CHAPTER 3.

VENTURING BEYOND
The two novels of William Styron SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE and SOPHIE’S CHOICE, in which the setting of the central action has shifted from the geographical boundary of the South to foreign strands, are set in the post-war European countries. Except these two, all other Styron novels are firmly rooted to the Southern soil. And even though the geographical boundary is changed, some link with the South remains intact. In SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE the protagonist belongs to the South. And in SOPHIE’S CHOICE, the narrator is from the South. Thus a definite link with the South remains intact in these two novels also. SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE has the post-war Italy in the background. There is a small village named Sambuco in Italy, where all the major happenings of this novel take place. SOPHIE’S CHOICE on the other hand has Poland in the background.

For SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE, the choice of Italy was a very proper choice, providing the writer with many advantages. This has been appreciated by many critics. Richard Pearce argues about it thus:

Italy was a good choice for
the central action of SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE. It has been traditionally an arcadia for American writers and artists and factions ironically in a pattern of Cass's development. It was major battle ground for World War Second and one seat of totalitarianism. And the experiences of war and totalitarianism are seminal in the novel. It was becoming a caricature of America and allowed Styron to gain some distance on his main subject. When Peter Leverette arrives at the Gothic Piazza he finds himself exposed to a battery of cameras...the aggressive incongruity between the movie set with its glitter of American affluence and stark Italian countryside with its implacable poverty recalls an incongruity of American life to which we are only now beginning to give full recognition...1

The Italian poverty and the American glitter present at Sambuco provided Styron with every opportunity to present the physical and psychological facade of American life. Moreover, it dramatically contrasts the facade with the senselessly violent irrationality, it covers.

Cass Kinsolving, the protagonist was born
in North Carolina and was orphaned in childhood, hence couldn't get education beyond the second year of High School. He joined army and took part in the World War Second. Due to his mental condition, he was sent to a psychiatrist and was released from the army. He fell in love with a girl named Poppy and married her with a desire to settle down as a painter.

For a long time he could not feel inspired enough to paint. And then being tortured by his inability to paint, Cass began to while away his time in drinking, wandering about and pitying himself. He moved his family to Paris and started wandering in Europe. Recollecting his days in Europe, Cass tells Peter:

When I was in Europe I was ...a biological disaster, a bag full of corruption held together by one poisonous thought and that was to destroy myself in most agonising way there was... full of booze, blind as bat, abusing my family and myself... teetering on an edge between life and death ... until I got to Sambuco... I thought I might pull out of it there, but I was deluded. The day you saw me I was blinder than I ever was
before or since. 2

From Paris to France and via Rome, Cass went to Sambuco in Italy. The town was just six hours from Rome by car. In Rome he had done enough roaming in churches, galleries, ruins and peering into Roman faces. But nothing had clicked. He had talked with young communists, and old ladies and drunk enough to kill himself but had survived.

Here he had drunk and fornicated with some girl in a miserable hotel and in the morning had discovered that the girl had gone away with all his money and clothes including his underwear. He had to telephone Poppy to come to his rescue with some of his clothes and some money. She had done so without any delay and asked no questions.

When he had arrived at Sambuco, the little town had seemed to Cass to be some kind of hell, inspite of the fact that it was a fully modernised town with an air of being cosmopolitan:

It (Sambuco) is thoroughly and completely modern even cosmopolitan. There are expatriate artists, Italian peasants, Greenwitch village cocktail parties, pornographic orgies,
American tourists... movie makers and movie making, army PX's and philosophical fascist policemen...

But this cosmopolitan city turns out to be a kind of hell for Cass. He made the wrong entry into the city on a truck, carrying barrels of wine. He was heavily drunk when he entered Hotel Bella Vesta, and began to make fool of himself. He was manhandled and sent to police station. When he was released, he was about to leave the station but stopped to witness sergeant Perinello dealing with a girl, dragged in there, by a shopkeeper with the complaint that she was trying to steal a windmill from the shop. The sergeant was telling the girl:

"You have a nice big behind on you. Why does a grown girl like you, with a sweet big behind, want to steal a child's toy like this...You should be down on the coast peddling that sweet behind to rich tourists...Do you know what fine is for stealing"? "No" "Then do you know what we must do.? We must take that sweet behind of yours..."4

Cass heard the sergeant saying that and could contain himself no more. He threatened
the sergeant with dire consequences and he let
the girl go. She was a peasant girl named
Francesca. Cass paid two thousand lire to
the shopkeeper as a compensation and left the
police station. Corporal Luigie was very much
impressed by this kind gesture of Cass and
fell in steps with him. He told him that he
was very greatly impressed by this kind of act
of his, and Cass told him that the girl was
very beautiful, and Luigie replied:

Peasants don't interest me.
They are a scummy lot, for most
part hopelessly unbred like
animals. Sometimes I think
they should all be
exterminated...they should be
put out of their suffering."
Cass blinked and wondered
whether the corporal was not
slightly loony, fascist,
humanist, intellectual, scourge
of peasantry, creative pessimist
metaphysician, philosopher and
lonely like himself.5

And when Luigie learnt that Cass was an
artist he told him that Italy was the most
vulgar country in the world and nine thousand
nine hundred ninety nine out of ten thousand
did not care a fig for arts. And when Cass
touched him about spiritualism he told him
honestly:
I am not a spiritual fascist... No Italian is spiritual any thing in politics... I am an opportunist...
It is a betrayal of soul for any man to embrace communism which is anti-human,
barbaric and monstrous depotism... "So when you joined the cops you junked all that
and became a fascist. You forgot all about that camp in Poland where they melted down
millions of little Jewish babies for butter and saddle soap... or near Rome in a cave
mowed several hundred of your countrymen with machine guns in one fearful, senseless
slaughter... Don't tell me any thing about Mussolini's fine roads...
"Please, we are not Germans... please listen.... In order to eat and hold myself togerher and
my family, in Salerno, I could not remain a communist, practically or morally... The
sins of Germany are not the sins of Italy..."6

During his entire European tour, this was the only fruitful friendship with a foreigner
that he had developed, which finally helped him to come out of the mire. He went to
Windgaser, apologised, booked a room in his hotel, and left for Rome, to fetch his
wife and children. There he learnt from the
lawyer's letter that the four thousand per month that his wife had been getting from her father's property, would stop thenceforth. So he came to Sambuco a broke. Here he came under the sway of Mason Flagg. He found every one willing to be owned by Mason Flagg.

Cass found that every one around, lived off Mason's money and enjoyed the supplies that he obtained from the nearby P. X. Which was a miniature version of the big P.X. that America itself was. But for Sambuco it was big enough. And Cass also allowed himself to be owned by Mason Flagg. He confesses about it:

Soon after that he made a mistake of accepting a bottle of whiskey which Mason gave him. "It was not exactly a tip for my services, yet it was a tip too... It was neither gift nor gratuity... I mumbled my humble thanks... I didn't even offer to pay for it, not because I didn't have money but because decency had left me, and good sense and pride... I lost count of times I went over to Naples with him; it became a habit like booze or dope. Then at last I was tied to him, bound to him for reasons of pure survival, and not just my own either, but of
all those around me... 7

The girl named Francesca for whom he had paid compensation to the shopkeeper at the police station, came to him for a job, and he got her work at Mason's place. And by telling her in advance about Mason's arrivals and departures, he got her remove, good amount of soap, sugar butter, flour and drinks from Mason's house and bring to his own.

Cass stooped himself further low when he painted a dirty picture for Mason Flagg. In return, Cass had promised to give medicines for Michael Riccy, the consumptive father of Francesca. But Mason did not give him the pills and hid them in his bathroom. Thus Cass simply sold away his soul to Mason Flagg and did not hesitate in performing clownish acts to entertain him and his guests. Sambuco had become a real hell for the artist:

On arrival to Sambuco he is persuaded that hell may be a reality. The little town strikes him as a purgatory of tormented souls whose lamenting cries, sound and resound through the ancient streets. Sambuco has a hotel... managed by effiminate Fausto Windgaser... idiot Saverio...
Esso station (American owned) and an American movie company for using up lire credits in which Italians mix with Hollywood....

Cass had left America because he had begun to feel that its ugliness was poisonous to his artistic temperament. And now in Sambuco he began to come across Americans everywhere. Mason Flagg under whose sway he came here was the very worst sample of his warped and infantile culture. Robert H. Fossum says:

Fleeing the land whose ugliness poisons his soul Cass has come from America to Sambuco, via Paris, Southern France and Rome. But his flight has proved futile. He encounters America (And Americans) everywhere; their behaviour reminding him that the country he can not help loving, is a land of vulgarity and ignorance....

Therefore, Cass’s attempt to avoid America, to be away from it and its impact, became futile. In Sambuco he found an other America established by some Americans. Mason Flagg who owned him was the worst example of that warped culture. He reduces
Cass to the level of an animal:

He(Mason) is the evil incarnate. And to this man the artist sells his soul in return for food, medicines and liquor, he can not do without. Cass reduces himself to the level of an utterly independant animal by painting a pornographic picture and performing clownish obscene exhibitions for Mason and his guests. 10

It is this point of climax when Cass has begun struggling to set himself free from the hold of Mason Flagg, when Peter Leverette, the narrator comes to Sambuco. He had been in Europe for five years and had begun feeling home-sick. He was in Rome when he got a letter from Mason Flagg inviting him to Sambuco. He decided to have a last look around, go to Sambuco, and from there leave for America.

He left for Sambuco in his car. Just beyond Pompei, a motor scooter Lambretta smashed into his car. The rider reeled with shock and the blood began to tickle down from his nose and ears. His name was Luciano - a thieving simpleton who had already lost one of his eyes and many fingers in a car
accident. But since it wasn't Peter's mistake, and Luciano was known to the police, they allowed Peter to go.

When Peter came to Mason's house in Sambuco, he found that it was a house fit for a Maharaja. He found a film shooting in progress. And then he discovered that Mason had many girls—Celia, Rosy, Carole, Nancy, Mary, Cathy and Anya and many others, each having firm belief that Mason was going to marry her.

Mason gave Peter a round of his Joint, full of books, paintings, and talked authentically about the theory of liberation through sex. He took him to a 'Group Interplay' at Harvey Glansner's and Peter found the hall full of "blue light, howling saxophones, bitter and sweet smell of marijuana, high hollow giggles, copulating and copulatory motions, frantic kicks and excitements" and was appalled as he felt himself very small in comparison to Mason:

Indeed the more I saw Mason in his dual role of day time squire and the night time nihilist, the more it became apparent to me that he was a truly distinctive American, able
in time of hideous surfiet-revolting against the traditional values, plunging into dope sensation, fabricated sin, and all the while retaining a firm and strong grip on his two million dollars...Rich, handsome, erudite, glorious, witty, gifted, a hero of war, I felt pitifully small and common place....

How ever, inspite of every attempt by Mason, at entertaining Peter, he was unable to forget the accident. He told about it to Cripps. And he told Peter that he should dismiss the fellow from his mind because "every Italian harbours a suicidal mania. A death-wish. And that is why they make such riproaring drivers, high ware artists and taper stars." And Peter wondered to himself that if this was so, why they made such poor soldiers.

The central action of Cass's freedom from Mason's clutches took place in these Italian settings. Cass's inspiration, Francesca, was raped by Mason and when he learnt about her death, he went to Mason's Piazza, forced himself in and challanged Mason. He ran out with Cass in persuit. At the foot of the hill
they fought - Cass with a piece of stone and Mason with a piece of wood. And finally Cass broke his skull, dragged the dead body up the hill-top, and hurled it down from there.

Corporal Luigie protected him from getting charged with, and arrested for, the crime of this murder and allowed him to get away to America - a totally reformed man. When he returned to America he had changed into a man with an attitude of reconciliation with life and its realities.

Thus it can be seen that the central action in this novel takes place far away from the south - on the Italian soil. Sambuco seems to have many similarities with America. But the specialities of the place, like Mason's Piazza in Italy, Windgaser's hotel Bella Vesta, the thieving simpleton Luciano, the philosophical fascist Luigie, the kind hearted doctor Caltroni who tried to end the misery of the dying dog, the consumptive Michael, insane Saverio, and the police sergeant Parrinello, and the peasant woman with her mountain of faggots, crowd this Italian world into which the narrator, the main characters and the central action or for
that matter all important happenings of the novel, are set.

The other novel in which William Styron has ventured beyond the southern soil is SOPHIE'S CHOICE. It is Poland that happens to be in the background. The choice of the central character from amongst the Polish sufferers of German war, and Poland itself as the centre of action, is well grounded on the consideration of its many similarities with the South:

Imagin if you will, a land in which carpet beggars swarmed not for a decade or so but for millennia and you will come to understand one aspect of Poland - stomped upon with metronomic tedium and regularity by French, the Swedes, the Austrians, Prucians, Russians and possessed even by such greedy incubuses as Turks. Despoiled and exploited like the South and like it poverty ridden, agrarian feudal society. Poland has shared with the South the bull - work against its immemorial humiliation and that is loss of pride. Pride and the recollection of vanished glory. Pride in ancestry and family name, factitious aristocracy or nobility...In defeat, Poland and the South America bred a
frenzied nationalism... 14

The protagonist in this novel belongs to Cracow, an ancient city of Poland. It has an ancient church of St. Mary in which instead of bells, a man blew trumpets to announce the hour. It is a poor city. It has one of the oldest European universities.

In 1939, when the German soldiers first came to Cracow, they didn't bomb the city like they had done at Warsaw and other places. Therefore the people of Cracow thought it to be a good omen. But very soon their hopes were shattered. The first target were the university teachers of Cracow. They were all called in the university campus, arrested and sent away nobody knew where. The slow process of devastation had begun.

Before the German invasion, Warsaw had the greatest concentration of Jews, having a population of 450 000 and three years later the number of Jews living in Warsaw remained only 70,000. The rest of them had been thrown away into the gas chambers. Although Sophie was not a Jew, she suffered as much as any Jew that had suffered and survived. Rather she suffered more than some Jews, because:
In certain ways she suffered more than most. She had been both the victim and the accomplish however haphazard, ambiguous and uncalculating to the mass slaughter whose sickening vaporous residue spiralled skyward from the chimneys of Birkenau, when ever she peered out of the window of the roof of the house of her captor Rudolf Hess....15

Sophie herself was caught when she was trying to smuggle some meat for her sick mother. Her father and husband, both were university teachers and were exterminated in the first lot. And now when she herself was arrested, she was sent to a Gestapo Camp. For many days and nights she remained in this camp and was then put on a train and deported to Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was used for slave labour and Birkenau for extermination. Sophie was sent to Auschwitz because she was young, beautiful healthy, and knew short-hand and typewriting. She remained there for more than twenty months. She was surprised to find the camp being run mostly by cross-section of civilians:

At Auschwitz and Birkenau the evil was perpetuated by civilians not professional
soliders but cross-section of
german society including
bakers, carpenters, physicians,
book makers, post office
clerks, waiters, waitresses,
bank clerks, nurses, firemen,
customs men and lawmen and even
musicians...16

It is here that Sophie underwent the most
traumatic experience of her life. Her son Jan
Zawistowski was ten years old and her daughter
Eva was six years old. And the doctor at camp
told her to choose one of her children and let
the other go to the gas chamber. Under the
threatening pressure she chose to keep her son
and let her daughter to be dragged away from
her. She could never pardon herself for this
unmotherly act of her. At the concentration
Camp the S.S.Functionary told her:

You have come to a
concentration camp and not to a
sanatorium and there is only
one way out--up the
chimney...and one who don't
like it can try hanging himself
on the wires. If there are
Jews in this group, you have no
right to live more than two
months...Any nuns here.? Like
priests you have one
month...All the rest three
months...17

Lastly her son was also taken away from her
when she was sent to work as a translator, cum short-hand-typist to Rudolf Hess. Hess's house was the only place into which the foul smell of burning human flesh coming out of the chimneys did not penetrate.

Though she had worked for more than ten hours per day in a tar-paper company, not for money but to keep her working card, to evade being taken to the camp, but it had not worked. And at Hess's house she tried to endear herself to Hess just for getting a chance to see or meet her son. But even that had not clicked. She tried to kill herself but failed or rather rejected the thought or postponed it for then. About this harrowing past she once told Stingo:

I want to write about Auschwitz... There are so many things that people still don't know any thing about.... Like the guard taking off the clothes of the nun and getting her attacked by dogs till she died; like I would never have tried to make Hess fuck me if it had not been for Jan... And I would never have pretended that I hated Jews so much or that I wrote my father's pamphlets... All that was for Jan... And that radio I could not take away...
Sophie wanted to write about the cruelties that she had witnessed during the Nazi destruction. She never wrote anything about it. But can such manmoth inhuman act be described in words. William Styron quotes Steiner to express his own bewilderment:

Steiner writes: One of the things I can not grasp, trying to get them into some kind of perspective, is the time relation....Precisely at the same hour in which Mehring and Langner were being done to death, the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, five thousand miles away in Newyork, people were sleeping, or eating, or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist. This is where my imagination balks...19

So it is this war-torn Poland in which no one had been left unscathed. In this war every one suffered- Jews, poles Gypsies, Russians, Czechs, Yugoslavs and every one became a victim of the brutal process of extermination. Of course the Jews were the worst sufferers. Eighteen hundred jews were sent to their deaths in just the inaugural action of the second crematorium.
It was in this inhuman and savage process of mutilation and humiliation in which Sophie lost her university teacher father, music teacher mother, mathematician husband and her two children, a son and a daughter. This world of horror contained people of Underground Polish Resistance Force which had members like Wanda and Joseph for whom she wanted and tried to smuggle away the radio but failed; helpless Mr. and Mrs Zawistowski, Eva, Jan on one hand and on the other hand it had all those civilians who were helping to maintain the work of extermination along with Hausptsturmführer and Rudolf Hess, making poles, Russians, Jews Czechs and all others suffer alike. Finally when the war ended in 1945, Sophie found herself in a refugee camp in Sweden. Thus she lost her country also.

From Sweden, Some relief organisation brought her to America which makes the present of the novel. But even this coming to America remains out side the South. It is the cosmopolitan Brooklyn where she stays in the big residential quarters of Yetta Zimmerman.

Brooklyn remains different from the South as it is seen in its usual northern
barbarity. Stingo's father who is a typical southerner hates Newyork and Brookiyn and most of the Nothern towns for their barbarity, lack of courtsey, total bankruptcy in most essential domains of public manners.

Thus in SOPHIE'S CHOICE, not only the protagonist was born and brought up in a foreign country (poland) but even when she comes to America, she does not come to the South. Of Course Nathan makes elaborate plans to roam about in the South- the three of them together-Stingo, Sophie and Nathan, but the plan remained unexecuted. And all the major happenings, the invasion of poland, the concentration camps, burning and gasing of Jews, the loss of father, mother, husband and children at the hands of cruel Nazi machinery, by the protagonist, loosing the mother land itself, every things happens out side the South.

In SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE the narrator and the protagonist both belong to America and thus a definite link with the South remains intact. Both of them return to the South, because though cass belonged to the North, when he came back, he did not go to the North
but settled down in Carolina which is in the South. Even Mason Flagg too belonged to the South what though he is the villain of the piece. Thus though in this novel the happenings and characters move out of the Southern soil, a definite link is maintained.

In SOPHIE’S CHOICE on the other hand, the enormous past happenings belong to Poland, Cracow, Auschwitz and Birkenau. The small present of Sophie’s involvement with drug addict Nathan, acquaintance with Stingo and ultimate suicide, takes place in Brooklyn which is in the North, not in the South. The only link with the South is the Narrator Stingo who belongs to the South. So it can be safely said that Styron had ventured beyond the south in this novel more than he had done in his SET THIS HOUSE ON FIRE. Both the novels have their pasts grounded into foreign lands, but where as Cass and Peter go back to the South, Stingo shows no sign of moving away from Brooklyn. However, in this novel through recollections of the Artist, Bobby Weed, Nat Turner, Theodore Gilmore Bilbo, the Negro hater, who died of the cancer of the mouth, and Stingo’s father’s letters comming
to Brooklyn, keep us constantly in touch with the South in this novel also. Thus no doubt in these two novels the scenes of major happenings have shifted from the south to the foreign land, a definite and decisive link with the south remains intact.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

5. ibid. P-316.
6. ibid. P-323.
7. ibid. P-332-3
15. ibid. P-266.
16. ibid. P-183.