CHAPTER 7.

The Narrator's Search
In the introduction to THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WILLIAM STYRON, the authors William K. Morris, and Irving Malin point out the central theme of modern novel and say:

Modern man's encounter with the abyss, his confrontation with the being and nothingness, his agonising over free will, his apprehensive acceptance of fear and trembling, his search for his soul, has in one way or another, since Dostoevski, been at the centre of the modern novel.¹

It is this search for the peace of the soul, that occupies, and is reflected in the actions of all the narrators in the novels of William Styron. Some times they achieve it to their satisfaction and find exactly what they want. But mostly they have to pacify themselves with the nobility of their resolutions.

William Styron's narrators, are of two types—those that themselves are protagonists and those that are just narrators. Naturally the search is also of two types—of the self, and of the knowledge of condition of some one else's self. These narrators are involved in the search of a meaningful connection between the past and the present, irrespective of
what ever meaning is to be gained out of it.

William Styron's only narrator who is a hero is Nat Turner in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER. And since the Hero himself is the narrator, the novel is autobiographical in nature. He gives the details of his heritage:

My mother's mother was a girl of Coromantee tribe of Gold Coast. She was thirteen years old and pregnant when she was brought in chains to Yorktown aboard a schooner sailing out of Newport Rhode Island (Africa) and sold to Alpheus Turner, father of Samuel Turner... Same summer my mother was born (Publically begot upon the same ship by some unknown father). My grand mother tried to tear my mother to pieces, in frenzy. She died within days of my mother's birth...Alpheus Turner brought my mother to the big house and she was brought up and taught nigger English by black aunts and grannies. Her name was Lou Ann. She died when I was fifteen... And I became a nigger servant like my mother.²

Nat Turner tells these details of his origin to his court-appointed lawyer Thomas Grey. He tells him about his childhood, Samuel Turner's efforts to teach him to read
and write, his divine liking for Emmeline and the subsequent disillusionment at finding her being made love to, by her own cousin; his own mother's sex act with Mc Bride; lead him to conclude that sexual beastiality was common to both the black and the white alike.

Moreover, the heinous effects of draught had affected the entire Virginia. Samuel Turner had to adopt many economic measures. He had to sell away his Negro servants. He didn't sell Nat away. He entrusted him to Reverened Epps a homo, priest, who sold him away to a slave-trader, who in turn sold him to Thomas Moore.

It was from this Thomas Moore that Nat for the first time in his life, tasted the bitter bite of a whip which gave birth of the rebellious spirit in him. The death of Thomas Moore, and his widow's marriage with Travis, made him property of Mr.Travis.

It was during this period that he befriended, Will, Hark, Nelson and many other rebels who brought to him the tales of cruelties on Negroes by the whites. Of course he himself had seen how the whites made the black boys fight, for their entertainment,
stooping so low as to force a Negro to copulate with a bitch. All this had gone into making him to resolve to wipe out all the whites out of the face of the earth.

Secretly he makes all the preparations for the war. He selects two dozens of tough, desperate, stalwarts, all strong haters of the whites. However, when they really struck, Nat found out that he couldn't kill. The inhabitants of the first house that they took by surprise were butchered by Wills and Nelson, not Nat.

The uprise was bound to fail because Nat had not considered the unmilitary conduct and character of his men:

"The item of drunkenness and general unmilitary conduct among your so called troops...a mob of drunken ruffians, who couldn't keep out themselves from stills and cider presses and thus in true nigger fashion contributed further to your downfall" "...I just couldn't keep an eye on them...What else could you expect from mostly youngmen deaf, dumb, blind, crippled, and hamstrung from the moment of their first baby squall on a bare clay floor.? ...It was prodigious that we came as far as we did, that we
nearly took Jerusalem"...
"There was a whole countless number of other Negroes who were your active enemies...There were Niggers everywhere who were as determined to protect and save their masters as you were to murder them...They were simply living too well...It was your own race, that contributed to your fiasco than any thing else."

The uprise failed. They were outnumbered and outpositioned. Will was shot dead. Henry was killed. Hark was captured and bootied. Nat escaped into the nearby forest but was found and arrested. All this he told his court-appointed lawyer Thomas Grey before he was taken to the gallows.

Nat might have begun with a search for social justice, which he failed to achieve for himself and his people, on physical plane, his real search was moulded by his reading of Bible. It was a search for the freedom of the soul, liberty of the spirit which he ultimately achieved in his self-conjectured vision of his union with his beloved Margarret Whitehead, the adolescent daughter of Mr. Whitehead. Thus Nat's search for social justice for himself and his negro fellowmen
was decidedly a failure but his primary search was a success, as Daniel Hoffman says:

Nat's meditation on history finds its resolution in a version of Tristram, Iseult or Romeo and Juliet's story... Styron's Nat died in the ironic belief that the self can be liberated from the historical circumstances of slavery to self fulfilment.  

In spite of the senseless murders and everything else, that were triggered off by him, Nat was really a very sensitive man. His religious and humanitarian view of the world remained very firm right to the very end. This leads to his defeat as a revolutionary but this and this alone brings about his redemption as a man:

As he is called by to go to the gallows Nat hears "We will love one another, "She seems to be entreating me, very close now, "We will love one another by the light of the heaven above" I feel the nearness of flowing waters,"Come," says the guard ... Great God, how early it is ... Until now I had forgotten his name... How bright and fair the mornning star...  

Robert K Morris and Irving Malin also believe that Nat's search of social justice for his
people might not have succeeded but it
definitely holds the promise of it;

Nat Turner holds out the
promise that joy may come out
of anger, justice out of
injustices, quietitude out of
fear, redemption out of
damnation, good out of evil and
charity out of brutality and
vengeance.  

In THE LONG MARCH, lieutenenent Culver is the
narrator as he himself assigns the place of

glory of the hero to his friend and colleague
Captain Mannix, with substantial reasons as to
why he thinks him to be the hero: "Since
suffering is implicit in the hero’s
role, Mannix is as heroic as anybody."

Lieutenant Culver, both a man of action
and feelings—not a career officer but an
ironic commentator, a tired thirty years
oldman who seems to be out of place in the
training camp where he has been called back to
undergo a physical fitness programme to be fit
and ready for the Korean war.

He is a kind of visionary, a World War
Second veteran who having adjusted to the
post-war prosperity and comforts of life,
finds the mechanism of reserve system,
training manoeuvre unreasonable and impractical. And to top it all when Colonel Templeton announces a thirty-six miles long march, the very injustice of this act, on account of physical and mental suffering it brought on the entire company, made the two reserves—Culver and Mannix, revolt against it.

Mannix comes out in the open to defy his and his Company's tormentor. And that is what makes him the hero. Culver on the other hand remains silent and observes the happenings with a keen desire to see justice done. He wants to see Mannix as a victor in his preordained defeat and no doubt it satisfied him endlessly to find Mannix completing the March inspite of his nail bruised foot.

To lieutenant Culver, the Marine training manoeuvre, with its symbolic guns, tanks, symbolic aggressor and his sinister chase, all seem to be futile. The dead bodies of the fifteen young Marines, killed by the misfired mortar shells, shake his sense of justice. He thinks that it is improper that such an act should have happened in peace time America.
He finds himself caught between two warring powers—Captain Mannix and colonel Templeton. Culver watches Mannix as he invokes Templeton's wrath by telling him that his company consisted mostly of reserves. And as such they had all forgotten every thing—even such basic things as taking apart a rifle.

Likewise, he just watched helplessly when he saw Mannix meekly submit to undertake the thirty six miles long hike. He wanted to intervene but could not, when he saw Mannix using foul language in his rage and bitterness and pulling down the catastrophe on himself. He remains an inert spectator when the Colonel finally threatens Mannix with a court-martial.

All through THE LONG MARCH there is only one occasion when Culver is grieved to find his old A1 (Mannix) letting up in his furious resolve. He saw Mannix shout at a soldier who was pleading to be allowed to go into one of the trucks. Mannix was about to hit him when Culver intervened:

"That's enough Al. They have just had enough." The March came to a halt and Mannix said, 'Yeah yes.' He seemed to be
touched with grief. 'Goddam, they have had enough ... O.K... O.K. Let them crap out... I have did... done... to hell with them all,' Culver watched Mannix limp away.

The colonel was standing nearby, thumbs hooked into his belts, regarding the captain soberly and Culver thought, 'Old Al, you just couldn't win, Goddam, old, great, soft scarred bear of a man....'

Culver's search is very simple... He just wants to see old Al's fury sustaining him to the very end. He is poetic by temperament; he is sensitive, skeptical, kind, visionary a man of feeling and action always moving in the right direction. He completes the march impelled by Mannix.

He felt fully contented as he saw Mannix clawing his way towards the bath. He saw him confronting the Negro Nurse who was horrified looking at his physical condition and said:

'Oh! my, You poor man. What have you been doing,? Do it hurt.?' Mannix looked up at her silent, blinking, and then Culver saw, during this unspoken moment of sympathy, the towel slipped away slowly from Mannix's waist and fell to the floor. Mannix was a mass of scars and naked as the day he
had emerged from his mother's womb... He seemed to have neither the strength nor ability to lean down and retrieve the towel, and so he merely stood there... and sent towards the woman a sour apologetic smile... His words uttered, it seemed to Culver, not with self pity, but only with the tone of a man who having endured and lasted, was too weary to tell her any thing but what was true, 'Deed it does. 'He said.

He was satisfied, fully contented to see this encounter. But Culver's search had in reality ended a little earlier than this when they had really completed the march. When the long hike had ended, and they had reached the camp, Mannix had grasped Culver's arm and said:

'What the hell, we have made it... and it had satisfied Culver to think that they all had made it. He thought that the Colonel had his march and victory and Mannix, 'Well, he had certainly had had it. There was no doubt about that. Old A1,' He thought tenderly, 'the man with the back unbreakable and the soul of pity....'

And in his encounter with the Negro
nurse, when Culver saw this soul of pity not pitying himself, he was filled with a blissful contentment for it had just made his search complete. He had wanted to see Mannix a victor in his preordained defeat. He was contented to see it so. He had wanted to see Mannix's fury sustaining him to the very end, and was happy to find that it really had not left him to the very end.

In SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE, the narrator is Peter Leverette who is a young lawyer. He is the son of Alfred Leverette. His search is altogether different from all the rest of the narrators of William Styron. He introduces himself in the novel in the following manner:

My name is Peter Leverette. I am white. Protestant. Anglo-Saxon, Virginia bred, just past thirty, in good health, tolerably enough good looking though possessing no romantic glint...given to ordinary habits, more than commonly inquisitive. By profession I am a lawyer, ambitious, but no-go-getter. I shall remain in decent mediocre level...I am a realist.11

This self-introduction by the narrator provides some basic clues to his character:
that he is inordinately inquisitive; that he is a realist. And these two qualities play a vital role in his search as a narrator.

The narrator's search in this novel, is defined by an innate desire to know the reality, to know the truth. Of the main story the narrator knew only this much: that Mason Flagg whom he had known and admired during his childhood, had grown into an evil incarnate; that he had raped Fransesca; that he had possibly killed Fransesca and had killed himself or had been killed; that Cass was a painter, an artist who was tormented by his inability to paint, and had gone to pots; that when he had met Cass, the latter had reduced himself to the lowest ebb of his self dignity; that he had sold his soul to Mason Flagg for just bread and booze.

Naturally his knowledge was incomplete; and therefore it was troubling him day and night. This is what Richard Pearce also says:

Peter is troubled by the dreams of treachery and betrayal even before he discovers in THE SUNDAY TIMES the cartoons by Cass. His dreams suggest that he had tried to suppress his Italian experience. They also point out that he was an
accomplice to some vague crime...His long dialogue with Cass is one of gradual discovery...\[12\]

Ever since his return back from Italy, he had felt that in some vague way he too was responsible for the brutal murder of Mason Flagg. So his search, controlled by a desire to know the reality, the whole story, was to find out the truth about Mason's murder. Only then he could be sure whether or not he was involved with the heinous act of murder.

Therefore, when he saw a painting by Cass Kinsolving in THE SUNDAY TIMES, he wrote to him and in a month received an invitation from him. He went to meet him. He found Cass totally composed and at peace with himself. Cass took him out on his fishing boat, told him all about his childhood, his army days, his marriage with Poppy, his desire to settle down as a painter, his inability to paint and taking refuge in drinks. He told him about his tour of European countries, arrival to Sambaco, and coming under the sway of Mason Flagg. He told him how he had found his inspiration in Fransesca.

Cass had degraded himself to the point of
painting dirty pictures for Mason to get medicines for Michael. Peter himself had seen him perform clownish sexual acts to entertain Mason and his guests. He had touched the limit of self-degradation in getting soup, butter, soap, drinks and such knick-knacks stolen from Mason's apartments and brought to his own. Of course he was doing it all through Fransesca. Pointing at this degradation of Cass, Robert H. Fossum has remarked:

Mason Flagg under whose sway he comes in Sambuco, is the epitome of this warp and infantile culture, the very man Cass has come to Europe to escape from. He is evil incarnate. And to this man the artist sells his soul for food and liquor and medicines, he can not do without. He reduces himself to the level of an utterly dependent animal by painting a pornographic picture, and performing clownish obscene exhibitions for Mason Flagg and his equally lecherous guests...\(^\text{13}\)

That night Peter had witnessed Fransesca running out of Mason's room and then Mason himself emerging out in great rage. And his curiosity, as to what had really happened in
Mason's room, is satisfied when Cass tells him that Francesca had directly come to him and had told him every thing:

He had fucked her once and had tried to take her again. But this time she was ready. She hit him on the penis and ran away. The realisation that he had done it, left me shattered... By raping her he had raped the two of us, just at that very moment when through her I had concieved of a life as having some vestige of meaning, and he tore that meaning from limb to limb... Who knows why he did it.? Because her beauty and innocence drove him crazy.? Because he knew she was mine.? Because the sodden wreck(I) he owned, was struggling out of the mire and out of his grasp.? Because in fear and fright she called 'Cass,Cass.' who knows why he did it'?14

However in this regard, Cass had made a wrong reading of Mason's character. He had thought that since Mason flagg had too much of preoccupation with sex, dirty pictures, mystical love makings, and the like, he would not be able to really make love to a woman. His calculations had simply gone wrong:

I had thought that he had too
much sex in the head and assumed that he couldn't get it up... distrust a man who celebrates anything too much... With sex on brain, interest in dirty pictures, always thinking of enormous thighs, mystical copulations, frenzied orgasms... couldn't be of any real service to a woman... May be the only way Mason could be satisfied with a woman was through violence. Who Knows... 15

Therefore that night an enraged Cass went to Mason's. He searched for the streptomycin pills and found them in a box in the bathroom. He took the medicine and also the dirty picture he had painted. He tore the picture into pieces and threw it into the ash-can, beside the street. He took the medicines to Michael.

While coming back from there he met Windgasser who told him that Francesca had been mutilated and ravished and was dying. Hearing that he went straight to Mason's house and shouted at him. He found Mason hiding himself under the bed and said, "I am going to kill you. That is the bleeding fact of the matter. So come out of there" 16

He told Peter that Mason gave him a slip
and ran out of the house. He ran in to the garden and from there towards the hills with Cass in close pursuit. He told Peter that at the foot of the hill they fought—he with a piece of stone and Mason with a piece of wood. And ultimately Cass broke Mason’s skull with his piece of stone. He dragged Mason’s dead body to the parapet embraced it and hurled it down. And that is how Mason in reality was murdered.

He also told Peter how Luigie saved him inspite of his insistence to go to jail. When he had tried to run away from him, he had hit him on the head and had tied him head and foot. When he came to his senses, Luigie had surmonised: “For the love of God, Cass, consider the good in yourself. Consider hope. Consider joy. That is all I have to say.”17 And with those words he had removed the manacle from Cass’s wrists and accompanied him to his house. Thus he had allowed him to return back to America, a reformed man with a positive vision of life.

Thus together they piece out the details of what had really happened at Sambuco. After listening to it all, Peter’s curiosity and
his vague apprehensions were satisfied and removed and when he left Cass he was purged and purified.

The Narrator in SOPHIE’S CHOICE is Stingo. He is a Southerner. He became twenty one years old in 1945. That means he was born in 1925, the year in which William Styron himself was born. And his name Stingo also rings some similarity with Styron. He left his home to become a writer— a novelist. For a brief period he worked as an assistant editor at Mc Graw Hill Co, and there once he was told by Farrel, the owner, "You are not cut out for this place. Write your guts out son."

and he left the job. Most of these happenings that we read about in the life of the narrator, are similar to the real happenings in the life of William Styron himself.

Naturally one is led to have an honest doubt whether in Stingo’s character, it is the author himself who is present. And if that is so, the narrator’s search becomes easier to decide. Since the narrator is here out to become a novelist, naturally the search would be to collect the material, and complete his work on the proposed novel. And that of
course is one of the searches of the narrator in this novel. But along with that there is something more he is out to find.

After leaving his job at McGraw Hill Co, Stingo stayed in New York only till he got his share of five hundred dollars, due to him from the Artist's sale. With this money in his pocket he left for Brooklyn. Here he found himself an accommodation at the Pink Palace of Yatta Zimmerman. And here he met a pack of Jews. But more important, here he found the protagonist of his novel, which was of course his first search. He met Sophie and fell in love with her at the first sight. He found Nathan Ladau and Sophie living together, like wife and husband, without being married to each other.

When they grew really intimate, Sophie told Stingo about her harrowing past of German war in which she had lost her father, mother, husband, a son a daughter and her motherland at the cruel hands of Nazi-ism. The war had also shattered her identity as a human being.

Knowing all this and also being enchanted by her beauty, Stingo wanted to protect her from Nathan the drug addict. He wanted to
take her to the sixty acre farm and settle down there with her. And when Nathan's various displays of brutalities make Sophie totally disgusted and disappointed with him, she accompanies Stingo on his way to the farmhouse. While at the Congress Hotel in Washington she leaves Stingo asleep. She writes a note for Stingo and returns back to Nathan.

After reading the note, Stingo also returned back to Brooklyn. There he learnt that Sophie and Nathan both had committed suicide.

I blinked in the dim light, then gradually caught sight of Sophie and Nathan where they lay on top of the bright apricot bedspread. They were clad as on that long ago Sunday when I first saw them together—she in her sporty togs from a bygone times, he in his wide-striped, raffish, anachronistic gray flannel that had made him look like a successful gambler. Dressed thus but recumbent, and entwined in each other's arms, they appeared, from where I stood, as peaceful as two lovers who had gaily costumed themselves for an afternoon stroll, but on impulse had decided to lie down and nap or
kiss and make love, or merely whisper to each other of fond matters, and were frozen in this grave and tender embrace for ever. 19

Stingo saw Sophie and Nathan lying dead together. It didn't have any too grave effect on him. It seemed as if they had dressed up for an outing and had at the last moment changed their plan and stayed home to enjoy each other's company. But of course when their dead bodies were taken to the cemetery, he could not stop his tears as the memory of the olden days, the days he had passed with them, crowded his mind:

It was of course the memory of Sophie and Nathan's long ago plunge, that set loose this flood of tears in my eyes... But it was also a letting go of the rage and sorrow for the many others who during past many months battered my mind and now demanded my mourning: Sophie, yes. And Nathan, yes. But also Jan and Eva and Bobby Weed and my young black savior the Artist and Maria Hunt and Nat Turner who were a few of them, beaten and butchered, betrayed and martyred children of the earth. 20
Stingo wept for all of them but specially for Nathan who was the first person to have calculated the correct number of the influences of authors on Stingo and had boosted his courage. Nathan firmly believed that Stingo had the makings of a novelist, with his own voice. Stingo also wept for Sophie for she was the first woman who had demonstrated and proved to him that he was a fully grown man and a good and great lover. When he had really become close with Nathan, at the Pink Palace, he had given some pages of his novel to Nathan on the promise that he would not criticize. And when Nathan had finished he had told Stingo:

After reading those ninety odd pages of my novel in an hour and a half, Nathan hustled in out of the night...Sprawled down opposite me, next to Sophie...his judgement hung in the air like an imminent clap of thunder, 'I am sure, you have read Robert Penn Warren.' He paused, 'I am sure you have read Thomas Wolfe and Carson McCullers...I am breaking my promise about no criticism.'

And I thought: Oh shit, he has got my number all right...I clenched my eyes shut...His lips smeared my
brows with a wet and slopy kiss, 'Twenty two years old!'
He exclaimed, 'And Oh, my God,
You can write...Of course you have read those writers. You will not be able to write a book if you hadn't, But you have absorbed them kid,
absorbed them and made them your own...you have got your own voice.'

Stingo was out to be a novelist and this con man had boosted his courage, believing that he was in the right direction of becoming a good one. And as if in confirmation of his creative virility Sophie too proved to him that he had the desired potential of a male. Till then he had been a virgin, and had many failed encounters with girls which all had led him to suspect about his own virility. But that day in Congress Hotel Sophie proved to him that he was a good and competent lover. In a way Nathan and Sophie work as two very vital dimensions of his own personality.

Therefore when he had wept enough at their grave and his tears had gone dry, he fell asleep on the sand of the beach of Coney Island, where he had once saved Sophie from drowning. When he woke up, it was early
morning and thorough the mist and above the quiet ocean, he saw Venus shining all alone in the sky, a sign of heavenly blessing and resurrection.

As it has been pointed out before, Stingo and Styron are identical, it would be interesting to note what Styron has to say about this novel:

I had been living in a boarding house in Brooklyn one summer, after the war, and such a girl lived on the floor above me ...I was moved by her plight...Then about five years ago, I woked one morning with a remembrance of this girl. A vivid dream haunted my mind. I suddenly sensed that I was given a mandate to abandon the novel I had been at work and write her story...22

Thus Stingo's search as a narrator culminates at having successfully presented the harrowing past of Sophie, her present and her ultimate suicide with Nathan, leaving him a mature, confident and thoughtful writer in the making. Styron is obviously suggesting that Stingo's experience of pain and pleasure, suffering and death is vital to the shaping of a creative sensibility.
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