CHAPTER VII

SOPHIE'S CHOICE :

ABSOLUTE EVIL VERSUS BROTHERHOOD

Sophie's Choice was the book that Styron was destined to write. Stingo, Styron's alter ego in Sophie's Choice says, "In my career as a writer, I have always been attracted to morbid themes - suicide, rape, murder, military life, marriage, slavery" (SC 131). Styron has always been fascinated by evil and in Sophie's Choice he deals with the greatest evil of our times - the Holocaust. In fact, one of the epigraphs to the novel is from Andre' Malraux's L'Azare: "...I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood". In Sophie's Choice this confrontation takes place on the railway platform where the Nazi officer in charge of deciding who is to live and who is to die makes Sophie decide which of her two children should go to the gas chamber. During an interview with Robert K. Morris, Styron defined "absolute evil" as "the total domination of human beings by others up to the point of extermination" (67). Styron feels that this is the essential region of the soul where humanity is at its most mysterious. Sophie's Choice is about how "innocence, benevolence, brotherhood" get destroyed in that essential region and about how they are also renewed in another way.

Styron was seized by the metaphor - that awful moment of choice that is inherent in the title, the choice a mother is forced to make between her two children. For Styron it sums up the whole totalitarian nature of the evil. There have been a number of autobiographical works dealing with concentration
camps like those written by Tadeusz Borowski and Elie Wiesel "but Sophie is the first character in the so called Holocaust literature who is indistinguishable from the concentration camp experience and totally identified with it" (Morris 65). She is a totally complex human being functioning at various levels: as an object for Stingo’s love and passion; as a channel through which to learn something about Poland before World War II; as a reflection on anti-semitism in Poland. Critics have compared her with Anna Karenina and Sue Brideshead to suggest the way she acts is a symbol of a society and an era.

But despite Sophie being the heroine of the book Styron leads us to the modern inferno by way of indirection. Rather than stepping into the center and identifying with the victim, he has created a narrator, rather like the aspiring writer he himself was, when living in Brooklyn and writing his first novel Lie Down in Darkness. This semi-autobiographical self, Stingo is led up to the "ultimate nightmare of history" by his link with Sophie, a victim of the Nazis though not a Jew herself. This brings in an important belief of Styron’s that the Nazi atrocities were not just anti-Jewish but anti-life, anti-human. Hence his choice of a Polish Catholic girl as the victim of the Holocaust. The question Styron raises here is:

what transformation could be undergone by those who were enslaved and unable to rebel. Those who sustained the horrors and evils as momentous as any connected with slavery in the Old South; those who suffered minute by minute, day by day, the dehumanization of the Nazi concentration camps; those, in short, who not only viewed the apocalypse, but lived through and beyond it? (Morris 13)
One of the most sensitive critics of the Holocaust, George Steiner, believes silence is the most fitting response to the ungraspable horrors perpetrated at Treblinka, Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald and Auschwitz - "for what is unspeakable is best left unspoken". But Styron rebels passionately against such a belief. "There is for Styron no language of silence. No more than slavery in the old South must the Holocaust be forgotten" (Morris 14).

"Someday I will understand Auschwitz" is the brave statement by the naive Stingo in Sophie's Choice. The older Styron realizes the absurdity of the statement. He corrects it "Someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world". "Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable" (SC 623). So writes Stingo on the last pages of Sophie's Choice.

Styron by no means rushes in where angels fear to tread. He stated at an interview that it would be presumptuous on his part to recreate life in a concentration camp. "It's too horrible to even contemplate". So he merely suggests the horror of the place by recording in an almost documentary way certain points, some of the recorded statements made by the victims, and some of the statements in diaries of the S.S. men that ran the camp. He admits it would be "sacrilegious" to intrude on that kind of extreme experience" and so he does not create characters and show them as actually experiencing torture in the camps.

Writers on Holocaust literature have differing attitudes in describing the agents of torture. Styron quotes Simone Weil in talking about evil: it is "gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring". He feels her insights are profound as
compared to those of Wiesel. Wiesel was against putting the spotlight on the executioners because if they were shown as human and not as monsters the danger of understanding them and, therefore, forgiving them would be more. Styron feels this is wrong as he feels evil is dangerous, precisely because human beings are capable of it and herein lies the danger of another Holocaust.

As it exists there are two major stories in Sophie's Choice. One is of the young man's rites of passage from innocence into manhood and the other is of Sophie's encounter with evil in the Holocaust. As Styron states: "Perhaps it's a story not so much of Auschwitz but of discovering evil". Styron distances himself from Auschwitz by the time honored technique of having an older man reveal his youthful experience through reminiscence. Styron deliberately distanced himself from the interior of Auschwitz by setting all the action outside of the camp, in the commandant's house, where the horrors could be registered through Sophie's consciousness of sights, sounds and smells. Styron thus achieved being "near Auschwitz and its atrocities but not of them". As to the objection that only survivors had the right to deal with events in the concentration camp, much of literature would then be banned on that account. Finally some Jews criticised Styron for making a non-Jew the heroine of a novel dealing with the Holocaust, where the Jews had been targeted as the major victims. He has been charged of trying to "universalize" Auschwitz. But Styron's point is that the evil of tyranny ultimately crushes the innocent and the guilty alike. Sublime hatred, like the hatred of the Jews will eventually destroy not only the Jew but the Christian and the Slavs and the Gypsies alike.
When *Sophie’s Choice* was published in 1979 most reviewers praised the novel as a master work of American fiction. Most critics praised Styron for his courage in taking on the Holocaust and grappling with the horrors of Auschwitz; for the skillful strategy adopted by blending Stingo’s loss of innocence with a moving account of Sophie’s sufferings and Nathan’s descent into madness. But there were others who had grave reservations.

John Gardner questioned the suitability of using what he termed techniques of Southern and Gothic for a topic as grave as the Holocaust. John Aldridge found fault with the grandiloquent style of Styron’s prose. Jack Beatty attacked the book, both in terms of characterization and structure. Robert Towers found fault with the fragmentary nature of the two plots. He found the Auschwitz sections memorable but on the whole he felt it was a flawed book and could not even be considered a noble failure. Most adverse criticism question the juxtaposition of Stingo’s sexual obsessions with accounts of Sophie’s suffering. Robert Alter wonders how this would help grasp the novel’s subject of "absolute evil".

But Styron himself has answered this by making Stingo worry about the structural coherence of his novel:

> In itself this saga, or episode, or fantasia has little direct bearing on Sophie and Nathan, and so I have hesitated to set it down, thinking it perhaps extraneous stuff best suited to another tale and time. But it is so bound up into the fabric and mood of that summer that to deprive this story of its reality would be like divesting the body of some member - not an essential member,
but as important, say, as one's more consequent fingers. Besides, even as I set these reservations down, I sense an urgency, an elusive meaning in experience and its desperate eroticism by which at least there may be significant things to be said about that sexually bedeviled era. (SC 143)

Some critics assailed the novel as anti-semitic while in fact it dramatized the madness of anti-semiticism. And by breaking "the sacred silence" recommended towards the unimaginable horrors of Auschwitz, he passionately hopes "to penetrate our consciousness" (West 255) and make us aware of the tragic dimensions of the unparalleled events at Auschwitz.

Styron has also been accused of being sexist but as with anti-semitism, the novel only explores the evils of sexism but is not sexist itself. Styron sets his novel in the "frozen moonscape of the 1940's" (SC 140). Sex becomes the symbolic setting of the novel, "a nightmarish Sargasso Sea of guilts and apprehensions" (SC 146). It does dramatise the consequences of patriarchal culture which make men and women victims and victimizers, that force us to behave according to stereotypical roles.

The novel's essential theme is the exploration of "absolute evil". Sophie's Choice is then "an American spiritual journey into the mystery of iniquity, a twentieth century Moby Dick" (Sirlin 7). Styron reflects on "the power and inextinguishability of evil in human beings and nature". But ultimately he presents a compassionate vision of man "as struggling for meaning in an indifferent universe" (Sirlin 7).
Sophie’s Choice has three separate but related foci: the concentration camp experience, which epitomises the meaning of evil, the artistic development of a fiction writer; and the sexual maturation of a post-pubescent young man. It is important to remember that "this is Stingo’s story as much as it is Sophie’s - perhaps even more. Styron after all does not pretend to understand Auschwitz" (Sirlin 92).

"Call me Stingo", is the unmistakable cocky, breezy informal voice of the younger Styron inviting us into his world. A rural Southerner in the northern metropolis of New York, a would be writer forced to earn his living by passing judgement on other writers’ literary endeavours. This is literally autobiography. Styron did work with McGraw Hill and Company and he did get thrown out as Stingo was. His use of "autobiographical narrator" is complex. At an interview Styron declared "I’ve started out with pure autobiography but then a quarter of the way I begin to invent episodes". (Arms 2). Styron did this to give as much authenticity as possible to the concentration camp experience which is imagined and didn't happen to him at all.

The novel begins with the significant theme of the portrayed artist. This is a theme Styron shares with the great classics of modernism. Proust’s Marcel, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Gide’s Edouard, are the fore-runners of Styron’s Stingo in Sophie’s Choice. Fabulation so characteristic of post-modernism also employs the same device. One has only to recall the self-conscious narrators of Fowles’ The French Lieutenant’s Woman, Citrine in Bellow’s Humboldt’s Gift and Stingo the surrogate-author of Sophie’s Choice. The self-conscious narrator serves to distance the reader from the tragic events
and makes the act of story-telling a central part of the reader's experience" (Orr 192). As a result there is "narrative displacement" within the text and though the hero or heroine may provide the nucleus of experience, the limelight is no longer on them. The first person, generally autobiographical narrator, occupies the center of the stage. One peculiarity of this strategy is that it is the narrator who emerges triumphant at the end. It makes for close reader-narrator intimacy. As Orr puts it, the autobiographical narrative is "a confessional lens" which helps the author avoid the pitfalls of melodrama or sentimentality. The reader is held at arm's length deliberately from the tragedy. The reader discovers Auschwitz half way through the novel, along with Stingo, through "the ambiguous and withholding confession of Sophie in Brooklyn where the Old world and the New tragically meet" (Orr 198). The reader enters into a conspiracy with the narrator and together they view the darkness of evil but the device helps the author "anchor the reader to a concept of normality in an abnormal world" (Orr 200).

Stingo has the ardent desire to write. "I wanted beyond hope or dreaming to be a writer" (SC 28). When he is dismissed his senior colleague advises "write your guts out", but then Stingo realizes that he is not ready yet. "I had travelled great distances for one so young, but my spirit had remained land-locked and unacquainted with love and all but a stranger to death" (SC 28). Glimmerings of this knowledge come to him after he experiences a strange hollowness in the centre of his being, on hearing of Farrell's loss of his gifted son during the war, when he himself had escaped death because he had been in the Pacific only two weeks before Hiroshima.
Morris Dickstein in his essay "The World in a Mirror : Problems of Distance in Recent American Fiction" finds fault with most Confessional novels because they "confess very little, and rarely show their authors in a bad light" (Qtd.in ORR 386-400). On the contrary, Styron shows his young self in humiliating circumstances. He makes no bones about his sexual obsessions. Styron explains that they are the normal fantasies of a young man in a period of sexual repression. Styron treats his 1940's persona with sympathetic satire. Stingo has Sophie, Leslie Lapidus and Maria Hurst floating in and out of his consciousness. This is consistent with the mood Stingo creates from the beginning - a kind of comic mood. This comic aspect is really prominent in the Leslie Lapidus episode. She is the phoney sexpot whose only claim to sex are the four letter words she employs. Poor Stingo is under the illusion that he can at last lose his virginity with Leslie Lapidus. But he discovers to his cost that she indulges in spurious words but is a "Jewish Princess" and cannot let herself go.

The significant observation here is that Dickstein is one of the few critics who have been perceptive enough to recognise that the book is more about Stingo's maturation than about Sophie's horrifying experiences. Richard L. Rubenstein went to the other extreme in calling it a "bildungsroman" (425-42). Crane states that "Sophie's narrative of Auschwitz is the catalyst for Stingo's coming of age from the brash young writer who dares to open his account of his first summer in New York with a line like "Call me Stingo", to the older Styron who has plumbed the depths of evil in his novels and has discovered the underlying principle of slavery, Southern or - particularly - German, to be a belief in the absolute expendability of human life" (Crane 3-4).
Styron shows his naive younger self with all his faults intact. Stingo has a convenient conscience. When he finds he is relieved of earning a living for a while because of the fortune left to him by the sale of an unfortunate slave under false accusations, he stifles any guilt he may feel by the glib remark, "what the hell, once a racist exploiter, always a racist exploiter. Besides in 1947, I needed Pounds 485 as badly as any black man or Negro, as we said in those days" (SC 37).

Stingo uses the the money to move to cheaper quarters in Brooklyn and concentrate on writing his first novel. He finds Yetta Zimmerman's Pink Palace congenial. It was a stroke of good fortune that he moved in here as he is no longer solitary but has larger than life characters like Sophie and Nathan to fill his life. Styron portrays Stingo affectionately at this stage of his life.

It was wonderful to be twenty two and a little drunk, knowing that all went well at the writing desk, shiveringly happy in the clutch of one's own creative ardour and the certitude that the well spring of youth would never run dry and that wrenching anguish endured in the crucible of art would find its recompense in everlasting fame and glory and the love of beautiful women. (SC 241)

Styron in an interview remarked, "I should emphasise that part of the story is that of a young kid who is desperately yearning to write, he wants to write so bad his teeth ache - but he has not experienced enough - he has to apprehend the tragic, to be able to write" (West 23). Stingo is aware of the block and says "I had the syrup but it wouldn't pour" (SC 1).
The elder Styron takes on the role of satirising, parodying, cajoling the younger Stingo in an attempt to bring out the novel imprisoned within him. He shows his young self struggling to lose his virginity and much of the comedy in the novel is built round these scenes. Stingo is seeking the affections of an older woman who is already in love with another man. He is shown struggling to find himself as an artist. In his desperation Stingo imitates and nearly plagiarises the opening paragraphs of Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and this becomes the initial pages of Styron's first novel *Lie Down in Darkness*. Rather conveniently for Stingo, he hears of the suicide of his childhood sweetheart Maria Hunt, and this becomes the subject of his first novel. In fact Stingo is embarrassed to admit that he had got a lucky break in having Maria Hunt die the way she did so that he could have a subject to write about.

Styron depicts Stingo as being "desperately naive" when he shows him imagining marital bliss with Sophie on a peanut farm, fathering children who will never exist, gaining laurels rarely shed "upon the work of a writer so young" farming peanuts on the side. Later on Styron makes him the subject of extended self-satire. He makes Stingo imagine he would complete his first novel in two years whereas it actually took him four and, he makes him get the title wrong: *Inheritance of Night*. He makes him believe that he would finish the story of Nat Turner by the time he was thirty. Whereas in fact he was forty two when the novel was completed and it was called *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and not *Those Barren Leaves*. He doesn't mention *Set This House on Fire* perhaps because Stingo hadn't yet gone to Italy. Stingo laments in retrospect "What folly! What conceit!" Crane comments that Styron divides
his own career into two halves in *Sophie's Choice*. He seems to be more defensive about the books written during the second half of his career (5). In the beginning of chapter nine of *Sophie's Choice*, Styron says:

> My heart was still with the art of the novel...and I was pleased that year of 1967 to be able to disprove its demise (to my general satisfaction at least) by publishing a work (*The Confessions of Nat Turner*) which in addition to fulfilling my own personal and philosophical requirements, as a novelist, found hundreds of thousands of readers - not all happy about the event. (SC 267)

This is the chastened voice of the elder Styron who has suffered more than most writers from the virulent attack on his portrayal of Nat Turner.

Styron comments that many writers after completing a novel feel "a doldrump-heavy crisis of the will". He describes the feeling as "a little death, one wants to crawl back into some wet womb and become an egg" (SC 262). For twenty years Sophie and Nathan and their appalling troubles had "preyed on his memory like a repetitive and ineradicable tic. Many more years were to pass before he could bring himself to record the sorrowful destiny of Sophie and Nathan and thus erect a memorial not only for the dead but for the living, a record that exists to enhance man's inhumanity to man. "How Styron orders this experience is the art of *Sophie's Choice*. No other novel of his so intimately welds the shaping imagination with narrative technique. For Sophie grows to fullness and power with Stingo's development as a man and artist, both brought about by the gradual development of his vision" (Morris and Malin 14). This vision expands from that of an innocent child from Virginia
Tidewater to that of a mature man of the world because of his relationship with Sophie and Nathan. He is drawn into their tortured relationship and this helps him break through the sterile loneliness of his own isolated existence to confront Auschwitz and learn about love and death.

But Stingo had to go through several shocks of recognition before he could grapple with the absolute evil of Auschwitz. As preparation for setting down the story of Sophie he had to read about the literature of concentration camps. This is how he read George Steiner and experienced the shock of recognition. George Steiner's remarks on "the time relation" intrigued him the most. Steiner had described the brutal deaths of two Jews at the extermination camp:

Precisely at the same hour in which Mehring and Langer were being done to death, the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, five thousand miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist. This is where my imagination balks. The two orders of simultaneous experience are so different, so irreconcilable to any common norm of human values, their co-existence is so hideous a paradox.

Treblinka is both because some men have built it and almost all other men let it be - that I puzzle over time. Are there, as science fiction and gnostic speculations imply, different species of time, in the same world, "good time" and enveloping folds of inhuman time, in which men fall into the slow hands of the living damnation? (SC 262-263).
Styron is struck by the insight which coincides with his own. On the day Sophie set foot on that fatal platform in Auschwitz, he had been gorging himself with bananas to meet the weight requirement for entrance into the Marine corps.

Millions of Americans like Styron had not heard of the Nazi death camps then. For them the enemy in the global war were the Japanese who swarmed the jungles of the Pacific. It is true that up to the sixties, American public awareness of the Holocaust was minimal. It was only with the capture of Adolf Eichmann in South America and his trial in April 1961 that Americans realized the exact nature of the crime that the Nazis had perpetrated. In 1963, Hannah Arendt published her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Her thesis is that evil is banal, trite, commonplace and that Eichmann was not a monster but, "terribly and terrifyingly normal". He was the typical organisation man desiring nothing more than rising in the ranks of the military and becoming part of history. What is terrifying is that he was an obedient, law abiding citizen. With him a new type of criminal came into being - a being unable to distinguish the fact that what they are doing is wrong. "In order to commit genocide according to Arendt, the Nazis had to turn around their natural instincts of pity, they focussed not on what terrible things they did to people but on what horrible things they had to watch in the pursuance of their duties" (Sirlin 20).

Styron takes up the idea of evil being commonplace and committed by ordinary people under certain circumstances. He like Melville and Hawthorne believes in the omnipotent existence of evil in human beings and nature. He
like his illustrious forbears, insists that we look at our darker side, our potential for evil and destruction, otherwise, we are doomed. "Styron has had to pay for his beliefs as he has been quite critical of American naivete. As a consequence he is more popular in Europe than in his home country. Essentially Styron's version is more European, more Manichean, more aware of our duality" (Sirlin 61). Sophie's Choice illustrates this European version and was awarded the highest honour, the Commander of the Legion of Honour in 1984.

When Stingo first encounters Sophie, shortly after the war, he is totally ignorant of the enormity of Nazi crimes and of Sophie's suffering. He is a stranger to love and death. He reflects the limitations of most Americans at that time. This is why he mistakes Sophie for a Jewish woman because he sees the numbers tattooed on her arm and assumed the Nazis got only the Jews. Today it is clear that while the Jews were the main victims of the era, a whole lot of others were also persecuted by the Nazis. Among them were the physically and mentally handicapped, homosexuals, Poles and Gypsies. Sophie then stands for these "others" who were also victimised by the Nazis. Even more important, children were destroyed by the very doctrine her father had believed in - anti-semitism. Styron wished to emphasise the fact that ultimately evil gets everyone irrespective of class.

It is the development of Stingo's vision that is of significance here. From an insular young man bent only on his own pleasures he develops into a mature individual, after his involvement with Nathan and Sophie. Unlike most
recent novels which deal with inner journeys that lead nowhere, Styron's protagonists reach a fuller understanding of themselves and of history.

Yet another fear expressed by Bruno Bettelheim is that to understand the Nazis comes close to forgiving them. But other psychologists and psychiatrists disagree with this argument. Dr. Scott Peck, author of *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, states we cannot heal what we do not even dare study. Evil, he maintains, is inherently and inevitably mysterious. Evil originates, he feels, not in the absence of guilt but in the effort to escape it. Evil can be conquered only through love.

Alice Miller, an influential psycho-analyst wrote a book called ("Thou shall not be aware of Society's Betrayal of the Child"). She explores the roots of evil, violence and madness. Her chief argument is that "those children who are beaten will beat, those intimidated will intimidate, those humiliated will humiliate and those whose souls are murdered will murder" (Qtd.in Sirlin 232). Miller believes, in brief, that every persecutor was once a victim. She points to Hitler's childhood where he was beaten everyday by his father while the mother looked on submissively. This produced the totalitarian state. One is reminded of the line "In the life of Judas, was Christ Crucified". Styron would agree whole heartedly with these insights.

The novel gains in complexity because of the double vision Styron develops. Styron's remarks on his characterisation of Sophie is illuminating:

I realized that in order to make Sophie really complicated and give her other dimensions, I couldn't make her just a victim. That
was very essential to the dynamism of the story. If she was just a pathetic victim she wouldn't be very interesting, but to put her in juxtaposition with the commandant not really as a collaborator by any means but as a person who in desperation is acting in an unconventional way vis-a-vis the Nazis, trying to masquerade as a collaborator - this would give her a larger dimension. (West 237)

Styron succeeded in making Sophie a complex character, who is not an anti-Semite but her father is and this suggests the anti-semitism of her environment. She has to struggle against the prejudices of her environment, just as Stingo has to struggle against the limitations of American innocence. They struggle together in Brooklyn united in their devotion to the dazzling but demonic Nathan Landau, "Jewish con man and prophet".

Each of the characters, Sophie, Stingo and Nathan show this doubleness of vision. In portraying Sophie, Styron shows us how she was a victim of the Nazis. She had stolen meat for her seriously ill mother but is caught red-handed and sent to Auschwitz. Because of her linguistic abilities she is taken to the commandant's house to serve as his secretary. Here she is shown making use of her father's anti-semitic pamphlets in order to get her son into the Lebenstom programme. Styron's thesis is that victims also become victimisers in their turn. "His is a double vision in that sense, which perceives both the victim's and the victimizer's point of view in the same character" (Stern 22). Stern remarks that this is a peculiarly Southern trait as such an awareness can be traced to the historical experience of the South. It has
experienced the profound victimization by death while at the same time it has victimized another culture. The South as victimizer is seen in The Confessions of Nat Turner where even Nat’s kindly master Samuel Turner is a part of an institution that denies man his fundamental humanity. It is also seen in the inheritance Stingo makes use of to write the first novel. This inheritance had its source in the sale of a slave.

It is this double vision that explains Styron’s extensive examination of the Nazi figures in Sophie’s Choice especially the doctor who forced Sophie to make the diabolic choice. Why did the doctor do this? The answer is that he wanted to commit an actual sin in order to feel remorse and guilt again. Understanding the victim alone will not help, but one should also realise how the victim can be the victimizer.

Through Sophie’s story Stingo gets to understand the duality of experience. Stingo comments on Sophie’s reticence concerning Auschwitz -"the fetid sink hole of her past" (SC 214). So the novel has no detailed chronicle of the killings, gassings, beatings, tortures and criminal medical experiments, slow deprivations, excremental outrage, screaming madnesses and other entries into the historical account which have already been made by Tadeuz Borowski, Jean Francois Steiner, Olga Lengyd, Eugen Kogan, Andre’ Schvlaaz Bart, Elie Wiesel and Bruno Bettelheim... (SC 264-65). Styron believes in penetrating the embodiment of evil which Auschwitz has become by trying to understand Sophie and thus make a start at understanding Auschwitz. Sophie forms the
nexus between "the different orders of time" (SC 264). She represents some one who was there and her experience is that of a witness and therefore authentic. What makes Sophie fascinating is that she was not a mere victim. Then she would have been merely pathetic, another wretched waif of the storm cast up in Brooklyn with no secrets which had to be unlocked" (SC 266). But at Auschwitz, "she had been both victim and accomplice, however haphazard and ambiguous and uncalculating her design to the man slaughter ..." (SC 266). This was the cause of her devastating guilt.

Sophie only talked of two central episodes concerning her life at Auschwitz. The second one of these had to do with her life at Hoss's, the commandant of Auschwitz. She was privileged in working at his place because it meant she did not exactly starve. It also saved her from back breaking menial jobs. She was his amanuensis translating and typing out letters from German to Polish and vice versa. She came to a momentous decision there. In order to get her son shifted to a better camp she was prepared to seduce Hoss. Sophie, whose existence so long has been like that of a sleep-walker suddenly is shocked into prayer, she is assailed by an ecstatic hosanna but half way through the "Our Father" the music stops and Sophie says "and I felt a complete emptiness. I never finished the paternoster, the prayer I began. I don't know anymore, I think maybe it was that moment that I began to lose my faith. But I don't know any more, about when God leaves me. Or I felt Him. Anyway I felt this emptiness" (SC 282).
Earlier, Sophie had given Stingo a totally different picture of her father. She had made him out to be a friend of the Jews. But as their relationship progresses, Sophie finds herself confiding more and more in Stingo, driven by an oppressive guilt to bare her innermost secrets. Nathan never gets to know of her complicity with Hoss or any of her other secrets. Her childhood in Cracow had been idyllic. Her mother had passed on her passionate love of music to Sophie who had hopes of becoming a music teacher one day. There was only one cloud in her peaceful life then - the oppressive presence of her father. She describes him as a tyrant, exercising oppressive domination over his household and especially Sophie. She was a grown woman before she realised how much she loathed him. He was a university professor and practised law from time to time. He was a militant anti-semitic and "began methodically to philosophise about the necessity of eliminating Jews from all walks of life, commencing with Academe" (SC 292). Sophie had submitted to her father's demands and transcribed some of her father's dictation and had taken on subserviently several secretarial chores. But it was only with the preparation of the manuscript Poland's Jewish Problem: Does National Socialism have the answer? that she began to understand just what it was her father was up to.

From Sophie's talk Stingo gets to realise the masochistic kind of relationship Sophie had with her father. This in turn becomes a pattern for all her relationships with men - with Rudolf Hoss and with Nathan Landau. Sophie has gone wrong in the typescript and then as she sits there listening to him making plans for the distribution of his anti-semitic pamphlet, she realised that she would never have the courage to refuse him anything. The realization also dawns on her that he had no more feeling for her than he
would have for a servant or slave. It was then that she became aware of an awful pain - "like a butcher knife in my heart", and she knew that she hated him with all her heart.

Stingo while listening to Sophie's reminiscences of Poland sees parallels between the American South and Poland. "Despoiled and exploited like the South, and like it, a poverty ridden agrarian feudal society, Poland has shared with the old south one bulwark against its immemorial humiliation, and that is pride" (SC 301). Again the two regions share a sinister zone - race. Poles have always reacted to the Jews in their country like the white Americans in the south to the blacks. It is race that has produced nightmare spells of schizophrenia in both countries.

Ironically Professor Bieganski was one of the first victims of the Nazi war machine. This was because he was behind the times, "a Polack" who was not "programmed" enough. Sophie's father and husband were seized one November along with the rest of the faculty and she never set eyes on them again. She heard later he had been shot dead in a fusillade of hot bullets against a wall in Sacksenhausen.

Sophie was among the privileged in getting a place in Hoss's household. The basement appeared like a secure shelter because though it was damp and ill-lit it was the only place free of the smell of burning flesh. Her place of work was in the attic where Comma...Jant Hoss ran an efficient aseptic office. Her daily journey from the basement to the attic is like Dante's Inferno. One day she was waylaid by the children's governess Wilhelmine and raped by her. Sophie can only react with passive acquiescence - this has been her pattern of behaviour right from childhood.
Styron cleverly varies the style of the Sophie sections, and within sections of her experience also. He sets up a double rhythm which reflects the double order of time. While Sophie and the other prisoners live a death-in-life existence, Hoss and his family live in style on the goods confiscated from the Jews. The basement is described in prosaic terms. Monosyllables like "damp and ill-lit", (stinking) of "rot and mold" convey the dreariness of this section of the house. Sophie as she ascends the stairs to the fourth floor where Hoss works in his attic, reflects:

Hoss in his eyrie waited beneath the image of his Lord and Savior, waited in the celibate retreat of a calcimine purity so immaculate that even as Sophie approached, unsteadily the very walls, it seemed, in the resplendent autumn morning were washed by a blindingly incandescent, almost sacramental light (SC 325).

In contrast to the passages describing the basement, this is charged with religious fervour and complex polysyllabic vocabulary. The place appears a sanctuary where Sophie feels she can play at normal pursuits and also plead for her son's life. But this is just another illusion. Her hopes are shattered by Hoss's failure to place her son Jan in the Lebensborn program though he had promised her a final meeting in his office. The higher orders are morally degraded, and put up only a show of normalcy.

Sophie's dark tale is told in bits and pieces and this is in keeping with her guilt-ridden soul. As Judith Ruderman puts it, the novel is a "psychological case study of a woman in the throes of guilt, who can only very slowly reveal
the horrible acts that she herself committed" (97). In fact, Sophie spins a number of lies at the beginning making her father out to be a lover of Jews. But gradually she peels away the masks and ultimately makes Stingo her father-confessor. The theme of illusion versus reality is implicit in the structure and language of the novel. Sophie's beautiful face is propped up by aids like false teeth. Stingo is shocked when he catches a glimpse of her caved-in face. He realises the illusion of health and beauty is a charade.

During her revelations, Stingo comes to know that most of Sophie's choices had been made through fear and passivity. Her unwilling collaboration in distributing her father's anti-Jew pamphlets, her inability to refuse typing the manuscripts for her father and husband, for her attempt to manipulate Hoss by using the hated pamphlet to establish herself as Jew-hater in order to secure the safety of her son - all these reveal the gradual degradation that the human spirit experiences. But she is too scared to reveal these truths to Nathan. He has in his fits of madness called her Irma Griese - beautiful blonde killer of Jews at Auschwitz. She recognises an element of truth in this accusation and accepts Nathan's violent abuse of her as fitting punishment for her acts of omission and commission. She had refused to help her friend Wanda and lover Joseph in the Resistance movement. Sophie realizes that her choices made at the camp had put her in the Nazi camp both morally and physically.

Sophie is released at the end of twenty months at the camp to carry the burden of freedom. She can do this only through a deliberate suppression of the past. Given her guilt and her self-loathing, her attachment to Nathan is
inevitable. It is a sado-masochistic relationship. Nathan becomes both her liberator and her executioner while Stingo is her father-confessor. It is significant that once she confesses her darkest secret - the choice she had to make as to which of her two children would go to the gas chamber - she can no longer continue to live. This revelation is made at the end of the novel - before she returns to Nathan and certain death. One is reminded of Eliot’s Words "Mankind cannot bear too much reality". Unable to face her own responsibility for the deed she embraces death with Nathan.

Nathan Landau is a multi-dimensional character. He is both Sophie’s liberator and destroyer. It is he who saved her from the linguistic tangle in the Brooklyn college library and finally restored her to health through massive doses of iron tablets and love. In Hebrew, Nathan means "gift". He is a gift to both Sophie and Stingo. Stingo experiences the joys of friendship and has the full support of Nathan when he is robbed of the inheritance money. Nathan brings spontaneous joy and warmth into both their lives. At the same time Nathan functions as a moral touchstone like the Nathan in the Old Testament. Nathan is obsessed with the horrors of the Holocaust and is determined to make those around him as obsessed and demonic as he is. Though diagnosed as Schizophrenia, we feel his madness is due to the excruciating horrors of the Holocaust. Sickened by wars, wounds and torture of the Jews which he himself had escaped due to the accident of geographical location, Nathan is haunted by this obsessive guilt and it makes him maniacal about totalitarianism. It is his obsession with ridding the world of evil that destroys those around him, including himself. The victim-victimizer syndrome is seen at work here. As Sirlin points out "Nathan who rages against - the Nazis' use of cyanide gas ---
swallows a cyanide tablet to kill himself" (69). Rabidly opposed to totalitarian behaviour, Nathan turns out to be brutal himself. Blinded by his cause, he is brutal and violent with Sophie and Stingo. He is enraged by a Gentiles' having survived the camps. In battering Sophie, then he is battering himself. The joint suicide makes psychological sense of their knowledge and experience. Nathan and Sophie succumb to their guilt. This should answer the charge of anti-semitism in *Sophie's Choice*. Nathan is not just a Jew who demeans and destroys Sophie, he is also a victim of his own isolation and madness, a victim of the twentieth century. He is not the demonic Jew whom all Gentiles fear. Neither Sophie nor Nathan could conquer despair and grief. "Wisdom about the Nazis is indeed a wisdom that is woe, and for Sophie and Nathan a woe that is madness" (Sirlin 24). Nathan's sadism is not a reflection of Styron's anti-semitism or the unconscious revenge of Jew against Gentile.

Paradoxically critics have ignored Nathan's brother Larry who is a Jewish doctor who protects his younger brother and helps heal Sophie. He is the embodiment of the compassionate, cultured Jew. It is ironic that Styron should be judged an anti-semite when *Sophie's Choice* is his most Jewish book. Not just because this subject matter is about the Holocaust, nor because he has created characters like Nathan and Larry but because he has successfully captured a Jewish sensibility, an ironic comic mode, made popular by the modern giants of Jewish-American fiction - Bellow, Malamud and Roth. Styron has characterised the Jewish sensibility as "that comic awareness so exquisitely poised between hilarity and anguish (West 152). This comic mode is a defence against tragedy, and is most appropriate for *Sophie's Choice* as it helps prevent sentimentality and melodrama in presenting the excruciating
experience of the camp survivor Sophie. Far from trivialising the Holocaust, this novel is "poised between hilarity and anguish, between Stingo's gropings and Sophie's descent into hell" (Sirlin 25). Styron is successful here because of his Southern roots. Like Jews, Southerners carry the weight of a tragic past while affirming human dignity.

Nathan, Sophie and Stingo become inseparable that summer of '47 and Stingo wonders idly if people around regard them as *menage de trois*. Stingo is fascinated by the versatile qualities of Nathan. Though a scientist, he was very widely read and was a born story-teller. The novel which he esteemed above all others, he said was *Madame Bovary*. He felt that Emma's suicide by self-poisoning was sublimely inevitable. He felt that it was "a supreme emblem of the human condition" (SC 225). His remark is prophetically significant, especially his claim that he was a reincarnation of a friar named St. Nathan Le Bon who had an obsessive penchant for self-destruction, "which was based on the reasoning that if life is evil, it is necessary to hasten life's end" (SC 225).

Stingo is blind to the depressive side of his personality because of Nathan's warm and brotherly encouragement of his creative efforts. Taking a gamble one night, Stingo had taken Nathan up on his offer to read his novel and had handed over ninety pages of yellow paper to him. Nathan's comment was:

Twenty-two years old!... you've got your own voice. That's the most exciting hundred pages by an unknown writer anyone's ever read. Give me more" (SC 227). This exuberant praise draws an
equally enthusiastic response from Stingo: "How could I have failed to have the most helpless crush on such a generous mind-
and-life-enlarging mentor, pal, saviour, sorcerer? Nathan utterly, fatally glamorous" (SC 227).

Stingo was at his happiest then that halcyon summer, "with loneliness in abeyance and with my creative genius in full flow I could not have been happier..." (SC 227). And then all Sophie's foreboding and fright proved right. Nathan's "latent capacity for rage and disorder became predominant and Sophie's unrelinquished past exacerbated the situation. Stingo's absolute lack of experience and utter guilelessness prevents him from seeing Nathan's intensely disturbed state of mind. When Nathan accuses Sophie of infidelity, Stingo thinks it a lapse of decency rather than "the product of some aberration of mind".

Sophie and Stingo wait for Nathan to join them at Maple's Court to celebrate what Nathan says is his Nobel prize winning discovery. But instead he shows up drunk. Sickened by the whole experience, Stingo returns from the scene only to find the place deserted by the two. He is told by Morris Funk, the caretaker of Pink Palace that they have packed their bags and gone in different directions! Stingo is left with "a feeling of some absolute void and of irretrievable loss" (SC 260).

The next two days were taken up in being with his father, and, Stingo, though depressed finds solace in his company. Reminiscing about his childhood, Stingo recalls how his father had punished him severely only once and he had welcomed it. He had been tempted to go for a ride in a friend's car
and had neglected to fulfill one of the few duties he had at home --- that of keeping the fire place well fueled so as to keep his invalid mother warm during the winter evenings. His guilt was so strong that the memory of his mother's face chalk-dry with cold always brought him anguish. When he finally did return he saw her eyes, "those hazel bespectacled eyes and the way that her ravaged, still terrified face caught my own then darted swiftly away. It was the swiftness of that turning away which would thereafter define my guilt" (SC 361). Suddenly Stingo realized with horror how much he had resented his mother's burdensome affliction. "She wept then and I wept, but separately, and we listened to each other's weeping as if across a wide and desolate lake" (SC 361). His father had dealt with this dereliction with grace and understanding. He had been marched to the cold and dark wooden shed and asked to remain there till long after darkness fell over the village. "I was only aware that I was suffering exactly in the same way that my mother had and my deserts could scarcely be more fitting" (SC 361). Stingo is glad to be given a chance to expiate his crime.

He concludes by stating that his crime was beyond expiation, for in his mind "it would inescapably and always be entangled in the sordid amoral fact of my mother's death" (SC 361). He would always be riven with guilt, "Hateful guilt. Guilt corrosive as brine. Like typhoid, one can harbor for a lifetime the toxin of guilt" (SC 362). Stingo's re-collection of this guilt brings him close to Sophie who had confided in him earlier as to her own survivor-guilt. She had said earlier,
the Nazis were murderers and when they were not murdering they turned people into sick animals. So there is nothing that is still a mystery to me. And that is why, since I know all this and I know the Nazis turned me into a sick animal like all the rest, I should feel so much guilt over all the things, I did there, and over just being alive. This guilt is something I cannot get out of and I think I never will. (SC 349)

Like Sophie and Stingo, Nathan has his own survivor guilt. While millions of Jews were being exterminated he had escaped those tortures by virtue of location. He cannot forgive himself for this and takes it out on Sophie who was a non Jew and had survived the camps. Richard Pearce remarks: "Nathan is not a realistic character. He is a life force" (290). But, he is also as Morris Fink says, "a golem, a runaway fuckin' monster" (SC 70). In fact, it is the presence of Nathan that raises Sophie's character to tragic proportions. She had been quite an ordinary character upto the time she met Nathan. It is he who brings out the life-force in her. She develops a zest for life, and is completely liberated sexually. He compels her to a full consciousness of the living death she had escaped from. The more threatening Nathan becomes the more she confides in Stingo until finally she confesses the horrible decision she was forced to make and with the admission of that Sophie sees no more meaning in life. As Pearce describes it "Nathan's developing madness drives her to consciously confront the madness of the Holocaust as well as her own involvement in it. One of the most powerful sections of the novel is generated by Nathan's raging insistence that she justify to his satisfaction the way in which she survived Auschwitz while the others perished" (Morris 291).
Chapter eleven is remarkable for the frenzied to and from movement. There is a total lack of sequence here and the persistence of the irrational is more than suggested. The story cuts back and forth in time. At one point we see Stingo with his father, at another he is shown reliving his guilt over neglecting his mother; at yet another stage we see Blackstock embracing Sophie after the suicide of his wife and Nathan's subsequent suspicions. Nathan is the moral touchstone here. He caresses the twin cyanide capsules and says: "Consider how intimately life and death are intertwined in Nature, which contains everywhere the seeds of our beatitude and our dissolution" (SC 405).

Nathan's latent madness finds expression in brutal acts and words. Sophie recalls how she had been warned about his addiction to drugs but despite all she can think is "I cannot live without him" (SC 409). For Sophie the pain of torture is preferable to life without Nathan and all this goes to show how right Nathan was in describing her as having no ego at all.

Nathan returns again just when Sophie and Stingo had given up all hopes. The darker side of his persona fascinates Stingo. He remarks: "Sophie and I were, to put it obviously, pushovers. It was enough that he had reentered our lives, bringing to us his same high spirits, generosity, energy, fun, magic and love, we had thought were gone for good (SC 509). "The old tripartite camaraderie" was re-established. Stingo relinquishes his obsessive love for Sophie and turns to his novel again and finds to his delight he can write with runaway speed. Of course, he was haunted and intermittently troubled by what Sophie had revealed about her past. Stingo realizes, however, that "life does indeed go on" (SC 509).
Nathan takes on once more the role of "supportive brother-figure, mentor, constructive critic and all-purpose cherished older friend" (SC 510). "He was captivated by my dark Tidewater fable, by the landscape and the weather which I had tried to render with all the passion, heroism and affection that it was within my young unfolding talent to command" (SC 510). It was his fresh vision of the South that Nathan responds to most. He stops baiting him about lynchings and red necks and praises his novel as "electrifying" and uniquely his own.

Stingo's progress as a writer is due to his recognition of certain incidents and themes in his own experience. Nathan had given him a gift of two hundred dollars to make up for the money he had been robbed of. Stingo feels it is divine justice that the money made by the slave Artiste's sale is better lost. "My survival would no more be assured through funds tainted with guilt across the span of a century. I was glad in a way to get shut of such blood money, to get rid of slavery" (SC 513). Hardly had he mentioned the word slavery than he feels a compulsion to make slavery give up its innermost secrets.

... 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... Then suddenly I thought of Nat Tuner and was riven by a pang of nostalgia so intense that it was like being impaled upon a spear" (SC 513-514).
Stingo says, "I would have to write about him and make him mine, and recreate him for the world" (SC 514). The radiant evening comes to a close with Sophie and Nathan informing him of their wedding plans and he is content.

Nathan’s brother Larry sends for Stingo and blows Nathan’s masquerade as a biologist. He holds a job in the Pfizer Company library and does a little research for the staff on the side but he shocks Stingo by stating that Nathan suffers from schizophrenia. Like Sophie, Nathan was incarcerated most of his adult life. He was never for long a free man. He had experienced rage, humility, terror utter helplessness and had suffered from a sense of victimization not by doctors alone but by friends, family and lover. Larry informs Stingo that he had prevented him from joining the paratroopers during the war. No wonder then, that Nathan has a love-hate relationship with Larry and this is the same pattern that he adopts in his relationship with Stingo and with Sophie. With Sophie it is Sophie or nothing and finally both Sophie and Nathan opt for nothing. Alan Shepherd comments with great insight on Styron’s characterization of Nathan,"... it exemplifies in heightened form, the symptoms of alienation, of a sense of marginality in the national and international community, of a feeling of expendability, of intellectual and moral eminence (609). Whatever Nathan’s destructive tendencies may be, Stingo is also aware that he had restored Sophie to health and given her the will to live. Stingo knows that Landau is "both a good humane man and a murderous lunatic" (Shepherd 610).

The measure of Stingo’s growth is his education in evil. He has to confront the void, through European experience and shed his own naivete.
Stingo's relationship with Sophie is at the core of the novel. The contradictions in Stingo's character, and the split between the intention and the ideal stand out. Stingo discovers that his greatest weakness is "to elude difficulty, to retreat, to dump!" He is an embodiment of evasions and this is evident in his guilt over forgetting to light the fire for his mother. It is this guilt that is emphasised when he allows pique to interfere with his watchfulness over Sophie. The six-hour lead she gets over him ultimately ends with her suicide pact with Nathan. Stingo is forever burdened with this guilt. Nathan accuses Stingo and Sophie of lying when he is in one of his violent rages and then forces them to flee him together. Sophie initiates Stingo into "the variety of sexual expertise". Stingo characterizes this as an olympian feat which for Sophie was an "orgiastic attempt to beat back death".

Sophie in the end chooses Nathan and death, and Stingo is left to recover from despair. Stingo describes this as "A study in the conquest of grief". Throughout, Sophie's Choice we see the use of double rhythm - the inflated rhetoric of Stingo's prose is swollen and turgid as the young man's libido. While the complex variation appears when Styron brings in other characters. There is this variation from inflation to deflation which indicates the character and also makes for alternating moods of elevation and despair.

The novel is obsessed with death. Farrel's son was a promising young writer but he died during the war and Stingo feels a sort of guilt for having escaped action and death. He calls himself 'Fortune's darling'. Then again he receives a letter from his father informing him of the suicide of Maria Hunt and Stingo though he is shattered when he hears of her untimely demise, uses
it as the subject of his first novel. He is haunted by this memory of his mother’s cancer - ravaged face when she lies dying. He overhears Nathan swearing at Sophie "I heard you like death. Later on he heard in a tone that might have been deemed a parody of existential anguish had it not possessed the resonance of complete, unfeigned terror. Don’t .... you ... see...Sophie... we are ... dying ! Dying!" (SC 92). It is Emily Dickinson’s poem "Because I could not stop for Death" that brings the two together but later Nathan’s capacity for rage and disorder brings them against death. Stingo receives a second legacy when his father’s friend Fred Hobbs dies. As Stingo ponders over the description of his heroine’s suicide the radio announces Goring’s suicide in Nuremberg. Again Dr. Blackstock’s wife commits suicide and he is heart-broken. Stingo is told about the death of Sophie’s lover and his sister Wanda. The pattern of nihilism and despair is emphasized by this agonized litany of deaths. The climax of it all is in Sophie’s revelation of the choice she had to make and her final choice is her own suicide.

Galloway comments : "Styron confronts us with the two existential phenomena on which Camus had focussed his philosophical explorations - murder and suicide " (Galloway 125). Stingo has to come to terms with his own guilt - his potential capacity for evil. Styron shows how art itself is a kind of expiation, this shaping of his experience into order. Camus himself describes the artist as the most absurd of all men. John Cruickshank has this to say on Camus’ position :

The artist joins Don Juan as example of absurdism. It is clear, at the same time that Camus does not romanticize art as an escape
from the absurd. He sees it as being, in its own way, a conscious or unconscious acceptance of the evidence by which l'homme absurde is faced. The work of art is situated at a point where the desire for transcendence and the impossibility of transcendence. Conflict in art for Camus, is imaginative confirmation of the absurd (Qtd.in Galloway 144).

Styron portrays the dilemma of the artist in the novel. In this context Styron made a comment right after publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* which is illuminating: "I realized that all my work is predicted on revolt in one way or another" (West 69). Camus in *The Rebel* comments: "The novel is born at the same time as the spirit of revolt and reflectis, on the artistic level, the same aim" (147).

Styron tries to suggest the universal dimensions of his story through the use of allusions to Dante's Inferno. Stingo recalls how when he first encountered Nathan's and Sophie's "bizarre rituals of love" he had been fascinated. They had quite simply laid siege of my imagination - like Paolo and Francesca" (SC 69). Sophie is associated with Dido and Cleopatra, all tragic queens who killed themselves for love. Styron makes use of pastoral devices. Most of Stingo's meetings with Sophie take place in the park or by the sea. In Brooklyn Stingo has a reminiscent sense of "a place remote, isolated, almost bucolic". The mention of this place of retreat -- "a peanut farm" -- is typical of his southern heritage.

One of the major points of sensibility is music which helps Sophie feel her life is tolerable again. It gives her hope and serenity. It is Beethoven's
Pastoral symphony she listens to when she faints and Nathan carries her home from the library. Music helps her assert her individuality as she looks back nostalgically to what was once Europe and home. Styron's use of music is impressive. Stingo's reaction on seeing the dead lovers is summed up with masterful economy by the use of musical motifs. They obviously had listened to part of the pastoral Symphony, the lament for Eurydice from Gluck's Orfeo and a Mozart piano concerto that always reminded Sophie of "children playing in the dusk, calling out in far piping voices while the shadows of nightfall swooped down across some green and tranquil lawn" (SC 607). The humanistic passion is clearly emphasised here. Both Nathan and Stingo cannot lead this "latter day Eurydice" out of the underworld. Stingo perhaps through the medium of art can give her new life.

Overnight as it were, Stingo stripped of love, friendship and dreams is confronted with the totality of death. At this point he would not know that the very two people he was closest to, Sophie and Nathan, would be the subject of a major novel of his, written in his own life's blood as it were. Phoenix-like he was to rise from the ashes of his own, all consuming passion for Sophie. He had to come to terms with rejected love, Sophie's choice of death with Nathan over life with him, and what was more, sorry to carry the guilt of having let the suicide pact happen through his own evasion of responsibility.

Stingo emerges the true artist, chastened but not subdued. He had salvaged three valuable passages from the journal he had kept in those days. Stingo values them for they were like "vital juices" from some one, "whose very survival was in question for a time (SC 623). We get to know that they are the
three fragments that he had "shored against his ruin". The first of the three short lines was: "Some day I will understand Auschwitz" (SC 623). The mature Styron fondly reflects on the absurdity of the statement. "No one will ever understand Auschwitz" (SC 623). He admits it would have been more appropriate to have said, "some day I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world". Styron's hindsight shows him to have grown in wisdom. "Auschwitz remains inexplicable" (SC 623).

What is God's role in all this? Styron seems to be suggesting that Stingo and Sophie need a scapegoat and for them God does quite nicely. Styron is quite seriously concerned with the possibility of religious faith in a post-Holocaust world. Although Styron has no explicit credal commitment to Christianity of the sort made by Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, his novels do address religious issues. The spiritual struggles of his characters are very intense. Sophie's Choice is an exploration of the moral and religious impact of the Holocaust, not only on Sophie but on several other characters and on Stingo as well. Throughout the novel, Sophie feels bereft of God. On the tenth day of her stay at Hoss's she hears Hayden's "Creation" and hearing the words is moved to recite the Lord's Prayer. But just as suddenly as it began, it stopped and Sophie says, "I never finished the Paternoster, the prayer I begun.... I think maybe it was that moment that I began to lose my faith. But I don't know any more about when God leave me or I left Him" (SC 282). Sophie insists she has no faith left but the very force of her rebellion against God provides one measure of the importance she attaches to faith.
Of course, Sophie does feel hostility towards Christianity. "Oh! how I hate that stupid religion!" Sophie declares when she sees two nuns "grovelling in front of a God who must be a monster, Stingo, if He exists. A monster!.... I hate religion. It is for, you know, ... imbecile people" (SC 239). She views Nathan as her "savior", "a redemptive knight", who offers "resurrection from the dead". But soon he becomes her destroyer as well. His violent rages exacerbate her consciousness of guilt. He taunts her with anti-semitism and then probes too closely to her sources of guilt. Styron illustrates man's potential for evil. Nathan is beyond control as he is insane. Whereas with the Nazi it was the sheer blackness of the individual's power - the evil of those who ran the death camps. Their evil is that of a cruel, ruthless irrational bureaucracy.

Like Melville and Hawthorne, Styron acknowledges the power of darkness in the individual's life. Styron is greatly impressed by Richard L. Rubenstein's The Cunning of History: the Holocaust and the American future (1975). Stingo praises Rubenstein's insights. Styron develops two main emphases in his own analysis of the Holocaust and its implications: (1) that the concentration camps must be seen as an extension of slavery: (2) that corporate enterprise usually as the government and the military cooperated to form a bureaucracy founded on what Stingo calls the "absolute expendability of human life" (SC 286).

Styron's portraits of Hoss and Jemand Von Niemand parallel one another in their presentation of two men's experience of the "functionally Godless" world out of which Auschwitz emerged. Hoss accepts the brutality expected of him in the line of duty while Niemand tries to recover God through renewed consciousness of sin.
The ultimate illustration of this necessity to feel guilt is the doctor Fritz Von Niemand. According to Stingo who speculates on the doctor's motives, the man was "a failed believer seeking redemption groping for renewed faith" (SC 591). He attributes to the doctor a crucial religious insight. He must have recognized that "the absence of sin and the absence of God were inseparably intertwined... Goodness could come later, but first a great sin" (SC 593).

Stingo's journal entry which asks "Where was man?" illustrates Styron's convictions of mankind's responsibility for the evil manifest in the Holocaust. "What should man have been doing all along to lessen the horror of the existence his novel portrays? (33).

That the suffering Stingo should have written this during the traumatic ordeal in the train, trapped by the fears and premonition of Sophie's death, speaks much for the human spirit. He was learning "at first hand in his grown up life about death, and pain and loss, and the appalling enigma of human existence, the only remaining, perhaps only bearable truth" (SC 623).

The last passage he has retained from the journal comprises of his own poetry. After the funeral and during his near mad, grief-stricken wandering, lost in a beery world of hallucinations, Stingo finds himself alone on the beach haunted by memories of Sophie and Nathan. He could see in his mind's eye Sophie and Nathan descending from a parachute amidst a peal of laughter. "It was there that the tears finally spilled forth - it was a letting go of rage and sorrow for the many others who during these past months had battered at my mind, and now demanded my mourning - the beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth" (SC 625). He wakes up to a
blue-green sky "with its translucent shawl of mist. "I heard children chattering nearby. I stood" (SC 126). Stingo realises that the children had covered him with sand protectively and this had shielded him from the freezing cold of the night. This spontaneous act of caring breaks through his loneliness and revokes a positive response. The artist has emerged battered, shriven, but with new strength and hope.

Neath cold sand I dreamed of death
But woke at dawn to see
In glory, the bright, the morning star (SC 626).

For the Styron hero, a vision of the abyss of suffering is a prerequisite for the birth of wisdom. Camus' statement is relevant here: "The novel is born at the same time as the spirit of revolt and reflects on the artistic level the same aim" (The Rebel 147). Stingo achieves "the wisdom that is woe" and it is this that helps him survive. He is able to conquer his grief finally, and artistically erect a memorial to Sophie, Nathan and all the victims of the Holocaust.