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Race and the human condition in William Styron's
The Confessions of Nat Turner

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RACE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION IN WILLIAM STYRON'S

THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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PREFACE

Literature has been for a long time a most effective mode of relating what it is like to be human. The various ages of mankind have produced literature that continually expresses a genuine interest in man and his struggles with timeless problems and with the meaning of his personal experiences. The Classical Age, the Medieval Ages, the Renaissance, the Age of Reason, the Romantic Period, the Victorian Period and the Modern Age represent some of the major cultural periods in the development of Western thought. The literature of each age or period exemplifies man's concern with the human predicament in which he finds himself as a unique being with personal beliefs, aspirations and frustrations—the product of a particular culture and time in history—responding to various problems of existence, the most serious being those of a timeless and universal nature. Since truth is a matter of perspective, the artists of each age add enriching dimensions to the already existing views on the nature of the human situation, and they describe specifically the human condition as they experience it during their own existence.

This study examines William Styron's view of the human condition and his attitude toward race as they are reflected in The Confessions of Nat Turner. Chapter One asserts that although The Confessions of Nat Turner is not a really good historical novel, it is representative of contemporary fiction that deals with man's suffering, alienation and despair. Chapter Two probes William Styron's Southern cultural, and social heritage and their relation to his theory of Black racial status.
The third chapter analyzes Styron's attitude toward the Black race and his view of sex and the human condition, and the final chapter examines the views of present-day Black American writers toward The Confessions.

Dr. R. K. Barksdale, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, has given me academic counsel and encouragement, during the preparation of this thesis. I wish to acknowledge his assistance and express my appreciation for his guidance.
INTRODUCTION

William Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner is an example of literature that deals with the age-old issue of man struggling against the limitation imposed on him by the fact that he must die. This problem is dealt with from the perspective of the white, contemporary American Styron whose book tells more about the attitudes of the author and the present generation than it does about the past which it superficially depicts. The story of Nat Turner's insurrection is told in the first person by the protagonist, Nat Turner, whom Styron characterizes as a condemned, meditative, anti-heroic Black slave who is peculiarly endowed with the neuroses and doubts of a post-Christian, twentieth-century white man. Styron's Nat Turner is a man sentenced to death for his role in the abortive attempt to murder masses of whites in Southampton, Virginia and free Blacks from slavery. He speaks from his jail cell and tells the entire story of the rebellion through a series of flashbacks. His thoughts and conversation articulate the problem of man's facing up to the mortal limitation of death and relates this problem to other central issues in the book.

In Styron's novel, Nat's Blackness is incidental; for as Shaun O'Connell states, "Nat's humanity is both Styron's and as he sees it, Nat's problem."¹ Styron a typically modern, typically white and uniquely Southern author meditates (from Turner's point of view), stressing issues implying that Nat Turner is a prototype of man in the midst of a human

situation that is characterized by doubt struggle, sexual tension, violence and alienation from God. Actually, Styron's Nat is a religious fanatic and it is his Christian fanaticism, not his Blackness, that is the cause of his problems.

Some view Styron's characterization of Nat as a major reason why The Confessions is not a good historical novel. For example, certain Blacks are dismayed because Nat is not cast as a revolutionary Black hero who bravely resists oppressive slavery. They bemoan the fact that Styron transforms the historically revolutionary General Nat into a man of indecision and even cowardice. Other critics point out that Styron's Confessions of Nat Turner "is in no sense 'historical' fiction of the kind we are familiar with...," that the novel "is not centrally about Negro slavery at all," and that "there is nothing in Turner's Negroness that accounts for his religious fanaticism..."  

The novel's essential historicity has also been challenged by those who charge that it is historically inaccurate. Not only have the ten Black professional authors and educators in Clarke's critical edition vigorously rejected Styron's book as a representative historical account, but Herbert Apetheker also states that there are many discrepancies

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3 Clarke, op. cit.
between the realities of the Turner Rebellion and Styron's Book.

Apetheker says that discrepancies in Styron's *Confessions* are "numerous, often quite serious and form a pattern amounting to consequential distortion."¹

Furthermore Apetheker charges that *The Confessions* is not good historical fiction because it does not illuminate or deepen our understanding of the actual, historical Turner insurrection. He writes:

*The Turner Rebellion cannot be understood unless it is seen as the culminating blow of a particular period of rising slave unrest. This was never absent in the South for long; it appeared and reappeared in waves, and the Turner cataclysm was the highlight of one such wave which commenced about 1827 and played itself out in 1832... One of the themes of the novel is the uniqueness of this event. Of course, each event is unique, but the idea here repeatedly offered is that the Turner uprising was "the only one sustained, effective revolt in the history of U. S. slavery. This is not true. The actual fruition in uprising in armed attack, occurred frequently in the United States..."

Accordingly, it is the sound judgment of many that Styron's novel is not essentially historical.

However, the foregoing observations and conclusions do not negate *The Confessions*' significance as modern fiction that reveals a great deal about the attitude of modern man toward himself and toward his cosmic status. It also shows the racist attitude of William Styron. In this sense, the book is representative contemporary fiction worthy of study for enlightenment about what contemporary writers feel are


significant characteristics of the human condition, and also valuable to
those who wish to study and examine White racism—both the subtle prac-
tice of racism either consciously or unconsciously engaged in by contem-
porary white "liberals" such as Styron—and the exercise of blatant
racist attitudes and actions practiced by certain white characters in
Styron's book.
CHAPTER I

WILLIAM STYRON'S VIEW OF THE HUMAN CONDITION
IN THE CONFESSIONS OF NAT TURNER

William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* defines modern man's attitude toward himself and toward his cosmic status. Like many other writers of this generation, Styron presents a human situation showing that man, afflicted by beliefs stemming from a tradition of Christian morality, exists in a God-is-dead world where the realities are suffering, sexual tensions, violence and spiritual alienation.

Styron's view of the human condition reveals that man's attitude toward himself is the same as his attitude toward his cosmic status. It is an attitude of despair and anguish. Toward himself, man's attitude of despair and anguish is caused by the mental suffering he experiences because of his morally sensitive intellectual nature and the emotional tension he experiences because of his sexual nature. His attitude toward his cosmic status is also one of despair and anguish; for man feels spiritually abandoned and unable to communicate with the cosmic forces (his idea of God) he tries to relate to.

The novel's main impulse has to do with man's alienation and doubt in a post-Christian era where the only certainty is death. Death is an impending inevitability for Nat Turner, since Styron's story begins after the insurrection and the protagonist is already in prison awaiting his turn at the gallows. Even at the beginning of the novel, Nat states that he had been experiencing "a hopeless and demoralizing terror as each day passed and I slept and ate and breathed, still unclaimed by
death" (p. 9). He knows that he is going to die, for he states to Gray, "yes, I know I'm going to be hung" (p. 29).

Nat's awareness of the imminence of his own death causes him to feel that he urgently needs some kind of harmonious relationship with God. Frequently does his mind digress from the incidents which he and Gray are discussing to meditate on his dilemma of having to die and not being able to know and communicate with God. He states:

I began to fear the coming of my own death... And somehow this sudden fear of death... had less to do with death itself, with the fact that I must soon die, than with my inability to pray or make any kind of contact with God (p. 79).

While Nat waits in jail, knowing he will soon die, he feels alone, spiritually alienated from God. The revolutionary general who only a few weeks earlier had executed a bloody rebellion, reportedly at God's direction, is, after five days in jail, "totally unable to force a prayer" from his lips, and he laments his inability "to bridge the gulf between myself and God" (p. 8). The feeling of "apartness from God" (p. 78) haunts him daily, and "His God's absence was like a profound and awful silence" (p. 78) in Nat's brain.

Nat's spiritual alienation is so real that it causes him to doubt God and to assume an attitude of despair. He says, "I thought the Lord had failed me, had deserted me"(p. 15). His doubt progresses to despair, and he relates:

Soon I tried to pray, but again as always it was no use. All I could feel was despair, despair so sickening that I thought it might drive me mad (p. 28).

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1 William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, New York: Random House, 1966. This and all subsequent references to *The Confessions*, are from this edition and will be cited by page reference in the body of the paper.
Nat reports further that his despair had resulted not only from "His God's absence alone," (p. 78) but rather, it had stemmed from Nat's feeling that "He had turned His back on me once and for all, vanished..." (p. 78).

The Aethist Attorney Gray's anti-Christian views reinforce Nat's doubt and despair. Gray admonishes Nat for persisting in his desire for a Bible to read in the jail. He says:

Christianity is finished and done with. Don't you know that Reverend? And don't you realize further that it was the message contained in Holy Scripture that was the cause, prime mover of this entire miserable catastrophe? Don't you see the plain, ordinary evil of your dad-burned Bible? (p. 111).

And he continues:

Christianity! Rapine, plunder, butchery! Death and destruction! And misery and suffering for untold generations. That was the accomplishment of your Christianity, Reverend. That was the fruits of your mission. And that was the joyous message of your faith. Nineteen hundred years of Christian teaching plus a black preacher is all it takes - Is all it takes to prove that God is a God-durned lie! (p. 114).

Nat apparently accepts the logic of Gray's assertions, for in a somewhat delayed response, he meditates, "maybe he is right... Maybe all was for nothing and all I've done was evil in the sight of God. Maybe he is right and God is dead and gone, which is why I can no longer reach him (p. 115). These and the foregoing lines suggest the contemporary Anglo-American death-of-God controversy; for Nat's dilemma results from an opposition between a desired ardent, personal faith and the actual thorough-going doubt and alienation from God which he experiences.

Thus, Styron's Nat is "a victim whose cries cannot reach Heaven and whose actions have made earth a noisy hell." Leslie Paul describes the modern writers' concern with this aspect of the human condition as
The modern view of the human predicament is characterized by a post-Christian meditation on the human condition that consists of struggle, self-accusation, decay, imprecision and death. Religion here is not a consolation, but another dimension of pain, one more level of awareness it might be better not to have.¹

Not only does Styron's Nat feel abandoned by God, he also experiences a sense of alienation from other people. He is different from white people because he is Black, and he is different from other Blacks in the novel because he is intellectually superior to them. For instance, Nat realizes even as a child that he was intellectually superior to other slaves. He recalls:

As I grow older, now there steals over me the understanding that Wash, a slave peer, has almost no words to speak at all. So near to white people, I absorb their language daily.... Wash is molded by different sounds - even now I am aware of this...(p. 141).

In another incident, Nat tells of how an adult, Black, non-reading male slave accused him of stealing a book and envied him because he was able to learn to read at such an early age. He says:

This creaking old man, simple-headed and unlettered and in the true state of nigger ignorance for a lifetime, had been sent into a fit of jealousy upon his realization that a ten-year old black boy was going through the motions of learning to read (p. 151).

Because of his intellectual and compassionate nature, Styron's Nat believes it is his responsibility to alleviate the suffering of other Blacks in slavery. By emphasizing this awesome responsibility that Nat assumes, Styron shows that the sensitive, brilliant Nat's violent actions result from an intellectual anguish that prevents him from accepting the

suffering of other Blacks. Nat is fanatical in his notion that upon him rests the responsibility of providing a means of freeing Black slaves. Because he is aware that they suffer physically, he suffers intellectually. He is determined to free them. He says:

I wondered why God should wish to spare the well-meaning and slay the helpless.... I saw in the unfolding future myself, Black as the blackest vengeance, the illimitable instrument of God's wrath.... His will and my mission could not be more intelligible. To free my people, I must one day commence with the slumbering, mist-shrouded dwellings below, destroying all therein...(pp. 52-53).

This aspect of Nat's character calls attention to another theme in The Confessions, a theme frequently found in the works of other modern authors also. Leslie Paul describes it as follows:

If there is one constant theme in the works of novelists and playwrights, it is the depth and persistence of human affliction, and indeed this affliction scourges most heavily the sensitive, the loving, the compassionate, so that not to be afflicted is less than human.1

Styron's Nat experiences a mental anguish that provokes him to commit violence out of concern for the suffering of other Blacks. The subsequent penalty of death which he pays for having wrought such violence upon the white people in Southampton, Virginia is the fate of one whose compassion and moral sensitivity cause him to have to endure a kind of burden of affliction. Were he not so morally sensitive, so aware of himself as God's instrument, so compassionate toward the suffering of others, many complicated problems would not have faced him. But his goodness and mental acuteness are like an affliction, making more painful his ordeal of existence.

1 Paul, op. cit., p. 37.
Styron's deliberate characterization of Nat in this manner focuses on the reality of intellectual anguish and its role in conditioning the human predicament of a man who contemplates rebellion in spite of one important existential fact: the fact that his own death is inevitable and impending. For even as Nat awaits execution, knowing that his own death is imminent, he feels no guilt and is determined that he would "have done it all again... would have destroyed them all..." except one: "I would have spared one..." (p. 428).

The "one" to whom Nat has reference in the above line is Margaret Whitehead whose role in Nat's emotional life is most significant in Styron's novel. Deferring all discussion of the racist implications of Nat's relation with Margaret to a later chapter, I wish only to note here that the relationship between these two, along with Nat's other infrequent somewhat perverted sexual experiences in the novel, show how man is constrained by his sexual desires; how sexual activity can temporarily relieve man's tensions during his struggle to find meaning and identity in life; and how sexual desire sometimes even allies itself with perversion and violence to complicate existence, rather than relieve tensions.

Styron's Nat is a lifelong celibate whose sole object of erotic interest is the teenage white Margaret Whitehead. In fact, Nat's unfulfilled sexual love for Margaret is a part of the novel's plot that developed from Styron's meditation on the historical account that she

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was the sole person he killed during the rebellion. "As a novelist, that got to me," Styron said. "Why did he kill only her? Hate? If you're a certain kind of man, you only kill the thing you love, and I think Nat Turner was that kind of man.

Nat's hatred that caused him to kill Margaret Whitehead had been a perversion of his sexual desire for her—a desire that normally should have fulfilled itself in love. Of course, it is only Margaret, the object of his sexual desire whom he regrets having killed.

Also, it is only after Nat is able to recall the love Margaret felt for him that he is able to face death courageously. Nat's memory of his relationship with Margaret enables him to feel close to her, to communicate with her, despite his alienation from all other people and from God:

We'll love one another, she seems to be entreating me, very close now, we'll love one another by the light of heaven above (p. 428).

For Nat to discover that it was Margaret's love which had given meaning to his existence is enough to renew his faith because he believes that love can show the way to God. He goes to the gallows, defeated in his efforts to correct the evils of slavery, but triumphant in another sense; for he believes that Margaret's love will show him the way to God. He mentions her in a final expression before going to the gallows:

I would have spared her that showed me Him... Until now I had almost forgotten his name... I turn in surrender... Even so, come, Lord Jesus... (p. 428).

Styron's portrayal of Nat in a way that focuses on sexual desire

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perverted to hate for Margaret Whitehead reveals his conception of the issue of sex as it relates to the human condition. His treatment of this issue is again characteristic of the way other modern authors conceive of it; for modern fiction and drama frequently show "how cruelly and even senselessly man is constrained by his sexual desires until he despairs or breaks."¹ Leslie Paul says:

And this torment is not so different whether he indulges his lists or represses them... Sex and love do not inevitably run together, and in many of its manifestations sex, perversion, and murder gallop as dangerously together as any troika of wild horses... literature testifies that man seeks in vain outside his moments of orgasm, for meaning, hope and identity.²

The complicated, constraining nature of sexual experience is clearly perceivable in Styron's Confessions. This, in addition to the concerns about man's seeming abandonment by God (or an unsympathetic cosmos), and the affliction that results from intellectual anguish and moral sensitivity are the main issues Styron meditates on in relation to man's facing the ultimate mortal limitation: death. His Confessions shows a human situation where man dwells in the face of death,—tense, despairing and doubtful,—plagued by spiritual alienation, moral confusion, and sexual tension.

¹ Leslie Paul, op. cit., p. 38.

² Ibid.
CHAPTER II

SLAVERY AND RACE IN THE CONFESSIONS

The view of slavery in The Confessions supports many assumptions, beliefs and sympathies commonly regarded as Southern attitudes and associated with Southern traditions. Specifically, William Styron's prejudice against Blacks is apparent and his belief in white racial superiority is reflected.

Race prejudice on Styron's part is shown in his presentation of an apologist view of slavery which includes the portrayal of docile, animal-like slaves; emphasis on benevolent slave masters; the controversial characterization of Nat Turner; and other racially prejudiced stereotypes of Blacks.

Styron's Confessions projects a characteristically Southern view of slavery and reflects Styron's belief that the United States slave system had "dehumanized the slave and divested him of honor, moral responsibility, and manhood."¹ In the novel, most of the slaves are characterized as sub-human, docile "Sambos." Styron's Nat describes them as follows:

... it is a painful fact that most Negroes are hopelessly docile... (p.58).

and:

It seemed rather that my black, shit-eating people were surely like flies, God's mindless outcasts, lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish (p.27).

¹ These are Styron's words in his review of Herbert Apeteker's American Negro Slave Revolts in The New York Review of Books (September 26, 1963), p. 12.
... and always I was haunted and perplexed by the docile equanimity and good cheer with which these simple black people, irrevocably uprooted, would set out to encounter a strange destiny.... I marked how seldom they seemed to bother even bidding farewell to their friends.... Twittering and giggling, they mounted the wagon poised to carry them to an impossible fate.... Slumborous in broad daylight they would flop against the sideboards of the wagon, pink lips wet and apart, nodding off into oblivion.... They cared nothing about where they came from or where they were going... (p. 224).

The above statements about slaves are observations made by Nat Turner in The Confessions but reflecting Styron's views.

Their lowliness and simplemindedness are also stressed in attorney Gray's description of them:

...the qualities of irresolution, instability, spiritual backwardness and plain habits of docility are so deeply embedded in the Negro nature that any insurgent action on the part of this race is doomed to failure... (p. 84).

At least one critic has suggested that Styron intended some irony in the above statement. He states that Gray, a Southern lawyer expressed a racist viewpoint, and not Styron's view. However, if Gray's description is meant to be ironic, it is ineffective because Gray's description of the slaves is, obviously, no different from the view given by Styron's Nat who calls them "hopelessly docile... mindless outcasts... who cared nothing about where they came from or where they were going."

In fact, there is very little difference between Gray's views and those expressed by Styron. Styron says:

What has been made convincing by such historians as Frank Tannebaum and Stanley Elkins: [is] that American

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Negro slavery, unique in its psychological oppressiveness--the worst the world has ever known--was simply so despotic and emasculating as to render organized revolt next to impossible.  

Styron says, "organized revolt was next to impossible," and Gray asserts, "any insurgent action... is doomed to failure." While Styron mentions the "psychological oppressiveness" of the slave system as the basic cause of the situation and Gray does not, there is no contradiction in the import of the two statements; for clearly the implication of Styron's assertion is that slavery was so "oppressive" and "despotic" that it did emasculate Blacks, making Gray's description of them, essentially an accurate description. His earlier quoted statement that the slave system "divested slaves of honor, moral responsibility and manhood" is also supportive of Gray's racist views. In fact, no where in the novel does Styron present a different view of slavery. Even the most complimentary pictures of slaves in The Confessions show them merely as cunning, partly comic characters, totally insensible to the magnitude of their wretchedness.

Styron reinforces the notion that slaves are lowly, sub-human creatures through the use of animal imagery, as illustrated in one of the previously cited descriptions by Turner, where he draws an analogy

1 William Styron, "This Quiet Dust," Harpers (April, 1965), p. 138. Styron's view of slavery has been challenged by many Blacks whose criticisms are discussed in Chapter IV of this thesis. Also challenging this view, Herbert Apetheker has written: "This novel reflects the author's beliefs that the views of slavery in the United States associated with the names of Frank Tannebaum and Stanley Elkins--which in substance are those of U. B. Phillips, the classical apologist for slavery--are valid. The data do not support such views; and whether "Sambo is seen as the creation of racism or the creation of a latter day socio-psychological environmentalism, the fact is that "Sambo" is a caricature and not a reality." "A note on History," The Nation (October 16, 1967), p. 376.
between slaves and flies. Other examples of Styron's use of animal imagery to emphasize the animal-like character of the slaves are:

Like animals they relinquished the past with as much dumb composure as they accepted the present, and were unaware of any future at all (p. 224).

...he'd set there crackin' chicken bones with his teeth and just rare back and laugh like a hoot owl (p. 99).

Will's /"madness/ had the frenzied mindless quality of a wild boar hog cornered hopelessly in a thicket snarling and snapping its brutish and unavailing wrath... (p. 102).

The character of the slaves demonstrated in the foregoing examples is a part of a broader picture of the so-called Old South that is very similar to the "historical" antebellum portrayals of U. B. Phillips.1

Styron, a Southerner like Phillips, perpetuates the myth, of "Sambo" and of "the benevolent slave master" in The Confessions. In addition to characterizing the great bulk of slaves as brainless, grinning, sub-human creatures, he also shows that for the most part, the slaves had kind masters, and they loved them.

Styron's racism, merely implied in The Confessions, is clearly expressed in a Harper's essay which he wrote about then his unpublished Confessions in 1965. In it, he tells us that Nat Turner was a "fanatical slave" whose plan to carry out the insurrection was a "wild scheme" of one who thought he had an "apocalyptic role " to play in history.2

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2 Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 140.
According to Styron, Nat's desire to rebel against slavery was the result of his religious fanaticism, not the result of a general discontent among slaves toward slave owners who kept them in bondage. Styron says:

...it was not remarkable that Nat was purchased and sold several times by various owners. (In a sense he was fortunate in not having been sold off to the deadly cotton and rice plantations of South Carolina and Georgia which was the lot of many Virginia negroes of the period); and although we do not know much about any of these masters, the evidence does not appear to be that Nat was illtreated, and in fact one of these owners (Samuel Turner, brother of the man whose property Nat was born) developed so strong a paternal feeling for the boy and such regard for Nat's abilities, that he took the fateful step of encouraging him in the beginnings of an education.¹

Evidence of a white racist attitude on Styron's part is also found in his emphasis on the benevolence and moral uprightness of white slave owners in The Confessions. This emphasis is present in the novel at the expense of the slaves' right to freedom.

The owners of large plantations are all romantically portrayed by Styron. They are idealized as perfect Virginia gentlemen for whom slavery was not a financial operation but the exercise of a moral obligation. Slaves owned by such gentry in Styron's novel love their masters so much that they fight against Turner and his men during the rebellion, protecting their white masters and helping to defeat the insurrectionists.

The poor white overseers and small landowners sometimes make the lot of slaves hard to bear in Styron's book, but they too are sympathetically portrayed as men, understandably human, the victims of their own personal problems and frustrations.

¹Ibid., p. 139.
Nat's first master is Samuel Turner, a most cultured, compassionate large plantation owner who endures great remorse over the role in which history has cast him. Styron devotes over a hundred consecutive pages in *The Confessions*, detailing Samuel Turner's benevolence toward all mankind and his fondness for Nat.

The story of Samuel Turner is a tragedy within itself. Life on Marse Samuel's plantation had been a blissful experience for Nat. Turner's daughters had taught Nat how to read, and Nat had been "the jewel of Turner's mill." Marse Samuel also had promised Nat his freedom.

But Samuel Turner, moreso than Nat, is a tragic victim of God, time and the barren land in Styron's book. He loses his fortune during an economic depression and is forced to break up his plantation, sell his slaves, and move to Alabama. Because of this, he is unable to keep his promise to give Nat his freedom.

Styron's sympathetic treatment of Marse Samuel Turner is such that it focuses so much on his plight that momentarily Marse Samuel, not Nat Turner, is the tragic figure; and Nat seems to dwindle into a mere literary device through whom the plantation owner's dilemma is sympathetically narrated in a melodramatic fashion. Nat says, of Marse Samuel:

He ceased speaking for a moment... for a long time now he fell silent and then finally he said... "I sold them out of desperation to hang on pointlessly a few years longer." He made an abrupt gesture with his lifted arm, and it seemed that he passed his hand in a quick angry motion across his eyes... He broke off and then I saw him shake his head convulsively, his voice a sudden cry: ... (pp. 221-222).

Styron's sentimental and emotional projection of Samuel Turner's

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condition shows the evils of slavery from the stance of the plantation owner, and not from the slaves' point of view. The result is that the reader's sympathies are directed toward Turner, since we are intimately told of his sufferings.

Although none of the other slave owners are as kind as Marse Samuel Turner, Styron also describes them with a sensitive understanding of their problems and frustrations. For example, one of Nat's owners, Reverend Eppes, is a cruel, Bible quoting homo sexual taskmaster; yet Styron portrays him so as not to stress the effects of his cruelty on Nat, but rather emphasizing the Reverend's depraved condition. Emphasis is placed on Reverend Eppes "face graven with poverty, sanctimony and despair;" and again attention is focused on the condition of the master rather than on the slave.

Another one of Nat's masters, Moore, admittedly a cruel and violent man, in one scene strikes Nat so severely with a bull whip, that his flesh bleeds. Later, however, Styron's Nat assures us that even Moore was not a bad master:

And as for Moore, never again did he lift a hand against me after that day when he struck me with his bull whip... (p. 268).

Moore, on the surface a cruel man, is, we discover, the victim of ignorance. At first, he had been jealous of Nat's literacy; it had been embarrassing for him, a white man, to have a slave who could read, and he could not; hence, his initial violence toward Nat. But as time passes, "Even a man so shaken with nigger-hatred as Moore could only treat me with passable decency," reports Nat (p. 270).

The description continues, stressing Moore's depraved economic status. Again Styron's racist attitude is evident as he discusses
Moore's "ramshakle and whitewashed raw-timbered farmhouse," his "meager income," and the daily grind of work at Moore's farm where Nat, the "only slave Moore was able to afford," had to "help Moore" cut down trees and drag firewood to the farmyard. Nat also was kept busy "helping Miss Sarah" (Moore's wife) in various tasks around the farm. Finally, in spite of his daily routine of work and meager rations, Nat says, "Never to my recollection was I driven beyond endurance-" (pp. 271-272).

The racist implications of the detailed descriptions of life on Moore's farm is that life during that time was as trying, if not moreso, for Moore and Miss Sarah as it was for Nat; for carefully shown is the fact that they were too poor to own as many slaves as they "needed" to do all the necessary work on the farm; therefore, Moore had to "help cut trees and drag them" and Miss Sarah had to "help with scrubbing and other household chores."

An obviously racist assumption, underlies Styron's emphasis on the fact that Moore ceased ill-treating Nat because Nat set such a "productive, industrious pace" and because Nat was so patient and passive. Nat says he knew that somehow "patience would get me through." He continues:

Indeed, after a while it "Nat's patience" tended to neutralize his "Moore's hatred, so that he was eventually forced to treat me with a sort of grudging, grim, resigned good will (p. 270).

The projection of the view that cruelty toward slaves was not generally present and that Moore's meanness toward Nat ceased because of Moore's latent, but inherent, inability to exercise cruelty toward an industrious, patient slave is a racist view. It suggests that patience on the part of Blacks can "neutralize" the hatred of whites. It discounts the facts of history that show that "easement of the slaves' condition came not
from the master's benevolence or the slaves' patience and passivity but from the slaves' resistance to extreme exploitation."¹

Of Travis, his last owner, Nat has another complimentary opinion:

Travis was no taskmaster, being by nature unable, I think, to drive his servants unreasonably and already having been well provided with willing help in the person of his stepson and the Westbrook boy.... My duties were light and fairly free of strain.... I was in as palmy and benign a state as I could remember in many years (p. 47).

Here, again, Nat points out that his work as a slave is not hard and his master, Travis is a good man who really doesn't need slaves. Nat's reference to his "benign state" recalls again the racist assertion that benevolence and moral consciousness were the motives of slave owners.

Describing slavery from the standpoint of the slave master instead of from the slave's view is another practice indicative of how Styron's racism results in a distorted historical picture in The Confessions; for "any history of slavery must be written in large part from the standpoint of the slave."²

The view of slavery in The Confessions depicts slavery as a peculiar, yet benign institution which, as meditated on by William Styron, was a necessary evil, but not necessarily so bad as to logically cause Nat Turner's "wild scheme of insurrection" that "caused only the most tyrannical new controls to be imposed on Negroes everywhere."³ In the Harper's

¹ Hofstadter, op. cit., p. 122.

² Ibid., p. 124.

³ Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 141.
article Styron continues his illogical argument:

Virginia had been edging close to emancipation, and it seems reasonable to believe that the example of Nat's rebellion, stamping many moderates in the legislature into a conviction that the Negroes could not be safely freed, was a decisive factor in the ultimate victory of pro slavery forces. ¹

Implicit in this statement is the racist assumption that Negroes must bear the responsibility of proving that they deserve freedom. Styron continues:

Nat brought cold, paralyzing fear to the South, a fear that never departed. If white men had sown the wind in chattel slavery, in Nat Turner, they had reaped the whirlwind for black and white alike. ²

Again, Styron emphasizes the insurrection in terms of how it affected whites; for when he speaks of the South, the fear of which he writes is the fear of whites only, and this statement reveals his inability to perceive of Negroes as being a part of The South.

In addition to the portrayal of benevolent slavemasters, docile slaves, and a benign slave system, Styron's view of slavery includes also a few slave-types who are different from the masses already described. They are racial stereotypes commonly found in Southern regional literature and kept alive in the racial myths of the South.

Two slaves who are different in The Confessions are Nat Turner, (the protagonist), and Will, the half-crazed victim of an insanely sadistic slave master. Nat's and Will's characterizations are also vital parts of Styron's arbitrary view of slavery and their portrayals show a lot

¹ Ibid.

² Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 141.
about Styron's prejudiced attitude toward Blacks. First, I shall discuss Styron's Nat.

Nat has a dual personality. As he narrates the novel, he demonstrates both aspects of his schizoprenia. One aspect of Nat's character fits the description of the "house Negro" and the other aspect is that of the preacher-fanatic.

The "house Negro" spends most of his time close to, yet isolated from, whites. He is a kind of Uncle Tom, the spiritual ancestor of present-day "oreo types" (Negroes who are Black only in the sense that their skin is black; their thoughts, mannerisms, aspirations, prejudices, and the like are white).

As a "house Negro," Nat despises most other slaves because of their supposed dumbness and immoral character. Yet, he harbors a fondness and compassion for whites. For example, the following description of Miss Maria Travis, the half-sister of one of Nat's owners, illustrates how the "house Negro" Nat is able to feel compassion for a white woman, even though she hates Negroes.

She was Travis's half-sister... She hated us Negroes who were at her beck and call..., with a kind of profound and pointless hatred...

On summer nights from the windows of the upstairs room where she slept, I could hear her sobbing hysterically and crying out for her departed mother. She was about forty, I suspect a virgin, and she read aloud from the Bible incessantly with a kind of hollow-eyed mesmeric urgency, her favorite passages being John 13, which deals with humility and charity... I felt myself feeling sorry for her... (pp. 42-43).

The "house Negro" Nat who renders this description understands whites with a kind of omniscience that probes their innermost suffering. Nat justifies Miss Maria's hatred of slaves by implying that she is in a
state of shock because of the recent death of her mother. His mentioning her probable virginity and her Bible reading suggests that inspite of her hatred of Negroes and her personal misery, she still has some qualities of virtue and good intentions. Hence, Nat can "feel sorry" for Miss Maria. Through the "house Negro" Nat, Styron explores in depth the southern psyche; for the "house Negro's" sympathy for whites is so genuine that it is easy for Styron to assume this stance. To speak from the perspective of a "house Negro" is essentially to communicate from a white viewpoint and this mode of narration allows Styron to give revealing insights into the mind and motives of whites.

In "This Quiet Dust," Styron expresses his ire at those who tend to generalize about Southern attitudes. He states that he distrusts any easy generalizations about the South, "whether they are made by white sociologists or Negro playwrights, southern politicians or northern editors." This probing of Miss Maria's character is an example of the way in which he painstakingly describes whites in The Confessions, seemingly in an effort to justify the ways of Southerners to Blacks. In the previously mentioned essay, Styron writes:

...the experience of each southerner is modified by the subtlest conditions of self and family and environment and God knows what else, and I have wondered if it has ever properly been taken into account...

Thus, it seems that to understand the southern white mind is as urgent

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1 Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 138.

2 Ibid.
for Styron as is his "moral imperative"\(^1\) to know the Negro.

In *The Confessions* also, Styron's "house Negro" Nat expresses admiration for whites, while at the same time he despises Negroes. He gives credit to whites for most of his pleasant experiences and for all of his academic achievements. He admires Miss Nell, Miss Emmaline and Marse Samuel more than he does his own mother, to whom Styron has given a secondary role in *The Confessions*.

Dr. Alvin Poussaint says that the "house Negro" Nat suffers from "an unfulfilled psychological need to be white," which is why, according to Dr. Poussaint, Nat possesses feelings of self-hatred and anti-Negro attitudes. Also, he states that the notion of casting Nat Turner in this manner is an example of white racism which assumes "that a Negro who achieves must be primarily doing so because of his association with whites."\(^2\)

Another example of racist assumptions as an influencing factor in the characterization of Nat as a "house Negro" is the fact that his "house Negroness" causes him to be attracted to white women. For example, Nat delights in "catching a glimpse of Margaret Whitehead's fine white skin, milky and transparent" (p.89). And he enjoys drinking water "from a tumbler held to my lips by soft white hands." He sometimes thinks of a nameless white girl with golden curls who fills his

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\(^1\) *Ibid.*, These are Styron's words. His complete statement is: "To come to know the Negro has become the moral imperative of every Southerner."

imagination, causing sexual desire to well up in him.

Nat's sexual yearning for white women is another example of a white racist's assumption that Black men secretly desire to sexually possess white women. Styron, himself admits that "The southern white man's fear of sexual aggression on the part of the Negro male is still too evident to be ignored."¹ In The Confessions, Styron provides a basis for whites' "fear of sexual aggression on the part of the Negro male" by having Nat want to possess white women.

The other side of Nat's personality which completes his character is seen in his role as a fanatical preacher. This aspect of Nat's characterization is also based on racist assumptions. First of all, casting Nat Turner as a fanatical moonlighting preacher who had been educated by a benevolent master reduces the significance of the insurrection to an illustration of how an ungrateful slave responds by "biting the hand that feeds him." The motives for rebellion are obscured and emphasis is placed on such issues as "How do you explain that?... A man who you admit is gentle and kind to you, and you butcher in cold blood!" (p. 34). Emphasis on the cruelty of Nat's actions toward his owners is an attempt to show, as Loyle Hairston states, that the Turner Rebellion is "proof of the vengeful ingratitude of a literate, pampered slave for his benevolent masters, an ingratitude which turns, unprovoked into hatred and murder"²

Styron's Confessions show how the Turner family's experiment in

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¹ Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 137.

educating their "tar baby" Nat, (by Styron likened to "an experiment as a lesson in pig-breeding or the broadcasting of a new type of manure"), causes Nat to become a Bible-quoting prodigy. Turner's daughters and granddaughter pridefully implore people to "Listen to our little darky recite out from the Bible" (p. 157).

*The Confessions* continue to illustrate how Nat's education results in his religious fanaticism—the fanaticism that inspires him to direct the slaughter of scores of whites.

Both *The Confessions* and Styron's comments in "This Quiet Dust" support the idea that *The Confessions* is illustrative of the white racist assumption that education is harmful to Negroes, that it strains their mental capacity and makes them unreasoning, restless and violence prone—in Nat's case fanatic. The kind of white racism assertive of the harmfulness of too much education for Negroes has been pinpointed by Richard Wright and is very clearly reflected in the attitude of the white racist Mississippi newspaper editor who pens the following lines in *Native Son*:

> We of the South believe that the North encourages Negroes to get more education than they are organically capable of absorbing, with the result that Northern Negroes are generally more unhappy and restless than those of the South.1

In *The Confessions*, Styron subtly asserts a similar racist position to that expressed above. Styron's Nat meditates that without an education, he might have been different:

> I would doubtless have become an ordinary run-of-the-mill house nigger, mildly efficient at some stupid task like wringing chicken necks or smoking hams or polishing silver... developing as I advanced into old age, a kind of

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purse-lipped dignity, known as Uncle Nat, well loved and adoring in return.... It would not have been, to be sure, much of an existence, but how can I honestly say that I might not have been happier? (p. 156).

He continues, making it clear that the value of his education is questionable:

And Samuel Turner... could not have realized in his innocence and decency, in his awsome goodness and softness of heart, what sorrow he was guilty of creating by feeding me that half loaf of learning: for more bearable no loaf at all (p. 156).

Styron's "half loaf" reference carrying the implication that Nat was an ordinary slave whose "half-loaf of education" (received from benevolent whites) was all that Nat's intelligence consisted of challenges. Nat's mental abilities and his motives for wanting to rebel. It is designed to round out the image of a fanatic and invalidate Nat's stature as an admirable revolutionary.

Even the racist attorney I. R. Gray gives more credit to the influence of Nat's parents in teaching him to read and write and to Nat's own ingenuity and mental capabilities than does Styron. Gray writes:

It has been said that he [Styron] was ignorant and cowardly.... As to his ignorance, he certainly never had the advantage of education, but he can read and write (it was taught him by his parents), and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension is surpassed by few men I have ever seen.¹

Note that Gray singles Nat out as a man of superior intelligence, not just a slave of superior intelligence. His comparison is not one that measures Nat's intelligence against that of other slaves' rather it is a comparison which clearly concludes that the mental abilities of Nat

Turner--the revolutionary general, the man guilty of causing the death of many whites--"is surpassed by few men" Gray had ever seen.

But Styron, who himself says that Gray's "Confessions" are "completely honest and reliable,"\(^1\) discounts this observation by Gray about Nat Turner, apparently because of his racist inclinations to reject historical data that do not fit into his preconceived notions about Blacks.

A second racist implication inherent in Styron's characterization of Nat as a fanatic is that it tends to portray the rebellious Nat as one who is unreasonably zealous and gloomy in his notion of religion. The word fanatic itself has a number of disparaging connotations; and to make Nat a religious fanatic is to deny credibility to his motives for rebelling against slavery.

Even the racist T. R. Gray did not assert that Nat Turner was a fanatic without qualifying his assertion; yet Styron has characterized him as such. In the original "Confessions" Gray says:

\[
\text{He } [\text{Nat Turner}] \text{ is a complete fanatic, or plays his part most admirably.}\quad 2
\]

This line by Gray raises the possibility that Nat Turner could have been role playing; for Gray, obviously impressed with Nat's intelligence continues, saying, "On other subjects he possesses an uncommon share of intelligence... with a mind capable of attaining anything." Gray's final description of Nat Turner is a portrayal more like that of a martyr than that of a gloomy, unreasoning fanatic.

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1 Styron, "This Quiet Dust," \textit{op. cit.}, p. 138.

2 Gray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 113.
The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions... clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him...  

Styron's characterization again ignores this part of Gray's "Confessions." Styron's conception of Nat Turner is more like the prejudiced concepts of other southern racists. For example, Styron tells us that his first knowledge of Nat Turner came from a history of Virginia text book which he read in elementary school when he was ten or eleven years old. His conception of Nat is very much like the reference to Nat Turner that he remembers from this textbook:

In 1831, A fanatical Negro slave named Nat Turner led a terrible insurrection in Southampton County murdering many white people.  

William S. Brewery, whom Styron calls an "unreconstructed Virginian of decided pro slavery leanings" and whose book, The Southampton Insurrection, Styron used as source material for his own novel, has also labeled and described Nat Turner as a fanatic.  

Like Drewery and the author of the Virginia history book, Styron plainly labels Nat a fanatic. In "This Quiet Dust," he says,  

His Nat's fanaticism grew in intensity... and he began to see apparitions... .

More importantly, Styron characterizes Nat as a fanatic whose goals were obscure and based on no sound, logical motives; whose cause was the

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1 Gray, op. cit., p. 113.

2 Styron, "This Quiet Dust," op. cit., p. 135.

3 Ibid.
result of his misguided notions about religion; and whose rebellion was "doomed to catastrophe."\(^1\)

Styron's racist conception of Nat Turner is markedly different from the following description of Nat in a modern anthology edited by Blacks:

...Nat Turner is known for the famous Southampt

There is a significant difference between the gloomy fanatical schiz

In the novel, when Gray asks more loaded racist questions, Nat's re

For example, Gray asks:

Do you not find yourself mistaken now?

\(^1\) Styron, "This Quiet Dust," \textit{op. cit.}, p. 140.

Answer: Was not Christ crucified?  

Again Gray questions him:

Question: Why were you so backward in joining them?

Answer: The same reason that had caused me not to mix with them for years before.

Gray, in the original "Confessions" reports that Nat answered all his other questions. He says:

When I questioned him as to the insurrection in North Carolina happening about the same time, he denied any knowledge of it; and when I looked him in the face as though I would search his inmost thoughts, he replied, "I see, Sir, you doubt my word but can you not think the same ideas and strange appearances about this time in the heavens might prompt others as well as myself, to this undertaking."

So it is apparent that William Styron's Nat, different from the historical Nat in the original "confessions" is a racist caricature that perpetuates the southern historical tradition of categorizing Nat Turner so disparagingly.

Another slave who is different in Styron's Confessions is Will. Will's characterization reflects Styron's tendency to perpetuate derogatory racial stereotypes. Styron's Will is altogether different from the historical Will who is described in Gray's document as one who did not have to be recruited to join Turner's band of men. Will volunteered because, he says, his "life was worth no more than the others and his

\[1\]
Gray, op. cit., p. 104.

\[2\]
Ibid.

\[3\]
Gray, op. cit., p. 112.
liberty as dear." He declares that he will "obtain his liberty or lose his life."¹

Styron's Will bears no resemblance to the efficient rebel in Gray's "Confessions." His characterization is based on racist assumptions. Styron's belief in the myth of white racial superiority that is the basis for his portrayal of the masses of slaves as being docile and animal-like is also the basis for Will's characterization. Also, the racist tendency to create monsters to distort the picture of Black oppressiveness is evident in Will's characterization.

Will, too, is an animal-like creature in Styron's book, but he is not docile. His sexual aggressiveness is bestial. His physical unattractiveness is monstrous and his hatred is violent and irrational. Will, in Styron's novel, is like a dog that has been teased and tortured by a cruel master until he is mad and ferocious. Nat says of Will:

I...turned to see the demented, murderous, hate-ravaged mashed-in face of Will. He...looked at me with his bulging eyes and scratched his black scarred belly... His wooly head was filled with cockle burrs. A scar glistened on his black cheek, shiny as an eel cast upon a mud bank (pp. 376-7).

The description here with emphasis on Will's madness, his physical ugliness, and a simile showing his likeness to an eel quite effectively suggests that he is more beast than man. But Styron takes no chances on leaving it up to the reader to draw his own conclusions about Will's beastliness or humanness. In the next paragraph, he gives more animal analogies:

His voice was the hiss of a cornered cat...
(p. 377).

¹ Gray, op. cit., p. 105.
He had lived like an animal and now streaked with mud, stinking, fangs bared beneath a nose stepped upon and bent...

Finally, Styron's Nat tells us:

It seemed to me that he was an animal—a wicked little weasel or maddened fox. (Emphasis is Styron's.)

Furthermore, Styron's racism is evident in Will's role in *The Confessions* because it again calls attention to the white racist's fear that lurking in the mind of the black beast-man is the desire to rape white women. In Styron's *Confessions*, Will, the beast-man, rapes a white woman. Styron's Nat describes the rape:

...those two acting out their final tableau—the tar black man and the woman, bone white, bone rigid with fear beyond telling, pressed urgently together against the door in a simulacrum of shattered oneness and heartsick farewell...

Styron's decision to inject this incident into the novel was arbitrary and is also indicative of his racist suspicions, for no such rape occurred during the actual Turner Rebellion.

Another racist inspired characterization in *The Confessions* is Arnold, the free Negro whose presence in the novel creates a picturesque, though misleading detail in Styron's view of slavery. Arnold's lot is described as being worse than the condition of the slaves. Styron's Nat describes Arnold as a "gaunt grizzle-poled old simpleton black as pitch with an aimless, slew-footed gait..." He continues:

Years before he had been set at liberty through the will of his owner, ... I suppose one might praise this high minded gesture, yet one must add that it was grimly misguided because Arnold was a troubling case. Rather than becoming an embodiment of the sweet fruits of freedom,... he was in truth a symbol—a symbol of something gone asunder in an institution... . Surely, even the poor lepers of Galilee and all the outcasts to whom Jesus ministered in those awful times lived no worse than such a free Negro in Virginia during the
years which I think and speak... (pp. 200-261).

This pro slavery narrative clearly implies that slavery was better than freedom for Negroes. Also, it illustrates the racism inherent in Styron's view of slavery reflected in The Confessions. Again, his decision to depict free Negroes in this way, like his decision to characterize Will as a depraved half-crazed man-beast is not based on historical fact; but rather is the result of his meditation on history—an obviously racist meditation.

In summary, Styron's view of slavery in The Confessions encompasses portrayals of docile, simpleminded slaves; kind, benevolent slave owners; a benign slave system; a schizophrenic "house nigger"—preacher fanatic protagonist; and other derogatory racial stereotypes. These portrayals combined with an apologist view of slavery and numerous beliefs and assumptions that perpetuate the myth of white racial superiority, make up the view of slavery in The Confessions. It is a view that affirms William Styron's prejudice against Blacks.
CHAPTER III

SEX AND RACE IN THE CONFESSIONS

William Styron's treatment of sex in *The Confessions* reveals his belief in white racial superiority and his prejudice against Blacks. Styron's racism as it relates to sex in *The Confessions* is reflected in three ways.

First, the kind of beauty which arouses sexual passions is white. In Styron's imagery only white is beautiful and Black is condemned (by omission of references to black sexual attractiveness).

Secondly, Styron (in the tradition of racists),\(^1\) exhibits a fear of Black sexual aggressiveness; for in *The Confessions*, he painstakingly emasculates not only the masses of slaves, but the protagonist as well.

Thirdly, Styron's racism is evident in his tendency to perpetuate the degrading racial myths which imply that Blacks are characteristically immoral in their sex desires and acts. In *The Confessions* emphasis is placed on the idea that Black men lust after white women with

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\(^1\) See Louis Jolyon West, M.D. "The Psychobiology of Racial Violence," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, XVI (June, 1967), pp. 124-130. Especially enlightening is a part of this essay titled, "The Myth of Negro Sexuality." In it, Dr. West points out, "The former slave is feared for his universally comprehended revenge...." But he continues, "...the fear of the Negro as an automatic sexual threat is irrational." And he continues, one of the most profoundly distorted but emotionally explosive aspects of American racial mythology has to do with the sexuality of the American Negro.... "A common Southern tale has it that a white woman who mates with a Negro will never be satisfied with a white man again. As this superstition suggests, many whites hate the idea of contact between the Negro man and white woman...." Finally, he states, "Case studies reveal that the irrational conscious hate toward Negroes is a reaction against a preconscious fear of Negroes, which in turn is a violent denial.
desires to rape them. Certain Black women are portrayed as prostitutes or potential prostitutes who willingly practice their trade with white men.

In Styron's novel, there are sexual relations between Black men and white women, white men and Black women, and a white man and a white woman. There is also a homosexual act between two Black men. There is no other incident of sex between Blacks in the book. In all sex activities, except the homosexual incident, it is obvious that white beauty arouses sexual passions. To conceive of sexual arousal--especially in a Black man--in such a manner as Styron does in the novel is certainly a racist notion.

Sexual relations between Black men and white women in The Confessions include Nat's relations with white women and Will's rape of Mrs. Whitehead. Nat's sex acts with white women are all imaginary, in the sense that his desire for them is never consummated in a sexual union with a white woman. But they are real in the sense that the physical act of masturbation actually occurs, and his sexual tensions are relieved as a result of his monosexual activity while thinking of either "the nameless white girl with golden curls" or Miss Emmaline "whose bare white full found hips and belly" later replaces the "nameless girl" in his fantasies. Also, Nat's sexual desire for Margaret Whitehead is real; in that it causes him to seriously consider raping her. He says:

There's not a soul for miles. I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her warm milky spurts of desecration. And let her scream until the empty pinewoods echoed to her cries and no one would be the wiser,
not even the buzzards or the crows... (p. 367).

In each of the sexual activities that involves a white woman and Nat Turner, Nat's passions are aroused by his thoughts of white beauty. In the novel, Nat, considering himself a "vigorous and healthy boy," excites himself whenever his sexual desire becomes "overwhelming"—usually on Saturdays—in a storage shed adjoining a carpentry shop. He thinks about a "nameless white girl." Her whiteness and golden hair fill his thoughts and arouse him sexually. Nat says:

It was always a nameless white girl between whose legs I envisioned myself—a young girl with golden curls.... I would feel a sudden surge and stiffening at my groin... as the memory began achingly to return, mingling tenderness and desire, of my vision of the golden-haired girl with her lips half open and whispering... (p. 173).

Nat's fondness for whiteness is consistently expressed, even when he ceases to think of the "nameless girl" during his Saturday masturbation sessions. He replaces her in his mind with Miss Emmaline whose white beauty Nat describes in greater detail. He calls her a "beautiful white mistress" whose white fingers were like the touch of fire." And he says:

In my fantasies she began to replace the innocent, imaginary girl with the golden curls as the object of my craving, and on those Saturday nights when I stole into my private place in the carpenter's shop to release my pent-up desires, it was Miss Emmaline whose bare white full round hips and belly responded wildly to all my lust... (p. 183).

Nat's sexual attraction to Margaret Whitehead is also expressed in terms of her white beauty. Nat adores Margaret, and her caucasian features are described in courtly fashion by him in The Confessions. For example, Nat tells of

...her hand white as milk glass, blue veined. (p. 364),

[her] white, delicate throat (p. 402),
and

the chestnut streaming luxuriance of her hair... (p. 414).

Styron's Nat is not sexually attracted to any black female in The Confessions, and the above illustrations show how much he is attracted to whites.

Endowing the protagonist with such an admiration for white women is an example of William Styron's racism. Black historian, Lerone Bennett notes that "there is not one shred of evidence to indicate that Nat Turner was obsessed by the traditional obsession of the white male."

Continuing Bennett says:

Nat Turner tells us in the Original Confessions that he was obsessed by Black liberation, and he tells us that he spent most of his life preparing for his great mission.¹

Styron's decision to project white women as the object of Nat's sexual desires illustrates the racist belief that a Black man must want to possess a white woman sexually to assert his own manhood with confidence, since racists believe white women represent the highest kind of feminine beauty.

This same racist assumption is the basis for Styron's having Will yearn for white women. Even in his beastial, demented state, Will broods about having sex with white women. Of Will, Nat says:

"Old white cunt," he whispers and in a sort of demented litany repeats it over and over (p. 102).

Also Will himself says:

I'se tired of huckaberies. I g'wine git me some meat now - white meat (p. 377).

Even when sexual relations are between a white man and a Black woman, white beauty is the kind that affects the passions. There are three such incidents in *The Confessions*. The following is one instance of two white men who plan to have sex activity with a Negro woman. Nat tells us:

At noon... Moore and Wallace went off to visit the town whore--a two hundred pound free mulatto woman named Josephine (p. 303).

Note that Josephine is a "Mulatto," the implication being that white men are attracted to Black women whose color is nearly white. Another similar reference to a Black woman as a potential sexual partner for white men also makes it clear that she too is nearly white in color. Nat says:

Jack's woman, a butter-skinned almond eyed beauty had been sold to a Tennessee trader scrounging quite openly he allowed to planter Reese (and within Jack's hearing), "for likely looking pussy for gov'mental gentlemen in Nashville." (p. 375).

This time, the Black woman is "butter-skinned."

The final instance of sex between a Black woman and a white man is the incident that occurs between Nat's mother and McBride, an overseer. Nat Turner does not describe in detail his mother's physical features. In one instance he calls her "my tall beautiful mother" (p. 127). The only other description of her physical characteristics is given when he speaks of "her brown long legs" embracing the overseer's waist during the sexual union between her and McBride. Styron relates the incident between McBride and Lou Ann in such a way that emphasis is not on her Black attractiveness. Rather, the aspect of this incident of sexual union emphasizes the superiority of whiteness. The fact is that while Nat's mother is being raped by the white McBride, she enjoys it! Nat relates:
All at once a kind of shudder passes through my mother's body, and the moan is a different moan, tinged with urgency, and I do not know whether the sound I hear now is the merest whisper of a giggle. ("Uh-huh, aw-right," she seems to murmur)... (p. 148).

In this case it seems that the Black woman is overwhelmed by the sexual performance of the white man. Thus, whiteness again is effective as a means of arousing sexual passion.

In the sexual incident between two whites in The Confessions, white beauty is naturally the basis for sexual stimulation. This union occurs between Miss Emmaline and her cousin Lewis. Nat calls Miss Emmaline a "pure, proud, astonishing smooth skinned beauty," and of course it is she whose attractive white body replaces Nat's "nameless white girl."

The emasculation of Black men in The Confessions is another result of Styron's racist tendencies. Nat, the protagonist, like the docile, dumb masses of other slave men, does not consummate the sex act with a woman in Styron's book. Styron makes it clear that Nat is a celibate. His sexual experiences (except for the previously mentioned masturbation exercises) consist of a single homosexual act with a young slave named Hark. This depiction of Nat Turner is illustrative again of Styron's racist attempt to emasculate Nat Turner. Dr. Alvin Poussaint says:

What is the communication here? Naturally it implies that Nat Turner was not a man at all. It suggests that he was unconsciously really feminine. Styron underscores this image by depicting Turner as a bungling, awkward soldier who is unable to kill his oppressors and who pukes at the sight of blood in combat. Thus, throughout the book he is revealed as an emasculated and "abnormal" character. There is even the suggestion here that the rebellion was participated in reluctantly by the "sensitive" Nat Turner who really only wished to sleep with Miss Margaret to salvage his manhood....

Dr. Poussaint concludes his observations by saying, "Styron was an
unwitting victim of his own unconscious white racism..."1

The perpetuation of two derogatory racial stereotypes is also evident in Styron's treatment of sex in *The Confessions*: the Black female prostitute and the Black sex-crazed man bent on raping white women. In Styron's book, the only sexually attractive Black women are prostitutes or potential prostitutes. Styron's portrayal of Nat's mother during her sex act with MrBride suggests prostitution because McBride makes clear that her body is being used by him in exchange for the “earrings” he promises her. The "two-hundred pound town whore" whom Moore and Wallace visit is a "free Negro" operating not unwillingly, but because of her own preference. This racist concept suggests that Negro women are immoral enough to want to engage in sex on a reciprocal basis.

Will's portrayal as a man-beast (described at length in the previous chapter), determined to rape white women demonstrates again how a racist perceives of Black men with regard to the sex act. Will, whom Nat says “was obsessed with the idea of raping white women” represents another derogatory racial stereotype of the "depraved" Black man's lust for white womanhood, and reveals Styron's fear of sexual aggressiveness on the part of the Black male.

Styron's treatment of sex in *The Confessions*, like his view of slavery in the book, reflects his belief in the superiority of white beauty, his fear of Black male sexual virility, and his perpetuation of racially degrading, stereotyped characterizations of Black whores and rapists.

CHAPTER IV

BLACK ATTITUDES TOWARD THE CONFESSIONS

For the most part, Blacks have objected strongly to William Styron's artistic treatment of the historic Turner Insurrection. Except for a few Blacks who made complimentary remarks about The Confessions in book reviews shortly after its publication, all else has been bitter criticism.

James Baldwin is the Black man who has been most vocal in his endorsement of The Confessions. A good friend of Styron, Baldwin was consulted by the white author during his writing of The Confessions. Indeed, Baldwin read all the galley proofs. He sees Styron's book as "an attempt to fuse the two points of view, the master's and the slave's," and he makes a plea for Black understanding of "what Bill [Styron] is trying to do and recognize its validity." Both he and Styron share the view that "race is not a Negro problem, but a trap for Black and white together." Furthermore, the Black Baldwin claims, "Styron is probing something very dangerous, deep and painful in the national psyche."1

Two other Blacks, Dr. John Hope Franklin2 and Dr. Rembert Stokes3

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1 James Baldwin, quoted in Raymond A. Sokolov's Into the Mind of Nat Turner, Newsweek (October 16, 1967), p. 68.

2 Dr. John Hope Franklin is Chairman of the History Department of the University of Chicago and author of several books on Black history.

3 Dr. Rembert Stokes is President of Wilberforce University which awarded Styron an honorary doctorate in humanities in November, 1967.
have endorsed *The Confessions*. "I thought it was a great book, says Franklin." Also he says, "In his meditation Mr. Styron makes many salient comments and observations that reveal his profound understanding of the institution of slavery."¹ Dr. Stokes says, "The book showed tremendous insight into the Negro psyche. It expresses what a number of contemporary Negroes, both militant and non-militant, feel about whites."²

Most other reactions by Blacks to Styron's *Confessions* have been intensely critical. Black objections to the book are presented in John Henrik Clarke's collection of ten essays³--a slim volume published in 1968, months after Styron's book appeared at newsstands. The essays in Clarke's critical edition are somewhat repetitious in the charges made against Styron by the various Black writers. However, the general attitude of these ten Blacks opposing Styron's *Confessions* is expressed in some or all of the following criticisms:


2. Styron's distortion of the true character of Nat Turner was deliberate.

3. Styron's *Confessions* dehumanizes every Black person in the book and subtly supports certain stereotyped views of most ardent racists.

¹ Dr. John Hope Franklin, quoted in John Leo, "Some Negroes Accuse Styron of Distorting Nat Turner's Life," *The New York Times* (February 1, 1968), Section 2, p. 34.

² Dr. Rembert Stokes, quoted in John Leo, *Ibid*.

And they assert that Nat Turner awaits a literary interpreter worthy of his sacrifice.

The following are excerpts from each of the ten essays in Clarke's collection. They are exemplary of the attitudes of their Black authors:

**Lerone Bennett**

*The Confessions* is the worst thing that happened to Nat since Nat's last white man (save one with the pen) broke his neck with a rope on a gallows in a Virginia town called Jerusalem.¹

**Dr. Alvin Poussaint**

Styron is a southern white man who has been raised in a racist society and is not free from the impact of its teachings—- Styron may be guilty of projecting on to Nat Turner many of the classical white stereotypical notions about Black people. Through his "imaginations" he has selected the types of psychological material which appear to emasculate and degrade Nat Turner and his people... The author must accept the responsibility for whatever part his book will play in perpetuating the racist myths of our white society.²

**Vincent Harding**

The tragedy begins with Styron's belief that such a caricature is really Nat Turner. It is deepened by America's eager acceptance of this uninspired offering of homosexuality, pseudo-religion and dreams (so wonderfully safe!) of black-white grappling in the dust as an authentic view from under black skin.... In spite of Baldwin's largest, kindest hopes Styron has done nothing less (and nothing more) than create another chapter in our long and common agony....³

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¹ "Nat's Last White Man," Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 16.


³ "You've Taken My Nat and Gone," Clarke, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.
John O. Killens

I don't say that William Styron is dishonest. I imagine he is as honest as he can be, granted his racial backwardness .... Styron has progressed but a short distance from the attitude of his grandfather.¹

John A. Williams

...Styron failed here as a novelist to research the historical influences on his character... Or did he? ...Could it be said that Styron is guilty of manipulation?²

Ernest Kaiser

It is clear... that Styron has no equipment either factually or psychologically to write a novel about Nat Turner or any other Negro for that matter.... This novel is a witches' brew of Freudian psychology, Elkins' "Sambo" thesis on slavery and Styron's vile, racist imagination....

Loye Hairston

William Styron's problem is conceptual--one of reading human history in fundamentalist terms, within the narrow confines of regional loyalty to the so-called southern tradition; a euphemism for institutional white supremacy, from its genesis in the African slave trade to Modern American racism.³

Charles V. Hamilton

We will not permit Styron's "meditation to leave unchallenged an image of Nat Turner as a fanatical Black man

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¹ "The Confessions of Willie Styron," Ibid., p. 43.
² "William Styron's Faked Confessions," Ibid., p. 47.
who dreams of going to bed with white women, who holds nothing but contempt for fellow Blacks, and who understands somewhat the basic human desire to be free but still believes in the basic humanity of some slave holders... Man, black or white, yellow or red—moves to maximize his freedom: That is the lesson of Nat Turner Styron did not deal with... ¹

Mike Thelwell

If this book is important, it is so not because it tells much about Negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white, southern myths, racial stereotypes and literary cliches even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds. Their largely uncritical acceptance in literary circles shows us how far we have to go. The real history of Nat Turner and indeed of Black people remains to be written.²

The attitudes of the ten authors in the foregoing quotations are attitudes of anger and outrage, charging Styron with being a racist who has deliberately distorted the character of Nat Turner and the historical significance of his insurrection.

Another essay similarly critical of Styron's book has been written by Cecil M. Brown in Negro Digest.³ Also, the critical essays by Loyle Hairston, Charles Hamilton and Mike Thelwell were published in Freedomways, The Saturday Review and The Massachusetts Review, respectively.⁴

Finally, John Henrik Clarke, Editor of Freedomways and of Ten Black


² "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner," Ibid., p. 91.

³ See Negro Digest (February, 1968), pp. 7-18.

Writers Respond, summarizes the charges by Blacks against Styron's book. In the introduction to his critical edition featuring the responses of Black writers, he surmises that Styron's Confessions "could be his reaction to the racial climate that has prevailed in the United States in the last fifteen years." He continues:

Nat Turner, a nineteenth century figure, seems to have been used to make a comment on a twentieth century situation. Why did the character of Nat Turner in Styron's novel vacillate between being a rebel and an Uncle Tom? Why in spite of his noble calling was he unable to conquer his lust for a white woman? Is there a difference between William Styron's stereotyped portrayal of Nat Turner and current racial bigots' opinions of civil rights leaders?¹

The questions raised by Clarke are answered by Blacks in their nearly unanimous response that William Styron is a racist and his belief in white racial superiority shows itself rather clearly in his pulitzer prize-winning novel, The Confessions of Nat Turner.

¹ Clarke, op. cit., p. viii.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

William Styron's artistic treatment of the historic Nat Turner rebellion is not characteristically a historical novel; rather, it is a book that reflects the despair, sexual tension, mental anguish, and spiritual alienation of the twentieth-century Anglo-American generation in general, and the racial prejudices of William Styron, in particular.

Styron's Confessions is not good historical fiction because it contradicts certain historical facts related to the Turner rebellion, and it does not deepen one's understanding of the historic occurrence of the Turner insurrection. Instead, the novel projects a view of the human condition as follows:

1. It focuses on man's doubt in a post-christian era.

2. It reveals the burdensome responsibility that has to be endured by a man who is sensitive, loving, and compassionate about the suffering of others; and it shows how these qualities not only cause him physical suffering, but also intensify his mental anguish.

3. It shows how significant a role sex has in governing the actions of man in his struggle to find meaning and identity in life.

Styron's view of the human condition is similar to views of other contemporary Anglo-American concepts of the nature of the human condition.

The Confessions also reveals Styron's prejudiced attitude toward
Blacks. This is evidenced in his treatment of slavery and his treatment of sex in the novel. His racially prejudiced attitude has been noted and deplored by many Black scholars (as well as some whites).

The view of slavery in The Confessions clearly reveals Styron's prejudice against Blacks. The book presents an apologist view of slavery that includes the portrayal of docile, animal-like slaves; benevolent slave owners; a non-heroic protagonist; and derogatory, stereotyped portrayals of Blacks.

Styron's treatment of sex in The Confessions also reveals his belief in white racial superiority and his prejudiced attitude toward Blacks. In Styron's novel, white beauty is the only kind that arouses sexual desires. Also in a typically racist manner, Styron exhibits a fear of Black male sexual aggressiveness as he painstakingly emasculates not only the masses of slaves in the novel, but the protagonist as well. Finally, Styron perpetuates degrading racial myths which imply that Blacks are morally inferior to whites in matters concerning sex. Black women are cast in roles as prostitutes or prostitute types. Black men are portrayed in equally degrading ways that show them lusting after only white women.

Almost unanimously, Black scholars have objected to Styron's treatment of Nat Turner's rebellion. Except for a few who made favorable remarks in reviews or interviews shortly after the book's publication, all others have been bitter critics of the book. Blacks who criticized Styron's Confessions have made the following charges:

1. There are serious historical errors in the book.
2. Styron has deliberately distorted the true character of
Nat Turner.

3. The book dehumanizes every black person portrayed therein, and it supports prejudiced views of the most ardent white racists.

Black critics also share the view that Nat Turner still awaits a literary interpreter worthy of his sacrifice; for William Styron's *Confessions* tells more about the attitudes and fears of Styron's Anglo-American generation than it does about Nat Turner's nineteenth century insurrection. More importantly, Styron's *Confessions* is colored by his belief in white racial superiority which results in an artistic view that distorts history, degrades Blacks and offers practically no enlightening perspectives on the nature of the historic Turner Rebellion or the true motives and character of Nat Turner, the man who made that rebellion a reality.
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