

30 QUOTATIONS



William Styron

(1925-2006)

William Styron is a Realist who became controversial for his historical novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which angered some black critics for its portrayal of Turner, a black slave preacher who led a rebellion by about 60 slaves in Virginia in 1831, murdering 55 whites. As a result Turner, 13 other slaves and 3 free blacks were hanged. This was the most serious uprising in the history of slavery in the United States and resulted in more stringent slave laws in the South. Edgar Allan Poe was apparently terrified by this revolt in his home state, for in one horrific episode in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), he dramatizes “evil” blacks betraying and slaughtering whites. The backlash experienced by Styron combined with ongoing criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain discouraged white fiction writers after the 1960s from depicting black characters except as idealizations or victims, one of the forces that led to the conformity of Political Correctness and to the replacement of Realism by Fantasy as the literary mode characteristic of Postmodernism. Styron thereafter suffered from extreme depression and avoided PC condemnation for his other major novel *Sophie’s Choice* (1979) by choosing a powerfully moving story about the victimization of Jews in the Holocaust.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, writing, Realist resists Modernism, generations, literature, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, critics, depression, death:

YOUTH

I went to Duke University and landed in a creative writing course.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

It did not occur to me that there would be many difficulties to impede my ambition.

I’m simply the happiest, the placidest, when I’m writing... It’s fine therapy for people who are perpetually scared of nameless threats as I am most of the time.

The good writing of any age has always been the produce of someone's neurosis, and we'd have a mighty dull literature if all the writers that came along were a bunch of happy chuckleheads.

To make matters worse, I was out of a job and had very little money and was self-exiled to Flatbush—like others of my countrymen, another lean and lonesome Southerner wandering amid the Kingdom of the Jews.

In Vineyard Haven, on Martha's Vineyard, mostly I love the soft collision here of harbor and shore, the subtly haunting briny quality that all towns have when they are situated on the sea.

WRITING

A writing course can only give you a start, and help a little. It can't teach writing. The professor should weed out the good from the bad, cull them like a farmer.

But I don't think even the most conscientious and astute teachers can teach anything about style. Style comes only after long, hard practice and writing.

Let's face it, writing is hell.

The writer must criticize his own work as a reader.

I like to stay up late at night and get drunk and sleep late. I wish I could break the habit but I can't. The afternoon is the only time I have left and I try to use it to the best advantage, with a hangover.

Edward was at the stage of drunkenness in which the ego glows like a coal, and brilliant people become more inspired, but in which dull people, fired by the same inspiration, become only more dull.

I sometimes feel that the characters I've created are not much more than sort of projected facets of myself, and I believe that a lot of fictional characters have been created that way.

I don't consider myself in the Southern school, whatever that is. *Lie Down in Darkness*, or most of it, was set in the South, but I don't care if I never write about the South again, really.... I'm beginning to feel that it's a good idea for writers who come from the South, at least some of them, to break away a little from all them magnolias.

REALIST RESISTS MODERNISM

Faulkner's a writer of extraordinary stature more because of the great breadth of his vision than because he happened to be born in Mississippi.

Faulkner doesn't give enough help to the reader. I'm all for the complexity of Faulkner, but not for the confusion. That goes for Joyce, too. All that fabulously beautiful poetry in the last part of *Finnegans Wake* is pretty much lost to the world simply because not many people are ever going to put up with the chaos that precedes it. As for *The Sound and the Fury*, I think it succeeds in spite of itself. Faulkner often simply stays too damn intense for too long a time. It ends up being great stuff, somehow, though, and the marvel is how it could be so wonderful being pitched for so long in that one high, prolonged, delirious key.

I'd say I've been influenced as much, though, by Joyce and Flaubert. Old Joyce and Flaubert have influenced me stylistically, given me arrows, but then a lot of the contemporary works I've read have influenced me as a craftsman. Dos Passos, Scott Fitzgerald, both have been valuable in teaching me how to write the novel, but not many of these modern people have contributed much to my emotional climate. Joyce comes closest, but the strong influences are out of the past—the Bible, Marlowe, Blake, Shakespeare. As for Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* is one of the few novels that move me in every way—not only in its style, but in its total communicability, like the effect of good poetry.

GENERATIONS

Don't you think it's tiresome, really, all these so-called spokesmen trumpeting around, elbowing one another out of the way to see who'll be the first to give a new and original name to twenty-five million people—the Beat Generation, or the Silent Generation, and God knows what-all? I think the damn generation should be let alone. And that goes for the eternal idea of competition—whether the team of new writers can beat the team of Dos Passos, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway.

The Naked and the Dead—is so good by itself that it can stand up respectably well with the mature work of any of those writers of the twenties. But there I go again, talking in competition with the older boys.

LITERATURE

A great book should leave you with many experiences, and slightly exhausted. You should live several lives while reading it.

POSTMODERNISM

Story as such has been neglected by today's introverted writers. Story and character should grow together.

What this country needs...what this great land of ours needs is something to happen to it. Something ferocious and tragic...so that when the people have been through hellfire and the crucible, and have suffered agony enough and grief, they'll be people again, human beings, not a bunch of smug contented cows rooting at the trough.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Basically it is a very politically incorrect book written by a white man trying to seize his own interpretation and put it into the soul and heart of a black man. [On criticism of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1967]

CRITICS

I'm afraid I don't think much of critics for the most part, although I have to admit that some of them have so far treated me quite kindly.

I think it's unfortunate to have critics for friends.

DEPRESSION

Mysteriously and in ways that are totally remote from natural experience, the gray drizzle of horror induced by depression takes on the quality of physical pain.

The pain is unrelenting.

Soon evident are the slowed-down responses, near paralysis, psychic energy throttled back close to zero.

A phenomenon that a number of people have noted while in deep depression is the sense of being accompanied by a second self—a wraithlike observer who, not sharing the dementia of his double, is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster, or decides to embrace it...I, the victim-to-be of self-murder, was both the solitary actor and lone member of the audience.

DEATH

The stigma of self-inflicted death is for some people a hateful blot that demands erasure at all costs.

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
"William Styron, *The Art of Fiction*" (1954)
The Paris Review Interviews IV (Picador, 2009)

