

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY
IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM STYRON

by

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ABSTRACT

Men have long been baffled by women--their habits, their needs, their desires. Even Sigmund Freud, the great psychiatrist, has asked, "What do women want?" As the centuries progressed, men started lumping certain female characteristics together to make women easier to understand. The passive, obedient, compassionate, self-sacrificing, married woman became known as the submissive wife. The domineering, headstrong female became the liberated woman. Stereotypes have their advantages. Society uses them as a standard to measure its members. But, stereotypes have so limited women that they have done more harm than good.

Much of the continued limitation of women in this century is because of Freud's observations as translated into literature. He contributed three theories about women to psychology: "anatomy is destiny," females hate their mothers for having brought them into the world as women not men, and the three major portions of a female's personality consist of passivity, masochism, and narcissism. Freud influenced not only the psychiatric community but the literary community as well, especially with his observations on the Oedipus complex. The idea of a child's desiring the parent of the opposite sex has been a theme in literature for centuries.

William Styron, author of four novels--Lie Down in Darkness (1951), The Long March (1952), Set This House on Fire (1960), and The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967)--uses Freudian psychology in his works. His female characters are poorly developed, weak women. They let life wash over them, passively allowing men to control their lives. The harder life is, the more suffering they do, the more the women feel they are fulfilling society's expectations. However, the women are not happy, proving that something is lacking in their lives.

Noted as one of the distinguished writers of the post-World War II generation, Styron shows his bias against women by stereotyping them, depicting them as shadows instead of as real people. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate Styron's treatment of female characters.

This thesis conforms in style and format to the MLA Handbook.

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN AS STEREOTYPES

The twentieth-century woman has presented herself for public study, analysis, and criticism to a degree unparalleled by her predecessors. Women are the subjects of magazine articles, television shows, and college courses. Conventions discussing women's rights and roles in society have been organized. The women's liberation movement, spurred by the awakened social consciousness of the 1960's, has led to scores of books being published either praising or damning women.

The examiners and critics of women are not content to have just the present-day woman pinned down under their scrutiny. They also wish to understand past women, using them as steps to learn how the modern woman has evolved. The critical review of literature facilitates the learning process. The reviewer must rely on an author's accurate portrayal of a subject; the biases of the author and the reviewer must be exposed and set aside. Then, it is possible to learn from literature what past women were like and how they affected the growth of the present woman.

This thesis conforms in style and format to the MLA Handbook.

Because writers are products of their times, they tend to pattern their characters according to the prevailing standards. Characterizations are based on rules governing what makes a woman good, bad, a seductress, and old maid. Since writers influence each other, over the years the patterns set down by earlier writers have become models for later ones. Certain characteristics describing a type of woman becomes a norm. Thus stereotypes are born.

Stereotypes give people guidelines by which to judge each other. The stereotype is society's yardstick. Breaking out of a stereotypical mold may bring great pressures from society in the form of guilt, anxiety, or hysteria. We are living in a time when the images of women in life are changing but the stereotypes are still with us.

Some sociologists use words such as "passive," "intuitive," "possesive" to describe women. These same types of words are used by critics when analyzing women in literature.¹ Women are often judged as having characteristics inferior to those of men. Stanley Eitzen writes in his book, In Conflict and Order: Understanding Society, "To be feminine in American society is to have a role that is conforming, passive, and dependent."² Simone de Beauvoir called women the "second sex," reflecting the attitude of a male-dominated world, both in real life and in literature. According to Mary Anne Ferguson in The Images of Women in Literature:

according This sexist image of women has prevailed in myth
world. and literature for so long that it seems inevi-
will, table and true in spite of the obvious logical
The impossibilities. . . .³

The images of women in literature often serve as justifi-
cation for the continuation of traditional roles.

Women characters are reflections of real women. Authors
may fall back on stereotypes to avoid fully developing a
character or because they lack the skill to create a non-
stereotypical character. Many male and female authors have
the latter problem. Some may be able to create well-rounded
characters of either sex, while others may only be able to
fully develop the characters of their own sex, the one they
best understand.

Common female stereotypes in literature are the earth
mother, the all-knowing woman who brings both life and death;
the wife, dominating or submissive; the virgin or "Mary,"
the pure and chaste woman that men desire but must not touch;
the seductress or "Eve," she leads men to their downfall by
distracting them from their goals through sex; the sex
object, the passive victim of men's lustful desires; and,
the old maid, a poor spinster who was jilted or had her
lover die.⁴

The earth mother controls the destinies of the members
of her family. She has given her children life, but because
of that, she has condemned them to die. The earth mother,

according to the stereotype, has an innate knowledge of the world. She understands suffering in a way that no man ever will. Her actions decide the fate of her family.

The submissive wife has often been portrayed as the ideal woman. She is beautiful, passive, and obedient. She devoutly cares for her husband and children and is willing to do anything to satisfy their needs, even if it means sacrificing her own.

Opposite on the spectrum is the dominating wife. Her dominance may be obviously overbearing or slyly subtle. Either way, her goal is to emasculate her husband and gain control of the family.

The virgin or "Mary" appears to be a "perfect" woman, but she is not an ideal one. She is pure in heart, mind, and soul. Her virginity is her most valuable possession, one that men idolize her for but want to take from her. If she loses it, she loses her "perfection," unless she moves up into the ranks of the submissive wife.

The antithesis of the virgin is the seductress or "Eve." Kate Millet, author of Sexual Politics, describes the seductress saying, "This mythic version of the female as the cause of human suffering, knowledge, and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes."⁵ The seductress is responsible for the evils of the world. She uses her sexual attractiveness to distract men from their goals.

The sex object is closely related to the seductress,

except that she does not use her sexuality against men. She is the prey of men, the victim of the attitude that "all women are bitches and castrators who interfere with or deny man's search for identity."⁶ Therefore, men often feel justified in taking advantage of women through casual sexual encounters.

The old maid is a curious stereotype because the role usually does not fit the reality. The old maid watches life pass her by. Unable to get a husband when she was young, she is now looked upon with pity. She is often a crotchety old lady and perhaps a bit demented. While the old maid was at one time a stereotype, she may better be classified as a myth because many unmarried women have led very full, satisfying lives. Their single status has aided them to achieve goals that often would not have been possible had they had a family to care for.

Women have made some progress in freeing themselves from such limiting roles, but their lives still follow the patterns of their grandmothers. Sigmund Freud and his theory, "anatomy is destiny," is largely responsible.

Freud, recognized as a genius because of his contributions to the psychiatric community, believed that to be born female was to be born inferior. In The Troublesome Helpmate, Katharine Rogers says:

He believed that woman's particularly complex sexual development exhausts her potentialities,

leaving her an almost purely sexual being and therefore hardly capable of rational or moral development. . . .⁷

Freud was sure that most women desired to become men and that they hated their mothers for having brought them into the world with such an enormous handicap. Freud writes:

Women regard themselves as wronged from infancy, as undeservedly cut short and set back; and the embitterment of so many daughters against their mothers derives from the reproach against her of having brought them into the world as women instead of as men.⁸

Freud based his theory on observation of women with degrees of hysteria or neuroses. He coined the term "penis envy" to describe the desire of these women to have the advantages of men. He overlooked the fact that repression of women in all areas of society was causing the problems, not just their sexual maladjustments. Millet explains:

Freud suggested that the source of most mental illness was repression of normal sex development. Through his clinical work Freud was able to observe women suffering from two causes: sexual inhibition . . . and a great discontentment with their social circumstances. In general his

tendency was to believe the second overdependent upon the first, and to recommend in female sexual fulfillment a panacea for what were substantial symptoms of social unrest within an oppressive culture.⁹

According to Freud, passivity, masochism, and narcissism composed the major portions of the female personality. Freud believes that masochism and passivity are closely interrelated because women take pleasure in being ruled by men, however harshly. A woman will take any type of punishment or humiliation from a man because it is her nature to be submissive. Freud considers a woman's love for her own body to be a perversion since the narcissism could lead to the female's realizing she does not need a man to bring her pleasure.

Freud made observations that possibly were accurate for his time. Women did envy the advantages men had in life. Men were much freer to do as they pleased compared to women. That did not mean that women wanted to be men; they simply wanted the same opportunities and freedom.

Great attacks have been made upon Freud by modern feminists because of his lack of sensitivity to what was really happening in the minds of his female patients. Writers such as Kate Millet, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer claim that Freud's theory was merely the reflection of an age-old cultural bias against women and that this theory actually constitutes a devious attempt to justify the

continuance of male supremacy. The human need to grow went unrecognized as a need as powerful as sex. Betty Friedan states:

Analysts who have freed themselves from Freud's bias . . . [and are] studying the human need to grow, are beginning to believe that this is the basic human need, and that any interference with it, in any dimension, is the source of psychic trouble. The sexual is only one dimension of the human potential.¹⁰

Millet adds:

Probably the real tragedy of Freudian psychology is that . . . its fallacious interpretations of feminine character were based upon clinical observation of . . . the unadjusted women of [his] time.¹¹

Another of Freud's theories which is controversial is the Oedipus complex, or the female version--the Electra complex. Critic Frederick Hoffman believes that "Freud ascribed great importance to the Oedipus complex as a most fitting characterization of [the] family relationship."¹² Basically, between the ages of three and six, the child enters the "phallic" or "Oedipal" development stage. Freud theorizes that the child begins to have sexual feelings for the parent of the opposite sex and desires to have all the

attention of that parent. The child resents the presence of the same sex parent because he or she is a rival in the battle for affection. Freud felt that the child may harbor hostile feelings toward the same sex parent, wishing him or her dead, or at least out of the way. Stories and plays such as "Snow White" and "Hamlet" involve varying degrees of the Oedipus complex. Whether or not it is fact, the theme has been used in countless pieces of literature from the time of the Greeks to the present.

One author who relies heavily on Freudian theories is William Styron. The themes and plots of his novels revolve around Freudian ideas. Styron's characters, especially his women, are interesting. Styron's women are usually doomed to ruin their lives because they are so inferior. They have neither the strength nor the mental ability to change for the better.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the female characters and suggest reasons why Styron has limited or stereotyped them. Because his male characters are well-rounded and fully developed, it is possible that Styron lacks the ability to create fully developed female characters. At the same time, he may be a sexist, using his female characters to exploit all women. A combination of both reasons is probably the best answer. Styron cannot create well-rounded women characters because of lack of skill and his sexist biases prevent him from trying to develop the women.

CHAPTER TWO

VIEWED AND REVIEWED:
PREVIOUS WORKS ON WILLIAM STYRON

Much has been written about William Styron and his novels. Since 1951, the year his first book Lie Down in Darkness was published, reviewers, interviewers, students, and professors have delved into his works trying to come up with analyses of Styron's style, themes, plots, and characters. When his first novel was published, Styron was heralded as the new, great southern writer, the new William Faulkner, the spokesman for the post-World War II generation. Most of the reviews that appeared at this time compared Styron heavily with Faulkner. Critics commented in articles such as "The Faulkner Pattern" by Malcolm Cowley and "A Place Where Love is a Stranger" by John Aldridge that Styron's style, language, characters, and use of time paralleled Faulkner's.

Styron was easily one of the most popular writers of the 1950's although he published only one other novel during this decade. His third novel Set This House on Fire (1960) set the critics on fire who proceeded to ravage the book. Many expected Styron to write another "southern" novel, which he had not. Some critics were so angry that they now denounced Lie Down in Darkness.

The Long March (1952) had gone relatively unnoticed, but in 1967, Styron started a storm again with The Confessions of Nat Turner. The black population, in general, was outraged that a white man could write a story of a slave revolt, and in their opinion, emasculate a folk hero. Ten Black Writers Respond contains essays and reviews attacking Styron as a racist. Because the country was in the middle of the civil rights movement and feelings were running high, Styron was a target for harsh criticism.² Styron has a new novel, Sophie's Choice, due to be published sometime this year. It is being eagerly awaited by critics throughout the country.

Robert Morris and Irving Malin put together some of the best critical essays on Styron in a book titled The Achievement of William Styron. Many of the critics compare Styron's novel Lie Down in Darkness to several of William Faulkner's novels but then delineate the ways in which they are different. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. remarks in "Notes on a Southern Writer in our Time":

All the same, Styron's novel was not simply warmed-over Faulkner. For one thing, it had a contemporaneity to it, a sense of dealings with moderns in a modern world, that is not present in Faulkner.³

Rubin goes on to say that Styron has a gifted style not seen in many new writers. "Critics habitually referred to him as one of the handful of really distinguished novelists of his

generation."⁴

The main topic of Rubin's essay is explaining what southern writing has been, dating back to Faulkner, how it has evolved, and what it might become. He defends Styron as a "southern" writer but not one as in the order of Faulkner.

Jan B. Gordon's essay "Permutations of Death: A Reading of Lie Down in Darkness" also compares the styles of Styron and Faulkner. She sees the difference to be Styron's use of "nostalgia" compared to Faulkner's use of "memory." She discusses at length Helen Loftis' desire to live in the past. Helen wishes for "a life that is all boundary, that walls oneself up behind identifiable barriers. And that condition is perilously close to the nothingness of death."⁵ She also notes the equalization of "love" and "need" in the novel, a trait that both Helen and Peyton Loftis display.

The Landscape of Nightmare by Jonathan Baumbach contains a chapter entitled "Paradise Lost: Lie Down in Darkness." Baumbach is concerned with the fall of the characters in the novel from a state of innocence to one of guilt:

With the progressive deterioration of its romantic ideals, the aristocracy of Styron's South falls from innocence into decay, from decay into guilt, and finally from guilt into redemption through death.⁶

Baumbach, as do most of the critics, gives a plot summary of

Styron's novels, then analyzes the characters.

In Radical Innocence by Ihab Hassan, the author deals with the negation of all aspects of the culture that Peyton Loftis has known. Southern society is dissolving as urbanization replaces the agrarian lifestyle. Religion is a façade, an impotent ritual. Love is hopelessly entwined with jealousy, hate, need, incest:

The hell of love, the hell of purchasing one's happiness with another's pain, the hell, even, of failing to know the love one is supposed to know--these are dramatized in scene after scene.⁷

Hassan's essay is an overview of the terror that fills the lives of the Loftis family and their unending failure to escape from it.

Marc L. Ratner gathered a collection of his essays into a book entitled William Styron. He comments on each of Styron's novels in separate chapters and also includes a chapter on Styron's use of satire, psychology, and social issues. The emphasis of Ratner's book is on rebellion as he notes that the main character in each novel is a rebel against society. Peyton Loftis fights the south; Cass Kinsolving, the United States; Lieutenant Culver, the Marines; and Nat Turner, slavery. As rebels, each of the characters is associated with violence--suicide, murder, war. Ratner focuses on the violent aspects of their personalities, the

satiric elements of their lives, the irony that surrounds them.

The critics generally comment on Styron's style, characters, and language, but they do not discuss specifically his use of women.⁸ They believe that Styron is a good writer but that he is not on the level of Faulkner or Hemingway.

Lie Down in Darkness, the first novel Styron published, is usually the one most focused on. Two of the major characters are women, but their roles as women are never discussed. Most critics analyze the effects the two women have on each other and their family, but they do not mention their affect on society or why the women are the way they are.

The novel's plot revolves around the life and death of Peyton Loftis. Her father, Milton, is a lawyer who once had political ambitions but lost them to alcohol. He loves Peyton very much, but his love is not that of a father for a daughter. Rather, the love he feels for her is almost incestuous, and he can never overcome that feeling. Consequently, Milton is overindulgent with Peyton, paying more attention to her than to his wife. Helen, Peyton's mother, raised in a strict, puritanical army household, tries to control her daughter in the same way, but Milton prevents it. As a result, Helen becomes jealous of Milton's affection for Peyton and treats her cruelly by ignoring her and lavishing

CHAPTER THREE

THE SINS OF THE PARENTS

Lie Down in Darkness, published in 1951, made William Styron, at the age of twenty-five, an overnight success. The novel is partially autobiographical with the setting, Port Warwick, actually Styron's home town, Newport News. One of the main characters is a composite of three girls he knew as a young man. The story concerns the degeneration of a wealthy Virginia family from the 1930's through the end of World War II. The main action takes place on an August day in 1945. Styron uses flashbacks to relate the rest of the novel.

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all her love on the older daughter, a mentally-retarded cripple named Maudie.

On Peyton's sixteenth birthday, Helen attempts to drag her home from a party for taking a sip of whiskey. She also falsely accuses Milton of having had an affair with Dolly Bonner for the past six years. When Milton realizes that he cannot convince Helen of his fidelity, he decides to take Dolly as his mistress.

Peyton leaves for college several days later and only returns home for short visits which are usually marred by violent fights with her mother. When Maudie becomes ill for the last time, Helen accuses Peyton of having indirectly killed her.

Therefore, Peyton flees to New York where she meets Harry Miller, a Jewish painter. She comes home to get married, hoping at last to reconcile with her mother, but the day turns out badly. Peyton and Helen have their final showdown which ends with Peyton physically attacking her mother.

After her marriage, Peyton's life becomes more miserable. She has numerous affairs and accuses Harry of being unfaithful to her. The situation eventually is too much for Harry to handle, so he leaves her. Peyton attempts to win him back, and when she fails, in desperation she commits suicide by jumping out of a women's room on the top floor of a garment factory in Harlem.

As mentioned previously, many critics compared Lie Down in Darkness to Faulkner's novels The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying. The families of Lie Down in Darkness and The Sound and the Fury are much alike. The father is an alcoholic lawyer; the mother is not entirely sane; one of the children is crippled; one of the daughters is sexually promiscuous; one of the children commits suicide.

The similarities of As I Lay Dying and Lie Down in Darkness arise from situations rather than characters. Both families are taking a dead member to be buried, and many obstacles must be overcome. Both novels take advantage of flashbacks. Styron and Faulkner give their dead characters long soliloquies which bind the other sections of the novels together.

Faulkner's novels are tales of the fall of the south and family dynasties. Lie Down in Darkness accounts for the fall of just one family caused by the problems of the individuals, not by heredity. Their struggles are personal ones, not societal.¹

Peyton Loftis is a tragic figure. She is a pawn in the war of affections between her parents. Milton turns to Peyton to find the love Helen will not give him. Helen vents her anger on Peyton in revenge. Richard Pearce in William Styron explains:

[Peyton] is desperately striving for an emotional, psychological, and ethical center. . . . Peyton is

led to search for links between Milton's incestuous desires, his drinking, his failures, his infidelity, Helen's neurotic connection with her crippled daughter, Maudie, her hatred of Peyton, of men, and even of women as sexual vessels.²

Peyton is never able to learn from her parents what love should be like. She gets no love from Helen and too much of the wrong kind from Milton. She sees Milton make overtures to Helen who ignores them. She watches her father pushed into infidelity by her mother's coldness. She knows she will not be able to find the type of parental love she requires in her home. Peyton recognizes the incestuous desire her father has for her, telling her boyfriend, "The poor guy. He's such a dope. But I love him, Dick. I love him. I think we've got a Freudian attachment."³

Milton encourages Peyton always to come to him with her problems. He never lets her try to solve them alone. When Peyton and Helen argue, Milton always sides with his daughter. He does not provide her a firm hand or guidance. Milton does give Peyton the only affection she ever knows from her family, but the overwhelming desire he has for her drowns the parental feelings. When Peyton marries, she begs Milton not to smother her. She knows that she will not be able to have a normal life with her husband if she does not get out from under her father's influence. Peyton tells him:

Peyton is afraid to love. She quotes "needing" people

with "love" You're a dear, and I love you, but please lay off
 marriage all the sentimental slop today. . . . Please don't
 "love" af smother me. I wasn't doing you a favor by coming
 for it. back here, it was a favor for me. . . . I've wanted
 Peyton re to be normal. I've wanted to be like everybody
 save her else. (pp. 254-5)

Peyton and Helen are never able to get along. Helen
 resents the attention Peyton receives from Milton and takes
 out her jealousy on the girl. In time, Peyton comes to hate
 her mother. She understands that no matter what she does,
 Helen will not like her. In The Absurd Hero in American
 Fiction, David Galloway remarks:

Peyton re Helen and Peyton despise each other, partly because
 and even of their rivalry over Milton, partly because they
 Harry tel are such wholly different creatures--Helen frigid
 and precise, Peyton sexual and flamboyant.⁴

As a child, Peyton did not feel a rivalry with her
 mother. She knew that her mother treated her much more
 harshly than did her father, but when she was frightened,
 she would try to turn to Helen first. Helen, however, con-
 stantly rebuffed her, allowing Milton to comfort Peyton.
 She opened the door for the degree of feeling Milton and
 Peyton finally felt for each other. Helen gave Peyton a
 fear of love.

Peyton is afraid to love. She equates "needing" people

with "loving" them. She has numerous affairs after her marriage to prove to her husband and herself that she can "love" after he tells her that she does not have the capacity for it. When Harry leaves her and refuses to take her back, Peyton realizes that she has lost the only person who can save her. She has not wanted to sleep with other men, but her need to have people love her, if only physically, drives her to adultery. Jane Flanders remarks:

Peyton's extreme need for affection, which eventually destroys her marriage and her sanity, reflects her emotional starvation in an inverted, hate-filled home. . . .⁵

Peyton requires Harry to play the roles of forgiving father and errant lover as Helen had tried to do to Milton. But Harry tells Peyton:

What do you mean I don't love you, Peyton? I love you more than you'll ever know. I'm just not your father. I'm not supposed to put up with these things. (p. 354)

Harry, having a stronger character than his father-in-law, moves out to avoid Peyton's demands, while Milton dives into a bottle to remove himself from Helen.

Peyton tries to escape the horror of her life through drinking and sex. She goes to a psychiatrist for a month, but he cannot help her. Galloway notes:

adultery. Peyton is too sophisticated, knows too much of the inner self to be able to escape through alcohol and sex, and when no other alternatives appear, she commits suicide.⁶

Peyton longs for a world that runs smoothly and unsurprisingly like the inside of the clock she carries around New York before her suicide. But the chaos of life is too much for her. Without love she cannot survive; she is totally lost. She has no way to find herself. Galloway perceives that:

The fruitlessness of the quest for identification is most resounding in Peyton, for she represents the promise of youth and sensibility; but rejected, unable to find the constant, Love, she continues a nymphomaniacal quest for peace and wholeness which is brought to an end only when she leaps, naked, briefly free, from the loft of a garment factory in Harlem. Unidentified for several days, her body is interred in a Potter's Field on Hart's Island, and even this temporary burial among unnamed dead suggests the horror of Peyton's frustrated quest for identity.⁷

Helen Loftis has more to do with Peyton's misfortune than any other character. Marc Ratner writes, "Helen's hatred and moral righteousness drive Peyton into sexual promiscuity, just as her attack on Milton drove him to

adultery."⁸

Helen's childhood was similar to Peyton's. She was extremely devoted to her father, a strict, puritanical army officer. Helen recalls in a conversation with her minister, Carey Carr, that the enlisted men called her father "Blood and Jesus" Peyton. She says that the men loved him, not realizing that she is substituting her own feelings in their place. Her idea of a perfect man to marry was someone like her father, but unfortunately, she chose Milton Loftis whose upbringing and morals were opposite from her own. Robert Fossum theorizes:

In the atavistic reaches of Helen's unconscious, her father is not only God's double . . . he is also the forbidden object of her sexual longings and consequently the cause of terrible ambivalence. Because all desirable men are surrogates of her father whom she both loves and fears, sex to Helen can never be free of guilt.⁹

Helen sees her guilt brought to life when her first child, Maudie, is born mentally retarded. It is brought to life a second time when Peyton is born. Although Helen names her daughter with her father's last name, she cannot bring herself to love Peyton. To love Peyton is forbidden because she bears her grandfather's name. The incest taboo constantly remains in Helen's mind because of her daughter's name, and they are separated from each other by it.

Life for Helen is a constant battle with imaginary enemies. Men are first on her black list. She wants to control the men she knows, emasculate them, dominate them to rid herself of her guilt:

Then her enemy, the Man, appeared: Milton, or Carey, sometimes her father, it made no difference--they all hated her, threatened her, asked her why she'd been so bad. . . . She'd have her triumph. She'd always--through a whole array of ministers, doctors, men (men! she thought) protest her stubbornness, her wrongness. . . . for this would be an acknowledgment of a woman's fury and . . . the defeat of men in general. (pp. 282-3, 285)

Her enemy is Dolly Bonner, the woman she had driven Milton to as a result of her constant accusations of his infidelity. She dreams often of finding Dolly dead in the street, the victim of a plague.

Her last enemy is Peyton, her young, beautiful daughter. Helen believes that Peyton is stealing the love that Milton owes her. She hates Peyton because Peyton is young and Helen is growing older and looks it. She hates Peyton because she believes that Peyton does not suffer as she does, because Peyton is not as morally straight or as worried about sin, because Peyton is not afraid to do as she pleases. Helen hates Peyton because her daughter is everything she is not.

has been given control because she is a good Christian. It

Helen is completely self-centered. She does not care for other people, but she cares about what they think about her. She pays an enormous amount of attention to Maudie so people will believe that she is a good mother. If someone comments about Peyton being spoiled, Helen blames Milton saying, "It's not I, not I who spoil her!" (p. 27). She organizes a huge wedding supposedly for Peyton but actually for the town. She wants the people to notice what a wonderful hostess she is.

Helen wants people to know how much she has suffered at the hands of her family. During the middle of a party, if Peyton or Milton does something to upset her, Helen flounces out of the room leaving the guests to themselves. The more she embarrasses Milton and Peyton, the happier she is. Peyton recognizes what motivates Helen and at the wedding she confronts her mother:

Poor Helen, you've really suffered, haven't you?

Poor Poor Helen. . . . You're like all the rest of the sad neurotics everywhere who huddle over their misery, and take out their vile, mean little hatreds on anyone they envy. . . . You hate everything, animal, vegetable, and mineral. Especially you hate me. . . . I'm free and you can't stand it. (pp. 297-8)

Helen has the power in the family. She believes she has been given control because she is a good Christian. It

is her duty to force her family to live by the rules of her God. Helen's God punishes those who stray. He punishes Milton and Peyton with Peyton's suicide. He is unforgiving much like Helen's father. Helen cannot cope with the unforgiveness. Her fear of her God eats away at her mind, slowly driving her toward insanity.

The other two female characters of any significance in Lie Down in Darkness are Maudie Loftis and Dolly Bonner. Maudie is the living symbol of the decay of the Loftis family. She is physically crippled as the rest are mentally. Her death foreshadows the final destruction of the family which happens when Peyton dies. She offers Helen a refuge from the threatening world. Maudie is the only person from whom Helen can accept love because Maudie never questions her or threatens her security. Dolly Bonner, Milton's mistress, is a silly social climber, but she provides Milton with the physical and emotional love that Helen and Peyton cannot.

Styron severely limits the women in his novel. He never develops their full personalities. Ratner comments, "His characters are seen as portraits. There is a static quality about them, because they remain fixed in their basic selfishness."¹⁰ Peyton and Helen seem to be incapable of happiness. They never have a good day.

The minds of Styron's female characters are shallow, stagnant pools. Helen went to finishing school; Peyton attended college. Apparently all they learned to do was

catch a husband. Peyton can carry on a conversation about art, but it is her husband who paints. She is a lousy housekeeper--she does not dust under the bed, thereby incurring her husband's wrath. Peyton bounces checks. She becomes a shrew if she catches Harry glancing at another woman. She is a typical bitch who can do nothing right.

Peyton wants no children, realizing that she would not be a fit mother. She cannot admit this knowledge to anyone, so she transfers the ineptness to Harry. She tells him that he would not be gentle enough or kind enough to a child. No one sees through Peyton's psychological shield. Therefore, they do not understand her.

Although Peyton is an intelligent woman who realizes what has happened to cause her life to be miserable and who tries to overcome her past, she is not strong enough to do it alone. Her values are confused, but she desperately desires to be "normal." She wants to have the upright ethics she believes other people possess.

Helen lives her life digging in her garden or caring for Maudie. She longs to be a child again, to be free from the burdens of adulthood. She is not honest about her feelings to herself or to anyone else except on rare occasions. She hides behind her religion.

Helen is vicious and cruel. She ruins the lives of those with whom she comes in contact. She is moody, alternately passive and aggressive, and abstractly spiritual.

She tries to play the role of the submissive wife while she actually dominates. She tries to be a good mother in the public's eye but would have been better off if she had sent Peyton to boarding school.

Lie Down in Darkness has no mentally strong women. They are retarded, or silly, or insane. They can be docile one minute, furious the next, as Milton Loftis notices:

. . . it was this sudden change of mood that he felt he could never cope with. Here was Woman, with a capital W, tricky and awful, inconstant as the weather. (p. 89)

Thus, Styron's women are baffling, insecure creatures that no man can understand.

Styron's reliance on Freud warps the personalities of the female characters. The Oedipus complex, as displayed by Helen and Peyton, paralyzes their lives. As women, they are weak, inferior, guilt-ridden, and evil. Helen and Peyton do not fight the bad things that happen to them. They appear to take pleasure in suffering. Both of them love their own bodies. Helen often looks at herself in the mirror remembering how she looked as a girl. Peyton is called "the body" by the fraternity men at college. To Styron, Helen shows signs of mental instability because she desires to dominate her husband. Her aggressive tendencies go against the female trait of passivity. Therefore, Helen is abnormal, in Styron's opinion.

With Lie Down in Darkness Styron sets the stereotypes of the women who follow in his future novels. His lack of skill in creating fully developed women characters becomes more apparent as do his anti-feminine biases.

Styron's three other novels, The Long March (1951), Set This House on Fire (1960), and The Professionals of Nat Turner (1967) contain very shallow women characters. Because they are so underdeveloped, it is easy to identify their stereotypes.

The Long March, a short novel about a thirty-six mile hike taken by some Marine reserves, contains only one reference to women, and they are portrayed as sex objects. The women are regular officer's wives who tease the reserve officers who had to leave their wives at home. The narrator of the novel, Lieutenant Culver, describes them:

... the constant teasing presence of their wives who were beautiful and spoke in tender draws and boldly flaunted at the wifeless reserves--in a proprietary, Atlanta-debutante fashion--their lecherous sort of chastity.

Set This House on Fire, Styron's second major novel, was widely denounced by critics when it appeared. Once again, the female characters are usually depicted as sex objects. It is the story of a young man, Peter Lovaretti, who with the help of an artist he knew in Italy, Gino Kinsolving, tries to

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE AND THE SEX OBJECT

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Set This House on Fire, Styron's second major novel, was widely denounced by critics when it appeared. Once again, the female characters are usually depicted as sex objects. It is the story of a young man, Peter Leverett, who with the help of an artist he knew in Italy, Cass Kinsolving, tries to

solve the mysterious death of a mutual acquaintance, Mason Flagg. Styron employs the technique of flashback as he did in Lie Down in Darkness to let the reader learn of the younger days of the characters.

Mason Flagg's life is totally engrossed in sex. He lives and breathes it. His obsession with sex comes from the relationship he and his mother share. The Oedipus complex revives itself again between Mason and Wendy whose relationship closely parallels that of Peyton and Milton Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness. Peter Leverett recalls Mason's seventeenth birthday when he and Mason and Wendy went sailing:

Wendy-dear (I rarely heard him call his mother anything else) . . . worshipped Mason, and with the blind constancy of some devout communicant, always seemed to be hovering near the image of her adoration. . . . To me Wendy had never looked so devastating as she did that day . . . with a saucy wink for me, prankishly tousling Mason's hair, breathing soft phrases of flattery and devotion to both of us, she seemed hardly a mother at all but some grown-up Dulcinea possessing both sexual allure and incalculable wisdom.²

Wendy is ever understanding, always supportive, even when Mason is expelled from school for having an illicit affair with a mentally-retarded thirteen year old girl. She

cannot be a parent to Mason. She is too much of a child herself to give guidance to her son.

Mason's wife, Celia, is an ambiguous character. She is very much in love with Mason, but she submits to Mason's beating her. She is completely dominated by him and will play the submissive wife to almost any extreme. Peter Leverett is very impressed by her intelligence and beauty until he learns what abuse she takes from Mason. Because she accepts Mason's beatings, she is an unsympathetic character. She changes, however, and finds the courage to leave him, but because Styron gives no insight as to the reason why she changes, Celia remains a flat character.

The rest of Mason's women are dumb blondes, beautiful but no brains. The women accept all types of verbal and physical abuse from Mason who uses them to show off his good taste. They seem to take the abuse because Styron presents them as inferior creatures who deserve to be treated badly. They appear to be sex objects with no other purpose in life than to be the victims of a man's desire.

The women which Mason involves himself with are not presented in a favorable light. A more sympathetic character is one woman who does not like Mason--Cass Kinsolving's wife, Poppy. Her personality is a bit eccentric. A devout Catholic, she has several children right away, but is hardly more than a child herself. Her mind has a tendency to wander as Cass tells Peter:

not having . . . I met Poppy. Love at first sight. . . . She
 unfaithful was on her way to flunking out of her first year
 not care at Vassar, not because she's dumb, you know, but
 because---well, I think she was a little what you
 for sex. might call ethereal. . . . [She is] unique in all
 the rescue this world in her strange blend of childish wisdom
 no equal and elfin charm, the pride and joy and despair of
 The her husband's life--sweet-souled, generous, loving,
 are also and the world's most catastrophic housewife. (pp.
 character 252-3)

Poppy will gather her children together following Cass' wanderings all over the world. She rarely objects to her husband's drinking or his frequent overnight disappearances. She only feels threatened once when she believes Cass is having an affair with a young Italian girl. Cass learns of Poppy's fear from his oldest daughter, Peggy:

mother. She told Timmy you have a sweetheart. Do you have
 has little a sweetheart, Daddy? . . . She told Timmy that
 female. you were an old goat who would never learn. Then
 ends over she cried again. She just cried and cried. (p. 430)

the plantation overseer. Nat watches his mother's rape:
 Styron shows his bias against women again with the above
 incident. When Cass learns that Poppy knows that he is
 attracted to Francesca, he realizes that it was foolish for
 him to believe that she did not know. But, then, Cass simply
 forgets about it. He does not explain to Poppy that he is

not having an affair. He allows her to believe he is unfaithful to her. His attitude appears to be that he does not care what Poppy thinks.

The primary use of women in Set This House on Fire is for sex. They have no economic value to society but drain the resources of their men. They cause problems but offer no solutions.

The female characters in The Confessions of Nat Turner are also poorly defined. They are more caricatures than characters. Several of the basic female stereotypes are apparent: the old maid, the sister of Nat's owner, is a cruel woman who enjoys mistreating the slaves. They attribute her eccentricity to her single status; the submissive wife comes in the form of the wife of Nat's owner. The complete opposite of her sister-in-law, Mrs. Travis is a kind, understanding woman who does whatever she can to make life pleasant for those around her. The sex object is Nat's mother. She is prey to men. Because she is a slave, Lou-Ann has little control over her life. She is not a mindless female, rather she is a very intelligent woman. Her influence over Nat is great, but she is a victim of the lust of the plantation overseer. Nat watches his mother's rape: She is on her back upon a table in the pantry, supporting the full weight of the overseer, who with his other hand fumbles and fights with her for her clothes and his own. . . . All at once a kind of

shudder passes through my mother's body, and the moan is . . . tinged with urgency . . . while her long legs go up swiftly to embrace his waist. . . .³

Styron not only degrades Lou-Ann by having her submit to the overseer, but he also has her enjoy the act. Here, Freud's influence is apparent. Lou-Ann seems to enjoy the rape because she is a masochist, and therefore, a normal female.

The most important female character in the novel is seventeen year old Margaret Whitehead. She is a torment to Nat. He is presented as a chaste man whose strength lies in his chastity, but his desire for Margaret is almost overwhelming. Margaret enjoys Nat's company because he is intelligent without being stuffy. But, she seemingly does not realize that her presence is a tease. Nat desires to take her the same way the overseer took his mother. A sexual union with Margaret represents Nat's conquest of women in general and white women in particular. The rape of a white woman is to defy the laws, natural and political, of the South.

Margaret's torment of Nat causes him to love her and hate her intensely. When the slave insurrection finally occurs, Margaret is the only person Nat kills, thereby eradicating his desire for her. He destroys the thing that has caused him anxiety and turmoil. Yet, Nat is not at peace with himself until, in jail, he allows the passion he felt for her to take over:

And as I think of her, the desire swells within me. . . . Her voice is close, familiar, real. . . . And now beyond my fear, beyond my dread and emptiness, I feel the warmth flow into my loins and my legs tingle with desire. . . . I search for her face in my mind, seek her young body, yearning for her with a craving beyond pain; with tender stroking motions I pour out my love within her; pulsing flood; she arches against me, cries out, and the twain--black and white--are one. (pp. 401-2)

The women of Nat Turner are secondary characters; therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions about them. They support the men, usually through sex. They have no distinguishing characteristics or personalities. They are filler shadows, devices to move the novel along but not impact on it. "Stereotypical thinking is necessary in the socialization process. In general, the women in these three novels are ghosts who haunt the pages. The reader is aware of their presence but cannot really picture them. They are part of the scenery instead of the action.

A better explanation of the stereotyping is that Styron is limited in his understanding of women because he is a man. His male characters are more fully developed, intelligent, sympathetic, sensitive to the world around them.

CHAPTER FIVE

FACT OR FANTASY: STYRON'S WOMEN

Styron's women are completely stereotyped. They are limited in all facets of their barely-there personalities. They make no contributions of any worth to society. They are doomed to eternal inferiority because they do not have the mental capabilities of their male counterparts. They have little common sense, are not logical, and are often slightly crazy. They have no self-esteem. In short, Styron's women are intruders in a masculine world.

It may be that Styron stereotyped his women so that they are more recognizable to the reader and easier to understand. Mary Anne Ferguson states in The Images of Women in Literature that, "Stereotypical thinking is necessary in the socialization process of finding role models."¹ Styron does explore what happens to Peyton Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness when she tries to break away from the image that had stereotyped her as a "southern lady." She becomes overtly psychotic--an unfortunate experience that is often the result of an escape attempt from a stereotype prison.

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Jonathan Baumbach makes an interesting note about the male characters in his book The Landscape of Nightmare:

... all of his sympathetic characters are alcoholics or reformed alcoholics, as if he were unable to conceive of a sensitive human being who could withstand the nightmare of existence without the anesthetic of drink.²

Alcoholics or not, Styron's men do important things such as holding jobs or practicing politics. During the years Styron was growing up, women stayed at home and cared for the children. They were not expected to work to make economic contributions to society. This type of life with the male as breadwinner and the female as cook, bottle washer, and bed partner is reflected in his novels.

Obviously, Freud's theories contributed greatly to Styron's work. The Oedipus complex relationships provided a simple, basic conflict for his novels to build around. But, Styron also included the theory that passivity, masochism, and narcissism were basic components of the female personality. Helen Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness takes sick pleasure in passively allowing her husband to have an affair. She enjoys suffering. Peyton Loftis knows her body is attractive. It is one of the few things she can take pride in, but she passively allows herself to be ruined by her parents. She does not try hard enough to defend herself.

The women in Styron's novels are taken for granted, and often, the men would be much better off without them. Certainly Harry Miller and Milton Loftis in Lie Down in Darkness would have been much happier divested of Peyton and Helen and their problems. Cass Kinsolving in Set This House on Fire would have found life more pleasing if Poppy and the children did not demand his attention.³ Mason Flagg would not have died if he had not slept with one woman too many. Styron seems to think that women are the bringers of evil who should be tolerated as inferior creatures.

To Styron, women are the bringers of life but also the bearers of suffering and death. They are man's fate. He cannot live with them, yet he cannot exist without them.

Styron has written a new novel, as yet unpublished, titled Sophie's Choice, about a young man whose life is influenced by a Catholic girl who lived in a Polish concentration camp during World War II. The story is semi-autobiographical because Styron is writing about a girl he knew. A short story pertaining to the novel appeared in the March 1978 issue of Esquire. It makes a reference to the landlady of the narrator in sexual terms, lending credence to the fact that Styron views women primarily as sex objects:

. . . his [the landlord's] lively and astonishingly well-proportioned blond wife, who bounced around in the garden in slacks or a bathing suit . . . or lay sprawl on an Abercrombie and Fitch hammock, where

I humped her to a frazzle with stiff, soundless, slow, precise shafts of desire.⁴

In conclusion, Styron does not seem to have a high regard for women. He appears to view them as the other sex who get in the way and prevent men from achieving their goals. His women are the bloodsuckers of life, parasites feeding on the men around them.

¹ John Edgar Hoover (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) and Carol Marvin and Katherine Pope, Who am I This Time? Female Authors in American and British Literature (New York: Schocken, 1976).

² D. Stanley Bitson, John Edgar Hoover: Understanding Society (Boston: Atha and Bates, 1978), p. 366.

³ Ferguson, p. 2.

⁴ Ferguson, pp. 4-10.

⁵ Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 52 and a personal interview with Diane Strommer, Associate Professor of English, 5 March 1979.

⁶ Ferguson, p. 8.

⁷ Katherine Rogers, The Troublesome Helix (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 235.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character Types Met With in Psycho-analysis Work." Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, (1915), p. 323. Cpt. in Sexual Politics, Kate Millet, p. 180.

⁹ Millet, p. 179 and Frederick Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University State Press, 1945), p. 157.

Notes
February 1979.

Chapter 1

¹ Two anthologies describing female stereotypes in literature that were very helpful are by Mary Anne Ferguson, The Images of Women in Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973) and Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope, Who am I This Time? Female Portraits in American and British Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

² D. Stanley Eitzen, In Conflict and Order: Understanding Society (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978), p. 366.

³ Ferguson, p. 2.

⁴ Ferguson, pp. 4-10.

⁵ Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 52 and a personal interview with Diane Strommer, Associate Professor of English, 5 March 1979.

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⁷ Katherine Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), p. 235.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character Types Met With in Psycho-Analysis Work." Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud, (1915), p. 323. Rpt. in Sexual Politics, Kate Millet, p. 180.

⁹ Millet, p. 179 and Frederick Hoffman, Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University State Press, 1945), p. 157.

¹⁰ Millet, pp. 178-9.

¹¹ Hoffman, p. 20.

¹² Jon Alston, *Sociology* 205, College Station, 26 February 1979.

Chapter 2

¹ John W. Aldridge, "In a Place Where Love is a Stranger," New York Times Book Review, 9 September 1951, Sec. 7, p. 5, cols. 7-8 and Malcolm Cowley, "The Faulkner Pattern," New Republic, 8 October 1951, pp. 19-20.

² Many Black critics saw Nat Turner as an attack on their culture instead of as a historical novel.

³ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Notes on a Southern Writer in our Time," in The Achievement of William Styron, ed. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 51.

⁴ Rubin, p. 52.

⁵ Jan B. Gordon, "Permutations of Death: A Reading of Lie Down in Darkness," in The Achievement of William Styron, ed. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 109.

⁶ Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 123.

⁷ Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 130.

⁸ To aid in my analysis of Styron's women, I first read Faulkner's Women. The Myth and the Muse by David Williams. Since Styron has been compared heavily with Faulkner, I found it helpful to see what had been written about Faulkner's women characters.

Chapter 3

¹ Louis D. Rubin, Jr. elaborates on this topic in his essay "Notes on a Southern Writer in our Time."

² Richard Pearce, William Styron (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), pp. 14-6.

³ William Styron, Lie Down in Darkness (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951) p. 221. All further references to this work appear in the text.

⁴ David Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), p. 56.

⁵ Jane Flanders, "William Styron's Southern Myth," Louisiana Studies, No.3 (1976), p. 266.

⁶ Galloway, p. 58.

⁷ Galloway, p. 55.

⁸ Marc L. Ratner, William Styron (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 43.

⁹ Robert Fossum, William Styron: A Critical Essay (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), p. 11.

¹⁰ Ratner, p. 36.

Chapter 4

¹ William Styron, The Long March (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 53. All further references to this work appear in the text.

² William Styron, Set This House on Fire (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 72,77-8. All further references to this work appear in the text.

³ William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 149. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Chapter 5

¹ Ferguson, p. 4.

² Baumbach, p. 134.

³ While Harry Miller, Milton Loftis, and Cass Kinsolving may have been happier without their wives, they also might have starved to death. All three men depended on their wife's inheritance or help from her family to stay solvent.

⁵ William Styron, "My Life as a Publisher," Esquire, 14 March 1978, p. 73.

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