Chapter 2
Unlocking the Gate   *At Heaven’s Gate*, 1943

Chapter 1    Jerry Calhoun, former college football star, flies back from New York City where Bogan Murdock, a financial tycoon in a 1920s southern city that seems a cross between Nashville and Memphis, had sent him on business. Although Murdock's daughter, Sue, and Jerry are lovers of a sort, on the evening of his return she asks Slim Sarrett, a graduate student at the local university, to take her out to dinner. The governor, accompanied by World War I hero Private Porsum, dines at the home of Murdock, who proposes to donate a tract of mountainous land to the state on the condition it be named for his father, Major Lemuel Murdock, now in his dotage.

Chapter 2    The beginning of Ashby Wyndham's "Statement," which will take up alternating chapters for most of the novel. Wyndham is a religious fanatic from the hill country of the state who has wound up in jail and has been invited to write the narrative of how he came to be there.

Chapter 3    Jerry Calhoun's childhood: his father, strong but incompetent about small things, his mean-tempered and club-footed Uncle Lew (his dead mother's brother), his blind Aunt Ursula; Jerry at college, poor but academically, socially, and athletically successful, is offered a job by Bogan Murdock upon graduation (which would mean abandoning his study of geology).

Chapter 4    Wyndham's upbringing: Orphaned early, he lived with his brother, Jacob. When a wagon with a sick old man and a young woman passes by, the brothers take them in; the old man dies, and Marie gets a job as a cook at the Massey Mountain sawmill.

Chapter 5    Jerry works in the financial department of Murdock's company for three years, getting sound advice and instruction in economics from Duckfoot Blake, an accountant in the firm. On a visit to his father, Jerry hears how Lem Murdock once assassinated Moxby Goodpasture when both were running for governor.
Chapter 6  Ashby Wyndham, returning from a visit to Marie at Massey Mountain, gets roaring drunk and kills her mule in a wagon accident. He tells Jacob he will go to work at Massey to get the cash to compensate her for the mule.

Chapter 7  Sue Murdock, who alternates between pretending to pay no attention to Jerry Calhoun and then demanding that he make love to her at potentially dangerous times and places, is playing Ellida in the college's production of Ibsen's *Lady from the Sea*. Bogan wants Jerry to marry his daughter so that he can be a better father to her than he has been.

Chapter 8  Marie is pregnant; Ashby wants to marry her and get Jacob to sell the homestead so that he can cash in his half. Jacob refuses, and Ashby strikes him down and walks away, with blood on his hands.

Chapter 9  Jerry takes Sue to visit his folks. She surprises him by announcing that they are to be married. At a country club party, where there is mention of labor troubles at Murdock's timber operation on Massey Mountain, Sue slips out. When she doesn't return, Jerry pays a man in a bar to call to see if she's come home, but she hasn't. He has the nightmarish fantasy that she has been kidnapped and murdered.

Chapter 10  Jacob has left, sold the homestead, and left all the money to Ashby.

Chapter 11  Sue had taken a taxi to town and arranged for Slim Sarrett to meet her there. He tells her what he claims is the story of his life: that his father was a New Orleans barge captain killed in an explosion (and that he had a recurring nightmare about seeing his father's head drifting toward him with "a hank of dirty white clothesline" attached), and tells of a succession of other "fathers"—chief among them the South American Almendro, whose seductive eyes Sarrett learned to imitate by practicing in front of a mirror.

Chapter 12  Marie gives birth.

Chapter 13  Sue returns home, accuses her mother, Dorothy, of leading an empty life, packs her bags, and leaves home. Her mother, suddenly feeling decisive, makes an appointment with Private Porsum to look at a horse he has for sale.

Chapter 14  Marie is sickly after the birth of Frank. Jason Sweetwater organizes a strike at Massey Mountain; Ashby supports him. Private Porsum, Ashby's "second blood cousin," comes to speak against the strike. Ashby's moral sense is offended in this debate when Sweetwater "takes a lie off a man" and doesn't defend his honor. When Sweetwater calls Porsum a liar, Ashby hits Sweetwater with a chunk of rock. Sweetwater is hauled off to jail.
Chapter 15 Sarrett is reading aloud to Sue from a paper on Elizabethan tragedy, sounding very much like Warren in "Pure and Impure Poetry." Description of Sarrett's coterie, which includes Sweetwater. Sue takes a dingy apartment, drawing on the interest of her grandmother's legacy.

Chapter 16 Ashby is laid off, as are all those who had first sided with Sweetwater. Their child, Frank, dies. Ashby hears Frank's voice tell him he died because he could not thrive on "the vittles of wickedness" (the money from the sale of the house) and that Ashby must go find Jacob and be reconciled with him.

Chapter 17 Murdock decides to send Porsum up to Massey Mountain to calm the strikers (an action preceding the events of chapter 14). Murdock gives Jerry a card on which he has written Sue's address. Jerry stops first at a drugstore to buy an envelope of condoms. Sue, persuaded that her father sent him, refuses his advances.

Chapter 18 Ashby and Marie leave Massey Mountain to look for Jacob. They pass from town to town, Ashby preaching his gospel, acquiring fellow travelers along the way, eventually living on a riverboat.

Chapter 19 Bogan comes to Sue's apartment to try to persuade her to come back to the family. Sarrett walks in, is insolent to Murdock, and boasts of his physical superiority. Bogan departs; that night Sue becomes Slim's mistress. At a Sarrett party, a Mr. Billie Constantidopeles shows up and mentions having recently spoken to Slim's father. Sue is furious, for Sarrett had told her his father died when he was a child. Another revelation is in store: Sarrett and Constantidopeles are caught in a homosexual embrace in the kitchen. Pandemonium ensues; Sweetwater escorts Sue home to her apartment.

Chapter 20 Ashby, drawn into a fight in Hulltown, is nursed back to health by Pearl, a prostitute.

Chapter 21 Jerry's father informs him that he is being foreclosed on; it's because Bogan wants to convert the area into a hunt club. Duckfoot tells Jerry that Murdock's company has committed some illegalities and that he's resigning before they're all arrested. The newspaper attacks Bogan's father concerning the park in his name and the "dumping" of the timber company and other holdings at enormous cost to the state. Bogan calls home to tell the black servant Anse to keep Bogan's father from reading the paper; Anse, however, neglects to do so. Lemuel Murdock, crazy and packing a pistol, hitches a ride to town on a mule wagon.

Chapter 22 Sue and Sweetwater are now lovers, although Sarrett keeps sending her published poems that he has dedicated to her. Sue tells Sweetwater she is pregnant, but he doesn't want to spoil his career as a labor organizer by getting married again. Sue says she'll get an abortion.
Chapter 23  Marie takes sick and dies. Pearl shoots a policeman and they all wind up in jail. A reporter comes to tell Private Porsum his cousin Wyndham is under arrest and asks what is he going to do about it. Porsum tries to get him out but Wyndham refuses. Flashback to Porsum wiping out a machine-gun nest singlehandedly (though with the help of a certain Percy) in the war.

Chapter 24  Porsum confronts Murdock with the letter he has given to the newspaper in which he apologizes for his role in the scandal. Dorothy Murdock claims that she and Porsum had an affair. Bogan draws a gun on Porsum, who (truthfully) denies it.

Chapter 25  Sarrett tries to talk to Sue; Sweetwater throws him out. Sue gets the abortion. Sarrett returns later and strangles her, stealing some $943. Though he also steals two rings and a bracelet, once outside he wraps them in a sheet of newspaper and thrusts them into the sewer.

Chapter 26  Anse has been arrested for Sue's murder. Duckfoot Blake visits Jerry, in jail for the Murdock financial scandal, to await the arrival of a bail bondsman. A crowd forms to lynch Anse. Porsum tries to talk them out of it; he is struck by a brick, and that disperses the crowd.

Chapter 27  Sarrett arrives in a hotel room in New York with expensive new clothes, does his calisthenics, and begins work on a poem. Jerry returns home to his father, ashamed of but aware that he has wished that Bogan were his father and that his real father were dead. Bogan, apparently recovered from the scandal (having benefited from public sympathy for the tragedy of his daughter's death), smiles for photographers in his living room, beneath a portrait of Andrew Jackson.

If the clue by which Night Rider provides access to the latent content beneath its surface is a sentence that doesn't quite fit—whether that sentence be the one about the Theban handkerchiefs or the one in Tolliver's letter—then its equivalent in At Heaven's Gate may be a certain hint about hieroglyphics. It appears when Sue Murdock realizes that she cannot really interpret the scars Jerry Calhoun's former unsophisticated rural background had left on him—for example, the clumsy way he held an unsmoked lighted cigarette and then knocked over an ashtray trying to put it out: “For a long time she tried to interpret those marks, to understand what life and meaning, what patience and strength and fortitude, lay behind them, but she did not have a key for the hieroglyphics.” Jerry doesn't either, “for he had forgotten their true meaning or had put it from his mind.” These hieroglyphics connote more than indecipherable writing. They are also, true to the original sense of glyph, carved
into a surface, for in Jerry's case they can be erased through abrasion: "Then, after a while, the marks themselves were worn away, smoothed out by the daily abrasions of the world she knew, the world . . . of her father" (59). Calhoun, in other words, was destined to lose his country roughness and agrarian integrity as he acquired the urban polish he needed to succeed in the business world of Bogan Murdock, his employer and the man he in the end admits he would rather have had for a father. Slim Sarrett, though not privy to this aspect of Jerry's life, nevertheless echoes these sentiments: "The successful man . . . offers only the smooth surface . . . In so far as he is truly successful, he has no story" (196).

That roughness and indentation are indicative of a hidden story is something Jerry would have already known from his college training in geology. "All I know is a little geology," he admits to Duckfoot Blake, who would show him the ropes. "Then you better forget it," Blake replies. "You don't want to let anything tarnish that profound and fruitful ignorance which is the *sine qua non* of your chosen profession" (72). What he needs to do well in this job is a smooth surface, a tabula rasa. He doesn't even need to memorize the pitches the other salesmen commit to memory "and run out quick to say . . . to somebody before they forget it. But do they know what it is? Hell no," Duckfoot exclaims, about to make another hieroglyphic reference. "You might as well make 'em memorize the Rosetta Stone."

Yet Jerry's hieroglyphics will still be there at the end of the novel, as he will realize when he returns, after the disgrace of Murdock's financial scandal, to sleep once more in his father's house. Murdock had foreclosed on the mortgage in order to turn the area into a kind of Appalachian theme park (though its tenants were still allowed to live in it, for a while), and as a result the house had been "restored"—rebuilt from the inside, painted and papered. What Jerry discovers is that "Under the paper there was the old wall, secret, aware, with eyes to see the old Jerry Calhoun under the new" (386). Similarly, in the opening pages, as Jerry gazes down at the landscape from an airplane, he draws upon his geological expertise to recall that a prehistoric sea, with its slime and sediment, had once covered the kind of indentations he had been trained to read, and that those fossil imprints had retained their communicative power despite the weight of the mass of water and sludge:

That great valley, and these hills themselves, had lain—how many years ago—under the suffocating mass, and undifferentiating tread, of water. It had been a lightless slime, receiving . . . the sediments and wastage of a life above. . . . It had its history. He had seen the shell in the limestone which had once been slime; the print of the frond, its delicacy unimpaired. He
had chipped these things out of stone, with his hammer. He . . .
had sorted and classified them. (10)

Like Ianthe Sprague in Night Rider, whose “delicate discrimination” made her resemble an underwater creature at the bottom of the ocean who sustained herself by “absorbing the appropriate matter and ejecting all else,” Jerry in his student days could likewise draw a certain intellectual nourishment from whatever he found on what had once been an ocean floor, rejecting irrelevant matter by chipping it away with his hammer, sorting and classifying what remained with something like Ianthe’s punctilious discrimination.

As he sat in that airplane, Jerry had the fantasy that the prehistoric sea had returned, though without altering in the least the delicate marks: “Now he looked down upon the valley, and the last light, layered, striated, and rippling, was like the substance of a crystalline sea which had risen again, on the instant, to drown out that valley, but had done so with such subtlety that not a single item of its cunning and laborious perfections had been altered” (10). If is as if at the moment he is about to reenter Murdock’s world Jerry intuited Sue’s perception of the danger that the marks of his original character could be rubbed out by the abrasive power of that business milieu, and as if his diluvial fantasy were an attempt to ward off the risk. Indeed, his Aunt Ursula’s hands, which had nurtured him ever since the death in childbirth of his mother, and which were thus part of that original world whose marks Sue sought to decipher, revealed beneath their fleshy surface something very much like the “cunning . . . perfections” that, in his daydream, that sea could not alter: “Her hands, with the beauty and cunning of their bony structure scarcely concealed by the . . . skin which sheathed it . . .” (364; emphasis added).

Now the first thing presented to our view in the very first words of At Heaven’s Gate is seen through a layer of light that bears an interesting resemblance to the one that caught Jerry’s eye in the plane. Like the “light, layered . . . like the substance of a crystalline sea” through which he saw the earth below, it too is somewhat aqueous: “It was the brilliant, high, windless sky of early autumn. The blue was paler than the blue of summer, but not leached out, still positive, and drenched in sunlight as though treated with a wash which was transparent but full of minute gold flecks” (3). A painter’s term, a wash is a thin layer of watercolor applied to the surface of an otherwise completed picture. Like the crystalline sea Jerry imagined covering the landscape beneath him and which the “last light, layered, striated, and rippling,” embodied, this wash is a trick of the light; and, like the wash a painter would apply as his final touch, it would not fundamentally alter what it covered. Neither did the fresh paint on his
father's house nor the new paper on the walls, as he was to discover when he felt the gaze of the eyes beneath the wallpaper.

Of these three instances of intervening, covering, yet ultimately unaltering layers—the watercolorist's wash, the primeval ocean, and the new paper on the walls of Jerry's father's house—it is through the last that this novel most clearly speaks the allegory of its own construction. The house is strangely the same and yet not the same. His father, uncle, and aunt had had to move out during its restoration (had in fact been evicted, but Jerry got Murdock to allow them to return temporarily). When they returned, "the objects which [his father] had so long been accustomed to were, though set in the old locations, in contrast to the new, discreetly gleaming walls, the even floors, the tight glass" (365). As Jerry was to find, there was something strangely familiar about the place, something that played with one's sense of place. What I hope to show in this chapter is that At Heaven's Gate, like that house whose new surfaces belie an essentially unchanged inner architecture and arrangement of furniture, is to a remarkable degree the same house Warren built when he wrote Night Rider. There is a certain identity of structure dissimulated beneath a new paper covering, in a house haunted by the same ghostly eyes.

Both novels are principally concerned with the decline and fall of a corporate enterprise—the Tobacco Association and Murdock's financial empire—and with what happens to a young man who has been seduced by a fatherly figure to hitch his wagon to the star of that enterprise when it descends into illegality and collapses. Percy Munn is hunted down and slain by agents of the law; Jerry Calhoun is arrested and imprisoned for being in Murdock's employ, and though Duckfoot Blake arranges bail and Jerry's father comes to take him home, his legal situation is by no means resolved at the end of the novel. It was when Senator Tolliver allowed the newspapers to print his letter of resignation that things began to sour for the Tobacco Association, and it is when Private Porsum denounces the machinations of Murdock's company through a letter to the newspaper first shown to Murdock (as the members of the board of the Association were likewise given the opportunity to read Tolliver's letter before its newspaper appearance) that the situation becomes irretrievable. Even the unnamed black from Mr. May's place who was hanged for a murder he did not commit returns in the person of the black servant, Anse, the Murdock family servant who is arrested (and will in all likelihood die) for Slim Sarrett's murder of Sue Murdock.

But it is the haunting that makes the papered-over walls in Jerry's old room such an evocative image; for what appeared to Percy Munn in a dream—the paper-covered bundle that was both his son and his father(s)—returns in a haunting way here. It begins to make its presence felt through
another dream of a son about a father, the one Sarrett recounts to Sue when he tells her the story of his life. His father, he says, was a barge captain who died in a boiler explosion.

“When I was a child I used to have a nightmare about his being blown to pieces. How his head—just his head, with something hanging out of the neck like a hank of dirty white clothesline—would come drifting through the air toward me, in the dark, dripping wet and muddy and with weeds in his beard and smelling of river mud and whisky. . . . And his face would be straining and twitching, so that I knew it was trying to tell me something. It would come close to me and put the mouth to my ear, but I couldn’t hear a thing. . . .” (156)

The resemblance here to Munn’s dream is astonishing: the head that tries to tell him something (“the face . . . was alive and strove to speak”), “dripping” and “smelling” (“dripping . . . and with a stench like death”), with “a hank of dirty white clothesline” attached (the white newspaper “hanging in shreds . . . the last shreds of the sodden paper fell away from what was the face”). Consider as well the fact that while Munn’s dream was a dream of the father bearing the disguise of Bunk Trevelyan, this dream bears the disguise of the father. The dream itself, however, is a disguise: Sarrett, it turns out, is lying. His father is still alive, was never a barge captain, and is presently a washing-machine salesman in Miami, Florida—as Mr. Billie Constantidopeles reveals when he unexpectedly shows up at Sarrett’s party (255).

A certain telltale element of Sarrett’s dream makes a strange reappearance toward the end of the novel when Jerry contemplates his father’s head:

He looked at his father’s face above the white shirt, the buttonless collar with the wisp of thread, the twisted tie. Looking at that wisp of thread, he saw with a horrible precision his father leaning over the open drawer, fumbling for the white shirt, dropping it in his haste, fumbling with the buttons, tearing off the button, his big knotted swollen hands shaking and his breath coming hard. And that scene was there before his eyes clearer than reality, and it was the last indignity, the last assault upon him, the last betrayal. No—it was more—it—(380)

Jerry is in jail, and his father has come to take him home. The wisp of thread (“Looking at that wisp of thread, he saw with a horrible precision . . .”) is a hieroglyph of character (just like the ones Sue tried to read on Jerry), the sign of something peculiar to his father, his innate clumsiness with his hands. “That was the image of his father which had dominated his
childhood, not the image of his father performing his casual and unprideful feats of strength" (41), but his incompetence at small tasks. "The stiff fingers could not hold the buckle, the wrench . . . the face would work with the agony of its intenseness," though his father's typical response to this impasse was not fury but gentle acquiescence. But "Jerry, when he was a little boy and was often with his father on the farm, could scarcely bear those moments . . . and, especially as he grew older . . . this confusion . . . might suddenly coagulate into a cold core of hatred, and he would suppress the impulse to hurl the object to the ground and strike out at his father or run away. At those times he felt as he did the time his setter puppy fell into the old well . . ." (41). The puppy could not accomplish the task of climbing into the bucket he had lowered to save it. Its "thin, mechanical, gargling, accurately timed yelps . . . strangely resonant" in the deep well, got to the boy, who, "involuntarily . . . dropped the rope and watched it spin down to the water, and sink. He grubbed an old brick from the sod, and with the icy assurance of hatred, or something like hatred, hard in him now, leaned far over. . . . The one brick did it."

The trail of white thread beneath Jerry's father's head, then, is the sign both of his father's most characteristic trait, his incompetent hands, and of his son's long-standing desire to kill him, while hands themselves, though competent, were the sign of the father in Night Rider: Tolliver's hand on Munn's shoulder, Professor Ball's white-bandaged ones, the way in which Captain Todd raised his for silence. But a trail of white thread is also what ties this vision of a father to the dream Sarrett tells: to the "hank" of white clothesline that hung from Slim's father's head, as well as to "the white trail" of talcum powder Sue Murdock's hasty packing left across the carpet when she decided to leave home (178).

It is more probable that Sarrett made up the dream than that he dreamed it, since he tells it to Sue in the context of the lie about his father having his head blown off in an explosion. Fictive or not, it is a dream in the text and calls out for interpretation. Its telltale hank of white clothesline is particularly illustrative of Freud's discovery that each of the elements of a dream has "been determined many times over in relation to the dream-thoughts" (318), although in this instance the dream-thoughts do not, as they did with Munn, belong just to the dreamer but—appropriately, as a dream invented by a poet who bears such a strong resemblance to the author of the novel—to the text in which the dream appears. The resemblance between the hank of white clothesline and the wisp of thread is part of the latent content of At Heaven's Gate and not of Slim Sarrett's psyche; so, too, is the white trail emerging from Sue's suitcase. Although, if Sarrett already knew what Constantidopelés was later to reveal about his father's current line of work—that he sold washing machines—then, as a piece of clothesline, this trailing white fragment could function in his dream to reveal
some of the latent content of Sarrett’s own psyche; for it is the perfect
disguise for his father’s real identity, alluding to the truth that is otherwise
masked. In fact, it is precisely because the “something hanging out of the
neck like a hank of dirty white clothesline” appears in the dream as some­
thing extra, something unaccountable, that it really is most likely to be a
nagging indication of the truth behind the fiction of the death of the father.
The dream is more accurate than the lie in which it appears, for even as
the father’s severed head emerges there as if fresh from the explosion that
Sarrett says killed him, it brings with it evidence of his real profession and
consequently gives the lie to the tale of his demise.

Freud found that dreams are profoundly linguistic, often employing
ambiguous words and even downright puns to accomplish their deciphera­
ble disguises. He cites Alexander’s dream, recounted by Artemidorus, of a
satyr dancing on his shield at the time he was besieging Tyre; the conqueror
was thus encouraged to pursue the siege to successful completion, because
sa Tyros means “Tyre is thine” (131-32n). Sarrett’s dream is no exception
to this, provided we view it with regard to the latent content of the novel
and of the one that precedes it, for it is perhaps no accident that he calls
the white object hanging from his father’s head a hank: no accident, that is,
in the context of a latent content in which handkerchiefs—hankies—play
such a significant role. There is a direct trail (white, like the one Sue left on
the carpet) leading from this dream to Percy Munn’s, from this hank of
white to the newspaper shreds that hung from that father, and from those
pieces of newspaper to Theban—and other—handkerchiefs. Even the
square of white cloth napkin in which Sissie Proudfit wrapped the rolls (as
well as the bread they enclosed) she brought to Munn reappears here, when,
in the same narrative in which he tells the dream, Sarrett recounts how his
mother “was in the habit of bringing me cake or something of the sort from
the restaurant, wrapped up in a paper napkin” (159).

A most curious gesture near the end of At Heaven’s Gate recalls the
parallel roles of wrapping and concealment that handkerchiefs and news­
papers play in these two novels, though it suggests even more. When Sarrett
murders Sue Murdock, he rifles through her bureau drawers to find the
money she had saved. “To perform these operations, he covered his right
hand with a handkerchief” (362). He found as well two rings and a bracelet,
which he took with him when he left her apartment and wrapped up in a
sheet of newspaper he found on the street, but then—almost inexplicably—“thrust the mass of paper down through the grating of a gutter
sewer . . . he congratulated himself on the idea. Nobody would ever find
those things there” (363). What nobody would ever find is actually a re­
markable double literary allusion—on the novel’s part if not Sarrett’s—to
two plays already more or less explicitly evoked in At Heaven’s Gate. One
is Shakespeare’s Cymbeline, from which the title comes (“Hark, hark, the
lark at heaven’s gate sings . . .” [2.3.20]), and the other is Ibsen's The Lady from the Sea, the drama in which Sue Murdock is playing the leading role—in more ways than she may realize.

Ibsen's play is the story of a dream—a nightmare—that comes true. Ellida, whose role Sarrett sees Sue act in a college production, has a recurring dream in which she sees standing before her the sailor with whom she had been romantically involved years before: “[H]e is drowned at sea. But the strange thing is that he has come home nevertheless. It's in the nighttime; and he stands there by her bedside and looks at her. He must be dripping wet, just as when they haul you up out of the sea” (251). We owe this vivid account not to Ellida but to Lyngstrand, a sculptor who is describing to her—without realizing that he is in fact talking about her—a sculpture for which he would like her to pose. He happened to have been on the ship with the man Ellida had once loved when that man, Albert Johnston, received the news that she had married someone else. Lyngstrand heard Johnston vow that, marriage nor not, Ellida was still his, and that she would have to follow him, “though I should have to go home and fetch her, as a drowned man from the bottom of the sea” (253). When she heard that, Ellida must have felt she was dreaming right then, for that scene was exactly the dream she had been having.

Sarrett watched Sue act out this scene in rehearsal, and he did so before he told her the story of his possibly fictive dream, so that The Lady from the Sea occupies a place in relation to his dream strangely analogous to the place the ballad of Pretty Polly occupies in relation to Percy Munn's—strangely so, because of the similarity of the stories they tell: in one, an abandoned woman comes back to haunt her lover at the bottom of the ocean; in the other, an abandoned lover comes back “from the bottom of the sea” to haunt the woman who left him. And, to hear Sarrett tell it, his father came back to him in quite similar fashion, “dripping wet . . . with weeds in his beard and smelling of river mud.” Sarrett's words recall Lyngstrand's: “dripping wet, just as when they haul you up out of the sea.” The words “dripping wet” appear in each of two translations widely available at the time Warren wrote the novel: the Archer translation (1912), cited here, and the Everyman Library edition (1910).

Now if Sarrett, litterateur that he was, was projecting his interest in Sue Murdock onto Ibsen's play, he must have been rather pleased to hear her tell him that the way she gathered sufficient courage to leave her fiancé Jerry Calhoun was by pretending she was in a play: “It was like when you rehearse something over and over in a play . . . in the end you didn't feel a thing, you just did something, and if you did it right you felt beautiful and empty, like a dream. It was like that” (151–52).

And this might help to explain Sarrett's strange gesture with the rings and bracelet. For in throwing them into the sewer, when they would be
carried to the river (it was a city on a river—if Nashville, then the Cumberland; if Memphis, the Mississippi) and then to the ocean, he was enacting a parody of the ritual by which Albert Johnson had "married" Ellida years before she left him to marry someone else. It was a "marriage" that had the force of a lasting bond for him, despite its informality and the fact that it had not, then or later, meant the same thing to her: "He took a key-ring out of his pocket, and drew off his finger a ring he used to wear. Then he took from me a little ring that I had, and these two he slipped together on the key-ring. . . . And then he flung the large ring and the two small ones as far as ever he could into the deep water" (285–86). But the most extraordinary thing about Sarrett's gesture is that it accomplishes something else as well. In wrapping up those two rings and a bracelet in newspaper and thrusting the packing into the sewer, Sarrett, far from burying the evidence, has wrapped up allusions not only to Ibsen's Lady but to Shakespeare's Cymbeline too—a play that, like his fictive dream, features a severed floating head. And a stolen bracelet.

In Cymbeline, that stolen bracelet is the most tangible evidence Jachimo can use to persuade Posthumus Leonatus of his wife's unfaithfulness, which he is trying to do for a bet. Claiming that Imogen had given it freely, and providing descriptive evidence gathered from a night spent hidden in her room, Jachimo is able to trick Posthumus into believing he has lost the wager. Posthumus, the deceived husband, bears more than a little resemblance to Jerry Calhoun. Both were orphaned from their mothers at birth. While Posthumus was raised in a royal household as a kind of adopted son, Jerry was taken in by Bogan Murdock who, as head of the Massey Mountain empire, occupied a role in the region that could be described as monarchial. Murdock paid Jerry's college fraternity bills, offered him a job in the firm, and received him as a frequent visitor to the house. Here Posthumus's and Jerry's careers diverge, for while Murdock approved of the idea of Calhoun marrying his daughter, Cymbeline was forced by his wife to banish Posthumus from the kingdom.

But it is the fate of Posthumus's rival, Cloten, that resurfaces most intriguingly in At Heaven's Gate: "Guiderius: With his own sword, / . . . I have ta'en / His head from him. I'll throw't into the creek / Behind our rock, rock, and let it to the sea, / And tell the fishes he's the Queen's son, Cloten" (4.2.149–53). Sarrett's nightmare of a head drifting through the air dripping from a watery catastrophe now appears to have, as does his thrusting the newspaper-wrapped bracelet and rings into the sewer, a double literary origin: the returning shipwrecked, wet ghost in Ibsen, the trunkless head in Shakespeare. His use of a gutter to dispose of something that had belonged to the person he just killed repeats the act of Guiderius, who tossed Cloten's head into the stream that probably passed for a sewer behind the cave where he, his brother, and adopted father lived.
That Sarrett should choose to wrap the rings and bracelet in newspaper may not be random either, in the larger scheme of things. He was, in a way, burying Sue in that sewer, disposing of those personal effects as carefully (if not as delicately) as if they had been her body. "Nobody would ever find those things there. Those things had belonged to Sue Murdock, and now nobody would ever find them" (363). At this juncture we might reasonably feel that we are in a strangely familiar place, as if we had turned a corner in Heaven's house and found ourselves back in Night Rider, where a dreamer could accomplish in his dreamwork the murder of his enemies and give them all a newspaper shroud. For not only is the newspaper wrapping in Percy's dream present once more, but the fetus, too: Sue had, until shortly before Sarrett strangled her, been pregnant.

The father of the fetus, Jason Sweetwater, seemed to see, as it would be there under his hand, the little hunched-up creature, blind, unbreathing, the tiny hands and feet like delicate carving... He remembered fetuses in jars, the wizened, little, simian-wise faces, intent, and for all their wisdom, contorted in profound puzzlement. He remembered the Indian mummies he had once seen at Salt Lake City, how they were hunched, and the eyelids squinting because there was nothing under them any more, and the intent contorted faces. Those faces were like the faces of the fetuses, the same look, intent, contorted, the same invincible, painful abstraction. Before and after taking. (317)

Like the fetus in Munn's dream, the one inside Sue Murdock stands as much or more for death as for life. Even as Sweetwater places his hand on her stomach and imagines it beneath his touch, it is about to be placed under a death sentence, since he has already told Sue he will not marry her and a few pages later she announces that she will have an abortion (320). (Her death at Sarrett's hands takes place the day she returns from the abortionist.) It is touched by death, too, because the emblematic significance it has for Jason lies in its uncanny likeness to a mummy—with its oscillation between a look of wisdom and puzzlement, an intent expression suggesting both knowledge and ignorance but really due to neither. The eyes have such falsely expressive power because, in the case of the mummies, there is nothing under them any more (and, in the case of the fetuses, because there is nothing under them yet).

Fetuses and eyes appear in one of a series of poems, Eleven Poems on the Same Theme, published by Warren a year before At Heaven's Gate. There they are said to resemble each other because both are hieratic, which is to say that they are both sacred (hieros) and hieroglyphic ("hieratic" in this sense is a term coined by the decipherer Champollion to describe a
In these poems, as Warren was to explain them later (in his Author’s Note to Friar and Brinnin, 542–43), the white-robed Roman fathers and similarly clad Moor represent an ancient knowledge complete in itself but unable to speak to the needs of modernity, an unteachable secret (the “might” in those lines from “Terror” representing wishful thinking on the part of those who sought such knowledge) like, it would appear, the inaccessible, wizened wisdom Sweetwater saw in the fetuses under glass.

The construction of “Terror” centers around a juxtaposition that justifies the likening of Moorish with fetal knowledge and goes some distance toward explaining why both are characterized in the poetic sequence as “hieratic.” The poem begins with a headline from an Italian newspaper announcing that American volunteers serving in foreign armies would not lose their citizenship, and, as Warren later commented, the “idea for the poem came” when he saw in the same newspaper (or another newspaper the same day) both that story, which referred to Americans fighting Russians in Finland, and “a report of the ‘death’ of the chicken heart which Alexis Carrel had kept alive for a long time in his laboratory and which had for popular-science writers the promise of a mortal immortality.” In both the poem and his explanatory note Warren takes those volunteers to task for being so caught up in “passionate emptiness and tidal / Lusts” that their heroism had no meaning. Allied with the Soviets in Spain, they fought against them in Finland: “They fight old friends, for their obsession knows / Only the immaculate itch, not human friends or foes.” These are the ones who sought a secret the Moor (glimpsed in Spain) might teach.

Carrel comes in on the heels of Onan:

You know, by radio, how hotly the world repeats,
When the brute crowd roars or the blunt boot-heels resound
In the Piazza or the Wilhelmplatz,
The crime of Onan, spilled upon the ground;
You know, whose dear hope Alexis Carrel kept
At Heaven's Gate

Alive in a test tube, where it monstrously grew, and slept.

("Terror")

What was so monstrous about Carrel's project that the poet should, through such a juxtaposition, make him guilty by association with a form of self-abuse? Warren cites a popular-science writer’s opinion that when disease and death are abolished the problem of evil will be solved; and Warren objects, particularly to the notion “that good and physical survival are identical.” It's not natural, he says, to prolong the life of something that's already dead—hence his quotation marks around “death” when he speaks of the newspaper account—or to isolate something from its original context and to try to give it an artificial life-support system. This is of a piece with his condemnation of the American volunteers and his assertion that the Moorish view of things, adequate as it may have been for the Moors, is of no help to anyone today. “The Moor may have a secret ... which is enough for him—but not enough for us. (That is what the modern devotee of violence [the volunteer in Finland and Spain] is seeking. But it can't help him.)” The problem with the volunteers is that they, like Carrel, have isolated something from its original context and have tried to use it without reference to their present situation: “the devotion to isolated ideas or ideals (isolated because not related to some over-all conception of the human situation) [does] not suffice.”

Thus Carrel's work was an experiment in onanism not only because it resembled Frankenstein's attempt to create life without its passing through the womb but also because, by tearing living tissue from its native site and trying to make it live, he was acting like those who pursue some abstract ideal without reference to the whole context of the human condition. And thus, too, the Moors, like fetuses, are hieratic: in the priestly sense, like the Roman sacrificial fathers, who embodied an ancient world view that lost its meaning with the barbarians' invasion; in the hieroglyphic sense, in that they are the living characters of a text no longer entirely readable.

It is strange, however, that Warren should condemn Carrel’s procedure of removing tissue from its native environment to give it new life in one of his own making, for this is just what Warren has done in writing the poem. Like Ianthe Sprague, evidently, he is not immune to the pleasures of meditating on the various unrelated stories that happen to appear the same day in a newspaper. And, like her, he is quite able to find nourishment from what those random current events bring. Of course, there is a connection between the two news stories, as Warren takes the trouble to point out; they are both signs of the sickness of the age, the wrongful pursuit of isolated ideas. Yet there is a certain aptness here that adds to the pleasure the poem can give, even if it detracts from the force of its apparent mes-
sage—and manifest content. And even if Warren should tell us that in generating a poem by juxtaposing (his term: "I don't mind making some remarks about the background ideas suggested by the two juxtaposed news reports . . .") these two newspaper items he was making explicit their implicit connection, that he was simply reconstructing their real underlying philosophical and political context, Carrel could have said the same in his own defense. After all, the object of his research was to discover what the actual life-supporting environment for such tissue was, to get at the truth of its cellular structure, and to do that he had to reconstruct that environment in the laboratory.

Warren's reconstructed context for these juxtaposed news items, the poem "Terror," itself appears in a sequence whose title (Eleven Poems on the Same Theme) asserts that it constitutes a context of its own, that the reader can expect to find implicit connections between "Terror" and the other poems in the sequence. If we were to read these poems as Warren read Il Messaggero of 27 January 1940, selecting those pieces that seemed when juxtaposed to bespeak some fundamental unity, we might well have come up with the string of quotations from "Crime," "Terror," and "Pursuit" in which hieratic fetuses lead to hieratic and white-clad Moors and sacrificial fathers. However, those echoes within the context of the Eleven Poems suggest that an even larger context supports their life in the Warren literary corpus—a context including the white (whether by handkerchiefs or strips of newspaper) sacrificial (in the other sense) fathers in Night Rider and the fetuses, both there and in At Heaven's Gate.

It is a combination that keeps reappearing. Bearing in mind that Sweetwater imagined the fetus inside Sue with features "formed like delicate carving" and looking like a mummy with intent eyes, consider the sight of Bogan Murdock lying under his sun lamp. And recall, too, that Bogan is the father Jerry Calhoun realizes at the end of the novel he wishes had been his:

See, there is my father . . . looking unusually well and handsome and carrying his stick and smiling hospitably and look at me with his fine eyes . . . . That isn't your father, that's Bogan Murdock! . . . Where is your father? You better run, and you better run quick and find him. Before they say you killed him. Before the police come and dig in the leaves in the woods and drag the river and look in the old well where you hit the drowning puppy with the brick and pry under the hay in the loft. (388)

(The father to be looked for under the leaves here may be what the "mad killer" in the contemporaneous "Crime" has slain: "Envy the mad killer who lies in the ditch and grieves, / . . . He tries to remember, and tries, but
he cannot seem / To remember what it was he buried under the leaves.” Pursued by his forgetfulness, he passes “among . . . rows / Of eyes hieratic like foetuses in jars . . .”). Bogan Murdock’s body under the sun lamp had “an Egyptian delicacy of bone . . . like a carved figure on a tomb, or like a dead body laid out ceremonially . . . (182–83). As an Egyptian corpse, Murdock would have been, one presumes, a mummy. The observation Sweetwater made about the emptiness of mummies’ eyes is one that will reappear in Warren; quite recently, in the father’s eyes in “I Am Dreaming of a White Christmas . . .”: “The eyes / Are not there. But, / Not there, they stare at what / Is not there.”

The newspaper part of the combination of images that keeps reappearing is what brings about the denouement of At Heaven’s Gate to which I alluded earlier when I pointed out the similarity between Tolliver’s letter to the papers in Night Rider and Private Porsum’s similar action here. Porsum’s motivation leads us, interestingly enough, to a newspaper that plays a similarly pivotal role in the plot of Ibsen’s Lady from the Sea. The denouement is not just the unraveling of Murdock’s scheme to bilk the state but also the knitting together of the two narratives which, until chapter 22, had been vying in alternate chapters for the reader’s attention, and which until Porsum’s intervention seemed to have had hardly anything to do with each other.

The other narrative is the “Statement of Ashby Wyndham,” a poor hill farmer who marries, has a falling-out with his brother over selling the family farm, gets religion, and wanders the earth to spread his version of the gospel. He makes his way down-river to the city where the rest of the novel takes place, is arrested when a member of his traveling church shoots a policeman, and is told in jail to write down his life story. In chapter 23 we pick up the thread of his narrative once again and at its conclusion discover that we have probably been reading it the whole time over Porsum’s shoulder; he has been given the manuscript by a Mr. Tucker, a reporter for the local newspaper. Wyndham claims to be second cousin to the Private, whose roots are likewise in the mountains, and so Tucker puts Porsum on the spot and asks him what he is going to do about the jailing of one of his relatives. What the reporter is up to also has something to do with the controversy surrounding Murdock’s scheme to unload his mountain properties on the state as a park bearing his father’s name. Porsum, already a public figure because of his legendary heroism in the war, is president of one of Murdock’s banks. In response to Tucker’s question, he makes an equivocating, noncommittal statement, then asks to see what the reporter has written down on his note pad.

His gaze met the brown uncommitting pupils of the muddy, flecked eyes which were now lifted to him.
“Let me see that,” Private Porsum commanded, and reached out his hand for the pad.

The reporter passed it to him.

He read it slowly. Then, very deliberately, he tore the pages from the pad, dropped the pad, and tore the detached pages of notes into several bits.

“For Christ sake,” Mr. Tucker said.

Private Porsum stood up. The bits of the paper scattered to the floor. Then he said, “I’m going to the jail.” (331)

When he does, he finds it nearly impossible to hold a conversation with Wyndham, who remains a willing victim wholly in the grip of his private religion. Yet his stubbornness does provoke Porsum to try to justify his own life in front of the man, particularly his role as Murdock’s spokesman when he had gone to Massey Mountain to tell the strikers, including Wyndham, that the company really could not afford to pay them any more. Unable to persuade Wyndham to cooperate in his release from jail, Porsum returns home, relives the incident in the war that had brought him such honor and fame (and which he had cashed in when he went to work for Murdock, especially when he put his prestige on the line in the speech to the strikers), and then decides to make his damning statement about the company to the newspaper.

Duckfoot Blake had already told Porsum what was wrong with the bonds and how Murdock had unloaded the Massey Mountain property onto the state. But it took the encounter with Wyndham for the Private to come to terms with his own sense of what was right. Yet, on another level, it may take more than that for the novel to come to an end: certain other events must be recalled; certain other terms be met. In the stages of the process by which he comes to his recognition of what he has to do, Porsum touches base with certain symbols we have now come to recognize: a torn-up newspaper, a handkerchief, and a rectangle of whiteness.

The first occurred when Porsum tore the pages of the reporter’s pad to bits. That note pad is not yet a newspaper story but is on its way to becoming one; as will later become evident, that the disintegration of a newspaper should here take the form of ripping apart a reporter’s pad—a sort of newspaper ur-text—will make it possible for that pad to be part of yet another symbolic underpinning of the novel. The disintegration of newspaper—the sodden bits of the shroud in Percy’s dream that fell away of their own weight—marked the beginning of a process of discovery for Munn; another kind of newspaper disintegration, more akin to what happened to the reporter’s pad, took place in the scene in Ibsen’s play in which Albert Johnston learns that his beloved Ellida has married someone else. His native tongue is English, and he had picked up an old, discarded newspaper
in Norwegian in order to improve his command of that language. Lyngs­
strand recalls what happened: “When all of a sudden, I heard him give a
kind of roar; and when I looked at him I saw that his face was as white as
chalk. Then he set to work to crumple and crush the paper up, and tear it
into a thousand little pieces; but that he did quietly . . .” (253).

When Porsum returns home after his meeting with Wyndham and
settles into his easy chair to think back to the incident in the war, the
remembered scene unfolds before his eyes and ours with absolute clarity.
But we may not see the same things. What Porsum saw—his decision to
assault the German machine-gun nest almost single-handedly, the dreamlike
trance in which he shot twenty-two of the enemy, his weeping afterward,
and his wish years later that he had not survived—together with his re­sponse
to Wyndham’s mad integrity, impelled him to act, to resign publicly
from Murdock’s empire, to denounce it to the newspapers, and to tell
Murdock to his face what he had done. What we might see, however, in
that scene from the war compels us to recognize once more the power of
certain images to persist in Warren’s texts. For Porsum did not quite accom­
plish his heroic deed alone; he was assisted by a man named Percy whom he
instructed in the proper use of a handkerchief: “I told Percy to get behind
the other tree across from me and put something on the ground, a hand­
kercief or something, to lay his clips on. I wanted him to have them where
he could get at them fast and handy and I didn’t want him laying them on
the ground to get anything on them to foul if he got excited and fast. He
did what I said” (338). As when he tore the note pad to bits, Porsum after
his wartime recollection stands up once again, his mind made up to act:
“He rose from his chair and stood there in the middle of the room, with
his arms hanging limp at his sides. He switched off the reading lamp . . .
Now the moonlight made a rectangle of whiteness on the floor under the
big window at the south end of the room. He walked to the window” (340).
The whiteness beckons him, and he steps into that white rectangle that
resembles both a sheet of paper and, in the immediate context of his rec­
collection, a handkerchief, that may stand for both, as well as for the text he
is about to enter—the text, that is, constituted by the union of the narra­
tives separated until now, Ashby Wyndham’s and the story of Calhoun,
Sarrett, Sweetwater, and Sue; the text he is about to put together by con­
fronting Murdock’s crime with Wyndham’s guilt; the text that is the novel
itself.

Porsum, however, did not accomplish this combination entirely on his
own. He had the help of Mr. Tucker, the reporter who put the text of
Wyndham’s story in his hands, thus serving as the catalyst to start the
process that brought everything together, tucked in the loose ends of the
novel, and made it possible for the alternating, though unequal, portions of
the text to find their common ground at last. It is perhaps not unimportant
that this man, who saw what possibilities lay in confronting Wyndham's world with Murdock's, should see the world through eyes that resemble the wash that colors the sky in the first lines of the novel and seem to have the right to color our reading of all that follows those lines:

a wash which was transparent but full of minute gold flecks . . .

His gaze met the brown uncommitting pupils of the muddy, flecked eyes which were now lifted to him.

Yet the reporter is not the only one with such eyes. One other character does; and the role he plays in both the story and the structure of the novel casts him as a distant double of Tucker, thereby confirming the importance of seeing that world through such eyes. Anse, the black servant Murdock was going to send to Columbia University, the young man who is made the scapegoat for Sarrett's crime (the absurdly proclaimed motive being his disappointment in not getting to go to Columbia) has "yellow flecks in the pupils of his large eyes" (180). Only he and Tucker share this peculiarity with the wash that covers the sky at the beginning of the novel. One might well wonder why.

The answer lies in yet another episode where a handkerchief and a newspaper are made rough equivalents, and where a confrontation is engineered from a distance (as Tucker engineered the confrontation between the Porsum and Wyndham—and, perhaps unintentionally, between Porsum and Murdock). Jerry Calhoun was in Murdock's office, and Bogan was trying to reassure him on the matter of the bonds, when a secretary tiptoed in to lay the afternoon paper on Murdock's desk. "She had dropped the paper, like an innocent catalytic . . ." (269). When Murdock saw the headline, he was furious: "Murdock" Bill Passed. Bogan had wanted to unload his unprofitable timberlands onto the state with the provision that it become a park named after his father, Major Lemuel Murdock. The newspaper seized upon the opportunity to dredge up an old scandal:

Who is Major Lemuel Murdock?

He is the man who, on April 4, 1892, in this city, shot and killed, willfully and of malice aforethought, Judge Goodpasture, a political opponent, who in the heat of a campaign uttered certain remarks which offended the vanity of Major Lemuel Murdock. Major Lemuel Murdock was tried and convicted in the courts of Mulcaster County. Upon appeal, the conviction was reversed. (270)

The Standard, Bogan was convinced, was trying to strike at him through his father, now senile and given to reenacting in his mind the day
he shot Goodpasture at the train station. The scene shifts to the Murdock stables, where the old Major is telling the story once again to several of the black children on the estate. They already know what happened and are more amused by the telling than the tale. They want to make him cry. They act out the drama of that day, forcing him to rehearse the sequence of events over and over again. Old Anse, father of the younger Anse who answered Bogan's urgent telephone call, arrives at the climax of the drama, swoops down on the children, and sends them scattering. He leans down to comfort the Major, whose face is wet and quivering. "Old Anse fumbled with his free hand in the breast pocket of the black broadcloth coat and got the big, snowy linen handkerchief, initialed, and wiped the cheeks, and patted the eyes gently, like a child's, and held the handkerchief to the nose, muttering all the while" (274). The Major is still reliving the assassination, giving fragmentary and incoherent justifications for what he did, looking up into Old Anse's face as if for absolution. Old Anse wipes his eyes once more and casts about for another source of comfort, having done all he could with the handkerchief; thus, at a crucial moment in the story, a newspaper is substituted for a handkerchief, both offered as objects to assuage the grief of Lemuel Murdock: "You jes hush now. You hush, and it's about time yore paper git here. You got git yore paper and fergit all it. Maybe it in the box by now" (275). The paper is there. The Major reads the lead story, and it has its effect. He makes a strange sound in his throat, trembles, looks wide-eyed over the landscape, and goes up to the house. He finds a gun, and begins walking to town. Hours later, having hitched a ride on a mule-drawn wagon, he is found at the train station, gun in hand, wondering aloud why the band is not playing.

Evidently the younger Anse had not followed Bogan's order: he had not intercepted the newspaper. His nonintervention was surely intentional, and Bogan Murdock surely knew it: his revenge is allowing Anse to be imprisoned (and probably executed) for a murder he knew he could not have committed. Anse had his reasons, perhaps: Bogan had indeed promised to send him to Columbia University and had reneged on that promise. Several chapters earlier Anse is described as having been "puzzled by things he read in the newspapers, and . . . books, which told what people had said and done a long time back and which told how the world used to be. He was puzzled by the way the world was now. He was puzzled by himself, and he did not know what he wanted in the world. But he knew the world was to live in. He knew that" (181). James Justus, in his book on Warren, complains that this passage is a "wasted closeup," as Anse "matters only in the final few pages because he is falsely accused of Sue Murdock's murder" (180). But perhaps, given the role he plays in the public humiliation of Bogan Murdock's father, this account of the inner workings of his mind is not, after all, without some relevance.
In any event, like the similar-eyed Mr. Tucker, Anse acts (or acts by not acting) to make sure that the newspaper plays its role, both in the plot of this novel and in the symbolic network it shares with its predecessor. These two know more about what is about to happen than do the other characters; that knowledge, and the way they intervene in the plot, suggest that they act in such a way as to reveal the hand of the author, who has perhaps let slip a clue by giving them eyes that resemble the transparent layer of light that colors our first look at the novel—that last touch of a colorist that serves at once to complete the picture and to put a layer of esthetic distance between the viewer and the world he might otherwise have thought was real.

That wash may be the first of several keys to Heaven’s Gate. It alerts us to the significance of covering yet unaltering layers, beneath which we find ancient prints, hieroglyphics, and the inner structure of an older house. And what happens in the final pages of the novel holds out some hope that where there is a Gate there may in fact be a key. For there, with the plot practically complete, if not resolved, we are presented with a sudden abundance of keys: the one the police discover Sweetwater had to Sue’s apartment but which in the end does not implicate him ("they done let that white feller go what had the key" [365]); the jailer’s key that alerts Jerry Calhoun to his father’s presence ("he did not look up until he heard the chink of metal as the key was applied to the lock. There, beside the man with the key, was his father" [379]); the keys his father struggled with at the door to his house ("Old Mr. Calhoun fumbled with his keys . . . finally opened the door" [383]); and the key pad from which Jerry detached his car keys so that Duckfoot Blake could return his car the next day: "Jerry took the key pad from his pocket and detached his car keys and held them in his hand. . . . Duckfoot . . . reached over and lifted the keys from Jerry’s hand as though he were taking them off a shelf" (383).

That last gesture repeats the one by which Murdock received the letter from Porsum that had already been delivered to the newspaper: "Bogan Murdock took one step toward him and grasped the paper, as if he were picking it up from a shelf" (342). What is paralleled here? What is the connection and what the analogy between the keys that came from Jerry’s key pad and the signed confession that was provoked by a chain of events that began with Tucker’s intervention? The answer, like the question, may lie in the precise use of words: Porsum’s first awakening of conscience, his realization that he cannot evade his responsibility to visit the imprisoned Ashby Wyndham, seems to have come at the moment he tears the reporter’s pad to bits. That small violence, which echoes so many other fragmentations of newsprint in these first two novels, is ambiguous enough to give rise to misinterpretation at first—is he not, Tucker surely thought, trying to destroy the evidence of his guilt? It becomes clear when Porsum stands up
that it means something else. And in the context of subsequent events and the complex network of allusion that pervades the novel, it appears that it may mean even more.

Or rather, Porsum's destruction of the pad is part of an underlying symbolic and allusive framework that gives a different coloration to such pivotal moments in the unfolding of the plot. From the perspective of the eventual outcome of that awakening of conscience—Murdock's reception of the original news story that was to bring down his financial kingdom—and how that acceptance is reevoked by the way Duckfoot Blake picks up the keys Jerry holds out to him, there appears to be some distant connection between the reporter's pad and Jerry's. That connection is in fact based on an allusive analogy to the scene in the play Sue rehearsed, already reenacted by Sarrett's throwing the newspaper-wrapped rings into the sewer, in which the American sailor cast rings into the sea as a matrimonial rite. It will be recalled that they were linked by a key ring. The keys Jerry gives Duckfoot are linked by a key pad, and now we can see that by that act Jerry completes the allusion Sarrett had begun. The trail of internal allusion that links the key pad—through Bogan's reception of Porsum's statement—to the reporter's note pad sets up an equivalence between a newspaper and a device for linking keys, pad or ring. Thus, by uniting those rings for their descent into oblivion by wrapping them in a sheet of newspaper, Sarrett was linking them by what in Warren's text serves the same purpose as Albert Johnston's key ring; for, through a chain of substitutable links more akin to what one might expect to see in a poem than a novel, a key pad is a note pad is a newspaper.

One more key scene, and one more key pad, appear in the final pages of At Heaven's Gate. Sarrett, having successfully escaped detection for Sue's murder, and having wrapped her rings and bracelet in newspaper and thrown them away, is seen settling into a comfortable hotel room in New York. He too has a leather pad of keys, which he hands over to the bellboy so he may open his suitcase. That task completed, the boy moves to the window to make some final adjustments, "toying with the sash to bring it to the precise point . . . like an artist who, stepping back from the easel on the last day, picks up another brush and in a spirit of grateful reverence applies to the canvas the last, minute, fulfilling point of color, too precious for discernment by the vulgar eye" (376). Minutes later, after the bellboy's departure, Sarrett's body, glistening from the perspiration of performing his calisthenics, acquires a touch of the same hue that flecked the sky on the first page of the novel, "tinting the flesh from white to the merest suggestion of gold" (377). Could it be that momentary possession of Sarrett's keys gave the boy the power to apply that last fulfilling point of color?