CHAPTER 10.

CONCLUSION
William Styron's literary contribution is very small—just five full length novels in his long literary career of more than four decades. Though volume-wise his contribution is very small, but it is very substantial, else the critical work done on him and still being done, would not have kept him continuously in the literary limelight. His importance lies not in voluminous writing but in valuable and significant writing. This is because he has been so very choosy in his subject matters, the diction and style, suited to the subject.

This attempt has grouped Styron's novels into two categories of 'Within the South' and 'Venturing Beyond'. The first group consists of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, THE LONG MARCH and THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER. These novels have been kept in first group not only because in them, every thing begins and ends within the geographical boundary of the South, but also because they give a very wholesome picture of the South from 1830s to 1950s. THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER is based upon a real happening. The Negro slave Nat Turner had rebelled, was arrested, dictated
his confessions to his court-appointed lawyer and was sent to the gallows in 1831, in Virginia Tidewater country.

LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS has the post-war Virginia getting industrialised. The World War Second had ended but it had left behind the fear of Korean war likely to erupt any time. This fear and preparations against this Korean war, are, in the background of THE LONG MARCH.

This section shows how apart from the geographical unity these novels present the development of the area in a sequence of time. THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER has the Virginia Tidewater country from 1790's to 1840's consisting of planters, wheatgrowers, tobacco and cotton growers, slave traders, living in big country houses, with large number of Negro servants working as household servants, farm hands, mill-slaves and shop-workers with slave trading and slave auctioneering as common sight in the area.

As such, there is a big jump in time schedule from THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER to LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS. The gap of time is, of, more than a century and two score years.
Though it is the same Virginia Tidewater country the topography of places and positions and mentality of men have, all undergone a sea change. There is a huge industrialisation and general expansion in market places, railroads, and the port. The old horse-drawn carriages of eighties and nineties have given place to trains, buses and cars. The feudal families of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have been replaced by middle class gentry. There have sprung up clubs, cocktail parties, smoking and drinking dens, signifying the tecnological advancement and spiritual bankruptcy.

THE LONG MARCH has in the background the Carolina summer of 1951, in which the central action is thirty six miles long march ordered by the colonel to ensure the physical fitness of the reserve catagory soldiers. It is the suburban area of Carolina military barracks where the reserves have been called to be trained and made fit, for being sent to Korea.

Thus all the three novels belonging to this group 'Within the South' present the slow development of the South from the Negro-
trading, slavery, and plantation to the 
industrialisation of the twentieth century. 
The characters, events, themes, the language 
and every thing else, is firmly rooted to the 
soil of the South. They also have all the 
literary tendencies for which the Southern 
literature is so famous.

The section 'Venturing Beyond' considers 
those novels of William Styron in which the 
settings have shifted from the geographical 
boundary of the South to the foreign strands— 
the post-war European countries. This group 
consists of the remaining two novels, SET THIS 
HOUSE ON FIRE and SOPHIE'S CHOICE.

In SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE the main 
characters leave South, roam about in Rome, 
France and Italy. It's Sambuco in Italy where 
all the important happenings take place. 
Amidst the Italian poverty, the American 
glitter, that is present in Sambuco, gives 
Styron every opportunity to present the 
physical and psychological aspects of American 
life. The protagonist, the narrator and the 
villain of the piece, all have their fair 
share in the central action, taking place in 
Sambuco.
The section vividly expounds with concrete instances how Mason’s piazza in Italy, Windgaser’s hotel Bella Vesta, the thieving simplton Luciano, the philosophical fascist sergeant Luigie, the kind hearted doctor Caltroni who tried to end the misery of a dog by killing it, the consumptive Michael, the insane Saverio, the old peasant woman with her burden of faggots, crowd the Italian world which prominently boasts about its night clubs, and dancing halls that are packed with ‘group interplays’, howling saxophones, high hallow giggles, and marijuana smokes.

In the other novel SOPHIE’S CHOICE, belonging to this group, the scene has shifted to Poland. The choice of the central character from amongst the Polish sufferers of German war, and Poland itself as the centre of the main action, is well grounded on the considerations of its many similarities with the South.

The protagonist in this novel belongs to Cracow, a very ancient city of Poland. Though the capital of Poland was and is Warsaw but the burning and gasing of Jews were accomplished at Auschwitz and Birkenau. In
this war every one had suffered - Jews, Poles, Gypsies, Russians, Czechs and Yugoslavs. And the Jews had suffered the most. It is said that on the inaugural day of the second crematorium itself, more than eighteen hundred Jews were sent to their deaths.

In SOPHIE'S CHOICE the protagonist was not only born and brought up in a foreign country (Poland) but even when she comes to America, she does not go to the South but settles down in Brooklyn which in the Northern America. Of course Nathan is shown to be making elaborate plans to roam about in the South, but the plan is never executed. All the major happenings - the invasion of Poland, the concentration camps, burning and gasing of Jews, the loss of near and dear ones at the hands of the cruel Nazi machinery, all take place outside the South.

Both the novels belonging to this group have their pasts grounded into foreign lands. However, even in these novels the South is kept alive by recollections of, and references made to the Artist, Bobby Weed, Nat Turner, Theodore Gilmore Bilbo the Negro hater, and Stingo's father's letters coming to Brooklyn
keep us in touch with the South. Thus the novels in the second group also retain some link with the South.

The next section 'The Impact Of The Past On The Present' is largest in this endeavour, because it had to cover a lot of ground in connection with the story part of each novel separately. In William Faulkner's novels the present could be seen rising out of the ambiguous past but in the novels of William Styron we find a past that is the very part of the complicated present. In most of his novels there is very little that happens in the present but the past is simply enormous. Some critics like Richard Pearce, Irving Malin and Frederick Hoffman have made passing references to this aspect of William Styron's novels. This section takes up each novel separately, distinguishes the past from the present and analyses how and to what extent the past influences the present thought, action and behaviour of the major characters.

In LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS the present consists of Milton Loftis getting a letter that tells him to pick up the dead body of his daughter Peyton, (who had committed suicide)
from the railway station. He gets drunk and goes to the railway station with his mistress Dolly Bonner. His wife Helen goes to the station with Carey Carr, the priest. The journey from the railway station to the burial ground is all that we get in the form of the present. The section has done its best to vivisect the past and its heinous impact that had forced Peyton to commit suicide.

THE LONG MARCH, on the other hand, has a good deal of autobiographical element about it. It is based upon the personal past experience of William Styron himself. The present in the novel consists of the central action of a thirty-six mile's long march ordered by the Colonel, leading to the rebellion of Captain Mannix, his suffering and punishment. The section distinguishes the past from the present to establish how it is the past of Culver, Mannix and all other reserves called back to duty, and Colonel Templeton, that is at the centre of all kinds of hostilities that develop in the military barrack of Carolina, leading to Mannix's rebellion of Gandhinian type—viz, taking on himself to suffer inorder to make the
oppressor realise his mistake.

About SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE Robert H Fossum pointed out that in this novel there is a re-examination of the past which enables the two major characters, free themselves from the history by accepting its realities. The section gives a detailed account as to why this freeing from the history, freeing from the burden of the past, becomes so essential for the present well-being of the concerned characters.

It gives the present account of Peter Leverette as he returns back from Sambuco and gets employed in a law firm in Newyork. He leaves for Charleston to meet his friend Cass. Together they sort out the mystery of life and death of Mason Flagg. All this is presented in the novel in form of a narrative dialogue. The section shows how this leads to the rebirth and reformation of the protagonist and an inner contentment of the narrator because he ultimately finds out what he had been looking for.

Dealing with THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER it analyses in detail all the past milestones in Nat Turner's life, and the life
around him. It distinguishes the simple present from the past and endeavours to establish a logical and psychological relation between them. In the present we find Nat in jail where he dictates his confessions to his court-appointed lawyer and is sent to the gallows. Why is Nat in jail? Why and what does he confess? Why is he sent to gallows? In order to find answers to all such questions one will have to peep into the dark abyss of the past and that is precisely what this section has attempted.

In SOPHIE'S CHOICE the present begins with the narrator's encounter with the protagonist at Yetta Zimmerman's place in Brooklyn. This section shows how after many constraints and reunions between Nathan and Sophie, ultimately they commit suicide together. The narrator sheds tears on their grave and in the end leaves for the farm which his father had asked him to overseer. The section analyses those effects of the past that linger so powerfully in the lives of the pair, as to force them to end their lives. An examination of the past of the narrator's life too has been attempted in order to set in
proper perspective, his aims, achievements and his involvements with Nathan and Sophie.

'The Trauma Of War' begins with a famous quote from Saul Bellow's memorable talk ON RECENT AMERICAN FICTION in which he has pointed out how the First World War reduced millions of people into corpses and the Second World War turned out to be more brutal than the first. They traumatised the lives of all the sensitive people all over the world. Man is found grieving, complaining, raging laughing and all the while aware of his own powerlessness, and inadequacy against the pressure of media, money, racial brutalities, organisation of cold war which all cut at the very roots of the meaning of his existence. The section shows how each one of his novels has a world which either directly or indirectly is dominated by some kind of war or the other.

Almost all the novels of Styron make us feel that War is a condition of life. In LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, Milton is a retired military captain whose bad days begin on the day his wife receives twenty thousand dollars from her Colonel father. THE LONG MARCH presents
Captain Mannix wrestling against the enslavement of his will to the senseless war machinery, which is working with a hectic schedule because of the fear of the Korean war in the background.

Even SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE has a protagonist who had been active participant in the World War Second the effect of which had driven him to the psychiatric ward. The section highlights how the protagonist fights against the spirit of self-negation induced in him by the Second World War.

And THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER has the time backdrop of 1830s, more than a hundred years before either the First or the Second World War had taken place. But even this novel is grounded on the spirit of the battlefield. Nat Turner’s rebellion, howsoever small, was none the less a rebellion in which more than fifty white people were killed and about a dozen Negroes were either killed or given capital punishment.

In this regard the last novel, SOPHIE’S CHOICE has the most cruel, shocking and most harrowing trauma of the Second World War which ultimately drives the protagonist to the point
of committing suicide. This section has tried, with relevant examples from the novels to establish the fact that there is some war or the other affecting directly or indirectly the lives of the characters in the novel of William Styron.

The next part 'Christianity vs. Spirituality' analyses how in the novels of Styron, there always seems to be a kind of direct confrontation between Christian religion and spirituality. The characters that represent religion and perform religious rituals are shown to be crude, grotesque, disgusting and spiritually bankrupt. The section shows how this contrast exists not only in those novels which are firmly grounded in the Southern soil but is found equally strongly in the novels that have been kept in 'Venturing Beyond' group.

The section elaborates how in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS Milton Loftis some times goes to church just to please his wife. He has no faith in religion and its manifestations. In the end his wife too discards the priest and calls the God a silly old ass. In comparison the Negroes are shown to have firm faith in
the church and in the God.

THE LONG MARCH on the other hand is a kind of direct parody of religious matters. The section points out with concrete instances how Rocky Templeton is akin to the Old Testament God and Captain Mannix and Culver the heretics become the victims of the wrath of this God. O’Leary, Bobb and many other like them are the believers and remain immune to the God’s wrath. It endeavours to analyse all those symbolic incidents which are supposed to present Al Mannix akin to Jesus Christ. There is yet another angle from which Mannix seems to be presented as Adam or even Satan. It establishes how the parodying and caricaturing of religious elements by the novelist has been done to signify the spiritual bankruptcy of the times.

Religion-wise SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE has many complicated images of both religious and spiritual nature. The protagonist in this novel is Cass whose father was an Episcopal minister and his uncle who brought him up, was a Methodist. But this strong religious elements in the family play no part in Cass’s redemption. But at the same time, the
stability and the order that he finds in life can not be dissociated from religious values—the ability to love, to care for the near and dear ones, to act justly and responsibly and be generous and kind to every one. With relevant instances the section expounds how the philosophical centre of the novel is the existential choice from out of Being and Nothingness, in a world in which the progress from the religious to the spiritual stage, seems to be a kind of impossible achievement.

The most important of all is THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER which the author himself termed as a religious allegory. This section gives relevant instances to show how Nat identifies himself with Christ. Also he identifies himself with The Old Testament prophet. The novel is full of instances that testify how those who are entrusted and associated with the religious manifestations, are not religious in the least. Reverend Epps is homo-sexual, and Richard Whitehead, the minister of Gospel is almost inhuman. The old South of 1830's was not capable of creating an appropriate religion as its way of life because the economy, the politics, the
culture, and the life itself of the region, and the God too were all created by the merchants of the sixteenth century, therefore the secular and religious impulses of the people were always seen to be at war in the South. The inhumanity that is seen pervading in the novel, is the result of the failure of Protestantism, which in its wake had brought about a spiritual bankruptcy.

The last novel dealt in this section is SOPHIE’S CHOICE. The protagonist in this novel rejects the very existence of God, which is not so heinous as the disbelief in the humanness of human beings. It emphasises how the absence of God would not have made so much difference, had man’s humanness remained intact and alive.

There are instances like that of Sophie’s burial at which De Witt, the priest, insultingly invoked Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Spinoza, and Freud and mentioned Christ just once and that too in a very distant sort of way. So like all other novels, in this one too, the religion has been treated as a totally useless thing, having no sanctity, no value and no utility of any kind,
emphasizing the fact that minus spirituality the religion is zero.

Thus this section shows how beginning with LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS down up to SOPHIE'S CHOICE, all the Styron novels treat religion with disdain and even mock, parody and caricature its manifestations. It gives instances to denote the author's anxiety that if religion remains far too long disconnected from spirituality, it might get finished. So he seems to be pleading that for its own survival and for the good of humanity, the spirituality will have to be kept at the centre of religion. In sequence, the next part in this endeavour is 'The Narrators' Search.' It distinguishes between the two types of narrators - those that themselves are protagonists and the others who are just narrators. In the first type there are Nat Turner and Culver. In the second type there are Stingo and Peter. Accordingly the search is also of two types - of the self and of the knowledge of the conditions of some one else's self. And both the types are involved in the search of a meaningful connection between the past and the present.
Critics have kept Culver and Nat in one group of narrators just for sake of convenience. In reality Culver is just a silent observer, not the traditional narrator as Nat is. However, both of them are in search of social justice for themselves and for their society. Nat's first search of getting social justice for himself and for his brother Negroes, is never achieved. But he died with the belief that the self can be liberated from the slavery if one can attain fulfilment and spiritual harmony.

Culver on the other hand has been considered hero by all the critics but he himself assigns this position to Captain Mannix. Culver's search is very simple. He just wanted to see Captain Mannix's fury sustaining him to the very end. Therefore at the end of the march when they reach the camp, he is fully contented to hear Mannix's 'What the hell, we have done it.'

The other two narrators, Peter Leverette in SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE and Stingo in SOPHIE'S CHOICE are different types of narrators, belonging to the second type. Theirs is search for the knowledge of the
conditions of someone else's self. The section endeavours to analyse Peter's troubled dreams of treachery and betrayal. And when he meets Cass, together they sort out the details of what had really happened in Sambuco on that fateful night that Mason had been killed. Peter's curiosity and apprehensions are removed and he feels purged and contented.

And Stingo in SOPHIE'S CHOICE resembles its author so closely that almost all the critics think that it is Styron himself present in this novel in the character of Stingo. As such, the narrator's search is easy to decide here. Here the narrator is out to become a novelist. Naturally his search is for the material of fiction length. At Yetta Zimmerman's place, Sophie's life provides him with the material. Thus his search culminates into presenting the harrowing past, the troubled present and ultimate suicide of Sophie, leaving the young Stingo a mature thoughtful and a confident novelist in making.

The next part 'Characters As Representative Of Attitude And Traits' deals with such characters in each of Styron novels, that are seen surviving from novel to novel.
It is true, their names and positions and bodies change, but their traits, attitudes thought-processes and some times even dictions, remain the same. Every novel has been taken up separately, and analysed with proper instances to show how this kind of harmony has been retained by the novelist.

The ever haunting voice of wisdom of Milton’s father in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, Culver in THE LONG MARCH, Jeremiah Cobb in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER, Peter’s father, Alfred Leverette in SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE and Stingo’s father in SOPHIE’S CHOICE, are identical figures. Likewise, it has been established how amongst Negro character there is a decisive and noticeable sequential change for better, in their lives and positions, from one novel to another. In order to put things in proper perspective, the sequence of novels has slightly been re-arranged, giving THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER first place simply because it has a time backdrop of more than a century years back in the past. Hark, Will, Nelson, Lou Ann, of THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER are present in LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS in the form of Ela Swan, the hearse-driver, and
La Ruth; in THE LONG MARCH, there is the Negro nurse who confronts Mannix in the final scene of the novel; Crawford in SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE is radio repairer and Mr. Guiri the Negro cabman in SOPHIE’S CHOICE, defying Stingo’s father, have all survived and made progress. Even alcoholics have made progress to the extent of becoming drug addicts. This part establishes how these characters, though minor, serve the major purpose of structuring and building up the framework, locale and background for the foothold of the major characters and events.

E. M. Forster in his ASPECT OF NOVEL has pointed out that every fiction of some literary value must have something more than a mere story in it. And this ‘something more’ naturally comes in the form of allegory, symbol, image, metaphor, suggestion or implication etc. It is these in which every careful and serious literary reader is interested. William Styron’s novels too have their fair share of this ‘something more’ in them. The part ‘Symbols And Images’ deals with this aspect of William Styron’s novel, beginning with LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS in which
the entire fertility cult has been presented through Helen's attachment to her garden. The nail bruised foot of Mannix, in THE LONG MARCH, the trapped swallow bird, the big spider's webs that Cass sees in his dreams, in SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE; the ordained circuit by Nat, the images of the white and black angles, in THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER; and Nathan's fancy for period costumes, Stingo's disguise as a priest, comparisons and contrasts between the classical and modern music in SOPHIE'S CHOICE, to name a few have all been analysed in detail.

As all such critical works are bound by certain limitations, this endeavour too, confines itself in dealing with some restricted aspects only, hence it neither is nor claims to be the last word on William Styron. It aims at arousing a keener curiosity and serious interest in the enormously rich world of American fiction. Since critical shoes do not fit easily, this humble attempt would appreciate a sympathetic perusal.

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