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INTERPRETATIONS OF SEXUALITY IN WILLIAM STYRON'S  
*SOPHIE'S CHOICE*

William Styron's (1925–) *Sophie's Choice* (hereafter cited as *SC*) was published in 1979. As almost all of Styron's books this novel has also become highly controversial, and its treatment of the theme of sexuality has been criticized for the following 'weaknesses':

the supposedly chaotic combination of Stingo's sex life with Sophie and Nathan's destructive love, the unjustified comparison of antisemitic Poland to a racist American South, the confused linking of Stingo's experience as a writer to Nathan's drug-induced madness, and, most importantly, the juxtaposition of all the above themes to the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps. (Durham 449)

This paper aims to analyze the relationship between meaning and sexuality and tries to explore the ramifications of the questions that are raised in connection with this topic: In what way are the different meanings of sexuality as creative power and compensation are interpreted. What is the definition of sexuality as a communicational channel in the novel? What is the rhetoric of sexuality?

In order to try and find answers to these questions, first I will analyze the situations in which the three main characters, Stingo, Sophie and Nathan are sexually entangled. Sophie is a Roman Catholic Polish girl, who is accidentally taken to the Auschwitz concentration camp and loses her father, husband, lover and two children. After her sufferings in the camp, she arrives in the U.S., where the Jewish and schizophrenic Nathan Landau saves the

emaciated Sophie, and offers her a seemingly better life, in which safety and security are the greatest values for her. Stingo is an autobiographical character, who is a promising twenty-two-year-old writer from the Protestant South, starting his career in New York. He unintentionally intrudes and witnesses Sophie and Nathan's self-destructive relationship ending in suicide. By telling the story of her life, Sophie immerses Stingo in the horrors of the concentration camps, but, unlike the two other characters, Stingo is reborn from the vortex of "monstrous mechanisms" (SC 625).

At the beginning of the novel the themes of sexuality and creative power are interwoven with each other. Stingo works for McGraw-Hill publishing house and as a young man hoping to become a great writer he longs for experiencing sexuality and lust on the one hand and for reaching the height of his creative power on the other. When tracing the most memorable events of his sex life, he remembers that up until the age of 13 he visualized sexuality "as a brutish act committed in secrecy upon dyed blondes by huge drunken unshaven ex-convicts with their shoes on" (SC 379). Then he has postadolescent fantasies about the girls around him, but he does not go beyond autoeroticism, which he does not regard as being unhealthy, and he shares the accepted opinion saying that "It was an old wives' tale... in which it was imputed to masturbation such scourges as acne, or warts, or madness" (SC 65-66). The need to leave autoeroticism and to fulfil his sexual desires parallels with the urge to achieve success in his writing career, and he nourishes ambiguous feelings in connection with both.

Ambiguity characterizes Stingo's consciousness when he tries to align his views on sexuality with the accepted moral code in the South. He is aware of the fact that he himself violates accepted norms, but he also feels the weight of his Southern background. For example, Stingo usually sticks to a modern idea compared to the old dogmas on masturbation, but later on in the novel there are other situations in which he argues by considering an old-fashioned moral code. He proposes marriage to Sophie at the end of the novel, and says that it is impossible to live down in the South and not to get married. Stingo justifies his incompleteness in the past by ignoring the same

moral code that he does adapt when projecting his own personal conduct in the future.

Individuals interpret everything as it is the most convenient for them and as it serves their purpose. Beyond regarding sexuality as satisfying lust, Stingo longs for establishing a family which he imagines as the stereotypical family based on the partners' mutual love and understanding, in which the mother, the father and all the other family members live up to their stereotypical roles imposed on them by the moral code of a Puritanical society. He ignores the contrary images of the family as a violent community where children are abused, wives and husbands divorce, beat and kill each other.

The young girls around Stingo make him remember the absence of 'real' heterosexuality in an office with "all-male clientele, mostly middle-aged or older" (SC 11). In the office the managers and heads are all men and the secretaries are women. The women in the office work under male management, under male conduct. This situation makes it possible for feminist critics to interpret the organization of labor in the office as a nice example of male chauvinism and misogyny. For Stingo the office job was monotonous, and he could be anything but a misogynist. The office is just the place where he is surrounded by women and his desire is aroused, as it usually happens to a man with a heterosexual flair.

Later on in the novel it is sexuality that brings Sophie, Nathan and Stingo together. In Yetta Zimmerman's house the innocent Stingo, who is a newcomer, gets to know about his neighbors, Sophie and Nathan, in an unconventional way. He "looked up at the ceiling in alarm. The lamp fixture jerked and wobbled like a puppet on a string" (SC 43). Stingo is accidentally exposed to Sophie and Nathan's sexuality even without first knowing or meeting them in person. This sexuality is faceless, he does not know his neighbors personally. From what he can see and hear he realizes that they are making love. The situation seems to be exotic to Stingo and it is because the words he can hear are "exotically accented" (SC 43). He cannot make out the words exactly, he can only hear sounds. For Stingo the accent of the words is enough to stimulate desire. The accent has a meaning to Stingo and not the word as a linguistic unit. This situation demonstrates that it is not necessary for words to have meanings and

to have distinctive forms. Maybe the sound sequence is a word upstairs in Sophie and Nathan's room, but it sounds like a murmur or a groan in Stingo's room.

Stingo's first love is Miriam Bookbinder, a Jewish girl. He remembers her while eating in a restaurant and enjoying his meal. One enjoyment evokes the image of another. "Enjoy, enjoy, Stingo, I said to myself ... I have from the very beginning responded warmly to Jews, my first love having been Miriam Bookbinder" (SC 45). Through the girl Stingo experiences empathy with Jews.

The first episode which darkens Stingo's erotic fantasies is the Maria Hunt story. He loved the girl when he was fifteen, and his father writes about her death. Maria committed suicide. She was from a tragic household. Her father was an alcoholic and her mother had high moral demands on people. Maria Hunt's story coincides with that of Peyton Loftis in Styron's first novel entitled *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951). The 'doomed' Maria Hunt's life is embedded in Stingo's story, she is the link between the two novels. After reading about Maria Stingo has a nightmarish erotic dream.

I soon fell into a heavy sleep that was more than ordinarily invaded by dreams. One of the dreams besieged me, nearly ruined me. Following several pointless little extravaganzas, a ghastly but brief nightmare, and an expertly constructed one-act play, I was overtaken by the most ferociously erotic hallucination I had ever experienced. (SC 52)

This is the first time when love and death are interwoven in the way they appear in Edgar Allen Poe's stories.

Another erotic incident awakens Stingo from his nightmarish and erotic dream. He can hear the still unknown neighbors making love upstairs. In the previous situation the noises from upstairs were stimulating but now after bearing the burden of the Hunt story Stingo's response is different. He shouts, " 'Stop it!' ... Fucking Jewish rabbits!" (SC 53). His anger expresses that Stingo interprets the neighbors' love-making in a different way compared to the first situation.

The first time Sophie and Stingo meet, he catches sight of her body and finds it sexually attractive. Sophie's physical appearance, after her



appearance in Stingo's mind as one of the love-makers, makes him realize how beautiful she is. Sophie's body has two functions for him. On the one hand it stands for the aim of his desire, on the other hand it makes him realize her sufferings. "As she went slowly up the stairs I took a good look at her body in its clinging silk summer dress. While it was a beautiful body,... It possessed the sickish plasticity ... of one who has suffered severe emaciation" (SC 61).

In the sequence of Stingo's sexual encounters Leslie Lapidus is the next character. Before trying to make love to her, Stingo recollects his sexual experiences. First he describes the "sexual moonscape of the 1940s" (SC 145). He describes the 40s as the era between the forefathers' puritanism and the arrival of public pornography. It was a transient period in which certain openness was accepted in sexual matters, but it was difficult to speak about it. Leslie Lapidus is a good example of the time. She could not speak about sex, and after her therapy she can, but she cannot do it. She is liberated to a certain extent, but not fully.

Stingo expects a lot from his date with Leslie. So far he has had an affair with a prostitute, but he does not count it as a 'real' sexual intercourse, because it was a failure for him. With all the tension and frustration in him which he says is due to the semi-puritanical 40s, he expects the fulfillment of his physical desire for Leslie. His desire towards Leslie is different from that for Sophie. He has a buried and poetic passion towards Sophie, and he wants to satisfy his needs with Leslie, as he wanted to with the prostitute. He assumes that his "attraction to Leslie was largely primal in nature, lacking the poetic and idealistic dimension of my buried passion for Sophie" (SC 145). He expects that Leslie would allow him to taste all the varieties of bodily experience filled with lust and she would be able to liberate his desires and further extend his artistic dimensions. A liberating force is needed when something is repressed. In this respect Stingo is not different from Leslie because he also has his repressed sexual desires and not-yet-born and latent artistic talent which also needs stimuli.

As I mentioned earlier in connection with the affair with autoeroticism and the moral code of the 40s, it is always necessary for Stingo to find justification for his sexual life. The keen striving for proving that what he does is right and accepted by even conservative

moral standards is present in the following lines. "Another thing: I had been almost beside myself with a sense of rightness of this prospect. Every devoted artist, however impecunious, I felt deserved at least this" (SC 144). When he starts making love with Leslie he tries to calm himself by doing things he thinks is typical of the forties. He does "a certain amount of smooching ... 'bare tit'..." (SC 147). The duality of clinging to the Puritan moral code of the 40s and the liberation of sexual desires is always present in Stingo's life.

Language and tongue are also of great importance in Stingo's relationship with Leslie Lapidus. Language means sexuality to Stingo when he hears this name. The 'l' sound implies sex because it is an alveolar and lateral sound, and its formation involves tongue activity. For Stingo, who links almost everything to sex, the tongue is a sexual organ and a speech organ, but the two functions are related to each other as tongue can be used for doing sex and for speaking about sex as well. Thus he expects inexpressible pleasures from Leslie after hearing her name. It also adds something to Stingo's excitement that oral sex was not accepted by the Puritan morals, and doing it meant breaking the rules, doing something forbidden. His expectations are even greater when he hears her speaking about sex. She does not have any inhibitions about language. She stretches out on the sandy beach and "peering into my face with all the unstrained, almond-eyed, heathen-whore-of-Babylon wantonness I had ever dreamed of, suggested in unbelievably scabrous terms the adventure that awaited me" (SC 148). Regarding sexuality, the impression Leslie has on Stingo goes a little bit beyond his expectations, because she can use her language so freely that he is even shocked. The following observation ironically expresses his astonishment, "Only the fact that I was too young for a coronary occlusion saved my heart, which stopped beating for critical seconds" (SC 148).

Stingo and Leslie are connected to language in another way as well. They both have a good command of English because they have majored in English. They can talk about Hart Crane and Walt Whitman, but all these conversations lose their importance when he sees her breasts. The conversation no longer has any meaning to Stingo. It is only meaningless background noise. It is meaningless in the sense that words do not mean as linguistic units. Their significance

is that they express a ritual. This meaning of the words is completely new to Stingo. This background conversation is just a prelude, or a foreplay, or an introduction to something desired. It is like the foreplay before the fulfillment of sexual desire. For Stingo it was a “prelude, a preliminary feeling-out of mutual sensibilities in which the substance of what one said was less important than the putative authority with which one’s words were spoken” (SC 151). Stingo realizes it is like a verbal game.

In this verbal game almost all the conversational fragments start with “My analyst said....” (SC 151). Eventually it turns out that Leslie’s repressed sexual desires are brought to the surface by uttering words that are connected to the sexual intercourse. Her analyst intended to liberate her sexuality by teaching her to pronounce these words. Although Stingo speaks about Leslie’s analytic treatment ironically, because he expected more than just kissing, the treatment was successful. She learned to use her tongue for sex in two ways; speaking about sex and doing it. Stingo’s disappointment comes from the fact that he expects words to mean what they mean. He thinks she means sexual intercourse when she mentions sexual intercourse. But for Leslie words have another function. Words can be speech acts, and words can substitute for actions. For her uttering the words ‘fantastic...fucking’(SC 205) is such a great achievement and enjoyment as a sexual intercourse in its physical sense could be for Stingo.

The sexual intercourse remains a fantasy to Leslie. She can imagine other people doing it, but not her. She finds great fun in imagining historical figures making love. These images are revolts for her. It is like desecrating history or in other words to ‘fuck’ history, but only in words. These images do something to her, they satisfy her. She says, “I mean, doesn’t it just do something to you to think of one of those ravishing girls with that crinoline all in a fabulous tangle, and one of those gorgeous young officers—I mean, both of them fucking like crazy?” (SC 208).

She reads Lady Chatterley’s Lover, which gives her inspiration, but nothing more. The fantasies she has are not much different from Stingo’s, since they do not go beyond autoeroticism.

Stingo meets Leslie several times, and he always has high hopes, before meeting her he is always “in a state of semi-arousal” (SC 200). He recalls memories of his erections. By remembering these situations he stimulates himself up to a higher and higher level, from where it is getting more and more painful to fall down into the deeper and deeper hole of frustrations. Ironically, the pain is not only spiritual but physical as well.

I can assume I am suffering from a case of ‘severe acute glossitis,’ an inflamed condition of the tongue’s surface which is of traumatic origin but doubtless aggravated by bacteria, viruses and all sorts of toxicity resulting from five or six hours of salivary exchange unprecedented in the history of my mouth and I daresay anyone’s. (SC 211)

Finally, he concludes that her failure is due to her Oedipal complex. “Should I have suspected something a little bit amiss when a few minutes later, as we were bidding the Lapiduses and Fields farewell on the gravel driveway, I saw Mr. Lapidus kiss Leslie tenderly on the brow and murmur, ‘Be good my little princess?’” (SC 205).

Another sign of her complex is that she does not dare to touch his penis which is the organ of her joyful fantasies, but it is also the organ which could take her virginity and the Puritan morality of the 40s away. She sticks to the idea of ‘your virginity should be preserved until you get married’ so notoriously that when she is forced to touch it she “sails off the sofa as if someone has lit a fire beneath her and at that moment the evening and all my wretched fantasies and dreams turn to a pile of straw” (SC 213).

The Leslie Lapidus story can have other interpretations as well. For example a feminist reading of the text could make it possible to say that Leslie is the victim of male chauvinism. She is forced to touch Stingo’s organ, and it is more like an implication of a rape. The male organ is the symbol of all female frustrations. It is the organ a girl lacks, and in our male dominated world she would like to own it, but it is impossible. It is the penis envy motive and it is the symbol of eternal frustrations that are a part of Leslie’s unconscious.

Stingo gets disappointed with Leslie, and his frustration reaches a state when he is no longer interested in her life, and he does not want

to understand her. He does not want to understand psychoanalysis or the Christian dogmas on sexuality either. He thinks he was taken in, "if through those frigid little harpies in Virginia I had been betrayed chiefly by Jesus, I have been just as cruelly swindled at Leslie's hands by the egregious Doktor Freud. Two smart Jews, believe me" (SC 216). He escapes into work, into writing. He tries to forget his sexual urge, he leaves the promise of physical satisfaction behind, and he wants to find spiritual satisfaction in arts.

The reader does not know a lot about another female character who might have played an important role in Stingo's life. It is Stingo's mother. The presence of the mother figure in Stingo's life is not so relevant as the lack of it. He thinks that he contributed to his mother's death, and that is why he has the combined feelings of remorse, self-hatred and guilt. The mother suffered from cancer and Stingo had to look after her. As he was a young boy at that time, one day he went for a ride with his friends and left the mother alone. That single day would not have any significance if the mother had not died later. The mother's death attaches a different meaning to that day. Abandoning the mother causes his very strong sense of guilt. In the following line he remembers the funeral, "I thought of the hearth, and my deserted mother, and became sick with alarm. Jesus Christ, guilt..." (SC 360). He thinks he sinned against Jesus and against his mother and against the moral teaching of helping our human fellows in need.

The mother is the first determining female person in a child's life. From a psychoanalytical point of view it is possible to say that for Stingo the loss of the mother evoked a sense of guilt which recurs whenever Stingo gets involved with female characters. The mother's death is the starting point which evokes guilt, and since the mother stands for THE female, sexuality is associated with her. "I recaptured the fright in my mother's eyes, wondered once again if that ordeal had not somehow hastened her dying, wondered if she ever forgave me. Fuck it, I thought. Prompted by a commotion next door, I began to think of sex" (SC 362).

The mother figure is supposed to be so dominant in a person's life that she is usually idealized. It is extremely difficult to satisfy the needs of an idol, to live up to an idol. In your life, sooner or later you will do something with which you will hurt your mother, the idol.

Hurting the idol results in guilt. If you do not have the idol, you cannot hurt her. Through getting rid of her you could get rid of your guilt. But if you get rid of her, by killing her, or abandoning her, you will be a sinner. It is a vicious circle, and no way out is offered. First Stingo asks for her mother's forgiveness, but then, since he realizes that it is impossible now, he wants to get rid of the mother and forgiveness and the mother's death and everything connected to that incident. He escapes into dreams.

His dreams are filled with sexuality. He dreams about sexual scenes and about the three women who have played an important role in his life. In his dream he visualizes ironically exaggerated sex scenes, "glistening coral-pink vulvas as lofty as the portals of the Carlsbad Caverns; pubic hair like luxuriant groves of Spanish moss; ejaculating priapic engines the size of sequoias; jumbo-sized dreamy-faced wet-lipped young Pocahontases in all conceivable and meticulously detailed attitudes of suck and fuck." (SC 363) Stingo mentions Pocahontas, who is a legendary heroine and respected by most Americans. Mentioning her name in this text is the same as Leslie's fantasy about historical figures making love. It is Stingo's little rebellion against something that can be read only in one way. Stingo's reading of the Pocahontas story is different from the one offered to most Americans. Leslie does the same. She wants to see historical figures from her point of view, and not from the historiographers' point of view. She wants to read the historical texts differently.

The three women he conjures up are Sophie, Maria Hunt and Leslie. Stingo begins to analyze the relationships he had with these girls. Sophie is the Roman Catholic Polish girl, Leslie is Jewish, and Maria Hunt is the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant girl from the South. These are the general notions that can be attached to the girls, but these are the distinguishing features as well. The three girls can be compared to each other and to Stingo, and the comparison can be based on the family background or Jewishness or Catholicism, or any other criterion which is not worse and not better than the other.

Comparing the results of analysis and synthesis in Stingo's life, I will add that analysis usually ends in blind alleys. Talking about things over and over again, and analyzing them do not always lead to

a better understanding of things. Stingo, urged by his sexual desires, is impatient and after a while he gets fed up with trying to understand. At the beginning he tries to understand Leslie's frustrations, but finally he gives it up. It is the same with his mother. He tries to understand her suffering, but then he wants to escape and eschew his thoughts about her behind.

Is it all right to say that he cannot understand the significance of these situations? Perhaps he does not want to understand them because he cannot understand them. I do not think that this assumption is the explanation, however, if I accepted this explanation, I could end my essay by saying that Stingo is just a simple-minded character to whom it is too much to comprehend, analyze or synthesize. I think the explanation lies somewhere else. Perhaps there is no final truth to understand. Perhaps the problem is not with Stingo but with the aim of understanding. There is not one single thing to understand, there is not one single explanation, there is not one single and eternal truth. It takes a long time until the narrator Stingo realizes it.

Someday I will understand Auschwitz. This was a brave statement but innocently absurd. No one will ever understand Auschwitz. What I might have set down with more accuracy would have been: Someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world. Auschwitz itself remains inexplicable (SC 623).

Auschwitz is only one example. Stingo tries to understand Auschwitz the way he wants to understand sexuality. Since death, horrors and almost all situations in the novel are linked to sex, it seems to be suitable to find an explanation to the failure of Stingo's sex life in the diversity of sexuality. At the beginning of the novel he is frustrated because he always has a lot of truths in his mind and he wants to achieve a monolithic single truth about sex. He tries to meet the requirements of the truth of the culture that ingrained the mystique of manhood in him. Even his own ideas related to truth in sexuality are different and vary from situation to situation, he has his truths, his ideas; he wants to meet the moral requirements of the age; he has Leslie's truth; he wants to know Sophie's truth. But at the beginning he



wants to make up one unity, or entity out of these truths and he does not accept them as they are. He does not accept the diversity of these truths. It is only at the end of the novel, after Sophie's death, that Stingo learns to read Sophie's life and his own life, and tries to accept the lack of one single truth.

At the beginning of the novel Stingo could be a typical modernist writer, who wants to understand the truth. When he asks Sophie about the truth in Auschwitz Sophie gives him the answer that she herself does not know the truth. She, who lived in the concentration camp, can remember things and recall memories and speak about the horrors, but perhaps it is not the truth, and she admits it to him.

Eventually, Stingo finds that the analysis of his sex life provides answers to his questions on why he is sexually frustrated, but a synthesis also seems to be adequate. The synthesis is linked to sexuality and death which is not physical. The quotation here starts with an exclamation expressing the painfulness of sexual frustrations. "Oh Lord, how my balls hurt as I synthesized stormy love-making not only with Leslie but with the two other enchantresses who had claimed my passion. ... a gathering distinguished not only by its diversity but for the sense that all three were dead. ... so far as each of them concerned my life.." (SC 363).

While Stingo has these dreams he is lying in bed with his father. His relationship with his father is balanced because they both respect the difference in character they have between them. Stingo makes a noise while having his wild dreams, and the father wakes up to it. He asks his son about what it was. It is very difficult for Stingo to speak about his dreams, to express what he wants to say, or perhaps it is difficult because he does not want to say anything, but he is forced to say something. Even in a relationship as close as Stingo and his father's sexuality is not an easy topic to speak about. Making words meaningless is a good way of escape for Stingo. When his father asks him about the noise he feigns drowsiness, and murmurs "something intentionally unintelligible" (SC 364).

The father lying beside Stingo frustrates Stingo. He likes his father, and he affectionately loved him when he was a child, but now the father cannot satisfy Stingo's needs. They make up an anti-heterosexual couple.

Stingo's relationship with Mary Alice, the literate and sensitive girl, is also disappointing to Stingo. In a certain respect she is just the opposite of Leslie. She is from the South and she is prudish in the use of language. Her Baptist upbringing does not allow her to use nasty words or to have a sexual intercourse with somebody, but it allows her to satisfy her partner by hand. This kind of experience seems to be exciting to Stingo first, but later on he finds it boring, because he cannot reach his aim which is the intercourse itself. His frustration is expressed in his dream after the Mary Alice affair. He goes to bed and after hours of sleeplessness he has his first homosexual dream. To him homosexuality is shameful. It is hard for him to confess that he has had a dream like that, but after waking up he thinks of societies of people, like seamen in the Marine Corps, to whom homosexuality is the accepted norm.

Sophie is the dominant character in Stingo's sex life. She is the motivating force for Stingo to start his quest, his voyage of discovery into two fields. She speaks to him about her life and reveals the horrors of history, and she is the aim of Stingo's sexual desire. Stingo has his first physically satisfying sexual relationship with her.

Sophie and Stingo have some similarities in their lives. Music is life-affirming in their lives. Music forms an integral part in their lives and stories. From the Freudian point of view they both have some unresolved Oedipal ties, because both experienced the death of their opposite sex parent and they both have some guilt about these deaths, and they want some punishment for their obstinacy. They feel guilt over not having pleased the lost parent, and they desperately need the lost parent's love and approval. Their dreams reveal frustrated erotic feelings. They are both involved in eccentric sexual affairs, however, the difference between them is that Sophie experiences most of these, whereas Stingo fantasizes about them.

Daniel Ross explores SC in a paper entitled "Sophie's Case, or What Does a Man Want?". The paper was delivered at the Feminism and Psychoanalysis Conference at Illinois State University, May 3, 1986. Ross states that the novel is more a case history than a Bildungsroman. According to him a case history describes the tension between male and female, hero and heroine, teller and tale. Ross compares the relationship between Stingo and Sophie to the famous

Freud and Dora relationship. Sophie's story gains power and importance only through the male narrator, Stingo. Stingo writes about his relationship with Sophie and Sophie's story becomes noteworthy only through his narration. Sophie confesses her life and her guilt to her psychoanalyst, who is Stingo. Stingo recollects his memories of Sophie, because he had a memorable relationship with her. And this relationship is memorable because it is sex oriented, so sexuality is among the main factors that motivates Stingo to remember Sophie.

It is true that Sophie confesses her story to Stingo, and that sexuality has a major role in Stingo's remembering Sophie, but sexuality is also a limitation for Stingo. His desire for manhood through sexual initiation limits his understanding, if there is a full understanding of Sophie's story at all. If we accept that the full understanding is impossible, we have to assume that sexuality influences Stingo's understanding of the story. Sexuality is a coherent part of his understanding of Sophie's story, of her story and not of THE understanding of THE story.

What the reader of the novel knows about Sophie's sexuality seems to be the truth but in fact it is not. What the reader knows about it is quite ambiguous, because what the reader knows is only Stingo's interpretation of Sophie's life. And even Sophie's original interpretation is ambiguous, because at the beginning of the story she tries to camouflage certain facts and creates her reality out of lies.

What are the elements of Sophie's sexuality Stingo knows about? It is important to know the elements of Sophie's sexuality and her experiences as all these are embedded in Stingo's reading of sexuality.

Stingo knows about the "digital rape" (SC 110) that happens to Sophie on the metro in New York. In the dark a finger penetrates into her vagina. That rape filled up Sophie with horror because she does not know her assailant's features and she cannot respond to this act. She wants to register something like malediction or hatred or disgust or fright inside her but she cannot. Far away from Poland, seeking reconciliation with her unstable psyche, Sophie finds that the place she escapes to is also a nightmare. She feels that this world is even more violent than the world of the concentration camps because this violence is faceless.

Sexuality in the concentration camp is not different from that in New York. Both are varied. Violence, rape, homosexuality, heterosexuality and sex for interest are parts of sexuality everywhere. In the camp Sophie flirts with Hoss in order to save her son from the gas chamber. Sexuality induces Sophie's choice between her two children. Wilhelmine, Hoss' housekeeper forces Sophie to make love with her. Wanda is also a character who finds satisfaction in making love with women.

Sophie and Nathan's love-making is the expression of the diversity of their relationship. It is gentle but most of the time it is violent and aggressive owing to Nathan's drug-taking and schizophrenia. Their sexuality involves forced oral sex, Nathan's urinating into Sophie's mouth and raping her. Besides being mentally sick and a drug addict, Nathan cannot come to grips with the situation that Sophie, who is not a Jew, suffered in the concentration camp and survived it. He loves Sophie but from time to time this love turns into despising and degrading Sophie through sexual abuse. For example he calls her Irma Griesse, who was known for her cruelty in the camp. By raping Sophie he wants to take revenge on cruelty in the camp. First Stingo cannot understand their strange love-making and searching for meaning he asks Sophie why she lives with Nathan. Sophie cannot give a satisfactory answer to Stingo.

In spite of all these her relationship with Nathan is life-giving to Sophie. Nathan is everything to her. They make love and Sophie's touching Nathan's penis is like a child's asking for protection. "Whenever she began to grope for him she was reminded of the way a tiny baby's hand goes out to clutch an outstretched finger" (SC 395)

Sophie confesses to Stingo that in Warsaw she had a lover, Jozef. She did not tell Nathan about him but she does not know why (SC 432).

She has a dream about Walter Durrfeld, who has Jewish workers in his factory. In her dream he wildly makes love with her. After this dream she realises that she is attracted to him, but this attraction is ambiguous. She imagines having sex on an altar with him, and she thinks that she wants to pay back what she feels she has unfairly received.

Another explanation from the psychoanalytical point of view can be that in a male-dominated world in which Sophie lives, her sexual fantasies reveal her need to be overtaken, to submit to the power of male dominance. She chooses to enslave herself and it contributes to her tragic ending. But it also seems to be all right to say that Sophie is the victim of all men, because their desires and prejudices distort their ability to save and help her.

Stingo's relationship with Sophie brings him fulfillment. The first encounter they have ends in "Ejaculatio praecox (Psychology 4B at Duke University)" (SC 439). Later on, before Sophie meets her tragedy, they have varied and satisfying sexual intercourses in a hotel room. Stingo has not been the perfect lover to any of the previous girls. He needs Sophie to prove that he is a great lover. She is the only one who appreciates him. The sexual relationship is also satisfying to Sophie, because she is usually forced to make sex, except when she is with Stingo and sometimes with Nathan.

As it was revealed earlier in connection with Leslie Lapidus, language and sexuality are interwoven in the novel. Most students of English are shocked when they read SC because they find the language used in connection with sexuality obscene. But when they are given the task to express the same ideas that are in the novel in another way they have difficulty in finding substitutes for the nasty words. They have the same problem as all the characters have in the book, that is the difficulty of speaking about sexuality. Speaking about sexuality is not convenient because the way you speak about it tells the reader or the listener a lot about you.

What does the reader know about the characters' sexuality just by reading how they speak about it? He knows that Leslie's sexuality is repressed, Mary Alice Grimbball's is misused and abandoned, Nathan's is schizophrenic, Stingo's is unfulfilled and Sophie's is oppressed.

The language of sexuality causes a lot of trouble to translators as well. Translations always modify the effect because translations are the translators' interpretations of the writer's text. In the Russian version of the book all the four-letter words were left out. Almost all the sex scenes were left out of the film version. These facts prove that the sexual liberation has not achieved its purpose, yet.

Sophie is a character who takes liberties with sex. She does not have a good command of English, and it is a limitation in her understanding, in her vocabulary. At the same time it is a great advantage as well. Sophie uses the English words she knows more freely than other characters. It is because the emotive value of words is different to her than it is to native speakers of English. She is the innocent user of English. She says that, “Dirty words in English or Yiddish sound better than they do in Polish” (SC 233).

At another chapter Sophie confesses that she is lost in the English-speaking world, because she cannot understand everything (SC 396). Is it important to understand everything? Not necessarily. In the happiest moment of their love-making Stingo and Sophie forget about what language they speak. It is such a freedom for them that they do not have to force their thoughts and feelings into meaningful linguistic units. Stingo admits that a “kind of furious obsessed wordlessness finally — no Polish, no English, no language, only breath” (SC 604).

In Sophie’s sexuality the versatility of language is also joyful. Whenever she is with Stingo she finds pleasure in seeking different words for the sex organs and for sexual activities.

Quiescence and wordlessness recur at the very end of the novel when Sophie and Nathan lie dead in bed. Their entangled bodies rest in “total quiescence” (Brooks 110) after the last outburst of desire.

The rhetoric of sexuality in the novel shows that sexuality can have lots of meanings. For example Stingo’s efforts to meet the moral requirements of a given age and to live up to the moral standards of the 40s or 50s are vain attempts because it is impossible to define general norms or accepted behavior in sexuality. The novel does not reveal THE truth or THE meaning of sexuality. The reader has to accept the ambiguity of sexuality and meaning. The rhetoric of sexuality confirms this ambiguity and the possibility of several interpretations and the same idea is expressed in Shoshana Felman’s article when she writes that it is not “rhetoric which disguises and hides sex; sexuality is rhetoric, since it essentially consists of ambiguity: it is the coexistence of dynamically antagonistic meanings. Sexuality is the division and divisiveness of meaning; it is meaning as division, meaning as conflict” (Felman 158).

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