It was in July that I visited Shadowbrook to gather material for this report. Except for one brief visit six years before, it was the first time I had returned since my own novitiate.

The hills were hung with swelling summer, the air heady with the odor of growth and future things, but I had come for elegy. I remember that on that previous brief visit I had reveled in recollection. Each bend and turn along the ready-made perspectives and memory-shortened distances had proffered recognition, and my single steps beat out assent. But now all my senses rejected every sight, every occasion. The ragged, hip-deep lawns brought protests, and the ratty gardens. But the house, where nothing but its lonely porte cochere still stood, was a dump of twisted, rusted metal, which-way heaps of rocks that once had soared, and dirty, evil-smelling rubble. The first reaction at the sight was swift, unthinking outrage, then a swell of awful pathos. The pity of this fall involved more than a long-dead architect, and his purse-proud client: somehow with the smashing of these pretensions I was less, and all who had lived here and loved its grandeur, no matter how qualified their love had been, were smaller than they were.

I sat down on the white stone steps which once connected the lower terrace to the massive porches. It was about eight o’clock of a midsummer’s evening, the light appropriately crepuscular,
and a small, pale curl of moon grew brighter in the eastern sky as the darkness moved towards Stockbridge Mountain. Mahkeenac was gray and still, and I sat there inevitably picturing impossible days of gaiety when it giggled beneath a technicolored sun. For elegies are built, like desperation, on a past which memory falsifies.

The novices of future years would live in an efficient, undistinguished building of a vaguely “contemporary design” and never know the mixed blessings of dwelling in the midst of mouldering splendor. I pitied them. I let my mind wander: the cotillions of Victorian balls whirled again to music incongruously Viennese, while Father Rector ordered eggs from smiling novices in a Christmas morning dining room, which, hung with ropes of laurel rich against the quiet wood, offered through cineramic windows a snowscape of travel-poster pines and distant sculptured mountains.

I tired of this self-indulgence, finally. The old house was opulent with memories, true, but the many facets of its rich, short life would never yield to sophomoric reverie. I was a reporter concerned with surfaces and must be content to let the gathered facts make what patterns they were able.

I lit a cigarette and began to walk around the ruins, pacing off distances, reconstructing the movements of the night when Fathers Kelly, Sullivan, Carroll and all the rest had groped along the raging corridors of the dying mansion. Suddenly, with a return of futile rage I threw down my cigarette and ground it to the gravel.