

## Social Concern in the Works of William Styron

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### Abstract

In twentieth century, the people were affected in many ways directly or indirectly by The Second World War. The war destroyed them physically, spiritually and people were dislocated. The mere condition of existing in the world alive became very difficult. The writers of this period were also influenced by the havoc of the war. The literary works written during or after the war reflected the social conditions which prevailed during that period. The characters shown in the literary works of that era were portrayed affected by so many factors such as financial insecurity; social discrimination, gender, race, fear, dilemma, guilt, violence and these were the prominent factors in the literary works of that period. This paper deals with the social problems faced by the protagonists in the works of William Styron. Most of his works are dealt with the theme of people who suffers a lot for survival. His novels are of the reflections of the people, societal condition, issues prevailed during that era. His protagonists are shown affected by race, culture, ethnicity, social discrimination, fear and guilt.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Discrimination, Ethnicity, Race, Fear, Guilt

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### Introduction

In twentieth century, the people were affected in many ways directly or indirectly by The Second World War. The war destroyed them physically, spiritually and people were dislocated. The mere condition of existing in the world alive became very difficult. The writers of this period were also influenced by the havoc of the war. The literary works written during or after the war reflected the social conditions which prevailed during that period. The characters shown in the literary works of that era were portrayed affected by so many factors such as financial insecurity; social discrimination, gender, race, fear, dilemma, guilt, violence and these were the prominent factors in the literary works of that period. This paper deals with the social problems faced by the protagonists in the works of William Styron. Most of his works are dealt with the theme of people who suffers a lot for survival. His novels are of the reflections of the people, societal condition, issues prevailed during that era. His protagonists are shown affected by race, culture, ethnicity, social discrimination, fear and guilt.

### Social Concern

Most of William Styron's novels are examples of social milieu existed during his period. He is very much concerned with the individual's struggling to come up in life and for recognition. It was a period of loss of identity, culture, recognition. His concern over

the individual becomes the concern of the society. Styron was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1925 and died in 2006 in Massachusetts due to pneumonia at the age of 81. He was trained as a candidate for officer in the Marine Corps while attending Duke University in North Carolina. At Duke, he became interested in literature and was encouraged to become a writer by Professor William Blackburn. Upon graduating in 1947, he worked briefly and unhappily as an associate editor for McGraw-Hill publishers in New York City. *Lie down in darkness*, *The confession of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's choice* are Styron's famous works. *The confession of Nat Turner* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

His works are *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), *The Long March* (1952), *Set This House on Fire* (1960), *The Confessions of Nat Turner*(1967), *Sophie's Choice* (1979), *This Quiet Dust, and Other Writings* (1982), *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), *A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth* (1993) and *Havanas in Camelot* (2008). The book *Havanas in Camelot* was published two years after the death of Styron and is a collection of personal essays. Many of his works are concerned about the social issues such as financial insecurity, social discrimination, gender, race, fear, dilemma, guilt. financial insecurity; social discrimination, gender, race, fear, dilemma, guilt, violence

Financial Insecurity, Social Discrimination, Race and guilt are predominant theme in the novel *Sophie's Choice*. Styron tells the story of the three young friends Sophie Zawistowska, Nathan Landau and Stingo. The three lived in Brooklyn in 1947. Stingo, the narrator, is a Southern boy who moved to New York with the aim of becoming a writer. Stingo works at Mc Graw – Hill, a publishing company. The social class system such as upper, middle, lower and working class which prevailed during this period have played a major role in *Sophie's choice*. Stingo, is oppressed by the social class system existed in his work place and society. Stingo was not allowed to read good novels. He was not respected and given less attention by others. His aim of becoming a writer was slowly diminishing. Due to his work pressure and hierarchical **social discrimination** in the workplace; he was not able to concentrate on writing. His spirit and his hopes were destroyed. Further, he was not able to write; he was blocked.

So in my capacity as the lowest drudge in the office hierarchy I not only was denied the opportunity to read manuscripts even of passing merit, but was forced to plow my way daily through fiction and nonfiction of the humblest possible quality-coffee-stained and thumb-smearred stacks of Hammer hill Bond whose used, ravaged appearance proclaimed at once their author's (or agent's) terrible desperation and McGraw-Hill's function as publisher of last resort.(P.11)

He faces **financial insecurity** by losing his job. He leaves the job and plans to write. As he got very less as income, he is not able to find a place there. New York is a place where only upper class people can afford to live. The living cost, the food, and rent everything is very high for him to afford. As Stingo is economically poor, he is not able to afford to live in New York. Due to his financial problem, he moves to Brooklyn in search of a low rented room.

But I simply could no longer afford either the Manhattan prices or the rent—even single rooms were becoming beyond my means—and so I had to search the classified ads for accommodations in Brooklyn. (P.39)

Sophie's life is filled with bitter experiences in Auschwitz. **Race** has played a major role in social category. It was forged through oppression, slavery and conquest. When German invaded Poland, concentration camp for assassination was set up. The people who were chosen for put into gas chamber were given priority based on their race.

“It’s hard to believe you’re Polish, with your superb German and the way you look- the fair complexion of your skin and the lines of your face, so typically Aryan. It’s a finer face than that of most Slavic women. And yet you are what you say you are – a Pole” (p.293)

In the concentration camp, Sophie learns that there is a secret program called Lebensborn. The children who were in the camp are selected to send to Germany and would be brought up like a Nazi. Racism is at its full swing when the kids were selected as saying

“Theoretically the children were to be of pure German stock. But that many of these young victims were Polish is another measure of the Nazi’s frequent cynical expediency in racial matters, since although poles were regarded as subhuman, and along with other Slavic peoples, worthy successors to the Jews of the policy of extermination, they did in many cases satisfy certain crude physical requirements – familiar enough in facial feature to resembles those of Nordic blood and often of a luminiferous blondness that pleased the Nazi aesthetic sense almost more than anything else” (P 315)

Sophie is haunted by **guilt** because of the choice she made to save one of her children. Sophie has two kids. They are in the concentration camp. Every effort she made to save her children becomes futile. The worst comes at the end when the doctor at the concentration camp responsible for choosing the kids to send for killing asked Sophie to choose any one of her child to send to gas chambers so that the other one will be alive.

“Shut up!” he ordered. “Hurry now and choose. Choose, god damn it, or I’ll send them both over there. Quick!” (p.508)

Sophie wanted both her kids to live in the world. She begs the doctor not to send her kids to gas chambers. The worst is that she was asked to choose any one of her kid to be alive which makes her very stressed.

“Don’t make me choose,” she heard herself plead in a whisper, “I can’t choose.” P.508

Sophie was under pressure. She wanted to save her both children but she was not able to do so. Her condition becomes worse.

“Mama!” She heard Eva’s thin but soaring cry at the instant that she thrust the child away from her and rose from the concrete with a clumsy stumbling motion.

“Take the baby!” she called out. “Take my little girl!” p.508

She chose Eva, her daughter to be put into gas chamber to save her another child, Jan, her son.

Sacrificing her daughter becomes guilt and haunts her throughout her life.

“All these years I have never been able to bear those words. Or bear to speak them, in any language.” P.508

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* is an example of slavery and **violence** during that period. Nat was a house slave. His first master was Samuel turner. Nat was allowed to study and learn carpentry which is not common for slaves. Nat was promised by Samuel that he would be given freedom but Nat was sold to Eppes. Nat was treated badly by

Eppes which makes him to hate white people. Eppes sold Nat to cruel redneck farmers. They violently whip the frightened, timid slave and treated him like an animal. This intensifies his growing hostility towards whites.

Since the practice was common in the region to hire out slaves from one farm to another, it was only natural that Hark's and my paths should cross not long following my sale to Moore and after Hark had been returned to Travis. Negroes were hired out for numerous jobs—plowing, chopping weeds, clearing land, helping to drain swamps or build fences, dozens of other chores. (P. 226)

After working under different masters for a number of years, Nat begins to work under Travis. Nat was allowed to work as a carpenter and to read his bible. And preach to other slaves. Nat and other slaves plan to revolt against their masters and whites. They want to achieve freedom from the white by violence.

“That I chose Independence Day as the moment to strike was of course a piece of deliberate irony. It seemed clear to me that when our eruption was successful—with Jerusalem seized and destroyed and our forces soon impregably encamped in the Dismal Swamp—and when word of our triumph spread throughout Virginia and the upper southern seaboard, becoming a signal for Negroes everywhere to join us in rebellion”  
(P. 281)

Problems arise when Nat meets Margaret Whitehead. Margaret is a beautiful, highly spirited daughter of a wealthy widow who is living nearby. Her family owns many slaves still Margaret opposes slavery and admires Nat's preaching. Gradually Nat and Margaret become friends. Nat is worried that if his plans succeed lovely Margaret will die. At the end Margaret is killed by the violence caused by Nat and other members of Negroes. Nat regrets for her killing. He is eagerly waiting to die as the feeling of violence and brutality haunts him.

## Conclusion

*Sophie's choice* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* blended with financial insecurity, Social Discrimination, Race and Guilt. The characters in the novel suffer in one way or another way by these social factors. These works are dealt with the people who suffer a lot for survival. These novels are of the reflections of the people, societal condition, issues existed during that period. The protagonists in the novels are affected by race, social discrimination, fear and guilt.

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