CHAPTER II

THE PHILOSOPHICAL NEXUS

The term "Existential humanism" best describes William Styron's approach to the predicament of man in the twentieth century. His fictional men and women provide "A comprehensive picture of contemporary man's attempts to live significantly in a world in which he can find no God nor any over-all, more than human meaning" (Barnes 4).

Styron portrays a Godless world where man is doomed to mindless suffering, but despite it all man emerges with his dignity intact. His world is one of despair, but he puts this despair to constructive use. Styron at an interview stated, "to me the universe is benign or indifferent. We don't know why we are here.... And yet the possibilities of life are limitless... We exist capable of pure joy, ecstasy even.... and these make the trip worthwhile" (Morris 57).

It is this intense awareness of the perilous nature of human life with an equally intense belief in the possibilities of life that makes for the peculiar blend of existential humanism in Styron's work. He is well aware of man's proclivity towards evil: "We ourselves are the agents of our own destruction", he declares, in the same interview, "Our beautiful opportunities which are here as human beings are absolutely destroyed because of our proclivity toward hatred and toward massive domination of each other. That is slavery and Auschwitz" (Morris 57).
Here Styron talks of the two major perceptions in his fiction -- slavery and the concentration camps. His fiction is an exploration of the evil that men do and Styron is intensely concerned with unearthing the good that can be salvaged out of the chaos of modern existence. His works are almost classically purgative despite the portrayal of profound despair. The ending is optimistic and actually exhilarating.

The quest motive is implicit everywhere; the quest is always for freedom from an entrapped self, entrapped environment, entrapped relationships. His characters are seen struggling for self-knowledge, a struggle that more often than not brings them to the edge of the abyss; many of them are destroyed by the confrontation. The exploration helps both Styron and his readers "to discover ways towards good".

The term existential humanism was suggested by Jean Paul Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*. Sartre defines two meanings of the term Humanism. One is the theory which upholds man as the end-in-itself and as the supreme value. But Sartre does not accept this sense of the term. According to Sartre:

Man is all the time outside of himself; it is in projecting and losing beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist. Since man is thus self-surpassing, he is himself the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity.
This relation of transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense of self-surpassing) with subjectivity (in such a sense that man is not shut up in himself but forever present in the human universe) - it is this that we call existential humanism. This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation that man can realise himself as truly human" (Existentialism and Humanism 55-56).

It is this aesthetic stand that Styron adopts, yet his is not a darkly pessimistic vision. Man has to agonize, has to go through the dark night of the soul in order to confront his true self. Just as Sartre's essay gives an optimistic account of the human condition, Styron explores the possibilities of living a life worth living. There is an element of defeat in every victory. Paradoxically, it is this arrival at a higher consciousness that is significant. The ambiguity of the human condition - its limits and its possibilities are revealed. This tragic awareness makes for Styron's existential humanism.

Existentialism and humanism both take man as the measure of all things. Both recognize the infinite potentiality of human existence while at the same time being fully aware of its infinite limitations. Horace L.Fries declares, "The humanist temper is man's awareness of a sense of human dignity and power, and of a sense of responsibility for cultivating and maintaining it, and
for achieving an integrity and wholeness of the human" (Kurtz 58). This harmonises with the definition of Humanism as given in The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy:

Existentialism is a philosophy which despite its acceptance of death as significant insists upon the uniqueness and importance of the individual, and the intuitive nature of knowledge, the insufficiency of science to explain the mystery of life, the necessity of rebellion against the tyranny of social conventions and political dominations, the infinite potentiality of human existence, and obligation of every individual to live up to the best that is in him. (Encyclopaedia of Philosophy 3:374)

In short, both existentialism and humanism are opposed to the determinist point of view which maintains that man's 'being' is shaped primarily by forces outside himself. The existentialist insists that "man is the determiner of his own value" (Hamachek 46).

The centrality of the idea of freedom together with their pro-man stand brings the two philosophies together. Both are opposed to authoritarian, religious and totalitarian ideologies. "Humanist existentialism claims that every man is free, but most men, fearing the consequences and responsibilities of freedom, refuse to acknowledge its presence in themselves and would deny it to others" (Barnes 3).

Literary existentialism had the greatest impact on American writers of the post world war II generation. Three French writers, Jean-Paul Sartre,
Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir share "a concept of man which is related to, but not identical with that of other existential philosophers" (Barnes 4). All three view the world as absurd. They share a constructive pessimism and accept the death of God and consequences of man's freedom, stress existence over essence and hail the same masters Nietzsche, Kafka, Kierkergaard and Husserl. Hazel Barnes classifies the three as humanistic existentialists in her Literature of Possibility (1959) because they share central recurrent themes:

The concept of Absurdity of existence, the concern to justify man's resolve to live meaningfully in the face of an indifferent universe, the philosophical analysis of the basis for human solidarity, the ideas of authenticity and bad faith, a sympathy with those scapegoats who are sacrificed to human expediency, a feeling for the absolute value of the individual combined with recognition that one cannot today live wholly innocently - all this based on an explicit or an implicit psychology which holds that every man is free in that we are all responsible for the situation within which a freedom must choose itself. (376)

Styron shares many of the central concerns of these writers. But he is no philosopher as such. Styron does not attempt to give a systematic account of man's connection with the world because he is first and foremost a novelist. Mary Warnock points out that "The non-philosophical existentialist will share the common interests of his philosophical cousin but he will not share a
method" (3). Styron's concrete imagination portrays characters who are concerned with exploring the meaning of the human in the human condition.

A major distinction between Styron and the French Literary existentialists is that for him character and plot are still very important. His is not a novel of situations, as Sartre defines existential literature. The new existentialists approach was to throw light on the basic human situations, by investigating the possibilities of new choices. Whereas Styron has great faith in the traditional elements of the novel like plot and character. Yet another difference is his use of language which reveals his Southern penchant for rhetoric.

In the light of these differences it would be more apt to describe Styron's view of the human situation as existential humanism. He is basically a humanist, as he urges man "to live by what he knows". He affirms human possibility while at the same time bringing his characters to a crisis situation. He is engaged in finding human possibilities in man's very real and disillusioning struggles against oppression - whether slavery in America or the Holocaust in Europe.

Styron's fiction tends to be a fiction of 'extreme situations' to use an expression of Jaspers. It shows us, man at the end of his tether, cut off from the consolation of all that seems to be solid and earthly in the daily round of life - that seems so as long as this round is accepted without question. (Barett 54)
His characters are brought to a "boundary" situation where their response is to either leap over the precipice and embrace nothingness or to go on as best they can - either with greater awareness or to sink back with various escape mechanisms like alcohol or sex. Nothingness is the ambience in which his human figures live.

The central question raised by Styron's fiction is also the central concern of the existentialists - the question of how to answer the absurdity of man's existence stemming from his awareness that his 'essence' - his consciousness of 'being' is surrounded by 'nothingness' and will dissolve into death. Hazel Barnes observes:

The absurd is at the heart of existential humanism. For Camus the absurdity of man lies in the fact that he makes demands upon himself and on the world which make sense only if there were a certain God and a perceptible meaning in existence. His finite mind insists on pursuing projects whose scope is infinite. (156)

Since the decay of traditional Christianity in the wake of the two world wars, the theme of the exiled individual in a meaningless universe has challenged the imagination of American writers. Yeats's prophecy, "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold" has become a reality. Man confronted with fragmentation is on a desperate quest for some meaning in an increasingly meaningless universe. Camus in The Myth of Sisyphus defines it this way: "A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But on the other hand, in an universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of
the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (MS 13). It is this disproportion between man's intention and the reality he encounters that makes for absurdity. But given such a world, Camus sees the infinite possibilities of man. He feels that man can create all by himself his own values. "He wants to find out whether it is possible to live without appeal" (The Myth of Sisyphus 53).

Camus' work repeatedly affirms that man could, despite a hostile environment, establish a new and viable basis for heroism and thus for human dignity. Camus' answer to the question of the absurdity of man's condition is to "scorn the world even while he lives in it". This scorn is man's assertion of his own individual being. Sisyphus becomes a metaphor for man's response to a meaningless universe. He was condemned by the Gods to roll a rock up a mountain only to have it roll down again. But Sisyphus found freedom in his scorn for his task.

Sisyphus, proletarian of the Gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition. It is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn. (The Myth of Sisyphus 109)

In other words, for Camus, the absurd man can become free the moment he recognises his own absurdity. For Camus, "the most appalling truths can lose their power over us once we have absolutely recognised and accepted them" (Galloway 10). The tragedy of Sisyphus comes from the fact that he is
conscious, argues Camus, but it is this very consciousness which causes the pain of his circumstance to vanish.

At the moment of consciousness tragedy begins but so too does the stuff of happiness. I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But reaches the higher fidelity that negates the Gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well.... The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (The Myth of Sisyphus 111).

In The Stranger (1942), Camus develops the concept of the absurd. It is the story of a man who with no heroics, accepts to die for the truth. The idea that life has no meaning is linked to the idea of the inevitability of death. The issues raised in this novel are highly complex but the story told is a direct and simple one. Meursault goes to his mother's funeral, has an affair with Marie Cardona the next day, gets involved in the affairs of a neighbour Raymond Sivets and shoots an Arab. He is tried for murder and sentenced to death. The death sentence is pronounced against him not for the murder of the Arab, but because he refused to show any sign of grief at his mother's funeral.

On the night before his execution, the prison chaplain comes to visit him to offer the consolation of an eternal life beyond the grave. For the first time in the novel, Meursault is stung into saying what he really thinks. He collars the priest and shouts out his belief that only sensations of the world matter. The wardens pull the priest away and Meursault is left alone. For the first time he experiences an epiphanic moment. He feels himself opening out to "the
benign indifference of the universe" (*The Stranger* 120). His own callousness is truth. Camus's novel is an attack on the hypocrisies of society. People who self-righteously condemn Meursault for his lack of feeling are really selfish themselves and hide behind a mask of so-called caring gestures. Meursault adheres to a strictly honest code and scorns all the normal palliatives. In Camus' own view Meursault has gone through the experience of the absurd before the action of the novel begins. His outburst to the chaplain reveals the fact that he has not made the leap into religious faith. He has not committed philosophical suicide. At the trial it becomes clear that Meursault does have so strict a regard for truth that he virtually sentences himself to death. He refuses to play the game as society expected of him. But he is sensitive to other people's hypocrisy and refuses to play it their way.

Camus is critical of Kierkegaard and other Christian existentialists who "see the concept and experience of the absurd as a kind of springboard into religious faith" (Thody 21). Instead, Camus advocates confronting the absurd and living with it. "Unlike Eurydice, the absurd dies only when we turn away from it" (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 53). Revolt is the only answer to Absurdity. While *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger* deal with the individual's revolt against an absurd universe, *The Plague* brings in the idea of human solidarity. *The Plague* is about human suffering in an absurd world. It can be interpreted superficially as an allegory of the German invasion of France. At a deeper level, it can be seen as universal, a kind of "darkling plain where ignorant armies clash" as Arnold would put it. As *The Stranger*, *The Plague* also deals with the theme of capital punishment. It becomes a kind of symbolic work and ceases to be an allegory the moment this theme is sounded. It invites us to think of
the phenomenon of totalitarianism. True revolt, Camus says, lies in man's attempt to create the human values of justice in a universe from which they are so conspicuously lacking. This is why it is significant that a doctor is chosen as the narrator and central character of The Plague. Camus is aware the plague is no external factor. He makes Tarrou tell Dr. Rieux that he carries the plague, within himself. We are all capable of spreading the disease of totalitarianism because we are all capable of violations.

Camus's significant themes are the necessity of facing up to nihilism and despair and the need to rebel against this human condition. There is a definite movement in his attitude from the solitary individual's approach to that of human solidarity. He writes: "man's solidarity is founded upon rebellion: and rebellion can only be justified by this solidarity" (The Rebel 27).

But it is Dr. Rieux, the organizer of the 'Sanitation Squads' who is the ideal of moral action. He has the defeatist awareness that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good... But despite it all, he retains his sense of humanity and his capacity for love and happiness. The Doctor is a 'saint without God'. His approach to life is a way of asserting human dignity, human values, human solidarity. In a world devoid of the supernatural, man has meaning because he is the one living creature that demands coherence and significance. Camus writes in The Rebel: "We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world: it is to fight them in ourselves and in others" (The Rebel 268).

Since World War II, American Fiction has recognised much in Camus that is congenial to the American experience, Ihab Hassan explains it this way:
... there is much in the American experience lonely, extreme, and willed as it is that invites the existential sense of man's nudity and of his self-reliance. It was not surprising therefore that in a world challenged by the erosion of old pieties and values, the works of certain European existentialists took hold in America. Foremost among these was Albert Camus who found the courage in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955) and *The Rebel* (1956) to face the radical incongruities of man and to affirm human dignity by rejecting in the name of lucidity, the ultimate temptation and of murder. (Qtd. in Spiller 1416)

Styron is very much in the tradition of Camusian humanism. Styron himself claims that, "Camus had the largest effect upon my thinking and I have valued the quality of his moral intensity more than anything I have found in any other contemporary" (Ratner 132). Like Camus, Styron believes in, "Man's ability to establish a new secular humanism in a world not only post-lapsarian but post-Freudian and collectivist" (Galloway 10).

Sartre's ideas have also influenced Styron's perspective. Sartre saw freedom as central to human dignity. He clubbed consciousness and freedom together. So long as consciousness is not blotted out, man cannot be deprived of freedom - the ability to say "no". So freedom in its very essence is negative, though this negativity is also creative. Sartre holds that nothing can redeem for man the absurdity of this world in which his is the only consciousness capable of being aware of itself. Man is involved in perpetual tension, never at home in the world yet irretrievably attached to it.
This disjunction between man and his world is defined by Sartre through a dualism. Being, according to Sartre, is divided into two fundamental kinds Being-in-itself (en-soi) and Being-for-itself (pour-soi). Being-in-itself is the thing-in-itself. Man is doomed to the radical insecurity and contingency of his being. The paradox of man's condition is vividly portrayed here.

That which constitutes man's power and glory, that which lies at the very heart of his power to be lord over things, namely, his capacity to transcend himself and his immediate situation, is at one and the same time that which causes the fragility, the wavering and flight, the anguish of our human lot. (Barret 219)

Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1944) contains the intricate and brilliant working out of these two notions as applied to human psychology. Man never is what he is at a given moment, but only what he will be as a result of his free choice. Since man is nothing else but what he makes of himself, he experiences "anxiety" in the act of his choice as he should choose alone and without the aid of conventional morality - God or any absolute. In such a world man feels himself "forlorn" and in a world where he should act without hope of any meaning, he feels "despair". Realizing his ever present responsibility Sartre says, "Man is condemned to be free" (Existentialism and Humanism 34). Sartre insists that in choosing for himself, man chooses for all men and "the responsibility becomes greater as it concerns all mankind. Sartre was later to repudiate this responsibility of choosing for all mankind. Given the basic hostility and rivalry which he sees as basic to every human relationship no such noble consideration would operate. For Sartre, "hell is other people".
Sartre's ethic of action is determined by "mauvaise foi" or bad-faith or "self-deception". Bad-faith is of great significance in his philosophy when the for-itself tries to escape responsibility by accepting some ready-made, socially acceptable consciousness of itself, it is guilty of inauthentic existence. The opposite of bad faith is the acceptance of one's own freedom and the recognition that human beings are the absolute origin of, and are solely responsible for, their own acts.

For Sartre the nothingness of the self is the basis for the will to action. "Man's existence is absurd in the midst of a cosmos that knows him not; the only meaning he can give himself is through the free project that he launches out of his own nothingness" (Being and Nothingness 547). Sartre turns from nothingness to human freedom as realised in revolutionary activity.

Sartre talks of three main emotions we must necessarily adopt in the face of the world. The first of these is "anguish" which man feels when faced with total freedom. The second response is the feeling of 'absurdity' when we realise the dispensability to existing. One can overcome this feeling of absurdity by adopting the reverse of bad faith. By believing one's life has a purpose. By engendering a feeling of self-importance one can get over this feeling of futility. The third emotion he talks of is "nausea" which becomes the focus of his novel by the name. The body is a crucial part of our awareness. According to Sartre it is the quality of nausea which enables man to be aware of things. Nausea is a kind of physiological counterpart of a "perceptive consciousness". We are also filled with nausea on becoming aware of certain aspects of the world. The very nature of existence can fill us with disgust. It
is an overwhelming sense of the meaninglessness of life, his own and the life outside of him.

Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938) can be looked upon as an exposition of existentialist philosophy. But the realism of the psychological study and the actual setting makes it both a revealing analysis of an alienated human being and a documentation of the inner mental aspects of the crisis of our times. The novel takes the form of a diary written by a historian working on the biography of a French nobleman at the time of the revolution of 1789. The historian Antoine Roquentin suddenly finds himself afflicted by "nausea" - an overwhelming sense of the meaninglessness of life. He finds himself filled with disgust towards himself and the people around him. He is alienated even from his own body. "I lean my hand on the seat, but I pull it away hurriedly; the thing exists. ... I'm in the midst of Things which cannot be given names" (Nausea 180).

Roquentin's half-hearted struggle against the nausea finally culminates in his acceptance of it as a revelation about the actual truth of life.

And then, all of a sudden; there it was as clear as day; existence had suddenly unveiled itself. ... the diversity of things, their individuality was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted leaving soft, monstrous masses, all is disorder - naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness (Nausea 183) ... and without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life. In fact, all that I was able to grasp afterwards comes down to this fundamental absurdity. (Nausea 185)
Sartre enlarges the breadth of his social engagement with the trilogy of novels published between 1945-49. *The Age of Reason* (1945), *The Reprieve* (1947) and *Iron in the Soul* (1949). The style and structure themselves embody Sartre's existential thinking. The main character Mathieu Delarue is the medium through whom Sartre expounds his existentialism. He is a teacher of philosophy and he is searching for a way to be "free". His teaching has no meaning for him, his students mean nothing to him except for a young girl whom he loves. A friend asks him to join the Communist party but he refuses as he has no strong convictions. In typical existential style he muses "This life has been given for nothing, he was nothing" (*Age of Reason* 300).

In the concluding novel, *Iron in the Soul* Delarue is presented as one of the group of French soldiers, waiting to be picked up as prisoner, by the advancing German army. He runs into a platoon of soldiers who are determined to put up a last ditch effort against the German forces despite the Armistice. Their pride as men requires them to spurn defeat though there is no logic in their action. Mathieu decides to join them. As the moment of death approaches, he realises that he is about to die for nothing. "Here and now I have decided that all along death has been the secret of my life. I die in order to demonstrate the impossibility of living" (203). In the space of fifteen minutes all the others are killed and Mathieu is the only survivor. These fifteen minutes, he realises joyfully, is his life of freedom. Sartre writes of him before his death, "He found, he was cleansed, he was all-powerful, he was free" (225). This is the existential revolt at its supreme moment. It shows how the range of freedom of growth has indeed diminished almost to a vanishing point, thanks to an age of war and monopolies and racism and capitalism. The individual is crushed and totally alienated. All possibilities of human
development are reduced. The only way to redeem oneself is through the act of revolt itself. Freedom lies in the act itself.

Despite the great diversity of his writings, the central theme that runs through Sartre's work is his passionate interest in human beings. It would be no exaggeration to state that his whole philosophy is an energetic affirmation of the primacy of the world of human experience to which literature and art are also addressed.

Though existentialism originated in the European experience of the twentieth century it has become an integral component of American fiction particularly the fiction of the post-war period. With its focus on the "existence" of man in an "absurd" universe, this philosophy that was not a "closed system" appealed greatly to the American imagination. A brief examination of some of the thinkers and their ideas will illuminate Styron's fictional predilections.

Existentialism as a philosophy defies rigid definition, all the more so because of its abhorrence of systematisation. John Macquarrie is of the view that existentialism is more a "style of philosophy" rather than an integrated system. Certain aspects of existentialism exercise a kind of fascination over the American mind. Problems of self, need of identity, isolation, alienation, frustration may be located in different densities in the texts of individual authors. Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Flannery O'Connor, J.D. Salinger, William Styron, Walker Percy and John Updike, all reveal deep existential concerns. Existentialism by its emphasis on the individual consciousness, personalised values and subjective ethics can claim to offer modern man a form of salvation. This is evinced by its emotively loaded, quasi-religious vocabulary,
for example, "despair", "crisis" ... choice. "commitment", "freedom", "transcendence", "authenticity". Existentialism vindicates the individual despite his limitations and failures by insisting that he can transcend facticity in his own consciousness. By paradoxically making the ineffectual individual both creator and arbiter of his own values, existentialism is an affirmation of the self in metaphysical revolt" (Chatterjee 14). Sartre's prophecy has come true, "Existentialism is a humanism".

Besides the influence of literary existentialism as illustrated by the work of Camus and Sartre, Styron's fiction also shows kinship with certain ideas of philosophical existentialists like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Despite their diversity existential philosophers share certain concepts. Most of them agree that "existence precedes essence". They believe that the world is absurd. Their concept of the freedom of the individual is unique.

An examination of the central ideas of some of these thinkers is vital to an understanding of William Styron's fiction.

Kierkegaard is looked upon today as the seminal existential thinker of the twentieth century. His basic theme is the despair that infuses all life. In Fear and Trembling (1843) he stresses the necessity of accepting life as absurd. The Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac is the archetypal example of the acceptance of the absurd. "He (Abraham) resigned everything infinitely and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd" (Finklestein 31). Human freedom and truth are organically linked according to Kierkegaard. Truth for him is a subjective, irrational response to an absurd world. Seeing the truth is the only way to emerge from darkness.
If Kierkegaard is at the theistic pole of existentialism, Nietzsche is at the atheistic pole. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) Nietzsche stated "God is dead" and thus began the era of atheistic existentialism. Sartre and Camus may be called atheistic existentialists.

The real insight that Nietzsche offers is that underneath the veneer of rational civilised behaviour is the ruthless greedy competitive war for profits. He offers a revolutionary solution to mankind in his *Beyond Good and Evil* (1866). He envisages a "superman" type of hero through his theory of the "will to power". But for existentialism Nietzsche's significance lies in his emphasis on a godless world. In such a world man must have the courage to "dance on the edge of the abyss", and say "yes to the creative power of life even in the very moment of acknowledging its nothingness".

Among other European writers who have influenced Styron we have Dostovesky and Kafka. The problems posed by Dostovesky in his books overlap those of existentialism and he is frequently claimed by the existentialists as one of their own. As Styron acknowledges his debt to Dostoevksy it is relevant to examine some of his major themes. Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) is "one of the most revolutionary and original works of world literature" (Kaufmann 13). The focus of this book is on "man's inner life, his moods, anxieties, and his decisions, that are moved into the centre until, as it were, no sense at all remains" (13). It is the night side of man's inner life that is revealed. Part I of the Notes "is the best overture for existentialism ever written" (Kaufmann 14). In the Notes the "I" of the story is an outsider, a man who has hidden himself from the corrupt eyes of "official society", buried
himself in an "underworld". The parallels with Kierkegaard are obvious, the chief one being the existential rejection of the world as it is. But there is a profound difference in the sense that Dostoevsky has contempt for the man.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* (1874-1880), what connects Dostoevsky with existentialism is that he places science and reason on a par with selfish money-grabbing. But the dominant idea in the novel is that to abandon faith in God is to abandon all basis for morality. As Father Zessma says, "If it were not for the church of Christ there would be nothing to restrain the criminal from evil doing". Virtually no writer of the twentieth century has been able to avoid Dostoyevsky's massive influence. He was "the great inward novelist, the psychological visionary who wrote of modern suffering, anguish, and in his later books the need for faith and mysticism" (Bradbury 32). *Crime and Punishment* has been seen in different ways - as detective story, in which detection of the crime involves ceaseless pursuit of its motive, and where the real detective is the criminal himself. It has been interpreted as a metaphysical novel where the nature of sin is analysed, as a tale of tragic pride, as a work of modern nihilistic egotism where he tries to go beyond good and evil. The significance of the book comes through when we examine some of Dostoevsky's notes: "Man is not born for happiness. Man earns his happiness, and always by suffering. There is no injustice here, for knowledge and consciousness of life is acquired by experiencing pro and contra which we must get through on one's own" (Qtd. Bradbury 42). What makes the novel dreadful is the terrible detachment of the doer from the deed, the separation of thought from action which has brought Raskolnikov so far. His acts are a part of his self-alienation, an approach to life which has brought about this
deed. "When the moment of truth came, things turned out quite differently in a kind of accidental and almost unexpected manner" (Crime and Punishment 89). The terror of the scene rises from the transformation of abstract thoughts into dreadful actuality. The psychological unfolding is the true centre of the novel --- the movement from the unconscious to the conscious level. Despair gives rise to a new perspective. The other major question of the novel is the purgation of the crime, the problem of redemption and punishment, Raskolnikov has to undertake this for himself. The traces of Dostoevsky's psychological and existential imagination are everywhere in modern writing. Proust, Virginia Woolf, Conrad and James Joyce, Gide and Graham Greene, Sartre and Camus all reveal his influence.

Another influence on Styron is Franz Kafka. In Kafka's works the absurdity of man's condition finds classical expression, "Kafka's characters are the children of a changed age," (Bradbury 32). The Trial was a book that came out of this breaking down of an era. Written between 1914-15 it was published in Germany in 1925. Bradbury observes: "His surreal methods and his exiled imagination became an influence on a generation of writers who saw before them a new world of war and the ominous apparatus of the modern totalitarian state" (256-57). Kafka projects vividly both the humanity and the fragility of the modern writer in the face of power and "the Age of Anxiety". Bradbury notes that the opening line of The Trial became one of the most famous endings in all literature because of the strangeness of an absurd event. Its terror is made to seem perfectly natural. It captures the timeless and the contemporary and seems both strange and real at once. It symbolises the state of modern man. To be alive is to be on trial. This finds an echo in Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner.
Styron in *Sophie's Choice* treats of the totalitarian nature of evil. His insights into the impersonal aspects of evil is close to Kafka's vision. *The Trial* ends with this vague hope for the good man, the hope of compassion for suffering humanity. This is also the pattern in Styron's fiction. Styron's people go through great suffering and despair but there is always the hope that man will prevail. It would be at best, a hazardous task to claim direct influence of European existentialists on Styron's fiction. It would be more appropriate to regard it as a case of affinity of mind or spirit. He shares the same problems and themes that engaged the European existentialists. Like them, he is "concerned with the meaning of identity in the modern world, the nature of good and evil, the possibility of fulfilment in contemporary society, the source of values in a world without God, and the possibility of action in an ethical vacuum" (Lehan 64).

Besides the European existentialists Styron like all good writers has been open to several influences both literary and philosophical. A glimpse at a few of the prominent American influences would help us place Styron in the literary landscape and the original nature of his genius can then be better understood.

William Styron firmly believes that coming under the influence of one's predecessors is a necessary part of growing into maturity as a writer. He declares "you don't bloom full blown from the brow of God" (West 55). Shedding these influences and finding one's own voice is the challenge before the good writer. He admits that Conrad's "orotund marvelous syllables kept haunting" him when he was beginning to write (West 36). Similarly he came under the
influence of "Hemingway's" sparse lean prose. Scott Fitzgerald was yet another of his favorites. He was struck by Fitzgerald's "ability to give a sense of poetry to very commonplace gestures" (West 51).

But it is Faulkner's influence that almost swamped Styron's individual talent. He states that the Southern element in Faulkner's ouvre and specifically his use of language "the white heat it generated" fascinated him (West 111). In fact Styron had "to leach" Faulkner out of his system in writing his first novel in order to avoid writing imitation Faulkner. He did this by using the Fitzgerald mode, "putting on the brakes" as it were. He did succeed in shaking off the more obvious qualities of Faulkner and achieved a distinct voice of his own ultimately. In his later novels it is not Faulknerian endurance that we see but suffering and struggle that ends in rebellion.

In the American literary tradition Styron belongs to the line represented by Melville, Hawthorne and Poe rather than that of Whitman, Thoreau and Emerson. The all pervasive sense of evil that lurks in the human psyche is so characteristic of Nathaniel Hawthorne and it is this that we see in a Styron novel. The isolation of the protagonist, the psychological insight, the struggle in the heart with evil these are the great themes that Styron shares with Hawthorne.

Styron's fiction portrays characters going through the mechanical gestures, characteristic of daily living. Suddenly this soporific rhythm is broken by some crisis and man finds the abyss yawning at his feet. The characters' response to the crisis decides the quality of life. One can either be lulled back to sleep by the rhythm of routine or one can choose to resist it and remain
awake. It is the choice that is significant. This struggle to persist with the truth in "a universe which says truths are impossible" is that which makes for the significance of Styron's fiction. Will it be suicide or life? This is the central question in the fiction of Camus, and Styron's fiction is likewise an exploration of this theme. Despite some of his characters opting for suicide, Styron never stops in his confrontation of the absurd. It is not the failure or success of an individual that concerns Styron, but the effort, the struggle to be.

Styron explores guilt and suffering in existential terms. He presents the spiritual conflict of man in apocalyptic images, with overtones of The Old Testament and Greek Tragedy. Morris and Malin comment very perceptively on the unique nature of Styron's characters and quote Frederick J. Hoffman:

They struggle just to assert their humanness, to get over the barriers of understanding to clear the personality of obsession.... Their quest is nothing less than a kind of grail buried within the darker divisions of a world of conflicting change and value to which they are drawn by its fitful incandescence as by their own living, ecstatic, and often tragic visions. (Morris 3)

What is unique about Styron is that he presents his characters experience and existential angst but plants them securely in, "What is concrete mundane, ordinary" (Morris 3). His world view is shaped by his persistent search for a base to discover, to define and to defend man's humanity. He is a brooding Virginian who believes that, "All ages are tragic, the heroism is always succeeded by tragic outcome and that this is the human condition"
(Morris 39). Man, he believes is trapped by the human condition. For Styron "life is a demonstration of oppression and submission, and variations upon them" (Morris 40).

Styron’s novels deal essentially with the efforts of man to become free and to affirm his humanity in his confrontation of despair. The pattern of existential despair leading to a fearful vision of oblivion, of nothingness is there, yet his fiction strives for a cure of this nothingness. There is ambiguity in the very nature of such a search. William Barret regards this ambiguity as leading to isolation: "But isolation of the self is an irreducible dimension of human life" (30). Styron’s characters come to grips with the knowledge that "The individual is thrust out of the sheltered nest that society has provided. He can no longer hide his nakedness by the old disguises ... each man is solitary and unsheltered before his own death" (Barret 30). Styron’s world is a painful one. His people suffer great misery - war, concentration camps, slavery, psychological traumas. These are the disasters that form the ambience of his world. Like Nietzsche, Styron’s vision also "pre-empts Dionysian forces" (Lehan 64) but not to the total exclusion of the Apollonian. Though Peyton and Sophie are destroyed by the confrontation with nothingness Cass and Stingo survive to affirm existence. In fact Peyton’s suicide is a form of fulfilment as well as destruction. This is in accordance with Lehan’s insight that the existential hero reaffirms his identity through a tragic fall. But despite the despair and agony, man emerges with the truth and he survives with a new knowledge.
The themes that obsess Styron are those of existential philosophy: "The alienation and strangeness of man in his world; the contradictoriness, feebleness, contingency of human existence; the central and overwhelming reality of time for man who has lost his anchorage in the eternal" (Barret 56). Man is confronted everywhere with a radical feeling of human finitude. On the one hand this isolated individual is seen as helpless in his struggle with a senseless world, on the other this isolated consciousness is the only source of his freedom. Man has to create his own new values.

Styron’s fiction has existential values grafted onto liberal humanism and so even when the individual is shown as helpless, he is exalted. It makes for a transcendental conception of humanity. Jerry H. Bryant in The Open Decision exemplifies these tendencies in the post-war American novel. He sees it as affirmative of human values. "To be human is to be open to possibilities" (Bryant 5). As Sartre would put it, man is condemned to choose from those possibilities, and to suffer the consequences of those choices. To be human is to be aware of the freedom and paradoxically, the limitations which it imposes. So when man becomes ‘self-conscious’ he separates himself from nature. This results in an intense and creative awareness of his existence. He does feel "angst" and "despair". He is inescapably isolated. In his being as a living creature, he is limited by death. "But these conditions of man’s existence, although they are the cause of pain and anxiety and loneliness, are also the foundation of a high intensity of individual satisfaction and that is the value of human life.... it is the intensity with which the individual knows he is alive and feels guilt, change, imminent death" (Bryant 5-6).
That consciousness can never be absolute makes for the tragic nature of the human condition. Paradoxically despite some element of defeat in every victory there is some satisfaction in the acceptance of the ambiguity of the human condition. This is best seen in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* and William Styron's *Set This House on Fire*. The modern novel believes in the subjective individual experience, not in a transcendent order conferred upon our world by another power. "To be human is our highest good" is the implicit assumption in the modern novel.

Styron's vision of evil is very close to that of Melville. Unlike the stream of American writers who yearn for an Edenic past Styron believes that such nostalgia dwarfs the personality. The individual achieves maturity only when he is purged of illusions based on puritanical and romantic myths. Melville's intuitive understanding of the power of the primitive within us is close to Styron's concept of evil. They share a vision of man as alienated, divided, skeptical.

Although Styron experiments with chronology and excels in the use of interior mindscapes he is a traditional novelist who believes that story, plot and character lie at the heart of the novel. His favorite writers are Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Conrad, Gide, Flaubert, Malraux, Melville, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Walker Percy and Philip Roth.

Styron has been accused of writing darkly despairing novels but as Styron himself puts it, "it is the sort of despair out of which great art is born". It is creative despair and there is no rule which says a writer should treat life
like a "bowl of cherries" (West 24). He says life would be a dull affair indeed if writers were all "a bunch of chuckle-heads". A writer should write about what he sees and if despair and gloom are all that he sees, he should be true to his vision.

This study is focused on the despair and affirmation that are both part of the human condition. Styron's fiction shows a development of the theme of affirmation, based in existential humanism. Though a religious reading of his work is possible, the real thrust of his work is to what possibilities a world without God holds out for man. His quest is for nothing less than meaning in an absurd universe. His fiction fulfils Elie Wiesel's observation on the function of art as expressed in her Nobel prize speech: it teaches us "how not to succumb to despair" (Qtd. in Sirlin 107).