

ANALYSIS

Lie Down in Darkness (1951)

William Styron

(1925-2006)

“In Port Warwick, a ship-building city of tidewater Virginia, during the last days of World War II, Milton and Helen Loftis and their family are met to bury their daughter Peyton, who committed suicide in New York City. The parents have long been alienated, in part because Milton, an unsuccessful lawyer, has been a kind of dependent of Helen, a bitter woman, in whose family house they live, in part because of tensions created by the fact that their eldest daughter, Maudie, was a retarded cripple, dead in her twentieth year. Milton had an almost unpaternal affection for Peyton, long ago took to drink, and has long had a mistress. Dolly Bonner, who accompanies him to the funeral.

Peyton was sent to the proper college, Sweet Briar, but, affected by her unhappy home life, left it to live in New York, to marry Harry Miller, a struggling artist, to separate from him, and to take lovers in a frustrated search to find her own way. Finally she threw herself from a skyscraper. Even her funeral does not go smoothly. The hearse breaks down and during the humid day the procession to the cemetery is interrupted by a traffic jam caused by a revival meeting of blacks. In it are servants of the Loftis family, ecstatic because of their redemption by Daddy Faith, in contrast to the hopeless despair of Milton and Helen Loftis.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 426-27

“William Styron, brilliantly in his first work of fiction, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), and somewhat opaquely in his very recent *Set This House on Fire* (1960), writes the peculiarly bleak, uncomfortable, largely a-social novel of the fifties... He has given us the moral bewilderment and the unfocussed anxiety haunting some of the most serious minds of his World War II generation... At the surface level of narrative event, Styron’s first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, was a richly detailed portrait of the unresolvable emotional chaos which defined the between-the-wars marriage of Milton Loftis and his wife Helen. Against an upper-middle-class, Southern background of country-club dances and drinking, Episcopalian moral conformity, and Negro primitive Christianity, the Helen Loftis of the novel clings with pathological, maternal devotion to the mentally retarded, crippled daughter Maudie, and her husband, Milton Loftis, over-indulges, in his half-sick role of father, the bright, seductive daughter Peyton.

The central focus of the novel... is the suicide of Peyton herself, after the collapse of her own disastrous marriage. Perhaps in part the victim of her parents’ unmitigated and fascinated hatred of each other, Peyton Loftis is shown to be more essentially the victim of the driving moral disorientation of the generation which came to maturity after World War II. It is not that Peyton actively sets out to destroy her own desire to live. It is rather that, for her, existence or death can be decided by no act of affirmation that can be isolated from the tumbled events of her life. The desperate moment of her suicide, I think, is almost wholly a question as to when the welling up in her of pure instinct for survival will cease.

Lie Down in Darkness was the first important post-war novel to demonstrate, both by its rather loose, episodic, unsynthesized structure, and by its assumption concerning the nature of human reality and human value, that the novel, as novel, had undergone an actual and a verifiable metamorphosis... Its first critics were, on the whole, favorably impressed by the quality of the writing it displayed, though the new ‘existential’ atmosphere and the tone of *Lie Down in Darkness* seems to have been puzzling to them. Maxwell Geismar, for example, found the novel ‘practically perfect.’ He also noted, in praise of Styron’s use of the visual, that ‘we are *at* all these ghastly parties, ceremonials, and festivals of a middle-class business society.’ And yet he could conclude of a book whose basic involvement was with the flight of coherency in our time, that it was ‘simply a domestic tragedy.’ (*Saturday Review*, September 15, 1951).

The commentator for *Time* magazine, in his own inimitable patronizing way, perhaps recognized the essential attitudes of the novel toward the human condition more clearly than Geismar when he described Styron as 'one more recruit for the dread-despair-and-decay camp of U.S. letters' (September 19, 1951).

Lie Down in Darkness seemed to me when I first read it (and as I have re-read it a number of times since) to be almost in a class by itself in its power to create characters caught in the mood of a generation, hovering, in its daily lives, between a drugged conventionality, a faceless and soulless identification with the formalized pleasures of a class, and a terror of the meaninglessness of existence. And I think *Lie Down in Darkness* contains one of the most stunning passages in contemporary fiction, in Peyton Loftis's Joyce-like internal monologue as she strips herself to what she calls 'this lovely shell' of her naked body, and plunges out the window to her death on the street below. But neither this novel nor those of Styron's most alert, most dedicated contemporaries have yet been generally accepted for the distinct triumphs they are, unlike and quite different from the triumphs of the novels of the twenty-five years between the wars. And an Arthur Mizener, for example, though he is willing to grant *Lie Down in Darkness* 'real power,' still insists (perhaps with the more tightly written, the more obvious content of a *Great Gatsby* in mind) that it loses stature by a 'certain factitious solemnity about The Meaning of It All' (*New York Times Book Review*, June 5, 1960)."

David L. Stevenson
"William Styron and the Fiction of the Fifties"
Critique III.3 (Summer 1960) 47-58

"Flannery O'Connor commented on Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951): 'To my way of thinking it was too much the long tedious Freudian case history, though the boy can write and there were overtones of better things in it.' On *Set This House on Fire* (1960), she wrote: 'I don't think concern with guilt has too much to do with the traditional Christian artist's attempts at the novel. It may have a good deal to do with Styron's.' Unfortunately, O'Connor did not gloss his work more, for her own work belies any attempt to group novelists regionally and her views would have been a corrective to those 'critics' like Granville Hicks who indiscriminately praised every Styron production.

Another view of Styron's career is this: that each novel, located almost a decade apart, was preparation for a succeeding effort in which he would break free of something. We can perceive *Lie Down in Darkness* as purging Faulkner; *Set This House on Fire* as exorcising elements of personal guilt; *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as coming to terms, Styron's own intimate terms, with black-white relationships by way of the legendary rebellious slave; and finally, *Sophie's Choice* as Styron's apotheosis of his freedom: his choice as embedded in Sophie's. Each work was like an act that had to be written, and while the earlier books are derivative, overly rhetorical for their basic weight, and full of artificial flourishes and feelings, they can be justified as part of a long development and reach for greatness in *Sophie's Choice*. For if nothing else, the latter novel demonstrates that Styron was straining for development and achievement at a time when many of his contemporaries had given up, either repeating themselves or reaching for popular modes. Whatever its flaws, *Sophie's Choice* justifies the mistakes we can observe in Styron's earlier work.

The war...created a crisis in the novel, ending the 'old novel' by implication and pressuring the writer to explore a new sensibility. In *Lie Down*, Styron failed to catch the note of the new and trapped himself in a pastiche of the old. Either he did not perceive or did not care that his kind of novel had been written before, although not with such lyricism, except perhaps by Fitzgerald. *Lie Down* is an artificial book. It is constructed out of other novels, not from any kind of life generated by a given set of characters or situations. Many novels of the highest quality in the past have been constructed out of others, but for satirical purposes. Styron's novel, however, is fully serious; it is at the highest levels of pastiche, where counterfeit and real yearn for each other. Gaddis's Wyatt Gwyon paints 'lost paintings' that are so real they help to create a canon of their own. Styron paints his characters and scenes so artificially he makes us marvel anew at the brilliance of those he imitates.

Essentially, his models are Fitzgerald—his characters as well as Scott and Zelda themselves; Faulkner—whose presence is everywhere, in Helen Loftis, the lost Southern lady, frustrated and yet hanging on, in Peyton, the damned young lady, in Milton, who has no role in the new South and cannot handle a life without work or aim; Hemingway—the constant drinking, the need for masculine assertion, the lyricism of

lost causes and lost generations. The models are excellent. To this Styron has fused a 'romantic prose,' in which words and phrasing are carefully modulated, what we call 'good writing.' It is very studied language, but, then, so is Faulkner's. We are reminded of Faulkner's imitation of the romantic poets in his early attempts at verse.

The style is perfectly attuned to the characters: a lost family in the South which, despite war and vast social changes, remains fixed in the past. Its pastness comes to us in Helen Loftis, a woman who through religious belief tries to mold a family that no longer fits her sense of order; and her husband, Milton, who wanders from one drink to another. His passion, when not directed at his daughter, is aimed outside marriage. Peyton, whose dead body runs like a leitmotif through the novel, is the moving force, the catalyst of doom. She is the repository of this South, which, while seemingly providing release, is really a source of final things. She is calculatingly self-destructive within her family, with her mother, in her drinking and promiscuity. Unable to function in any orderly way, she forgoes the love and forbearance of the one man who tries to help her, Harry Miller, a Jewish painter.

As in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, the chief image is of burial. In *Lie Down in Darkness* (the title refers to 'lying down' with the devil, experiencing sin so that one can become cleansed), the corpse of Peyton arrives in Port Warwick, Virginia, at the beginning of the novel and is then transported despite several breakdowns of the hearse, to the cemetery. Thus, we are always aware of Peyton's death and Styron reconstitutes her life, from childhood to death and original burial in New York's potter's field. Though her death dominates the novel, her lack of actual presence dilutes that stress. The structural conception—to locate all within flashback—creates a tightness which we associate, also, with Faulkner, especially in *Absalom, Absalom!* Although Styron handles the flashbacks well, the method as well as the content is by now more than a twice-told tale.

Styron provides no persona or external commentator beyond an omniscient narrator; thus, irony, narrative locationing, and objective comment are forsaken. The author, we assume, accepts Peyton's story, much as Fitzgerald accepted the stories of his protagonists in *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and the Damned*. All detail falls into familiar, unquestioned patterns. College is not for learning, but for drunken frat parties, football games, screwing in the woods or a distant motel. The question is not simply one of stereotypical locales, but of authorial acceptance of the fact that no other dimensions existed. With all its sophisticated prose, *Lie Down* is a very young novel. Styron cannot escape from one point: lacking experience of the world, he created a world from literary sources.

Stereotypes close like a trap around Styron's ambitions. After their wedding, Harry and Peyton take a ferry; and of course, it is a ferry to hell, across the Styx and monitored by Charon. Their stay in New York's Greenwich Village is a decent into the Inferno, replete with Italians. When Peyton is unfaithful to Harry, she takes an Italian lover, who wants only to screw and treats her like dirt. Peyton's mother back in Port Warwick is religious and pious, whereas her husband is promiscuous and alcoholic. Milton Loftis, frustrated by an ascetic wife, looks longingly at the young body of his daughter and commits incest in his mind several times over.

No matter how fine the prose, there is not way for an author to overcome the deadness such a pastiche creates. Worse, Styron is offering up, evidently, dangerous elements—incest, promiscuity, drinking bouts, extramarital affairs—as though this were a perilous and exciting life. Such characters are surely not ready for tragedy, maybe not for farce either; though irony, distance, repositioning might have created a novel that spoke *to* us rather than repeated things about us.”

Fredrick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
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Michael Hollister (2015)