CHAPTER -1.

INTRODUCTION
The most productive period in American literary history began shortly before the World War First. For almost three previous centuries the Americans had been copy ing the techniques and ideas coming from European countries. For the first time, a little before the World War First, the creative writers and the artists of the United States, displayed the originality and the creative vitality, equal, if not more, to those of any European country.

The new American literature was predominantly realistic and critical in tone. The writers set out to show the social forces in operation and portray the lives of typical Americans. They emphasised the defects rather than the virtues of the American society, insisting that its values were too materialistic and the atmosphere too repressive. The young writers therefore showed little respect for the traditional religious beliefs and moral taboos, and suggested that the individual could attain fulfilment through emotional liberation rather than through ethical discipline. Loose ends and broken links, a confusion of moral values,
a mixture of sickness and health, present the blurred picture seen by some of the writers. These tendencies had originated long back in 1880 and 1890's. But it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that they began to dominate the literary scene.

Out of the hundreds of the twentieth century Americans who have written novels, those that have attracted most, the critical attention and literary fame, are, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Doss Passos, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. All of them had their first book published before or during the 1920's.

Dreiser in his SISTER CARRIE and JENNIE GERHARDT (1921) and AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (1925) communicated a great sense of pity for his main characters whom he saw as victims of their own biological drives. In his book, American society was presented as a jungle, governed by a Darwinian struggle for existence, dividing men not into good or bad, but into weak and strong.

Sinclair Lewis on the other hand, in his MAIN STREET (1920) and BABBITT (1922) portrayed
the daily habits of the average middle class American and also portrayed the misinformed, prejudiced and frustrated small businessmen and women. While Sherwood Anderson's novels dealt with the middle class men and women in revolt against materialism and puritanism. Willa Carther in her SONG OF THE LARK (1915) and THE LOST LADY (1923) described American life as mean and impoverished.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in his THIS SIDE OF PARADISE (1920) THE GREAT GATSBY and TENDER IS THE NIGHT (1934) presented a revolt against parental authority, a bootlegger's romantic love and the glamour of wealth and position along with their hollowness.

Earnest Hemingway specialised in the study of the simple characters confronting inevitable defeat. His world is mysterious and terrifying. In his world men enjoy physical pleasures and love and confront death with stoical courage. And Doss Passos's world was even gloomier. His novels, ADVENTURE OF A YOUNGMAN (1939) and GRAND DESIGN (1949) present corrupt reformers, power hungry reactionaries and the loss of sound moral values due to rampant material success. His
trilogy consisting of THE 42nd PARALLEL (1930) NINETEEN NINETEEN (1932) and THE BIG MONEY (1936) present the picture of American life from 1900 to 1930. The trilogy was an ambitious project for presenting his critical outlook about industrial capitalism.

Thomas Wolfe published his first novel LOOK HOME WARD ANGLE in 1929. This was followed by three more autobiographical novels. In his four novels he poured out youngmen's hunger, experience and search for realities. His novels are long and follow the outlines of his own creative development.

William Faulkner, on the other hand, wrote specifically about the South. Most of his novels dealt with a mythical Mississippi county and presented an interpretation of the whole history of the black belt—the beginning of the planter aristocracy, its respect for courage and generosity, its ancestral curse upon the South brought about by the enslavement of Indians and seizure of their land, the rise of the new ruling class and the ultimate possession of the land by the Negroes. He portrayed his symbolic history of the South in his macabre and grotesque
episodes. His novels, SOLDIER’S PAY (1926) SARTORIS (1929) THE SOUND AND THE FURY (1929) AS I LAY DYING (1930) show that he had a clear grasp of moral values.

The generation of post-war novelists includes such great names as Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, William Styron, James Jones and Trueman Capote. They were awakened to a larger vision of the Southern history. They tried to associate it with the development of the contemporary history. Lewis P. Simpson says:

The common theme of the American novel Southern or not, became a quest to define a vision of the self’s being, in the post-humanist, post-christian, in short post-modern world. The Southern novelist has struggled to confront the meaning of vision of existence no longer limited to the Southern history.¹

After 1950, the American novelists seem to reflect about the regional, national and international realities of life. The modern life in its totality has been puzzling and even embarrassing for the novelists of the post-war period. Saul Bellow has very subtly
described the world scene of the time and its impact on the writers. He makes a passing reference to the destruction caused by World War First, and also to the sacrifices of millions in the building of the socialism, and the World War Second which reduced millions of human beings into heaps of bones.

Saul Bellow remarks:

It would be odd indeed if these historical events made no impression on American writers even if they were not given to taking the historical view....So the latest works of writers show the individual under a great strain, labouring to maintain himself or an idea of himself. He feels the pressure of the vast public life which may dwarf him as an individual, while permitting him to be a great giant in hatred or fantasy. In these circumstances he grieves, complains, rages or laughs. All the while he is aware of his lack of power, his inadequacy as a moral being, the nauseous pressure of mass media and their weight of money and organisation of cold war and racial brutalities.²

There was not much the novelist could do about the crises in the international
politics, the Russian Revolution, the World War Second, revolution in Asia, Africa and the rise and transformation of the masses. There was the world. There was also the self. Both were real and both existed as they have always done and will. And the post-war Southern novelists (apart from the Catholic trio) who clearly see the spiritual identity of the self against the historical backdrop are, Carson McCullers, William Styron, Reynolds Price and Cormac McCarthy. Each one of these novelists suggests a paradoxical but existentially logical resolution for the dilemma of the self in history.

So the common subject of the second half of the twentieth century Southern writer is the time of the final defeat of the Christian corporate community by on coming forces of science, money, capitalism, resulting in individual's sense of defeat, sense of guilt, self awareness and feeling of rootlessness. Frederick J. Haffman has categorised the Southern writers into three groups and has placed their works into a comprehensive order:

The literature of the
Southern place belongs in three major classes: that which defines, describes and preserves the tradition without abstracting from it, consisting of such writers as Miss Roberts, Caroline, Bardon and Allen Glasgo etc; that which reveals the genuinely native particulars of the scene while at the same time communicating their existence in time and commenting on it, consisting of such writers as Miss Welty, Shirley, McCullers and Flannery 'O'Connor etc; and that which explores the complex influence of the place as moral fable influencing the rhetoric and space, ultimately serving a desirable role in contributing to the novel's meaning, consisting of such writers as Faulkner, Wolfe and Warren.3

But apart from these three important categories of Frederick J Hoffman, other equally important and different kind of writing did exist in South. In writings of this kind, the scenes have been shifting from the land to the city. Moreover, the intellectual and moral change from the Southern past to the contemporary present is also very significant. And it is to this category that William Styron, Renolds Price,
Cormac Mc Carthy belong. As such they have certain basic tendencies of the South yoked together with the contemporary present.

The first crop of the Southern novelists of the first half of this century, include such big names as William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Wolfe, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. This first generation was disillusioned by both the civil war and the First World War but had managed to remain intact. Their rationality and optimism had survived.

The second generation of the writers like Carson McCullers, William Styron, Renold Price and Cormac Mc Carthy etc. were greatly influenced by the first generation of novelists. The second generation of writers came of age in the wake of the first and the Second World Wars. And these wars did not leave these novelists of the second generation, intact. They were puzzled to find the old values gone defunct. The process was initiated by the senseless and inhuman destruction of Hiroshima and Poland. Richard Pearce has very correctly observed:

It (this second crop of
writers) was traumatised by the war experience, by the unimaginable presence of the bomb and by the feeling that the war was a perpetual affair, was in fact the condition of life. The World War Second turned into a cold war whose clammy presence haunted our days and nights. The cold war turned into Korean war for which William Styron like so many of his contemporaries was called to duty again.4

Born in 1925, in Virginia, William Styron passed the major part of his childhood there. He attended Duke University and then had a very disappointing experience in the Marine Corps. After that he had a short spell of an unhappy time in the publishing line which he left very soon in preference to becoming a writer. He was just twenty six years old when he published his first novel, LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS in 1951. And with the first work itself he became a famous writer and was awarded the Prix De Rome of American Academy Of Arts And Letters.

After two years, when he still had only one novel to his name, he was interviewed by PARIS REVIEW. This made him famous and he began being considered as one of the important
novelists. It took him about three years to come out with his second novel, THE LONG MARCH which in a way, is a long short story. He himself termed it as a 'novelette'. It is based on his first hand personal experience of Marine corps.

In 1952 winter, when he was staying at the American Academy in Rome, Styron became acquainted with Rose Burgunder. She was a promising poetess and was introduced to him at a John Hopkin’s Seminar. They became close friends and married on May 4, 1953. The young couple came back to the United States and settled down in Roxbury, Connecticut.

However, his literary career remained paradoxical. Though his first novel was highly acclaimed, he didn’t write much, for more than five years. It took him almost seven years, after the publication of LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, for his third novel SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE to come out. It was published in 1960. The novel was very warmly received. It was followed by another period of calm of seven years after which William Styron published his fourth and the most controversial novel, THE CONFESSIONS OF NAS
TURNER. It was published in 1967. It brought him hostile accusations starting a long term debate of ten years. TEN BLACK WRITERS RESPOND started publishing the ideas and opinions of Black writers accusing Styron of racist feeling and moral senility. And Styron’s answers to these charges were published in NATION, AMERICAN HERITAGE and NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS. This kept William Styron and his name in the limelight for all the ten years. It was for this novel that he got PULITZER AWARD of 1968.

And just when the debate had ended he published another controversial novel, SOPHIE’S CHOICE in 1978. Although not so harsh and angry as the black voices attacking NAT TURNER, some Jewish dissent was expressed about Styron’s attempt at making an abstraction of a concrete and systematic attempt by the Nazis to annihilate the Jews. In the spring 1983 issue of POLISH AMERICAN STUDIES a group of Polish-American historians questioned the authenticity of the polish scenes in the novel. THE BOSTON GLOBE and NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS published Styron’s answers to their charges.
Apart from his passionate involvement in literary activities, William Styron's extra-literary activities too have been significant enough to keep alive his name and picture in print. His active support for liberal causes like the defence of a Negro who belonged to Connecticut and was convicted of murder, opposition to death sentence, protest against Russia's oppressing treatment of its writers, and his support for Eugene McCarthy for the presidential candidacy, kept Styron at the centre of public controversy. When we look at the publication of his novels, we find that in his long literary career of more than four decades William Styron has produced only five novels, one drama and a collection of essays. When asked about this slow pace of work he replied:

The advantages of my slow pace are enormous. You can sit down and painstakingly do your thing and make your vision come true, even if you are writing one paragraph a day. It's the only way I can work.  

In fact William Styron's importance lies in his being very selective and choosy in his subject matter and style. Even though the
realities of life had been tossing up innumerable characters worth novels, the imagination he exercised showed great restraint and fastidiousness in his selection of characters and themes. And that explains why his contribution has been so meagre but so substantial at the same time. It is interesting to note his ideas about society and literature:

I still maintain that the times precisely get the literature they deserve, and that if the writing is gloomy, it is not so much inherent in the literature as in the times. ... The writer will be dead before any one can judge him... But he must go on writing, reflecting disorder, defeat and despair; should that all be that he sees at the moment, but never search for the elusive joy, love and hope...the qualities which, as in the act of life itself, are not commonly come by with much ease, either by a critic's formulae or by a critic's yearnings. 6

However slow the pace of his writing may be, William Styron has never ceased to write. He has always attempted to reflect the disorder, defeat and despair of the times.
And that is why his small but outstanding contribution provides us with the moral and intellectual scenes from the Southern past combined with the contemporary issues. He has sense of the ornamental, a sense of the concrete and a sense of the elemental combined with the present universal.

It has been observed that Christianity generally gets a very hard knock in his novels. Also there are his twins philosophies of life—existentialism and transcendentalism that have so much been talked about. William Styron himself has clarified his position in this regard in an interview with Robert K. Morris. The relevant part produced here clears the position:

RKM: All your three major novels are framed of epigraphs of a religious nature, yet in the novels themselfe, religious per-se, or atleast Christian rituals come in for a hard knock. Is this intended simply as constrasting irony or something more.?

WS: I think, I have always been partially intent on contrasting the spiritual impulse as defined by Christianity with the hypocritical shallowness and thought that surround much of its
manifestations in life. So I consider the use of epigraph an important device of irony.

RKM: Why did you choose epigraphs from the seventeenth century writings. Thomas Brown for LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, John Donne for SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE, and King James' Bible for THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER?

WS: With NAT TURNER it had to be with others, I was when I wrote them, still very much steeped in the seventeenth century poetry and I seemed to want to strike chords that were common to both, to that time and ours.

RKM: Can you explain why your protagonists tend to be visionaries, of an apocalyptic sort?

WS: ...Perhaps I am grounded in some manner of unconscious transcendentalism that makes me believe that people are really striving for some impossible state. Perhaps they are hopelessly romantic (I don't know if that is the word, perhaps it is as likely that as something else.) but anyway, this is an impulse I see in my self and therefore it may take over those characters.

The interview makes it clear that William Styron perceives the spiritual identity of the self against the persistent
intimations of history. He does not have any calculated or conscious intention in the suggestions of paradoxical but existentially logical resolutions of the self.

William Styron’s literary contribution is very meagre but the amount of criticism and critical works that have been done and are still being done on his books, have kept him continuously in the limelight. Amongst the American scholars who have been fascinated by William Styron’s novels, Frederick J. Hoffman’s name comes first. His ART OF THE SOUTHERN FICTION published by Illinois University (1966) contains a small chapter on Styron’s novels. He has analysed the tragic aspects of the first three novels of William Styron.

Richard Pearce’s WILLIAM STYRON published by the University of Minnesota press (1971), Ratner Marc L’s, WILLIAM STYRON published by Twayne (1972), Leon philis’ WILLIAM STYRON published by Greenwood Press (1972) and WADSWORTH GUIDE TO LITERARY STUDIES by Irving Malin published by Bowling Green University Press (1974) are more or less, pamphlets written on his novels.

WILLIAM STYRON: A DESCRIPTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY by James L. W. West published by Boston Hall (1977) offers a complete listing of styron’s publication- books in English and in French, contribution to books, magazines, newspaper appearances, published letters, discussions and comments.

WILLIAM STYRON: A Critical Study, by Robert H Fossum published by Elderman’s press in 1968 is to a great extent, a very sincere, genuine, and extensive work, dealing with most of the novels which were available then. This critical work devotes itself to analysing and interpreting the symbols, allegories and the religious elements in the novels of William Styron. However, there is nothing in this book on SOPHIE’S CHOICE simply because this novel was published almost ten years after the
publication of the critical work.


Along with these, a few French critics like Andre Bleikasten, Jacques Pothier, Rachel, Price-Kreit have also produced magnificent appreciations of William Styron's works. All his novels have been translated into French. CONFIGURATION CRITIQUE DE WILLIAM STYRON Edited by Friedman and August J. Negro, published by Minards Letters Modernes Paris, (1967) was the first collection of Styron criticism in French. Considering the amount of critical work done on Styron's books in French, his frequent visits to France, and appearance of his name in French magazines and newspapers, Melvin J. Friedman remarked: "Styron's reputation is greater in France than in his own native country."
Amongst the Indian students and scholars of American literature there are just a few who have shown interest in, and appetite for William Styron's work. First of all there is Meera Manvi's THE TRAGIC WORLD OF WILLIAM STYRON, for which Chandigarh University awarded her a Ph.D. degree in 1977. The work deals essentially with the tragic aspects of only four novels of William Styron. It has nothing on SOPHIE'S CHOICE as this novel came out after two years after the thesis.

Paul Deepak kumar's WILLIAM STYRON AND THE MODE OF NARRATOR PROTAGONISTS IN AMERICAN FICTION OF 60'S AND 70'S deals with narrators as heroes in the American Fiction published during the two specified decades. The dissertation concentrates on only THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER.

In Lalit Mohan Sharma's QUEST FOR SELF IN AMERICAN NOVEL there is a general discussion of the crisis of self's identity in the American Fiction. There are some passing references here and there about Styron's novels as well. And THE NOVELS OF WILLIAM STYRON by S. Laxman Murthy (1988) deals with the tragic elements in Styron's novels. This
book analyses the narrative mode, characterisations and religious allegories in detail.

This study aims at dividing William Styron's novels into two groups to help a categorical analysis and interpretation of the novels. In the first group are kept those novels which begin and end within the South. LIE DOWN IN DARKNESS, THE LONG MARCH and THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER have been considered in this group for the simple reason that they have most of the regular features of the Southern fiction such as the Negroes, the first families, the church, the guilt, the over-sexed Southern matrons, war, alcohol and psychological failures.

The second group consists of the remaining two novels, SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE and SOPHIE'S CHOICE. They form a separate group because every thing and any thing of any consequence that happens in these novels, happens outside the South. Of course the narrators in both these novels are from the Port Warwick Virginia. But that is all that we have of the South in these novels. These novels come to us in the form of reminiscences
of the characters and happenings with them in Newyork, Paris, Rome, Italy, Sambuco, Cracow, Poland, Germany, Birkenau, Auschwitz and Brooklyn. Here in, we get Italian peasants, village cocktail parties, American tourists in the European countries, movie-makers and their movie-making, philosophical fascists, University professors of Cracow, Polish Underground Resistance Group, Adolf Hoss, and the glimpses of the Nazi rule in Germany.

The main aim of this study is to put the past and the present of each novel separately and try to show how and to what extent the past influences the present thought, behaviour and action of the main characters in each of the novels of William Styron. Along with that, the study also aims at devoting separate chapters to each one of the important aspects of Styron’s novels, such as trauma of wars, narrator’s search, the father figures or voices of wisdom, the sequential growth of characters, religion vs spiritualism, symbolism, images and allegories, so as to be able to present a comprehensive analysis of the works.

William Styron’s main characters manage
to retain our interests and sympathies right up to the very end. And this study aims at arousing a better and keener curiosity understanding and serious interest in the wonderous, rich and vital world of William Styron, whom Jackson R. Bryer and melvin J. Friedman consider to be "clearly of Noble Laureate stature."
BIBLIOGRAPHY

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