1989

Calvinism Revisited: Predestination and Sterility in William Styron's "Sophie's Choice"

Reba Carol Dismukes
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Calvinism Revisited: Predestination and Sterility in William Styron's Sophie's Choice

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

by

Reba Dismukes

1989

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Reba Dismukes
Author

Approved, October 1989

Christopher MacGowan

Susan Donaldson

Robert Scholnick

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor Christopher MacGowan, under whose guidance this investigation was conducted, for his patient assistance and many thoughtful suggestions. The author is also indebted to Professors Susan Donaldson and Robert Scholnick for their careful reading and helpful criticisms of the manuscript.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the lack of free choice permitted by William Styron in his book, Sophie's Choice, to his major character, Sophie, and the concommitent inability of the character to escape a hellish, tormented existence. Furthermore, this paper explores Sophie's symbolic nature as a representative of the human suffering brought on by the evil contamination of the Holocaust, which casts an ominous shadow over the entire post-war world.

Calvinism Revisited: Predestination and Sterility in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*

INTRODUCTION

William Styron's novel, Sophie's Choice, raises the fundamental question of what choices are actually available to its protagonist, Sophie. Whatever her range of choices, the novel indicates that she does not have the means to alter her destiny or to choose the kind of world in which she lives. Sophie is the culmination of a series of central characters in William Styron's fiction who are forced to act against their will and whose freedom to react becomes progressively more and more limited. Like the slave Nat Turner in Styron's earlier novel The Confessions of Nat Turner, she cannot will herself free. Her lack of choice is illustrated by the juxtaposition of images of Eden, creativity, and fertility against scenes of hell, wasteland, sterility, and death. The illusory nature of the book's Eden-like settings and the dominance of its hells severely limit Sophie's range of choices, as Styron makes clear by placing his victim, Sophie, in a bleak, macabre landscape. These images confirm that although Sophie at times appears to have the option of choosing a placid existence in a tranquil,

pastoral setting and of starting a new family, she is doomed to experience only torment, sterility, and premature death. One further important point which this paper will stress is that Sophie, as the protagonist, is an Everyman figure intended to represent all those characters whom William Styron depicts as struggling futilely against fate. Indeed, it is a principle theme of the novel that Stingo the narrator fails to understand either that Sophie is helpless or that she is a universal figure. It is, therefore, the contention of this paper that Stingo does not recognize the fuller implications of his own narrative, one of which is that he shares Sophie's impotence, and, secondly, that both physical and intellectual regeneration are impossible.

The facts that Stingo has learned about Auschwitz and one of its inmates stimulates him to demonstrate his hope by bringing back to life the characters of Sophie's Choice. Yet his lack of insight into their lives is made plain by his fallacious assertion of hope at the end of the book. Moreover, in spite of the fatalistic implications of the narrative, Styron himself ambivalently remarks in an interview with Robert Morris

> Indeed, Stingo wakes to the dawning of a new day. This is certainly as honest a way as any of ending a book as profoundly despairing in nature as Sophie's Choice. Life did go on

> after Auschwitz. People did see hope, did see redemption. Again, by the very nature of writing, we are affirming something very optimistic, it seems to me.[1]

The hope of regeneration that Stingo expresses and Styron appears to endorse in the interview with Morris is undercut, however, by the thematic implications of the novel itself, as well as by some of Styron's other comments. Like most commentators on the novel, he has usually discussed the darker, more hellish aspects of Sophie's Choice. In an interview with Valarie Arms, he elaborates upon the complexity of evil and notes that, at Auschwitz, some victims became victimizers as well.[2] He explains that he has "felt a sort of mandate as a writer...to probe evil of the worst order in order to discover what makes people tick,"[3] and he has called the Nazi concentration camps a "betrayal of the human race."[4] Even though he feels that the act of writing is "very optimistic," he adds that the human ability to feel great joy or even ecstasy is ruined by the "evil which human beings alone are capable of." Furthermore, in spite of his belief in the possibility of "hope" and "redemption," he notes that we, as a species, engineer our own destruction.[5]

Nonetheless, despite his preoccupation with the nature of evil, Styron does not define his sense of the

word "evil" in his interviews. Neither does his narrator, Stingo, completely clarify the question of how evil should be defined. Stingo does, however, offer some insight by quoting Simone Weil, who distinguishes between "'imaginary evil,'" which "'is romantic and varied'" and "'real evil,'" which is "'gloomy'" and "'barren,'" banal and mediocre.[6]

Weil's categories of "imaginary evil" and "real evil," to which Stingo alludes, are demonstrated by certain characters within the novel. Nathan personifies the concept of imaginary evil, and it is important to note that the romantic evil of Nathan and his temper, which no one can govern, illustrates the characters' lack of control over their environments. His explosions of anger are melodramatic and irrational. During his first conversation with Stingo, in a voice "charged with turbulent emotion," Nathan unreasonably attacks Stingo for the murder of Bobby Weed (69). On their trip to Connecticut, in another explosion of anger, Nathan irrationally and without cause likens Sophie to "Irma Griese" (334), a Nazi war criminal.

Yet there is much "real evil" contained within the hells of Sophie's Choice. Paradoxically, the people who operate the terrifying inferno of Auschwitz are excruciatingly banal and mediocre. Furthermore, as the central example of evil in the novel, the horror of

Auschwitz contaminates the post-war world, even such an outwardly neutral setting as McGraw-Hill. And, although it is certainly much less evil than the death camp, Styron's "spiritually enervating green tower" of McGraw-Hill, where "hulking works of technology" are published (5) echoes for Stingo the tedium, ordinariness and mechanization of Auschwitz. The anonymous crowds of the "rackety BMT" subway "cage" share this same sinister aspect (92). And, in much the same way, Sophie's father is an insignificant precursor of the Nazis and their final solution. The most evil personage of all, Rudolf Hoss, is described as "crushingly banal" (149). Sophie's Choice demonstrates the quotidian nature of evil through its portrayals of Hoss and Auschwitz. It is this feature of the novel which suggests that evil is so much a part of everyday life that there exists the potential to produce another Auschwitz.

One important result of these representations of evil force is that Sophie Zawistowska's representative existence is devoid of peace even though she is drawn toward idyllic, tranquil settings. Even while sleeping in the Commandant's basement at Auschwitz, Sophie dreams of "climbing, a dozen years before, in the Dolomites with her cousin Krystina" (256). Later, she makes pilgrimages to verdant Prospect Park, her "favorite refuge" (90). It is this very attraction that illustrates

her lack of choice and her lack of control over her fate, for she does not have the option of choosing an idyllic, pastoral existence.

The book's apparent Edens are not only illusory, false, and unreal, but they exist in close proximity to hells. Dr. Blackstock's home is an artificial Eden - the bright colors presided over by a "buxom dyed blond" (96) wife whose name - Sylvia - suggests forest glades and the natural world. Yet the house over which she presides is "eerie," like a "mausoleum" (96,97), and Sylvia possesses an inner hell which drives her to drink. Prospect Park, "dappled in shades of gold-flecked green" (90), presents another Eden-like image. There, on "a grassy peninsula" (135), Sophie names the geese, just as Adam and Eve named the animals in their garden. Styron contrasts the park, in its lushness, with the netherworld of the city environs, particularly the "hot and humid" Hades of the "New York subway trains" (91, 92). Of course, the most thorough and constant evil pervades the stark and surrealistic waste of Auschwitz, and, by comparison with it, the commandant's garden, which has been created and nurtured by the surrounding evil. Stingo emphasizes the coupled existence of illusory Edens with hells by quoting from George Steiner's book Language and Silence, a strategy that accentuates even more Sophie's lack of control over her fate and the irony

of Stingo's final declaration of hope. Steiner describes the way in which people in New York lived in relative ease and security while those at such places as Treblinka suffered miserably and died.

> Precisely at the same hour in which Mehring and Langner /two Jewish prisoners at Treblinka extermination camp/ were being done to death, the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, five thousand miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist (216).

However, Stingo does not realize the full implications of what he quotes. Places in which there is no apparent evil have lost their innocence simply by existing simultaneously with the atrocities of Auschwitz and Treblinka.

Styron expands upon Steiner's example by comparing Stingo's April 1 (April Fool's Day), 1943 with that of Sophie. On the day that Sophie arrives at Auschwitz, Stingo is in Raleigh, North Carolina, where it is "a lovely spring morning" (217). He notes further that on the day when Sophie is sickened by the realization that 2,100 Greek Jews are being cremated, Stingo is in the pleasant environs of Duke University writing a "letter of birthday felicitations" to his father (220). Stingo

is concerned with nothing more momentous than an upcoming football game. This comparison demonstrates the chronological proximity of Stingo's agreeable college environs to the Nazi death camps. Styron uses the comparison to emphasize what Stingo is unaware of, which is that, in the post-war world, there is no escape from the kind of evil that produced Auschwitz.

Because evil invades paradise, the apparently idyllic settings within Sophie's Choice prove to be illusory for Sophie, Nathan, and Stingo. In this book, the evil of hell itself negates paradise and the supremacy of evil denies that the hope of any sanctuary can be fulfilled or even exist on earth. From the perspective of Styron's novel, pseudo-paradises actually depend upon evil for survival and are so intimately entwined with the sinister as to be unable to survive without their attendant hells. One notable example of such interdependence is the illusion of health and normality that the Hoss family strives to create in the midst of Auschwitz. Their apparent Eden is an illusion because of its falseness - this garden of life is not only surrounded by the desolation, fires, and stench of an inferno but has been created and sustained by hell itself.

Section II

It is Stingo, not Sophie, who believes the illusions of paradise are real and who consequently has a misguided hope. He lives under the delusion that people have the freedom to control their lives. Yet clearly the three main characters of Sophie's Choice lack control over their respective fates. Sophie, "'filled with terror,'" does not want to believe that she is doomed (476), while Nathan fatalistically knows that he and Sophie "are...dying" (77). For Sophie, Nathan represents death, and she is inextricably bound up with him. Moreover, Sophie is condemned by the power of evil which the Nazis manifest, so that her destiny is determined in advance.

Furthermore, despite his youth and good health, even Stingo experiences sterility, impotence, and thwarted desire. Indeed, he makes much of his celibate sufferings. For the scholar William Heath, Stingo's melodrama competes with and trivializes Sophie's tragedy. Styron, he writes, "pompously" celebrates and falsely agonizes over Stingo's unsatisfied sexual desires.[7] But Heath does not acknowledge that this contrast emphasizes the sterility present throughout the book. Towards the

relationship of Sophie and Nathan, Stingo is more observer than participant, showing the impotence and sterility of a voyeur. His attempts to seduce both Leslie and Mary Alice come to nought. His association with Leslie consists almost entirely of "fantasies" (130), and he imagines that he "will make" Mary Alice "whisper, moan, and squeal with joy amid tangled sheets in the hotter tangle of love" (431). But like Stingo's metaphor of rebirth at the book's end, these imaginary love affairs are merely constructions of fantasy and language.

Like Stingo, Sophie has only a limited range of choices. However, her alternatives are much more circumscribed than his. Furthermore, just as her life is rigidly controlled, the progress of events within her life is predetermined and she is shunted from one despotic, authoritarian environment to another. While young, she is ruled by her father and husband. Following the Nazi occupation of Poland, Sophie "went to Warsaw - it was necessary" for her to "find work" (86). She tells Nathan that after living there for three years, "I was sent to the concentration camp in the south of Poland called Auschwitz-Birkenau" (143). After Auschwitz is liberated, Sophie is sent to a "displaced person's camp" (66). And, in New York, she flounders until Nathan enters her life to "take care of everything" (105).

Yet, Sophie is doomed from the beginning. Although she grew up in a home in which her parents were well-educated - that is, they were "both professors at the university" in Cracow (81) - her formal education ended prematurely and she "was married very, very young" (83). Her early life was restricted and her choices circumscribed by "enforced obsequiousness" to her father (241). The restrictions imposed on her by the war, then by Auschwitz, and finally by Nathan, are merely variations of the "tyrannical domination" of her father (238).

Sophie's lack of choices shapes her reactions toward the world around her. At times she is powerless to resist what others do to her and is unable to defend herself from abuse, as if she does not know how to do so. In fact, she is often a yielding victim and Stingo as narrator presents Sophie as feeling "that she was as helpless as a crippled moth" (263). Her defenselessness is exemplified by Morris's description of Nathan beating her: "and she doesn't move and then he gets down on his knees and begins to slap the livin' shit out of her" (61). Again, she submits in the Connecticut woods when Nathan kicks her three times "hard between two of her ribs" (340). Similarly, she passively acquiesces to Wilhelmine's "advances" (263).

At times, Sophie vainly tries to exert some control over her environment, but her attempts to assert herself

are desperate and thwarted acts. This tendency is most forcibly demonstrated at Auschwitz by her conversation with the "maverick" S.S. doctor, which results in immediate death for her daughter, Eva (484). Likewise, her "attempt at seducing Hoss" and winning "freedom for Jan" also comes to nothing (392).

Thus, Sophie is unable to choose until forced into a position in which there is clearly no real choice. Her predetermined fate is illustrated by her forced "choice" of Jan over Eva - she must decide or both will be sent to the gas chamber (483). After she has made this decision, everything that Sophie does follows inexorably from her feelings of guilt and nothing that she does can absolve her of that sense of guilt.

Beginning with her release from the death camp, Sophie is almost literally resurrected from the dead to be brought back to apparent good health. Although she is reprieved from hell (Auschwitz), in New York she still periodically descends into the netherworld of the subway and into the fiery torments of her guilt. Sophie is paired with another tortured soul, Nathan. It is clear that they are both living with a sense of their damnation, which early in the book Nathan expresses, "'Don't...you...see...Sophie...we...are...dying! Dying!'" (77). Stingo vicariously experiences their torment, for he hears that statement and even before overhearing it,

he knows "with a dreamer's fierce clarity" that Sophie is "doomed" (53).

Although Sophie is initially rescued by Nathan and attracted by his charm, kindness, and good looks, she senses in him the same feelings of impending doom that she herself feels. Had she wished to live, it would have been wise for Sophie to detach herself from him, but she is incapable of doing so and ultimately is unwilling to resist him. Attracted by his magneticism, Sophie loves Nathan and is not strong enough to pull herself away. Nathan is at once both "her savior" (because her only release from hell is death) and "her destroyer" (by instigating her suicide). Indeed, Sophie is well aware of Nathan's dual role, as she tells Stingo "in a voice alternately desperate and hopeful" (136).

Furthermore, Sophie is spiritually dead and dwells in her own particular hell. She has lost her religious faith and belief. For this reason, it is allegorically appropriate that her union with Nathan should be sterile. Even her earlier attempts at fertility are futile, as is brutally illustrated by the annihilation of her children at Auschwitz. Superficially, she appears to have another chance to begin a family with Nathan, but it is very probable that the hardships that she endures at Auschwitz have made her sterile, as the doctor at the center for displaced persons implies when he tells her

that she has probably suffered "more or less permanent and damaging metabolic changes " (90).

In an interview with Stephen Lewis, Styron suggests a connection between death and a regeneration symbolizing creativity. He explains that Sophie and Nathan embody a literary tradition in which the death wish and the procreative urge are inseparably entwined. Styron insists that this conflicting desire is a vital aspect of their relationship.[8]

Paralleling the erotic relationship of Sophie and Nathan, Stingo's attempts to "understand" (513) the great sterility, death and hell of Auschwitz figuratively stimulate his creativity by causing him to write, that is, to create. Here, also, as Richard Pearce notes, the erotic theme connects both with death and fertility.[9] Furthermore, Stingo's passion for Sophie is part of his creative urge.

Nathan shares in Sophie's agony, but he is also her tormentor. According to Richard Pearce, Nathan is a "life force," a "monster" who serves as a substitute for Sophie's father.[10] His destructive, psychotic force is anti-happiness and anti-creation, thus illustrating his sterility.

Yet, like Sophie, Nathan himself has suffered intensely. Allen Shepherd correctly points out that Nathan's suffering parallels that of Sophie - he was

locked up most of his adult life and could expect to be reincarcerated at any time.[11] And because of his illness, Nathan, like Sophie, is unable to choose a safe existence over hell. Shepherd's observation demonstrates that the characters of this novel are more alike than different and once again illuminates Sophie's universality, for, although her suffering is extreme, she is representative of the universal nature of human suffering in Sophie's Choice.

However, Nathan's suffering differs from Sophie's because his pain arises from mental illness. Yet one commentator on the novel, G. A. M. Janssens, contends that if "Nathan's case" were resolved "in the moral rather than in the pathological sphere, it might have been better attuned to the weighty questions the novel poses."[12] But it is important to note that Nathan, Sophie, and even Stingo frequently find themselves in situations in which there are no consistent moral guidelines. The resulting confusion of moral standards makes it possible for hells to be created and sustained. Certainly at Auschwitz, the mechanical and scientific efficiency is both logical and rational. The Nazis use "discriminating methods of cost accounting and other advanced formulations of input and output" (236). Yet machines and science are amoral, that is, outside the bounds of morality. In view of the mechanically created

hells of Sophie's Choice, Allen Shepherd perceptively terms Nathan a "mechanical devil."[13]

Unlike a machine, however, Nathan has become sick, but in spite of being "quite mad" (424), his suspicions are usually founded on a grain of truth that he magnifies out of all proportion. For example, he accuses Stingo of planning to have an affair with Sophie, and Stingo, infatuated with Sophie, dreams of "making ravenous love" to her (299). Nathan taunts Sophie with accusations of "anti-Semitism" (209). In reality, as "dragooned secretary," she unthinkingly aids her father in his anti-Semitic activities, and she tries, while in Auschwitz, to use her father's "pamphlet" to curry favor with Hoss in order to save herself and her son Jan (241, 276). Thus, Nathan's instincts are correct, but his conclusions are misleading and erroneous. Sick and crazy in a sick and crazy world, Nathan is a perfect embodiment of the post-Holocaust world of this book.

Contrasting with Nathan, Stingo serves as Sophie's alternative to her lover, but his youth is no match for Nathan's deadly charm. Sophie may waver a little between the two of them, but Stingo is not compelling enough to draw her away from the charms of death - Nathan and his premonitions of doom.

In the post-Holocaust world of Sophie and Nathan, Stingo is inadequate. His faith and optimism are

repeatedly called into question by the events of the novel. Stingo is pale and washed-out in comparison to Nathan's dramatic personality. While Nathan is self-assured and commanding, Stingo is indecisive and his deficiencies emphasize how unrealistic his hopes and his idealism really are.

Clearly, in this book, hell dominates over paradise and evil is stronger than good. Even Stingo's eventual sexual initiation by Sophie results in exhaustion, abandonment, and despair. He follows Sophie back to New York only to find her "dead" (507). For Stingo, as for Sophie and Nathan, fertility and regeneration are unrealistic goals, for they are not possibilities.

Section III

The numbers of unnatural and premature deaths within Sophie's Choice call into the question both the possibility of regeneration and the possibility of choosing between life and death. Thus Sophie and Nathan can only find peace in death. The Nazis peremptorily condemn their victims to death, some to die quickly while some, like Sophie, die slowly. Others, such as Mr. Farrell and Dr. Blackstock, are doomed to a life without the persons whom they most love.

Just as the book calls into question the possibility of choosing life over death, it also raises the question of whether there are any truly serene and lasting havens. As noted earlier, within Sophie's Choice, settings that appear to be serene and tranquil actually possess a dual nature. The examples of Edens in this book are illusory because they are impossible to attain. They are false because of their proximity to and dependence upon various hells. Just as Stingo's peanut farm in Virginia is a mirage because it is unattainable, so are the Polish farms surrounding Auschwitz, which Sophie can only imagine. The garden at Haus Hoss is another false Eden for Sophie - she sleeps in the basement and

works in the attic; the garden is wholly outside her sphere.

These Edens are dual in nature because while they possess an illusion of beauty and serenity, they are rooted in evil. The peanut farm is the legacy of the "bigoted" Frank Hobbs (108). The Polish farmers in the vicinity of the death camp acquiesce in the evil of Auschwitz by doing nothing to resist it.

Moreover, the unconquerable nature of evil within Sophie's Choice is demonstrated by chimerical paradise-like settings that are formed and nourished by the novel's mechanized hells, so that many of them result either directly or indirectly from the amoral nature of machines and their use by human beings in an unfeeling, immoral manner. The automated New York subway parallels the classical subterranean Hades, but its demons, such as the "digital" rapist (92), are as unemotional and nameless as machines. Sterile, desolate McGraw-Hill is ominous because of the robot-like quality of its employees, whose standard of moral behavior requires that a man must "wear a hat" (17). The wasted lands of New Jersey through which Stingo and Sophie travel on the train are "satanic industrial barrens" (451).

Of course, the most obvious example of an efficient, mechanized hell is the death factory of Auschwitz, where death is an assembly-line process that functions

with industrial proficiency. The people who operate Auschwitz have become mere cogs within the machine which is Auschwitz. Even the commandant, Rudolf Hoss, is an "automaton," "a mere servomechanism," "an obedient robot" (149). Here the mechanization and efficiency are not only the means of creating and sustaining the hell but part of its evil as well. These characteristics make it possible for the worst of human impulses to be realized. Atrocities at Auschwitz are mass-produced on assembly lines. The raw materials - human beings - are packed in freight trains for transport and provide fuel for the ovens. Those people who are spared immediate death are stacked, rather than housed, in warehouse-like barracks, while those who are selected for extermination are murdered with the most up-to-date methods of the day.

Yet Styron's hells are also based on biblical models. For example, Sophie's Auschwitz has its own Satan in the person of the urbane Durrfeld, the I. G. Farben executive. It is Durrfeld who appears as Satan in Sophie's dream. When she encounters him in the seaside chapel, where she "wandered," she hears "a clattering of hoofs on the floor" and smells smoke. In her dream, Sophie, "in a frenzy of craving" and "with pleasure" collaborates with this Satan in desecrating the church by copulating with him at the altar (402).

In the environment of Auschwitz even theology becomes perverted when Jemand von Nieman, a religious ghoul and fiend of this particular inferno, forces Sophie's "choice" (483) by twisting the precept of Christianity from one of love to one of murder. Indeed, in the world which Styron has created in Sophie's Choice, humane ideals of love have been corrupted and perverted.

Like the representations of hells and wastelands, those of the book's pseudo-Edens are biblically based as well. In the original garden of Eden, Adam and Eve are commanded by God to "Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Genesis 1: 28).[14] In Sophie's Choice, the apparent Edens seem to Stingo to be as fecund as the original. Yet in none of these is life actually regenerated. For example, the garden at Haus Hoss contains plants, animals, and children, but all have been imported and set down ready-made. Prospect Park is home to animals, such as the geese that Sophie names, but she and Stingo are not Adam and Eve, and there are no eggs, no goslings, no children, and no prospects of rebirth. Stingo imagines a "matrimonial bed," "children," and animals on an Eden-like farm in Virginia, but these new lives can only exist within his imagination (449).

Moreover, the above illusory images of fertility and regeneration are repeatedly countered by and linked

with vignettes of death. Both of Sophie's children perish at Auschwitz. The Nazis "cut Josef's throat" and hang Wanda "up on a hook and let her strangle to death" (357, 475). Eddie Farrell is killed "by a sniper" on Okinawa (23). And even on the day that Sophie meets Nathan, she herself feels that she is dying. She is revived by Nathan, almost literally brought back to life, from a "dead faint," only to die at the end of the book (104).

Furthermore, the repeated pattern of erotic imagery includes a metaphor of distorted or thwarted sexuality/ fertility. In other words, there are repeated examples of nonprocreative sexual behavior that show the barrenness of the world within Sophie's Choice. One is the German soldier whom Sophie sees from the train "grinningly exhibiting himself" (479). Wilhelmine, the housekeeper of Haus Hoss, who "had all but pounced upon" Sophie (262), is an excellent illustration of this kind of sterility, as is the "digital" rapist on the subway (92). Emblematic of a thwarted and frustrated fertility is the behavior of the "little Miss Cock Tease" who does not know how to say either "Yes" or "No!" (121). She simply cannot make a choice. Leslie Lapidus and Mary Alice Grimball also demonstrate this type of behavior. Leslie's sex life is entirely "foul, priceless words" (127). Mary Alice's "sexual eccentricity" is that her

erotic response exists only in her perfunctory, emotionless, detached hands (432). Both Leslie and Mary Alice are incapable of reproducing life.

This distorted sexuality demonstrates a central sterility that occurs not only within hells and wastelands but also within such apparently idyllic settings as Jack Brown's country home. For example, in Sophie's bright, colorful room, which is "fragrant with fresh flowers" (62), no life is created, despite the sexual acrobatics of Sophie and Nathan.

Furthermore, fertility is never quite realized, even by those characters who engage in heterosexual copulation. Indeed, at least three are missing vital parts of themselves. Sophie has lost her health, her teeth, and her religious faith. Nathan is "paranoid schizophrenic" (424) and thus lacking the emotional equanimity of a normal person. Even such a well-adjusted person as Stingo's friend Jack Brown is mutilated; he has lost a leg.

However, in spite of the pervasive nonregeneration within the novel, there exist numerous allusions to fertility. For example, "storks...builded their nests" atop chimneys in prewar Cracow (79). This motif is also embodied by the boy and girl whom Sophie sees at Brooklyn College "kissing with the urgent hunger of animals" (103). In this novel, Styron extends the

regeneration metaphor to equate fecundity with creativity and Stingo envisions his renascence through his ability to use words. On a literal level, he conceives his characters by writing with Venus pencils. Drawing attention to the fertility motif in his discussion of language as "the medium and subject" of this novel, Michael Kreyling explains that Stingo confuses words with living things because words have color, warmth, movement, and sound. Stingo is infatuated with words and confesses to an "almost 'erotic'" obsession with them,[15] so that, in Sophie's Choice, the eroticism of language mirrors Stingo's sense of the possibility of regeneration through intellectual and verbal creativity.

However, in this novel, destruction is so pervasive that regeneration is impossible. Thus, although the book's allegorical references to fertility are not negative, they are negated. Furthermore, the sterility of language is demonstrated threefold by the creator, publisher, and keeper of literature. Stingo, the literary progenitor, becomes a party to cruelty, as Elizabeth Hardwick has noted, when he uses blood money from the sale of the slave Artiste, to get his start as an artist.[16] Moreover, Stingo's novel, Sophie's Choice, depends on the double tragedies of Maria and Sophie, tragedies which he never fully understands. The publisher, McGraw-Hill, manufactures "works of technology" (5)

rather than art. Finally, the "pallid dour" librarian, Mr. Sholom Weiss, keeper and guardian of "volume after volume of the earth's humane wisdom" is a "demi-monster" who, surrounded by words, cannot answer or even decipher Sophie's question (103). In such a world, art feeds on death and misery, and the artist does not even understand his own work. The publisher does not produce literature and the guardian of knowledge forbids admittance to one in search of knowledge. Within this book, art exists in a wasteland, a Hades of its own and is presented as powerless to redeem or regenerate. Stingo thinks he can achieve an intellectual and spiritual rebirth from his endeavor, but he does not.

Thus, in Sophie's Choice, the impotent nature of literature demonstrates the sterility of language. Furthermore, as Michael Kreyling appropriately observes, language is meaningless in a world that permits the existence of Auschwitz because Auschwitz constitutes "a blasphemy against language, for it negates the human connection of language."[17] This contradiction of the humanness of language is demonstrated by the Nazi euphemisms for their cruelties and murders. Even innocent Leslie Lapidus demonstrates the emptiness of words with her verbal enticements.

Nonetheless, Stingo does feel that language truly has meaning, and he demonstrates this belief by writing

his book about Sophie. Furthermore, Stingo's faith in the expressiveness of language is inexorably allied to his hope for the future, which is demonstrated by the novel's epigram from Malraux. Brotherhood, compassion, and empathy shine from inside the soul, and, united, people can "confront" and fight against evil. But in the world of Sophie's Choice, there is no salvation or escape from evil. Malevolence pervades the narrative, and every character is sucked into the maelstrom of evil, even those who, like Sophie, seek most to avoid it.

The novel makes clear that Sophie is doomed to die young and soon because of events beyond her control. However, although she does not have the freedom to arrange the surrounding world or to choose to live in idyllic circumstances, limited choices are available to her. For Sophie, as for the slave, Nat Turner, there is only one accessible freedom, and that is the ability to choose her reactions to the various environments in which she is placed. But because Sophie has never had control of her own life, she does not understand that she can make this limited choice. Passively, she avoids making decisions and taking actions until it is too late for her to be effective. A prime example is her attempt to steal Emmi's radio. Sophie waits until she has only one possible last chance and is so hurried and desperate that she makes "a ghastly error in tactics and timing" -

she does not see that the child is in the room (395).

Because Sophie does not understand the limited alternatives which are available to her, she also does not know that she can consciously decide to resist evil and she does not realize that passivity is acquiescence. Therefore, she does nothing. But her biographer, Stingo, chooses to do what Sophie could not do - he resolves to resist evil by writing Sophie's story.

In the end, however, Stingo overestimates the power of the human will to combat evil. As the story concludes, he is lying on a beach where children are playing and "chattering nearby." He dreams of being "buried alive," but as he awakens he sees the planet Venus "solitary and serene," and he feels almost as if he has been resurrected from the dead. Although he should be in mourning, he believes that he has awakened to a new day, "Morning: excellent and fair." Nonetheless, while he feels resurrected, he is only "as safe as a mummy," that most dead and mutilated of humans (515). Clearly, Stingo does not comprehend that, for him and his world, the hope of regeneration is a false hope.

Furthermore, the world to which he awakens is the same world in which Sophie has only the limited freedom to choose her reactions to the authoritarian environments in which she finds herself. It is the same world in which the Nazis tortured and murdered. It is a world in

which nothing has essentially changed.

In such a world, hope is unrealistic. The Nazis were defeated, but the immorality that they represented remains and for this reason the potential for evil still exists. Notwithstanding Sophie's misfortunes, the story is full of such examples as "the brutal deaths of two Jews at the Treblinka extermination camp" (216), or the murders of Josef and Wanda.

However, Stingo's desire for a better world prevents him from changing his perceptions of the human condition, so his knowledge of Sophie's tragedy cannot give him a clearer understanding of human nature. When he awakens on the beach, he knows that he has reached a major turning point in his life, but this does not make him a wiser person. Although writing about Maria's death and suicide should help him to gain sufficient insight to understand his encounter with Sophie and Nathan, he fails to fully grasp the significance of their deaths. And as an author, writing many years later, the older Stingo has little sense of the crassness of his earlier behavior. Stingo also does not perceive the extent to which his fate and the fates of others are predetermined. In his narration, he offers a promise of salvation from the nightmarish post-Holocaust landscape, but his promise proves, finally, to be vain and illusory because in this novel choice is merely a matter of determining one's own

limited reactions. Stingo does not comprehend the omnipresence of evil in his world, mistakenly thinking he can control his destiny. While he has illusions of having the freedom to choose to live in a pastoral Eden, his narrative presents a bleak vision of those doomed to suffer a death in life within earth's hellish wastelands. He does not comprehend the implications of his own narrative, one of which is that there is no sanctuary or safety and also that the individual cannot even choose to live via procreation (having children) or through intellectual and artistic regeneration. Because of his lack of prescience, Stingo is destined to experience an artistic, intellectual, and spiritual sterility from which there is no salvation.

NOTES

[1]Robert K. Morris, "Interviews with William Styron," The Achievement of William Styron, Eds. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981) 56.

[2]Valarie Meliotes Arms, "An Interview with William Styron," Contemporary Literature. 20.1 (1979): 8.

[3]Morris, 57.

[4]Ben Forkner and Gilbert Schricke, "An Interview with William Styron," Conversations with William Styron, Ed. James L. W. West, III (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985) 197.

[5]Morris, 56, 57.

[6]William Styron, Sophie's Choice (New York; Random House, 1976) 149.

[7]William Heath, "I, Stingo: The Problem of Egotism in Sophie's Choice," Southern Review, 20.3 (1984): 532-538.

[8]Stephen Lewis, "William Styron," Conversations with William Styron, Ed. James L. W. West, III (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985) 262-263.

[9]Richard Pearce, "Sophie's Choices," The Achievement of William Styron, Eds. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981) 286-287.

[10]Pearce, 289-290.

[11]Allen Shepherd, "The Psychopath as Moral Agent in William Styron's Sophie's Choice," Modern Fiction Studies, 28.4 (1982-83): 604.

[12]G. A. M. Janssens, "Styron's Case and Sophie's Choice," From Cooper to Roth: Essays on American Literature, Eds. J. Bakker and D. R. M. Wilkinson (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1980) 89.

[13]Shepherd, 607.

[14]King James Bible, Genesis 1: 28.

[15]Michael Kreyling, "Speakable and Unspeakable in Styron's Sophie's Choice," Southern Review, 20.3 (1984) 547, 549.

[16]Elizabeth Hardwick, "Southern Literature: The Cultural Assumptions of Regionalism," Southern Literature in Transition: Heritage and Promise, Eds. Philip Castille and William Osborne (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1983) 19.

[17]Kreyling, 552.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Styron, William. Lie Down in Darkness. New York: Random House, 1951.

Styron, William. The Long March. New York: Random House, 1952.

Styron, William. Set This House on Fire. New York: Random House, 1959.

Styron, William. The Confessions of Nat Turner. New York: Random House, 1966.

Styron, William. Sophie's Choice. New York: Random House, 1976.

Styron, William. This Quiet Dust and Other Writings. New York: Random House, 1982.

Secondary Sources

Arms, Valarie Meliotes. "An Interview with William Styron." Contemporary Literature 20.1 (1979): 1-12.

Forkner, Ben and Schricke, Gilbert. "An Interview with William Styron," Conversations with William Styron. Ed. James L. W. West, III. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985. 190-202.

Hardwick, Elizabeth, "Southern Literature: The Cultural Assumptions of Regionalism," Southern Literature in Transition: Heritage and Promise. Eds. Philip Castille and William Osborne. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1983. 17-28.

Heath, William. "I, Stingo: The Problem of Egotism in Sophie's Choice." Southern Review 20.3 (1984): 528-545.

Janssens, G. A. M. "Styron's Case and Sophie's Choice." From Cooper to Roth: Essays on American Literature. Eds. Bakker, J. and Wilkinson, D. R. M. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980. 80-92.

King James Bible. Genesis 1: 28.

Kreyling, Michael. "Speakable and Unspeakable in Styron's Sophie's Choice." Southern Review 20.3 (1984): 546-561.

Lewis, Stephen. "William Styron." Conversations with William Styron. Ed. James L. W. West, III. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985. 256-264.

Morris, Robert K. "Interviews with William Styron." The Achievement of William Styron. Eds. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981. 29-69.

Pearce, Richard. "Sophie's Choices." The Achievement of William Styron. Eds. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981. 284-297.

Shepherd, Allen. "The Psychopath as Moral Agent in William Styron's Sophie's Choice," Modern Fiction Studies 28.4 (1982-83): 604-611.

VITA

Reba Carol Dismukes

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 27, 1954. Graduated from Graceville High School in Graceville, Florida, June 1972, B. A. in Psychology, University of West Florida, December 1974.

In September 1983, the author entered the College of William and Mary as a graduate assistant in the Department of English.