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William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: Can "Faults" Become Assets?

Abstract

The article examines critical responses to Styron's controversial novel *Sophie's Choice*, and argues that precisely those aspects of the novel that have been the most severely criticized – the sudden changes in narrative technique, the mixing of different genres, the parallels between Poland and America, the comparisons between a slave plantation and a concentration camp, as well as the use of atypical characters – are exactly what makes the novel powerful. Those "faults" serve a universalizing function. The strength of the novel, and its lasting impact, stem from the fact that it is ultimately a moral book.

Keywords: Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, holocaust fiction, Styron criticism.

Introduction

Upon its publication in 1979, *Sophie's Choice* was greeted by a mixture of acclaim and outrage. The acclaim culminated with the 1980 American Book Award. The novel stayed on the "New York Times" best-seller list for almost a year (Vice) and has since been included on numerous lists purporting to contain "the most important books of the all times". However, voices of criticism were numerous and harsh, especially immediately after the book's publication. I would like to look at some of the aspects of the novel that were the most criticized, and show that in fact, paradoxically, those aspects which met with the most scathing condemnation, ironically are actually responsible for its success.

Styron himself contributed to raising the temperature of the debate surrounding his novel by giving numerous interviews, in which, in a teasing and provocative manner, he adopted a rather lighthearted attitude to the outburst of criticism, saying that at least he was relieved to be spared the "assault" of a book called *Ten Rabbis Respond*. He was alluding, of course, to the book entitled *Ten Black Writ-*

ers Respond, published in response to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1966), his well known novel about the rebel slave.¹

Shifts between narrative modes and jarring themes

Although the prevailing critical reception to *Sophie's Choice* was positive, almost all of the early reviews pointed out some problems with the interweaving of the different narrative strands in the novel. Of particular concern were the awkwardness of the shifts back in time to prewar and wartime Poland and the jarring nature of the narrator's elaborate and detailed stories of his own erotic pursuits when juxtaposed with the story of the main character, Sophie, a concentration camp survivor.

The novel includes three basic temporal levels. It is composed from a point in the late 1970s, the time when the narrator, Stingo is an established novelist in his fifties. The middle-aged Stingo reminisces about the events of the summer of 1947, when he was a young, aspiring writer, newly settled in Brooklyn. During that time he met Zofia Zawistowska, a Polish survivor of Auschwitz, and her lover Nathan, a brilliant Jewish intellectual who suffered from schizophrenia. The third temporal plane is made up of the story of Sophie's life in pre-war and wartime Poland, including her experience at Auschwitz, which is told in retrospect, as Stingo gradually learns about it from Sophie.

It is indeed true that the novel includes abrupt changes of narrative perspective, and they may seem somewhat crude at times, but there is a specific reason for this design that has to do with Styron's representation of history. In writing a novel about the Holocaust, arguably the most atrocious crime ever perpetrated by the human race, Styron faced a considerable challenge in his search for an appropriate means of artistic expression. He was familiar with the position, expressed by many, for example Elie Wiesel, that no one can say anything about the death camps who was not there, and, in a sense, he seems to agree with this position. His agreement can be seen in the way in which the novel is constructed. Styron does not set out to write a fictionalized survivor's account. In fact, the number of passages in the novel where life in the camp is described are very limited. What he does instead is to combine a number of narrative perspectives involving temporal shifts. In this way, he carefully controls the extent to which the reader is allowed to come into direct contact with the actual story that lies at the center of the novel – the story of Sophie's experience at Auschwitz. Rather than writing directly from her point of view, Styron provides us with a narrator who has not been to Auschwitz or even anywhere near it. He is callow, naïve, and has only a superficial knowledge about the war and the Holocaust. However, by creating a narrator of this type, he is able to create a narrative in which the reader (who may or may not share Stingo's initial ignorance) is gradually drawn into Sophie's story by learning about it in installments, just as Stingo does.

¹ W. Styron, *A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle: The Making of Sophie's Choice*, "The Sewanee Review" 1997, no 105(3).

Thanks to the temporal shifts, and the contrast between Stingo's graphic tales of his (mostly unsuccessful) sexual encounters, Stingo's contact with the topic of Auschwitz parallels that of an average person – he approaches the topic somewhat unwillingly through his naïve preconceived ideas. His initial interest in and fascination with Sophie have nothing to do with the fact that he wants to learn about her death camp experience. It takes a lot of time for Stingo not only to learn about what really happened to Sophie, but also to understand the way in which Sophie's behavior is a delayed outcome of her Auschwitz experience.

The enormity of the industrialized mass murder committed at Auschwitz is such that it falls outside our normal frame of reference. As Styron said himself: "Auschwitz can be compared to nothing"; "Auschwitz must remain the place on earth most unyielding to meaning or definition".² Thus, it is possible to know the historical facts about Auschwitz, but it is impossible to really take them in. The human mind naturally defends itself against having to deal with them.

Richard Law observes that:

Because of its literally almost unspeakable subject, the manner of the unfolding of the tale is an exercise in overcoming, or putting to sleep, reader resistance. To keep the reader's imagination from evading the nature of Sophie's experience, Styron employs a variety of stratagems (...). The unfolding of the narrative, then, is a kind of trick which simultaneously carries us toward and hides its destination. The whole narrative is skillfully crafted to get us in a frame of mind where we cannot evade, or fail to imagine, the experience of genocide from the point of view of one of its victims.³

This design is further complicated by yet another layer in the narrative, the existence of which I have mentioned already; Stingo's story of his relationship with Sophie told from the point of view of his own older self, from a point in time some thirty years after the events that took place in Brooklyn. The more mature Stingo offers a retrospective reconstruction of the events, frequently adopting a satirical tone when talking about his younger self. The older narrator is writing with the benefit of not only his maturity, but also his substantially increased knowledge of both Sophie's life and the historical events in which she was involved that the young Stingo has yet to confront.

This juxtaposition of the two mindsets is a very successful device, allowing the older Stingo to adopt an ironic stance about his earlier innocence and occasional obtuseness. The younger writer writes in an overly self-conscious, pretentious and agonizingly "literary" style. The contrast between his puerile attitude and the enormity of Sophie's experience, told to the readers through his mediation, is a very productive, intriguing design which throws Sophie's story into relief.

Along with the sudden changes in narrative modes, the proliferation of sexual themes in the novel has raised numerous objections; more specifically, the scenes devoted to Stingo's obsession with sex and lack of opportunity to have sexual intercourse, and well as the episodes of his – mostly failed – experiences with

² W. Styron, *Auschwitz* [in:] W. Styron, *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings*, New York 1993, p. 336.

³ R.G. Law, *The Reach of Fiction: Narrative Technique in Styron's Sophie's Choice*, "The Southern Literary Journal" 1990, no 23(1).

women, have been found to jar with other parts of the narrative. A large number of critics regretted that Stingo's sex diary had not been somewhat condensed.⁴

Sue Vice explains that "the lurches between Sophie's painful testimony and Stingo's comic escapades are partly explained by the novel's publishing history".⁵ She is referring to the episode with Leslie Lapidus, a young woman with whom Stingo has a failed sexual encounter that was originally published separately in the magazine *Esquire*. This, however, is not an entirely convincing explanation. It is not very likely that a writer of Styron's stature would have a large stack of already written, mostly unpublished stories that he would want to use so badly that he would incorporate them in the novel he was currently writing without a good reason.

Rather, those episodes also serve a specific function in Styron's overall design, which dramatizes the fact that the young Stingo's attitude to women is simplistic and blatantly sexist. Caroline Durham and Gavin Cologne-Brookes, among others, have established a parallel between the sexism and other patterns of oppression, thus providing yet another level of analogy between the different workings of evil. Stingo's attitude towards women is one of many illustrations of the overall image of oppression; and women are one of many groups of people in the novel who are the subject of systematic oppression.

The mixing of genres

Another strand of critical responses has centered upon Styron's misrepresentation of historical details. One may ask, why is there a demand for factual exactness in a book which is, after all, a work of fiction? *Sophie's Choice* was published in the year 1979. Historiographic metafiction had been around for more than a decade, and already several years had passed since the publication of what is now regarded a classic of postmodern criticism – Hayden White's *Metafiction*, in which White provocatively argued that novelistic and historiographic narratives are essentially the same thing. What made the readers of Styron's novel react so strongly to every departure from fact, even if they were very minor? A factor that has greatly contributed is the fact that Styron included numerous autobiographical details in the novel. The narrator, Stingo, in many ways resembles Styron; for example, the young Stingo is contemplating writing novels that are identical in subject matter to Styron's own early novels. (This has led many readers to equating Stingo with Styron, and some of the criticism leveled at Styron was based on the assumption that whatever views the narrator expresses are Styron's own.)

Beginning the novel in what appears to be the autobiographical mode has a powerful effect. The positioning of Sophie's story within an account that appears, for all intents and purposes, to be biographical, is a fully intentional ploy to give Sophie – a fictional character – the illusion of being a real person, just as

⁴ For example P.K. Bell, *Evil and William Styron* [in:] *The Critical Response to William Styron*, ed. D.W. Ross, Westport 1995.

⁵ S. Vice, *Holocaust Fiction*, London 2000, p. 117.

Stingo is taken to be the real Styron. As Styron put it in an interview: "if you start out in the autobiographical mode and make that convincing on its own level, it gives you an element of credibility with the reader when you touch the part that is fictional".⁶

Apart from autobiography elements, there are other genres mixed in the novel. In *Sophie's Choice*, Styron also incorporates an impressive amount of material that is not fictional. He consults, summarizes, and sometimes directly quotes scholarly sources and philosophical texts. He refers extensively to Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt, while Wilhelm Reich's theories about the relation between sexual and political repression underpin the unfolding of Sophie's story. The narrator refers the readers to a vast array of eye-witness accounts of the war and the Holocaust, as well as to commentaries and scholarly analyses, quoting – among others – Bruno Bettelheim, Elie Wiesel, and George Steiner. Of the autobiographical accounts, Styron relies most extensively on Olga Lengyel's, *Five Chimneys*, and Rudolf Höss's autobiographical statements entitled, *Commandant of Auschwitz*.

Another important feature of Styron's presentation of historical events is that he provides an extensive commentary on the events of the narrative. In this way, the novel acquires a meditative character, it turns into a reflection on the Holocaust. The specific blend of scholarly input, extensive quotations from autobiographical statements by both victims and perpetrators, and Styron's ruminations on the topic serve a specific purpose: they make it abundantly clear that no single voice can possibly express the truth about Auschwitz.

Speaking of genres, as John Gardner brilliantly illustrated, *Sophie's Choice* draws heavily on the tradition of the Southern Gothic.⁷ Gardner actually considers the excessive Gothicism to be the book's main fault. He argues that Styron, "when he's not watching himself"⁸, falls into a habit of presenting everyone and everything in a uniformly depressing way as evil. Seeing evil everywhere, in the souls of the Poles, the Jews, the Germans alike, is seen by Gardner as predominantly a Southern Gothic feature.

But Styron's insistence on the omnipresence of evil is not merely a Gothic device – it is an important part of his overall aim, which is to generalize the mechanisms that made it possible for concentration camps to be created by humankind at large.

The analogies between the American South and Poland, concentration camps and slave plantations

Perhaps the most critically received of all aspects of *Sophie's Choice* is Styron's design to emphasize the affinities between Poland and the American South. In the novel, the narrator reflects upon climatic, geographical, historical and cultural affinities between the two countries. Along with this parallel, Styron often

⁶ Qtd. in *ibid.*, ft. 8.

⁷ J. Gardner, *A Novel of Evil*, "The New York Times Review of Books" 1979, 27 May.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

compares the system of slavery and concentration camps. In the eyes on many critics, the parallel falls flat. For example, in one of the early reviews, Joanna Rostropowicz-Clark wrote that:

I also do not agree with Styron that there were strong resemblances between southern racism and Polish anti-Semitism. The Jews in Poland were there because for many centuries it was the quietest place for them to settle. They were never economically dependent on the Poles, and would not work as servants in gentiles' homes; moreover, they did contribute significantly to the development of the Polish economy, culture and science. They always held on to their pride and did not have inferiority complexes. Anti-Semitism in Poland, as everywhere else, had its roots in envy and distrust rather than in contempt. And there were religious aspects of the problem, which played no role in southern racism.⁹

Yet the comparison – sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit – between slave labor in the Nazi camps and that in America is a pronounced motif in *Sophie's Choice*. In fact, Styron's novel is full of parallels and comparisons that are woven together to create the image of a world in which distant countries, different political systems, various ethnic and social groups are affected by the same destructive force: hatred and prejudice.

The use of “untypical” characters

Another group of critical responses to *Sophie's Choice* is related to what is interpreted by some critics and writers (e.g., Alvin Rosenfeld, Cythia Ozick) as Styron's intentional strategy of de-Judaizing the Holocaust. A good example of this approach is an essay by D.G. Myers, in which he argues that “Styron's novel about a Polish Catholic woman who survived Auschwitz only to die tragically in America puts under interrogation the claim that the Holocaust was a uniquely Jewish catastrophe. [...] Styron does not merely dissent from the orthodoxy of the ‘uniqueness thesis’ (as it has come to be known); he delivers an *elenchus*, a strong rereading of the Holocaust which goes beyond challenging the predominant view to reverse it”.¹⁰ The Holocaust, Myers says, was distinguished by the Nazi intention of totally eradicating the Jewish people, who were in this respect its unique victims – the purpose and whole reason for the Holocaust – and thus, he argues, historically it was without precedent, without sequel.

While the Holocaust definitely can be seen as unique in this sense, I am not persuaded that Styron wants to “reverse” that reading. The universalist view that Styron advocates – understanding the Holocaust as a particular instance of the working of absolute evil, which threatened humanity as a whole, as if encompassing a theological vision. Presenting the destructive force of a totalitarian regime cannot possibly be equaled to denying the Holocaust. To the contrary, the universalist vision of the Holocaust is precisely what may help prevent future genocide.

⁹ J. Rostropowicz-Clark, *Review of Sophie's Choice by William Styron*, “The Polish Review” 1980, 25(2), p. 99.

¹⁰ D.G. Myers, *Jews Without Memory: Sophie's Choice and the Ideology of Liberal Anti-Judaism*, “American Literary History” 2001, no 13(3), p. 500.

At the core of the criticism made by Myers and others who wrote in a similar vein was the fact that Styron's main character was a Catholic Polish woman. There is a certain similarity between this choice and other decisions made by Styron with respect to his characters. To give just one example, there is a character whose importance is much lesser than that of Sophie, yet who also earned a large number of critical remarks for somewhat similar reasons, though this time mostly from Polish critics. That person is Sophie's father, Professor Bieganski from the Jagiellonian University, who had before the war, already written a treatise on how the Jews should be exterminated.

No record of such a manuscript exists, but that of course does not mean that it could not have existed. Given the high levels of anti-Semitism among some members of the Polish academia, the existence of a prewar professor wholeheartedly devoted to Nazi ideology, and a worshipper of all things German is not unthinkable. The accusations leveled at Styron by Polish critics were not that the existence of such a person cannot be conceived. The criticism was, rather, that such a professor was highly *atypical* – a statement made by a number of Polish critics of the older generation, who remembered the war, including Jerzy Krzyzanowski, Thomas Napierkowski, and a professor at the English Department of the Jagiellonian University, Jerzy Strzetelski (Krzyzanowski, Napierkowski, Strzetelski – personal communication).

The above criticisms are based on the assumption that by choosing characters that are not, statistically speaking typical representatives of a given group (Jews were by far the most numerous victims at Auschwitz; yet Sophie is Catholic; most Polish university professors did not write books advocating the extermination of Jews, yet Styron's character did), the novelist somehow falsifies history. Yet the purpose of such an "atypical" character is, again, to help make a universalist point.

Sophie Zawistowska made the mistake of thinking that she and her family were in no major danger from the Nazis, since the Nazis were preoccupied with exterminating the Jews. The shock comes when her father, despite being a devoted Germanophile and an outspoken anti-Semite is arrested because he belongs to the Polish intelligentsia and is killed at the camp in Sachsenhausen. The professor (and later on, his daughter and grandchildren) falls victim to the same type of hatred he himself professed: in Styron's words, evil comes full circle.

Evil is ubiquitous in the form of the threat of dehumanization and destruction. Everyone is partly guilty of the Holocaust, and the reader too, is both a potential victim, but also a potential perpetrator. In an interview, Styron mentioned that Auschwitz is the culmination "of the titanic and sinister forces at work in history and in modern life that threaten all men, not only Jews".¹¹ In this universalist view of things, to focusing only on the Jewish aspect of the Holocaust is, in Styron's words, "to underestimate dangerously [Nazism's] totalitarian dimension" (West, 248).¹²

¹¹ S. Vice, *op. cit.*, ft. 12.

¹² *Conversations with William Styron*, ed. L.W. West, III ed., Jackson 1985, p. 248.

Conclusions

It is quite telling that the critical responses to Styron's novel seem to evolve over time. Some critics, for example John Gardner, have admitted that their appreciation of the novel's value has increased since the first reading. Gavin Cologne-Brookes in his recently published book, *Rereading William Styron*, admits to being now even more convinced than he ever was of the fact that *Sophie's Choice* is Styron's most important achievement, because "it contains a quality of craftsmanship that took decades to master, and it the service of a subject that warrants it".¹³

I have tried to show that it is precisely those aspects of the novel that have been the most severely criticized – the sudden changes in narrative technique, the mixing of different genres, the parallels between Poland and America, the comparisons between a slave plantation and a concentration camp, as well as the use of atypical characters – are precisely what makes the novel powerful and explains its lasting impact. Those "faults" serve a universalizing function. The strength of the novel lies in the fact that it is ultimately a moral book. By painting a bleak picture of the world, and a depressing image of various ethnic groups (none of the ethnic groups represented in the novel could possibly be pleased with their portrayal), Styron delivers a moral lesson. He is not as much preoccupied with the Holocaust as such, but rather, he is interested in it as a particular embodiment of absolute universal evil. Appropriately, at the end of the novel, Stingo feels rage and sorrow, not just for Sophie, but, in his words, for all "the beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth" (625).¹⁴

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¹³ Cologne-Brookes G., *Rereading William Styron*, Baton Rouge 2014, p. 162.

¹⁴ W. Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, New York 1979, p. 515.

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