

# **Despair and Affirmation – Existential Humanism in the Fiction of William Styron**

By

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The most profound statement yet made about Auschwitz, was not a statement at all but a response:

"At Auschwitz, tell me where was God ?"

and the answer:" Where was man ?" (SC 623)

It is this query and response which Styron raises in Sophie's Choice that captures most effectively his fictional stance. Styron makes no bones about , placing the responsibility for the most cataclysmic evil of our times squarely on man's shoulders. In fact, this is the key to Styron's complex depiction of the predicament of man in the twentieth century. It is man and man alone who created the evil of the concentration camps and not any transcendent supernatural power. In novel after novel he has explored the nature of evil in terms of existential humanism. Existential because according to the existentialists evil is innate in man and not something imposed from outside. Whereas according to traditional humanism evil was considered to be external to man. Humanism believed in the perfectibility of man and evil lay in the corrupting influences outside him. Hence the romantic concept of evil is that man is a victim of evil forces that are outside. But modern humanism joins hands with existentialism in recognizing and accepting man's potential for evil. During an interview Styron stated:

... basically, the unhappiness and the things we all consider to be evil derive from ourselves ... We who are supposed to be brothers are the authors of the pain and oppression of the world. (West 232)

Existentialism also postulates the hope of overcoming evil through conscious exercise of free will. Styron admits that events as well as aspects of man's nature tend to warp or twist free will and then it becomes "a conditional free will" (West 57).

Styron believes that evil is a mandatory subject for every writer worth his salt. He realizes that evil is a mystery and hence the necessity to confront it. Each of his novels has been an attempt in this direction. He evinces an ardent desire to catch humanity at its most mysterious - the crucial region of the soul which Malraux in Lazare described as "Where absolute evil opposes brotherhood". Styron's aim is to explore the possibilities of achieving love, goodness and friendship despite the propensity that man has for evil. His fiction explores human

relationships which involve domination and submission. He admits to Hilary Mills that he considers this "a very important artistic theme - what other people do to each other in the guise of idealism or of passion or of zealotry, whatever" (West 235). The pathos of the victim has been a general consideration of his novels. We see the pattern of domination and submission everywhere - within the family, in Lie Down in Darkness within an institution like the military in The Long March, between individuals like Mason Flagg and Cass Kinsolving in Set This House on Fire, in the institution of slavery in The Confessions of Nat Turner and in the oppression of the Jews in Sophie's Choice. Styron explores these dark areas of the human psyche in order to see the possibilities for man. The final image of man is not dark and despairing but of man who goes through the dark night of the soul to rise phoenix-like to affirm the human condition. It is not the dark cheerless existentialism of the early Sartre that we find here, but the warm compassion of a Camus. Man discovers himself not by himself alone but when he reaches out to another, breaking the barrier of self. From his very first novel to Sophie's Choice he presents a growth from the landscape of despair to the affirmation of the spirit.

Styron's view of evil is complex to say the least. He has expressed his opinion during many an interview to the effect that evil is a very innate part of human nature. "Animals aren't capable of evil. It is human nature and one has to combat it as a disease" (Morris 57). He believes it should not be excused as a "sickness of the mind" but should be dealt with firmly. Everyone has a potential for evil, but only when it is realized in action does it become truly evil. Helen Loftis is the one character he has depicted as truly evil. She hurts both Milton Loftis and Peyton but destroys herself in the process too. Mason Flagg is an interesting character with a propensity towards evil. Ultimately his evil qualities predominate and he is destroyed.

In an evil world man has to confront it directly in order to overcome it. Cass Kinsolving has to kill in order to experience regeneration. Similarly Nat Turner has to commit murder before he has a chance to experience salvation. Both, Nat Turner and Cass Kinsolving are brought to a realization of their true identity after violation of society's codes. A feeling of guilt is essential to reform. Some of his characters like Peyton and Sophie and Nathan Landau cannot survive the guilt. Guilt is what one tries to induce in oneself in order to break the monotony of evil and prepare the way for one's own salvation.

Styron's fiction reveals the corrupting influence of evil. This is seen when victims become victimisers in turn. Sophie tries to get concessions for herself by putting on an anti-semitic attitude before Hoss. She tries to get her son out to a better place by revealing her father's anti-semitic pamphlets. This tendency on the part of individuals to procure their own advancement at the cost of hurting others is highlighted by Styron. Sophie is even willing to seduce Hoss in order to secure her son's release. She also refuses to help with the underground movement for fear of hurting her own children. Similarly Nat Turner uses his anger against the whites and manipulates the blacks in order to forge them into a unit. It is only after his defeat that he realizes how wrong he has been. He then sees Hank as an individual and tries to reach out to him in prison.

Styron's view of evil is complicated by a manichean view of evil. In Set This House on Fire, God is seen as unable to control evil Himself. Michele and Cass view Him as sick. Cass pictures a vengeful Jehovah like the God Manicheans pictured in the Old Testament and views God as existing to torment mankind, annihilate man. Cass ruminates:

... This business about evil - what it is, where it is, whether it's a reality, or just a figment of the mind. Whether it's a sickness like cancer, something that can be cut out and destroyed, .... or whether it's something you can't cure at all - but have to stomp on like you would a flea carrying bubonic plague .... At least that is what I've come to believe. Yet for the life of me I don't know of anyone nice golden mean between the two. (STHF 128-129)

Evil is elusive by its very nature. Does it lie in man's inhumanity to man? Or does it come out of an unnatural guilt in man? Whatever that may be, Styron's fiction offers no easy solutions. His fiction portrays his belief that "man is the only creature capable of inflicting pain". The measure of one's growth as a person is the sincerity with which one prevents the infliction of pain. "I don't think you can really define what evil is.... the word 'misunderstanding' is at the centre of all human relationships which go awry"... I would say anything that aggressively tends to hurt someone else is an evil act (West 60).

Styron goes on to explain his notion of evil :

I think there are all sorts of sub-divisions of evil. Certainly the Nazi madness was a sort of evil beyond anyone's conception. That's the sort of super evil we still have difficulty in understanding. That sort of evil has to do with the evil of crowds, with crowd behaviour, where people lose their identity as morally responsible individuals, when the concept of the Mass overtakes that of the Moral. I think all human beings are capable of this. (West 59)

Styron denounces the romantic image of evil as violent and melodramatic. He quotes Simone Weil : "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied, whereas true evil is dark, monotonous, spare, boring" (West 249). Styron emphasises the banality and the mediocrity of evil and Sophie's Choice illustrates this. It is the banal nature of evil that is so terrifying but the ones who carried out the horrendous evil experiments at Auschwitz were ordinary human beings going about their duties in a normal manner. The novel is truly Styron's inferno.

William Styron born in 1925, belongs to the post-war era of American novelists. In novel after novel, Styron sets out to explore the predicament of man in a world marked with anguish and suffering. The fiction of the period has concerned itself with the deepest private suffering, the deepest private agonies of men and women. David L. Stevenson observes:

In company with such contemporary writers as Norman Mailer, Herbert Gold, Saul Bellow, George P. Elliott and J.D. Salinger, he has given us the moral

bewilderment and the unfocussed anxiety haunting some of the most serious minds of the World War II generation. And he has pushed his explorations of the nature and meaning of human value, in an existential world, to the point where the essential act of staying alive is itself at stake, is the central question of his novels" (265).

Styron considers his fiction as a bridge between two generations of writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner on the one hand and the postwar writers like David Barthelme, Philip Roth and Kurt Vonnegut on the other. The chief difference he sees is that the earlier group of writers wrote for a world which resembled a stable and apparently purposeful world. Whereas he and his contemporaries wrote for an audience which had experienced the loss of all certainties, haunted by the atom bomb and the death-of-God philosophies. He has faith in literature as a way to knowledge and order, and in humanism as a way to salvation. Like most writers of his generation, especially writers like Flannery O'Connor and John Updike, he feels that America is suffering from a disease of the spirit which as he observes "cries out for a religious interpretation, an interpretation in letters of finitude, anxiety, sin, guilt and despair, grace repentance, faith, regeneration and eschatological interpretation" (Urang 7). At the same time, with the writers of a later generation, he shares an apocalyptic view of evil, which denies the possibility of knowledge, order or salvation. Hence Styron's perspective is ambivalent. He is at his creative best in evoking a world, as described by Richard Pearce : "where irrational warfare is the condition of life, a world that undermines psychological connection, temporal causation and any kind of certainty. He makes us suffer the ambivalence ... suffer the loss of human values while remaining engaged in a struggle to perceive them" (43). It is this ambivalence that makes for the complexity of Styron's fiction.

A study of his literary background reveals the ambiguous nature of the hold the South has on him. His fiction defies easy categorizing. He is born and bred a Virginian but has spent almost the whole of his adult life away from the South in Roxbury, Connecticut. Right from the publication of his first novel Lie Down in Darkness (1951) critics have persistently labelled him as a Southern writer. In fact, he was hailed as the heir to Faulkner's Southern tradition and most of the critical exegesis of the period found parallels between Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury and Lie Down in Darkness. Taken in by the superficial resemblances, many saw his novel as derivative. Critics expected him to continue writing in the tradition of the Southern school. Hence, they were sorely disappointed with his second major novel Set This House on Fire (1960), as it had no recognizable Southern concerns and it was more European in its depiction of the human predicament. With the publication of The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) and Sophie's Choice (1979), a turning point was reached. Though both the novels had the South as an important feature it becomes clear that Styron's work represents the expansion of the Southern tradition into a national literature, mainly existential.

What is more obvious today in the light of Styron's literary career is that even in his first work Styron emerges as a Southern writer with a difference. He prefers to call himself "an

American Writer with Southern roots". He decries the tendency of critics to rush into easy categorizing of new writers into schools. He feels this habit prevents them from gauging the new and original aspects of a writer's genius. Nowhere does Styron repudiate the literary tradition of the South. In fact, he admits freely that it is the source of his own literary strength. In Sophie's Choice his persona, Stingo comments on his writing: "I was exhilarated after a morning of specially fruitful work, and the spell of the South (whose sights and sounds I had so painfully set down, spilling quarts of my heart's blood) was upon me like a minor ecstasy, or a major heartache" (SC 419).

This "ecstasy and heartache" have been a characteristic part of his role as a Southern Writer. He is quick to add that he is not "regionally" southern like Eudora Welty or Flannery O' Connor. Yet he shares their broad concerns. He affirms the existence of a Southern literary tradition that sets it apart from the rest of America. The South is caught up in a process of change and this transition from the old agricultural economy to the urbanised democratic modern one provides wonderful scope for literature.

Then the South simply provides much wonderful material. Take for instance, the conflict between the ordered Protestant tradition, the fundamentalism based on the Old Testament, and the twentieth Century - movies, cars, television. The poetic juxtaposition you find in this conflict - a crazy colored preacher howling those tremendously moving verses from Isaiah 40 while riding around in a maroon Packard. It's wonderful stuff and comparatively new, too, which is why perhaps the renaissance of Southern writing coincided with these last few decades of the machine age. (West 12)

There are distinct features of the Southern school which gives it a definite identity: the role of the black people, the finitude of man, the role of an individual within a society, the consciousness of religion, a sense of place and a sense of community. Along with this Styron's fiction reveals a preoccupation with evil and a sense of guilt arising from the existence of slavery, a system condemned long since by the rest of America and the world. It is the defeat of the South at the hands of the Confederates in the Civil War that casts a long shadow and makes the South akin to European countries. They share a strong sense of tradition.

A Southern sensibility continues to inform Styron's writing and this is in keeping with his belief that a writer's concerns are formed during the first twenty five years of his life. As Stingo puts it : "A knife blade of nostalgia for the south runs through all my fiction". Styron confesses during a conversation: "I have a very strong attachment to the South as an idea" (West 267). According to Robert Penn Warren: "William Styron was born at almost the last moment when it was possible to get, first hand, a sense of what old fashioned Southern life had been, or to hear, actually, the word-of-mouth legends about it (West 266). Styron shares some of the outstanding characteristics of the Southern writer.

Exploring the various meanings of the word 'Southern', Louis D. Rubin remarks:

For Allen Tate it is 'a literature conscious of the past in the present' ... Frederick J. Hoffman believes it has to do with a literature of "place", with all the historical, cultural and social factors thereto appended. I prefer to think of it as at bottom an attitude towards the nature of man in society that can best be described by the word 'religious'. Though, I hasten to add, by no means sectarian. (Rubin, William Elliot 253-54)

It is this attitude to human life that distinguishes the Southern Writer from the others.

Innumerable instances of race, religion and rhetoric can be traced in Styron's fiction. Yet his approach to character and plot is far more contemporary and modern than that of writers of the Southern renaissance of the first half of the century. The familiar elements of Faulkner's world are all there in Styron but with a difference. The blacks in Lie Down in Darkness act like a Greek chorus as in The Sound and the Fury but Ella Swan and La Ruth are seen from a comic perspective as is Daddy Faith's pretentious rabbleroising religious rites and baptisms, complete with trumpets and drums. In The Long March the black maid lends perspective to the human plight. In Set This House on Fire, Cass Kinsolving's guilt over burning down the shack of a black man is at the basis of his anxiety. In Sophie's Choice, Stingo survives on the money bequeathed to him by the sale of a black slave. The Confessions of Nat Turner is wholly based on black-white relationships.

Rhetoric is yet another of his southern traits. Dolly's love of Milton's talk is a case in point.

For all the years she had known him she had identified him with talk, speech; ...she loved to hear him talk and was a conscientious listener, although often, in a dreamy sort of abstraction, she found herself listening not so much to the substance of what he said as to the tone of the words, the melodious really endearing way he said them. The eccentric manner of twisting words into grotesque parodies of themselves, ...she could listen to all that for ever. (LDD 66)

Styron uses Dolly's response to Milton's rhetoric to point the contrast between her dumb admiration and Helen's shrewd insight into Milton's rather hollow talk. Carey Carr had a similar hold over Helen because of his use of words. Styron's depiction of Carey Carr during his awesome performance at Peyton's wedding is brilliant. "In his own mild and plaintive way he was a sweet singer of the liturgy, and would embroider upon the fabric of Christian poetry, already so rich in texture, the most exquisite designs" (LDD 256). Nathan Landau holds both Stingo and Sophie spell-bound by his flow of words. Styron loves words and revels in using polyphonic syllables. This is brilliantly displayed in his description of Stingo's sexual fantasies and in the Leslie Lapidus sections. In fact he achieves a fusion of the tragic and the comic strains

in Sophie's Choice, and is successful like the Jewish American Writers- Saul Bellow and Philip Roth.

The traditional notion of family and community also comes for examination in his fiction. In Lie Down in Darkness it is the disintegration of the family that is seen. In The Confessions of Nat Turner the notion of family is bound up with the colour of one's skin. The blacks have no freedom to enjoy family life as the white master thinks nothing of separating black couples for financial gains. Family cohesiveness is still a goal but it is not a 'given' of one's birth anymore.

Again in the South "manners come before morals" - Milton Loftis tries to preserve an air of propriety even while conducting an adulterous affair with Dolly. Stingo misjudges Nathan Landau due to too much respect for manners. He thinks he is poorly behaved rather than mentally deranged. Styron's point is that manners are not ends in themselves but means towards civilized relationships.

Styron, like the grand Southerner that he is, is a born story-teller. Styron uses the first person narrative to great effect in The Confessions of Nat Turner. It makes for immediacy and authenticity. The "Call me Stingo" trick is based on the oral tradition of story-telling and the use of semiautobiographical details in Sophie's Choice makes for authenticity.

Despite all the usual Southern values, Styron's fictional landscape is different. All of his southern attributes have a distinct modern twist to them. The situation is "existentialist" with his characters experiencing estrangement from God and finding salvation in strictly human terms.

The major theme of Styron's fiction is that human beings, not a higher force are the agents of the conflicts and catastrophes in the world. The universe is "benign or indifferent" to human activity and God is probably nonexistent. In an interview Styron said :

human institutions: humanly contrived situations which cause people to live in wretched unhappiness. And this seems to be the largest mystery of human existence. Why we here on earth – we fellow human beings, theoretically a family -- should find ourselves in such constant and universal discord: not supportive of each other, not sympathetic, not loving, but filled with hate and revenge and the desire to annihilate our own kind (Morris 56).

War is a condition of life in Styron's fiction. There is a never-ending sense of impending or potential warfare in his work. Forces of destruction lurk beneath the polished surface of life. For instance, Peyton commits suicide on the day the atom bomb was dropped. The Long March is set during the time of the Korean War. Cass Kinsolving traces his problems to the time he had to be admitted to a psychiatric ward after the war. The Confessions of Nat Turner has echoes of the battlefield. Sophie's Choice is the story of the victimization of the whole nation during World War II. Styron comments, "The war which began as a hard-boiled matter of stamping out a lot of very real and nasty totalitarianism ended on a note of violent untouchability which was fully

realized some years later by many who experienced the cold war and the Korean War" (Pearce 14).

When asked whether the literature of the present age was more despairing, Styron replied :

I still maintain that the times get precisely the literature that they deserve, and that if the writing is gloomy the gloom is not so much inherent in the literature as in the times ... The writer will be dead before we can judge him but he must go on writing, reflecting disorder, defeat, despair, should that be all he sees at the moment, but ever searching for the elusive love, joy and hope - qualities which, as in the act of life itself, are best when they have to be struggled for and are not commonly come by with much ease, either by a critic's formula or by a critic's yearning ... (Qtd. in Hoffman 145).

This struggle to assert values like love, joy and hope despite the violent chaos of the modern world is at the centre of Styron's fiction. Describing the struggle in Styron's fiction, Frederick J.Hoffman says, "lack of belief carries great cracks in the human landscape : and man looks, desperate and afraid, across them at each other. Most of what they do has the character of trying to heal the wound, close the gap, but by means of ordinary secular devices" (145). More often than not, alcohol is used by his characters to avoid the abyss of nothingness yawning at their feet.

Religion, like the Christian Church is ineffectual. When his characters do get deeply religious it is in the form of neurosis which ultimately destroys them. Helen Loftis is a case in point. Only two of his characters experience stability because of religious faith - Poppy of Set This House on Fire and Ella Swan in Lie Down in Darkness. Nat Turner bases his divine mission on his reading of the Old Testament. He abandons this only when things go wrong and he turns to the New Testament for personal rather than political salvation. Sophie in Sophie's Choice gives up her faith in God after her nightmare experience in the camp and the choice forced on her. It is the absence of religion that is deplored. His characters are thrown upon their own resources to make meaning out of existence.

What is significant is that it was at the time Styron started writing that this post-modern sensibility was being shaped. His generation's experience with ruthless power turned them to be passionately anti-war. This explains why his sympathies are always with the victims of imprisoning institutions like the military, elaborate caste systems like Slavery and Nazism. It is the human condition of being victims that arouses Styron's deepest sympathies.

Unlike T.S.Eliot and like W.B.Yeats Styron always brings in a thread of the personal in his fiction thus disproving the traditional English teacher's dictum that autobiographical elements mar great works of art. The Long March is based on a march he himself experienced during the Korean conflict. Set This House on Fire was written after his sojourn in Italy. Nat Turner is a

historical character who had haunted his mind even in childhood. Stingo in Sophie's Choice is his semi-autobiographical self. This use of experience makes for authenticity and immediacy in his fiction.

A considerable body of criticism has grown around Styron's fiction over the past fifty odd years. His first novel Lie Down in Darkness not only won him the Prix de Rome from the American Academy of Arts and Letters but it also led to eminent critics like R.W.B.Lewis, Alfred Kazin and Frederick J.Hoffman pigeon-holing him as a Southern writer. He was seen as continuing the Faulknerian tradition. But Louis D.Rubin in the following decade redressed the balance by recognising the difference in his approach to the South. His brilliant analysis in The Far Away Country (1963) gives useful insights into Styron's themes and techniques. It was not the guilt of generations that haunted Styron's characters but existential guilt more in keeping with the post-war years.

The Long March (1952) caused only a mild flurry in critical circles, perhaps, because it was only a novella. But later on Robert Fossum (1958) and Marc Ratner (1969) commented on its importance as one of the few significant novels on the Korean war. The novel also struck the first note of rebellion which was to have increasing importance in his later novels.

Styron's third novel Set this House on Fire (1960) drew a lot of critical flak. Perhaps because it was not written in the expected Faulknerian tradition. But it came in for instant acclamation in Europe, specially in France where Maurice Coindreau translated it. Styron was to become the only living American author included in the compulsory reading list for Ph.D. students in France. Critics like Louis Rubin commented on the existentialist strain in the novel and recognised it as a great though flawed work of art.

The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967) was highly praised at first. Because of the rabid racial climate of the period the Blacks responded violently to the portrait of their cult hero Nat Turner. They protested against the affront of a White Southerner taking on the enormous task of a first person narration and secondly pointed out elements of the stereotype in characterisation. The controversy resulted in a book Ten Black Writers Respond which called Styron a racist. In 1968 the novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize despite the controversy. David Galloway in The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (1966) made an excellent study of the novel in terms of the absurd. The novel was criticised in terms of the historical novel. But R.W.B.Lewis and Van C.Woodward made an excellent case for the novel in terms of historical relevance and of art.

On Sophie's Choice (1979), the reviews were good at first, later on he got a mixed reception. Robert Tower found fault with the two strains of the novel - the growth of a young artist side by side with Sophie's traumatic experience in the concentration camps. But Edith Milton saw it as a masterpiece and praised the ingenious structure of the novel. It won him the "American Award for Fiction" in 1980. A few critics felt he had cheapened the subject of the Holocaust by breaking the "sacred silence" that George Steiner - a survivor - had recommended.

But Styron, the champion of the underdog, undaunted by criticism is convinced that writing about such evil helps sensitise human conscience and prevents further occurrences of evil. It was seen as a bildungsroman by eminent critics. Carolyn Durham analysed it in terms of oppression of women. Recent criticism sees it as a post-modern work of art belonging to the genre of metafiction. Still others analyse it as "faction", made popular by Truman Capote. John Orr interprets it in terms of documentary realism in Twentieth Century Fiction (1991).

The greatness of a work of art is the variety of interpretation it gives rise to. Styron's work has been analysed in various ways. Lewis A Lawson in Adversity and Grace: Studies in Recent American Fiction (1960) and Robert Detweiler, in Four Spiritual Crises in MID-Century American Fiction (1964) approach his fiction as spiritual explorations. They see the quest for redemption in religious terms, though Styron insists that for him redemption is always humanistic, rather than religious.

Richard Pearce (1971) and Marc Ratner (1972) have brought out full length studies on Styron which give useful insights into his handling of theme and technique. Ihab Hassan examined the existential elements in two of his novels in Radical Innocence (1961). The tragic vision is a theme in both the doctoral dissertations of two Indian scholars, Meera Manvi and K.Lakshmana Murthy - both useful sources for other scholars.

Styron's views on writing helps us understand why he has written only five novels in a period of fifty years. "It (writing) is like a progressive, slow terminal disease. It can't get any better" (West 49-50). Given the nature of his themes - slavery and the Holocaust - no doubt Styron finds the task herculean.

He cites Faulkner's story about novel writing to explain his own slow process. "To write a novel is placing oneself in the position of a one-armed carpenter trying to build a chicken house in the middle of a hurricane (West 254). This points to the fact that Styron really finds writing a painful process. It is the difficulty of getting started that is the problem and occasionally he suffers "writer's block".

At the same time writing is therapeutic for him. It is the only time he feels balanced because he admits he is emotionally fouled-up most of the time. Unlike Sartre, he believes in the role of literature : "...if literature can't change the world in a radical way, it can, all the same, penetrate deeply into human consciousness" (West 255).

Critique of Styron has run a whole gamut from sociological to metafictional studies. The southern element has been the most commented on followed by the religious and the gothic factors. His work has been analysed mostly from the thematic and narrative point of view. A few studies on the existential element have also been made namely by David Galloway and Ihab Hassan. But they devote only a chapter each to this element in their full length studies. There has been no full length analysis of Styron's peculiar use of existentialism and humanism and hence the need for this study. This thesis proposes to analyse Styron's heart of darkness by taking the

existential humanistic stance. There is growth from despair to affirmation and Styron has shown himself as a worthy artist in undertaking this stupendous task. His novels stand as immortal testimony to the mortal condition of the unaccommodated man.