CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Suffering and rebellion are the two major parameters of Styron's fiction. While some of his characters stare too long at the abyss that is at the centre of modern existence and are petrified, others do find the courage to affirm existence, such as it is. Peyton Loftis, Sophie and Nathan Landau ultimately embrace death rather than live death-in-life existence but Cass Kinsolving, Stingo and Mannix choose to go on, facing reality and growing out of despair to affirmation.

The literary imagination has responded most passionately to the threats to man's humanity as it were. The reality around is just another name for chaos. In an increasingly dehumanized universe, man has chosen to rebel and this redefines his humanity. The modern American novel in particular has confronted the age as it is. A random glance at the titles makes this very clear - *The Dangling Man*, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Invisible Man* and *Lie Down in Darkness*, to mention just a few. Ihab Hassan remarks in *Radical Innocence* that all novelists agree that "the contemporary world presents a continued affront to man and that his response must therefore be the response of the rebel or victim, living under the shadow of death" (4-5).

Almost all of Styron's fiction begins under this shadow of death. Milton Loftis awaits his daughter's corpse in *Lie Down in Darkness*, eight young recruits are blasted by an accidental explosion in *The Long March*. Nat Turner
is seen meditating on his past a few days before his death in a prison cell. In Sophie's Choice we are never very far from the ovens of Birkeneau. This intense awareness of death underlines the fragility of life in each of his novels. One cannot escape the belief implicit in Styron's novels, that man is mortal and this makes life a precious commodity. Faced with the inward darkness of things, man tends to respond with despair. Wright Morris in The Territory Ahead states:

If the modern temper, as distinct from the romantic lies in the admission that men are mortal, this admission determines the nature of the raw material with which the artist must work. An element of despair, a destructive element, is one of the signs by which we shall know him - the other is the constructive use to which this element is put. (Qtd.in Hassan, Radical Innocence 6)

Despair is a dominant emotion in Styron's universe but it is in their capacity to feel despair that his men show themselves as human. His heroes and heroines appear as expressions of man's irrepressible desire to affirm. This is at the heart of Styron's existential humanism. It is by their "radical innocence" that they are distinguished. The quality of the characters' "passion", of their "awareness" of "the aboriginal self" whose radical imperative for freedom cannot be stifled, that makes Styron's characters occupy their own existential space. "The disparity between the innocence of the hero and the destructive character of his experience defines his concrete, or existential situation" (Hassan, Radical Innocence 7). Hence Stingo and Cass have to learn about love and death from their European encounter.
Styron's fiction is primarily concerned with characters who live their lives on the edge. They peer over the edge of the abyss and they are interesting precisely because of their varied response to this nothingness. Suicide seems the answer for some, but others do achieve a measure of redemption. Faced with "the panorama of anarchy and futility" (in Eliot's phrase) that makes up the modern world, his characters are on a passionate quest for values that will help them endure. The encounter with the dark gods ultimately leaves them either as rebels or victims. In either case they become alienated. It is a double vision that Styron reveals in his portrayal of the Rebel-Victim. The Victim-Victimiser syndrome manifests itself and this gives us a Sophie who is a collaborator in her own way at the death camps. Then again Captain Mannix takes on the tyrannical aspects of Colonel Templeton when he bullies his men to complete the March. It is this insidious nature of evil that leads to suffering and despair in his world. The mortal condition of man is emphasised by the suffering his men and women have to endure. The suffering is a necessary prelude to regeneration.

From Lie Down in Darkness to Sophie's Choice human suffering has dominated Styron's universe. In examining "what man must endure" (Bryant 542) Styron has depicted suffering both at the physical and the mental planes. Each of his novels portrays physical suffering. We see Peyton Loftis doubled up with the pain in her womb during her last monologue and the handicapped Maudie symbolises undeserved suffering, and Milton's hangovers enclose the novel like "a sick hue of disaster".
The Long March is built round pain as metaphor. The opening scene is that of shattered bodies and the conclusion is that of two individuals who have endured, commiserating over the reality of pain. "Do it hurt?" and the response "Deed it does" (LM 119-120).

John L. Cobbs remarks, "By the time Styron wrote Set This House on Fire physical suffering had become his primary metaphor for the nature of man's empty and agonizing relationship with the universe" (16). The novel has a veritable array of horrors ---- the tubercular body of Michele, the drunken orgies of Cass, Luigi's tale of his brother's immolation and Peter Leverett's car accident where Di Lieto is injured horribly and is hospitalized. Styron's metaphor for the human condition is of a dog that had been crushed by a bus, caught in the throes of death-agony but unable to die. It becomes a symbol of suffering humanity in a universe where God himself is unable to help man to alleviate his misery.

But it is in The Confessions of Nat Turner that we have Styron's most profound treatment of human suffering and degradation. Nat Turner is shown in the cold cell where he awaits judgment. The cold and the pain he experiences is indescribable. He meditates over the past and Styron reveals the abuses he endures at the hands of various masters to the moment when he runs the sword through Margaret. The menial jobs that Nat Turner has to carry out is depicted graphically.

In Sophie's Choice the horror of physical agony is implicit and hence all the more deadly. Styron denies his narrator the right to describe the agony of others:
Thus the jaded reader surfeited with our century's perdurable feast of atrocities will be spared here a detailed chronicle of the killings, gassings, beatings, tortures, criminal medical experiments, slow deprivations, excremental outrages, screaming madnesses and other entries to historical account which have already been made by Tadeusz Borowski, Jean Francois Steiner, Olga Lengyel, Eugen Kogen, Andra Schwarz - Bart, Eli Wiesel and Bruno Bettelheim, to name but a few of the most eloquent who have tried to limn the totally infernal in their heated blood. ... I have been haunted, I must confess by an element of presumption in the sense of being an intruder upon the terrain of an experience so bestial, so inexplicable, so undetachably and rightfully the possession alone of those who suffered and died, or survived it". (SC 264)

Yet the narrator can speak of the visible scars of those wounds - Sophie's emaciated flesh, the tattooed skin, the reconstructed teeth not to mention the psychological scars of past tortures. Sophie is forever maimed spiritually and she suffers from survivor-guilt. The language of pain is evident every where in the novel. Sophie describes the pain she felt when she realised how much she hated her father for his anti-semitic activities. She compares it to "a butcher - knife in my heart" (SC 246). Stingo himself is no stranger to pain. He recalls the cancer-ridden face of his mother and how it continued to haunt him for years. This again is guilt.
However it is in the depiction of mental agony that Styron develops his fictional perspective on the human condition. This agony is usually a response to the pain of another and marks the humanity of his characters. The mental anguish that Milton suffers at the sight of his daughter's body marks the depth of his feeling for her. Cass Kinsolving also experiences sympathetic grief when he sees the old woman vainly attempting to carry an enormous hammock of wood on her back. "Cass's stomach knotted up in a swift paroxysm of pain" (STHF 351). This is what Nat also feels for Hark and his fellow slaves. When Stingo hears of Sophie's sufferings he is profoundly moved.

But Styron's major characters experience existential agony stemming from their own deep sense of alienation. They go through the dark night of the soul as it were. It is their sense of alienation that causes them great anguish. His characters suffer over their sense of separation from God and man. Milton, Peyton, Mannix, Cass, Nat, Sophie all confront the "broken craters" in their lives. There is a pervasive sense of emptiness. It is their response to this sense of fragmentation which makes them unique, gives them a sense of identity. They do not passively accept their lot but are charged with powerful emotional longings, and they engage themselves in deep soul-searching.

Styron employs various metaphors to depict this sense of fragmentation. In Lie Down in Darkness the central image is that of non-communication. A family unit physically together, but emotionally apart is presented. The more they strive to communicate, the further they are driven apart. The images of isolation and failed communication are expressed in terms of agony. "It was cruel not to love or feel as one was supposed to. It was hell" (LDD 182). Hell
is not just other people as Sartre has put it, but oneself. The inability to break out of one's self and reach out to another marks the lives of the Loftises. "Milton, Helen and Peyton form a triangle of desperate attachment without communion, of emotional over-dependence and exploitation which produces a paradoxical isolation of the spirit" (Pizer 121). The characters prey upon one another and always it is "need" that moves them to seek out each other.

Life is reduced to a vale of suffering ---- either by way of forced marches that reduce men to ciphers, or through slavery that deprives men of their humanity, or through concentration camps which is the ultimate horror as they are based on "the expendability of human life". Styron's contemplation of the agony of life reaches its apotheosis in Sophie's Choice. The human propensity to dominate is evident in the extermination of one race by another.

But the central insight of his fiction is the humanity that is born out of suffering and despair. Whatever the agony of existence, his characters have to go through, they are purged of their existential dross and emerge clear-eyed, facing the world stripped of all illusion. Though some are pushed to the brink and do not survive, they all do gain awareness and self-recognition. This is the affirmation in Styron's fiction --- not magnificent but authentic and true to his artistic vision.

We have seen how time is one of the obsessive themes of existentialism. Styron's handling of narrative structure revolves round the question of time. At an interview he stated "The business of progression of time seems to me one of the most difficult problems a novelist has to cope with" (West 30). Existentialists tend to see time as destructive or demonic. Styron has used a
number of ingenious devices to triumph over time. Cheshire states that the "recollective structure" is most characteristic of the Styron novel. A man on his judgement day, reflecting on his moral responsibility for past actions and the possibility of redemption - this is an important motif not only in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* but in Styron's two other novels as well" (Morris 223). In *Lie Down in Darkness* we see Milton Loftis forced to confront "the evidence of all his errors". He tries to grapple with the past, hoping to find answers to the question: what did I do wrong? what is my responsibility in Peyton's death? Is there any hope that I can transcend my sorrow and my guilt? (Morris 223). Similarly in *Set this House on Fire* Peter Leverett and Cass Kinsolving go back in memory to Sambuco, to find out more about themselves and their responsibility. It is clear that the recollective structure of the hero's meditation provides the key to the novel. The existential nature of the work is thrown into sharp relief from this perspective. In *Sophie's Choice* Stingo would still ask the questions but the difference is, being younger than Nat or Milton, he can look forward to the future.

But it is in his depiction of evil that Styron truly shows his existential humanism. His views on the question of evil in the universe are fascinating:

> The older I get, the less I know about what evil is. I know it exists, and I know there are evil things in the world. But I tend, however, to interpret certain evil in a certain way, in a different way than I did ten, twenty, fifteen years ago. I think one of the slightly more important things about a person's life is that he is able to alter his notions about right and wrong, good and evil as he goes along ... Evil for me is often the result of neurosis. (West 59)
Styron's remarks to Rodha Sirlin throw further light on his attitude to evil: "I don't think that you can lay down any firm edicts on evil except to say that it exists and somehow it perpetuates itself and what can you do except try to expose it whenever you see it" (103). He views evil as a cancer, a neurosis which is inherent in each human being. Unlike Camus, Styron believes every individual has the potential for evil in him. It becomes evil only when the potential is translated into action. When another person is hurt as a result of one's own evil then it becomes truly evil. Evil he feels turns on oneself. His fiction illustrates this belief. Helen Loftis one of the few truly evil characters in his fiction hurts everyone around her with her neurotic nature but in the process she destroys her own chances of happiness and fulfillment.

The problem of evil haunts Styron at all levels --- social, psychological, metaphysical. It is his keen awareness of evil that makes him send his characters on a moral quest in search of values amid the stark realities of pain and suffering. It is a war-torn world that he presents. We begin with Port Warwick "with its husk of culture", which has spawned a world of narcissistic corruptions; the inhuman world of the marines follow next with the soldiers for ever in quest of an unknown enemy; the corrupt world at Sambuco marked with violence and revenge; and the world of slavery in the old South is equalled in horror by the ultimate desecration of Auschwitz. It is a world marked by suicide, murder, hatred and revenge. In short tyranny, be it within the family or outside, has always fascinated Styron. The propensity of human beings to dominate over others ends finally in oppression. In fact it is 'the continuing slavery' of mankind that Styron views as the greatest evil on earth.
But he is no mere chronicler of the miseries of the century. In novel after novel he has depicted the need for rebellion. His victims are never passive sufferers but they take up arms against the evil forces to assert their humanity. Styron creates witnesses through whose eyes we see these larger-than-life characters. We have Culver watching Mannix's heroic rebellion; Peter Leverett who gives us an insight into the world of Cass and Mason and it is through Stingo's eyes that we come to know Sophie and Auschwitz. This distancing technique helps us get a perspective on the action. The onlooker stands for the narrator and is usually a sane, moderate figure who along with the hero gets transformed in the process.

The entrapment of the mind and spirit so vividly portrayed in his fiction can be broken once man becomes aware of the source of the entrapment. The angst-ridden Cass is not allowed to wallow anymore in guilt because Luigi gives him a chance to find redemption and he discovers the source is within himself.

The Manichean vision of evil which the opening quotation of *Sophie's Choice* announces dominates the novel. Love battles death in *Sophie's Choice*. Nathan is both savior and destroyer; North and South are drawn in battle lines over vice and virtue. Poland is both victim and aggressor. These are some of the Manichean dualities we are made to grapple with in Styron's world. It is not compassion that is inevitably born out of suffering but at times anti-semitism as in Poland. Then again Styron uses Christian imagery while at the same time undermining the ritual-ridden nature of the religion. Stingo disguises himself as the Reverend Entwistle to get a room with Sophie and admits that "the Scriptures were always largely a literary convenience,
supplying me with allusions and tag lines for the characters in my novel"
(SC 613).

Guilt is the predominant emotion that brings self-destruction in its wake. Sophie, Nathan, Stingo and Peyton all suffer from an extreme sense of guilt. For Styron guilt cannot be confined to religious or rational explanations. It exists as an over whelming presence, like some great Manichean "black hole". Styron's opening quote from Rainer Maria Rilke sums it up succinctly "death, the whole of earth, --- even before life's begun --- this is beyond description" (SC epigraph). Styron's fiction is a marvelous conjuring of the dark side of man's nature but in pointing out the evil, he has showed us ways toward good.

He is not contented to be an Ivory-tower writer but instead is the writer who is engagé. His fiction is living proof of this. After a recent bout of severe depression he wrote a description of his ailment in the book "Darkness invisible : Memoir of Madness" (1991) in order to help the millions afflicted by the same disease. Then again he is against capital punishment and his passionate involvement is seen by the case of Benjamin Reid a convicted felon who got life sentence due to Styron's efforts.

It is in Styron's portrayal of the artist that he reveals his faith in man. A continuing motif in his fiction is the place of the artist in our time. The artist seeks reality, confusing it with "life" and tries to locate it in his work. Hence the struggle of both Cass and Stingo. The artist today has to struggle with the task of creating a new relationship between attitudes and values on the one hand and "real life" on the other. Cass achieves affirmation of Being
at the end of his quest and Stingo reaches transcendence when he conquers
grief and erects an artistic memorial to Sophie and all the victims of the
Holocaust.

Styron's work is a living testimony to the resiliency of the human spirit.
He has charted the landscape of nightmare, the wasteland of our modern
culture and suggested ways of traversing it. Considering the discontinuous
nature of much modern experience he has seen man's plight - in terms of a
continuous humanistic tradition.

Styron's fiction posits the fundamental absurdity of the universe, where
the senseless cruelty of life is everywhere apparent. Rebellion is the true
response to such a world. Art is a form of revolt where the imprisoned artist
transcends his bonds imaginatively and creates a new world. Stingo is the
artist who successfully conquers the urge to lie down in darkness and instead
erects a memorial to Sophie, Nathan, Wanda and all the victims of the forces
of darkness. And Stingo is Styron's alter ego.