, before I see how it will go
with her-- with Ramborg."2

For years remorse has eaten at Ragnfrid's heart.
Her sufferings increase as she comes to love Lavrans.
And now in his darkest hour she lets slip that she was
no maid when she came to be his wife. Thus the tragedy
of Kristin's parents is resolved and we await with fear
the strife that must ensue from Kristin's marriage.

The Master of Hestviken opens with one of the basic
ideas of Greek tragedy. This is an unfamiliar theme to
the modern reader. It is the conception of the sin of
pride and its inevitable punishment. To the Greeks the
expression of pride was the most ominous foreshadowing
of a character's downfall. This high esteem of oneself
for real or imagined merit or superiority lies in the
background of the story and it is also the flaw of the
hero. A vestige of lack of humility is perceived in
Inguun's parents, who were not lawfully wedded until
three years after Inguun's birth. Her mother, Ingebjorg
Jonsdatter, had been persuaded by Steinfinn to flee with
him although she was betrothed to another. Queen
Ingebjorg brought about a reconciliation between the
young couple and her father, Jon Paalsson. Thus the
marriage of Ingebjorg and Steinfinn was then held in all

2 Ibid., I, 265.
all honor at the King's court in Oslo. However, the couple showed no humility that Jon Paalsson had not exalted the full penalty for their misdeeds.

At that time Ingebjorg was expecting her third child; but neither she nor Steinfinn showed becoming humility toward Jon or thanked him as they ought for his fatherly kindness. Steinfinn gave costly gifts to his wife's father and her kinsmen, but in other ways both he and his wife were very overweening and behaved as though all their life had been honourable nor had they any need to humble themselves in order to retrieve their position. They brought their eldest daughter, Inguun, to the wedding, and Steinfinn danced with her on his arm and showed her to all who were there; she was three years old, and her parents were proud beyond measure of this fair child.

Punishment quickly follows and does not cease until the couple makes atonement to their father.

But their first son died, whom Ingebjorg bore close upon their marriage, and after that she had still-born twins, both boys. Then the two bowed the knee to Jon Paalsson and besought his pardon with contrite hearts. Thereafter Ingebjorg had two sons who lived. She grew fairer with every year that passed; she and Steinfinn lived together in affection, maintained a great house, and were merry and of good cheer.

Full amends for their offense were not made, however, to all. No reparation was made to the rightful bride-

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4 Ibid.
groom, Mattias Haraldsson. He exacts his revenge and in

turn Steinfeldn seeks him seven years later and kills him.

Unfortunately Steinfeldn receives his death wound. Before

his death Ingebjorg dies under mysterious circumstances.

Thus the Greek pattern that pride merits misfortune pre-

pares us for the tragedy to befall the daughter and the

foster-son of the household.

Olav, too, is guilty of great pride. He can not

bear that anyone should know of Inguun's seduction, and

so he kills Teit. He conceals this sinful act, as the

acknowledgement of it would proclaim Inguun's dishonour

and his also. It is his pride which bars him from God's

friendship and for which he yearns so tormentingly. Yet,

when Arnvid explains that God asks only one thing of Olav,

namely, to confess his sin and none of the other sacri-

fices which Olav is making, he replies. "The only thing--

but that is everything, Arnvid-- honour, Life, maybe. God

knows I fear not so much to lose it in other ways-- but to

lose it as a caitiff--"5

Not until Olav has escaped the temptation of the

woman bearing Inguun's likeness does he see himself in

his true light, and lacking in humility in his dealings

with others.

5 Ibid., II, 199.
But in this unearthly light which now shone into his darkness, what he had secretly wished to preserve from God's hand appeared to him at last: the pride of the sinner, which is even harder to break than the self-righteousness of the righteous. -- Be it as it may, I am innocent of the sins of a mean man.

Visions came swarming upon him, without his being able to hinder them. Once he complained aloud. Was it to see this that he had been brought back to the very starting-point, his youth? In secret he had been proud of his youth: After all, I was overborne by force, I was compelled to stand alone, none helped me-- whatever I have done or left undone, was not the sin of an ignoble man.

Had none helped him--? They had helped him, those of whom he had asked help, Arnvid and the good bishop, Lord Torfinn. They were men he had loved and looked up to as his superiors-- of his inferiors he had never asked anything. But of the friendship of these two he had availed himself as fully and eagerly as any of his inferiors had availed themselves of him. The difference was merely that he had never thought of calling any man his friend and equal who came to him as a suppliant. Out of a pity that was both proud and lukewarm he had given his gifts. But the men who took him under their protection when he came to them in his need, had received him as a younger brother. -- Humiliation over-whelmed Olav like a landslied.-- He was painfully crushed beneath the rocks.

By tricks and by honest dealing, by a little lying and a little truth combined, he had gained advantage for himself from the few men he had met in the world whom he had reckoned good enough to call his friends, to love and respect. He had never dared to tell them the truth about
his own conduct, because he wished to have their respect— and because he needed their help. He stood in debt to his friends—he who had always looked down with pity on every debt-burdened wretch.

He divined that now he had well nigh unravelled the whole skein of his life's misfortunes to the end of the thread. "Cleanse thou me from secret faults, O Lord," he had learnt in his morning prayers—in all these years, when he recalled that psalm, he must have thought upon his own evil deeds. Now he saw that what he had tried to conceal, both from God and men, was that he might have gone astray, from weakness, from childish thoughtlessness and blind desire—that he had sought to deny at any cost: even if he should take upon himself the guilt of far worse deeds, charge himself with a burden of sorrow so heavy that it broke him down, then rather that. If only it might look as if he had acted with premeditation and accepted his sorrows knowingly and of his own free will.

"And preserve thy servant from the power of strangers: let them not have dominion over me, so shall I remain unspotted—" Let me not submit to my enemies, he had meant. And then it had been nothing but his own sheer nature that kept him from submitting to his enemies, he would not bend to men for whom he had no respect, or who opposed him; to such he had always shown his stubborn obstinacy and his mute, cold defiance. It was toward his friends he was weak and submissive, even to falseness and dissembling; it was when he first became aware of his love for his bride that his whole being was inflamed and bent aside from uprightness, melting and leaning over like a heated candle. —That should have been the object of his prayers: courage, so that he dared acknowledge his blushing; strength, so that he ventured to act rightly and speak the truth without heeding the judgment of those he loved.6

6 Ibid., III, 88-94.
Three omens of disaster occur before the killing of Teit. Olav cuts himself, and Brother Helge has difficulty in stopping the blood, Kin-fetch rings out, and a bird flies into the room. The brother begs Olav to put off his journey but he will not.  

Another basic idea in Greek tragedy is that of the unbalanced man. He was one who, through personal tastes or preferences, neglected certain phases of activities and interests of most men. In the Greek conception this man aroused the wrath of certain gods by his neglect of them. Olav was termed "odd and unsociable, a joyless companion in a joyful gathering." He was lacking in convivial spirit.

Another matter which had been remarked by the neighbors was that no man had seen Olav get honestly drunk or free-spoken in a carouse. He drank no less than other good men at a banquet, but it seemed that God's gifts did not bite on him. And by degrees there grew up a feeling in the countryside—vague and formless, for no one really knew on what they based it, but with all its obscurity it was strong as a certainty—that this man had something on his mind, a secret misfortune or a sin. The handsome, erect young master, with the broad, fair face beneath his curly flaxen hair, was a marked man.

7 Ibid., I, 302-03.
8 Ibid., IV, 340.
9 Ibid., II, 152.
Olav recognizes his oddity and he realizes that the people of the countryside do not seek his company if they can avoid it.

Olav guessed that no one liked him. Coldness and distrust met him everywhere, and often he thought he could detect a hidden satisfaction when things went ill with him. Yet in this part of the country he had always acted rightly and had never done any man an injustice. He could not even bring himself to be angry at this; he received his sentence without wincing. It must be that folk saw the secret mark upon his brow.10

The secret mark was the concealment of his sin. Here, however, Sigrid Undset departs from the Greek concept of sin, which regarded sin as something committed lightly and forgotten, unconsciously, or by one's parents. It merited punishment because proper atonement to the gods had not been made. Sigrid Undset's characters knowingly sin and realize the seriousness of their offense to God, and the necessity of repentance. This consciousness of sin, which occupies such a prominent place in Christian literature and in which Greek literature is lacking, plays a predominant part in Sigrid Undset's medieval novels.

Parallel with the Greek heroines, Kristin Lavransdatter is neither eminently good nor bad. Her nature is such that she could sin grievously and deliberately,

10 Ibid., II, 182.
but not lightly. This is because as a child of God she was well aware of her true destiny. Her great change in fortune results from her error of judgment. We are excited to fear for her because she has willfully chosen to wed a man who is incapable of assuming the responsibilities that marriage entails, and because she disregards her betrothal to Simon, the man chosen by her father, and in many respects the better man. This act of disobedience is a very serious offense in a society based on kinship, for the family tie extends far beyond the immediate family circle and includes the hereditary servants and vassals; and all these were dishonoured by Kristin's sin. Her tragedy is heightened in that she is fully aware that the reliable and stolid Simon is the better man. It is Erlend, however, whom Kristin loves with a love so dear that honour and her parents' devotion mean nothing. Our fear for her is aroused in perceiving all the trials that must ensue from such a match, and noting how each mis-step and its consequent suffering falls not on her alone, but also on those whom she loves and who also love her.

In Kristin Lavransdatter tragedy is the invisible garment that clothes all the characters. Ragnfrid's loss of virginity, occasioned by a drunken brute drives her to deceive the young boy, Lavrans. She is haunted by her duplicity, with the thought that her inability to bear
strong children is God's way of punishing her, and with the awesome knowledge that she is unworthy of a man so good as Lavrans. The responsibilities accruing from her act mold her into a good but cold woman. She lacks the emotional warmth of great love, both in the ability to receive it from her husband and her children, or to give it to them. Not until she acknowledges her dissemblance to Lavrans does Ragnfrid gain serenity of mind. Final peace results only with the regeneration of love which came late to Lavrans and herself. This was after the birth of Kristin's first child, when on Lavrans return, he gives Ragnfrid his dearest treasure, his mother's ring.

In Lavrans, the true Greek concept of tragic hamartia is violated, for it concerns a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity through no error of his own, though perhaps some critics may say Lavrans' fraility was his inability to give his wife a husband's love. This flaw of character is heightened by his too absorbing love for Kristin. We pity Lavrans for his loveless marriage; we take joy in his pride of Kristin, and sorrow with him in Kristin's betrayal. Despite life's misfortunes, the light of redemption completely enshrouds him. He is re-born somewhat through his children and the warm love he gives to them.

Ramborg's tragedy is in loving Simon, who could
never love her, in perceiving his greatness of character, and in being forced to hide from him the knowledge of her awareness that his love for her is only the overflowings of a great heart-- the remains of his love for Kristin. Like her mother, she grows into a good and moral woman, but sorrow warps her nature rather than softens it.

In turn, Simon's tragedy is in loving Kristin, whom he can never have, with a love that lasts to his dying day. His love and sorrow have that soothing redemptive quality lacking in Ramborg's. Tragedy ennobles Simon, tempering him so that he can rise to any need unselfishly-- even that of saving the live of the man who stole his betrothed. Redemption comes to him with his death, with the knowledge that no longer will he have to fight his love for Kristin. Then too, Ramborg, in a measure finds peace, in the doubtful knowledge that a marriage with love on her part alone is ended, and that there need be no more striving, no more despairing hope that some day she would reign supreme in Simon's heart.

It is in Erlend's make-up that his tragedy lay, in his inability to assume life's responsibilities, and in loving a woman stronger than himself.

Even the minor characters feel the breath of tragedy upon them. Ulvhild is a cripple, who obtains relief only through death. Arne, too, finds early death, because in
loving Kristin, he will let no one speak ill of her. Even Gunnulf, Erlend's brother, must break the last ties of kinship because of Erlend's momentarily jealous doubt of him.

The similarity of Greek characterization holds true in *The Master of Hestviken*. Potentially Olav is a good man. His nature is such that he scorns petty deceits and lying. His tragic flaw is his pride, and this compels him to follow these dubious paths. Like the Greek heroes, his first misstep is his fatal error, and the events which follow prove even more tragic. Olav falls from one sin into another, and each has tragic consequences. First, he takes Inguun unlawfully to be his bride. In anger he slays Einar. The willful murder of Teit follows, and its concealment. Olav takes Eirik as his lawful child, thus making Cecilia lose her lawful birthright. Harassed by unconfessed sin and despair, in a weak moment Olav takes Torhild. Each sin seems but a preparation for the next; and while Olav suffers and repents, he is unable to bring himself to confess. Thus the triumphant note on which *Kristin Lavransdatter* ends is not found in *The Master of Hestviken*. Probably some readers would have preferred to have Olav confess and thereby obtain relief in the end. This, however, would have been anti-climactic and inconsistent with the story. Olav's stroke was the more artis-
tic conclusion. He has been given, it is true, conditional absolution, but we are aware that it can not prove a great consolation to Olav after the many bitter years of concealing his sin. We discern that his suffering is even greater now that he is at last ready to confess. Unfortunately circumstances deny him this grace. The reader perceives that the sufferings which Olav endured through silence were greater than any suffering which the acknowledgement of his sins could ever bring.

Sigrid Undset's general trend is toward tragedy wherein a character has violated racial ties and moral laws, and the denouement resulting from remorse and retribution is as inevitable as in Greek drama.

Kristin and Erlend in consumating their love unlawfully violated not only the moral law but also the law of kinship. Through the virtue of chastity women have preserved the strength of their race. In her first misstep, Kristin perceived the dishonour she had done to God, to her kinsmen, and to mankind in general. This act by its very nature involved tragic consequences. In binding herself to Erlend, Kristin again sinned against her people, for it was the law that parents and kin had the right to give their children in marriage.

Unsanctified cohabitation was not the least of their sins. The driving of another to seek death by her own hand must also be accounted for. Kristin's conscience unrelentlessly recalls the evil which she and Erlend have done, and with fear perceives the punishment and suffering that must be exacted. Remorse, not repentance assails her. Alone with Lady Aashild, Kristin unburdens her heart.

"I am thinking," said Kristin, cold with dread, "on all we have brought to sorrow that we might see this day."

"'Tis not joy alone, I trow that you two have had," said Lady Aashild. "Not Erlend at the least. And methinks it has been worse still for you."

"I am thinking on his helpless children," said the bride again. "I am wondering if they know their father is drinking today at his wedding-feast--"

"Think on your own child," said the lady. "Be glad that you are drinking at your wedding with him who is its father."

"Kristin lay awhile, weak and giddy. 'Twas strange to hear that named that had filled her heart and mind each day for three months and more, and whereof yet she had not dared speak a word to a living soul. It was but for a little, though, that this helped her.

"I am thinking on her who had to pay with her life, because she held Erlend dear," she whispered, shivering.

"Well if you come not to pay with your life yourself, ere you are half a year older," said Lady Aashild harshly. "Be glad while you may--"

"What shall I say to you, Kristin," said the old woman in a while, despairingly. "Have you clean lost courage this day of all days? Soon enough will it be required of you twain that you shall pay for all you have done amiss-- have no fear that it will not be so."\[12

12 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, I, 258.
Kristin's wedding day brings no peace to her troubled soul. She tries to pray but cannot. She is plagued with the thought that their punishment may revert to her unborn child.

...Holy King Olav, I cry upon thee. Above all in heaven I pray for help to thee, for I know thou didst love God's justice above all things. I call upon thee, that thou hold thy hand over the innocent that is in my womb. Turn away God's wrath from the innocent; turn it upon me. Amen, in the precious name of the Lord. ...

...Holy Olav! Yet do I pray for grace. Pray thou for mercy for my son; take him beneath thy guard; so shall I bear him to thy church on my naked feet, so shall I bear my golden garland of maidenhood in to thee and lay it down upon thy altar, if you wilt but help me. Amen. 13

The denouement is not complete. There is yet more remorse to come before Kristin is fully purged of her sins. In the following months Kristin suffers more and more with the thought that her child may prove to be misshapen. And with her anguish she finds sorrow and her way back to God. Thus it is with her travail in the past and her son in her arms that Kristin sets forth to keep her promise to St. Olav.

Lord Jesus Christ, holy Mary, St. Olav-- She longed to reach the goal of her pilgrimage-- she longed to cast from her the burden of the hidden sins of years, the weight of masses and

13 Ibid., I, 260.
offices that she had filched unlawfully while yet unshriven and unrepentant—she longed to be free and cleansed, yet more keenly than she had yearned to be delivered of her burden in the spring before the boy was born. ... 14

Only through intense suffering and deep repentance does Kristin find salvation.

And here knelt she, with the fruit of sin in her arms. She pressed the child to her— he was fresh as an apple, red and white as a rose— he was awake now, and lay looking up at her with his clear sweet eyes. 

Conceived in sin. Borne under her hard evil heart. Drawn from her sin polluted body, so fair, so whole, so unspeakably lovely and she knelt, crushed with penitence, and the weeping welled up out of her soul as blood flows from a death-wound.

Naakkve, Naakkve, child of mine—God visiteth the sins of the fathers upon the children. Knew I not that? Ah, yes, I knew it. But I had no mercy in my heart for the innocent life that might be wakened in my womb— to be accursed and condemned to torment for my sin—

Repented I my sin, when I bore you within me, my beloved, beloved son? Oh, no, 'twas not repentance. —My heart was hard with anger and evil thoughts in the hour when I first felt thee move, so little and so defenceless. — Magnificat anima mea Dominum. Et exaltavit spiritus meas in Deo salutari meo— thus she sang, the gentle Queen of all women, when she was chosen out to bear Him that was to die for our sins.

—I called not to mind Him that had power to take away the burden of my sins and my child's sin— oh, no, 'twas not repentance, I but feigned me lowly and wretched, and begged and begged that the commands of

14 Ibid., II, 365.
righteousness be broken; for that I could not bear it if God upheld His law and chastened me according to the Word that I had known all my days—

Oh, aye, now she knew it. She had thought that God was such an one as her own father, that St. Olav was as her father. She had thought all the time, deep in her heart, that when her punishment grew to be heavier than she could bear, then would she meet, not with justice, but with compassion. ...

The problem initiated in book I is now resolved. The grief which her father had forseen in this marriage is yet to come. Kristin and Erlend have little in common save their great love. Thus it is that each pulls unevenly against the marriage bond. It is Kristin's harboring of past offenses and her determination to dominate that brings tragedy to this couple. Twice does Kristin drive Erlend away. The last time it results in the disintegration of the family. Not until Erlend's death and Gaute's marriage does Kristin take a true measure of herself. She leaves her home and enters a convent to end her days.

...A handmaiden of God had she been—a wayward, unruly servant, oftentimes an eye-servant in her prayers and faithless in her heart, slothful and neglectful, impatient under correction, but little constant in her deeds --yet he had held her fast in his service, and under the glittering golden ring a mark had been set secretly upon her, showing that she

15 Ibid., II, 373.
was His handmaid, owned by the Lord and King who was now coming, borne by the priest's anointed hands, to give her freedom and salvation. 16

It is this aspect of salvation that differentiates the conception of tragedy as conceived by the Greeks and the Christians. The element of deliverance is accentuated rather than that of doom.

In The Master of Hestviken Sigrid Undset again deals with characters who violate the same laws and in consequence merit punishment until they too by means of suffering have earned redemption.

Olav's sorrow for his concealed sin is intense and prolonged. His conflict is doubly enhanced because admission would bring burdens on those whom he loved. Not until Jorund's murder, of which Olav believes Cecilia guilty and following in his path of concealment, is Olav able to bring himself to rise above both his pride and his unwillingness to hurt those under his protection. Despair, however, dominates his decision, for he has lost sight of the fact that God loves even the greatest of sinners.

Now he could no longer repent. There was no longer any love of God within him, nor any longing to find his way back; now he would rather

16 Ibid., III, 1040-41.
have gone on and on away from God, everlastingly. That was Hell. That was the realm of eternal torment, he knew it, but the home of torment had become his home.

The game was played out, and now he might indeed confess and do penance imposed by the Bishop--it would be of no avail. Absolution cannot absolve him who has no repentance within him. And he knew that what he had once believed, was all that is and was and shall be, and he himself was what was not; but so many times had he chosen himself and that which was haught, that he had lost sight and sense for that which was Life.

But for Cecilia's sake he would do it nevertheless. ...17

A measure of peace comes to Olav with the admission of his sin to Finn Arnvidsson. God's infinite mercy and love triumph over Olav's despair. A stroke prevents Olav from making a confession to the proper authority and it is not until Olav is on his death-bed that he is given conditional absolution, and his tragedy resolved. The catharsis in The Master of Hestviken is similar to that illustrated in Greek tragedies. It does not rise to the heights of Kristin Lavransdatter because the saving grace of redemption is not as complete.

The Master of Hestviken does end on a redemptive note, however, for just before Olav's death he has a vision of God and of salvation.

Then the very rays from the source of light broke out and poured down over

him. For an instant he stared with open eyes straight into the eye of the sun, tried even, wild with love and longing, to gaze yet deeper into God. He sank back in red fire, all about him was a living blaze, and he knew that now the prison tower that he had built around him was burning. But salved by the glance that surrounded him he would walk out unharmed over the glowing embers of bliss, and the fire that burnt him was not so ardent as his longing. 18

It is in the drama of salvation in which Sigrid Undset is interested rather than in that of sin and its temptations. This type of drama is the most profound and happy of all. Her emphasis is on God's mercy. The factor of redemption lessens the element of tragedy and resolves it triumphantly. Thus man's trials and failures are not the source of defeat, but the means of bringing him closer to God. 19

Olav knows that some day he will confess because he perceives the truth that, as a man, his spiritual nature seeks God as truly as God seeks him. The mere thought of surrendering himself to His Creator brings peace to Olav. 20 It is because God loves Olav and perceives Olav's love

18 Ibid., IV, 330.


for Him that He persecutes him.

Kristin's life is an illustration of the drama of a woman's salvation achieved through the experiences of every day life. The first book treats of Kristin's carefree childhood. This is terminated by her association with Erlend and their consequent passion for each other. The two following books describe her suffering and growth. Previously she had seemed almost wanton in sin and defiance. Now, haunted by the grievousness of her sin, she becomes submissive to God and her whole nature is turned in a new direction. She knows that both the souls of her children and her husband are entrusted to her care and that only through constant vigilance and guidance can she gain redemption. 22

Kristin's story is the oldest story in the world and reacted in countless homes today. It is the eternal story of seven ages of woman, of her progress through life, of frenzied passion, sin, retribution, repentance, disillusionment, remorse, bitterness, and abandonment. Life is both symbolically and realistically portrayed, and is worked out in the grand scale of an enduring classic. 23

21 Ibid., III, 89.
22 Monroe, op. cit., 84-85.
It is because Kristin was so heavily burdened with sin and guilt and human short-comings that she strove for greater heights of faith. Governed by fear and self-reproach she finds peace in her faith and in its teachings. It is through Kristin's sufferings that this theme of sin, repentance and atonement is brought to its conclusion of peace, happiness, and calm rest. Through her we perceive our own erring soul, beset, and often yielding to the temptations of life, yet ultimately conquering these and coming home to God.

This religious yearning for salvation is expressed through surrender of self. Kristin's revolt against her father resulted in a life-time of suffering. Kristin's harboring the thought of wrongs done raised barriers between herself and her husband, which eventually brought ruin to their patrimony and terminated in Erlend's leaving her. Even then, much could have been saved had Kristin surrendered her dominant passion for rule and abided with Erlend, satisfied with the means he was able to provide. This refusal to let her husband hold the reins resulted in the breaking up of her family and culminated in Erlend's death. Only by surrendering her desire for dominance near the close of her life did Kristin earn her peace with God.
Two of Sigrid Undset's novels, however, lack this redemptive quality, namely, Gunnar's Daughter, 1909, and Jenny, 1911. The basis for this deficiency lies in all probability midway between the following two views. Both from a literary and a spiritual viewpoint Sigrid Undset had not reached her full maturity. Her art was still in its incipient stage and as yet she had not felt the truth of Catholic philosophy. Undoubtedly, this latter has played a great part in her work. Nevertheless, one should be wary of too great an emphasis on this point. The development of the theme in the two novels may be summarized as follows:

In Gunnar's Daughter, Ljot falls in love with Vigdis. She is about to return his affection when he earns her scorn by conducting himself in a disgraceful manner.

On a pretext he arranges a meeting and when Vigdis will not flee the country with him he seduces her. She gives birth to a son and instills in him the desire to avenge her.

Unknown to each other, years later, Ljot meets his son and saves his life. They become dear friends. Ljot discovers the relationship and promises to pay a visit.

Vigdis demands that her son choose between herself and his father. Perceiving the futility of ever gaining Vigdis, Ljot provokes a quarrel with his son and is slain by him.

Only when Vigdis' wish of having Ljot's head in her lap is granted does she realize her love for Ljot. Her son, having played his part, bids his mother good-by and is never again seen.
In Jenny we perceive the emotions of a woman who believes her final destiny lies in a complete and full identification with another. Thus, she cheats herself into believing that she is in love with Helge Gram. Eventually she breaks her engagement only to become involved with his father, Gert.

She goes away to have her child. Unfortunately he is a weakling and dies. Jenny starts life anew, only to meet Helge again. He forces himself into her room and violates her. Broken by these degradations Jenny kills herself.

Both of these stories end on a despairing note. Life holds nothing for either of these characters. They do not perceive anything to be salvaged from their mistakes. The element of redemption is lacking.

Jenny is Sigrid Undset's only character that tries to escape life and its burdens. The hope of regeneration is lacking in this novel as well as in Gunnar's Daughter.

Jenny is also lacking in that ultimate harmony that distinguishes tragedy from mere disaster.

It is characteristic of Sigrid Undset that seventy pages (of the three hundred given over to the entire novel) are devoted to the minute, circumstantial depiction of the horrors of the lonely, terror-filled period of advanced pregnancy and childbirth and the violently tragic aftermath in Rome. The novel reminds one of Guy de Maupassant's Une Vie in its brutal lingering over the sad details of the tragic denouement. A normally precipitate tragic action is not permitted here. The reader must concentrate, with whatever patience he may have, upon a slow, steady accumulation of tragic detail: he must linger, all but sadistically, over the
gradual stages in Jenny's final decay; he must finally come to see, always directly, never by subtle narrative implication, the "inevitability" of Jenny's tragic fate in the light of the severe ethical idealism of her earlier years.

Jenny's moral idealism -- founded alone upon an inner consciousness of the good and the beautiful, wholly independent of outward, objective forms or institutions -- was in the end too weak to cope with her yearnings, her impulses, and the accidents of circumstances with which life had come to surround her. ... 24

In both *Kristin Lavransdatter* and *The Master of Hestviken* the characters are presented with almost heart breaking pathos. This is managed by the utmost simplicity, naturalness and economy. This tenderness is accentuated by a tone of sparseness, austerity, and even bleakness. Here is wonderfully presented the mystery of suffering which engages the most profound and sensitive minds. Sigrid Undset does not solve the problems of suffering; she does, however, succeed in throwing upon the majestic concepts of Greek tragedy the redeeming light of Christian faith by depicting man's suffering as the cross which he bears on his way to eternity. 25


In Lavrans is the Christian perception of the meaning of suffering best portrayed. How simple are his replies to Ragnfrid's question.

"Seemed it never to you," asked his wife, "as though God had forsaken you?"
"No."
"What were your thoughts on that night we sat there in the barn—when you learned in one hour that we whom you held dearest and loved most faithfully, we had both been false to you as we could be."
"I thought not much, I trow," said the man.
"And since," his wife went on, "when you thought upon it always— as you say you did—"
Lavrans turned away from her. She saw a flush spread over his sun-burned neck.
"I thought on all the times I had been false to Christ," he said very low.

The high value Sigrid Undset places on suffering is shown by the manner in which her characters grasp the true meaning of suffering, and the relation of their own sorrows to God's supreme sacrifice. Through suffering they are united with Christ, their cross is not meaningless or purposeless, but a means of making them dearer to God. It is a promise of fulfillment of life to come, and through it the soul is purged and deepened and made ready for its final home.27

26 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, II, 505.
27 Monroe, op. cit., 78.
This is wonderfully shown in Olav's perception of the sorrows that come to him.

...but he knew now that this sorrow of his was also as a bleeding wound upon that crucified body. Every sin he had committed, every wound he had inflicted on himself or others, was one of the stripes his hand had laid upon his God. As he stood here, feeling that his own heart's blood must run black and sluggish in his veins with sorrow, he knew that his own life, full of sin and sorrow, had been one more drop in the cup God drained in Gethsemane. And another sentence he had learned in his childhood came back to him: he had believed it was a command, but now it sounded as a prayer from the lips of a sorrowing friend: Vade, et amplius jam noli peccare--

Then it was as though his eyes lost their power of sight, and his blood rushed back to his heart, so that he grew outwardly cold as a dead man. All this was as though it were within him: his own soul was as this house, destined for a church, but empty, without God; darkness and disorder reigned within, but the only sparks of light which burnt and sent out warmth were gathered about the image of the rejected Lord, Christ crucified, bearing the burden and the suffering of his sin and his despair. Vale, et amplius jam noli peccare.--

My Lord and my God! Yea, Lord, I come--I come, for I love Thee--. I love Thee, and I acknowledge: Tibi soli pec--

cavi, et malum coram te feci-- against Thee alone have I sinned, and done evil in Thy sight. --He had said these words a thousand times, and only now did he know that this was the truth which held all other truths in itself as a sup. --

My God and my all! -- 28
The greater one's sense of ultimate values, the greater is one's capacity for suffering. Therefore, the conflict will take on an intensity and depth of meaning according to one's potentiality for suffering. Erlend in sinning, feels only the shame that he sees in men's eyes; while Kristin feels, first, the shame of the loss of honour to herself, her family, and to her unborn son; and second, the knowledge that her sin has made her not only an outcast of society, which she is willing to bear, but of heaven also. It is this last which gnaws unrelentlessly at her heart.

Inguun is of little mental or moral stature, and as such her capacities for suffering are lessened. On the other hand Olav assumes an heroic stature because his depth is immeasurable. The greater stature of both Kristin and Olav results from their conception of themselves as heirs of heaven, and their realization that their sins have made them outcasts of heaven. It is in their struggle to return to God that their characters grow.

At one time, however, Inguun does have some perception of the wrong she has done and relates it to her suffering. She is unaware that Olav suffers because of her early sins and therefore, believes that Olav's sins of concealment are as nothing compared to hers of adultery.
and intended suicide. She begs Olav not to confess lest punishment fall on him and shame descend on her. She has no realization of the punishment that Olav has meted out to himself.

"Olav, look at me-- in Jesus' name, have no such thoughts as these. Have I not sins enough myself to atone for--? Do you remember"-- she forced him to raise his face-- "'you are not human,' you said to me that time-- you know what I would have done with Eirik, if you had not prevented me. Should I reproach upon God for deeming I was not fit to bear children?-- all that winter long I thought of nothing but of stifling the innocent life I felt quickening within me--"

..................

"I may thank God's mercy and naught else that I have not child murder upon my conscience. And no sooner was I saved from that sin than I went about to do a worse one-- God stretched out His hand again, when I was already half-way through the gates of Hell. I have perceived it long ago. I was not allowed to send myself straight to Hell; every day I had lived since has been a loan, a respite given me to bethink myself and understand-- "I do not complain as I lie here-- Olav, have you once heard me complain? I know well that God has chastised me, not from unkindness-- He who has twice plucked me out of the fire into which I would have thrown myself--"

..................

"Oh nay, Olav! She took his hand, drew him down and clasped his head to her bosom. He heard her heart beating violently within the narrow, wasted chest. "Say not such things, my friend! Your sin-- 'tis white by the side of mine! You must know that they were long for me, these years, and oftentimes heavy-- but now it seems to me they were good in spite of all, since I"
Olav's suffering is more introspective than either Kristin's or Inguun's and of its very nature is more spiritual. His trials are borne uncomplainingly. One instinctively senses, however, that these patient acceptances are silent bribes to the Lord. Olav is willing to bear any cross in the hope that he will be spared acknowl-

29 Ibid., II, 245-50.
edging Teit's murder and specifically, Inguun's seduction.

Suffering is a means of positive good wherein pity and awe chasten man's pride and purify his emotions. With the added grace of Christianity, sorrow develops Kristin from a passionate and willful girl into a noteworthy woman in her countryside. 30

While Olav relates his suffering to the wrongs he has done to his Creator, his pride is never completely disciplined. Because of this factor the redemptive value in The Master of Hestviken is not as great as in Kristin Lavransdatter.

Closely related to this theme of suffering is the theme of freedom. It is through man's free will that he sins, and thereby suffers, and by this freedom and suffering he attains his full stature. The price of freedom is suffering. Were man not free, but as in the Greek tragedies a pawn of a higher power, or a victim of circumstances, his suffering would be without meaning and without promise of growth. To such a person God must appear cruel or as an incomprehensible mystery. Sigrid Undset's exposition of suffering shows how freedom may lead a man away from God and into sin; and yet, just as inevitably will it lead him back to God. Olav in sinning

30 Monroe, op. cit., 79.
loses his friendship with God, and yet, every moment of his life he is fully aware of the awfulness of God's presence and yearns deeply for His love. 31

Before Inguun's death Olav again wrestles with his conscience. Having perceived the emptiness of his soul without God, Olav knows that his dilatory repentance must cease. No longer can he hope that God will force him to choose to return to his Saviour.

So many a time had he allowed himself to be driven out of his road, upon false tracks which he had no desire to follow. Long ago he had acknowledged the truth of Bishop Torfinn's words: the man who is bent upon doing his own will shall surely see the day when he finds he has done that which he never willed. But he perceived that this kind of will was but a random shot, an arrow sent at a venture. -- But he still had his own inmost will, and it was as a sword. When he was called to Christianity, he had been given this free will, as the chieftain gives his man a sword when he makes him a knight. If he had shot away all his other weapons, marred them by ill use-- this right to choose whether he would follow God or forsake Him remained a trusty blade, and his Lord would never strike it out of his hand. Though his faith and honour as a Christian were now stained like the misused sword of a traitor knight-- God had not taken it from him; he might bear it still in the company of Our Lord's enemies, or restore it kneeling to that Lord, who yet was ready to raise him to His bosom, greet him with the kiss of peace and give

31 Ibid., 80-81.
him back his sword, cleansed and blessed. 32

The knowledge that free will is a dangerous gift
but one that cannot be revoked accounts for Sigrid Undset's
insistence that her characters assume the obligations
which free will entails. Olav's unconfessed sin harasses
him the greater part of his life. It becomes entangled
with his obligations. His confession would bring oppro­
brium on Inguun, as it was her betrayer he had killed
and her illegitimate son he had adopted. Toward the end
of his life Olav realizes it was his pride and not his
duty to others which prevented him from regaining the
friendship of God. Willing enough is he to bear punish­
ment for his great sins but not for the little ones of
lying and deceit.

While free will may be a burden it is also a price­
less honour. It is mostly by freedom of act that man
attains greatness. Sigrid Undset could have glossed
over Olav's real sin and excused him because of his
extreme youth, the strength of his temptations, his great
responsibilities, the nobleness of his life, or his
intense suffering. She let Olav suffer to the end, however,
because he had the right to choose whether he would make

33 Monroe, *op. cit.*, 77.
his peace with God, or go on living in rebellion against Him. 34

In taking advantage of the drama of every day life, Sigrid Undset makes causality the very centre of her stories. Dramatic complication and catastrophe are the sign and symbol of spiritual laws that surround our universe. Aesthetic action and natural action are always reinforced with spiritual laws. Olav's story is full of the drama inherent in life. The murder of Teit and its consequent complications are only resolved by Olav's reconciliation with God. 35

Aesthetic laws demanded Eline Ormsdatter's death before Erlend and Kristin could marry. In a pagan age death by one's own hand was the natural action of a discarded woman. It was also the psychological reaction of a woman in the hysterical and despairing state of Eline. Her death was brought about partly by Kristin's goading of Erlend to choose between his paramours. Erlend too, played his part. He was determined that Eline would take the draught she had brewed. In despair she stabs herself. The law of nature and of God demanded restitution. Equal responsibility fell on both Erlend and Kristin. Each

34 Ibid., 77-78.
35 Ibid., 54.
suffered and each paid the debt according to his own nature. Erlend bought a place for Eline in hallowed ground, confessed to the bishop, and then made a pilgrimage at Schwerin. Kristin, however, could find no peace, for she could be absolved only by her parish priest. On the eve of her marriage she was plagued with visions of Eline's children, and during the marriage ceremony the dead woman seemed to cry out for payment of her death. Then before the birth of Naakkve, Kristin was tormented by Eline's similar travail. Her reconciliation with God brought her peace. Nevertheless, her obligations to Eline's children, Orme and Margret, went on. Kristin tried to mother them and guide them. She succeeded with Orme but not with Margret.

Sigrid Undset's modern novels are problem novels, dominated by a secularized atmosphere of current times, wherein man thirsts for God either consciously or unconsciously. This satisfaction must be quenched if total demoralization is not to be his mead. Her characters grope for truth in an attempt to discover some teleological significance to their lives. Paul Selmer in The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush is a story of a man's need for God.

36 Evans, op. cit., 103.
In The Wild Orchid, Julie Selmer reared her children by liberal, scientific, pagan ideas. Lacking objective religious security, they seek happiness outside the home. Paul finds it in an alliance with Lucy, who is socially, educationally, and intellectually beneath him. That he might marry sooner, he gives up his professional career for that of a business. In his absence, Lucy, believing she is tubercular, marries another.

In the sequel, The Burning Bush, Paul drifts into marriage with Bjorg, a petty, doll-like woman. Marriage does not prove satisfying and Paul seeks solace in the Catholic Church. They have two children, Sunlife and Helge.

Bjorg leaves Paul for another man, but returns when Sunlife is near death. Paul asks if Bjorg will remain, even though he can not love her. His aim is to retain a family relationship for the sake of the children. Bjorg, deserted, in need, and with child by the other man agrees to be Paul's wife in name only. The child born to Bjorg proves sub-normal and lives only a few years.

Lucy re-enters Paul's life and wishes to take up their old relationship. This Paul cannot do. Lucy's husband attempts to kill her, but is prevented by Paul. However, Lucy's husband falls down the stairs and is killed. Paul is held by the jury but is acquitted. Lucy dies from her injuries.

Tragedy enters Paul Selmer's life when he establishes an illicit liaison with Lucy. The law of nature itself seemed to protest against a permanent alliance between two such unequals in spiritual, mental, and social outlook. Our pity is aroused at Paul's unmerited misfortune and in seeing him sacrifice his career to marry Lucy,
only to discover she has married another in his absence. The catastrophe is culminated by Paul's permitting himself to be lured into a marriage with a spineless child, fully aware that he was not in love. His sufferings are great because he must go through the motions of loving one who is not capable of loving in return. All of Bjorg's petty demands are endured for the greater good of a home for his children. His redemption is resolved triumphantly by his acceptance of the responsibilities accruing from his marriage and in finding consolation in Catholicism.

Lucy's re-entry into Paul's life and her tragic death are anticlimactic. Bjorg's perception of Paul's suffering may possibly serve as a means of reuniting them.

Paul's conception of sorrow is intellectual. He perceives that sorrow is an illuminating influence. Man, despite his grief, gains fortitude through the right acceptance of his sorrow and thereby finds goodness and happiness in his life. He fails, however, to see that sorrow is the means by which man approaches God, that man's seeking release from his sorrow ends in his finding His Saviour. Notice how he analyzes the effects of his grief in his loss of Lucy and his loveless marriage.

He had not revolted at what had really been sorrow. In a purely intuitive way he must always have guessed that in the presence of real sorrow man is powerless. He who has
courage and patience enough to bear his sorrow, instead of trying to crawl away from it, will end by discovering it to be a powerful and mysterious domain of life. If he succeeds in working his way through it, he himself will undergo so great a change that he will have grown out of his old notions of what is good and happy. He will be strengthened and emboldened to seek what, in his new state, he considers goodness and happiness.37

His sorrow does, however, bring him to a greater understanding of each individual as a soul dear to Christ because He had created it. Paul came to understand, too, the fact that because man is unable to see the worth of every soul does not subtract from the value of the individual's soul.

Both The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush are lacking in that tragic struggle, entailing intense moral conflicts, which are so necessary if a book is to rise above a moderate level.

In the later novels, Ida Elizabeth, The Faithful Wife, Images in a Mirror, and Madame Dorthea, Sigrid Undset discusses ideas without reference to religion by asserting that morality is older than religion and that the only rational way of looking at life is a moral one.38


38 Monroe, op. cit., 72.
In *Ida Elizabeth* we see a woman making the best of a stupid marriage. Her husband, Frithjof is immature, and incapable of responsibility. He leaves her the greater part of their common burdens. He is inadvertently responsible for the death of his daughter.

When he becomes interested in another woman, *Ida Elizabeth* seizes this opportunity to leave him, although at the time she is pregnant. Alone she makes a home for herself and her two children. Later she meets and falls in love with Toksvold, a lawyer. They are about to marry when she perceives the animosity of the children toward him. She sacrifices her happiness for theirs and Toksvold and *Ida Elizabeth* part.

*Ida Elizabeth*’s first misstep is in her youthful involvement with a weakling, and this was brought about because of negligent parental protection. They are married as the best way out of the situation. Her tragedy is in having a mate whom one must humor as a child and yet present him to the world and to himself as a man. It is heightened by the death of Solvi and in seeing the father’s weaknesses generated in the children. Bearing the brunt of the responsibilities ensuing from their marriage, *Ida Elizabeth* treads wearily but with stoic perseverance the path of redemption. She has not, unfortunately, the consolation that religion alone can give. Her actions are governed by the instinctive knowledge that the home must remain intact and that
the responsibility lies with the strong. Frithjof's infidelity proves no added tragedy, but rather, opens the way for a new life. The tragedy is culminated by Ida Elizabeth's meeting a man whom she is able to love. Unfortunately, the children's antagonism stand in her way. The conflict is one of mother love versus adult love.

Ida Elizabeth's growth through her union with Frithjof prepares her for the necessary strength to relinquish Toksvold's love, as she forsees the inevitable conflicts which would of necessity arise. In choosing between Toksvold and her children there lies the path of all their salvation. Her redemption is achieved by surrendering her love as a woman to her love as a mother. The children and Ida Elizabeth are bound to each other. Toksvold can make his way alone, or with Kari, who has long loved him. The children's need is greater and in choosing them Ida Elizabeth fully redeems her youthful lapse.

The Faithful Wife concerns the marriage of Nathalie and Sigurd, which is apparently happy. To Nathalie's surprise Sigurd asks for a divorce that he might marry Anne Gaarder who is about to have a child by him. He is wrong, however, in his belief that Anne will marry him, even though she insists that her faith makes this impossible. Anne dies in childbirth.
Nathalie becomes her old suitor's mistress in an effort to forget Sigurd and to fulfill the need of being necessary to someone. The relationship, however, proves futile, and both parties are conscious of its emptiness. Nathalie is about to break it off when Sverre is killed.

Sigurd and Nathalie meet. Each has a child. Sigurd has little Anne and Nathalie has Knut, a fair child of a friend of hers who has died. In their common problem of providing a natural home for the children they are remarried and come together once more.

This is a story of a marriage built on an unnatural foundation wherein children are eliminated because of supposed economic necessity, and the consequences accruing when man loses his position as head of the household. The quasi-tragedy results in Sigurd's mesalliance with Anne Gaarder, who is about to give him that which his marriage lacked and which he has long desired, namely, a child. The pain and suffering which both Nathalie and Sigurd endure because of the latter's transgression result in their both gaining a greater appreciation and understanding of the needs of man and of the meaning of marriage. They are reunited, not as the modern taste for romance dictates, but because each perceives that together they can salvage much in their lives. Their love perhaps will not glow as brightly as before, but warmth and good may still be felt and the salvation of the two children lies
in their reunion. With the rebirth of their marriage, life can take on a deeper meaning; the divine aspect of love is realized when that desire to be necessary to another is satisfied and redemption lies at hand.

The tragic element is too slight in both Images in a Mirror, and Madame Dorthea to be considered. In fact, Young characterizes the former as a novel of a happy marriage and one staying happy for more than two hundred pages.

In Images in a Mirror Uni and Krisian are happily married. Marital responsibilities and childbearing break Uni’s health and she goes away from the family cares to regain it. She meets Vegard, who is much attracted to her, and a mild flirtation begins. He, however, is serious. Nevertheless, nothing comes of it, for Uni realizes that the greatest role is that of being a mother, and that regeneration is possible only through one’s children.

It is true that Uni’s toying with the temptation of being in love again might have resulted in tragedy, but it does not. Aristotle would have condemned this as the weakest form of tragedy, for here is a deed about to be acted, with the persons known, and then the deed is not perpetuated.

Madame Dorthea is merely concerned with the problems that a woman encounters when she loses her husband. It

lacks the element of conflict. Some critics characterize it as incomplete and assume that world peace will bring a sequel.

Both Sigrid Undset's medieval and modern works have a lesson in them. This is the triumph of failure, which proceeds logically from the spiritualizing effects of Catholicism. Her conviction is that spiritual salvation and material success are not necessarily incompatible, but merely that salvation is immeasurably more important and interesting from either an artistic or spiritual standpoint. Our interest in Kristin, Olav, and Paul is greater than in Nathalie and Uni. This is because their struggle has a spiritual significance which is lacking in the others.

Christianity is seen by Sigrid Undset as a means of regenerating society in accordance with the highest ranges of man's nature, and not alone as an individual spiritual experience. Her supernatural motives are as real and vivid as the erotic motives or any other concern of man. These studies of sin, passion, and rebellion provide a catharsis of emotions which have a far reaching social significance.

40 Evans, op. cit., 103-04.

41 Monroe, op. cit., 254-55.
Sigrid Undset's realistic treatment of sin is encouraging, for its portrayal is shown as a deliberate turning away from God. Man, himself, chooses between good and evil, with full knowledge of his responsibility for the evil done or rejected. Description of sin is not an end in itself. Its emphasis falls on man's suffering and God's redemptive grace by which man's full stature is attained. 42

Sigrid Undset's realization of the fundamental malice of sin cannot help but make for a great theme, which, followed by repentance and retribution, make the theme inherently greater. The novels, themselves, testify their adherence to the first criterion established. Sin is recognized as sin in the medieval novels. It is recognized in its higher sense as a loss of God's friendship. In the modern novels it is recognized in its minimum sense as an element of confusion, discord and the basis of conflict. Sin is presented in both medieval and modern novels completely, in that it includes the reaction within the agent himself, the miseries that ensue, and the way each erring soul seeks to redeem himself.

42 Ibid., 56.
CHAPTER III

THE ANALYSIS OF EROTICISM

Sigrid Undset's books, as stated in Chapter One, have aroused a certain amount of controversy because of her treatment of sexual passion. "And there are, it must be admitted, few writers who abound more in scenes of sexual passion, or who deal with them more realistically."¹

Mrs. Undset's treatment of sex... is marked by fearlessness and responsibility. Modern novelists who have made the sex urge an end in itself, or who by the meretriciousness of their art have courted popularity, are inclined to look askance at Mrs. Undset's realism.²

A writer like Sigrid Undset, aware of the good in this world and also that the world has lost its conscience, sees that drastic measures must be taken to shock the world into the meaning of sin and the need of salvation. The gentiles, the modern pagans whose society has collapsed, are the necessary raison de etre of her literary endeavors.³

Since the Catholic attitude on the subject of sex requires expression, Catholics are most fortunate to have

¹ Maynard, op. cit., 21.
² Monroe, op. cit., 61.
³ Connolly, op. cit., 634.
a writer of such dimensions as Sigrid Undset. She has given us magnificent delineations of characters sinning in human weakness, but chastened and saved and brought to sublime heights of virtue through the influence of their Catholic faith. Kristin, morally as feeble and erring as Madame Bovary, Lady Chatterley, and Kit Branden, is more inspiring because she has realized the innate nobility of her nature through repentance and patient suffering. Sigrid Undset's characters find in their early transgressions the ground for deep humility and charity. 4

All of Sigrid Undset's great works, particularly those belonging to her maturity, have in common the following point. They are attempts to deal with the psychological effects of sin and in particular with those of sexual sin. 5 This is a delicate subject and although its portrayal may in no way violate good art it may still arouse controversy because of its very nature.

On the subject matter of sexual sin it is very necessary to restore the confidence of some Catholics who veer toward squeamishness. As impurity is the most common of all sins and has such devastating social conse-

4 Udell, op. cit., 115.
quences, it is literature's most fruitful theme. The problem is that material of this sort too easily arouses man's passions and particularly those of the young, whose moral stamina has not yet been forged. Because Sigrid Undset takes her material from life with man as her subject, she must portray him as sinful and his spiritual nature in conflict with his passions. 6

It is admitted that her books are daring and frankly realistic. However, they are meant for the intellectual, for the person that can perceive the strength and warmth and hope that pulsate through them. They are not meant for the adolescent, or for every family table. The discerning person, aware and willing to acknowledge the unpleasant and sordid incidents in life, will not be shocked, because he will see in her portrayal the sound ethics of Catholicism. Her writing is essentially and truly Catholic, showing the teaching of the Holy Church and depicting the eternal struggle between man's good intentions and his evil passions. These conflicts not only develop belief in the fundamental philosophy of the Church but are worked out and solved in the light of Catholic doctrine. 7

For some readers a defense of Sigrid Undset is unnec-

6 Ibid., 21.

essay. On the other hand there are those readers who are fearful at the vision of sinful humanity. These readers should recall that the depiction of sin as a source of temptation depends on the author's treatment. Undeniably, the modern novel has many cruel and perverted scenes, some beyond any moral defense. Nevertheless, some novels often regarded as obscene because of their gross language, upon close examination show an exceptional moral intention. Readers, shocked by her resolute limning of erotic incidents, will on careful analysis find that there is no catering to the prurient. Any reader seeking passages to stimulate lasciviousness cannot be but sobered and purged by the lessons therein. Sigrid Undset is no literary coward, and with true Catholic wisdom veers away, for the most part, from either the extremes of excessive virtue or the flagrant hedonism of today's fiction.

Sigrid Undset is a stern moralist, in that she shows us how sin entangles itself around the soul, and that often one unretraced false step is man's undoing. In her novels the wicked are not always punished, nor the good rewarded. Her characters, like her readers, are neither

8 Maynard, op. cit., 22.

9 Stanley B. James, "Significance of Sigrid Undset," Irish Monthly 59: (June 1931), 356.
villians nor impeccably virtuous heroes. They are people struggling with their dominant passions.  

Sigrid Undset's treatment of sin simply follows the rules of our first Catechism. Sin is shown as an offense against God. Her characters sin grievously, with full knowledge of the wrong they are doing. Sin is never philosophized out of existence. Kristin knew full well that she and Erlend were seriously offending God in coming together when unmarried, but also her family, as well as the laws of society. She realized the shame and sorrow that would come not only to her, but to all who loved her. The effects of their sin could not be but far reaching, touching both Erlend's and her honour, her father and her mother, and also her first child. Full well does she know that her rebellion has made her an outcast of heaven.

Olav Audunnson, too, sins deeply; first in illicit wedlock, followed by manslaughter, deliberate murder, and adultery. He is very conscious of his offense to God. Sigrid Undset shows how the first sin is but the key to others. So, too, it dawns on Olav, when he is ransacking Steinfinn's chest and clothes for the key, that once one leaves the straight path of honour one is forced to many a crooked road.

10 Maynard, op. cit., 22.
Both Kristin and Olav by possession of their free will had the right to choose whether they would make their peace with God or continue to live in rebellion. Kristin chose the former, but Olav the latter. It was Olav's pride, his lack of humility that would not let him admit of Inguun's betrayal and it stood in the way of his regaining God's grace. Sigrid Undset portrays her characters as all men are— as sinners. They are aware of their sins and consequently their responsibilities. It is not necessary for the characters to recognize their sin as sin; however, unless man's moral sensibilities are blunted it is usual for human nature to do so. Kristin and Olav are both conscious of the wrong they do. On the other hand, while Erlend and Inguun regard their acts as sinful they fail to see these in their deepest significance. This lessens the conflict in the reader's eyes and consequently the interest is not as great.

Sigrid Undset's emphasis is always on right morality wherein the spiritual side of man triumphs over his passions. It is Gustafson's opinion that:

**Sigrid Undset is a moralist, first of all, though she is certainly not by temperament an ascetic. She has a profound, brooding awareness of the domination of the flesh in the average human life, the central place of passion in the average human destiny. To Sigrid Undset the immediate, as well as the**
ultimate, truth about purely human life is the central reality of sex; and in the recognition of this truth she is one with not a few of her contemporaries. Still she does not—as do some modern authors—accept the actual dominance of sex in human life as essentially a blessing, for which man must be grateful, or as a primary constructive fact of human existence, upon which an adequate positive philosophy of life may be built. Though sex is to her of central importance, the free natural functioning of sex is not looked upon by her as an unmixed blessing. It is, rather, simply a fundamental condition of human existence which has in it much of evil, simultaneously with some good—and man never attains the complete, the good life by means of it alone. Hers is, in the last analysis, a severe, a high morality; between the flesh and the spirit there exists a constant, intensive strife—and the spirit must eventually triumph over the flesh if man is to be good. This is the dominant theme of Sigrid Undset’s two greatest works, the historical novels, Kristin Lavransdatter (1920-1922) and The Master of Hestviken (1925-1927), as well as her novels dealing with contemporary life which have appeared after The Master of Hestviken; and the theme is more or less explicit in the long series of early stories which came from her pen before the composition of Kristin Lavransdatter.11

Somewhat of an exception to this type of theme is that of Gunnar’s Daughter (1909). While all the ensuing acts stem from Ljot’s taking Vigdis, its emphasis is on the pagan conception of revenge. In the violence of its actions it is decidedly pagan. The moral codes and the social sanctions are depicted and the characters act

11 Gustafson, op. cit., 286-87.
accordingly. Wrong is judged by these standards alone, rather than as an offense against God. The seduction of Vigdis\textsuperscript{12} is less movingly portrayed than it would be in today's newspaper, and as such has little if any reaction for the reader.

Never does Sigrid Undset seek to set aside the central validity of love, even passionate love in human life. Passion, she insists must not be denied. It should, however, be subordinated to certain higher laws of being, these of the race and the family. Kristin illustrates this when she refuses to abide with Erlend at Haugen because she feels her children need her. Ida Elizabeth renounces her love for Toksvold for the same reason. The position is reversed in \textit{The Faithful Wife} when Nathalie and Sigurd reunite because of their children. In \textit{Images in a Mirror} Uni and Kristian, too, feel that their children are the main reason for existence.

Sigrid Undset never accepts eroticism as an end in itself, nor its vivid portrayal as an end in art. Her emphasis is on the right use of sex and the acceptance of responsibility as a sign of man's maturity, rather than on the avoidance of passionate irregularities. The

workmen's talk of their commerce with women is never a temptation to Olav, for their acts are those of men without responsibilities. Little comment is made on Nathalie's and Sigurd's cohabitation before their marriage in The Faithful Wife. Sigrid Undset emphasizes rather the futility of making the sexual relationship all of life. 13

In her early exploration of the erotic impulse in man she attempted to discover the real values of life and the relationship between sense and spirit. She dismissed sense in the pleasurable meaning as unworthy of man. As a fulfillment of self it has some place in man's life. However, if this is to be its sole aim it defeats itself, for its true end is as a means of reaching God through the contemplation of religious ideas. 14

Although Eirik in The Master of Hestviken had no lustful premeditated intention of taking Eldrid, but did so in despair, he discovers his love for her and a feeling that she was destined for him.

Of the women he had possessed, she was the first he loved-- and the first who had desired him and not a penny in reward. And then-- to ride away from her one day and leave her alone, deserted and in want, that he could never bring

13 Monroe, op. cit., 47.
14 Ibid., 55.
himself to do. And in the midst of his misfortune it dawned upon him-- this was not the end. He had been drawn down into evil before, but he had been saved, his feet had been set on the firm rock and he had been made a freer man than before. And He who had saved him then, would save him again. From his destiny no man can fly, but above his destiny is God. And so in what had befallen him it could not have been designed that Leman should strike her beak into his heart and drink him dry and empty, but he began to think he might be called to set free Leman from her semblance. 15

Because she is a realist, frankly concerned with what is central in human experience, and perceives that the physical relationship shows God's love for man, this particular aspect of life is of interest to Sigrid Undset. Her instinct for social solidarity is too great to experiment with love as an end in itself. Her female characters explore the erotic thoroughly; but even unguided by religion or morality they perceive some purpose other than individual desire. Sigrid Undset is deeply sympathetic but never sentimental in her regard for these women, recognizing a woman's desire to be necessary to another's happiness, to have her life caught up and used completely. This desire is the nearest man comes to knowing Divine Love. If the chance to make this sacrifice does not come, 15

Undset, The Master of Hestviken, IV, 236-67
a woman may try false avenues for fulfillment. She may think she is in love and deceive herself as Jenny with Helge Gram. She may try casual affairs as Nathalie attempted with Sverre Reistad, or she may marry and repent as Ida Elizabeth. However, eventually she sees that the marriage relationship, satisfying or otherwise, has responsibilities that cannot be shed and sets an indelible mark on the parties concerned. 16

Sigrid Undset's characters learn that sex, to have meaning, must have the race in view, otherwise it is a barren pleasure based on pride and ending in boredom. Any other view proves unflattering to their ego. Only through the full acceptance of the responsibilities involved can the marriage relationship prove satisfying. 17 This Erlend learns in his relationships with Sunniva 18 and also with Eline Ormesdatter. 19

Sigrid Undset rejects eroticism as unworthy of man when it places its emphasis on pleasure. She admits the place that sex plays in the fulfillment of self but points out that its real basis is as a means of reaching God.

16 Monroe, op. cit., 60-61.
17 Ibid., 61.
18 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, II, 565.
19 Ibid., I, 205.
In *The Faithful Wife* Nathalie accepts Sverre as a lover because of her need to be loved. As a lover he is very satisfactory but she cannot deceive herself into thinking that she loves him.

It is through Kristin's relationship with Erlend that she comes to understand the meaning of Divine Love. Through the realization that, despite all her transgressions, she is still loved very deeply by her father, Kristin is brought to a greater comprehension of God's love for His children and His Infinite mercy when they have offended Him. Olav, also, is constantly aware of God and longs for His love even more than Kristin does. Sin, unconfessed, stands in his way, effectually shadowing the illuminating effects of redemption.

Upon analysis the following illicit acts in *Kristin Lavransdatter* appear dramatic. That they are an occasion of sin is dubious. The emphasis falls not on the act itself but on the consequences. The first incident that comes to mind is Bentein's intended rape of Kristin. This she happily averted but her first close contact with man's carnal nature tormented her innocent mind.

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Nevertheless, by this experience Kristin perceived the sinfulness of mankind and the darkness of men's souls when attached to their fleshly lusts. Sin in this incident is recognized not only as a source of conflict but also as sin.

Kristin's first yielding to Erlend lacks that passionate erotic longing and glamourization so characteristic of modern literature. It is simply told-- one brief line, and immediately the significance of the act is seen and its unhappiness.

Kristin shook-- it must be because her heart beat so, she thought-- her hands were cold and clammy. As he kissed her vehemently she weakly tried to push him from her. Erlend lifted his face a moment-- she thought of a man who had been given food at the convent one day-- he had kissed the bread they gave him. She sank back upon the hay. ... She sat upright when Erlend lifted his head from her arms. He raised himself suddenly upon his elbow:

"Look not so-- Kristin!"

His voice sent a new, wild pang into Kristin's soul-- he was not glad-- he was unhappy too!  

As brief as this is each following illicit coming together. The seduction of Margret, Erlend's daughter, is recounted with little emotion and the wretchedness of Margret, Erlend, Kristin, and Haakon Eindridesson portrays

22 Ibid., I, 129.
23 Ibid., I, 545-59.
the horror of this act. Erlend feels it keenly because he had committed the same sin against the mother. Kristin recalls the bitterness she brought to her father. Margret, however, is fearful of her father's wrath, and not of the misfortune befallen Haakon. Despite his dismembered and crippled body, Haakon is sorry for the part he played in seducing a young maid, and is willing to hush up the matter, and does not bring suit against Erlend for the injuries inflicted upon him.

Erlend's adultery with Lady Sunniva develops because of his trifling nature and because Kristin drove him to it with her scorn. One senses Erlend's repugnance for his act and his remorse. Its portrayal emphasizes how revolting sin can be even to the evil doer at the time of his act. Such depiction cannot prove to be a temptation to any reader.

Gaute's carrying off of Jolfrid is merely recounted and Gaute is none too happy that he behaved without honour.

In The Master of Hestviken Olav and Inguun's coming together is recounted in one sentence. "And Olav and Inguun flew to each other's arms, as though they had escaped a great danger."25 Certainly this portrayal lacks

24 Ibid., II, 564-71
vividness. Olav is secretly humiliated by his act. He perceives that: "For a boat and a horse and a bride a man should pay the right price before he took and used them-- unless he had great need." 26 He regards himself without honour. Their subsequent coming together was governed by Inguun's insistence. Olav's good resolutions to avoid further temptation are cast aside because of Inguun's stand that he is avoiding her. He is humiliated, however, that she has rejected the sacrifice he had wished to offer her. 27

Inguun's seduction by Teit was first done against her will. We learn of this when he pleads with her to marry him. Inguun cannot plead the same excuse when, as was her usual custom, she left the door unlocked and he came again to her. Her yielding in this instance resulted from her lack of understanding. She felt that her shame would be greater if she yielded not to him who had already possessed her. 28 Her weak mind does not measure the act in its true light until the next day. Then she perceives herself as an adulteress in the sight of God.

Olav's adultery with Torhild 29 is merely recounted

26 Ibid., I, 82.
27 Ibid., I, 90.
28 Ibid., II, 248.
29 Ibid., II, 256.
in retrospect and without pleasure. The sorrow that it brings to all concerned parties is apparent to every reader. Olav sorrows because of his infidelity to Inguun; likewise, because of the position in which he had placed Torhild, who was upright and scrupulous in her dealings and had served him well. Inguun sorrows because she is not able to be a good strong wife to Olav and to bear him strong sons. Eirik sorrows because he fears his father will send them away and take Torhild instead.

Eirik's taking of Eldrid, done in his hour of despair, ends in his perceiving his love for her, and in believing that he was called by God to save her soul. And so they are married.

Sigrid Undset always shows that sin brings no joy to anyone; moreover, it leaves an indelible mark on one's soul. Of all the parties concerned in the various related illicit acts only Jolfrid and Torhild perceive neither shame nor repentance. In Jolfrid there is the determination to win Gaute, a poor but desirable man. In Torhild there is the knowledge that she has been some comfort to her Master coupled with the joy of having a child by the man she loved. Inguun does not recognize her first illicit acts with Olav as sin. She has convinced herself that

30 Ibid., IV, 235.
their childhood betrothal gives them privileges of the marriage state. Her adultery with Teit she regards as sinful.

Save in the three stated incidents Sigrid Undset always shows her characters aware of the sinful nature of their acts and conscious of the retribution they must make to God. The reader is, nevertheless, aware of this sinfulness because of the attitudes of the other characters toward the illicit act. In the novels in general the event is seldom explicitly detailed. Moreover, the element of remorse invariably follows the portrayal of sin and is generally coupled with retribution.

Discussions have at times appeared regarding the justification of portraying childbirth and other such scenes where due reticence is commendable. One must not fall into the error of mistaking the conventions built up as safeguards to morality as morality itself. For an adult, childbirth could hardly be a source of temptation. Any such scenes as are found in Kristin Lavransdatter and Gunnar's Daughter have all the necessary artistic requisites. Such scenes frankly depicting childbirth and

31 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, 336-42.
32 Undset, Gunnar's Daughter, 70-71.
33 Udell, op. cit., 116.
seduction are not the raw and meaningless affairs of the sur-realists. There is no dwelling on the erotic experience, nor the morbid recital of purely physical details of childbirth. Emphasis is never on man's animality, but on his humanity and his drama is conceived in epic proportions. Whatever deeds Sigrid Undset's characters perform they never lose sight of the supreme dignity of their human nature and even in sin preserves its sacredness. 34 Her descriptions are neither orgiastic nor purposeless, but imaginative and redemptive, and have highly significant overtones. 35 Those sensitive souls who do not care for literature of this sort should be warned of the profusion of seduction scenes and frank portrayal of childbirth. However, to leave Sigrid Undset unread on these grounds is to miss perhaps the greatest Catholic fiction ever produced. 36

While admiring the greatness of Sigrid Undset, it must be admitted that occasionally her writings induce not approval of, but preoccupation with the flesh. She comes very close at times to the very emotional state that she desires to cure, and despite her spiritual affirmations

34 Ibid., 115-116.
36 Maynard, op. cit., 22.
the morals of decadence cling to their portrayal. That is to say that aside from considerations of good taste, some passages treating of seduction and physical suffering in or out of their context, are pathologically exaggerated, hypertrophied and almost sadistic in their brutality. Undeniably, certain people, the "infantile types" or the abnormally sexually preoccupied, will read these books for these passages alone. Her motives will escape them entirely, as will the relation of the scene to the pattern as a whole. In choosing to analyze the more powerful emotions of men and the psychological effects of sin on them Sigrid Undset has a dangerous but awesome task. She is in agreement with Newman. 'Such is man; put him aside, keep him before you; but whatever you do, do not take him for something more divine and sacred, for man regenerate.' "And be it said to her credit that only a few times in her whole production has her material wiggled out of control, only a few times have unnecessary orgiastic details obscured or distorted the determined motif of her work."

37 Connolly, op. cit., 635.
38 Evans, op. cit., 104.
39 Ibid., 105.
Two scenes in The Master of Hestviken are perhaps marred through the violation of the sense of probability and not in their graphic limning. The depiction of the woman bearing Inguun's likeness to lure Olav into sin and of Eirik's tormenting desire and consequent attack on Bothild appear out of place in the context. Their inclusion is an error of artistic judgment on Sigrid Undset's part. That they would prove a temptation to any, save possibly an adolescent, is extremely doubtful. In regard to the medieval novels it can only be affirmed that Sigrid Undset fully abides by the rules set up in the first chapter.

For the benefit of the English readers of her novels a few words on extra-marital relations as viewed by the Scandinavians would not be amiss. Such influences are more apparent in Sigrid Undset's modern works than in her medieval works. The reason lies probably in the age depicted, for the modern stories are dominated by Protestant freedom and liberalism, while the medieval stories emphasize Catholic Absolutism.

E. Gustav Johnson of North Park College, Chicago, admits that co-habitation before marriage is not frowned

41 Ibid., IV, 39-54.
upon in the same manner among the Germans and Scandinavians as it is here in America. In Norway, one reason is the scarcity of men because of their emigrating to other countries and the reverse number of female residents. This is especially true in the rural and isolated sections of the country. Thus, it is not unusual for a dairymaid or a serving maid in order to prevent frustration of her maternal instincts to form a temporary alliance with her employer or one of the farm hands for the express purpose of having a child.

Then, too, at least up to the 19th century, it was common for farm hands of both sexes to have a common sleeping room. Frequently these conditions led to loose living. While this condition has been remedied it may still exist in some isolated rural districts today.

Economic conditions today make it difficult for a couple to set up a home and frequently "marriages of conscience" are tried wherein "the advocates of this view hold marriage vows as a private matter and refute the interference of society therein." Such was Martha Helman's relationship in The Wild Orchid. With these prevailing

43 Ibid.
customs it is only natural that a certain tolerance be taken, and judgment be suspended in regard to the depiction of such incidents.

Scandinavian rural customs also allowed almost complete marital relationship between engaged couples. Little social danger was involved because any breach of promise was regarded as seriously as the desertion of a married mate. Consequently, it was natural for the rural landlady to give both Paul and Lucy the same bed-room for she regarded them as engaged. The fiancée of Madame Dorthea's brother came to live with him before her marriage. For this act Madame Elizabeth was severely criticized as such country customs were going out of vogue. That the custom still existed was evidenced by Madame Elizabeth's stand against Pastor Struwe.

Possible reasons for the delaying of the marriage ceremony may be attributed to the climate which made it difficult for people to journey to the wedding. Another likely reason may be the custom of the guests to bring some gift of food, which was naturally more abundant at certain times of the year.


There exists also the ancient custom of "Night Courtship," or "Saturday Courtship," wherein a young woman entertained her fiancé in her bed-room. Fully dressed they slept that might on the same bed and theoretically their conduct accorded with all due propriety. This accounts for Simon's mother's vexation at Kristin's too apparent coolness when Simon wished to lie down and talk with her awhile.

In the 18th century it was common particularly for men of the upper classes and to some degree of the middle classes to keep mistresses and to seduce their serving maids. It was not until 1815 that a noticeable change occurred in the upper classes' attitude. This was owing in part to the frugality imposed upon them by the economic collapse, to the religious revival, and in particular to the final emergence of an independent bourgeois culture. Thus, the alliance between the Captain and his housekeeper in Madame Dorthea can be viewed in the light of their day. In this instance, neither of the parties attached too much importance to their transgressions; and Marie certainly seemed content to let the matter stand, and apparently had no hope that the Captain and she would

47 Hoode, op. cit., 756-57.
48 Ibid., 754-55.
marry. Lucy in The Wild Orchid must have viewed herself in the same light, for Paul was ever conscious that Lucy never really believed that he would marry her.

In her modern series Sigrid Undset does not treat specifically of sin as a spiritual conflict. She emphasizes, rather, the present discords of society, in particular the problem of marriage and its place in the social and spiritual scheme of the world. Sin in its true relationship is not under scored in her contemporary works. This is accounted for by the modern world's tendency to push responsibility and sin into the background; and to consider all of man's conflicts as a result of social and economic flaws. Thus, her modern characters perceive sin in its minimum sense. Moral wrongs are transgressions against society and not against God. Their conflicts assume neither the intensity nor the tragic proportion which they have in her earlier novels because wrong resolves itself into a matter of personal integrity. Liaisons appear to be the accepted order of the day. Despite their acceptance, Sigrid Undset points out the resulting responsibilities that inevitably follow whenever men violate the law of God, society, or nature.

With the exception of The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush the conflicts pictured in her modern novels are of a social nature. They are problems arising in present day
society, rather than clashes between man's riotous passions and his desire to abide by the laws of God. This shifting of attention to the specific modern problems of today can only be portrayed with the accent on man's erotic behaviour for such is the 20th century drift.

In these novels, Ida Elizabeth, The Faithful Wife, and Madame Dorthea, Sigrid Undset leaves religion aside as an influential factor. She points out that if man is to solve his problems, these solutions must adhere to basic morality which is inherent in all men. Her point is that "morals are older than religion and that a moral conception of life is simply the rational way of looking at things."\textsuperscript{49}

Some readers become absorbed in Paul's pre-marital episodes and lose sight of the real issues in The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush. The enduring ties and the grave responsibilities of marriage to which Paul clings most faithfully are overlooked. These glorious principles on which the Church has taken a dogmatic stand and by her determined adherence to which she lost England are seemingly underestimated here. Thus, we have such an eminent critic as Blanche Mary Kelly making the following comment. "Holiness is the mark of the Church and it does not seem

\textsuperscript{49} Monroe, \textit{op. cit.}, 72.
too much to ask a Catholic novelist that she shall show forth the sacraments as a means of grace.\textsuperscript{50} This rebuke appears unwarranted in the light of the subsequent events related in the novel. With Paul's conversion he perceives marriage as a binding tie even though both parties find they are unsuitable to each other. He realizes the necessity that children have for a united home. He understands how every man, shallow, weak, or sinful, is dear to God, simply because he was created by Him. Miss Kelly, herself, sees that Paul is governed by Catholic teaching in his later acts for she softens her criticism by admitting that in the end Sigrid Undset does show Paul influenced by his faith.

Such criticism as this frightens the over scrupulous reader. There is no intention to minimize the author's tendency toward graphic portrayal, nevertheless, there is no need to spotlight isolated incidents to the detriment of the entire work.

On examining \textit{The Wild Orchid} the reader finds that Lucy has little moral stamina and views her cohabitation only as it might be mirrored in other's eyes, in particular, those in a higher social position than herself. Her moral sense, one sees, is blunted. She shrinks from

\textsuperscript{50} Kelly, "Review," \textit{The Catholic World} 136: (Oct. 1932), 114-115.
the Gotaas' scorn, yet when none is forthcoming condemns these simple people for their apparent lack of moral perception. Paul, on the contrary, senses that his and Lucy's relationship is wrong from a social standpoint. He is quite aware of the view his world would take in regard to their mesalliance and is earnest in his desire to safeguard Lucy from this stigma. Also, he instinctively senses that, by making Lucy his mistress, despite his strong intention to marry her in a better day, Lucy has no great faith that he will, and thus barriers to a lasting alliance grow stronger with the passing of time.

There is one scene which could have been omitted in The Wild Orchid. This is Paul's insistence on Lucy's bathing nude with him. From an aesthetic point of view it was a mistake, an error of judgment similar to an author's imperfect sense of timing when he continues to narrate although the story is ended. It is an incident that easily could have been omitted without detracting from the story. Its inclusion adds nothing. It merely acknowledges that Sigrid Undset, too, can be found wanting and on occasion in poor taste.

52 Ibid., 150.
53 Ibid., 192-195.
Its sequel The Burning Bush treats mostly of the preservation of marriage for the sake of the children when love is non-existent. This is the stand which the Catholic Church takes. It is the primary end of marriage to safeguard the children. A temporary association results in harm to the children and therefore to the race. A permanent monogamous union is necessary because the human child depends entirely on its parents for its physical development for many years and for its intellectual and moral development for a greater number of years. The child also needs the love of both parents to make him a happy well adjusted individual. It was this latter need which prompted Paul to insist on Bjorg's returning to her rightful position as mother of his children when he no longer loved her.

The question of temptation looms up momentarily when Lucy re-enters Paul's life and wishes to resume her previous relationship. 54 Paul, as a Catholic, knows that this cannot be; his responsibilities are to God, his wife, and his children. Life does hold similar temptations, but that any reader can find Paul's behavior other than exemplary is dubious. These scenes were portrayed with a certain poignancy which one attaches to

"might have been" episodes of life. Sin does not enter at all.

Nevertheless, there will be many who will either condemn these two books or hesitate to recommend them indiscriminantly because of their spotted passages and early erotic phases. Sigrid Undset is not at one with those Catholic critics who believe in portraying sex and passion with the utmost reticence. This is not to imply that reticence, accepted proprieties, and normal conventions are thrown aside in her writings, or that these are diseased. Never does she depict evil for the sake of evil; it is always a sin and as such must be condemned. Nevertheless, these few scattered spots make the conscientious reviewer or reader add a reservation to his praise. For the most part these passages are unnecessary, either for the continuity of the plot, its integration, its exposition of character or general interest.

Sin as a source of conflict is not the thesis of Ida Elizabeth. The novel is concerned with the problem arising out of a marriage wherein the woman is the mainstay of the family.

It must be admitted with Walsh that there are occasions in Ida Elizabeth when Sigrid Undset does display a

lack of reticence. In particular, the love scene wherein we see Ida Elizabeth's physical desire for Toksvold. This scene is in poor taste and has no artistic necessity to plead for its grossness. It is not to be excused by saying that the author merely represents life as it is, for art should select and sublimate the significant aspects of reality rather than to photograph them. That this scene could be an occasion of sin, however is doubtful.

The Faithful Wife treats essentially of the spiritual consequences and moral meaning of a single transgression. Sigurd realizes his infidelity to Nathalie in his affair with Anne Randine. He also perceives his responsibility to Anne and the child she bears. Neither he nor Nathalie are religious. Sigurd's transgression is viewed more in the light of the suffering which his lapse has given the two women he loves.

Nathalie senses that her relationship with Sverre Reistad is wrong because it is a violation of self and means a loss of caste in her own eyes. It was not love that moved her to offer herself, but the desire to fill the void which Sigurd's departure left. All mankind

58 Ibid., 241-42.
feels this need to be of value to someone. Her effort to be used completely is a dismal affair in her eyes and consequently in the reader's. It would prove more a source of prevention than a temptation were one contem­plating the same desperate act.

Sigurd's conception of his unfaithfulness is greater than Nathalie's. This is possibly through some permeation of Anne Randine's faith on his consciousness.

The question of sin enters mildly in Images in a Mirror when Uni toys with the idea of falling in love with Dr. Luders. Catholics who admire stories running to "sweetness and light" can rejoice that Uni has chosen rightly. Traversi feels that it illustrates the additional dimension which Catholic philosophy gives to the artist. 59 While it is possible that the author's belief has penetrated to the frame of the story, nevertheless, the dominating characters are not Catholics, and neither God nor religion influences the characters in their final decision on the permanence of marriage. Amatory desire plays no part in this novel.

One is certainly confronted by sin with a capital "S" in Madame Dorthea. There are intimations of incest and murder. Abortion, youthful passion, and attempted rape.

59 D. A. Traversi, "Images in a Mirror," Tablet 172: (Sept. 13, 1938), 368.
all pass before our eyes. There is a feeling that in this novel Sigrid Undset has over emphasize the erotic design in man. Thaddeus is of the opinion that here Sigrid Undset's Catholic philosophy of life failed to be one with the mental attitude of the Church in depicting sins against the Sixth Commandment. 60 Monroe acknowledges that here the erotic impulse is too vividly depicted. However, she believes that the author's portrayal has been done with an intelligent purpose in mind; namely, an attempt to show that a harmonious blending of reason and instinct would lessen the confusion which exists in a woman's sex life if there were less emphasis on thwarting this instinct. While an element of truth may exist in the last conclusion one suspects that the average reader has no such reflections. The reason lies, perhaps in ourselves, that we too have lost sight of the basic realities of life.

The repugnance of the abortion scene 62 is inherent in its very subject matter. That it could produce any emotion other than disgust is improbable. With the exception of the scene of youthful passion between Tora and Wilhelm 63

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60 Thaddeus, op. cit., 117.
61 Monroe, op. cit., 72.
62 Undset, Madame Dorthea, 249-51.
63 Ibid., 225.
one cannot say that life is pictured too vividly, and this scene is more in poor taste than an occasion of sin for the adult reader.

The account of Dorthea's feelings in regard to her first marriage and her later one is related with a frankness which is foreign to the American mind. There are passages where it would have been best if the author had remained silent. One cannot help but agree with Maritain that: "The more deeply the modern novel probes human misery, the more does it require superhuman virtues in the novelist." 64

It is difficult to determine whether or not a scene is too vividly portrayed. What one reader will object to another will discount. A passage proving vivid and disturbing to one may leave another unmoved. It all revolves on the question of responsiveness and combustibility of one's imagination. Maynard's opinion in regard to Catholic squeamishness is: "Fundamentally it is a desire to serve God, but it is mixed with undue timidity and perhaps some Jansenism. It is very hard to know just where to draw the line in these matters. In the case of Sigrid Undset I don't think it is hard to draw the line

64 Maritain, op. cit., 245, n. 154.
at all; she is a great moralist, as well as a great artist. (I refer to her medieval romances."

It should be remembered that one cannot apply the metaphysical principle of **bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defectu** to moral and cultural matters without distinction and reservations. It may happen that a number of scenes in a book from an aesthetic and religious point of view would violate the standards of good art. These do not prevent the book from being a great work. However, it must be noted that these do not necessarily make it an objectionable book. To concentrate on the shocking passages is to miss the effective and motivating force behind the book and the operative virtue in the work. 66

In conclusion condemnation of Sigrid Undset's too vivid representation of sense experience in her novels is not justified when one considers that her brilliant evocation of the life of the senses exists as a medium of truth, and always has intermingled with it motives of suffering. It is never for the sake of sensuality. The average mind understands spiritual realities through the

66 Gardiner, op. cit., 186.
senses. As such Sigrid Undset has portrayed life. Her ability to use the materials of her craft in a manner that both the material and spiritual aspects of life are visible is a great triumph for Catholic writing.

67 Monroe, op. cit., 87.
CHAPTER IV

THE TREATMENT OF MARRIAGE

Marriage and its place in the social and spiritual scheme of the world is one of Sigrid Undset's major concerns.\(^1\) The main thesis in her books is the solidarity of the race by means of the family. This is illustrated in both her medieval and modern novels. It is more noticeable in the former than in the latter. The reason lies in the age depicted. For medieval society had its roots in the race and the family. Relationships were established for the purpose of gaining powerful kin. Marriages were contracted with a view of bringing neighboring families closer, with a consequent gain in fortune, in land, and in strength.\(^2\) Although this aspect of marriage was not the main consideration in Kristin Lavransdatter, the author gives the adjacency of the Darre's land as one of the reasons that Lavrans chose Simon as Kristin's husband. Thus: "Father has said so often, he would never force us, his daughters," said Kristin. "The chief thing is that our lands and Simon's lie so fitly together. But I trow father would not that I should miss

\(^1\) Monroe, op. cit., 54.

\(^2\) Ibid., 42.
all my gladness in this world for the sake of that."  

In The Master of Hestviken this aspect is also emphasized. This was the objection raised by Inguun's kinsmen to her marriage to Olav. He lacked powerful kin. Kolbein tells him.  

...It is true, Olav that we know there was once talk between your father and our brother that you should marry one of his daughters. And you must not think we do aught but esteem your good will in desiring to order this matter so that we might all have been well pleased. But the thing is whether your kinsmen would now be so set upon this marriage of our niece to you that they would consent to your offer. But what weighs most is that we now have a greater need to ally ourselves by marriage with men who have power and powerful kinsfolk, and these you have not. We must now seek support rather than riches—-we look to you to acknowledge this, since you have shown by your offer that you have foresight far beyond your age. ...  

The theme of marriage in Sigrid Undset's books holds equal place with that of religion. The reason lies in the closely interrelated life of the two institutions. It was Christianity in medieval times that gave women their greatest honour and security. True, her legal rights were not so great. However, as a mother and a housewife, her importance was never contested. Today,  

3 Undset, Kristin Lavransdatter, I, 122.  
4 Undset, The Master of Hestviken, I, 103.
however, modern men and women are enslaved by the capitalistic system of competition. Machines and servants can run a home. Children can be trained in schools and by social agencies. Freed from the demands of wifehood and motherhood, a woman can work beside a man. Her rights are viewed as a by-product of capitalism and man's unwillingness to support a home. Her freedoms are merely her enslavements. 

Although Kristin worked with the servants at their menial tasks, compare her complete authority and respect in her home with Ida Elizabeth's constant drudgery and Nathalie's days at the office. Ask yourself which had the greater freedom of life and creativeness.

Normally the family is the consummation of marriage. Sigrid Undset, in depicting a Catholic civilization, instinctively hit upon this fundamental truth. In delineating the importance of the family and the home she has unconsciously given us a Catholic view of history, for the Church regards the integrity of the family, marital fidelity, and the upbringing of children as the really crucial things in a civilization. Apart from any personal taste, her intimate knowledge of medieval society forced her to emphasize the responsibilities of marriage, the

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5 Monroe, op. cit., 60.
home, and the family.\(^6\)

Her medieval novels stress this familial morality. The characters’ concepts of obedience emphasize their feudal character. These concepts appeal eloquently to those seeking a solution for current social maladjustments. In delving into the primeval relationship of the family, emphasizing its natural or revealed protectiveness, Sigrid Undset touches on man’s permanent requirement of the mothers for renewed strength and guidance. It is especially welcome today when the artificial frame of an inorganic economy is disintegrating and men are losing their homes.

While paying tribute to the traditional family idea, Slochower is of the opinion that its over emphasis may have devastating results. In adhering to the family ideal, he points out that the children will prove ill prepared to cope with the problems outside the home, and in this sense condemns Ragnfrid and Lavrans and Kristin as poor parents. This undue dwelling on the family, in his estimation, leads to a lessening of broad social interests; and consequently, when the family group is broken up through

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6 James, "Sigrid Undset Re-discovers the Past," *Ave Maria* 33: (June 13, 1931), 738-39.


8 Ibid., 223.
marriage or death, life holds nothing but emptiness. Ragnfrid, on the death of Lavrans, as well as Kristin on the death of Erlend, have nothing more to live for. This, he feels, proves that the very values championed in the Undset novels lead to frustration. The traditional ideal of the family shows the irreligious consequences of religion, the self extinction that results in seeking the Absolute. This is one of the errors of modern thought, because the welfare of the society depends on the welfare of the family. An enduring background of family life is necessary for the sake of the children and the community. The health of these is based on the family home.

Sigrid Undset's characters know that complete love is spiritual and that through sacrifice it gains its deepest meaning. Marriage to them is an acceptance of responsibility. In Kristin Lavransdatter, Sigrid Undset gives the Church's viewpoint on marriage. It is a permanent union and can be dissolved only by the death of one of the parties. Marriage is shown in its true relationship; namely, the acceptance of all responsibilities which may evolve from it. It is a union whereby two people help

9 Ibid., 46-47.
10 Monroe, op. cit., 84.
each other find their way to God. If one of the parties is weak, the other must be doubly strong for both of them, and upon the latter must rest the burdens and responsibilities accruing from their marriage. Kristin is the stronger character in her marriage. She sees clearly even before her marriage that Erlend would not be one on whom she could confidently lean and could trust so that she and their children would be provided for under his guidance. Rather must she be watchful for him, her children, herself, and for all of their combined fortunes. With the consummation of their union, the responsibilities fall on her and she accepts them. She works as hard as any peasant servant to right Husaby, only to have it pass out of their hands. For this, Kristin is as accountable as Erlend, because it was her inability to forgive and her sharp tongue which drove him into the arms of another woman, consequently, the loss of their patrimony. Kristin realizes that it is her failure to guard her husband against his weaknesses that has wrecked their combined fortunes. Again she gathers fortitude and tries to husband their remaining fortunes at Jorundgaard. In her absorption with these material cares, Kristin fails to see that the deprivation of Erlend's heritage has broken his spirit. No longer will the slender tie of their love
conciliate their differences of thought. Kristin's bitterness wells up; and again she fails Erlend in his direful need of gentleness and wifely understanding. This time he refuses to come back. It is she who must yield in this instance and come to him on his terms. Thus, the disintegration of the family begins. With the realization of this, Kristin makes some effort to solidify her family. She neglects to see that Erlend can grow only by regaining faith in his ability to care for his family and in fulfilling his share of their joint responsibilities. Kristin would not give him this responsibility and return to him as it would leave the children to their own resources. It is her later perception of her failure to Erlend that determines her decision to leave Jorundgaard and let Gaute and his wife make their own happiness together.

In The Master of Hestviken, Olav feels that his union with Inguun before their marriage places the responsibility on him, for he is the stronger, mentally, morally, and physically. It is his duty to see that Inguun finds her way to God, for without him standing by she would surely perish. In his absence, she lets herself be seduced. Deeply hurt by her betrayal, nevertheless, Olav knows that because of their early union their destinies are
bound together and only as such can they make their way to God. Thus, he assumes their joint responsibilities; accepts her son Eirik and in doing so defrauds his daughter, Cecilia, of her rightful portion.

Sigrid Undset always insists on the indissolubility of marriage. Olav's perception of this is most apparent. Even after Inguun's unfaithfulness to him he perceives that he cannot part with her; and that while they live they are bound together. 11

When Olav first sees Inguun after her attempted suicide he knows that the marriage tie is lasting.

The boundless pain and distress in her poor eyes—it was that which drew his soul naked up into the light. Away went all that he had thought and determined—he knew right well that they were great and important things that now dropped from his mind, but he had not the power to hold them fast. He was left with the last, the inmost cruel certainty that she was flesh of his flesh and life of his life, and this could never be otherwise, were she never so shamefully maltreated and broken. The roots of their lives had been intertwined as long as he could remember—and when he saw that death had hold of her with both hands, he felt as though he himself had barely escaped from being torn to pieces. And a longing came over him, so intense that it shook him through and through—to take her in his arms and crush her to him, to hide himself with her. 12


12 Ibid., I, 336.
God made marriage indissoluble. On temporal grounds alone this arrangement promotes individual and social welfare on the whole, despite hard exceptions. The happiness of the married state demands an unwavering insistence on the indissolubility of the bond even to the extent of personal sacrifice. Any breakdown in marriage can usually be found in the deficiencies of the individuals or the unjust structure of society. It was Kristin's unforgiving nature and her usurpation of Erlend's rightful place as head of the household that eventually disrupts their marriage. It was Olav's embitterment with Inguun because she would not let him confess that made him seek solace in another. It was Nathalie's unwillingness to have children until it was too late that led to Sigurd's adultery. It was Frithjof's inability to assume a man's responsibility to his wife and children that made Ida Elizabeth seize the chance to leave him when he engaged in a flirtation. It was Paul's failure to consider Bjorg as a woman and not a child that led to her leaving him. Despite these breakdowns all the characters perceive sooner or later the indestructible quality of the marriage bond.

Modern life has tended to make man less conscious of his responsibilities and lessened his regard for human
rights. Marriage outside the Catholic Church has lost its true relationship. Permanent union is not emphasized; length of marriage is based on continued interests held in common. Responsibility to each other and to the children is not of primary importance; rather, is it the individual's happiness which is emphasized. Dominated by the industrialization of the day, the family unit is in the process of disintegration. The evils are many and the present day solution of socialization, which entrusts the duties of the home improperly in the hands of social agencies, is not the answer. Sigrid Undset, therefore, must portray in her modern novels marriage as it exists today and the problems arising from man's refusal to accept marriage as a Sacrament and a responsibility. She places the responsibility where it rightfully belongs in the home and on the family. She portrays the evils that arise when the home is violated through the demands of modern thinking in pushing the family into the background. Only when man realizes these responsibilities will he find a solution for present day social difficulties related to the family unit. It is this angle which Sigrid Undset attempts to show in her modern novels.

In working out their burdens and discontents each one of Sigrid Undset's characters arrives at the inevitable conclusion, namely the indestructibility of the
Sigrid Undset's modern novels are not quite in the sociological casebook manner of most writers. They are clinical enough, however, and treat of the truisms of marriage, married life, and the home. *Kristin Lavrans datter* and *The Master of Hestviken* are not medieval history but are portrayals of medieval home life. Likewise, Sigrid Undset's modern novels are not modern history but are portrayals of the modern home. Family life is beset by the difficulties of the modern age, for existing convenient divorce laws lie always ready to threaten the modern home. Sigrid Undset regards adultery with distaste. She justifies her aversion by showing the untenability of the divorce laws as opposed to the absolute tenability of the Catholic marriage laws. 13

Paul Selmer in *The Wild Orchid* and *The Burning Bush* portrays the study of the religious sanctity of marriage. His Catholicism makes him see all humanity as souls for whom Christ died. Even Bjorg, despite her shallowness and immaturity, is viewed thus. His problem is to treat her as a human being and of profound value to him because she is of infinite value to God. 14 Paul sees the Catholic

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13 Evans, *op. cit.*, 103.

viewpoint whereby he accepts the burdens and responsibilities which his marriage brings him, knowing that he must not only guide his children's souls, but also his wife's to God.

It is through Paul's religion that he finds the patience to endure his unhappy marriage and the strength to conquer the temptations of unlawful love. This is the only one of the modern novels which externally sets forth Catholic dogma on the subject of matrimony. Paul sees that his marriage is indissoluble. Catholicism shows him his marriage in a new light.

For naturally, now that he had to judge of his life as something for which he must answer to God, one of the first things he discovered was his wife.

He had never denied to himself that he had acted foolishly in becoming involved with Bjorg. But he had tried to make the best of their relations, so far as his understanding went. Regret after the event would be shabby. No more miserable creatures existed than such men who tried to rid themselves of wife and children because it dawned upon them later that their marriage had been a blunder, or who excused their extraconnubial adventures by saying that they didn't know what they were about when they married, and that their wives only cared for them as breadwinners and fathers of their children, so they were not robbing anyone in giving to a mistress what the woman at home cared not a rap for. To be

sure, this was true enough— he too could easily imagine relations with other women which would not lessen Bjorg's share in him in the slightest degree. --But if ever, in his callow youth, he had imagined marriage to be something like the perfect mutual devotion of two personalities, a kind of wordless and profound interdependence, he had been cured of such ideas so effectually that the feeling remained with him. Not two human beings who were merged in one another, but two who charged themselves with duties and tasks in common, that was what it was. And should it turn out that one was not equal to performing one's tasks and duties so well that it was not easy to imagine how they could have been done better— then one had to go on doing one's best. And even if in one's heart one thought the other partner had not succeeded according to one's expectation— that did not excuse one's contributing less than one's full capacity in the circumstances, or actually turning one's back on the whole thing. Regrets for a stupid act were out of place.16

Time and again Paul sees that the marriage bond is indissoluble. When Bjorg returns to him at Sunny's sickness and wishes to take up their old relationship of man and wife, he feels revulsion for her; nevertheless, at the same time he perceives that they are irrevocably bound together.

She was so— so absolutely revolting he thought her, as she clung to him— and at the same time he had never before felt so completely that they were both human beings and that the bond between them was unbreakable— it was an actual fact.17

17 Ibid., 313.
Ida Elizabeth is a study of modern marriage." This is a subject which is very dear to the heart of Sigrid Undset. Here she deliberately ignores all religious aspects of matrimony and concentrates chiefly on the emotions of Ida Elizabeth. In this novel Sigrid Undset shows the sacramental nature of marriage as it reacts upon those who live without reference to God.

The keynote to marriage whether dominated by religion or not is responsibility. Ida Elizabeth perceives that she must be the backbone of the family because her husband cannot be. She therefore acts accordingly. She faces life and views marriage with its ensuing obligations. She is fully cognizant that these duties do not cease even with the separation of the parties concerned. Despite Ida Elizabeth's lack of religious beliefs, her sense of reality points to the only solution. Marriage is an indissoluble contract, and the welfare of the family comes before any individual's happiness. Ida Elizabeth faces the burdens which that relationship brings. Even after her separation from her husband she continues to bear their common debts. She helps pay Frithjof's stay at the Sanatorium. She assists his sis-

ter, Jeja, who is overburdened by the support of Elsa and the child, Bojan. However, odious as family ties can sometimes prove to be, Sigrid Undset does not let her characters sidestep them. She portrays these obligations unrelentlessly, as safeguards of society and the family.

Because of the lack of spiritual influences on Ida Elizabeth, Maynard feels that Sigrid Undset has not written a thoroughly satisfactory modern novel depicting marriage. Brande, however, believes that the author deliberately avoided definite Catholic influences in an effort to show that the fundamental law of society and Catholic beliefs are in unison. Ida Elizabeth does not remarry, though strongly desiring to do so because life itself proves the validity of the older tradition.

The Faithful Wife shows how marriage can be destroyed by a wife's independence. It is an attack on the unjust structure of modern society, wherein man is unable to assume his rightful position as provider for his family. It deals with the moral meaning of a single transgression which has resulted from a household built on unnatural


foundations. Financially Nathalie is the backbone of their family. As such, she undermines Sigurd's masculine desire to safeguard her as his wife and thereby fails to give him the rightful position of head-of-the-family. She falls short of being that spiritual strength which all women must be to their husbands. Sigurd, too, is not without fault. He also neglects his marital responsibilities by seeking in another woman what his wife could not give him, namely, a child. From this transgression accrue even greater responsibilities, for the child from this union must be given precedent over the parents' happiness. Anne refuses to legalize her position because, to a Catholic, marriage with a divorced man would be adultery. Sigurd and Nathalie separate. Eventually they conclude that only together can they make something of their lives. Together they can give both Anne and Knut a well adjusted life, a real home, a father, and a mother. It is in scrapping all the intervening episodes and working in unison for a common end that these two attempt to earn their redemption.

The modern problem is posed in this story. It is the problem wherein a household is destroyed by a man's

inherent desire for children and the economic conditions hindering the advisability of having them until too late. It portrays the various consequences that result from the repression of man's natural instincts. Because of this viewpoint this book has met with a great deal of criticism from radical emancipated women who have struggled for the rights of married women to keep their jobs in Norway. They have objected to Sigurd Undset's portrayal of a marriage destroyed because of the wife's financial independence. The real question, however, is the truth underlying this modern problem.

Images in a Mirror portrays how inextricably are the fortunes of a husband and wife bound up in their children, and shows that the soapbubbles of romance and the exaggerated importance of a career melt into insignificance along side of these. Kristian tells Uni that however miserable their life may be together there is no way out of it for either of them, and their marriage must endure because of the children's happiness. As in Ida Elizabeth this is another instance in which the individual's happiness is discounted in favour of the

22 Kieland, op. cit., 337.

well adjusted lives of the children. Uni does not feel frustrated by her decision to remain in the background, as the champions of careers for mothers would have us believe. Ultimately she perceives that the triumph of being a wife and a mother has no parallel.

Mutual desire, mutual devotion, the sharing of the worries and joys and humors, as well as the greater concerns of love, birth, and death, and grace, these are the basis for a real, enduring, and happy marriage. Uni feels this when she sits alone with her child in her lap.

Happiness, she thought, how could I at my age believe in happiness— or doubt it. Such happiness as Kristian and I had together once is like a shooting star, and when we see a star fall we should remember to wish our dearest wish; in the fleeting moments when caresses are new and wonderful we should understand and order our lives. But I wonder how many know how to do it.

And our happiness in the children is so much a matter of course that we don't think of it. All the times when our hearts seem to glitter with joy—in the comical things they say, and their first funny steps, and when they begin to show human sense, and want to love us, and when we touch them, or when we get over a fright, or a threatened illness turns out not so bad as we thought—we never think that all those tiny little gleams are what make up happiness, but we never think of it while we have it. It is only when we are miserable that we become conscious of ourselves. So long as I have the children I can live—cheerfully, no matter what happens.

And when I think that after all
Kristin and I have loved each other, and love each other yet in a way, and as things are between us now so they will continue to be as long as we both live—then I think I can meet death when it comes.24

Images in a Mirror shows in a positive way the true conception of marriage. This is reflected in Kristian. It is his wisdom and understanding which prevents Uni from making a tragic mistake. He perceives that as a family unit they belong together. In Sigrid Undset's portrayals the reader perceives the beauty to be found in a marriage wherein two people, despite the conflicts of their different natures, find happiness in their sharing of life, its sorrows and its gladnesses.

Sigrid Undset's modern novels show how pagan concepts, divorce, refusal to have children, unjust social conditions, unjust wages, supplement of income by means of the wife's working, outside interests unrelated to the home, have attacked the stability of the home and the family. Personal love, financial independence, a career which refuses to let the home encroach on one's personality, are factors which challenge the subordination of self for the common good of the family. By showing that the happiness that such successes bring, and how fragmentary and unsatisfying

24 Ibid.
they are as compared with the complete and gratifying 
happiness that marriage yields when accepted as a sharing 
of mutual responsibilities, Sigrid Undset makes her readers 
aware of the true concepts of matrimony.

Basically these modern novels portray marriage as a 
relationship which cannot be dissolved at the will of one 
party or of both. Her characters sometimes attempt to 
eradicate the permanence of the marriage bond but eventu­
ally perceive their error and its indestructibility. 
They reach this conclusion even without the aid of reli­
gious beliefs or influences. They finally grow aware of 
the old age truth that marriage is a lifelong institution. 
This indissolubility acts as a safeguard of society and 
the family. Any ignoring of its permanent relationship 
must have its effect on society as well as on the indi­
vidual. Many factors are operative today for the destruc­
tion of marriage. It is an imperative problem of the day 
and Sigrid Undset's treatment of it can only meet with 
the approval of all.
CHAPTER V

THE IMPLICIT CATHOLICISM IN THE NOVELS OF SIGRID UNDSET

The modern reader wants his fiction true to life. He accepts the portrayal of man's emotional life but paradoxically rejects the depiction of his spiritual life. Because Sigrid Undset sees man in his entirety she deals with both aspects. Opinions vary as to whether or not she has minimized or emphasized man's religious nature. Some readers, absorbed in her treatment of man's erotic nature, are unable to discern any adherence to Catholic principles. In their preoccupation with the portrayal of sin they fail to perceive the lesson underlying the sinful act. They neglect to see that behind every act of man there is always a supernatural power working. The foregoing chapters discuss this aspect.

This chapter will now consider the criticism of those who reject the inclusion of Catholic ideals and ethics that permeate the works of Sigrid Undset together with the judgments of those who accept the validity of including these principles. Objections are based on the premise that the portrayal of dogma, particularly religious dogma, is destructive to art. Sigrid Undset, however, treats the spiritual side of man not as a vehicle of religious propaganda but as an aspect of man that cannot be disre-
garded if he is to be portrayed completely.

Praise for The Bridal Wreath, the first volume of Kristin Lavransdatter, was acquired partly through a misunderstanding. Catholic philosophy which permeated this book was overlooked because the story was laid in the medieval age. Sin and salvation, suffering and sanctity were then viewed in the light of the quaintness of the period. On account of the evidence of great scholarship which Kristin Lavransdatter possessed, a certain amount of indulgence was also granted toward the infusion of Catholic principles enunciated in the story of Kristin. Sigrid Undset's portrayal of Catholic philosophy in the life of "medieval man" was viewed in the same light as her portrayal of the crude table manners of the day. With the issue of the last two volumes of Kristin Lavransdatter and the first of The Master of Hestviken some critics grew uneasy. Sigrid Undset, although observing artistic detachment, gave no sign that she regarded her characters as quaintier than her contemporaries, or found their dilemmas more artificial. It appeared that she observed all men and their problems in a universal light. An occasional critic wondered if she were humorous enough to take seriously these matters of sin and retribution.  

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1 Brande, op. cit., 316-17.
It is Slochower's opinion that *Kristin Lavransdatter* depicts in a human and historic setting pagan passion and Christian piety at war. There is embodied in this story the clash between Norse tradition and feudal Catholicism. In a wider sense it portrays the dissolution of medieval collectivism and the beginnings of Protestant individualism. Moreover, behind these conflicts lie such fundamental ones as the call of the sea and the love of the soil, between waywardness and stability. These are waged by Kristin in her choice between Erlend, an adventurous lover, and Simon, a conservative Northerner.²

The pages of *Kristin Lavransdatter* are replete with Catholic dogma. These, Gustafson feels, are taken for granted because the novel is concerned with an essentially Catholic world.³ Moreover, the long moralizing passages, which even on cursory analysis show formal Catholic dogma, are so capably worked into the normal narrative processes that we are little disturbed by the dogmatic implications.⁴

Catholic criticism regards the religious life in these novels as thoroughly medieval. It lacks the brooding doubt so characteristic of modern thought. The faith of the

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² Slochower, op. cit., 26-27.
³ Gustafson, op. cit., 311.
⁴ Ibid., 348.
people is strongly stamped in their lives. Undoubtedly Kristin Lavransdatter is saturated with the poetic beauty and mysticism of Catholicism. Moreover, it is epical in sweep and the intensity of its emotions. In its adherence to historical detail it is a masterpiece. It is an eloquent persuasive sermon for the return of Norway to the faith of its forefathers.

Gustafson is of the opinion that religious dogma in The Master of Hestviken is overemphasized and never sufficiently subordinated to the story. This defect gives the story a moralizing effect. Too frequently this long moral sermon interrupts the steady flow of the story. Justification of its inclusion can only be made on the grounds of exemplifying a particular religious doctrine. This is the only explanation of Olav's curiously inconclusive temptation episode when he visits England after Inguun's death, and the unrelated episode of Eirik's brutal and morbid attack on Bothild. Sigrid Undset has seldom, if ever before, erred in her choice of literary episode. It can only be accounted for by her earnest desire to preach. Objections to the inclusion of these scenes are based, first, on the lack of narrative probability and consist-

5 Van Hoek, op. cit., 340.
6 Talbot, "Romance of Catholic Norway," 284.
ency, and second, on the romantic characterization of the physical by means of a crudely conceived "temptation scene." 7

The modern mind rebels against the long punishment that Olav and Inguun were forced to suffer until they were permitted to be together at Hestviken. It rebels against Inguun's interminable physical agony and Olav's spiritual one. Modern emphasis on youth, with its consequent distaste for and resolute avoidance of the tragedies of middle age, make *The Axe* more interesting than *The Snake Pit*. The modern mind is impatient with stories of fate and death and sin in so far as these are banished in its world. 8

Objections to the dogma employed in the last part of *The Master of Hestviken* are unjustified in the opinion of Miss Monroe. In her mind there are few things more dramatic than Olav's colloquy with God as he flees his pursuer. The ensuing dialogue does not exist for its own sake, but is a struggle to the death between the soul and its pride. 9

7 Gustafson, *op. cit.*, 348-49.
9 Monroe, *op. cit.*, 87.
Larsen admits that the entire conception of Olav's spiritual history is Christian. She feels that despite the objections of many Protestants to the apparatus of the Confessional which largely dominates the story, they cannot and will not want to deny that Sigrid Undset has given flesh and blood to the inmost heart of Christianity.

Notwithstanding the fog and darkness in the story, the drift is toward light. It is a progress of a race toward God, wherein the paganism of the North gives way to the advancing Christendom and men grow conscious of the salvation of the Cross. Here the historical background provides an indispensable service; for the victory of man over sin is a matter of record, rather than an idealistic dream.

The depth of Sigrid Undset's Catholicity is more deeply embedded in Kristin Lavransdatter and The Master of Hestviken than in The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush. Unfortunately, our modern times do not see Christianity in its true perspective. Consequently Sigrid Undset must portray life in her modern novels attacked by the forces of materialism and social evils of the day.

The chief defect, in Gustafson's opinion, in The Wild


Orchid and The Burning Bush is that they are too obviously motivated by the desire to extoll Catholic religious dogma. Such inclusion falls just short of religious propaganda, and is responsible for the distinct falling off of quality in these novels. 12

Many Catholics, themselves, have objected to what appears to them as a too evident intention of molding the novel into a vehicle of religious propaganda. However, they must admit that her modern novels, void of Catholicism, appear infinitely dull and dreary. In the definitely Catholic novels it is the spiritual aspect which gives them life. 13

In its widest and best sense The Burning Bush is a novel of propaganda, for it sets forth a philosophy of life and a way of life. It is not symbolical or even the typical story of "modern man." Paul's destiny is a specific one. He is thoroughly individualized. Because The Burning Bush does not solve Paul's particular problem it is Kronenberger's opinion, that the propagandistic element can be discounted. He feels that Sigrid Undset has not made Paul her mouthpiece, nor has she made him into a symbol of modern intelligence beset by doubts and seeking

12 Gustafson, op. cit., 355.
faith. A good propagandist would have made Paul waver constantly between faith and doubt before he was converted. This would have been subtler propaganda and more convincing to the intelligent reader. Moreover, Paul's difficulties as a Catholic are human ones, his dislike of Catholics as people, his distaste for certain aspects of Catholic ritual and demeanor. The arguments for and against Catholicism in this book are very much like the arguments about any fact of contemporary society. It is the talk of people revealing their minds and not of spokesmen arguing for and against causes. Some of the conversations are stupid, prejudiced; some are enthusiastic and intelligent. This is as it would be in life.

Having called attention to the prevalence of religious ideas in the Selmer series, Gustafson admits that:

It must be said to Sigrid Undset's credit, however, that her propaganda is effective--particularly, perhaps, on the negative side. She aims her critical shafts with very telling effect at many of the more naive shibboleths of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries--at a half bourgeois "liberalism" and at a merely sentimental humanitarianism, at scientific optimism and so-called "industrial progress," at religious sectarianism and at certain

late forms of Puritanism, and so on. ... 15.

He observes that in The Wild Orchid some of the liveliest satire is directed against modern "psychological" studies of sexual and religious phenomena. In particular Sigrid Undset denounces those pseudo-psychological books treating the influences of unapplied eros and unsatisfied maternal feeling. 16

Her aggressions against bourgeois "liberalism" and sentimental humanitarianism and her distrust of modern psychology have their basis in post-war materialism. This she feels must be replaced by Church dogma if society is to survive. In her late contemporary novels this is apparent to the discerning reader. 17

The Wild Orchid strips bare the assumptions and exposes the fallacies of our modern free thinkers and free livers. It analyzes the weaknesses of and the futilities of Protestantism in Norway. This is a courageous undertaking for one woman, particularly since Evangelical Lutheranism is the state endowed religion in Norway and the Catholic population is three thousand out of three million. This book artistically and soundly unfolds the Catholic

15 Gustafson, op. cit., 355.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 356.
beliefs about God, the authority of the Church, marriage, divorce, chastity, the Bible, the Blessed Sacrament and other Catholic doctrines. These passages, in Talbot's opinion, are among the finest bit of apologetics done in the modern manner. 18

The mystical beauty of Catholicism permeates The Burning Bush. When Paul’s children make their first Communion, the love of God cements a secret bond between them and their father. Paul knows the limits of supernatural experience when his daughter insists on his offering her as a sacrifice to God. Helge is inconsolable when Paul, through mortal sin, is unable to receive Holy Communion with him. Consequently, Paul's nature grows with his love of God. 19

In The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush, Sigrid Undset has reiterated her idea that men and women, notwithstanding time, race, and place, are very much the same. They make the same errors, suffer, learn, and have the same choice of ultimate ends. Certain things are eternal in a human society and remain so whether we admit them or not. There is a right and a wrong action. Man's intellect guides him to discriminate between them and his free will

to choose between them. These truths have existed since time began; let modern man remember them.

In Sigrid Undset's modern novels religious life is portrayed in conflict with liberalism and skepticism and the materialistic trend of modern civilization. The characters push God aside as old-fashioned, regarding themselves superior to the dogmas of the past, rather than being openly antagonistic toward religion. Their religion is that of boundless good will and progress. Dogmatic religion has been supplanted by a cheerful belief in the enlightened self-interest, evolution, science, and new thought. Thus in dealing with the contemporary scene, Sigrid Undset turns away from the inclusion of religious principles. Attention is now centered on the spread of comfort, and well being, and freedom of thought. This loss of spiritual anchor is observed in The Wild Orchid. All of the Selmer children feel this deficiency. Man's purpose in life goes beyond comfort, self-interest and vague good will. Paul's nature is unsatisfied by his mother's philosophy. He feels the need for both the security of his father and an objective religious belief.

20 Brande, op. cit., 318.
21 Monroe, op. cit., 57-58.
Ida Elizabeth is a story of the greatness of maternal love and its ability to surpass romantic love. Maternity is the strongest trait in Ida Elizabeth's character and will always win out. The modern mind objects to this emphasis and feels that this is its weakness. Hutchinson regards Ida Elizabeth's maternal love, which also characterizes her love for Frithjof, as a weak link in the psychological chain. Maternal love, he believes, undermines the thesis in the second part of the book. Such a decision wherein a woman deliberately rejects happiness on the possibility that it may adversely effect the children's lives is based on sentimentality. One wonders if the opinion holds true in Lucy's rejection of Paul because she is tubercular.

Ida Elizabeth is the hardest book of all for many non-Catholics to accept. This is because of its exposition of the enduring ties and responsibilities of marriage which remain when love no longer exists, and in its emphasis that the welfare of the children is the first consideration.

From a Catholic standpoint this novel is somewhat

23 Hutchinson, op. cit., 10.
inconclusive in that the story introduces two Catholics, supposedly to show the impact of Catholicism on Ida Elizabeth's problems. However, in no way, do these characters influence her. Maynard believes that Sigrid Undset has still to write a thoroughly satisfactorily modern Catholic novel of marriage.

In *The Faithful Wife*, Sigrid Undset is trying to get over the point that the disintegration of modern marriage lies in the economic situation and man's unwillingness to accept his responsibilities. Marriage can only prove unsatisfying if man is deprived of his right of children and also his natural position of provider of the family. Because of financial reasons Nathalie, for the time being, gave up her rightful position in the home, only to discover it had slipped away from her. It is a novel built on Catholic premises, which have their foundation in the natural law of morality. It is an analysis of the consequences which inevitably result from the violations of man's reason for being.

This story portrays how narrow and egotistical people become who believe only in themselves. They are forced into the new morality of enlightened self-interest, which proves of stunted growth. In trying to fulfill all of

life in purely human relationships, they find themselves barren and insecure without something greater than themselves as a measure. As in her medieval novels, Sigrid Undset perceives that the individual is significant only in his own esteem as a child of God. His powers should then lead him to his proper destiny.  

The great merit of Images in a Mirror is in its aim at giving full value to Uni's natural desire for a life free from commitment. In the mood of longing to have herself intact, bestowing nothing and experiencing nothing, she turns to Dr. Luders for fulfillment. This mood assumes that the individual can escape the consequence of his past actions and live solely for the impulse of the moment. Sigrid Undset aims to show that this is impossible. She shows how, as a mother, Uni's life is bound up with the fortunes of her children and how her feeling for Dr. Luders is fundamentally different than for her husband, Kristian, because of the very nature of human experience. Bestowing and experiencing nothing implies one is not living, for every experience has its commitment and limits one's freedom of response to those which follow it. The alternative is to regard each one as isolated and meaningless. "Sigrid Undset accepts the essential postulate of any moral phil-

26 Monroe, op. cit., 59-60.
osophy, that every act stands in significant relationship both to its causes and its consequences; every right presupposes a duty." Sigrid Undset is trying to show that if one fails to find complete marital happiness one does not have the right to seek it in another relationship.

In Madame Dora thea Sigrid Undset is not too successful in that she explores the erotic impulse more intensively than is necessary to establish its reality. This is accounted for by her too frequent tendency to turn the story backwards, therefore, not keeping close enough to the central theme.

Because Sigrid Undset is a Christian she writes like one. Her beliefs are one with the Catholic Church. She believes in God, freedom of the will, sin, the sanctity of marriage and the inviolability of the home, in redemption and damnation, and in man's responsibility and his submission to spiritual authority. Because of these convictions she shows that the drama of salvation is the type drama for all Christian people. Therefore, if one reads Sigrid Undset he must accept these concepts however foreign they may be to his thought, at least while reading the books.

27 Traversi, op. cit., 268-69.
28 Monroe, op. cit., 87.
29 Brande, op. cit., 316.
It is Monroe's opinion that Sigrid Undset's work illustrates how a consistent view of life deepens and objectifies the art of the novel. True, much of her medieval work was written before her conversion, nevertheless, all of it was influenced by Christianity, and acquired significance through it. Sigrid Undset believes that all great literature is profoundly religious, not necessarily concerned with edification, but haunted by a memory of a lost paradise, coupled with deep humility in the acknowledgement that man's powers, which ought to give him dominion over the world, do not in reality give him dominion over his fate. 30

Sigrid Undset's art is worth discussing in the light of our present day fear of dogma as a limitation of the artistic vision.

...The fear derives from various sources and displays itself in various ways. There is, first of all, the genuine fear that dogma may inhibit or restrict the artist's intuition of life. Intuition is one of the most important elements of the creative process, the very bedrock on which ideas must build. The novelist in particular depends on the subconscious mind, which is the great storehouse of thought and sensation, for the raw material of his art. Since his intuition draws up from his unremembered past the seeds of story, it must be free and receptive. There is also the great

miscellany of human experience in the world before him, which he must be allowed to share in freely, if his art is to be universal.

To have accepted a philosophy which explains all of life as Sigrid Undset has done is not to inhibit the intuitive process of art, or to limit a novelist's participation in life or his representation of it. Religion merely adds to the storehouse of the mind a new and rich sphere of experience. The novelist now has more than his own observations of life; he is aware of the supernatural world surrounding the natural and at times impinging on it. He sees things in order, not as the result of chance or of his personal interpretation. Higher and lower take their place with unblurred outlines. The life of the senses is enriched as sense merges into spirit and spirit sharpens his awareness of things. His sympathies go out to men and things through the communion of saints by which all men, living and dead, are united. It would be hard to imagine a richer evocation of the life of the senses, or a more universal understanding of man than Sigrid Undset's. The senses give place to the motives of suffering and atonement as her epic progresses and human nature is gradually completed by grace.31

Moreover, the reader need neither accept Catholic ideas nor understand them in detail to realize the influence they exerted in Sigrid Undset's work and in the novel generally. Catholicism is the only philosophy known that gives eternal significance to the individual. Sigrid Undset's significance to modern thought and

31 Ibid., 26-27.
life is obvious. In her medieval novels she portrays the same creature, the identical disarray, which the reader meets in the contemporary scene. Here are arguments of indulgence against the spiritual order, and with the evidence of naturalism as present today as of old. Paganism is as rampant in the industrial civilization of the twentieth century as in the fourteenth.

Undoubtedly, the Norway Sigrid Undset recreates in her medieval novels is Catholic Norway. The background of her sagas is unlike modern literature, wherein nature dwarfs human life and destiny to insignificance, while hemming it it. Rather is it the whole space of eternity. It is its supernatural atmosphere which gives significance and substance to characters and it is Catholicism that gives it this atmosphere. Without this characteristic, her books, vast, psychologically interesting, vital and learned, would still be great, but with a diminished greatness. They would be pathological studies, depressing, interesting but sterile. 33

She has recreated the medieval Church in Norway for her countrymen. In reconstructing the services of the

32 Shuster, "Sigrid Undset and the Nobel Prize," 228.
33 Margaret Mackenzie, "Sigrid Undset: Catholic Novelist," Month 155: (June 1930), 548.
ministers and the village churches, in opening the convent and the monasteries doors that men might see where charity and piety flourished, Sigrid Undset has made manifest the chastening effect of true religion. True, medieval Norwegians, although Catholic, were not all saints. Because they were Catholic, however, they had open to them the paths of sanctity. Scandals existed in the Church and out of it. They are neither concealed nor unduly exaggerated. Combining the skill of a romancer with the accuracy of an historian, Sigrid Undset has shown her people the ideal that inspired their progenitors, the mystic influences that vivified them, the devotion, liturgy and sacraments that consoled them, the doctrines and morality that elevated them from their savage nature.

Sigrid Undset helps to correct the three destructive tendencies in the modern novel: first, the movement away from life, second, the loss of spiritual conception of personality, and third, the loss of a sense of community. The first has devitalized the novel, while the second and third have resulted from the disintegration in society and in the novel. As the novel and society are closely connected these losses have wide implications and any

reviving influence would have a marked effect in both spheres. 35

Sigrid Undset avoids the two dangers of the modern novel, namely the failure to go beyond the concrete and particular, and the failure through over abstraction to breathe life into the story. The novelist must see the general in the particular and elicit the supersensuous from the sensuous. Religion has helped Sigrid Undset to do this, making her stories move on two levels, one representative and the other supernatural. Moreover, literary effectiveness is enhanced when natural motives are reinforced by supernatural motives. 36

Through inclusion of man's spiritual life Sigrid Undset has succeeded in restoring personality to the novel. She has done this by portraying her characters completely through her inclusion of man's spiritual life. This the modern novel has ignored. Relative to the problem of personality is the restoration of a sense of community. Only by restoring man's dignity and security can the community be held together. These influences are reflected in the novelist. Previously the cohesion of society rested on moral and spiritual unity. Men were in agreement on

35 Monroe, op. cit., 41-42.
36 Ibid., 47-48.
right and wrong, their family and community obligations. Resolution of the problem of the community can be achieved only through the right use of freedom. Sigrid Undset's medieval novels are portrayals of man's lawlessness as a result of his unruly passions, rather than a denial of values. They were aware of their spiritual obligations. Because Sigrid Undset's modern novels are based on a sound philosophy of life, a Catholic philosophy, they also do not fall into the error of denying values.

Sigrid Undset's main concerns are, first, the realities of the spiritual life; second, marriage and its place in the social and spiritual scheme of the world; and third, the problems inhering in modernity. These are the problems her characters meet and they are not used as propaganda. Her ideas are forcefully dramatic, hurling men and women into sin or through suffering and atonement preparing them for redemption. The impassioned dialect of her later novels gives dramatic force to the plot.

Sigrid Undset's religious growth is clearly etched in her novels and essays. She develops from a kind of moral idealism to an independent ethical Christianity, governed neither by Church institutions nor by Church

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37 Ibid., 44-45.
38 Ibid., 54.
dogma, and in the final stage to positive Catholicism. She believes that the Roman Catholic Church is the only religious institution that avoids all the pitfalls of mere sectarianism. This sectarianism originates in man's will to create a God in his own image. To Sigrid Undset God is a fundamental positive reality. What makes Sigrid Undset regard the Roman Catholic Church as the supreme authority in her life is her acceptance of God's revelation of Himself through the instrumentality of the Church. He is not a subjective reflection of man's own religious spirit. 39

In conclusion, Sigrid Undset has not won in her unrelenting battle to prove the tragedy of lives divorced from the old realities. The day may come, however, when modernism while not admitting defeat may be granted a moment of insight and the reviewer will say that Sigrid Undset is great because she writes as a woman and as a Christian. For this is the basis of her greatness. Her writing is mature, candid, and direct, because she knows her position. The Church and religion appear in her books in relation to their importance to women, as safeguards of the home, the fortification of marriage and the eternal

39 Gustafson, op. cit., 359-60.
enemies of corruption. 40

Undeniably, Catholic philosophy permeates Sigrid Undset's novels. It has been admitted by both non-Catholic and Catholic critics. The objections and validity of their inclusion have been examined. Whether the reader rejects or accepts the inclusion of Catholic dogma he will most likely agree with Gustafson that:

One cannot but admire the thorough-going consistency with which she develops Catholic dogma in her late novels and essays and the seriousness with which she is prepared to apply a positive dogmatic Christianity to the ills of a confused modern society. 41

It is also agreed that the works that are obviously Catholic in their philosophy are the greatest, first, Kristin Lavransdatter and second, The Master of Hestviken. Her modern novels, although never violating Catholic ethics, do not rise to the levels of either medieval novel. The characters come to a moral way of regarding life but their struggle is unrelieved by God's grace or His mercy. The Wild Orchid and The Burning Bush rank first of these modern novels, possibly because the spiritual side of man is included.

40 Brande, op. cit., 321-22.
41 Gustafson, op. cit., 360.
My dear Miss Renesch,

Your letter of the 12th inst. did get here some days ago, but I am sorry I do not think I could help you much.

You are right of course—the writers who ventilate their ideas about an author's thoughts and beliefs mostly produce guesswork, and even when they turn to an author, the author may have forgotten so much about the book in question (most authors think of the next thing they want to do, and not so much of the things they have done. When a thing has been printed it is in a way detached from one's mind). I did read Miss Monroe's article before it was printed, and I seem to remember that I made some comments, though I do not know if she used them, I don't think I have see her article since it was printed.

Of course she is right in her idea that my "main concern is the spiritual life", in as far as I, like most authors, is interested in life, and spiritual life is an integral part of it—just read the books of people who try to deny the spiritual life and see how papery and unreal...
they turn out. And marriage- or love-life outside marriage- play a greater role to me, an European, than to Americans, whose treatment of love and sex very often seem unrealistic - not least when they try to be hard-boiled and sexy. In the American novels I have read and found convincing puritanism seems a natural thing, and the most convincing young women in American fiction are the cool ones - either kind, good and intelligent helpmates, or gold-diggers. But of course, in both cases love as a passion is ruled out.

If I had been born and bred an American, - provided I had not been different from what I am as an Norwegian - I suppose the passion that shapes and frustrates the life of most people, and which I then might have happened to write a lot about, would be the passion for "making Good", for "success", and for making money. Not that I believe the Americans love money the way misers do, but for the power and prestige it gives them, for the gadgets they imagine may fill the void left by a lack of sensual vigor, - for the self-assurance, - I know they are generous and not afraid to give away large sums, but utterly unwilling to submit their economical selfwilledness to the inevitable development of society towards some kind of class integration for instance. Which is quite alien to most Scandinavians, who are as afraid of confessing that desire for making money might drive them to commit something not
strickly* fair, as the Irish are afraid of hearing about sex. (Of course Norwegians are not economically pure, and the Irish not sexless, but that is the main hypocrisy in these nations). Of course no author would ever say to oneself he wanted to depict this or that sin and its consequences, but wanting to make people live they would of their own accord run into the temptations that are most common and considered not disgraceful in the society they live in.

Yours very truly

Sigrid Undset
July 5:

Dear Miss Renesch:

Your questions are too wide to answer in detail. But I don't think intelligent Catholics are down on Sigrid Undset, or that she has, on the other hand, ever received her due share of praise from the non-Catholic world, despite the Nobel Prize. On the general questions involved you might get some light from the essays "Religio Poetae" and "Ancient and Modern Ideas of Purity" and "Dieu et ma Dame" in Coventry Patmore's book called *Religio Poetae*. And Fr. Gardiner of *America* wrote some months ago four or five articles there on the subject. (These were issued as a pamphlet by Mother Grace Damman of Manhattanville College. And I am sure she would send you a copy for the asking.) What is behind Catholic squeamishness? Fundamentally it is a desire to serve God, but it is mixed with undue timidity and perhaps some Jansenism. It is very hard to know just where to draw the line in these matters. In the case of S. U. I don't think it is hard to draw the line at all; she is a great moralist, as well as a great artist. (I refer to her medieval romances.)

That's about all I have time for -- short of writing a book.

Yours sincerely,

Theodore Maynard
Miss Mariruth Renesch
6540 Kenwood
Chicago 37, Illinois

Dear Miss Renesch:

Father Talbot has turned over your request about your thesis to me and I am afraid there is not much I can give you in the way of direction save a very general suggestion. It is a fact that a bit of Jansenism crept rather early in American Catholicism and this it is, I think, which makes American Catholic readers particularly sensitive in matters of sex. You might be able possibly to trace this influence by something like a study of the influence of Jansenism on the Irish and French clergy both of whom, particularly the first, did so much with American Catholic beginnings. A great many of the Irish clergy were trained in France before coming to America where they took on this rather severe moral attitude. The Scandinavians were never influenced by this trend and hence it is that Sigrid Undset feels a bit freer to indulge in what we so sweepingly call her realism.
I hope this suggestion will give you some ground to explore. I am sure if you mention it to your advisor at Loyola he would be glad to put you on to bibliography, etc. It will be of some specific help.

Sincerely yours,

H. C. Gardiner, S.J.
Miss Mariruth Renesch  
6540 Kenwood Avenue  
Chicago 37, Illinois

Dear Madam:

In reply to the questions put in your letter of September the 30th I beg to state as follows:

I do not think one is justified in saying that there is any deeper cleavage between the moral attitude with regard to marriage in the Anglo-Saxon countries on the one side, and in Scandinavia on the other. The custom known as "Marriage upon trial" which I think was no uncommon characteristic of the Scandinavian countries, both in the medieval time and later, has also prevailed in many other European countries, as for instance in Scotland (the so-called handfasting) Ireland, Wales, and Germany (Probe-Ehe) (See History of Human Marriage 5th Ed. 1925, Vol. I, 135, by the noted Swedo-Finnish scholar Edward Westermarck). In order to explain this custom I therefore do not think one must necessarily resort to the hypothesis based on climatological conditions set forth by you.

It might be worth mentioning that the present Swedish law contains a provision according to which children born to parents who are not married but only betrothed ("trolovingsbarn"), are in many respects considered as legitimate and should the betrothal be broken, entitled to support. In case of the engagement being broken one of the parties is also entitled to a limited damage for losses incurred by the failing marriage. The betrothal is supposed to have taken place where there are proofs of an agreement to marry evidenced by the exchange of rings, testimony of witnesses or otherwise. Though I don't know whether this is correct, I should think this law reflects an older, possibly pro-christian marriage procedure, a fact supporting the thesis advanced by the said Westermarck that "marriage is rather rooted in family than family in marriage."
A very well known work, on social and cultural conditions in ancient Scandinavia is written by the Danish scholar Troels-Lund. The work is called "Dagligt lif i Norden" (daily life in the North) and is probably available in the greater libraries in this country.

Regarding the modern views on marriage set forth in the writings by Undset, quoted by you, I regret to say that I have not read this part of her works. Maybe that you can get some comments on the subject from the Norwegian Consulate? However, I am probably not mistaken if I assume that the view on marriage propagated in these writings belong to the same "radical" trend which has also appeared in Sweden. The advocates of this view hold marriage vows as a private matter and refute the interference of society therein. The technical term of these marriages is "marriage of conscience" and probably the best known proclaimer of this idea was Ellen Key (see her Love and Marriage, London, 1910). There is of course a similarity between these ideas and the ancient customs referred to above, thus not the only instance of how quite ancient custom and more advanced theory concur.

This is the information I have been able to gather. I regret that I cannot devote my time to further research which of course is necessary before drawing any definite conclusions. I understand such research must be done in both the ethnographical, sociological and theological field. I hope, however, that in giving you the above information I have been able to put you on the right track.

Yours very truly,

Eyvind Bratt
Vice Consul
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mariruth L. Renesoh has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

[Signature]

January 29, 1946

[Signature of Adviser]