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Investigating the Work of William Styron:
the Perpetuation of the Fantastic Hegemonic Imagination

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William Styron's work, because of the perspectives and subjects he chose to portray, brought about significant controversy in the literary community. In his novel, *Sophie's Choice*, he tells the story of a fictional, female, Polish, Auschwitz survivor from the perspective of a male, white narrator. What's more, in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he takes on the perspective of the historical Nat Turner, a black man who led a large slave rebellion in 1831. In both novels, Styron — a white southerner — conveys the point of view of a character who suffered a real tragedy with which he had no true experience. However, the methods used in each novel deliver his intended story with varying levels of respect to their subjects. Styron's use of a narrator closer to his own perspective in *Sophie's Choice* respects the suffering of real Holocaust survivors; conversely, his direct assumption of Nat Turner's perspective in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* harms the memory of an important historical figure by contributing to the fantastic hegemonic imagination.

The concept known as the fantastic hegemonic imagination — the systemic, conscious, and subconscious oppressive beliefs held about underrepresented people that drives cultural evil — permeates everything we do, say, think, and write. It affects us in all ways, as it exists deep within our minds by dint of the world around us.¹ Thus, everyone has an inherent responsibility to dismantle this catalyst of evil through the way we live our lives. Primarily, those who wish to dismantle the fantastic hegemonic imagination must conjure countermemory by telling their truth in speech, writing, and everyday action.² Justice also requires that we seek historical truth directly from its source³ to give voice to those oppressed by this imagination. This involves

¹ Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 159.

² Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 162-163.

³ M. Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (Place of Publication Not Identified: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10-11.

analyzing the memories and stories of the past and learning from the experiences of people most affected by cultural evil.

With this goal and method in mind, much of Styron's work fails to uncover the truth about the struggles of historically oppressed people. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he actually contributes to the fantastic hegemonic imagination by insinuating that the historical Nat Turner had rape fantasies about the young woman he eventually kills, Margaret Whitehead. Throughout the novel, Nat experiences various fantasies about raping Margaret, whom he comes to simultaneously desire and detest. Styron associates this relationship with Nat's dreams about a white temple on a promontory over the ocean, using the imagery to imply his yearning and hatred for whiteness. He describes the dreams with particular emphasis on the colors white and blue, and the idea of the promontory: "in the sunlight the building stands white—stark white and serene against a blue and cloudless sky... I don't dwell upon the meaning of the strange building standing so lonely and remote upon its ocean promontory."⁴ He then describes his encounters with Margaret with a similar emphasis on these themes; he finds himself obsessed with his blue and white clothing, and even uses the word "promontories" to describe Margaret's thighs.⁵ By connecting these two images of repulsion and desire, Styron insinuates that Nat yearns for whiteness as a result of his oppression at its hands.

However, Styron's decision to use daydreams of rape to illustrate this point undercuts it almost entirely. When Nat kills Margaret, he — as the narrator — says, "Ah, how I want her, I thought, and unsheathed my sword,"⁶ using extremely sexual imagery and language to describe her murder. By implying that the historical Nat Turner regularly fantasized about raping a young, white woman, Styron feeds into the antiquated, racist stereotype that white women should fear

⁴ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 10.

⁵ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 377.

⁶ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 461.

black men. He imposed upon Turner a vulgar trait which he had no evidence to suggest, effectively declaring that his act of rebellion against the cruelty of slavery needed some further justification. He villainizes Turner, intentionally or not, and suggests that he must have had a better reason to kill Margaret Whitehead than simply the evil of African American enslavement.

Styron also characterizes Nat in a way that implies a desire to be white and a belief in his own superiority over the other black people around him. Throughout the novel, Nat compares black people to dogs and describes them as though he thinks of himself as white. In particular, Nat's relationship with his friend, Hark, exemplifies this sentiment. "You ain't a man," he says to Hark, embarrassed of the way his friend talks, "as a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly." He also says of Hark, "in certain ways he was like a splendid dog."⁷ Nat repeatedly compares him to a dog, and in doing so demonstrates his disdain for and condescension towards him. Throughout the rest of his narration, we learn that Nat feels much the same way about most other black people. He makes such remarks as, "though it is a painful fact that most Negroes are hopelessly docile, many of them are filled with fury,"⁸ and, "a Negro, in much the same way as a dog, has constantly to interpret the tone of what is being said."⁹ Styron uses this language to suggest that Nat thinks of himself as apart from and above other black people. While Styron may have intended to insert this idea into a larger message about the negative effects of slavery, Styron's own identity as a white, southern man causes his depiction of Nat to appear skewed and either ignorant or intentionally harmful. Nat's inherited desire for whiteness translates as racism on the part of the author. Styron's Nat Turner speaks as though he were also a white man, and the lack of apparent effort to depict Turner's true perspective does a disservice to his memory as an important, black historical figure.

⁷ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 68-69.

⁸ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 69.

⁹ William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Open Road Media, 2010), 73.

Much of the disrespect present in Styron's work derives from his insistence that he could write novels like *Sophie's Choice* and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* without removing his own perspective from the narrative. In *Sophie's Choice*, while he writes from the point of view of a white, American man, Styron provides insight into the fictional life of a Polish woman who survived Auschwitz. Once again, Styron writes on behalf of a group of people for whom he has no right to speak. In this case, however, Stingo — the narrator — mirrors Styron's world experience closely enough to lessen the harm done by the novel. What's more, Sophie's fictional nature means that Styron avoids misrepresenting any particular person; he does not presume to tell another person's truth and generally refrains from contributing to the fantastic hegemonic imagination. As a novel, *Sophie's Choice* presents a picture of hope and empathy, as it ends with Stingo proclaiming the following after Sophie's death: "This was not judgement day — only morning. Morning: excellent and fair."¹⁰ Stingo learns about empathy and love by listening to Sophie's experiences, and that much about the story inspires admiration for Styron and his capacity as a writer. It even — somewhat ironically — upholds the idea that we must learn about the past directly from its source. Still, the decision to write about a real-world struggle with which he has no true experience is inherently arrogant and potentially harmful. Countermemory and truth ought to derive from their original sources, not from the mouth of a man merely speculating about the past.

Generally, Styron's largest offense in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* comes in the form of its title. He took the confessions of an actual man and repurposed them for a story that had little to do with its original source. After he published *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a group of black writers issued a response to Styron called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers*

¹⁰ William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York City, New York: Random House, 1979), 562.

Respond. In it, they object to his assumption of Turner's perspective, summing up Styron's primary sin thusly:

The voice in this confession is the voice of William Styron.

The images are the images of William Styron.

The confession is the Confession of William Styron.¹¹

Styron's words could never hold the weight necessary to properly express the truth of an enslaved black man, and he contributes to the fantastic hegemonic imagination by trying.

As a novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* successfully communicates complex ideas about the harmful effects of slavery and the nature of a man driven by hatred. Similarly, *Sophie's Choice* tells a compelling story about love, empathy, and hope and teaches us to listen to the past struggles of others. Both novels have the potential to contribute positively to the literary world, and even arguably do. Ultimately, in the interest of artistic freedom, the considerably more appropriate choice of narrator in *Sophie's Choice* saves it from disgrace. Thus, readers should forgive him enough to get what they can from its better aspects as a work of art. To an extent, even *The Confessions of Nat Turner* tries to portray Turner as a complex human being rather than a baseless villain, and we ought to allow Styron at least so much credit. However, neither novel escapes the undercutting hamartia of Styron's arrogance as a writer; *Sophie's Choice* provides a touching story from a speculative narrator at best, and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* actively aids in the cultural production of evil. Styron's writing succeeds only to be nullified by the inherent disrespect of his writing it at all.

¹¹ John Henrik. Clarke and William Styron, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston, MA: Beacon P, 1968), 4.

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