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UNIVERSAL IMPLICATIONS OF WILLIAM STYRON'S SOUTHERN HERITAGE

This paper attempts to analyse how William Styron can find a new approach to literary motifs and how the Southern literary mode could be made to stay alive in conjunction with various trends in literature.

In other words: what did Styron inherit and what did he learn from his literary predecessors? How could he incorporate this inheritance into his works? How can the familiar motifs convey entirely different implications?

In the first part of this essay, in order to answer these questions, I want to outline the various motifs that influenced Styron and the universal dimensions of his art. In the second part I want to examine how these motifs are incorporated in William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (further on referred to as *LDD*) and *Sophie's Choice* (further on referred to as *SC*), by comparing Peyton Loftis in *LDD* and Stingo in *SC*. My aim is to prove the otherness of these two protagonists and to seek the social and psychological implications of the inherent difference.

Taking into consideration the two parts of my essay as a whole I want to analyse the shift from the particular to the universal in Styron's art.

I.

William Styron could not escape being compared with his literary predecessor, William Faulkner. All of these comparisons have raised the issue of the relationship between tradition and innovation or imitation and originality. For example, Styron's works have 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 anti-semitic 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."¹ These critics tend to see the novels as either too general or too specific and they cannot see the shift from the particular to the universal.

In a closer analysis of the motifs and the dimensions dominating in *LDD* and *SC* the conventional requisites convey new and different meanings.

The main thrust of Styron criticism has been to weigh lightly the regional Southern influence. Recent criticism identifies broader contemporary ideas from existentialism to the French "nouveau roman" and it concentrates on the universal dimensions of Styron's themes.

In Styron's novels the reader can find a lot of references to myths and motifs due to "... factors like the mosaic-like social structure of U.S. society and a host of contradictions between the American creed and social reality, or between the gradual degradation of the presumably high idealism of the first generations of new world settlers and the subsequent course of American historical development, by now there is practically no American myth that has gone unchallenged within the nation itself."²

The following myths and motifs extend the dimensions and create the encyclopedic characteristic features of Styron's novels.

1/ The Southern Myth

An important Southern quality and perspective exists in Styron's novels. Styron struggles with the ambiguous inheritance of an American who belongs "neither to the Deep South sunk in its archaic doom nor to the Yankee blend of purposefulness and inferiority complex."³

The recurring elements of the Southern Myth can be found in Styron's works. It is hard to define what the Southern Myth is because in a broad sense it contains various interdependent myths related to hot-blooded Cavaliers, who founded the South, to romantic characteristics of the Southern temperament like a chivalric attitude toward women and a code of personal honour. The pro-slavery South meant oligarchy and Cavaliers imitated the manners of the European nobility.

These characteristics of the Southern myth have changed and in Faulkner's fiction "doom" and "defeat" became the key words when speaking about the South.

"Doom" derives from numerous legends of drowned and buried cities. In the Bible the wicked city of Babylon its walls were doomed to destruction by the Lord⁴ and, for example, in American literature Edgar Allan Poe incorporated this motif into his poem called "The City in the Sea", earlier entitled "The Doomed City". In the South the Cavaliers sunk to the level of the meanness of the whites, and aristocratic families, haunted by the memories of past glory, degenerated. The general decline of the South and the sin of pride dooms the ambitious families. "Doom" becomes a part of the subconscious of Styron's heroes. For example, Stingo, "... in bed with a woman not his

wife, was basically ill-at-ease in this illicit ambience, even while asleep. DARK DOOM! DARK DOOM! pealed the wretched bell."⁵

For the South, "defeat" has special overtones. Southerners live among defeated grandfathers. The shattered economy, the Civil War and the exploitation of white and black relations have connected the South with defeat from which there is no escape except in death or in the world of unreality. "From the Golden dreams of the Roanoke adventurers to the fantasies of a Tennessee Williams heroine, the South has always preserved a certain element of moonstruck unreality in its outlook, has more than any other part of the country convinced itself that the best things in life are not those which are but those which ought to be or which once were supposed to have been."⁶

At first glance Styron's novels, especially *LDD*, seems to fit perfectly into the Southern literary mode. The Loftises in *LDD* are the inhabitants of Port Warwick but not in the way that the Compsons are the inhabitants of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha Country. In *LDD* Styron possessed the traditional Southern attitudes, but in his later novels he proceeded with an examination of the terms by which Southern attitudes can survive and flourish in modern times. He examined how Southern heroes can live and cherish and create.

2/ The Quest Motif

The Southern protagonist had an unshaken belief in his unity with Southern civilization and he had no doubt about who belonged to the South and who did not. The Southern writer had a strong sense of belonging to a homogeneous region, he had a strong sense of "locale", and he felt that the South, with its organized system of values, was superior to the North. Northern culture was also regarded as something inferior. Attachment to a place gives an abiding identity because places associated with family, community, and history have depth. Philosopher Yi-Fu Tuan points out that a sense of place in any human society comes from the intersection of space and time. Southerners developed an acute sense of place as a result of their dramatic and traumatic history and their rural isolation on the land for generations. As Welty noted, 'feelings are bound up with place', and the film title "Places in the Heart" captured the emotional quality that places evoke. 'Home' is a potent word for southerners, and the 'homeplace' evokes reverence."⁷

The decline of the South and the dominance of the urban North led to the detachment of Southern values and to the loss of common awareness. And this is why the Southern protagonist begins his quest for regaining balance.

Earlier, the Southern writer always knew himself as being part of history and the South, but this direct contact was interrupted. In Styron's concept we can find America

if we find the parts of ourselves we have lost. In Martin Heidegger's concept of quest every human being is preoccupied with finding some way in which he can feel "Dasein", literally the sense of "being there", of having meaningfully existed in the face of death and nothingness.⁸ Styron's heroes need to feel that they have at some time established some meaning in life, a temporary balance, which death cannot take away from them. In his quest for meaning, Gustav Mahler achieved it in his Ninth Symphony.

What is the aim of the quest and how can it be achieved in Styron's world?

Styron's characters, in their quest for truth and their longing for perfection, search for nothing less than a kind of grail, which is buried within the darker divisions of a world of conflicting change and lost value. But they are drawn by their own burning, ecstatic and tragic visions to lost values. They are yearning for the impossible state but they need roots in the solid stuff of life.

In Styron's world the deception of others and the self is the first step towards redemption. The personality, burdened by the consciousness of guilt and unsure of the means of redemption, wants to find meaning, and in this long process he has to face and meet all the distortions and cataclysms of the world which can destroy his own physical and spiritual self, and at last he cannot reach the core of the problem. "The quest motif stresses less the journeying than the sought-after results of that journey. The goal of the quest is the lost treasure of innocence, which may be symbolized in various tangible and intangible ways. Ultimately though, the quest hopes to find the self through uniting the conscious with the unconscious."⁹

In the search for meaning the protagonists lose touch with themselves and the world, and this evokes the feeling of hollowness and emptiness.

3/ The Motif of Hollowness

Harry Guntrip has found a fundamental human problem to be that of our fear of inner emptiness, of the weakness of identification, and a fear of the meaninglessness of our existence: the schizoid problem.¹⁰ There is always an explicit moment which implies a character's internal feeling of emptiness. In *LDD* Dolly and Milton talk about the war between North and the South and the prospects of the USA, and this conversation indicates the realisation of how "perverted" they are. "What have I got? I'm perverted, religion's perverted - look at Helen... What have I got? Nothing!"¹¹ Helen Loftis lost her daughter but it is not the loss of her daughter and Peyton's actual death that are the greatest shocks for her. Helen realizes that she is a mother no longer and she thinks life is for others. She examines her face in the mirror and she can see her white hair and pale face. It is unbearable for her to see that her motherhood, youth and husband are lost. She escapes into an imaginary world. She pulls the skin of her face so

that the wrinkles vanish and thinks of an invisible and imaginary lover. Her lover is but a creation of her imagination. The man who could be a real saviour, Milton Loftis, the archetype and the stereotype of the quester, enters and says: "God knows we've lost something."¹²

Stingo in *SC* wanted to be a writer but after reading Farrell's story future seemed to him "misty" and "obscure". He hopelessly says, "... I was aware of the large hollowness I carried with me."¹³ Stingo lost touch with himself as a writer, an artist, while Sophie lost the "chain of being" as a human being. The world of the living dead in the concentration camps haunts her. Her loss of faith in God and human beings evoked her feeling of emptiness. "I felt a complete emptiness. I never finished the paternoster I think maybe it was that moment that I begun to lose my faith."¹⁴ Sophie's emptiness was generated by the loss of the possibility of rebirth and the impossibility of the appearance of a savior, a redeemer. "I felt this emptiness. It was like finding something precious in a dream where it is all so real - something or someone, I mean, unbelievably precious - only to wake up and realize the precious person is gone. Forever?"¹⁵

These familiar motifs are in a set order in Styron's works. The South is the basis, the one-time land of order and clearcut values, where Styron's heroes start their quest for a better understanding of the world, and, at last, they have to face nihilistic spaces evoking the feeling of hollowness. This is how Styron's Southern background is related to the universal motifs of quest and hollowness.

II.

In the second part of my essay I want to compare two of Styron's Southern characters. The aim of this comparison is to prove that Styron could incorporate the myths and artistic motifs discussed in the first part, and after establishing a firm starting point in his first novel, *LDD*, he could create his own myths in his encyclopedic novel, *SC*. That is why I want to compare Peyton Loftis in *LDD* and Stingo in *SC*. The social and psychological implications of the difference between the two characters show how Styron could find a new approach to his Southern heroes after the Second World War.

1/ Social implications of the difference

By social implications I mean the family backgrounds of the protagonists and their ties to the South as a geographical unity.

The family backgrounds of Peyton and Stingo are different. Peyton's mother and father are destructive forces in her life. Her mother longs for a timeless, unaltered state and she is damned by her obsessive piety. Her father is fallen, aged, middle-class, whose alcoholic stupor is not importantly the result of changed times. Peyton is surrounded by the conventional stereotypical props of southern belle, lady and gentleman.

Stingo's devoted father, who calls himself a liberal democrat but considers Northerners as ignorant and vulgar, is supportive. He often writes letters to his son and he is his son's friend. This is the reason why this relationship between father and son can contribute to the establishment of a temporary Eden for Stingo.

Stingo starts from his insulated, middle-class innocence in Virginia's Tidewater. The inhabitants of this region are generous and cordial, and Stingo is closely attached to them and slavery. "I have been linked so closely in time to the Old South... my own grandmother at the age of thirteen possessed two small Negro handmaidens... regarding them as beloved chattel all through the years of the Civil War,"¹⁶ The emphasis is on the word "own" in these sentences said by Stingo. He is proud of his Southern origin and his ancestors. Not only does Stingo have geographical and familiar ties to the institution of slavery, but he continues to benefit directly from that practice. His purpose as a struggling young writer is made possible financially by money he has inherited from his great-grandfather's sale of a young slave named Artiste.

The two protagonists' ties to the South are expressed in the description of their houses.

The Loftises' house represents Southern pride and honour. "It was a big house, Virginia Colonial style, an elegant house... a spring of ivy had begun to climb one rainspout... . Nodding there in the sunlight, this ivy seemed to lend a touch of permanence, possibly even of tradition, to the house."¹⁷ But this idyllic picture is disturbed by the image of the first chapter - "... the curtains fell limp without a sound and the house, sapped of air, was filled with an abrupt, wicked heat,"¹⁸ The image of the "wicked heat" anticipates the tragic ending of the Loftis family. In these contrasting images the characters' personal doom and the social decline of the family are foreshadowed.

The description of the old Southern family house appeared in *SC* as well. Stingo looks at a picture of the old house and he thinks "The temptation was both poignant and powerful, and it lasted for as long as it took me to read the letter twice more and to brood over the house and its homely lawn again, all of it seemingly suspended in a

milky idyllic mist, which may however, have been the result of the film's over-exposure."¹⁹

On the one hand these descriptions radiate poetic space. Styron belonged to the tradition of Joyce and Proust. In their writings "Their cities, landscapes and rooms are not photographically literal. Never frontal reportage about apparent localities... A particular time /space axis, as world of appearance, may be recognized, certainly, in the words and the imagination words embody."²⁰

On the other hand they express the difference between Peyton and Stingo. "Peyton, a modern American girl, can run away from the conventions of society. She can and does; but she cannot escape the self-destructiveness in her own heart, an ugly inheritance bequeathed by her father, Milton, a dissolute, philandering lawyer who spoiled her, and her mother, Helen, one of the more memorable bitches in contemporary American literature."²¹ Peyton's family and geographical ties to the South forecast her tragedy while Stingo's Eden in the South includes the possibility of regaining balance and establishing personal order. Stingo can inherit the sense of personal order lacking in Peyton's life. For Peyton and Stingo the land of order is the South with its traditional, clear-cut values. And at this point the social implications are connected with the psychological ones.

2/ Psychological implications of the difference

By psychological implications I mean the protagonists' longing for the old values, the "land of order", and how they search for order.

Styron avoided the determinism of Dreiser and Steinbeck. His characters behave as free agents. In the psychological analyses of his characters he followed the tradition begun by Dostoyevsky and Melville.

His attempts to create new dimensions preserving the values of Southern culture are expressed in his heroes' attempts to establish personal order and "the sex, religion and violence are used as vivid means with which to illustrate those attempts."²²

Styron makes a clear distinction between the world of order in the traditional old South as well as personal order and the order of organized systems.

Peyton cannot establish personal order because her search for order is always undercut by recurring threats of disintegration, annihilation and absurdity.

The establishment of personal order has a direct expression in Stingo's life, as illustrated, for instance, in his relationship with his things. He accurately examines them,... a jar of Barbasol shaving cream, a bottle of Alka-Seltzer, a Schick injector razor, two tubes of Pepsodent toothpaste, a Dr. West's toothbrush with medium bristles, a bottle of Royall Lyme after-shave lotion, a Kent comb, an 'injecto-pack' of

Schick injector blades, an unopened cellophane-wrapped box of three dozen rolled and lubricated Trojan condoms with 'receptacle tips', a jar of Breck's anti-dandruff shampoo, a tube of Rexall nylon dental floss,..."²³ Personal order is inconsistent with organized systems in *SC*. Stingo begins his career on the twentieth floor of the McGraw-Hill Building "an architecturally impressive, but spiritually enervating green tower."²⁴ McGraw-Hill represents what Styron understands as organized system: the organized oppression of a given group of people in the name of their deviation from an established norm.

After being detached from the values of the old South and after losing their balance, their personal order, the protagonists escape into the world of fantasies and dreams.

The South is the starting point for the characters and their belief in a "Winnie-the-Pooh world of sweetness and light."²⁵ is the first step in leaving the reality of the actual world behind. The "Winnie-the-Pooh world" occurs several times in the novels as an expression of childhood innocence. At the beginning of *LDD* we can see "Peyton twisted up in a chair, calmly reading Winnie-the-Pooh."²⁶ Helen, Peyton's mother, reads "stories about people who hardly even existed."²⁷ However, time and experience destroy Peyton's childhood innocence and her naive faith in a benevolent world. The dream-world expresses longing for order but the popular stories about "Pocahontas saving John Smith" do not lead to a better understanding of the self and the world around.

"There was something open and withdrawn about her at the same time; there seemed to be a part of her that he couldn't reach. She complained of a headache... perhaps she was drowning, she announced with a pretty yawn ... 'Did you ever read Winnie-the-Pooh?' she said, and he was about to answer, but a man with a broom came by, sending the pigeons aloft like feathered rockets, and Harry leaned down and said, 'You know you're beautiful'"²⁸ This conversation between Peyton and Harry, and the recurring theme of the "Winnie-the-Pooh world" reflect how desperately Peyton searches for love and balance. The "Winnie-the-Pooh world" isolates her from reality and she cannot escape because her dreams and hopes, "the pigeons", were sent "aloft". The greatest contradiction of the Winniethe-Pooh world" lies in its double feature. The possibility of escape into an imaginary world of clear-cut values and the impossibility of returning to the values of the Southern past are both included in it.

However, in order to be saved, dreams must justify Peyton's existence. Dreams form an important part of Styron's subconscious. He says in an interview, "... dreams are a very impressive part of my subconscious. They linger with me ... and seem to be

teaching me something... they must have their own significance somewhere: where and how, exactly, I'm not prepared to say."²⁹

Stingo lives in a "Wizard of Oz" world. Peyton penetrates deep into the unreal while Stingo lives in the "pink"³⁰ world of eye-opening wonders. Peyton rises high into the unreal and immediately falls down to meet her tragedy. Stingo ascends to a level from where descending is possible without destroying his own self. The slow, ritualistic pace of writing in *SC* gives a further emphasis to Styron's view that modern man will succeed by persistence.

Stingo's dreams are restricted to fantasies about sex. He begins with the normal fantasies of a young man of his age in a period of sexual repression. Alone in New York he imagines making love to Mavis Hunnicutt. But then he moves to the pink apartment in Flatbush and his dreaming takes on a darker side because he has just got a letter from his father saying that Maria Hunt, a beautiful girl with whom Stingo had been hopelessly in love, was dead. Here sexuality and death are related to each other. Maria Hunt is Peyton Loftis and the similarities are obvious. Maria Hunt killed herself by leaping from the window of a building. She came from a tragic household. Her father is Martin Hunt - Milton Loftis -, who is a near alcoholic and always at loose ends. Her mother is Beatrice Helen Loftis, who is "cruel in her moral demands upon people."³¹ After reading the tragic story of Maria Hunt, Stingo was overtaken by an erotic hallucination. Stingo's personal balance was disturbed and death was again interwoven with sex.

The Maria Hunt story is the best representation of the organic relationship between Peyton Loftis and Stingo and Styron. Stingo and Peyton were created by Styron and Peyton's story was absorbed into Stingo's life, and Stingo as a writer was inspired by her tragic life. The autobiographical implications are unequivocal in *SC* and this is how Peyton's story becomes "Stingo - Styron's" story. Stingo is the survivor of Peyton's tragedy and he is the character who relates Peyton's personal tragedy to Sophie's experience in the hell of Auschwitz. Styron put the emphasis on Stingo, he says, "The book was meant to radiate outwards like concentric circles being set up in a still pond. There's Stingo at the centre, alive, young, thinking of love and sex and art, gradually discovering these other things, and carried at last to the complete horror of Auschwitz."³²

After observing the social and psychological implications of the difference between Peyton Loftis and Stingo one can see that the analysis of the protagonists' background and their ties to the South is extremely important for Styron because he

must find a firm basis in the South and start somewhere in the world he knows. He was not a witness to the Holocaust and he tries to come to grips with the Holocaust over a distance of time and culture. Maria Hunt's story absorbed into Stingo's experience helps Styron to establish a starting point from where he can penetrate into the nightmarish world of Nazi Germany. This is the way how Peyton's and Sophie's lives become history in *SC*, and the constituent elements of the two novels are incorporated in an internal relationship.

Styron is a master in finding various approaches to his protagonists' past, where they start their quest for pride, dignity and nobility. The difference is Styron's artistic treatment of Peyton's and Stingo's past provides an explanation for the difference in the ending of the two novels. Peyton would not have been able to endure the burden of Sophie's confessions. Stingo's supportive Southern background and innocence made the ending of *SC* possible.

"This was not judgment day - only morning. Morning: excellent and fair."³³

III.

What is unique in William Styron's art?

Styron is not just the follower of the myths analysed in the first part because he can create his own myth in his encyclopedic novel, *SC*. All the motifs are intermingled and made internal.

Although the starting point of view is intensely personal and Southern, Styron extends the scope of his traditional themes and he has created characters who "are willing, out of a sense of an ultimate motive and purpose in life, to challenge it. This is why Peyton commits suicide and why Sophie Zawistowska, after surviving the absolute evil of Auschwitz, though physically dying there, endured further the demonic relationship with the schizophrenic Nathan Landau as a temporary recall to life."³⁴

Styron drives his protagonists to the edge of the abyss, then they peer into deep, nihilistic spaces before. In tragic recognition of themselves, they pull back, renewed, and they carry on their search, or ecstatically transformed they embrace their death.

Styron, unlike his predecessors, met the tragedy of the Second World War. He himself incorporated the relationship of the individual and history. Americans do not like to learn that people can be unbalanced, desperate and sometimes corrupt but Styron confirms that life can be horrible. All the former feelings of uncertainty, loss and disillusionment culminate during and after the war, and people found themselves

involved in the horrors. The distorted world foreshadowed by the apocalyptic vision of the Bible came true and Styron's Sophie became involved in the "blackness of darkness".

Cataclysms force the individual to understand what is unbelievable and unbearable for human consciousness. The individual has to take on the inexorable weight of the world and face the tragedies of mankind and he feels how meaningless and hopeless his life is when he realizes how the full scope to act is limited. He is not able to take an active part in forming the world around.

"The four novels of William Styron reflect a world that is at its core a prison. This imprisonment is the basic condition of mankind, and from it there is no escape. What each of the protagonists in the novels must do is come to a recognition of the fact of his bondage and come to some accord with that fact: he must find a *raison d'être* even within the confines of that bondage."³⁵

Styron opens up a new dimension in his fifth novel, *SC*. Sophie strongly believes that she can compose a new self of "the scattered pieces of her life."³⁶ And Sophie's hope is realized in Stingo's resurrection. This rebirth has a purgative quality for Sophie's guilt-stricken mind.

Styron's novelty lies in the correlation of the Southern literary mode and the very slight implication of optimism reflected from the mirror of cataclysms. He extended the Southern literary imagination into a new generation and this was the only possible way how he could make the Southern myth alive. The fusion of motifs with the Southern myth enlargens our horizons and new imaginative structures are "generated both encountered and questioned the world's ugly presentness."³⁷

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