A case can be made for the idea that William Styron is the foremost novelist of his generation. His first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), was widely acclaimed as a masterpiece, a structural and stylistic tour de force whose tragic power belied the author's twenty-six years. In a bravura challenge to his literary predecessors, Styron took on Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Warren, Wolfe, Lowry, and Joyce, absorbing their influences while asserting his own voice and vision. In *Set This House on Fire* (1960), he demonstrated a determination to move beyond his southern heritage, choosing an Italian setting and an existential situation. Inverting Henry James's International Theme, Styron's Americans proved to be not so innocent, committing murder and rape for reasons reminiscent of Dostoyevsky and philosophizing on The Meaning of It All straight out of Sartre. Turning next to the tragic core of American history, he wrote *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), in which he dared to enter the consciousness of his black hero, showing that Nat's motivations, as well as the evils of slavery, were a tangle of private frustrations and public injustices, of love, hate, guilt, and misunderstanding. Despite a heated controversy over Styron's portrayal of Nat, the book was both a popular and critical success and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Twelve years later Styron published his most ambitious work yet, *Sophie's Choice* (1979), which amplified the meditation on slavery in his previous novel into a confrontation with the most appalling crime of our century—the new world of total domination that was Auschwitz. By telling the story of one scarred survivor, an elusive and captivating woman named Sophie, he was able to approach the Nazi atrocity obliquely, and thus to personalize and dramatize a horror so monstrous that the human component is usually lost. All four of these novels have been praised for
their stylistic mastery, their structural virtuosity, their creation of multifaceted characters, and their courageous depiction of private griefs as well as public dilemmas. At a time when most American novelists have engaged in needlework, nit-picking, and navel-gazing, Styron has affirmed his belief in real people, actual places, and the most harrowing facts of modern history. Surely, one can argue, his is an achievement that must be called major.

On closer examination, however, the question of Styron’s merit and reputation proves to be problematical. After an initial whirlwind of puffery and praise, each of his books has received more reserved critical estimates. On rereading it is clear that *Lie Down in Darkness*, for all its impressive evoking of place and creation of character, dissipates the brilliant promise of its exceptional opening chapters, failing in the end to achieve the tragic effect Styron was aiming for. Once the stage is set and the principals introduced, he seems at a loss how to dramatize their predicament. Instead the characters stand around feeling sorry for themselves and blaming each other for their failures. The drunken father haunted by the cynical quips of his drunken father, the neurasthenic mother substituting piety for a dry heart, the idiot child inadequately loved, the hypersensitive daughter cursed to commit suicide to expiate familial doom, the funeral procession, the God-fearing blacks as choral witnesses to white decline and fall—what is this but a retelling of tales Faulkner has definitively told? The same problem of imitation is evident in the country club scenes—where Styron sometimes does Fitzgerald better than Fitzgerald—and in Peyton’s long deathward dramatic monologue, which sounds like Quentin Compson ad-libbing Molly Bloom. In sum, Styron is all too enmired in his sources, which frequently swamp his own considerable talents.

*Set This House on Fire* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* are even more obviously flawed. The first slips into melodrama, relies upon stereotypes, strains too hard to be topical and profound at the same time, fails to see the essence of its main characters, and imposes an unconvincing upbeat ending which exposes the glib uses Styron was making of his borrowed existentialism—“As for being and nothingness...” In spite of some vivid and dramatic scenes, the book seems finally an unnatural mating of *Tender Is the Night* and *The Marble Faun* with *Being and Nothingness* and *Crime and Punishment*. The central problem with *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is the unfortunate choice Styron made to tell Nat’s horrendous story in stilted pseudo-Victorian rhetoric which smothers the slave’s life in a prodigal and prolix language that is foreign.
to his mind and actions. Furthermore, Styron's sense of Nat's personality and motivations, which are questionable at best, suggests that in truth we are reading the confessions of William Styron. Critical reappraisal, in short, indicates that Styron's career has not been the triumphant procession his admirers have insisted on; rather, there is substantial evidence of floundering, of failing to fit technique to theme and find an eloquence appropriate for his important subjects. In truth Styron's fictions serve to illustrate Randall Jarrell's witty definition of a novel as a long piece of prose that has something wrong with it.

This brings us to the difficult critical conundrum presented by Sophie's Choice. Most reviewers praised the novel as a superior achievement, even a masterwork of American fiction, citing Styron's valiant grappling with the evils of Auschwitz, his moving recounting of Sophie's sufferings, and his intricate blending of her story with Stingo's loss of innocence and Nathan's descent into madness. But others had grave reservations. John Gardner questioned whether Styron's transferring the techniques of Southern Gothic to a topic as unique as the Holocaust didn't "seriously alter the thing seen," while John Aldridge asserted that the "soaring grandiloquence of Styron's prose," which portends "some large and apocalyptic meaning," was completely out of key with the "sad comedy" of his story. Jack Beatty attacked the book as "a palimpsest of self-canceling intentions," finding Sophie "insufferably coy," Nathan "fudged," Stingo "masturbatory," the style "sluggish and self-indulgent," the structure "rambling," and Styron's moral sense "purblind" and "promiscuous." Almost as harsh was Robert Towers, who thought that Sophie remained "a parcel of fragments," that Nathan was merely "a confection from the gaslight era," that significant themes were "insufficiently dramatized," and that the style at its worst was "elephantine." Although Towers admitted that the Auschwitz sections were "memorable," he also felt that the book was so flawed it could not even be considered "a noble failure."

Is it possible, amid all these conflicting claims, to elaborate a more convincing interpretation? It seems to me that the key to a satisfactory evaluation of Sophie's Choice is the problem of Styron's characterization of Stingo, a central figure in the novel, its narrator, and the author's alter ego, his "brother-self." Stingo plays a double role in the novel; as a twenty-two-year-old budding novelist and reluctant virgin he learns the ways of the world largely through his encounter with Sophie and Nathan, and as a narrator in his fifties he recalls his youthful experiences and adds his own commentary on everything from the contents of medicine cabi-
nets to the meaning of Auschwitz. Both the younger and the elder Stingo are obviously based upon Styron himself, who has chosen to imbed fragments of his own autobiography in the larger edifice of the novel. Apparently, the purpose of this method is to establish an authenticity based on Styron’s life in 1947 from which he can lure the reader into accepting the grand fable he is creating about Sophie and her ordeal at Auschwitz. Unfortunately Styron is not always clear about what his stance toward his persona should be; ironic detachment yields to nostalgic identification, satiric comedy is superseded by apologetics, and the entire relationship between Styron and Stingo becomes hopelessly confused.

Styron himself has described Sophie’s Choice as “a funny, split book” which merges Stingo’s “raw curiosity about the world, his naivete, his groping, and his yearning” with the demonic story of Sophie’s life, which is “past any American concept of what horror is.” Stingo is “a kid coming up against this inferno, of which he’s only had the vaguest hint. And this girl being the filter through which it is rendered.” In other interviews Styron has insisted that Stingo is, for the most part, a stand-in for himself: “The novel is plainly autobiographical,” he told James Atlas, “but it shouldn’t be taken as God’s truth about my life.” And to Valerie Arms he said, “I wouldn’t feel happy unless they immediately identified Stingo as a man who is masquerading as Bill Styron. That is central to the whole strategy of the book.”

The problem is not with the use of an autobiographical persona as such, but with the fact that Stingo as presented seems too vain, callow, and self-deceived to be Styron himself; yet the author makes only fitful attempts to differentiate himself from his character. The reviewer Edith Milton was convinced that Stingo is not at all autobiographical, regardless of the fact that his history is “identical” with Styron’s, claiming that what we are witnessing is a “breath-taking” balance between fiction and fact with Styron moving “from confession to invention, from deeply felt compassion to glibness, from wisdom to asinity, in the most brilliant display of pyrotechnics in the uses of the narrator since Byron’s Don Juan.” I find this reading too clever by half—Styron, after all, is not Borges. It is tempting to separate Styron from Stingo completely, but the text simply does not support that kind of interpretation. Robert Towers has stated the problem best:

Is it possible that Styron is playing a complex literary game of some sort, endowing Stingo with the externals of his own career, using him for purposes of self-parody, establishing him at an ironic dis-
tance from himself? Or is the whole thing an exercise in self-castigation? Alas, there is no telling, for Stingo's voice is the only voice we hear.

Let us listen, then, to Stingo's voice to see what we do hear.

When we first meet Stingo he is an ambitious young novelist of twenty-two who is experiencing his first case of writer's block—"I had the syrup," he says, "but it wouldn't pour." His dreams are of destined fame, but his lowly job involves reading unsolicited manuscripts for McGraw-Hill. With the spite that seems to make the literary world go around, Stingo rejects every single submission, "all of them so freighted with hope and clubfooted syntax," taking a sadistic delight in his work: "I honestly enjoyed the bitchery and vengeance I was able to wreak upon these manuscripts. . . . Oh, clever, supercilious young man! How I gloated and chucked as I eviscerated these helpless, underprivileged, subliterary lambkins." In his smug zeal he even casts off Kon Tiki. Were this novel about anything but the Holocaust, the "supercilious" ironies of this episode would be plain enough, but when we juxtapose Stingo's attitudes toward this selection process with the choices of life and death involved in the Final Solution, suddenly all the language becomes acidic—"clubfooted," "helpless," "eviscerated." Whether Styron is aware of these added ironies, and the commentary they make on his narrator, is not clear. What is clear is that when Styron is talking about his persona, Stingo, he tends to forget that the central story of the novel is Sophie's tragedy, not Stingo's "voyage of discovery." Instead of using Stingo's sexual yearnings and novelistic ambitions as an understated ironic counterpoint to Sophie's more significant fate, Styron makes the two tales compete with each other. Although the novel's title is Sophie's Choice, Styron gets so caught up in his fable of how his narrator writes his novel, wins his manhood, and conquers grief that the novel might just as well be called Stingo's Progress.

Obviously there is a strong element of nostalgia in Styron's portrayal of Stingo; like Whitman singing a song about himself, it is only natural that Styron/Stingo celebrates himself as well:

How I now cherish the image of myself in this earlier time. . . . Oh, Stingo, how I envy you in those faraway afternoons of First Novelhood (so long before middle age and the drowsy slack tides of invocation, gloomy boredom with fiction, and the pooping-out of ego and ambition) when immortal longings impelled your every hyphen and semicolon and you had the faith of a child in the beauty you felt you were destined to bring forth.
If I am right in my contention that Styron's career has been floundering almost from its inception, then there is an added poignancy in this attempt to reinvigorate his mid-life stagnation by reincarnating his younger, more confident, self—a young man who can boast, "Move over, Warren, this is Stingo arriving," and who takes enormous pride in "the sheer quality of what I had put into the book."

The book in question, apparently, is Lie Down in Darkness, and Styron's compulsion to tell how that book got written is the key to why Stingo's story tends to subvert Sophie's. Stingo is aware that he is "unacquainted with love and all but a stranger to death," and that until he has understood these things he cannot hope to be more than "a skinny, six-foot-tall, one-hundred-and-fifty-pound exposed nerve with nothing very much to say." At this point three important things happen which foster Stingo's ambitions: his father sends him the necessary money (improbably derived from the sale in the past of a slave named, ironically enough, "Artist"), Stingo learns of the death of a childhood crush named Maria Hunt ("she was beautiful enough to wreck the heart"), and he meets Sophie and Nathan. With the money he can quit his job and devote full time to writing, using the death of Maria as his tragic subject and finding in his turbulent new friends the companionship and experience he has been longing for. At first Stingo resists their overtures for fear of "getting sucked toward the epicenter of such a volatile, destructive relationship," declaring that "I, Stingo, had other fish to fry," determined as he is to "write my guts out," and not get trapped into playing "the hapless supernumerary in some tortured melodrama."

As it turns out, the tragedy is theirs and the melodrama is his, but Stingo never seems to realize that, always upstaging the more significant action. His obsession is with "poor dead Maria, doomed and a victim from the outset through all the tangled misunderstandings, petty hatreds and vindictive hurts that are capable of making bourgeois family life the closest thing to hell on earth"—a statement that Auschwitz renders absurd. Stingo's eye, however, is not on the sufferings of others, but his own. He tells us, after his failure with Leslie, that "I was a writer, an artist," who would not allow "some misplaced notion of the primacy of the groin to subvert grander aims of beauty and truth. So onward, Stingo, I said to myself, rallying my flayed spirits, onward with your work." "Flayed" as he may be, Stingo still has the certitude that "the wrenching anguish endured in the crucible of art would find its recompense in everlasting fame, and glory, and the love of beautiful women." Admittedly, there is a degree of irony here, but none when Stingo speaks of "spilling quarts of my heart's blood" after a morning of "especially
fruitful work.” Similarly, when Nathan claims priority over Sophie, Stingo dismisses his love for her as “futile woolgathering” and returns to his novel, “intensely aware that I had my own tragic chronicle to tell.” Even at the end, when he has triumphed over his rival and has Sophie in his arms, Stingo’s mind is on his all-important career: “I hugged Sophie softly and thought of my book.”

From Stingo’s point of view, then, Sophie and Nathan are merely crewmen on his own voyage of discovery. They teach him about the complexity of human nature, the evils of Auschwitz, the splendors of love, and the horrors of madness. They become, in a sense, a surrogate family for Stingo, nurturing his talent as they initiate him into the Freudian depths of life. The elder Stingo, in describing his preparations to tell Sophie’s story, displays the same egocentric pattern as his younger self. He stresses how he had to “torture” himself “by absorbing as much as I could find of the literature of l’univers concentrationnaire,” and he pinpoints his own “time relation” to the Holocaust—“as Sophie first set foot on the railroad platform in Auschwitz, it was a lovely spring morning in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I was gorging myself on bananas.” Once again Stingo’s ego gets in the way, comparing the sufferings of the Jews with his own torturous reading of George Steiner.

Nathan’s role in “Stingo’s Progress” is equally ironic. Styron goes to great lengths to convince us that Nathan is a polymath and a prophet. Mad though he may be, his breakdown is also a breakthrough; he sees, Stingo alleges, things the rest of us miss. Nathan’s prophecies range from the trivial—the advent of unbreakable records—to the profound—the coming years of “madness, illusion, error, dream and strife.” But as far as Stingo is concerned, all the indicators of Nathan’s sagacity are only preparations for his augury of Stingo’s future artistic preeminence. “That’s the most exciting hundred pages by an unknown writer anyone’s ever read,” Nathan proclaims, and Stingo becomes an instant believer: “How could I have failed to have the most helpless crush on such a generous, mind-and-life-enlarging mentor, pal, savior, sorcerer? Nathan was utterly, fatally glamorous.” Thus while Nathan the Mad goads Stingo with the aspersions of his harshest critics, that he has “a pretty snappy talent in the traditional Southern mode” with “all the old clichés,” Nathan the Wise is there to reassure him that he had created a “fresh vision of the South” which transcends the admitted influence of Faulkner and is “uniquely” and “electrifyingly” his own.

However self-serving Styron’s characterization of Stingo’s artistic ambitions may be (he even suggests that his book on Nat Turner disproved the demise of the novel), I can appreciate some of the author’s
indulgence—after all, writing a novel is an enormous challenge and the first hundred pages of Lie Down in Darkness are astonishingly good. But Stingo’s presentation of himself as an “aspiring swordsman” is a complete miscalculation. In an effort to aggrandize Stingo’s lust Styron unlooses the floodgates of his rhetoric, pompously celebrating Stingo’s vain efforts to get laid as a quest of epic proportions. In consequence, what should be light comedy and ironic contrast competes with and undercuts Sophie’s unfolding tragedy.

One clue to Styron’s lack of stylistic control may be found in the affinities he perceives between sex and language. Written words, Stingo tells us, fill him with erotic feelings, so that even reading a telephone directory can cause him a “noticeable tumescence.” Likewise, when Stingo is at a loss for words he feels “foreshortened, shriveled” on one occasion and “feeble, impotent” on another. He thinks of his novel as “a cathartic instrument through which I was able to discharge on paper many of my more vexing tensions,” and when he is contemplating writing about the evils of Auschwitz, he declares that the topic is “impenetrable only so long as we shrink from trying to penetrate it.” Not surprisingly, then, Stingo feels grateful to Nathan for purging his prose of “onanistic dalliance.” Indeed, masturbation plays a large role in Stingo’s life. He sees himself as “sacrificed on the altar of Onan” and “reduced to performing furtive pocket jobs”; he even prides himself on a “surprisingly witty” essay on the best manual lubricants which he has confided to his journal. Sartre has argued in What Is Literature? that “to speak is to fire”; it would seem that the corollary for Stingo is that to write is to “shoot off.”

In writing about Stingo’s lust, Styron is misled by the classic American assumption that bigger is better. A giganticism dominates his prose which combines the worst mannerisms of Thomas Wolfe and Edgar Allan Poe. Stingo tells us that his lust was “incredible—something prehensile, a groping snout of desire, slithering down the begrimed walls of the wretched old building, uncoiling itself across a fence, moving with haste serpentine and indecent,” and he pictures himself as “a godforsaken organism in absolute thrall to the genital urge, capable of defiling a five-year-old of either sex.” He is “a recumbent six-foot-long erogenous zone,” in a nearly constant “stallionoid condition,” whose gargantuan sexual need is “immeasurably huge.”

While Stingo swoons over the “various undulant roundnesses” of the women of his dreams, nothing is more blatant, and vulgarly inappropriate, than his “dorsal fixation.” Leslie is praised for her “darling behind” and Mary Alice for having “the most gorgeous sweetheart of an
ass"; but the trophy, of course, goes to Sophie's "achingly desirable, harmoniously proportioned Elberta peach of a derriere," which is as "sumptuous . . . as some fantastic prize-winning pear" and is "the paragon of world behinds." Readers may take their pick from the fruit metaphors and speculate about how the world's best behind is chosen, but when Stingo finally enjoys Sophie's body, and finds himself "thrusting into the cleft between those smooth white globes," he, for one, is convinced that it is now necessary to redefine the meaning of "God."

The spirit of Poe haunts Stingo's imagination. In anticipation of his visit to "the dark gods" with Leslie he zooms in to admire "the orthodontically fashioned perfection of her sparkling incisors" in language that recalls how Ligeia's mad husband extols the width of her nostrils and the height of her forehead. Stingo kissing Leslie is described as though it were a shoving match between creatures of the deep: her tongue "plunged like some writhing sea-shape into my gaping maw . . . it wriggled, it pulsed, and made contortive sweeps of my mouth's vault." Given this grotesque Poe-like magnification, it is apt that Leslie's tongue should taste like "Amontillado." Even more disturbing is Stingo's fascination with necrophilia. He delights in imagining bouts of "stormy lovemaking" with Leslie, Maria Hunt, and Sophie all at once. What makes these dreams particularly enticing for him is the thought that they are all dead—"not truly dead . . . but in effect extinguished, defunct, kaput, so far as each of them concerned my life." Certainly part of Stingo's attraction to Sophie is the fact that she is damaged goods; Alvin Rosenfeld has even suggested that Stingo's lust for Sophie perpetrates an "Erotics of Auschwitz," with Sophie's "abused and broken body" dramatizing the appeal of "the Mutilated Woman." Overstated as that may be, clearly Stingo's sexual yearnings, as presented by Styron, are impossibly heavy-handed and offensive, if not downright perverse.

Nevertheless it is precisely Stingo's greedy libido that Styron presents as his chief claim on our sympathies. Stingo, we are repeatedly told, suffers; his balls ache like no others; for him purity is "an inwardly abiding Golgotha." Even if Sophie's Choice were not a novel about the Holocaust, Styron should have had enough sense of proportion to stay away from such inept comparisons, but instead he glories in them. Stingo describes hearing Sophie and Nathan making love in the room above him as "another nail" to "amplify my crucifixion," and his fumbling sessions with Leslie as "a Passion Week" which concluded with "my time on the Cross in the small hours of Friday morning." He bemoans "the torture she inflicted on me," and cries out, "Oh Lord, how my balls hurt," and asks himself, "Could John the Baptist have suffered such deprivation?"
But how can he explain such torments to a silly girl? "It's tough on a guy," he whines to Leslie. "It's terrible. You can't imagine." Yet Stingo forgives Leslie, since she knows not what she does, and predicts that she found "her full need of happiness" in a "multiorgasmic" life.

Later in the novel Stingo endures the same mock-ordeal with Mary Alice. Once again he "writhes inwardly" and complains that his "poor John Thomas" was "as moribund as a flayed worm." Enraged by her "prissy chagrin" he shouts, "You cock teasers have turned millions of brave young men, many of whom died for your precious asses on the battlefields of the world, into a generation of sexual basket cases!" Then he goes back to his room to have his first homosexual dream. Obviously, all of this should be played as low comedy, but Stingo insists that his sufferings must be taken as seriously as Sophie's. When he mourns with her after his failure with Leslie, he feels that "her grief met mine in some huge gushing confluence"; and after he has been "flayed" by Mary Alice, he is convinced that he has now experienced "the horror of existence," and he prays that Sophie will come to help "relieve my angst." When she does arrive, he insists that they were both "bleeding to death with . . . gaping wounds," and shortly thereafter Stingo and Sophie flee together—as though Stingo through his sexual suffering had earned the right to share his fate with hers.

What does Styron hope to accomplish by such a bombastic treatment of Stingo's sexuality? Are Stingo's pseudo-agonies inflated to the size of Sophie's genuine ones so that he can win her love and have the last word? Styron's explanation for including Stingo's erotic escapades seems an exercise in apologetics. He claims that to cut out this part of the novel would be like "divesting a body of some member" and that he senses "an urgency, an elusive meaning in this experience and its desperate eroticism" which says something significant about the "sexually bedeviled" 1940s:

A lot in the way of bilious reminiscence has been written about sex by survivors of the fifties, much of it a legitimate lament. But the forties were really far worse, a particularly ghastly period for Eros. . . . For the first time within reckoning society permitted, indeed encouraged, unhindered propinquity of the flesh but still forbade the flesh's fulfillment. For the first time automobiles had large, upholstered back seats. This created a tension and a frustration without precedent in the relationship between the sexes.

As social history this is hardly convincing, yet Styron appears to take it seriously, depicting mid-century America as "a nightmarish Sargasso Sea
of guilt and apprehensions" which "the ensuing decades, with their extraordinary scientific progress in terms of the care and maintenance of the libido" have wonderfully transcended. As proof of his thesis he cites the fact that now for five dollars he can "freely and without anxiety... view sex like the conquistadores beheld the New World:... jumbo-sized dreamy-faced wet-lipped young Pocahontases" and so forth—as if pornography were the cure for all the terrible tensions caused by those big back seats! Stingo contends that the story of how he lugged his "engorged penis across the frozen sexual moonscape of the 1940's" provides a "nice counterpoint to the larger narrative," but a close reading of the text does not support his argument. Rather his tale seems to be an ill-considered indulgence and a narcissistic attempt to sabotage Sophie's much more significant chronicle.

Further evidence of Styron's confusion of purpose is found in the use he makes of Stingo's journal. Once again we are given self-deceiving excuses:

Although I promised myself not to inflict upon the reader too many of the voluminous jottings I made that summer (it is a tiresome and interruptive device, symptomatic of a flagging imagination), I have made an exception in this particular instance, setting my little memorandum down just as I wrote it as unimpeachable testimony to the way some people talked in 1947.

As the novel progresses, Stingo makes several more "exceptions," and so we get to sample quite a few of his jottings. After presenting his first selection—"I have turned on her the pure flame of my intellect,"—Stingo confesses that he is "a little mortified" to see that his younger self wrote without "the faintest trace of irony," but when he comes to quote his notations again two chapters later, his evaluation is much higher. Now these writings are compared to Gide's Journals: it is plain to see, Stingo announces, that their style "continues to possess an unruffled, wryly sardonic, self-anatomizing quality which Gide might have admired." A few phrases, however, refute Stingo's appraisal:

I am so beside myself with plain old hog lust... Never before have I known that kissing can be so major, so expansive... In the soft light of the foyer my membra, betrousered, is truly rampant. Also a spot of "dogwater" there, pre-coital seepage, as if a puppy had peed in my lap.
Gide, of course, would never have admired such trite musings—I imagine his saying something like “Qui est ce fou là?”—but Stingo maintains that his journal is filled with “vivid and valuable passages” which have a “legitimate place” in the narrative.

Stingo’s relationship with Sophie—how through loving her and learning the story of her life he comes to understand that “absolute evil is never extinguished from the world”—is at the core of the novel. In order to analyze some of the difficulties Styron has with his hero/narrator in these central sequences, I want first to note some of the salient traits of Stingo’s personality. As I have already shown, Stingo is a very ambitious young man with an overheated and misdirected sex drive. Certainly he is not averse to praising his own merits, admitting to “a spacious and sympathetic intelligence,” et cetera, but he is also aware of at least some of his crucial shortcomings. As an only child he was “classically though not immoderately spoiled,” and the easy success of his life enables him to say “I was fortune’s darling if there ever was one.” He is aware that his privileged position is a mirror of America’s auspicious status in an iniquitous world—“Our glut of good fortune was enough to make us choke.” He also knows that despite his “staggeringly puerile inexperience” he has a tendency to turn pontifical and didactic. In sum, Stingo is not lacking in self-criticism, yet I think he is largely insensible to his most detrimental traits: his condescension to “inferiors,” his latent potential for violence, and, most importantly, his tendency to retreat from difficult situations into a self-satisfied complacency.

I have already shown Stingo’s contempt for unfit manuscripts and the nasty connotations such an attitude implies; frequently he betrays the same disdain for people—from the “series of reptilian desk clerks” in the first chapter to the “clots of thuggish policemen” in the last. Stingo has inherited his condescension from his father—a man he praises for his “abiding belief in good manners and public decency,” but also a man who scorns New York as a hellhole and who is baffled by the “feisty Hibernian umbrage” of a taxi driver he has tipped a nickel. Given such “umbrage” on the part of the lower orders, Stingo himself is often tempted to “acts of near-violence.” He thinks that his situation in Brooklyn is “closely analogous” to Raskolnikov’s in St. Petersburg and speculates on the consequences to himself were he to kill his landlady. Women who frustrate him, those “loathsome little vampires,” also trigger off murderous urges. When Leslie fails to fulfill her sexual promises to
Stingo, he wants to “belt the living shit out of her” and to ram a “priceless Degas down around her neck.” With Mary Alice, whose caresses lack affection, he has an “overpowering longing to perpetrate a rape.” Even the ineffectual minister at Sophie’s funeral brings out his “homicidal potential.” Stingo demonstrates, in short, the pattern of dehumanizing people through contempt and then wishing to destroy them with the impunity that has been the fatal curse of modern history.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Stingo lavishes an indiscriminate “understanding” on Rudolf Höss and Dr. Jemand von Niemand, inserting explanations for the feelings and motivations of these two important Nazis which are remarkably at odds with his narrative dramatization of them. Stingo tells us, for example, that Höss is a man who is profoundly “tormented” by his job: “A convulsive despondency, megrims, anxiety, freezing doubt, inward shudders, Weltschmerz that passes understanding—all overwhelm Höss as the process of murder achieves its runaway momentum. He is plunged into realms that transcend reason, belief, sanity, Satan.” Yet the Höss we meet in the novel, and as far as I can tell, the Höss of history, is very much the ambitious petty bureaucrat of banal evil that Hannah Arendt has so aptly described. A selection from Höss’s journal shows how much he is merely a man of smug mediocrity:

I was no longer happy in Auschwitz once the mass exterminations had begun…. When I saw my children happily playing or observed my wife’s delight over our youngest, the thought would often come to me: How long will our happiness last? My wife could never understand these gloomy moods of mine and ascribed them to some annoyance connected with my work.

The soulless obliviousness of this passage is beyond commentary. And as for the Weltschmerz of Höss’s megrims, what the narrative demonstrates is that his headaches are the product of logistics, not ethics; he complains to Sophie that “They seem to have no knowledge of the incredible numbers involved in these Special Actions.”

The portrait of the doctor who forces Sophie to make her most terrible choice is equally skewed. The scene of the choice itself is taut and laceratingly effective, but Styron immediately follows it with a cockeyed homily on the doctor’s motivations. It seems he was looking for “some tender and perishable Christian” upon whom he wanted to inflict “an unpardonable sin”:

Was it not supremely simple, then, to restore his belief in God, and at the same time to affirm his human capacity for evil, by com-
mitting the most intolerable sin that he was able to conceive? Goodness could come later. But first a great sin. One whose glory lay in its subtle magnanimity—a choice.

This interpolation is a serious artistic blunder; Styron deflates the power of the decisive scene his novel has been building toward for nearly five hundred pages by foisting on us the so-called "religious strivings" of a bored mass murderer who misses God. It is as if Shakespeare were to interrupt the climax of King Lear for a disquisition on how and why a slave came to be Cordelia's hangman.

The contradictions in Stingo's character, as well as the split between how skillfully he tells his story and how poorly he interprets it, are best illustrated by his infatuation with Sophie, which combines vanity and empathy, attraction and repulsion. Stingo is truly moved by Sophie's distress, yet he also wants to use her for his sexual relief; he is more than willing to play her father confessor, and to help alleviate her survivor's guilt if he can; but he also wants to turn her tragedy to his own artistic advantage, and he reserves the right to suppress her disclosures if they become too threatening. Indeed, nothing is more striking in Stingo's personality than his tendency to elude difficulties, to retreat, to escape.

Stingo states that as a writer he is drawn to "morbid themes"; yet when he is actually confronted with Nathan's madness, for example, he finds himself suddenly transformed into "a triumphant paradigm of chickenshit," and all he really wants to do is "curl up and take a nap." In other scenes we find him abdicating responsibilities, not listening to the problems of others, and deliberately forgetting disquieting events. The archetype of all these evasions is found, I believe, in the revealing anecdote Stingo tells about how he once neglected to care for his dying mother. Instructed to stay at home and keep a fire burning for her, Stingo goes joy-riding instead; when he returns one look tells him that she has almost frozen to death in his absence:

Those hazel bespectacled eyes and the way that her ravaged, still terrified gaze caught my own, then darted swiftly away. It was the swiftness of that turning away which would thereafter define my guilt; it was as swift as a machete dismembering a hand. And I realized with horror how much I resented her burdensome affliction.

As punishment Stingo's father makes him spend two hours in a freezing shed, an ordeal Stingo welcomes because he believes he can expiate his crime by suffering in exactly the same way his mother has. A few weeks later his mother dies "a disgusting death, in a transport of pain," and he
is left to wonder whether his actions hastened her death and if his mother ever forgave him. He describes his resultant guilt feelings as hateful, corrosive, and toxic, and he seeks a convenient excuse to be rid of them and to “think of sex” instead.

Several clues to Stingo’s motivations are suggested in this episode. Most striking is the idea of equivalence—that if he reenacts and imitates what his mother endured he will be able to purge himself of guilt. At the same time we see that he resented his mother’s sickness, hated his pangs of guilt, and would rather contemplate erotic pleasures. Later in his life Stingo is compelled to encounter tragedy, to witness the appalling truths of life, and then to lay claim to and impersonate equivalent disasters, in order to be free of the dire situations he himself has sought out. We have already seen how Stingo tries to pit his sexual frustrations against the far more profound agonies of Sophie, thus pretending that he has earned the right to share her sufferings and her love. In general, Stingo’s pattern is to transform tragic empathy—with its burden of guilt, fear, pity, and pain—into what he takes to be a comparable self-dramatization, which serves to neutralize the bane and permits him to slip back to his customary complacency. The result is a thwarting of authentic tragic catharsis by self-serving mimicry and evasion.

Stingo’s entire relationship with Sophie is restricted by the egocentric limits of his response. When he learns that Sophie needs a father confessor, he is sure that “I, Stingo, handily filled the bill,” but he also admits that he is acting on “a strictly self-serving scheme” to steal her away from Nathan. Yet when Sophie tells him how terribly Nathan has been treating her, Stingo’s basic response is personal—“‘. . . what about me? Me? Me?’ I began to smite my chest to emphasize my own involvement in the tragedy. ‘What about the way he treated me, this guy?’” A similar prideful insistence is seen when Stingo, talking to himself in the shower, rehearses his proposal—“So now love me, Sophie. Love me. Love me! Love life!” Nonetheless when Stingo the life-force first has a chance to love Sophie, he glumly confesses that “kissing was all I could manage,” and he is devastated when she describes his penis as “sweet” rather than “gigantic.” He also resents that, minutes after masturbatiing him, Sophie’s thoughts wander back to a dead lover from her past. “Could women, then, so instantaneously turn off their lust like a light switch?” Stingo asks, offended that he is not the alpha and omega of her world. Shortly afterwards Sophie tells him that “some day you will know what it is to be in love,” a statement Stingo rejects as “infinitely boring,” and one which he thinks reveals a “profound failure of sensibility.” But
Sophie, of course, knows what she is talking about; Stingo’s selfish lust is a far cry from love, and the failure of sensibility is his.

Even after Stingo has supposedly fallen in love with Sophie and learned some of the most dreadful truths about the Holocaust, he facilely decides “to hear no more about Auschwitz,” not to let Sophie obsess him as “a love object,” and to “put her story out of my mind.” Informed by Larry that Nathan is clinically insane, and asked to keep a close eye on him, Stingo goes running after Mary Alice instead, abandoning Nathan and Sophie to their fate. Predictably, Nathan has one of his sinister rages, prophetically accusing Stingo of the seduction he has not yet accomplished, and, in effect, forcing Sophie into his arms, as they both flee from Nathan’s mad wrath.

Thus Stingo is given his great opportunity, but he proves inadequate to the situation. Nowhere is his basic complacency of mind more apparent than in this crucial sequence. Rather than rising to the occasion he subsides into “a remarkable tranquility” and “equanimity,” thinking more about his career than Sophie’s anguish. He basks in the prospect of his future fame, priding himself on the hard work and the “occasional freshets of grief” that have combined to enrich his novel. When he has a moment of gloom, it concerns not Sophie but the question of whether he will be able to summon the necessary passion and insight to write his climactic scene—the suicide of Maria Hunt. Clearly, in the story of “Stingo’s Progress” it is Sophie’s job to provide those essential “freshets of grief” and her suicide inspires him to complete his masterpiece. All of this is wonderfully presaged in an anecdote Stingo tells Sophie about how as a boy he once won a pile of nickels and, in his passion to horde them, managed to lose them all. “It is a cautionary tale,” he acknowledges, “about the destructive nature of greed.”

As if to shock Stingo out of his narcissistic complacency, Sophie finally tells him the story of the horrid choice she was forced to make at Auschwitz. But, as we have already seen, Stingo seems to be more interested in the motives of the doctor than the death of Sophie’s child. Rather than take the tragedy to heart, he seeks “the blessed release of witless diversion,” prattling away to her “with brainless unrestraint” about how happy they will be on Stingo’s farm in Virginia. He tells us, with astonishing self-delusion, that they then “drank, ate crab cakes and managed to forget Auschwitz”—as if Sophie could ever forget. That night she initiates Stingo into the “varieties of sexual experience,” putting him through his paces with a passion he finds as “boundless” as his own. With typical hyperbole, Stingo presents their lovemaking as an Olympian
event which for Sophie was an "orgiastic attempt to beat back death," but for him was a chance to win the laurel of Sophie's praise—"Your [sic] a great lover Stingo."

Sophie rejects Stingo's questionable life-force, choosing in the end Nathan's malign death wish, and Stingo is left to recover from and make sense of their tragedy. Characteristically, Stingo's part in this fatal sequence begins with an evasion—he heads South instead of immediately going to Brooklyn to try to save Sophie. He is perplexed by his action—it is almost as if he wants to share the guilt for her death: "To the guilt which was murdering her just as surely as her children were murdered must there now be added my own guilt for committing the sin of blind omission that might help seal her doom as certainly as Nathan's own hands?" By claiming complicity in Sophie's death, Stingo is able to expand his role in the final scene so that it is his soliloquy which has stage center at the end. "I was determined," Stingo tells us, "that before our last leave-taking Sophie and Nathan would hear my voice."

Stingo calls his last words on the tragedy "A Study in The Conquest of Grief," but how much grief is actually felt and how well it is conquered are questionable. That Stingo wants the spotlight all to himself is made obvious by his "homicidal" resentment of the Reverend DeWitt, whom Stingo tries to upstage by swearing and talking out loud during the funeral service. Next he drinks beer all the way to the cemetery, feeling a "euphoric, inebriate glee" and a "hilarity...mixed with grief," in a pathetic effort to call attention to himself and compete with the funeral of his best friends. His eulogy to them, with the exception of the enigmatic poem by Emily Dickinson, is platitudinous and insufficient. Stingo quotes three passages from his journal, each of which discloses how little he has learned.

"Someday I will understand Auschwitz," the younger Stingo asserts, which his elder self revises to "Someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world." This modification is more within an author's scope; but it tends to reduce the complex fabric of the novel to a pat moral, and it evokes the Gothic notion of "absolute evil." The next words of wisdom which "the suffering Stingo" has for us are "Let your love flow out on all living things," a precept which Stingo, as we have seen, rarely practices. Nevertheless, Styron presents it to us without irony as "the only remaining—perhaps the only bearable—truth," and he claims that in uttering such deep thoughts Stingo is in the company of "Lao-tzu, Jesus, Gautama Buddha and thousands upon thousands of lesser prophets." However prophetic universal love may be, clearly for
Stingo it is a cliché which has no bearing on his conduct; and the debate which ensues about whether or not Auschwitz has blocked the flow of "titanic love," and whether we can still love a "rabies virus" is sheer sophistry.

For his final phrase Stingo chooses a line of poetry, his own, "Neath cold sand I dreamed of death / but woke at dawn to see / in glory, the bright, the morning star," a verse which seems to mourn the dead but whose real purpose is to call attention to the fact that Stingo is still alive. What the novel ends with, then, is not Stingo's conquest of grief, but his mock death and pseudo resurrection; thus the focus is switched from Sophie's tragedy to Stingo's woe, as we see him weeping for "the beaten and butchered and betrayed and martyred children of the earth." And so it is as a man of constant sorrows that we are meant to see Stingo as he lowers himself "to the sand on legs that suddenly seemed strangely frail and rickety for a man of twenty-two," where he lies all night "as safe as a mummy" until he rises like a man reborn, blessing his "resurrection" and stating that "this was not judgment day—only morning. Morning: excellent and fair." These words, of course, echo Emily Dickinson's apt poem, but for Stingo they serve to imply a conquest of grief which the woman who wrote "I like a look of agony / Because I know it's true" would have found, I suspect, fraudulent.

What, then, are we to make of Stingo the character and Stingo the narrator, and what do they tell us about Styron the author? I think it is clear that both Stinges are narcissistic, with traits which enable them to exploit others, avoid unpleasant truths, and celebrate the imperial self. As a result, Sophie's Choice, which at its best is a tragedy of great power, is sabotaged and replaced by "Stingo's Progress," which draws upon Sophie's sufferings and Nathan's prophecies in order to proclaim Stingo a Great Lover and a Great Writer. To what degree Styron is aware how "funny" and "split" a book he has written is difficult to tell. Certainly there are places where his ironic distance is perfect, as when he terms Stingo's encounter with Leslie "a scratching match between two virgins" and when Sophie condemns the "unearned unhappiness" of Nathan's Jewish friends. Furthermore, my exclusive focus on the liabilities of both Stinges should not blind us to the superb sequences in the novel which deserve extensive praise. But still the evidence does suggest that at many points in Sophie's Choice there is a problem not only of an unreliable narrator, but also a problem of an unreliable author as well, and that Styron in certain critical scenes blends with his hero/narrator and fails to heed the fundamental Socratic dictum to "Know Thyself."