Theron Ware:  
The Fall from Innocence  
and the Escape from Guilt  

“What if he did abandon  
this mistaken profession of his?”
As the minister of a fundamentalist sect of the Methodist church, Theron Ware, in Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), should have been adequately armed with such minimal theology as would have prepared him to recognize the sins of pride, lust, and cupidity; paradoxically, though, his innocence, which leads to his subsequent "damnation," lies in his unawareness of these self-defeating traits. Theron's pilgrimage toward the *terrestrial* city of self-knowledge, therefore, departs from a point in life when he is most ripe for a fall—a fall that will lead to his escape from Octavius and the ministry, and his flight to Seattle. We can thus look upon Theron Ware's escape, nonreligious though it is, as redemptive and partially cleansing in its effect, perhaps his one honest act in the novel.

When Theron first arrives in Octavius, where he has been assigned to a small Methodist church of fundamentalist persuasion, he meets three individuals who are destined to play a decisive role in the drama (and the agony) of his ministry: these are Father Forbes (Theron's Catholic counterpart in Octavius), Celia Madden, one of the priest's parishioners who plays the organ in the Octavius Catholic church, and Dr. Ledsmar, a physician friend of the priest. For Theron these three become a trinity of wisdom, beauty, and knowledge, respectively. In a sense one might call them a kind of "secular trinity," even though it ambiguously includes Father Forbes. Of these three the priest appears to be the most significant figure, for he is a friend of each, and perhaps represents a synthesis of Celia's worship of beauty and Ledsmar's worship of knowledge. Yet Father Forbes goes beyond them, for he has a tolerance for human frailty that the other two do not seem to have. Thus—and there is a symbolic aptness here—Celia Madden (a physically attractive woman) represents beauty; Ledsmar,
chilly knowledge—he is something of a Hawthornesque figure; and Father Forbes, pragmatic wisdom.

How do these three—the priest, the girl, and the physician—play such a devastating part in bringing about Theron’s fall and his subsequent flight from the town? First, Father Forbes. Though it is true that the priest is, for Harold Frederic’s purpose, the voice of Catholicism in Octavius, Forbes’ brand of Catholicism is quite liberal, even heterodox. He is not only the preaching priest; he is the urbane scholar discussing religious belief _sub specie aeternitatis_:

I remember saying to you [Theron] once before, there is really nothing new under the sun. Even the saying isn’t new. Though there seem to have been the most tremendous changes in races and civilizations and religions, stretching over many thousands of years, yet nothing is in fact altered very much. Where religions are concerned, the human race are still very like savages in a dangerous wood in the dark, telling one another ghost stories around a campfire. They have always been like that.¹

But the priest also recognizes the aesthetic values of the church, if only for the reason that they make life more livable for those within the fold who are primarily drawn to the church for its ritual and beauty.

Theron’s relationship with Celia Madden is, of course, quite different from that which exists between himself and the priest. In addition to worldly knowledge, Celia represents sexual temptation, which hardly simplifies matters. Indeed, Harold Frederic’s sense of artistry and aesthetic symmetry was unimpeachable here: for without Celia Madden to “spice” the story, it might have collapsed under its own dull weight. But Celia is more than an artistic counterpart to Forbes; she plays an essential part in Theron’s fall, acting (perhaps consciously) as the Eve-like agent to Theron’s Adamic innocence and—later—pride. It is not unexpected, therefore, that the fatal kiss Celia
permits Theron—as Theron himself reminds her—was given in the picnic woods outside Octavius. Here, as in Hawthorne a half-century earlier, the woods are a symbol not only of freedom but of those illicitly stolen delights that later leave a stain on the residual conscience. On Theron the effect is to erode what little conscience he has left. Celia’s effect on him, then, is probably the most devastating of the three tempters. She has not only made him more aware of the lack of beauty in his life; she has affected him in a much more basic way—through her sexuality. Yet, in the last scene with Celia, toward the end of the book, our feelings are mixed; we both pity and have contempt for Theron. On the one hand, we can understand him without necessarily sympathizing with him: to love well but un­wisely is a common human experience; yet we must also see Theron for the proud oaf he is, one who deserves all he gets. Celia affects him not only aesthetically but erotically, and the two quite understandably have become mixed up in Theron’s mind. The aesthetic-erotic elements have become so fused by the heat of Theron’s passion to break free from the restraints of his church and its simplistic theology that when Celia offers him some Benedictine, and further calls herself a “Greek”—a wor­shiper of pagan beauties and Eleusinian mysteries—Theron ex­
claims:

I want to be a Greek myself, if you’re one. I want to get as close to you—to your ideal, that is, as I can. You open up to me a whole world that I had not even dreamed existed. We swore our friendship long ago, you know: and now, after to-night—you and the music have decided me. I am going to put the things out of my life that are not worth while. Only you must help me; you must tell me how to begin. (p. 301)

Actually, Celia’s aestheticism is rather tame, even shallow, though it does appear bold in terms of the times and the com­munity in which she espouses and practices it. The effect of this
aesthetic "paganism" on Theron Ware is devastating. Like Omphale, Celia has made Theron into the slavish worshiper at the loom of (her) beauty, and she becomes for Theron the aesthetic-sexual counteragent to the dullness of Octavius and its brand of Methodism. Thus, for Theron Ware, Celia represents what countless similar temptresses in American literature have represented: bewitching beauty, and even witchcraft itself, with its orgiastic and diabolic ritual in the night-cloaked woods—in short, the revolt against puritanism.

There seems to be something compulsive about Celia's drive for freedom. But Theron, in his innocence, is blind to this possibility: for him, Celia symbolizes unlimited freedom. Possibly, it is this attitude that finally elicits from her those crushing words that bring Theron's Octavian innocence to an irrevocable end: "It is all in a single word, Mr. Ware—I speak for others as well as myself, mind you,—we find that you are a bore" (p. 477). Yet it is in this last talk with Theron that Celia betrays the essential puritan in herself. Celia Madden is really no more than a self-projected eidolon of the free, aesthetic life. It is difficult to believe that she would ever allow herself the ultimate gesture of feminism in that time of small-town mores, namely, having an affair and, even more in character, flaunting the fact. Her fin-de-siècle stance is no more than that, and she remains throughout—even when she offers Theron a glass of Benedictine (hardly a temptation!)—quite the proper, and ultimately offended, lady, even a prude.

Just as Dr. Ledsmar will prove to be another kind of tempter when he invites Theron into his laboratory, so Celia proves to be a temptress when she invites Theron into her Aubrey Beardsleyan chambers. For if Ledsmar's science is cold and bloodless, Celia's worship of beauty is a cold thing too. Ironically, she herself is repelled by the cold Dr. Ledsmar, but her
own aestheticism is itself nothing more than a bait with which to lure the naïve Theron into an alliance against Ledsmar. "I want you on my side [she tells Theron], against the doctor and his heartless, bloodless science" (p. 149). True, Ledsmar is indeed a cold fish; but then, Celia is hardly a paragon of humanistic warmth and compassion herself. She is to art what Ledsmar is to science—a matter of too much head and too little heart. Thus, Celia's interest in Theron is not entirely disinterested. In this tension between Miss Madden and Dr. Ledsmar, we see an allegorical playing-out of the conflict between the sciences and the humanities—though in vastly oversimplified terms.

If, for Theron Ware, Celia Madden is more dangerous than Ledsmar, then Ledsmar is the more diabolic of the two. The physician is a kind of "mad scientist," inducing in the minister a morbid fascination for all he represents. He reminds one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Aylmer of "The Birthmark"—also a physician, of sorts—though without the suggestion of sympathy that Aylmer elicits. As Celia Madden's chambers seem to epitomize the arty fin-de-siècle studio, so Ledsmar's rooms seem to represent the laboratory of the unhinged scientist obsessed with "truth," even if the discovery of that "truth" leads to the complete destruction of man's moral foundations. In one part of his house are bookcases, and "the corners of the floor [are] all buried deep under disorderly strata of papers, diagrams, and opened books. One could hardly walk about without treading on them" (p. 322). Elsewhere there are "dark little tanks containing thick water, a row of small glass cases with adders and other lesser reptiles inside, and a general collection of boxes, jars, and similar receptacles connected with the doctor's pursuits. Further on was a smaller chamber, with a big empty furnace, and shelves bearing bottles and apparatus like a
The Escape Motif in the American Novel

drug-store" (pp. 328–29). Ledsmar’s house is a depository of the pathologically obsessive—the world’s knowledge gone berserk.

Theron Ware’s problem does not lie so much in an intellectual attempt to reconcile faith with science, but in the deeper problem of his coming to terms with his own pride. As compared with those who have found some sort of security in an older, more knowledgeable—perhaps more serviceable—faith, Theron is unprepared to handle the hazards of the world. Certainly, his brand of Methodism, unlike that of the hardy Dinah Morris in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, has hardly given him that ability, or prepared him for the world. Because Theron’s intellectual background has been inadequate, he is totally unprepared to handle the problems that the world thrusts upon him as a challenge to his flimsy doctrines and even flimsier beliefs in them. Unlike the Forbeses, the Maddens, and the Ledsmars—whom it is difficult to think of as having their own periods of innocence—Theron’s innocence has never received its own immunization against a spiritually diseased world.

After a number of sessions with the priest and the doctor, Theron decides that his meeting them has been a turning point in his life; for he has come to see them as the antithesis of the dominant—and unlettered—minority within his own church. Where the minority represents narrowness and bigotry, Forbes and Ledsmar represent sophistication and skepticism; where the minority would imprison Theron within a deadening, and deadly, conformity, the priest and the doctor would free him for greater knowledge. Thus, “Nothing was clearer to [Theron’s] mind than that his meeting with the priest and the doctor was the turning-point in his career. They had lifted him bodily out of the slough of ignorance, of contact with low minds and sordid, narrow things, and put him on solid ground” (p. 197). But whatever might be said of Ledsmar and Celia Mad-
den, it is Father Forbes, with his Bishop Blougram apologetics, who turns Theron's head intellectually—or at least makes such an overwhelming impression on Theron that the minister completely loses his head. The priest, of course, is a greater realist than his friends, Ledsmar and Celia Madden; in truth, it is he who even represents a healthy balance to the intellectual excesses of the doctor and the false—even sentimental—aesthetics of the young woman. In this he comes close, as I have suggested, to Robert Browning's Bishop Blougram, though perhaps with a lesser dose of cynicism in him than Browning's shrewd, worldly bishop.

The split between soul and mind in Theron soon becomes apparent: "He had passed definitely beyond pretending to himself that there was anything spiritually in common between him and the Methodist Church of Octavius" (p. 199). The step from contempt for others to the elevation of oneself is a short one: not long after, Theron decides that there is really no spiritual bond between himself and the "low minds" of his congregation, for he has begun to see himself as a kind of genius. If—according to Theron—one of the marks of genius is a predisposition for contracting unfortunate marriages, then Theron finds that he too fits into that category. Hadn't he, in marrying the rather dull, if loyal, Alice, contracted such a marriage? Further, his pride encourages in him an envy of those who have not married. He sees Forbes and Ledsmar as perfect examples of the free, if celibate, life; they can give themselves up to the study of literature and philosophy, and dedicate themselves to the loftiest thoughts without troubling themselves with more mundane things. Not married bliss but single blessedness is what Theron sees as his great loss. All of these forces, when added up, do not make so much for damnation as for a (rather limited) fall. If Theron is damned, then the word ought to be placed within quotation marks, since, at the end of the novel
and his stay in Octavius, Theron is better able to handle himself in his confrontation with his own weaknesses and the world that was partly responsible for them than he was at the beginning of the novel.

With the kiss Celia Madden has permitted Theron in the woods outside Octavius, Theron's fall is virtually complete; the kiss in the pagan woods bears pagan fruit. For Theron has begun to identify that experience with a growing affinity for pantheistic nature. Theron Ware is no longer a minister in the full sense of that word, ministering to the needs of his flock; he has become a worshiper of nature. He will no longer worship God, or even the Deists' God in nature; instead, he will worship the moon, which he has come to identify with Celia Madden. Harold Frederic makes this vivid by having Theron stroll out into the woods on a moonlit night, ostensibly to offer up a prayer of thanksgiving to God for making it possible for him to meet Celia. But the sacred intention is nullified by the profanity of his pagan inclinations:

> The impulse to kneel, there in the pure, tender moonlight, and lift up offerings of praise to God, kept uppermost in his mind. Some formless reservation restrained him from the act itself, but the spirit of it hallowed his mood. He gazed up at the broad luminous face of the [moon]. "You are our God," he murmured. "Hers and mine! You are the most beautiful of heavenly creatures, as she is of the angels on earth. I am speechless with reverence for you both." (p. 390)

During this period of lunar worship, Theron begins to consider the possibilities for his escape from the ministry. Thus, for the first time during his stay in Octavius, he has begun to face the possibility that he may not be fitted for a religious calling. It would be better to resign immediately than to be ousted under an ignominious cloud later, when—as it would appear in-
evitable—his indiscretion in the woods would be discovered. It is at this point that Theron begins to think of moving out while it is still possible to do so without scandal.

What if he did abandon this mistaken profession of his? On its mental side the relief would be prodigious, unthinkable. But on the practical side, the bread-and-butter side? For some days Theron paused with a shudder when he reached this question. The thought of the plunge into unknown material responsibilities gave him a sinking heart. He tried to imagine himself lecturing, canvassing for books or insurance policies, writing for newspapers—and remained frightened. But suddenly one day it occurred to him that these qualms and forebodings were sheer folly. Was not Celia rich? Would she not with lightning swiftness draw forth that checkbook, like the flashing sword of a champion from its scabbard, and run to his relief? Why, of course. It was absurd not to have thought of that before. (p. 393)

Where Theron's search for a viable faith had led him from extreme fundamentalism to a superficial and shallow rationalism, now, not having found that faith, he rejects all that the old faith implies. For Theron, one is either “good and straight and sincere,” as he had once thought himself to be, or “rotten to the core,” as he now thinks of himself. Such has been Theron's simplistic two-valued orientation to his faith. Sister Soulsby, a member of Theron's church, is the complete antithesis of a Father Forbes; she is a simple “soul,” relatively unlettered, but possessing a hard practicality; she makes no great claims on her religion. For although she is a person who does not have the learning of a Forbes (one might add, however, that these two share a certain realism), the culture of a Celia Madden, or, at a most unlikely remove, the “science” of a Ledsmar, she ultimately turns out to be Theron's only true friend. Upon Theron's return from his drunken escapade in
New York City after his rejection by Celia, Sister Soulsby attempts to brace up his low spirits:

"I've told you my religion before. . . The sheep and the goats are to be separated on Judgment Day, but not a minute sooner. In other words, as long as human life lasts, good, bad, and indifferent are all braided up together in every man's nature, and every woman's too. You weren't altogether good a year ago, any more than you're altogether bad now. You were some of both then; you're some of both now. Nobody is rotten to the core." (pp. 499–500)

In these words there is much more than a touch of the kind of pragmatic wisdom that comes of having been exposed to hardship. Certainly, the Soulsbys—both Mrs. and her husband—having been itinerant sideshow performers, have had a checkered career. Their pragmatism involves a view of life that will not permit any excessive idealization either of life's pitfalls or of its possibilities. Although they do not see life steadily or whole, they are at least aware that learning comes as much from experience as from books. Consequently they can accept the world for what it is rather than for what they would like it to be. And they are never too proud to admit a certain complicity in the world's duplicity. In this they are much more "human" than Theron, for they have the ability to compromise where compromise does no great harm either to themselves or to others.

Until his final escape from Octavius and the ministry, Theron's urges to flee have not been entirely unacted-upon. His early gestures, though tentative, have been made as far back as his boyhood on the farm. Born and reared on the farm, Theron has seen the ministry not merely as a dedication but as an escape from the drab monotony and drudgery of farm life. Thus, even as far back as his transition from farmer to minister, one
Fall from Innocence and Escape from Guilt

can already see the seeds of discontent that will later blossom into the full flower of flight. For “neither his early strenuous battle to get away from the farm and achieve such education as should serve to open to him the gates of professional life, nor the later wave of religious enthusiasm which caught him up as he stood on the border-land of manhood, and swept him off into a veritable new world of views and aspirations, had been a likely school of merriment” (p. 29). Even before his marriage to her, Theron sees in Alice a possible avenue of escape:

She was fresh from the refinements of a town seminary: she read books; it was known that she could play upon the piano. Her clothes, her manners, her way of speaking, the readiness of her thoughts and sprightly tongue,—not least, perhaps, the imposing current understanding as to her father’s wealth,—placed her on a glorified pinnacle far away from the girls of the neighborhood. (p. 27)

If, from the first moment of his arrival in Octavius, Theron has no conscious urge to escape, he has at least begun to give way to a wistful yearning. Discouraged by his first interview with the trustees of the Octavius church, Theron already feels like running away. On this occasion the trustees inform him where they stand on such matters as flower-bedecked “bunnits” and their antagonism toward “book-learnin’ or dictionary words in [the] pulpit” (p. 43). They go on to tell him that “no new-fangled notions can go down here. Your wife’d better take them flowers out of her bunnit afore next Sunday. What we want here, sir, is straight-out, flat-footed hell,—the burnin’ lake o’ fire an’ brimstone. Pour it into ‘em, hot an’ strong” (pp. 43-44).

Theron’s escapes, or what have thus far been proclivities, are as yet not consciously conceived in explicit physical terms or plans. He would like to “learn a trade,” write a book, enjoy a
certain solitude (as he actually succeeds in doing when he con-
tracts some vaguely defined, probably psychosomatic, illness).
But he does not even begin to contemplate an actual escape in
terms of geographical flight until the end of the book, an es-
cape that also coincides with the end of his year in Octavius.

For some months before his urge to escape becomes a con-
scious plan, Theron, still the minister, desires to make the best
of both worlds: to enjoy his position as minister—with all of
the respect and regard such a position exacts from others—and
to indulge his whims. But this conflict of interests sets him up
as an excellent target for his own self-destructive urges. This
kind of fence-straddling is then untenable. Sooner or later he
must decide which it is to be—the "buried life" in Octavius or
escape from it; sooner or later he must translate his urges into
action.

His first plan is of course the dead-end plan of an escape
with Celia. Yet, blind as it is, both as to its possibilities and
consequences, it is one of the first signs that Theron is now
consciously planning an escape of some sort; the circumstances
of his wife and the church, both to whom and to which he is
"married," lead him consciously into the practical considera-
tions of such a projected flight:

But he could not enter upon this beckoning heaven of a future
until he had freed himself. When Celia said to him "Come!" he
must not be in the position to reply, "I should like to, but un-
fortunately I am tied by the leg." He should have to leave Oc-
tavius, leave the ministry, leave everything. He could not begin
too soon to face these contingencies. (pp. 394-95)

In this early, consciously considered escape, then, we see what
later turns out to be the great impulse that not only will take
Theron Ware out of Octavius, but out of a way of life he had
heretofore (until his arrival in the town) resigned himself to.
These early considerations of escape have taken three forms: first, his desire to escape from the church and its ministry; second, his desire to escape from Alice and what he feels to be an unfortunate marriage; and third, his desire to escape his former (innocent) self. Theron pleasurably indulges in one of these fantasies on the train that is taking him to New York City and to what he hopes will be a critical and successful reunion with Celia Madden. Peering out the window, he sees a rich man's yacht that will take them both to those happy isles of blissful irresponsibility:

Ah, how the tender visions crowded now upon him! Eternal summer basked round this enchanted yacht of his fancy,—summer sought now in Scottish firths or Norwegian fiords, now in quaint old Southern harbors, ablaze with the hues of strange costumes and half-tropical flowers and fruits, now in far-away Oriental bays and lagoons, or among the coral reefs and palm-trees of the luxurious Pacific. He dwelt upon these new imaginings with the fervent longing of an inland-born boy. Every vague yearning he had ever felt toward salt-water stirred again in his blood at the thought of the sea—with Celia. (p. 454)

If the yacht represents for Theron an escape from responsibility, it also suggests the Edenic idyll of innocence that has been the staple of American fiction since Melville's *Typee*. Of course, Theron's dream of escape with Celia on such a yacht (symbol of the ideal escape?) is in the realm of pure fantasy, because it is based on nothing more substantial than Theron's innocent vision of the world. Yet—and we might call this a fault of hyper-imagination in Theron—fantasy that it is, it nevertheless represents for this minister *manqué* a sharp and pleasant contrast to the drab-hued existence of his life in Octavius.

Throughout the year in Octavius—a year that for Theron represents a spiritual lifetime—the minister, whether he has
known it or not, has been attempting to flee the mask toward his truer (perhaps better) self. Because Theron Ware had thought of himself as possessing a kind of Edenic goodness, when he finally discovers a side of himself that he had never thought existed, the knowledge almost kills him. As Sister Soulsby puts it, “Whatever else he does, he will never want to come within gunshot of a pulpit again. It came too near murdering him for that” (p. 506).

Theron Ware, having finally learned a lesson, can now turn his back on the past and look toward the future and a new way of life. Disabused of his outworn illusions, he can now face a new life in a new country. For Theron, the year has come full circle, and, looking toward the future, he can now decide to take his chance in the West—Seattle—where he will build a new life, perhaps even go into politics. To Alice, Seattle “sounds like the other end of the world,” which of course, in a sense, it is. And even more than that, Seattle represents for Theron not only the “other end of the world” but a new world. Like all of those escapers extending back into the American past, Theron is also in the tradition of the escaper who, if he is to survive as an individual and a human being, must strike out into the “wilderness” of a new life. For Theron, as for Huck and Deerslayer before him, the restrictive settlements have closed in, and he must “light out,” if he is to save himself from an even greater calamity than he has already experienced.

The final scene—that of Theron’s departure for the West—takes place in the spring, signifying renewal and the rebirth of hope. Like George Willard, who also takes his leave of the old life in the spring, Theron will depart (or escape) in a season of promise. Thus, The Damnation of Theron Ware, though a story of a fall, is really the story of a fortunate fall (even if “fortunate” in a highly qualified sense). For Theron has left his greater innocence behind in Octavius; he has grown to
larger manhood, with a more mature knowledge of the world—namely, a knowledge of his limitations.

1. Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware, or Illumination* (Chicago, New York, 1896), p. 357. All further quotations are from this edition, published by the Herbert S. Stone Co.

2. Italics added. It is interesting to note that these very words could apply to Celia Madden later in the story. Having at last begun to identify his wife with his drab ministry, Theron sees in Celia all of the glamour, the beauty, and the excitement he had once seen in Alice; for Celia too “reads books,” and plays a musical instrument—an organ in Father Forbes’s church.