"FIAT LUX"

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(1) In the section entitled "Flat Lux" of Walter Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz, a debate rages between the two forces of science and religion. Specifically, the debate centers around the acquisition of knowledge and scientific discovery.

(2) Paulo and Taddeo live in the year 3174, in a world being rebuilt after total nuclear destruction and on the brink of an intellectual renaissance. Consequently, the central issue in the debate is the question of responsibility. Dom Paulo feels that knowledge should not be given to people who would use it irresponsibly and might eventually cause the same kind of mass destruction. In contrast, Thon Taddeo believes that the misuse of knowledge and power is inevitable and it is therefore useless to attempt to stop it. Though no clear-cut "winner" of the debate is apparent, Miller seems to favor the religious viewpoint.

(3) Indeed, Dom Paulo seems to have the upper hand in his confrontations with Thon Taddeo. Taddeo argues in his address to the brethren that one day men of science will rule alongside of the new king, Truth, and that to acquire knowledge is supreme no matter what the cost. He even believes that unfair political actions and bloodshed (like his uncle Hannegan's) are justifiable if they serve to benefit the academics at the collegium. In Taddeo's world view, it is natural for people to benefit at the cost of others.

(4) Dom Paulo, however, points out that this is not always the case. In fact, he points to the nuclear holocaust as a situation in which no one benefitted, because of the greed of many nations. Furthermore, Dom Paulo believes that warrior chieftains like Hannegan should not control the uses of scientific discoveries. Thon Taddeo defends himself by saying that the people of the world will never be wise enough to manage such power, and thus it would be useless to control or suppress knowledge. If one is to accept Taddeo's argument, one must believe that man is either too stupid or too greedy to keep from blowing his world to bits. Indeed, when compared to Dom Paulo's argument, one which stresses patience and responsibility, the rationale of Thon Taddeo's argument suffers.

(5) Miller also uses minor characters, notably the poet and Benjamin, in a symbolic way to show his pro-religious viewpoint. The poet, a jester of sorts, first
makes his presence felt at the gathering where Thon Taddeo will speak, confronting Taddeo with an elaborate satirical jest. The poet says that the blue-headed goat should be enshrined to the men of science who will some day reshape the world. By using this scapegoat, the poet suggests, the scientists can keep from wearing the "thorny crown" of responsibility. (Interestingly, Miller uses the religious reference of the "thorny crown" synonymously with the social reference to responsibility.) In addition, before the poet leaves the gathering, he takes out his glass eye, which he calls his conscience, places it by Taddeo and says to it, "Watch him carefully." Even the poet's death seems senseless, and it calls into question those actions of men which Taddeo deems inevitable and justified in the pursuit of knowledge. The poet dies of a musket wound received while entering the scene of a political battle. The poet could not have been a "less disinterested witness"; yet, as a result of a man's political greed and actions, the poet dies.

(6) Like the poet, the character Benjamin Eleazar shows the supremacy of Dom Paulo's argument. Benjamin is an old Jew who has been alive for 32 centuries (or so he claims), because he is still waiting for the Messiah. In effect, Benjamin, who calls himself Israel, has taken on the responsibility for an entire race. Thus he patiently waits. In "Flat Lux" Benjamin feels that he may have found the Messiah—Thon Taddeo. However, after carefully looking Taddeo over, Benjamin dejectedly says, "It's still not him." Symbolically speaking, then, Thon Taddeo, the man of science, is not the savior of mankind.

(7) Even though it is not always so obvious, Miller favors the religious viewpoint, which stresses the need to control knowledge so that it is not misused, especially for destructive purposes. In short, it stresses responsibility. Miller makes the scientific argument, on the other hand, less logical. This viewpoint implies that man will never be responsible enough to use knowledge in purely constructive ways, that he will always be subject to greed and to political pressures. In fact, Thon Taddeo says, "If you try to save wisdom until the world is wise, Father, the world will never have it." This statement is indeed pessimistic, implying that the misuse of power is inevitable and that nothing can be done about it. Yet to do nothing and simply accept the possibility of another nuclear holocaust as inevitable, Miller believes, is totally unacceptable. In short, this kind of thinking shows a total lack of responsibility, against which right-thinking people must continue to argue.