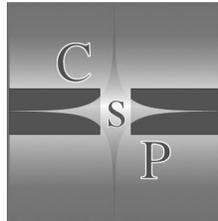


Sophie's Choice
A Contemporary Casebook

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Edited by

Rhoda Sirlin and James L. W. West III



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R.S.
J.L.W.W. III

INTRODUCTION

STYRON'S CHOICES

RHODA SIRLIN

On November 1, 2006, William Styron died suddenly of pneumonia. While we mourn his loss and the fact that he will not see this book, we hope that our casebook on *Sophie's Choice* will provide readers with a useful tool to help appreciate and reevaluate his novel.

Over a quarter-century has passed since the 1979 first edition of *Sophie's Choice* appeared. Since its publication, the novel has been re-imagined as an Academy Award-winning movie in 1982 and later as an opera, premiering in London in 2002. Few twentieth-century American works of fiction have inspired both cinematic and operatic versions (two that come to mind are Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*). Despite the fact that *Sophie's Choice* won the American Book Award for fiction and served as an inspiration for a powerful film and opera, the novel continues to provoke heated debate over its methods, characters, and themes—indeed over its very existence.

William Styron was no stranger to controversy. His entire career was marked by his uncanny ability to hit sensitive nerves. This tendency began in 1951 with the publication of *Lie Down in Darkness*, a dispassionate look at a dysfunctional New South, decaying under the weight of alcoholism, cruelty, selfishness, and false piety—a novel published when Styron was just twenty-six. As a native Virginian himself, Styron did not make many Southern friends with his first novel. Controversy continued in 1953 with the publication of *The Long March*, an anti-war novella, unfashionable in the 1950s. In 1960 Styron published his second full-length novel, *Set This House on Fire*, which takes place in a small Italian village populated by self-indulgent, corrupt Americans who bring vulgarity and violence to the Italian villagers. Here Styron rejected (to the displeasure of some reviewers) the stereotype of the naïve American corrupted by European wickedness. Most explosive, however, was the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967. Though it won a Pulitzer Prize, this novel generated bitter attacks during the fiercely political black

nationalist movements of the late 1960s. Styron's reading led him to the conclusion that slave insurrections were the exception and not the rule in pre-Civil War America, an unpopular notion in the late 1960s. It is not surprising, then, that Styron's work was often more appreciated in Europe, particularly in France, than it was in his own country. He was European in his ability to wed literature and politics and to be engagé. He was attracted to the traditions of secular humanism and European existentialist thought, particularly as found in the writings of Albert Camus.

Styron probably thought that he had seen the worst of such criticism after the publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but it soon became apparent that *Sophie's Choice* would also provoke bitter and sometimes irrational responses. Never one to shy away from sensitive issues, Styron felt compelled to confront in his novel the worst evil of the twentieth century—the Nazi Holocaust that led to the destruction of six million Jews and five million non-Jews. As one epigraph to Styron's novel states, "I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood." Such daring was bound to disturb many readers. Styron had been warned against writing such a novel on three grounds: first that silence was the only fitting response to the Holocaust; second that the Holocaust belongs exclusively to Jews; and third that only survivors themselves can write about this unique horror. Styron was conscious of these warnings, but he disagreed with those arguing against his desire to grapple with the Nazi nightmare. He felt that no subject could be placed beyond the purview of the artist, at least one who approaches his task with the respect and reverence that Auschwitz by its nature demands. He also rejected the notion that the Holocaust belongs only to Jews. Five million non-Jews were also exterminated, and he felt that his novel should show the lethal effects of anti-Semitism on both Jews and non-Jews. Lastly, he rejected the idea that only survivors should write about Auschwitz. That argument, according to Styron, would have eliminated a vast amount of literature—especially historical works, including most of the writings of Tolstoy and Dickens.

In short, Styron did not believe that the term "Holocaust literature" was itself an oxymoron. While mainly imagined, *Sophie's Choice* was based on much reading and research and was faithful to historical facts. A testament to its fidelity to history is the fact that the novel was originally banned in South Africa, and only a heavily edited version was available in the Soviet Union. Censors in both countries were conscious of its historical veracity and power. Poland originally banned the novel as well for its unflinching portrait of Polish anti-Semitism. Despite this dissent, *Sophie's Choice* has been translated into over two dozen languages and, when first published, remained on the hardcover bestseller list for forty-seven weeks.

It must be noted that there is another collection of essays on *Sophie's Choice*, edited by Harold Bloom and published in 2002. That collection takes an essentially negative view of the novel. Bloom believes that "Holocaust fiction" is an oxymoron and that "no one has been able to transmute the Nazi Holocaust into important narrative fiction, and perhaps no one ever will." That bias is revealed in his introduction and in his selection of essays. Our casebook provides a more evenhanded approach. It also contains relevant essays by Styron himself and interviews with him in which he explains his artistic intentions. We have not included material on the film or opera versions of *Sophie's Choice*; we have focused exclusively on the novel. We have divided this casebook into three sections that address the major areas of debate the novel has generated: sexual politics; anti-Semitism and the Holocaust; and silence.

The complexity and richness of *Sophie's Choice* continue to inspire debate and passionate writing. The relevance of the novel can be seen in daily headlines and in current films and works of fiction. Only a few weeks after Styron's death, a conference was held in Iran, in December 2006, the purpose of which was to deny the existence of the Holocaust. The Nobel Prize-winning German novelist Günter Grass recently revealed his involvement with the Waffen-S.S., the military arm of Himmler's elite corps. Grass, once described as the "conscience of Germany," is now being asked by some critics to return the Nobel Prize he received in 1999. In the fall of 2006 a Holocaust opera, "The Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz," was staged in Germany for the first time. A new documentary called "2 or 3 Things I Know about Him" has just been released by German filmmaker Malte Ludin, whose father, Hanns Ludin, was a fervent Nazi who was executed for war crimes in 1947, when Malte was five years old. The film courageously explores this legacy; it includes interviews with three surviving sisters, all of whom find ways to minimize, excuse and dismiss their father's crimes. Malte presents his siblings with documents proving that Hanns knew the Slovakian Jews he was deporting would end up in extermination camps, revealing his sisters as liars. Another new documentary available on DVD called *Hitler's Courts: Betrayal of the Rule of Law in Nazi Germany* is a cautionary tale, warning all nations that they too might be vulnerable should fear and propaganda gain strong footholds, clearly resonating in a post-9/11 America. In our era of rising anti-Semitism, Sacha Baron Cohen plays anti-Semitism for laughs in his movie *Borat*. While the movie is actually anti-anti-Semitic, it has hit many sensitive nerves. Jonathan Littell has published a controversial new novel called *Les Bienveillantes (The Kindly Ones)*, with a defiant, unrepentant Nazi officer as its hero. This 900-page novel, written in French by an American author, is to be published in the U.S. in 2008. A new book called *Bad Faith* by Carmen Callil chronicles the life of French anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator Louis Darquier and gives a devastating

portrait of Vichy France. Shira Nayman, an Australian native, has just published a collection of short fiction about the Holocaust called *Awake in the Dark*, a portion of which has been set to music.

Also of relevance was the celebration, in October 2006, of the birth centennial of German writer and philosopher Hannah Arendt. This global celebration explored the importance today of Arendt's two controversial books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Styron was influenced by both books while writing *Sophie's Choice*; it was Arendt, in fact, who encouraged him to ignore those who warned him not to write the novel at all. These two writers both came to the same conclusion—that the Holocaust was a crime against all of humanity, and that totalitarianism and genocide did not end after the Second World War. These issues seem particularly crucial now when one considers the situation in Iraq and the threat of global terrorism. The debate continues as to whether Islamic fundamentalism is a form of totalitarianism, and whether such totalitarianism could ever take hold in the United States.

These dark issues are found in the pages of *Sophie's Choice*. Styron continued to be preoccupied with Auschwitz and with the lessons of World War II after the publication of his novel. In a 1993 *Newsweek* article included in this book, he contends that World War II left us with “two prodigious and enduring metaphors for human suffering: Auschwitz and Hiroshima.” War, for Styron, is a savage continuum often caused or influenced by racism. The atomic bomb did nothing to eliminate war and aggression, with ethnic atrocities still dominating the headlines. Evil, for Styron, is inexhaustible; *Sophie's Choice* defends the values that the Nazis and slaveholders denied their victims. The novel does not embrace hopelessness or nihilism, despite the enormity of the horrors it depicts, nor does it provide easy solutions. Love and brotherhood, the novel demonstrates, must not be absurdities if we are to survive after Auschwitz. Styron acknowledges that no one will ever wholly understand Auschwitz, but the right question must not be: “Where was God at Auschwitz?” It must be: “Where was man?”

Styron's compassion and daring continued in the nonfiction he published after *Sophie's Choice*. His memoir *Darkness Visible*, which recounted his near-fatal bout with depression, began as a 13,000-word essay published in the December 1989 issue of *Vanity Fair*. Random House published an expanded book version of the essay in 1990; it had an initial printing of 75,000 copies and remained on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list for six months. Styron became a spokesman for removing the public stigma of depression, speaking on radio and television and appearing before community and health organizations. *Darkness Visible* is a *tour de force* that has challenged the medical profession and has reached many sufferers from mood disorders.

Styron argues in the book that suicide often proceeds directly from depression and that no moral blame should be attached to the act. His memoir also suggests that, with intervention and treatment, a depressed person can recover. Readers respond differently to Styron's fiction after having read *Darkness Visible*; the book acts as a kind of Rosetta Stone for his previous work.

In 2002, Styron was given the Witness to Justice Award by the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation in New York, a great honor and a vindication for him and for *Sophie's Choice*. While the legacy of the Holocaust continues in the children and grandchildren of the survivors, in the near future no more survivors will be left to testify about this enormous atrocity. If artists choose silence as the appropriate response, the Holocaust will be forgotten; if it is remembered, it will be because of literary treatments of it. We hope this casebook will inspire those who have never read *Sophie's Choice* to read it and those who have read it, a quarter century ago, to look at it again with fresh eyes. The humanity and tragic dignity of the novel will continue to haunt and enrich its readers, enduring long after its creator's death.

FOREWORD

THE MESSAGE OF AUSCHWITZ

WILLIAM STYRON

Springtime at Auschwitz. The phrase itself has the echo of a bad and tasteless joke, but spring still arrives in the depths of southern Poland, even at Auschwitz. Just beyond the once electrified fences, still standing, the forsythia puts forth its yellow buds in gently rolling pastures where sheep now graze. The early songbirds chatter even here, on the nearly unending grounds of this Godforsaken place in the remote hinterland of the country. At Birkenau, that sector of the Auschwitz complex that was the extermination camp for millions, one is staggered by the sheer vastness of the enterprise stretching out acre upon acre in all directions. The wooden barracks were long ago destroyed, but dozens of the hideous brick stablelike buildings that accommodated the numberless damned are still there, sturdily impervious, made to endure a thousand years.

Last April, as this visitor stood near Crematorium II, now flattened yet preserved in broken-backed rubble, his gaze turned and lingered upon the huge pits where the overflow of the bodies from the ovens was burned; the pits were choked with weeds but among the muck and the brambles there were wildflowers beginning to bloom. He reflected that “forsythia” was one of two loan words from Western languages that he recognized amid his meager command of Polish. The other word, from the French, was *cauchemar*—“nightmare.” At the beginning of spring, the two images mingle almost unbearably in this place.

At Auschwitz itself, in the original camp nearby, there is still the infamous slogan over the main gate—*Arbeit Macht Frei*—and only yards away, unbelievably, a small hotel. (What does the guest really order for breakfast? A room with *which* view does one request?) It is hardly a major world tourist attraction but Auschwitz is not unfrequented. Many of the visitors are Germans, festooned with Leicas and Hasselblads, whose presence does not seem inappropriate amid the *echt*-German architecture.

These grim warrens, too, were built to last the Hitler millennium. Hulking and Teutonic in their dun-colored brick, the rows of barracks where hundreds of thousands perished of disease and starvation, or were tortured and hanged or shot to death, now shelter the principal museum exhibits: the mountains of human hair, the piles of clothes, the wretched suitcases with crudely or neatly painted names like Stein and Mendelson, the braces and crutches, the heaps of toys and dolls and teddy bears—all of the heart-destroying detritus of the Holocaust from which one stumbles out into the blinding afternoon as if from the clutch of death itself. Even thus in repose—arrested in time, rendered a frozen memorial, purified of its seething mass murder—Auschwitz must remain the one place on earth most unyielding to meaning or definition.

I was unable to attend the recent symposium on Auschwitz at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York City, but many of the aspects of the proceedings there, at least as reported, troubled and puzzled me, especially because of the overwhelming emphasis on anti-Semitism and Christian guilt. My interest in the meeting was deep, since although I am not nominally a Christian, my four children are half-Jewish and I claim perhaps a more personal concern with the idea of genocide than do most gentiles.

There can be no doubt that Jewish genocide became the main business of Auschwitz; the wrecked crematoria at Birkenau are graphic testimony to the horrible and efficient way in which the Nazis exterminated two and a half million Jews—mass homicide on such a stupefying scale that one understands how the event might justify speculation among theologians that it signaled the death of God.

The Holocaust is so incomprehensible and so awesomely central to our present-day consciousness—Jewish and gentile—that one almost physically shrinks with reticence from attempting to point out again what was barely touched on in certain reports on the symposium: that at Auschwitz perished not only the Jews but at least one million souls who were not Jews. Of many origins, but mainly Slavs—Poles, Russians, Slovaks, other—they came from a despised people who almost certainly were fated to be butchered with the same genocidal ruthlessness as were the Jews had Hitler won the war, and they contained among them hundreds of thousands of Christians who went to their despairing deaths in the belief that *their* God, the Prince of Peace, was as dead as the God of Abraham and Moses.

Or there were the few ravaged survivors, like the once devoutly Catholic Polish girl I knew many years ago, the memory of whom impelled my visit to Auschwitz. It was she who, having lost father, husband and two children to the gas chambers, paid no longer any attention to religion, since

she was certain, she told me, that Christ had turned His face away from her, as He had from all mankind.

Because of this I cannot accept anti-Semitism as the sole touchstone by which we examine the monstrous paradigm that Auschwitz has become. Nor can I regard with anything but puzzled mistrust the chorus of *mea culpas* from the Christian theologians at the symposium, rising along with the oddly self-lacerating assertion of some of them that the Holocaust came about as the result of the anti-Semitism embedded in Christian doctrine.

I am speaking as a writer whose work has often been harshly critical of Christian pretensions, hypocrisies and delusions. Certainly one would not quarrel with the premise that Christian thought has often contained much that was anti-Semitic, but to place all the blame on Christian theology is to ignore the complex secular roots of anti-Semitism as well. The outrages currently being perpetrated against the Jews by the secular, "enlightened," and anti-Christian Soviet Union should be evidence of the dark and mysterious discord that still hinders our full understanding of the reasons for this ancient animosity.

To take such a narrow view of the evil of Nazi totalitarianism is also to ignore the ecumenical nature of that evil. For although the unparalleled tragedy of the Jews may have been its most terrible single handiwork, its threat to humanity transcended even this. If it was anti-Semitic, it was also anti-Christian. And it attempted to be more final than that, for its ultimate depravity lay in the fact that it was anti-human. Anti-life.

This message was plainly written in the spring dusk at Auschwitz only short weeks ago for one observer, who fled before the setting of the sun. To linger in Auschwitz after nightfall would be unthinkable.

—*New York Times* Op-Ed page, 25 June 1974.
Reprinted in William Styron, *This Quiet Dust*
(New York: Random House, 1982)

PART I

SEXUAL POLITICS

EVIL AND WILLIAM STYRON

PEARL K. BELL

In an introductory note to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, his brooding story of the Negro preacher who led the only significant slave revolt in American history, William Styron wrote that he had tried “to produce a work that is less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history.” His new novel, *Sophie’s Choice*, is also, in part, a meditation on history, a gravely ambitious attempt to confront the truth of the Nazi death camps and to define the moral legacy of the Holocaust not only for the Jews but for all of humanity.

The Nazi slaughter of eleven million European Jews and Gentiles may seem a curious choice of subject for William Styron, an Anglo-Saxon Presbyterian from Virginia whose previous work derived in one way or another from personal experience: his Southern upbringing (*Lie Down in Darkness* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner*), his brief stint in the Marines toward the end of World War II (*The Long March*), and a year spent in Italy after he won the Prix de Rome (*Set This House on Fire*). Yet each of these novels was charged with an apocalyptic sense of evil, and this may perhaps explain Styron’s fascination now with one of the most diabolical events of the century.

Sophie’s Choice, more frankly autobiographical than the earlier novels, provides a memoir of the summer of 1947. Styron has recently come to New York from Virginia, “a lean and lonesome young Southerner wandering in the Kingdom of the Jews.” Living in a rooming house in Flatbush, he has just embarked on the Faulknerian tale of family damnation that will become *Lie Down in Darkness*, and we are told a great deal about the genesis and composition of the book. Yet as a lifelong captive of historical memory, he is also haunted by the stories of the Turner revolt he has heard since boyhood, and Stingo, as young Styron is called in *Sophie’s Choice*, frequently declares that someday he will “write about slavery ... make slavery give up its most deeply buried and tormented secrets.”

Here Styron displays the two sides of his literary imagination in high relief. In the course of his career, he has been strongly attracted to the flamboyant melodrama peculiar to Southern romance, a regional genre awash in the morbidity of ruin, guilt, and decay. He has also been deeply engaged with the actualities of history. The lure of Gothic sensationalism was responsible for

his worst book, *Set This House on Fire*, a synthetic *Sturm und Drang* about American expatriates in Italy; but this was followed by *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, whose poignant exploration of the humiliations of slavery and densely textured rendering of the ante-bellum landscape and of plantation life made it his most powerful piece of work. (What infuriated the black nationalists who excoriated *Nat Turner* as a “vile racist myth” was not so much the liberties Styron took with the known facts about the slave leader, but the presumption that any white man could understand the soul of a black slave.) Caught between the inconsonant seductions of Gothic romance and the realities of history, Styron has now tried to resolve this creative dilemma by plunging into the actuality of the death camps.

In *Sophie's Choice*, history assaults the provincial innocence of Stingo by accident. Twenty-two years old in 1947, he is just out of Duke and, fired by familiar dreams of literary glory, has made his way to the big city. But as a junior reader at McGraw-Hill, he finds himself squandering his education and taste on witty rejection letters to tenth-rate authors. Sickened by his sexless isolation in Manhattan, Stingo is soon liberated by a windfall from his father. After moving to Flatbush, he settles down to write that first novel, and is befriended by the woman living above him, Sophie Zawistowska, a survivor of Auschwitz. In the course of the tempestuous summer, the young novelist, “a stranger to love and death,” learns about the recent horrors of wartime Europe.

Sophie is a Polish Catholic whose golden beauty captivates Stingo, though he is struck by a strange quality of her body, “the sickish plasticity ... of one who has suffered severe emaciation and whose flesh is even now in the last stages of being restored.” In the deceptive tranquility of Brooklyn, Sophie slowly unfolds her terrible story to Stingo in bursts of memory expelled like poison from her soul: her father and husband shot by the Nazis in Sachsenhausen, even though they were rabid anti-Semites who worshipped Hitler; her craven refusal to help her friends in the Warsaw resistance for fear that it would endanger her children's safety; her arrest when she was caught smuggling meat to her dying mother; the journey to Auschwitz, and the loss of her two young children there.

The ravaged woman remains a prisoner of her past. As with many survivors, guilt at being alive has reduced her to a victim yearning for punishment, and this she finds in masochistic abundance through her Jewish lover, Nathan Landau, a brilliant but violently mercurial intellectual who enters her life as a savior only to become her doom. A Harvard-educated research biologist who claims to be within sight of cures for cancer and polio, Nathan is a polymath who can range with miraculous ease over the world's body of knowledge, “as brilliant on Dreiser as he was on Whitehead's philosophy.” To

the bedazzled Stingo he is “the embodiment of everything I deemed attractive and even envied in a human being.”

Styron the novelist is enthralled by men like Landau—glittering charmers who cast a rapturous spell—and there is a decadent version of this same sinister enchanter, Mason Flagg, in *Set This House on Fire*. But Nathan, at one moment generous, loving, high-spirited, erudite, funny (this last we must take on faith; Styron tells us about the comic genius but fails to show it), can without warning turn into a snarling fiend, raging at Sophie for imagined infidelities and at Stingo for his incurable Southern racism. Only toward the end do we learn that Nathan’s bewildering fluctuations of mood are in fact psychotic, that his beguiling façade is a crazy pack of lies—he has never been to Harvard, he is not a research biologist—and that he has been in and out of mental hospitals most of his life. Despite this explanation, however, Nathan never develops into a credible human being, for Styron paints him in such garish shades of genius and bestiality that, mad though he may be, he is deprived of plausibility. No matter, for his role in the story is primarily instrumental. It is not Nathan’s operatic madness but Sophie’s slavish devotion that absorbs us, and she is the passionate heart of the book.

With a sure instinct, Styron has written Sophie’s story in the grand manner of nineteenth-century fiction—she is, indeed, one of the very few women in contemporary American fiction to possess something of the tragic stature and self-defeating complexity of such classic heroines as Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina and Hardy’s Sue Bridehead. A victim of absolute evil, she is not simply a pathetic survivor trembling before the lash of fate. She is lover, liar, masochist, drunk—a martyr but not a saint. Despite the cowardice and deception she divulges to Stingo, it is impossible not to be touched by the nobility of his lovable woman devoured by self-loathing. Even when she summons up the courage to tell her young friend, with self-flagellating candor, about her pretense of anti-Semitism when making a futile attempt to seduce Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, while working as his secretary, we cannot bring ourselves to condemn Sophie. This cruel secret hidden in the title is withheld until almost the last, and it is the darkest reason of all for Sophie’s suppurating guilt. In Sophie Zawistowska, Styron has achieved an intensity of feeling and pain that is admirably unsentimental, and he forces us to see that her sins deserve, beyond pity, the generosity of forgiveness.

Sophie’s Choice, however, deals not only with this fragile survivor of Nazi barbarism. It is also an account of William Styron’s young manhood, and clearly one of his motives for placing Sophie’s life in the context of his own, though they are so disparate, is to play on that recurrent theme of American fiction, the contrast of New World innocence and European experience. If in Henry James this encounter brings about alterations of manners and morals, in

Sophie's Choice it acquires the extremity of nightmare. Listening to Sophie, Stingo is shattered by the realization that while millions were being massacred in Europe, the rest of the world, oblivious, went on with its ordinary business. Stingo feels he can never come to terms with the fact that on the very day Sophie arrived in Auschwitz, he was stuffing himself with bananas in North Carolina to meet the weight requirement of the Marine Corps.

But it is a question whether the collision of innocence and experience requires the profuse indulgence of Styron's portrait of the artist as a young man. There is too much in this novel about Stingo's frustrated efforts to unburden himself of his pent-up virginity. Except for the lyrical celebration of Prospect Park in high summer and a funny account of his failure to conquer an impregnable fortress named Leslie Lapidus, Stingo's horny preoccupations are prolix and faintly embarrassing.

At the end of the novel, Stingo vows that "Someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world," and Styron has tried to honor this vow in *Sophie's Choice*. On one level it is an extraordinary act of the novelist's imagination, which recreates Sophie's ordeal in Auschwitz and beyond through a wealth of immediate, dramatic detail. We see the "bluish veil of burning human flesh" that darkened the sunlight in the camp; we see and are repelled by Höss taking a break from his murderous duties to gaze lovingly out the window at his Arabian horse. Or, in an appalling episode, Sophie, haggard and defenseless during her first weeks in New York, is crushed in a rush-hour subway train and, when the lights go out, raped by an anonymous marauding finger.

But Styron does not limit his scrutiny of evil to these devastating obscenities. He has a moral to spell out. He has read widely and conscientiously in the literature of the Holocaust—not only such detailed chronicles as those of David Rousset, Tadeusz Borowski, Eugen Kogon, Andre Schwarz-Bart, but also the theoretical efforts of Hannah Arendt, George Steiner, and the Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein—and he means to wrest some lesson from the slaughter. Styron has been particularly impressed by Rubenstein's thesis, in *The Cunning of History*, that the concentration camps were not only "places of execution" but a new kind of slave society—"a world of the living dead"—based on ruthless domination and "the absolute expendability of human life."

Midway through *Sophie's Choice*, then, Styron abruptly and for a long moment exchanges the voice of the novelist for that of the moralist. What especially troubles him is the fact that the world is, to this day, largely unmindful of the millions of non-Jewish Russians, Serbs, Gypsies, Slovenes, and Poles like Sophie who died alongside the Jews. It disturbs him that "It is

surpassingly difficult for many Jews to see beyond the consecrated nature of the Nazis' genocidal fury." Though Styron allows that such parochialism is understandable, in his view it reveals a deficiency of moral responsibility and a dangerous insensitivity to those forces in contemporary life that might spawn new Holocausts. In a recent interview, he has even questioned the validity of the word Holocaust, as Jews have defined it for more than a decade, and argues that the French term *l'univers concentrationnaire* more accurately describes "the significance of this intolerable crime."

In one sense, given his revulsion at the radical evil of the Nazis, Styron may be right. But what he misses is that, precisely as an expression of radical evil, the Holocaust gained its significance because its first purpose was the total eradication of one people, the Jews—not for anything they had done but only for being who they were. It is this that distinguishes the Jewish victims in the death camps from all others.

Styron also neglects the historical fact that the word Holocaust acquired importance for Jews only twenty years after the defeat of Nazi Germany. What happened between 1940 and 1945 became fully manifest to Jewish consciousness not in the decade after World War II but with the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, the third time that the Israelis had to defend their lives, when it became evident that the symbolic and actual history of the people was again being threatened. It was then that the theological meaning of the Holocaust became clear; that, as Emil Fackenheim put it, Hitler should not achieve in death what he failed to do in life.

Styron's insistence on seeing the Holocaust as an example of slavery—if a particularly horrible one—is perhaps to be expected in a Southerner who has devoted a good deal of his mature life to contemplating that institution. Yet by emphasizing not the end goal of the Nazi plan—mass murder—but rather the means of domination and enslavement which they settled on to effectuate that goal, Styron loses a sense of the full enormity of the Holocaust. He is, in any case, too prone to highly charged but dubious generalization: "And were not all of us, white and Negro, still enslaved? I knew that in the fever of my mind and in the most unquiet regions of my heart I would be shackled by slavery as long as I remained a writer." Sentiments like these, intended to enlarge the didactic range of his novel, have, rather, the effect of undermining its dramatic power.

Yet it should be stressed that Styron's "philosophy" is, in every way that counts, external to *Sophie's Choice*. Philosophers analyze, classify, and make distinctions of language, but a novel like this one cuts across distinctions because human beings embody within themselves endlessly various motives. The art of the novel is necessarily dramatic, concrete, and idiosyncratic, and it can reveal complex truths about individuals, and their dissonant impulses, in devious and untidy ways. Styron may not be persuasive as a philosophic mind

meditating on history, but that does not diminish his genuine strength. So powerfully does the *novelist* bring Sophie to life that she seems less imagined than remembered. As we read her story, we bear witness to her fatality, and it is the word made flesh that remains with us in the end.

—*Commentary*, August 1979

NIGHT THOUGHTS OF A MEDIA WATCHER

GLORIA STEINEM

It's high time that someone thanked Gay Talese for titling his boring, detailed catalog of mechanical sex, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*. Since women don't have wives, we are warned (however inadvertently on the author's part) that we need not buy this book. So are male readers who no longer think of women as other men's possessions. That leaves a narrow but fervent readership for Mr. Talese: men who, sexually speaking, are on automatic pilot.

Sophie's Choice, however, another best-seller soon to become a major motion picture, is much more deceptive. By putting a woman into the title of his novel, William Styron (author/narrator/protagonist) might encourage readers to believe that he could write about a woman with empathy.

No such luck. In his last historical novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Styron was criticized for turning that black leader of a famous slave revolt into a white male fantasy; even portraying him as sexually obsessed with, and the murderer of, a young white woman (though there is no historical evidence that he was either). In *Sophie's Choice*, a heavily autobiographical novel about a Polish woman, the survivor of a Nazi concentration camp, whom Styron knew and loved when he was a young writer in New York, he brings the same liberal *chutzpah* and infuriating bias to her portrayal.

For instance, though Sophie had been strong enough to survive the deaths of her two children and years of atrocities in a concentration camp, though she had vowed to (and does) live longer than its hated commandant so that he will not triumph, she is described by Styron as freely choosing to love a sexual fascist in New York; a drug addict who beats her and is so jealous that he literally condemns her for living.

There could be alternative explanations: this man saved her life with medical treatment for malnutrition, and besides, she has almost zero alternatives. Nonetheless, the author/narrator rebukes her for expressing relief when her violent lover temporarily takes off. Though the narrator professes to love Sophie, and is (God knows) sexually obsessed with her, he also admires her sadistic lover. (What turns out to be the lover's long history of criminally insane behavior is seen by Styron as a fairly normal male mating style.) Alarm only sets in when the lover threatens to kill not just Sophie but the narrator, too.

Sophie's choice turns out to have been unthinkable: a Nazi officer had forced her to choose which child, her son or her daughter, might survive the gas ovens, and threatened to kill them both if she did not comply. She chose to save her son. Though Styron elaborates on the possible motive of the guard (he decides it was a religious desire to force a sinful choice), he spends *not one word* on the sexual politics and self-hatred of the choice that is his title. Son-preference is expected; so much so, it needs no comment. It's as natural as sexual masochism in a woman.

And so is suicide. Like the heroine of his first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, Sophie chooses to kill herself. (Another unexamined motive is why she does this in preference to being "saved" by marriage to the Styron-character. He just assumes that she was irretrievably doomed.) Either Styron prefers suicidal heroines, or prospective heroines have been reading his books.

Though the events of Sophie's life conform to the author's misogyny in a way that makes me suspicious, I'm willing to believe that there was a real Sophie and that his memory of her is accurate. The problem is that he just takes for granted female self-hatred, egolessness, and obsession with pleasing men. The reader comes away convinced that, if she weren't beautiful and the author hadn't spent a whole summer trying to go to bed with her, he wouldn't have bothered to record her existence at all.

Of course, there's always the hope that the movie of *Sophie's Choice* won't be as painful as the book. But I had the same fantasy while reading about Sophie as I did while reading Styron's version of Turner. If she were still alive, she might mount a campaign of signs and graffiti: "Please help me. I am a prisoner in a book by William Styron."

—Ms., November 1981

WILLIAM STYRON: A CONVERSATION

JAMES ELLISON

William Styron's first novel, Lie Down in Darkness, propelled him into the front rank of American novelists at the age of twenty-six. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for his novel The Confessions of Nat Turner in 1968. Sophie's Choice, published in 1979, is the first of his works to reach the screen. James Ellison, a senior editor at Psychology Today, recently interviewed Styron about the film.

Ellison: Are you satisfied with the movie that Alan Pakula has made from *Sophie's Choice*?

Styron: I think the movie is a very respectable recreation of the book. And while I have reservations in the sense that so many things were left out, I realize the necessity of selection.

Ellison: There has been some negative feminist reaction to your portrayal of Sophie—that she is too weak, too much the victim. Would you care to comment on that?

Styron: I would say that there's something wrong with anyone who felt that Sophie was an ill-spirited portrait of a woman. I fail to see anyplace in the book that could offend a reader's idea of femaleness or womanhood. And, in addition, at the risk of overanalyzing my own work, I don't know of a woman in modern literature who has suffered as much at the hands of men as Sophie has. Her father is a monster, her husband is a monster, her male associates in the camp are monsters, and finally, she is done to death by a haphazardly monstrous but nonetheless terrifying psychopath. It is true that Sophie responded to men in certain masochistic and supine ways, but that was simply the way she was constituted, and anyone who would construe that as an insult to womanhood is just simply a lunatic. I don't know what women want.

Ellison: Do you feel that your treatment of women in your fiction underwent any change through the increasingly feminist climate of the '70s?

Styron: It's very hard for me to step back and examine analytically my professional attitude toward women. But I have found that true women—not feminist harpies—have responded to my work in a very strong way, starting with *Lie Down in Darkness*. I've saved most of the letters written to me, and

I think that if any disgruntled feminist radical would go through them, she would realize that my work has had a strong and positive effect on women. Women have been centrally located in almost all my work. And they have almost always been victims—victims of men.

Ellison: Certainly Peyton Loftis in *Lie Down in Darkness* was a victim of her father, as Sophie was a victim of *her* father.

Styron: Yes, they both were. And I just cannot understand how any feminist could argue that I have a warped or perverted attitude toward women. I think that if they do, they're being hysterical, and they're also totally wrong.

Ellison: One last question, which I feel would interest the readers of this magazine. Your career has been an unusual one in that you've written four very long books over the past thirty years, nearly one a decade. Do you plan to take another decade for another long book?

Styron: No, I have nothing planned of any such scope or length. Not that I've ever felt that the length of my books, or the time they took, was really relevant to the quality of the work. They had to be what they were and they had to take the time they took to write them. All I can tell you is that whatever comes next will be forthcoming much more quickly than another decade.

—*Psychology Today*, January 1983

WILLIAM STYRON: AN INTERVIEW

JUDITH THURMAN

William Styron is a large man with a leonine air and a soft Southern voice. In the summer, he lives with his family on Martha's Vineyard. The Styron establishment is run along the hospitable lines of an old Russian manor house. Several distinguished guests have come to stay for an indefinite period, and several famous neighbors have dropped by. This party sits on the porch, facing the sea, well-supplied with wine, and keeps up a high standard of conversation. Behind the main house, there is a little studio where Styron works, and where, after a walk in the woods, we talk.

JT: You have said that you felt a “mandate” to write *Sophie's Choice*.” Could you explain?

WS: I'd been struggling with a novel about the Marine Corps. Yet there was something missing from it—a lack of confidence. About the time I decided to abandon it, I received the “mandate” to write *Sophie*—in the form of a dream. I don't want to make it sound creepy and metaphysical, but I woke up one morning in the spring with the vivid memory of this girl, whom I had met in Brooklyn, in a rooming house, more than thirty years before.... From that moment, I knew the whole architecture of the book. I also knew that I would tell it in a totally autobiographical way, in the voice of Stingo—which is my own voice as a young writer.

JT: When you are running so close to the wind of autobiography, what is the relation between fiction and reality?

WS: You pick and choose as you go along. You improvise; at points you invent; at other junctions you tell the very marrow of what really happened. The freedom—the kind of happy freedom of that mode of storytelling—is that you can do both.

Sophie, however, was really the girl's name. She had survived Auschwitz, was a Polish Catholic, had a tattoo. The real Sophie had a lover, but he was a colorless sort of fellow—not anything like Nathan in the book. Their wild lovemaking was true, though. They were at it night and day. And that was one of the things that allowed me to emphasize Stingo's awful yearning for the same thing—which he couldn't have.

JT: How does a man writing intimately about a woman get to know her?

WS: I can't say precisely how a male writer is able to create a woman character. There are fragments in *Sophie* of many women I have known. But the fact is, we all have components of maleness or femaleness in us, and I am able to draw on a certain femaleness in me to describe this woman, from the inside, as she is meant to be.

In the beginning, I didn't actually conceive of *Sophie* as being so subservient, if that's the word—so masochistic in her relationships with men. But I soon saw that that was an important component of how I had to tell the story. She was victimized by men all her life. When you are creating a special person, you cannot make apologies. You simply have to show her the way she is, to render her tragedy and to do it justice.

JT: Having written about this woman, these men, the Nazi period, with such power, what do you understand about the relationship between sexuality and violence?

WS: It has always bewildered me why men are violent. But this does not prevent me from perceiving how—perhaps out of the little flickers I might have in my own being—how this violence could erupt in certain men. If you are really honest, you have to admit that the violence exists—both in men toward women and in women toward themselves. Many of *Sophie's* masochistic sexual fantasies were confessed to me by real women. Women give male writers their most interesting secrets, you know.

JT: Why do you seem to kill off the women you really care about?

WS: It is nothing more complicated than having a tragic view of the human condition. I suppose I could write some kind of story in which the heroic woman becomes a symbol for survival. But women and men are victims.

JT: Of what?

WS: I guess of being half-connected animals. Who live neither in nature nor in civilization. Who don't know how to accommodate either one. Nor do most men and women seem able to accommodate each other, to find an equilibrium within a love affair or a marriage. Perhaps the tragedy, the flaw, is the romantic notion that everything can be perfect or is perfectible. In reality it is a struggle.

JT: How does your intimacy with a character—in the case of *Sophie*, over many years—affect your relations with real people in your life: With your wife, for example.

WS: I think it enhances those relations. I have the feeling that creating *Sophie* was, in fact, an act of catharsis for me, which allowed me, once again, to enter a state of balance with the opposite sex. I think it was a healthy thing for me to do.

JT: Could you explain that a little more?

WS: I saw, in effect, that I could create—full-blown—another persona for myself. In other words, I dragged out of that femaleness in me, which all men have somewhere, a living human being. It satisfied the desire for a new birth *in* myself, and a new birth *out* of myself. And I felt a great jolt, a sense of confidence and recognition which had been eluding me before.

—*Mademoiselle*, February 1983