

2017

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## Recommended Citation

Sewell, William, "When Choice Is an Illusion: Suppression of Women in William Styron's "Holocaust" Novel" (2017). *Faculty Research & Publications*. 13.  
<https://scholar.dsu.edu/anspapers/13>

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When Choice Is an Illusion: Suppression of Women in William Styron's "Holocaust" Novel

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**Abstract:** This article examines how Styron shapes *Sophie's Choice* through Southern Gothic literary techniques. In particular, we will explore the development of Sophie, who throughout the story served as the Gothic archetype of the "damsel in distress." She is a heroine who lacks agency, a character with "a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued—frequently." Ultimately, the harsh suppression of female identity entrenched in Gothic literature contributes to the "unimaginable pain" that forces female characters like Sophie to make their "choice." Finally, we will examine how Sophie, controlled throughout her life, really does not have a real "choice" when she is forced to decide which of her children to keep and which to send to the gas chambers. For all her life, Sophie has had only the illusion of choice.

William Styron's captivating novel *Sophie's Choice* won the 1979 National Book Award for its haunting tale of a young writer's friendship with a troubled couple in 1947 Brooklyn. The celebrated author, however, had an "uncanny ability to hit sensitive nerves" (Sirlin viii). Critics condemned him for writing an "erotics of Auschwitz" (Rosenfield cited in Trouard 494) and for not being a Holocaust survivor. Countering such criticism, Wyatt-Brown asserts that "other novelists and poets have utilized the immense suffering of the concentration camps as a very serious metaphor for their agonies but more significantly for the inhumane, evil propensity that can reside in us all" ("William Styron's" 61). Wyatt-Brown contends that Styron "was seeking the most effective way to stress the universality of prejudice, an issue scarcely concealed in the contemporary world" (61).

Most scholarship (e.g., Lackey) focuses on Sophie's story, her relationships with insane and abusive men such as Nathan, and the novel's racial themes. Absent from discussion is how the author/narrator's cultural background shapes the text. The fact is, that while Styron wonderfully fixates his audience on Sophie, his worldview—like that of the author—is overtly from the American South. As "a white Southerner," notes Trouard, "Styron carries the implied burden of racism...into historically sensitive, even volatile historical junctures" (490). Thus, while Styron seemingly relates a Holocaust survival story, the plot, characters, and settings are very much shaped by American literary traditions—especially, the Southern Gothic.

Demonstrating how William Styron shapes *Sophie's Choice* through Southern Gothic literary techniques, this article examines the development of Sophie, who exemplifies the Gothic archetype of the "damsel in distress." She is a heroine who lacks agency, or as Melani observes, a character with "a tendency to faint and a need to be rescued—frequently." Ultimately, the harsh suppression of female identity entrenched in Gothic literature contributes to the "unimaginable pain" (Styron, "Why Primo Levi" 23) that forces female characters like Sophie to make their "choice." Finally, this article will show how Sophie, controlled throughout her life, does not really have the "choice" to decide which of her children to keep and which to send to the gas chambers. For all her life, Sophie has had only the illusion of choice.

### **A Southern Gothic Holocaust Tale?**

*Sophie's Choice* chronicles Sophie Zawistoska's journey from Nazi Poland to post-war Brooklyn. Sophie, however is not the narrator. Rather, the point of view comes from a Styron-like alter ego, Stingo, who relates the tale from the present (the 1970s of the novel's writing) weaving his experiences with Sophie's autobiography. While the novel follows a linear, chronological arc driving towards Sophie's revelation of her choice and her subsequent decision to end her life, Styron deftly mixes flashbacks (e.g., Sophie's story) with foreshadows (e.g., her suicide), and commentary on cultural changes (e.g., Nathan's ability to predict trends in literature and science) to heighten dramatic tension.

Scholarship of *Sophie's Choice* debates the historical veracity of Styron's representation of the Holocaust. Rosenfield, for instance, dubbed the novel an "unwitting spoof" (cited in Trouard 494). Styron knew that he would face criticism for his decision to write about the holocaust, but he spurned the notion that only the Jews could communicate the terrors of the Holocaust (Sirlin ix). Sophie, quite pointedly, is not a Jew: she is a Catholic. Styron never promises to render a truthful tale; in fact, he posits a heavily-mediated narrative depicting "a morbid and solitary period" (4) of his Stingo's life. Even if Stingo told the story as accurately as they were portrayed to him, issues regarding authenticity can easily be overlooked since his source of information was a mentally ill woman who deliberately withheld information (158).

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Ultimately, Styron presents a flawed human as a narrator: Stingo exhibits a strong sexual appetite coloring his interpretation of women. For instance, his failed sexual experience with Leslie "was so wounding to my spirit, that I became physically ill" (194). Stingo's racial attitudes are also flawed. Even though he is torn about his ancestors' status as slaveholders, he still takes the money: "Years later I thought that if I had tithed a good part of my proceeds of Artiste's sale to the N.A.A.C.P. instead of keeping it, I might have shriven myself of my own guilt" (34). Poverty, however, got the best of his guilt, "Besides," writes Stingo, "in 1947 I needed \$485 as badly as any black man, or Negro, as we said in those days" (34).

Since Stingo conceives himself to be a Southern James Joyce (119), a "young Southerner wandering amid the Kingdom of the Jews" (4), literary interpretation of the novel should reflect this reality. Stingo's obsession with his ancestors' involvement as slave owners outlined in the second chapter indicate that the novel's scope extends well-beyond the Holocaust. As West argues, "all Virginia should be reading *Sophie's Choice*" because it is infused with a Southern cultural and literary heritage (190).

In addition to the Southern themes and setting, there is a great deal of intertextuality with Southern novelists such as William Faulkner. For instance, Sophie, the voracious reader, spends much of her time reading the *Faulkner Portable*, an anthology that Stingo "had practically memorized" in college (141). Stingo even admits to appropriating Robert Penn Warren's style and tone in *All the King's Men* when beginning the novel: "using similar rhythms and even the same second-person singular to achieve the effect of the author grabbing the reader by the lapels" (37). Because of these factors, a reexamination of *Sophie's Choice* in this context may provide new insights into this gripping novel.

### **The Fall of the House of Bieगाński**

Scholars, such as Mulvey-Roberts in her *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, demonstrate a great variety of "Gothic" literature as the genre evolves over time and region: Victorian, Welsh, Irish, Colonial, and Caribbean Gothic. For the most part, Gothic novels includes "a setting in an ancestral house, real or perceived occult events, and a woman at risk" (Palmer 123). Harris adds that women are often portrayed as swooning, terrified, and

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screaming heroines who are "threatened by [a] powerful, impetuous male" ("A Glossary of Literary Terms"). Repeatedly, Sophie is cast as a helpless heroine. Perhaps the most consequential aspect of her helplessness is the fact that she is denied control of the narrative; instead, her story is told by a man.

In addition to Styron appropriating numerous Gothic themes, he heavily alludes to another Virginian's work, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." Lee argues that this short story should be considered the founding text for Southern Gothic fiction (Cited in Mulvey-Roberts 217). Both works feature an estranged relationship between the narrator who is in an alien environment, a mentally unstable friend who hosts the narrator, and an extremely ill female who has some profound connection to the host. For Roderick Usher, this female is his sister, Madeline. For Nathan, this female is his girlfriend, Sophie.

Having traveled a great distance at the behest of an ailing childhood friend, Poe's narrator finds himself a guest in "a mansion of doom" that fostered "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart" ("Fall" 26). Stingo, too, has journeyed to a distant land very alien to him when he becomes a lodger in Mrs. Zimmerman's home. Styron comically twists the stereotypical Gothic mansion: "I was instantly reminded of the façade of some back-lot castle left over from the MGM movie version of *The Wizard of Oz*. The interior was also pink" (35).

There are intriguing similarities between Roderick and Nathan. For instance, the characters have a "nose of a delicate Hebrew character" ("Fall" 29). Roderick and Nathan both suffer from a potent mental illness that causes deep disturbances in their households. Stingo observes, "I also began to see seeping out of Nathan, almost like some visible poisonous exudate, his latent capacity for rage and disorder" (*Sophie's Choice* 203). Later, Stingo learns that Nathan burned his parents' house down and had to be institutionalized. Poe's narrator captures a similar instability in Roderick: "His actions were alternately vivacious and sullen" ("Usher" 30). To sooth their illness, the two are fanatical about the arts: painting, literature, and music; consequently, both tales contain allusions to artistic works.

The few good times Roderick and Nathan have with their friends are overshadowed by their uncontrollable bouts of madness. For instance, when Madeline dies, Roderick

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temporarily entombs her so a doctor could study the body. Madeline's should have evoked grief in her brother; Roderick, however, was gripped by fear. Finally, he confesses that, "*We have put her living in the tomb!*" For days, she clawed her way out the casket, but Roderick "dared not speak" (42) of her predicament even though he knew that she must be experiencing, to allude to Styron, "unimaginable pain." Hands dripping with blood, Madeline renders twin a "victim to the terrors he anticipated" (43). It is only after the collapse of the House of Usher, that she is permitted rest.

"Fall of the House of Usher" exemplifies the "female Gothic" narrative as conceived by Moers in the 1970s. Such narratives convey female dissatisfaction with patriarchy and women's confinement to maternal roles. In this form of Gothic literature, as Smith and Wallace contend, the text becomes "a coded expression of women's fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body, most terrifyingly experienced in childbirth" (1). Madeline's actions are particularly horrendous because she has overthrown her male oppressor, Roderick; she rejects the limitations of her patriarchal tradition; and she chooses a path for herself, death.

Like her counterpart, Madeline Usher, Sophie returns from the grave. She bears a tattoo permanently etched on her arm and indelibly imprinted on her soul. Stingo acknowledges the very first evening he met Sophie that "she was doomed" (57). The Holocaust, of course, took her entire family, from her famous father, Professor Bieगाński, to her young children, Jan and Eva. The Holocaust also took a tremendous toll on her body: she weighed only 85 pounds; suffered from numerous diseases (among them were typhus, scurvy, scarlet fever, and anemia); was shaved bald; and had been left toothless. She emerged from the concentration camp "a *wraith*" (69). Due to years of malnutrition, she is unlikely to bear more children. Hence, she cannot assume a role (note how she rejects Stingo's marriage proposal) conforming to post-war America's norms: woman as wife and mother. Spiritually, Sophie died in the concentration camp, but she could not rest until she had unburdened her soul. After her confession, Sophie returns to her savage gloom (63) and ends her and Nathan's lives. Wreaking havoc upon Mrs. Zimmerman's peaceful house, the Bieगाński family line finally falls.

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**From Krakow to Brooklyn: Subjugating Sophie**

While *Sophie's Choice* is a Southern Gothic, it also is a female Gothic. The novel records the systematic oppression of women. Reading the text as such provides insight into Sophie's "unimaginable pain." The characters revolving around Sophie, both male and female, are inextricably linked by their desire to subjugate or conquer her, which is a plot device common to Gothic fiction. For instance, in Stoker's *Dracula*, the titular character declares: "Your girls that you love are mine already; and through them, you and the others shall yet be mine—my creatures, to do my bidding and be my jackals when I want to feed" (267). Victor echoes a similar sentiment in Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

[M]y mother has said playfully, "I have a pretty present for my Victor—tomorrow he shall have it." And when, on the morrow, she presented Elizabeth to me as her promised gift, I, with childish seriousness, interpreted her words literally and looked upon Elizabeth as mine—mine to protect, love, and cherish. All praises bestowed on her I received as made to a possession of my own. (21)

In modern Gothic tales, heroines are not confined to decaying castles; they are trapped in "domestic spaces" (Smith and Wallace 5). As I will demonstrate in this section, Sophie falls into a constant pattern of subjugation beginning with her father, Zbigniew Biegański. Stingo states that Biegański "compelled her to learn typing and shorthand when she was only sixteen. He may already have schemed at using her" (*Sophie's Choice* 262). Biegański, himself longs to transform his Poland into an Aryan utopia free of "superfluous Jews" (260). As a "Distinguished Professor of Jurisprudence at the Jagiellonian University of Cracow" (257), he writes "countless articles to distinguished political and legal journals in Poland and in such centers of culture as Bonn, Mannheim, Munich and Dresden" (260). Though not wealthy, Biegański's reputation provides access to members of Polish nobility such as Princess Czartoryska. Throughout his career, he ingratiates himself with the upper class, but he is clearly not a member; some reject him as a "parvenu and hopelessly vulgar" (506).

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Biegański exploits Sophie for his anti-Semitic enterprises, and she dutifully assists him to earn his love (Bertram Wyatt-Brown 60). Stingo reflects that it was "all bound up in her Polish Catholicism, in which veneration of a father seemed appropriate and necessary anyway" (*Sophie's Choice* 261). Sophie may even like "her virtually menial submission...she shared with her mother" (262). Sophie painfully discovers the shallowness of her father's love when she erroneously types "Neville Chamberlain" repeatedly in a manuscript rather than "Houston Chamberlain." Furious at the error, Biegański viscously lashes out: "Your intelligence is *pulp*, like your mother's. I don't know where you got your body, but you did not get your brains from me" (*Sophie's Choice* 266). Years later, a saddened Sophie observes that "this man which gave me breath and flesh have no more feeling for me than a servant, some peasant or slave, and now with not a word of thanks for all my work was going to make me...grovel?—yes, grovel" (*Sophie's Choice* 267).

Sophie is not oblivious to her plight, but she continuously attempts to find happiness by pleasing those who dominate her. Her husband, Kazik, will become the next of many dominating Sophie. Long before her epiphany about her father's love for her, she idealistically loved her husband. "I was married very, very young," she notes, "and I suppose I was still in this state of being a little girl and thinking that this wonderful life so comfortable and safe and secure would continue forever." (88). The destruction of this dream—the murder of her family caused inconceivable anguish. "I was beyond feeling," she laments, "like there was no more tears in me to pour on the earth" (92). Haunted by her past, it should not be a surprise when Sophie tells Stingo that she tried to kill herself shortly after she was liberated from the camps: her identity as a daughter, mother, and wife had been stolen from her.

In addition to subjection to patriarchy, Gothic narratives depict a continual denial of the heroine's sexuality. For example, in her examination of *Dracula*, Roth argues that "for both the Victorians and twentieth-century readers, much of the novel's great appeal drives from its hostility toward female sexuality" ("Suddenly Sexual Women" 411). Roth notes that women are not allowed to exhibit their femininity until they have become monsters. For instance, "Only when Lucy becomes a vampire is she allowed to be 'voluptuous'" (414).



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Even Mina, who like Sophie has prodigious clerical talents, has a repressed sexuality. Stocker notably fails to provide a physical description of Mina. *Dracula*, asserts Roth, is in a "constant...attempt to destroy the mother" (417). Arata makes a similar charge, arguing:

"The violence of Lucy's demise is grisly enough, but we should not miss the fact that her subjection and Mina's final fate parallel one another. They differ in degree, not kind. By the novel's close, Mina's sexual energy has been harnessed for purely domestic use" ("Dracula and Reverse Colonization" 468).

Ultimately, *Dracula* attacks the mother when she "threatens by being desirable" (Roth 420). In fact, Gothic tales pervasively marginalizes mothers. There are no mothers in "The Fall of the House of Usher." In *Dracula*, Lucy's mother dies from fright. In *Sophie's Choice*, Nathan, Stingo, and Sophie's mothers are dead. Ultimately, by eliminating her children, the Nazis eliminate her maternity.

Emerging from Roth and Arata's essays are important themes for consideration. First, there is the durability of the horror myth and its overt misogyny. In Gothic tales, while men strongly desire women, their sexuality is viewed as a sinful undermining of man's self-control. As Kristeva notes, "desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects" (*Powers of Horror* 1). Women, thus, are constantly caught up in the dichotomy of desire and abjection. For instance, in *Dracula*, female sexuality is exhibited by Lucy and the three sisters. Their sexuality is viewed an evil means to enthrall men so these female vampires may feed upon them. Women are so repressed sexually that their maternity is reduced to an oxymoronic virgin/mother persona. Hence, Mina may be viewed as being a mother but there is no hint of her as a sexual being. No longer is she like those *other* women: "The snow is not more stainless than her forehead. The curse has passed away" (*Dracula* 326).

This pattern of desire/abjection continues during Bieगाński's meeting with Dürffield. Bieगाński makes every attempt to equate his technical skills and ideals to those of the Nazis, but the German industrialist was far more interested in Sophie than he was in Bieगाński. She was a plaything to satisfy his carnal appetite. During the meeting, Dürffield surreptitiously flirts with Sophie to the point she had to "turn away feeling a spasm of

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adulterous guilt" (*Sophie's Choice* 422). The war proved unkind to this lecher. Sophie sees him years later in Auschwitz, and he "looked a caricature of the romantic figure gone to seed. He had grown swollen around the face and porkishly rotund in the midriff, and she noticed that those perfect fingers which...had so mysteriously aroused her six years before seemed like rubbery little wurstlike stubs" (443-444).

When Sophie is caught smuggling meat to her sick mother, the Nazis ship her to Auschwitz. In this nightmarish Hell, Sophie once more plays the role of the persecuted, helpless maiden of the Southern Gothic. Thus, when Dr. Jemand von Niemand allows Sophie the "choice" to select which of her children is to live and which is to die, the doctor has not empowered her with the "privilege" (529) of agency. The doctor knows that all those who walk through the gates are doomed. To him, empowerment is a cruel illusion where he could "affirm his capacity for evil" (532). Struck by Sophie's beauty, von Niemand exhibits the desire/abjection pattern outlined earlier. When he first spoke to Sophie, he states "as bluntly and unsexually as possible: 'I'd like to get you into bed with me'" (526).

Dr. von Niemand, however, is not the only one to lust for Sophie at Auschwitz. Despite death, filth, disease, and despair permeating the prison, she finds herself in one predicament after another. First, a female prison guard nearly defiles her. Later, Wilhelmine, Commandant Höss' housekeeper, succeeds. This "ogress" (286) wields absolute power over the household staff. All Sophie could do was submit to her mistress as if she was a "crippled moth" (286).

Sophie became a member of the Höss household due to her secretarial capacities. Just as she did with her former master, Professor Biegański, she works like a faithful automaton for her new master. "Sophie's typewriter," observes the Stingo, "went clickety-clack...while Höss brooded over his cesspool diagrams and the flies droned and twitched, and the movement of distant boxcars kept up a blurred incessant rumble like summer thunder" (*Sophie's Choice* 248). Although Höss professes emotional detachment, he, too, is enthralled by Sophie's beauty. When Sophie discovers his affection for her, she vainly tries to seduce him in a desperate attempt to save Jan. After much flirtation, Höss breaks: "Having intercourse with you would allow me to lose myself, I might find forgetfulness"

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(306). To her horror, he is also caught up in the dichotomy of desire/abjection. Höss controls his lust and sends Sophie back to Block Two.

Nazis fondly tell all new arrivals that "there is only one way out—up the chimney" (*Sophie's Choice* 424). Somehow, though, Sophie vanquished them: she escapes the nightmare and finds a new existence in Brooklyn. In those early days, her body was "weak and ravaged" (p. 102). While researching in a library, she literally swoons like a damsel in distress and is promptly rescued by her new savior, Nathan Landau, who pretending to be a doctor, takes her to his home and restores her to health. "When I first met this one," brags Nathan, "she was a rag and a bone and a hank of hair....We'll make a nice big milk-fed American girl out of her in no time" (*Sophie's Choice* 69). Nathan sends Sophie to a nutritionist so that she can "bloom like a rose" (171) and supplies her every physical need: teeth, food, and clothes. From his toil, Sophie is reborn, but at the same time, she has once again been domesticated. Sophie states, "How could it be possible to know a man for forty-five minutes and feel this emptiness when he is gone?" (145). She complains that she was like a "kitten for him to fondle" (382); she is completely aware of her subjugation. Wyatt-Brown sees Nathan as an "unfathomable master" whom she must submit to like she once did to her father. Certainly, the terrors of "Auschwitz reinforced her regressive habit of servility (65)."

Her Prince Charming, Nathan, comes from a wealthy family—wealthy enough to keep him in the finest mental hospitals. Accordingly, Nathan purchases extravagant gifts for his friends. In Stingo's case, Nathan provides funds so he can stay in Brooklyn and write. In addition to being wealthy, he is an intellectual and an equal among his peers. Like Sophie's previous masters, he has a darkness which consumes them both: Nathan is a violent paranoid schizophrenic and is locked in a vicious cycle of desire/abjection of Sophie. Wyatt-Brown contends that Nathan "plays the godly arbiter of her soul just as von Niemand had when compelling her to make an earlier and equally tragic choice over the life and death of her beloved young children" (65).

### **Sophie's Masters**

Sophie's masters as outlined in the previous section may vary by nationality and relation, but there are striking similarities. Foremost, each person has some social status that imbues a sense of authority. Ultimately, they represent the Gothic villain, an oppressive male figure who rules as a tyrant, who insists "that one or more of the female characters do something intolerable" (Harris). The heroine, notes Harris, "may be commanded to marry someone she does not love (it may even be the powerful male himself), or commit a crime" ("Elements of the Gothic Novel").

Sophie's masters are also consumed by fraudulent obsessions. Biegański succumbs because of his "worship of the Reich" (*Sophie's Choice* 411). Kazik fails because of his blind faith in his father-in-law. The Reich—along with the Nazis who oppressed Sophie—collapses due to schizophrenic leadership, which is conflicted by "the lust for murder and the need for work" (412). Nathan declines due to paranoid schizophrenic delusions of being a doctor those delusions are aggravated by drug abuse which causes a "furious, unalterable and predetermined plunge toward disaster" (467).

Even if Sophie had fully recovered from the atrocities of Auschwitz, the numerous degradations imposed upon her in her new home, Brooklyn, were insurmountable. Predators, it seems, are everywhere in this Gothic horror. Perhaps the most unnerving of these occurred when she was attacked by unknown rapist on a broken and unlighted subway. Stingo feels that this assault was most damaging because she had begun to heal physically and spiritually. This "looting of her soul...pushed her back toward the *cauchemar*, the nightmare from which she was ever so delicate and slowly trying to retreat" (99-100). No matter where she travels, it seems she cannot escape her Gothic nightmare.

### **Stingo: Hero or Oppressor?**

Stingo's insatiable sexual appetite makes him as culpable as Sophie's villainous tyrants. Like all the others, he desires her; unlike the others, he does not reject her. Throughout the novel, he longs for sexual fulfillment and is humorously thwarted by his inexperience. But there is more to Stingo than other men in Sophie's life. In contrast to his relationship with Leslie, Stingo listens to Sophie's thoughts about life, literature, and culture.

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Ultimately, this confused and infatuated Stingo views Sophie as an equal, not something to be domesticated. Sophie, thus, permits him to play the "patient confessor's role" (*Sophie's Choice* 386) to a woman who desperately wants absolution from her sins. So, while Sophie is the first to fulfill Stingo's physical needs, Stingo is the first to fulfill Sophie's spiritual needs. He becomes the keeper of "Sophie's...past, trailing its horrible smoke—as if from the very chimney of Auschwitz—of anguish, confusion, self-deception and, above all, guilt" (203).

Stingo certainly is not a perfect hero. As noted previously, he is deeply flawed. Given his strong sexual appetite, one should certainly question Stingo's reliability as a narrator. However, Styron's invocation of the unreliable narrator meshes with Poe's practices. For example, in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe utilized an anonymous narrator making it difficult for the audience to establish credibility. In Poe's tale, certain questions about the narrator go unanswered. For instance, why has the narrator not seen his childhood friend for so long? Where did the narrator travel from? Additionally, many of Poe's narrators lack credibility: they are mad; they are criminals; they are both.

Stingo, nevertheless, differs from tyrannical figures of Gothic literature. First, he tends to play the role of passive observer, allowing others (particularly Nathan) to be more dominant. Notably, it is Sophie who makes sexual advances on Stingo. Second, Stingo feels profound sense of compassion for others—for instance, the loss of his dead mother and dead friend, Mariah. Other male characters are certainly not this empathetic. Stingo possesses a terrible naiveté regarding the world beyond Tidewater, Virginia. Despite his faults, Stingo plays the role of confidant, not villain, in the same way the narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" plays Roderick's confidant.

Fleeing from a deranged Nathan, Sophie and Stingo travel to Washington. There Stingo confesses his "heartbreaking desire" (*Sophie's Choice* 490) and offers to take her to his farm in southern Virginia where she can have "all the modern American conveniences" (503). Sophie would not allow her Stingo to squander his energy and talent pursuing a fantasy that he himself realized was not suitable for either of them. Thus, when Stingo proposes to make her a properly domesticated Virginian—a "Roy Acuff fan" (507), Sophie recognizes that by permitting Stingo's desires, she would fall into another trap. Regardless,

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of the matter, she was still beholden to Nathan. Sophie politely rejects his offer citing a long list of concerns such as her older age and delicate physical condition, her inability to drive, her love for classical music, and her growing concern for Nathan's safety.

Sophie then proffers her last confession, dredging up memories that she could share with no other living soul: her "totally unpardonable sin" (530). "At this instant," writes Stingo, "I sensed for the first time a distance separating us—an intolerable distance which, in my delusory dreams about a Southern love nest, I had not realized had been keeping us apart" (536). Having finally unburdened her soul, she is "free" to end her life. In a final note to Stingo, she writes: "So I must be with Nathan again for whatever that mean. I may not see you again but do believe me how much knowing you have meant to me... I love Nathan but now feel this Hate of Life and God (545). Sophie realizes that she can never find happiness; constantly denied agency, all her choices have been illusions. She laments, "If I could just find my little boy, I think that could save me" (538). Sophie knows that Jan will never be found; he most likely did not survive Auschwitz. At the end of "Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick and Madeline lie in death together. Likewise, Nathan and Sophie lie "recumbent and entwined in each other's arms" (553). The two lovers, recounts Stingo lie in "this grave and tender embrace forever" (553).

### **Conclusion**

In the end, there is much more to *Sophie's Choice* than a treatise on the horrors of Auschwitz. William Styron's Southern Gothic novel reflects the numerous degradations women suffer in an authoritarian patriarchal society. Stingo inherited the tragic memory of woman who could not escape her demons and those who tried to possess her. Stingo knew that this broken damsel in distress "would be able to endure any hell" in the afterlife (555); she lived a lifetime of "unimaginable pain." Perhaps it is this knowledge that allows him to grieve for all those who have suffered, to "dream of death," to "bless" his resurrection," and to cherish "*in glory, the bright, the morning star*" (562).

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