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Styron's Sophie's Choice is an ambitious novel constructed in the form of a confrontation with the Holocaust. Superficially many of the formal devices through which the narrative is told - the discontinuous temporal sequence through which Sophie's story gets gradually revealed and which seems to reflect a disintegrated identity that circles around an unassimilable past that has effectively blocked the possibility of further personal development, the mixture of fictional and expository modes of discourse and the inclusion of historical and documentary material which function to authenticate the narrative and offer it not strictly as fiction but as a form of meditation on the central moral and historical catastrophe of our time, the thematic exploration of an initiatory confrontation between innocence and the experience of evil - resemble those that we find in other Holocaust fiction and which have been developed as a consequence of the unique challenge which the Holocaust as a historical event, moral riddle, and psychological experience poses for the literary imagination, bound as it is to literary tradition and its inherently archetypal view of experience. But while some of the best Holocaust fiction struggles to develop a formal and linguistic medium through which a non-analogous model may function as the vehicle of an imaginative apprehension of the Holocaust or attempts to register in its narrative form and style its difficulties in picturing the event through traditional forms and contexts, Styron's self-conscious and often quite sophisticated handling of narrative conventions and formal resources do not work this way at all. For while the novel certainly constitutes - at least in its intentions if not in its execution - a serious attempt to understand the Holocaust, the form Styron has chosen as his medium of this understanding has nothing experimental about it, contains no real awareness of the problem of containing the Holocaust within traditional modes, and has in consequence the effect of absorbing the event into a set of familiar conventions which not only vulgarize, exploit, and ultimately occlude it from view but constitute a revision of the Holocaust for the apparent purpose of exculpating Christianity from its guilt in being implicated as a factor in facilitating the execution of the "Final Solution".

Fundamentally, the structure of the novel is constructed in the form of an interpenetration of two modes of romance, that of a quest romance with the writer/narrator as its hero and that of a Gothic romance which is the mode through which Sophie's personal history and through it the history of the Holocaust and the nature of the concentrationary universe are visualized and made imaginatively meaningful. The novel is so elaborately constructed and its use of literary conventions and formulas so self-conscious and self-knowing that it is difficult to know if the romance pattern and imagery through which the various stages of the narrator's encounter with Sophie and Nathan are narrated are used parodistically or offered as a model of initiatory encounter with the Holocaust. In a crucial sense both modes are validated, for while the conclusion of the novel and the narrator's eventual confession of incomprehension in the face of the Holocaust tend to mock the narrator's youthful optimism, quest for sexual adventure and initiation, and fantasies of artistic success, the romance pattern and imagery become the vehicle through which a rite of initiation is enacted and a necessary stage in the artist's growth toward "maturity" is dramatized. Throughout the novel almost every situation and character is pictured through the imagery and symbolism of romance. Thus we have, in the opening situation of the novel, a movement so typical of romance from a familiar world to a strange, mysterious one (the fact that this enchanted realm of romance is Brooklyn, dubbed in the language of romance as the "Kingdom of the Jews" suggests an almost willed refusal, though protected by irony and parody, to move beyond the image of Jews to which the narrator confesses as having had as a child as mysterious creature practicing savage rites); the initial situation of the narrator is familiar from romance: that of a ritual isolation preparatory of an encounter with adventure; we have in the character of Farrel the sort of protective figure also familiar from romance, one whose blessings constitute a kind of sacramental launching of the hero's descent into the underworld; there follow various preparatory signs of the upcoming ordeal such as the suicide of Maria Hunt and the dream image of the mother's cancer-ridden

body. As the novel progresses romance images and formulas proliferate: the triangular situation which develops between the narrator, Sophie, and Nathan is entirely conceived not only in terms of traditional romance but in terms of a Freudian family romance. The alternate view of Sophie as an idealized object, removed from the narrator by belonging to Nathan and to her past (and her relationship with Nathan functions as the psychological reenactment of that past from which she can't free herself) and as an object of erotic quest who sets up a rivalry between Nathan and the narrator; Sophie's function as an initiator into historical and sexual experience and thus as the narrator's artistic and erotic muse; the role of Nathan as Sophie's rescuer and demonic enchanter and pursuer; Sophie's situation throughout the novel as poised between rescue and doom - these are all themes and motifs and images from romance. While Styron's use of them is often ironic and parodistic, they remain his chosen mode of apprehending the Holocaust. As a result the Holocaust recedes from view as a historical event and becomes the occasion of a rite of passage for the narrator on his way to sexual and artistic "maturity".

Sophie herself is trapped between the two modes of romance by means of which she is presented. As a heroine of a Gothic romance, her history is reducible to a set of persecutions and a sequence of sufferings in the hands of various figures of tyranny, who dominate and exorbit her. Her father dominates and abuses her; her planned seduction of Hess backfires and she ends up as his victim; she is finger raped in the New York subways; and in her relationship with Nathan she becomes the passive vehicle of his needs: an object of his rescue efforts and the object of his rage. In this sequence of pre-ordained doom, her experience in Auschwitz comes to seem not a radical break with a previous life but the ultimate expression of a life lived under some form of domination, the gratuitousness of her arrest by the Gestapo for smuggling into Warsaw some piece of ham illustrating not what Styron has meant to illustrate (the randomness of the Nazis' choice of victims) but a life lived under the sign of doom. As a figure apprehended through the eyes of the narrator, Sophie is seen primarily as a figure of taboo, someone who has been deeply defiled but whose defilement constitutes one of the sources of attraction. The marks of her concentration camp experience are constantly filtered through the glamorized, Romantic symbolism of a fairy-land in which she has sojourned and to which she belongs, marking her off as a type developed by the Romantic poets, particularly in Germany, a type of the La Belle Dame sans Merci, a figure who represents the temptations of an eroticized Death for the artist. The tattoo number on Sophie's arm is visualized as some form of teeth marks from a vampire; her anemia and iron deficiency as a result of ~~the~~ malnutrition in Auschwitz is presented as some sort of an attractive, ghost-like whiteness which is a sign of her belonging to the Kingdom of Death; her toothlessness, which the narrator discovers early in the novel, is presented as a kind of revelation of her being a witch. - thus in the Romantic mythology through which the concentrationary world is filtered as kind of Lamia; her body, which is lovingly and licentiously described in great detail throughout the novel, is both beautiful and irredeemably tainted with the signs of Death. The effect of all this is that we never get to visualize Sophie or the actual nature of the concentrationary universe through which she has passed except through the Romantic mythology and symbolism in which she is clothed and which identifies her as a doom-laden, haunted creature, an enchanted fairy who has dwelt in fairy-lands forlorn which still has her in its thrall. Even the happy end which "Stingo" fantasizes for her and himself during their aborted flight to the South, to back "home" from the enchanted realms, and which is of course parodied as a facile Hollywood formula unrealizable in the real world, seems to be an impossibility not so much because of the permanent psychic damage she has suffered in the camps but because of her status as an enchanted figure of dark romance who cannot be domesticated into a hausfrau but must continue to belong to the fairy-land from which she has escaped but which is still exerting its spell on her. What we are presented then in Sophie is an image of the survivor as a figure of magical taboo, simultaneously defiled and attractive, attractive because defiled, the focus of a Romantic liebestodt.

One of the central features of the Gothic genre is the figure of the Gothic villain who is the embodiment of a sexual and religious terror because he has broken with the taboos of

her of civilized life, taboos pertaining primarily to sexual conduct and to a religious life of obedience to divine authority. All three representative Nazi figures in the novel are conceived in this Gothic mould, figures of sexual terror like the Nazi industrialist Durrfeld who is identified with Satan in Sophie's erotic dream of anal intercourse just before total submersion into the concentrationary universe, figures of religious terror like the doctor who counsels Sophie to choose one of her children and whose act is explicitly identified as a form of metaphysical rebellion against and simultaneous craving for God, and figures who combine both sexual and religious terror, such as Hess. For despite Styron's assurances as to Hess's banality and tediousness, substantiated by references to Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil and by attempts on Styron's part to make him self-empty and programmed to mouth only the cliches of Nazi ideology, Hess is viewed in the novel primarily as a kind of evil monk, one who has preserved in his mode of life something of the austerity and ritual discipline of a monk and who is still haunted by some visitations of conscience and former faith, by the ghost of the Christ in whom he had once believed but whom he had now replaced by a new divinity, Hitler, whose picture as a Teutonic knight is hung in Hess's monkish cell at a place where ordinarily a crucifix would have hung. Moreover, the whole aborted seduction scene between Sophie and Hess, in itself a rather shoddy piece of stage melodrama, is shrouded in the atmosphere of a gothic thrill whose source is the potential breaking of some sexual taboo.

It is in this Gothic vision of Nazism as a demonic rebellion against God, specifically against Christ (and as a source of erotic fascination) that the center of the novel lies. Much of the historical revisionism of the novel consists in Styron's insistence, through authorial voice, through authorial spokesmen like Wanda, the Polish resistance fighter, and most provocatively by creating a non-Jewish survivor as the center-piece of a narrative about Auschwitz, that the essence of Nazism lay not in the "Final Solution" to the Jewish problem but in the concentrationary camp system which was based on the principle of total domination and human expendability, "demonic principle which ~~is~~ applicable and ~~was~~ of course applied to other peoples than the Jews. While such a view owes something to Hannah Arendt's thesis of totalitarianism, what it does primarily is two things: it sets up a model of Nazism which can be reenacted at the level of sadomasochistic sexual relations - as Sophie and Nathan do - and most crucially it proposes a fundamentally anti-Christian view of Nazism. For if the essence of Nazism were to be identified with the murder of the Jews, then Auschwitz, as the embodiment of the Nazi vision, could be looked at as the culmination, however monstrously magnified, of centuries of Christian anti-semitism and as the enactment, in a modernized, technologized form, of a huge pogrom. But by insisting that the center of Nazism lay elsewhere and that the genocide against the Jews expressed a purpose other than traditional anti-semitism and that, in any case, Jews were to be the first in a series of planned genocides, Styron is able to disassociate Christianity from its responsibility for the Final Solution. This attempted exculpation is of course the reason for the analogy between Poland and the American South which Styron develops in the novel. Both Poland and the South were Christian countries where anti-semitism in the one and racism in the other were only intermittent, representing a lapse and not the expression of Christian principles, lapses which were comprehensible, if not excusable, on the ground that both countries were essentially defeated and exploited nations with racism and anti-semitism functioning as conduits of frustration and compensation for defeat and impotence. The fate of Sophie's father, a fanatical anti-semite who has not broken completely with Christianity is meant to illustrate the radically anti-Christian nature of Nazi anti-semitism, indeed the almost irrelevance of anti-semitism as the defining feature of Nazism and the impossibility of genocide within a Christian framework. For the point of the Professor's fate is that in Poland before the German occupation genocidal anti-semitism could not get a hearing and in occupied Poland the Professor's proposal becomes an irrelevance and beneath notice as coming from a Pole.

The central paradox in this quasi-religious view of Nazism as the incarnation of the anti-Christ, and one which is an inherent aspect of the Gothic mode through which this view is presented, is that it tends to glamorize evil and evoke it as an eroticized form of terror.

Precisely because of this the novel never attempts to visualize the specific nature and actual functioning of the concentrationary world but fabricates instead scenes which indulge in a pornographically stimulated fantasy of the concentration camp - such as Sophie's attempted lesbian rape by Hess's housekeeper and of course the scenes dealing with Sophie and Hess. The depiction of the Hess household itself in the midst of Auschwitz has the intention of ~~uncover~~ uncovering some ultimate truth and revelation of Nazism but has the actual effect of indulging in the atmospherics of Satanism, thus blurring the scandal and actuality of the crematoria which function as evocative backdrops to conventional images of hell, their flames fueling the palace of Satan. Sophie's own narrative is structured not to signify an unassimilable past which breaks the continuity of personal identity but to create a suspenseful drama with a melodramatic climax. Styron has insisted that he has singled out Sophie as his vehicle of understanding the concentrationary universe precisely because she was not just another victim but one with a story to tell, a secret to reveal. This admission is tantamount to confessing that his imagination can't and won't penetrate areas of experience it cannot find thrilling or absorb into ready-made images and structures of erotically stimulated fantasies. This moral failure of an imaginative inability to grasp and penetrate areas of experience not dramatizable in the modes of melodrama also accounts for the most flagrant piece of vulgarity in the whole novel, the reduction of Sophie's choice at the platform of Auschwitz to a climactic piece of melodramatic horror.

The Gothic mode, at least as Styron employs it, has the effect of occluding from view the specific nature of the concentrationary world and the historical contours of Nazism and substituting for ~~it~~ ^{them} conventionalized images of eroticized demonism. It also accounts for the unresolved ambiguity which lies at the center of this novel: the role of eros and its relation to Christianity. The novel, in the manner of Richard Rubinstein to whose view of theology in a post-Auschwitz world Styron is greatly indebted, seems to be poised in an ambivalent posture toward the sexuality which it so copiously exploits. For while it seems to endorse an attitude of sexual liberation, the absence of which is one of the chief reasons for the narrator's frustrations and the search of which forms one of the objects of his quest, it seems to be fascinated by and fixated on the view of the inextricable fusion of sex and violence, eros and death, a fusion which Sophie and Nathan exemplify (and is one of the defining features of the Gothic vision of Nazism) and to which the narrator's self-absorbed, narcissistic eros cannot offer an alternative. This ambiguity about eroticism in its relation to Christianity is accurately embodied in the situation of Sophie who is pictured alternately as a romance heroine to be saved or damned through her erotic relations and as a kind of sinner, a lost soul, one of the damned in a permanent state of despair and guilt who is to be saved or damned through some recovered presence of divine grace. Styron wants to affirm the validity of a Christian conception of love and of the signs of a divine presence in the human soul (the departure of that presence in a scene in Hess's house while Haydn's Creation is played as an ironic commentary on the process of de-creation or anti-creation ~~at~~ Auschwitz constitutes one of the signs of Sophie's fall, her condition of becoming one of the damned) but at the same time he also wants to affirm the role of the body, an eroticized, sexually liberated body as means to salvation in ~~the~~ ^{the} new, post-Auschwitz gospels. But the two affirmations of faith do not coalesce, and their irreconcilability (despite the willed attempt to reconcile them) is ~~symbolized~~ symbolized in the last scene where Sophie and "Stings" are together in Washington, with Stings masquerading as a priest while enacting the role of an erotic knight of romance. The effect of this scene as well as of the problem which it dramatizes here and elsewhere in the novel is not so much to pose a religious and moral dilemma as to indulge in the kind of sensationalism familiar from the literature of the late Romantic as well as from much popular literature: that of providing a thrilling mixture of sex and religion, sin and punishment, and this particular indulgence in the erotics of sin bespeaks of an imaginative and moral failure to ~~emancipate~~ emancipate eros either from its fascination with death or from its narcissistic self-absorption and to subordinate it to a selfless form of love.