

ANALYSIS

Sophie's Choice (1979)

William Styron

(1925-2006)

“Narrated by the author’s autobiographical persona, Stingo, a young would-be novelist from Tidewater Virginia, it tells of his experiences in New York City, where he was first a publisher’s reader, then a resident of the Bronx, able to be jobless and to concentrate on the creation of his first novel thanks to a small legacy of money deriving directly from the sale, generations before, of a family slave. In his boardinghouse Stingo becomes the devoted friend of Nathan Landau, a slightly older, brilliant but drug-deranged manic-depressive Jewish intellectual, and his beloved Sophie Zawistowska, an émigré Polish Catholic beauty, with whom he has a tortured relationship marked by frenzied sex.

The account of her frightful experiences during World War II as told to Stingo make him recognize ‘a sinister zone of likeness between Poland and the American South,’ thus creating another dimension for the novel and its narrator. Her father, a professor of law, and her husband had been killed by the Nazis, and she and her children had been imprisoned in the concentration death camp of Auschwitz. From it she had escaped, first by becoming the secretary of its commandant, Rudolf Hoss, then by appealing to him by diverse means, including a pamphlet written years before by her anti-Semite father. Although thus saved from death, she suffers her own perdition in the years of life left to her.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 708

“Consciously or not, Styron in *Sophie's Choice* (1979) tried to write a *Doctor Faustus* for our era, emulating the Mann model as a way of delineating evil, guilt, and redemption for American audiences. The effort is of such overwhelming ambition that any reservations we may have—and they are numerous—must be weighed against Styron’s reach, his attempt to move beyond any previous undertaking. That desire to move beyond himself is clear even in the narrative patterning. For the older narrator, clearly reflecting Styron’s own career as novelist and man, is writing about an earlier period in his life when he received from Sophie Zawistowska the information that becomes the bulk of the novel.

The narrative device is a circling one, enabling Styron to comment upon the younger Stingo’s reactions at the same time he can present him receiving the information which will alter his life.... Styron’s use of music in his novel echoes virtually the entire play of music in the Mann book; for Styron sees music at every turn connected to life and death, whether in the pink house which is young Stingo’s house or in the concentration camp which is Sophie’s. The musical motif—Mozart, Schubert, Lehar—accompanies every phase of the novel, and more often than not is associated with a death theme, as a *Liebestod*.

In Mann’s novel, music becomes the reflection of a culture and a civilization. Styron strives for this, but the nature of *Sophie's Choice* disallows his moving more precisely into the theme, although by juxtaposing music to death he does question how one of the highest examples of civilization can exist so close to pure forms of evil.... Styron has attempted...an Americanized version...of the Mann thesis: that in man’s highest gifts one can discover the greatest areas of evil, or that man’s highest gifts lie closely associated with the lowest forms of human behavior. Art is itself a trickster, for in offering beauty it also disguises the very worst man is capable of. Implicit in creation are the rot and decay which go into its shaping. Great music is a bourgeois art which can never leave behind the terrible evil lying at the heart of the placid, banal bourgeoisie.

Styron’s young Stingo, at twenty-six, is involved in writing his novel, which sounds exactly like *Lie Down in Darkness*, when he meets Sophie in a Brooklyn boardinghouse. Yet the nature of that novel is not disturbed by Sophie’s story. He proceeds with it, and offers sections to Nathan Landau, Sophie’s savior and

lover, as if he had not heard her story. It is Stingo at fifty-two, who guides us through Sophie's story of her life in Poland and then in Auschwitz. The distinction is quite important, for Styron is filtering the experience, not allowing it to change the younger Stingo sufficiently so as to alter his art; but giving it resonance by way of memory. Stingo keeps a journal in his younger days, but it is mainly through memory that the older Stingo, or author Styron, recreates the story of Sophie.

Some of the major problems in the novel develop from this superimposition. For we often find matters, sexual and otherwise, related by the fifty-two-year-old writer that seem adolescent, but that would suit the twenty-two-year-old. The rhetoric of the older voice establishes one kind of reality; the expectations, needs, and longings of the younger person establish another. And since Styron has so clearly intervened with his own work—repeated references to *Lie Down in Darkness*, *The Long March*, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Stingo plans to do research on Nat Turner on his trip south with Sophie)—we have still another voice, that of the 'external' Styron, the Styron of history who has written several successful books and is an established literary figure.

The elements, then, are very consciously conceived. Styron evidently did not wish to disguise, but to manifest. The nature of Sophie's tale is not to be buried in novelistic trappings, but to be made palpable through several voices: the young Stingo, the older Stingo, the novelist Styron. Sophie's choice, the point where good and evil cross, is the choice all must face, either in actuality or in the ethical demands they make on themselves and others. Here the ambitious nature of Styron's book becomes apparent. For he has tried no less than to pick up the enormous questions forced on us by Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, and Mann about the nature of good and evil in a godless universe. Sophie's story, climaxed by her choice, is the testing ground for civilization itself. In Mann, the testing ground was music, in all its manifestations; for Styron, it becomes the camps, specifically Auschwitz. How, quite simply, do we deal with Auschwitz in reality and in our imagination? By forcing the experience on the young Stingo in 1947, then on the older Stingo in the 1970s, when he writes this narrative, Styron is forcing a response to a thirty-year span of lingering evil. At stake is nothing less than our sense of our culture and civilization.

Sophie Zawistowska, when Stingo meets her in the pink Brooklyn boarding house, is thirty or so, living with the highly unstable Nathan Landau, an intellectual, a manic-depressive of such swings that he speaks with several voices at different times. The boardinghouse is itself bizarre, the result of war-surplus pink paint; and, therefore, an apt accommodation for an almost hallucinatory experience. Stingo is most vulnerable: attempting to make headway on his novel, lacking a job or direction, hungering after female companionship and sex, unformed except by intelligence and ambition. Sophie and Nathan reveal themselves to Stingo by way of thumps on his ceiling. Their coupling sends vibrations through the room below, and Stingo's introduction to them derives from fantasies of their sexual encounters. This stress on Stingo's sexual needs—fantasies, gropings, masturbatory episodes—demeans the novel; it is Styron's accommodation to the American marketplace, whereas the theme is his attempt to enter high European seriousness.

The sex is very American, almost completely at the physical level of thrust, plunge, and suck. Fellatio, the great revelation of the sixties, is every young man's hoped-for experience, and Stingo yearns for it as part of that impossible dream. Fellatio, in fact, is the final sexual experience he has of Sophie, the climax of their one night of sexual plunging and heaving. Doomed lovers in the present, Sophie and Nathan; doomed Sophie in the past; the doom of all the camp victims, Jews, Gypsies, Slavs; doomed Europe, its civilization, its veneer of culture: all are reduced by Stingo and his sexual yearning. Sophie's agonizing existence at Auschwitz has as its counterpart Stingo's desire for her lovely person; while she speaks of the unspeakable, he feels lust. Although this may be the norm for the younger man, it establishes tensions which cannot function for the older Stingo. Disproportions exist, and what the older man wants us to see as the crisis of civilization the younger man sees, at least in part, as the crisis of his virginity.

Here the voices play Styron false, part of it connected to that circular narrative. Yet even here, the weakness of conflicting voices does not subvert the power of the internal story; nor does even a certain shallowness in Sophie hide the sense of what she reveals. She reveals the essential duplicity of all human behavior, the fact that civilization is merely a veneer for overwhelming individual needs for power and

domination; that the Nazis struck a chord in everyone, victim and conqueror alike. An individual must, in a sense, define himself by how he would react to the camp situation...

Midway through the book, Styron notes several commentators on the camps, one of them George Steiner, who, in *Language and Silence*, counseled silence. Yet Steiner, who was not a witness, went on to speak about the camps as a phenomenon so beyond the imagination of those who were not involved in them that their commentary could only demean what they had not experienced. Yet Steiner's caution is pure presumption. The camps can be demeaned, of course, as can the entire Nazi experience, by a marketplace vision; we saw this in the 1979 television production of *Holocaust*, beamed out not only to America but to much of the Western world. The real question is quite different from the one Steiner poses; and that is the issue Styron faces: whether or not one can find ways of describing and dealing with the experience, whether or not one can define the phenomenon without reducing it. The camps become a great artistic challenge, as did the Christian Passion, the Trojan War, the Crusades, the Napoleonic era, and other momentous historical events....

What Styron does do as Sophie's tale unfolds is to find a moral equivalent, and that he discovers in American slavery. Since Sophie is not Jewish—and, therefore, representative of all European 'slaves' in Nazi eyes, not just Jewish scum—Styron winds back to his own Southern background for the injustice historically done to blacks. He cites slavery itself, and his own guilt at having received money from a fund that derived from the sale of a slave. He points to the Mississippi racist Bilbo, the Nat Turner slave revolt, the Emmett Till case, and others. 'Bobby Weed,' whose death reflects Till's, runs as a leitmotif through the novel: the victimizing of a young black for 'leering' at a white woman. Styron works very hard to find moral equivalents for the camps, and he notes how the worst scoundrels often begin as social reformers [Bilbo, Huey Long] and then play on fear and hatred to consolidate their power. '...for each of them in the end, to one degree or another, was forced to play upon and exploit the poor-white redneck's ancient fear and hatred of the Negro in order to aggrandize what had degenerated into shabby ambition and lust for power.'

Yet shrewd as this strategy is, it tends to reduce and even simplify the camps, to the very degree that it attempts to become an equivalent. For there are no equivalents, *only the artistic challenge itself*. Nothing Sophie says about her horror can characterize what happened there and what she felt. This is Styron's dilemma. It is as if he recognized this and attempted to finesse the point by the narrative strategy. We have, essentially, throughout the main segments of the novel four temporal tiers. In the forefront, with interruptions for Stingo's other activities, we have Sophie and Stingo going to the beach, eating, talking and drinking, on occasion with Nathan present. Then we have, in the immediate past, a year or so back, Sophie's story of her relationship with Nathan: how he saved her in a library when she fainted, how he brought her back to health, how he tried to kill her in one of his insane rages. Further back, in the depths of what occurred in the camps, her 'choice,' which is climactic; and behind that, her childhood in Poland as the daughter of an anti-Semitic and anti-female autocratic professor.

The narrative method is tunneling, recalling a Faulknerian or Conradian narrative.... Styron's method works through a continuous clearing away of underbrush, giving the choice an element of suspense, since it lies so deeply embedded in other memories and can only be retrieved by way of hundreds of other divulgations [*sic*]. Before we reach the choice, it is essential that we wind through Sophie's tale, especially the direction of her childhood with a father whose racial policies had been to exterminate the Jews before the Nazis thought of it, her own anti-Semitism at various points in order to survive, her disastrous first marriage, her humiliation in the camps under Hoss, the commandant of Auschwitz. Buried deep in her consciousness, and the guiding element for everything she does, is that terrible choice. So that when it does come, the choice must be of such immense proportions it governs the novel's entire moral perspective.

Sophie's choice is that when she first comes to Auschwitz the doctor who determines who lives and who is gassed tells her to select either her son or her daughter for life, the other for death. If she fails to make the selection, both die. 'You may keep one of your children,' he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?' This is the phrasing she cannot believe she is hearing, but it is repeated. As a 'Polack, not a Yid,' she has the 'privilege' to choose. And for this moment, she has the terrible, unspeakable power of life and death that the doctor himself has. She pleads she has two racially pure

children who speak German—perfect representatives of the Aryan policies of the Third Reich; that she is herself a Christian, a ‘devout Catholic’ and not to be confused with the scum of Europe, racially impure Christ-killers. The doctor is like granite, for he is, according to Stingo’s reasoning, working through his own moral dilemma, testing out his own sense of good and evil. Sophie chooses, and her small daughter, Eva, is carried off to be gassed. ‘Take my little girl!’ For the time being at least, she has saved her son.

The scene is unbearable, since the choice is of such moral rottenness there can be no equivalent for it. Even in the horrors of slavery, the ‘choice’ for separation came from the master, not from the slave; nor was it direct consignment to death, and not for moral reasons, but because a slave was a valuable property. Yet unbearably moving as the scene is, does it work fictionally? We draw a large distinction between what moves us because of its ugliness and what functions within a literary text. The two are not comparable, or else sensational events could keep stunning us in a third-rate novel. Styron has worked exceptionally hard to bring us here, and he has taken tremendous risks: given us a non-Jewish victim, making her voice anti-Semitic remarks, trying to find equivalents in his own heritage and attempting to explain the doctor as having replaced God with his own sense of himself as a god. He has even worked in the musical motif, that music always so close to death and final solutions.

Yet, at any of the highest levels of literature, the effort fails. And why it does is embedded in what has come before: Sophie herself, her relationship to Nathan, and most of all, the way in which the younger Stingo has related to her. For by observing Sophie in such explicitly sexual terms, Stingo has established certain terms which inevitably affect how we receive Sophie’s past as Stingo himself receives it. If forefront is a form of sexual comedy, then background must be tinged, even though the two are not formally connected. Sophie’s tale is being related to a young man with a perpetual erection. As she speaks of the unspeakable, of what has constituted her life, of her having been witness to the greatest crime in mankind’s history, the receiver of that story should, somehow, be commensurate with what he is hearing.

By Styron’s very narrative strategies, Stingo must be less, at twenty-two: a virgin, perpetually hard up, just starting out. This places a disproportionate burden on the older Stingo, who is writing of that earlier period; and in a sense, the older Stingo must bail out the younger. Yet it is the latter who receives the story, not the older man, who is removed by time and focus and that presentness in 1947—what is being related—constitutes the major segment of the novel.

There is an additional set of factors besides the literary awkwardness created by the receiver. Sophie’s relationship with Nathan, which parallels the narration of her story to Stingo, never coheres with the elements relating to her past. Styron works harder over Nathan than over any other character in his fiction except Nat Turner. Nathan is the prototypical New York Jewish intellectual: allegedly a scientist, a reader of poetry and fiction, a brilliant analyst of politics and social thought; but also mad, a bogus scientist, a man protected from himself by his brother and family friends, sufferer from wild swings of temperament which can turn into murderous impulses.

Once again, Styron has tried something very ambitious, to capture a cultural phenomenon which requires considerable artistry; but Nathan does not ring true, from the first. He encounters Stingo in the boardinghouse and he parodies the Southerner: ‘We could have talked about sports. I mean *Southern* sports. Like lynching niggers—or *coons*, I think you call them down there. Or *culture*. We could have talked about Southern culture, and maybe could have sat around here at old Yetta’s listening to hillbilly records. You know, Gene Autry, Roy Acuff and all those other standard bearers of classical Southern culture.’ All this is far too pat, Styron working too close to stereotypes; and this is what is wrong with Nathan Landau. He is the stereotypical New York Jew, brilliance tinged by madness, insights complicated by obsessive personal needs. He always goes at Stingo as Northerner to Southerner, Jew to Gentile, urban sophisticate to untutored hillbilly. Nearly every interchange rings false, for ultimately Nathan speaks not like the character but like the type.

Once more, the narrative strategy which seemed necessary for one reason is wrong for another; for it juxtaposes hostile materials. No matter how sympathetic Nathan is to Sophie’s past—although he does not know of her choice—his very presence in the forefront jars what we hear of her past. It is, yet again, too pat that after all her denials of Jewishness in the camps, after her intermittent bouts of anti-Semitism, after her

upbringing by an intensely anti-Semitic father, she should find her good samaritan and savior in a prototypical Jew. This formulation combined with other narrative factors works on us almost subliminally to weaken the real story, that interior tale sunk in the hellish past.

The final factor is Sophie herself. She must function under terrible burdens. One of these is her intense physical beauty, so that she has movie star appeal, even though she is presented as a great tragic being, Antigone, Medea, Clytemnestra. We recall she first comes to Stingo's attention from thumps on the ceiling of his room, her sexual acrobatics with Nathan. With such physical assets, and they are necessary in her survival, she is nevertheless hampered as a tragic figure. Her present must, in some way, manifest the entire German nightmare. As a non-Jewish Pole, she stands for all victims, not only six million but double that number who went up in the crematoria. And her final choice, the personal level of the final solution, is the great tragic act of our time. The scope of the attempt, once again, is undermined by elements enveloping her. Stingo's sexual longing for her is reductive; Nathan's abuse of her is reductive, as are her own physical qualities. This is not to suggest that Styron had other options; very possibly he had none. What he attempted was so large, so ambitious, so compelling in human terms that he faced failure in whatever conditions he posed.

Perhaps that is not all. There are several aspects to the novel which jar, several irrelevancies. The details of Sophie's employer, a chiropractor, his wife's decapitation in an accident and the search for her head, the references to Styron's own career, even the research on Nat Turner, make the major elements less cohesive. They may have served in Styron's mind as buttresses for key points, but they weakened the latter because they are diminutions. The problem with such a mighty theme is that everything is reductive, unless scaled up. In *The Magic Mountain*, Mann had to scale up at every level to accommodate something as supernatural as a 'magic mountain'—characters, events, conversations. Sexual longing finds its manifestation in bizarre forms of expression, not in tits and ass; he was watchful for anything that would demean or reduce his major elements.

In nearly every respect, the ways in which *Sophie's Choice* stumbles are connected to the ambition of the effort. Even Styron's prose, quite toned down from the excesses of *Lie Down in Darkness* and *Set This House on Fire*, does not always function as it might, given the level of achievement he strives for. Yet in this novel he has found a distinctive voice. As Nathan Landau says when he reads parts of Stingo's first novel, he, Stingo, has copied others (Faulkner, etc.) but has developed his own style; so, too, Styron forged his own style from all the Southern streams flowing into his earlier work. Still, there is some jarring. For the older Stingo lays on with words and voices linguistic modalities which, additionally, echo Styron, not the character in the novel. Stingo, too often, speaks like Styron, and his thick rhetoric often works against, not with, the starkness of the internal story related by Sophie.

For example: young Stingo is dressing down Nathan for his blind prejudice toward the South: 'Could it be because you Jews, having so recently arrived here and living mostly in big Northern cities, are really *purblind*, and just have no interest in or awareness or any kind of comprehension whatever of the tragic concatenations of events that have produced the racial madness down there? You've read Faulkner, Nathan, and you still have this sassy and intolerable attitude of superiority toward the place, and are unable to see how Bilbo is less a villain than a wretched offshoot of the whole benighted system?' Not only is the language unlikely (could it be parodic?) for a twenty-two-year-old to reach Nathan with, but it inevitably clashes in tone, texture, stress, and phrasing with Sophie's story. The clash is not that kind which results in harmonious blending of dissimilars, as in a fugue, but the kind which takes our sensibilities in several directions, unresolvably.

Withal, the novel is a tremendous advance for Styron, a book of immense ambition and achievement, a work that helps to close out the 1970s encouragingly. Except for Gaddis's *JR*, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Barth's *Letters*, and perhaps one or two other novels on a large scale, fiction had scaled down for the decade. *Sophie's Choice* raises our expectations, forcing us to span the forty-year period since the Second World War and reviving a topic of greater moral importance than anything raised in those four decades. Having tried nothing less than a *Doctor Faustus* or a *Magic Mountain*, Styron failed in his cultural grasp only by reason of a theme that lies too thickly and intensely within history for any but a Dostoyevsky, Mann, or Kafka. Whatever, *Sophie's Choice* shows that a large postwar fiction, however flawed in its

execution, can assimilate history, morality, and individual experiences as great novels of the past were able to do.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 535-40

“The slave plantation which had been the metaphor for suffering and inhumanity is revisited in the German torture and death camps in Poland, including Auschwitz. Violence, crime, and brutality—common denominators of existence—define humanity; a Nazi officer forces Sophie to choose which one of her two children will live and which will die. Subsequently, Sophie herself must choose whether to live or die—this son she had earlier chosen for survival disappears, as does the other main character of the novel, Stingo, Styron’s persona. Some Jewish readers faulted the author’s use of the Holocaust, but the objections did not match, either in number or in substance, those voiced about his previous novel [*The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1967]. Despite the controversy surrounding some of his writing, Styron’s novels have lasted the test of time—and place.”

Carl Singleton
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Michael Hollister (2015)