Darkness Visible Study Guide

Darkness Visible by William Styron

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Introduction

Developed from a lecture William Styron gave at a symposium on affective disorders at Johns Hopkins University, *Darkness Visible* was first published as an essay in the December 1989 issue of *Vanity Fair*. The title derives from Milton's description of hell in *Paradise Lost*. The slim book chronicles Styron's battle with depression, which consumes him shortly after his sixtieth birthday. Styron begins his story in October 1985 when he flies to Paris to receive the prestigious *Prix Mondial Cino del Duca*. During this trip the writer's mental state begins to deteriorate rapidly. Using a mix of anecdotes, speculation, and reportage, Styron reflects on the causes and effects of depression, drawing links between his own illness and that of celebrities and writers such as Virginia Woolf, Randall Jarrell, Albert Camus, Romain Gary, Primo Levi, Ernest Hemingway, and Abbie Hoffman. Critically acclaimed for its honesty and Styron's unflinching examination of his condition, *Darkness Visible* helped to de-mystify depression at a time when the disease was gaining more visibility in the media. The early 1990s saw the popularization of Prozac, a radically new kind of antidepressant, which was released in 1987 and is now the most widely prescribed antidepressant in the world. Styron's reputation as an internationally-acclaimed writer, and an older one, also helped the book gain a wide readership.

Author Biography

Born June 11, 1925, to engineer William Clark Styron and Pauline Margaret Abraham Styron, William Styron grew up in the port town of Newport News, Virginia. His grandparents and great-grandparents came from North Carolina and were deeply enmeshed in southern culture, running a cotton plantation and owning slaves. Styron's traditional southern education consisted of a heavy dose of the liberal arts and religious discipline. After studying at Presbyterian Davidson College, Styron enlisted in the Marine Corps, training to be an officer. His experience in the military became fodder for his books, especially *The Long March* (1956), a novel about a forced stateside road march of Marine reservists. After his stint in the Marines, Styron returned to the states to finish his degree at Duke University in North Carolina.

Thinking that he was feeding his dream of becoming a writer, Styron took a job at McGraw-Hill publishers but resigned shortly afterwards, returning to school. At New York City's New School for Social Research, Styron began writing his first novel *Lie Down in Darkness*, which, when published in 1951, would establish his reputation as one of America's most promising young writers. Disillusioned with the United States government and searching for a more satisfying way to live, Styron moved to France. There he founded *The Paris Review* with Peter Matthiessen and George Plimpton. *The Paris Review* remains one of the most influential and widely read literary journals published today. Styron is best known, however, for his novel about a slave's uprising. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) received the 1967 Pulitzer Prize and cemented Styron's standing as a leading American novelist. His 1979 novel, *Sophie's Choice*, the tale of an Auschwitz survivor who cannot escape her past, was made into a popular motion picture starring Meryl Streep and Kevin Kline.

Styron's writing has always been more popular in France than in the United States, his doomed characters and gloomy settings appealing to the French sensibility. In 1985, Styron was awarded the Prix Mondial Cino del Duca, a prestigious award given annually to an artist or scientist whose work embodies the principles of humanism. While in Paris to receive the award, Styron first became fully conscious of the debilitating depression that he would later chronicle in *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*(1990). Styron recovered from his depression and has gone on to write *A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth* (1993).

Styron lives in Connecticut and is married to Rose Burgunder.

Plot Summary

Chapter One

In the first chapter of *Darkness Visible*, Styron locates his narrative in place and time, writing that he first became fully aware of his illness in October 1985 while in Paris to receive the *Prix Mondial Cino del Duca*, an award given each year to a writer or scientist whose work reflects the values of humanism. Styron employs a flashback to discuss the eeriness of returning to the city thirty-three years after first visiting it in 1952. By examining his own strange behavior in Paris, Styron illustrates the chaos into which the human mind sinks during an episode of deep depression. He discusses how enigmatic the disease is and how difficult it is to come up with an adequate definition of depression.

Chapter Two

In this chapter Styron reminisces about Albert Camus and Romain Gary. Camus was a well-known French writer and existentialist whose philosophy influenced Styron's novels. Existentialism, a philosophical position emphasizing humanity's alone-ness in a godless world, was in large part popularized by Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, another mid-century French writer. Camus died in an automobile accident in 1960, before Styron had the opportunity to meet him. Gary was a writer and a friend of Styron's, who committed suicide in 1980. Styron speculates on the relationship between suicide and depression, making connections between these two writers and his own situation.

Chapter Three

Styron continues reflecting on the connection between suicide and depression, pointing out artistic people are often more prone to the disease than others. He reflects on the deaths of political activist Abbie Hoffman, Italian writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, and American poet and writer Randall Jarrell, all of whom died under mysterious circumstances. Styron suggests that their deaths were probably suicides and attempts to explain their deaths as a consequence of their battles with depression.

Chapter Four

In this chapter Styron examines the history of the word *depression*, suggesting that a better word for the disease it signifies is *brainstorm*, for the latter more accurately portrays the tumult of the human brain when impaired. Styron speculates as to reasons for his own illness, considering his sixtieth birthday as one possible cause, and the fact that he has stopped drinking alcohol. He also notes that he had become addicted to Halcion, a powerful sleeping aid, in dosages dangerous for someone his age. He describes the chemical changes in the brain during depression and likens the symptoms

to madness itself. He discusses admitting himself to the hospital in December 1985 and a few of the symptoms of his depression, including the loss of his libido and the waning of his voice.

Chapter Five

In this chapter Styron introduces his psychiatrist, the Yale-trained Dr. Gold. Styron presents Gold as largely ineffectual, whose attempt to help the author consisted primarily of prescribing medication. At this point in his illness, Styron writes that he is consumed with a sense of loss and has given up hope.

Chapter Six

Styron continues to deteriorate. He can no longer drive and has taken on the countenance of a much older man. Dr. Gold prescribes Nardil, an older antidepressant. Styron writes that he feels as if a "second self" is following him around, watching him as he prepares to die, rewriting his will, preparing a letter of farewell. The chapter is suffused with the writer's sense of nostalgia, of gloom and impending death. Styron details the events of the night before he checks into the hospital during which, on the brink of suicide, he destroys his diary.

Chapter Seven

In this chapter, the shortest in the book, Styron points out the irony of Dr. Gold helping him get admitted to the hospital. It is ironic because, earlier, Gold had told Styron to avoid the hospital "at all costs." For Styron, this is further evidence of Gold's ineffectuality.

Chapter Eight

Styron describes his seven weeks in the hospital, writing that his fantasies of self-destruction ended once he was taken off Halcion. He details his time spent in group therapy, during which he and others are infantalized, asked to participate in activities such as drawing a picture of his house and using colored modeling clay to make something that represents his condition. Nonetheless, during his stay in the hospital, Styron begins the process of recovery.

Chapter Nine

The author reflects on the genetic roots of depression and refers to a book by Howard Kushner, *Self Destruction in the Promised Land,* which argues that depression is in part caused by incomplete mourning. Styron notices the theme of suicide in most of his

books and considers how a kind of low-level depression has been with him for most of his life.

Chapter Ten

In the last chapter of the book, Styron recapitulates the fact that so many people have suffered and continue to suffer from depression, especially those involved in the arts. He emphasizes, however, that there is an end to the suffering and offers hope to those who suffer. He uses figures and phrases from literature to emphasize this hope.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Darkness Visible is the brief memoirs of William Styron's descent into depression. At the time of Styron's diagnosis in 1985, antidepressant medication had not yet been released and psychiatrists often felt impotent to fully understand the illness. This book is an internal exploration into one man's psychological journey and the struggle against an almost unbeatable enemy.

Styron's story begins in October of 1985 in Paris where the author has a flashback to the spring of 1952 when he was a young man, new to Paris, and staying in the Hotel Washington. The sight of this hotel from a car window on this night almost thirty-five years later makes Styron feel that he has gloomily come full circle. At that moment, Styron feels certain that he will never again see Paris.

Styron has come to Paris this time to attend an award ceremony where he will receive the coveted Prix Mondial Cino del Duca award for artists and scientists dedicated to works of humanism. The pall of depression had begun to set in on Styron for some time before this night, and he almost declined the invitation. Now as Styron accepts his award, he relates that most of the cash prize will be donated to charity, but a small part will be retained for personal matters. Only Styron and his wife, Rose, knew that the author wanted the money for two tickets on the Concorde in order to keep an appointment with a New York psychiatrist in a few days.

Styron is painfully honest about his symptoms in these early days of his disease, which is coupled with the lack of any real assistance available through the medical community. The author painfully endures the events to which he is obliged to attend while in Paris but it is uncomfortably evident to his companions that Styron is not well. As Styron rides in the car on this night in Paris he thinks of Albert Camus and Romain Gary.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The author uses two important style techniques to begin his story, narrative perspective and flashbacks. Being such an intensely personal story about Styron's struggle with the debilitating disease of depression, it is natural that the story be told from the first person point of view. The flashbacks are utilized to efficiently relay history and appropriate detail to show the author's state of mind and events which have meaningful impact on the current situation.

Ironically Styron is presented with a prestigious award for humanism at the very time in his life when he feels the least like himself and his own self-esteem and self-image are critically in jeopardy.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Continuing on Styron's thoughts about Camus and Gary in the first chapter, the author relates that Albert Camus had been the singular literary figure by which Styron guided his own life. Camus, a French author and philosopher, spoke about man's alienation from other men, a concept which had a profound impact on Styron.

Styron's dream of soon meeting Camus was cut short with Camus' untimely death in a car accident. The meeting had been arranged by another of Styron's colleagues, Gary Romain, who told Styron that Camus spoke often of suicide and Styron wonders if Camus' decision to ride in a car with a notoriously reckless driver was not somehow the fulfillment of that death wish.

Romain's suicide not long after that is another blow for Styron and the author struggles with the idea that he himself will soon be faced with the idea of suicide as the only solution for his mental torment.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The suicides of two of Styron's mentors and colleagues are daunting to the mentally struggling author. Throughout Styron's professional career, Camus and Romain had been beacons of perseverance in the presence of debilitating depression. The deaths of these two men have shaken Styron's own volatile composure and he wonders if he himself is on the same inevitable path to self-destruction.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The suicide of yet another friend, Abbie Hoffman, prompts Styron to further explore the relationship between depression and suicide. Hoffman, a political activist made famous during the riots related to the Democratic Convention in 1968, seemed the picture of forward-thinking, singularly focused idealism. Hoffman's death came as a blow to all who knew him, particularly his family who could not accept suicide as an answer.

Another probable suicide case involved a poet, Randall Jarrell, who was killed when he was struck by a car in the middle of the night in North Carolina. Jarrell's widow and a coroner's jury agree that Jarrell's death was an accident but the poet had been hospitalized only a few weeks before for depression and had even slit his wrists while in the hospital.

The sense of shame surrounding these self-imposed deaths leads Styron to question the immediate lack of character that is assigned to the people who commit this final act. Italian writer, Primo Levi, is another case in point. Having survived the horrors of Auschwitz and caring for a paralytic mother did not enter into the equation when others cast judgment on the depressed Levi.

The elements of secrecy and shame outshine any other factors when people address the issue of suicide, a tendency to which Styron takes particular offense for their limiting and uninformed perspectives.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The correlation between suicide and artistic temperaments has long been a topic of discussion when considering depression. Styron note that the tendency is especially among poets, but certainly many artists suffer with the affliction. It is not known what pushes some of those afflicted over the edge to the ultimate act of suicide but Styron suggests that the reader not judge any person so afflicted without having benefit of experiencing depression firsthand

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Styron moves from some of the emotional stigma associated with depression to some of the physical ramifications of the disease. Starting with the actual name, Styron suggests that a more appropriate name for the affliction would be *brainstorm* because that is essentially what is taking place. That word is used to mean just the opposite of Styron's use for it so the author resigns himself to the term *depression* until something more suitable evolves.

Styron also honestly admits to a long-term reliance on alcohol and Halcion, which contributed to his depressed state. Normally used for the mitigation of anxiety and depression, the substances were only worsening Styron's condition.

As Styron worked to rid his body of chemical substances, he battled anxiety attacks and periods of complete ambivalence toward things and events, which normally would have filled him with hopefulness and joy. Styron describes the internal process as all the circuits in his mind going in the wrong directions and totally missing the appropriate connections.

In addition to the mental distress, Styron suffered changes in his voice, libido and appetite. Most bewildering though was the inability to sleep in spite of overwhelming exhaustion, which Styron describes as rare torture. During a sleepless state, Styron realizes that the disease will at some point take his life if left to continue on this course.

Chapter 4 Analysis

It is important to note that the period in which Styron suffers his depression, the 1980's, is one in which there was a rush of new medications including Prozac. Unfortunately for people like Styron, the main drug prescribed for anxiety and sleeplessness was Halcion, which the author now claims to have been a big factor in furthering his depressive state. The depressive characteristics of alcohol were not as well known at the time either and Styron was unwittingly adding to his mental distress thinking that the substances helped his condition.

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Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Styron compares his own situation with that of Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* when the desperate Emma seeks help from a parish priest for her madness but receives only platitudes. Styron's first visit with his psychiatrist, Dr. Gold, sends the author on a journey of trial and error with medications and cognitive therapy. The failure of these things to act quickly keeps the depressed person in a state of perpetual anxiety and hopelessness.

Styron recalls clinging desperately to familiar items such as reading glasses and a pen in an attempt to stem the tide of life slipping hopelessly away. Also during this advanced stage of his disease, Styron experienced an overwhelming sense of hopelessness which forced him to his bed for several hours each day where he would lie with his anguish until he could muster the strength to eat and then return to sleep.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Dr. Gold's approach to depression is to Styron what the ineffectual parish priest's platitudes had been to Madame Bovary. To Gold, treatment meant a process of trial and error of medications which took weeks to show any efficacy and whose side effects were intolerable. This experimental phase was an agony to the further declining Styron, who was desperate for release from the mental anguish. Dr. Gold symbolizes the medical community's predilection for pharmacological solutions in the mid 1980's without enough ancillary physical and emotional support.

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

Styron had kept a diary of sorts for a few years and knew that when he reached a point when he wanted to throw the book away he would be near to his own demise. The author remembers the night when the destruction of the book came true during a dinner party at his home one night in December. No longer able to participate in the conversation, Styron wrapped his book in plain paper and put it in the garbage.

From that night, Styron began the process of preparing to die by revising his will and even making attempts at writing a goodbye letter. Finding no words to adequately convey his feelings, Styron tore up all drafts of the letter. One night soon after the destruction of the diary, Styron was spending another sleepless night watching a movie in which the strains of Brahms' *Alto Rhapsody* moved him to the point that he knew the shell of depression had broken. Styron was admitted to the hospital the next day.

Styron's admission into the hospital had an almost immediate beneficial result in that he finally feels safe. Ironically the sterility and constant activity of the hospital provide the calm that the author was unable to attain while at home in his pleasant Connecticut farmhouse. Styron knows that now he is no longer subjected to the items of everyday life such as knives and ropes which at any moment could have been weapons of death. Styron knows that being sequestered here will be his salvation and that all he needs now are this controlled environment and more time.

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Styron's diary serves as a symbol of his self-esteem and self-worth in that the words that had come from his own heart and mind could be thrown away in the garbage with no consequence. It is at this point that Styron was at the brink of suicide. In Styron's mind there was nothing left to lose.

The scenario Styron paints of the night of his breakthrough when hearing the music in the movie seems to be the stuff of which movies are made. The drama is almost palpable and although Styron still has much work to do, the moment when hope reappears is triumphant and climactic for the author and the work.

Given the immense relief that Styron feels when finally admitted to the hospital, it is difficult to imagine why his doctor or someone close to him did not intervene on his behalf sooner. Possibly the social stigma associated with hospitalization for mental health issues could have been one factor but most probably it is merely the fact that people cannot grasp the sicknesses that occur in the mind because they are not visible or tangible.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Despite recommendations for shock treatments, Styron managed to avoid this disruptive procedure because he began to improve almost immediately. During the author's seven-week stay in the hospital, he trudged through group therapy, art therapy and many hours watching inane television shows. By early February, when Styron was released, he felt more like full person again and less of a shell and was able once more to sleep peacefully with only pleasant dreams.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Styron's major life-crisis has been averted and the process of his road back to recovery is alluded to briefly but it is clear that much internal work was done and great strength of character brought the author back from the brink of despair and his own demise.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Styron gives hope to those who suffer from depression by offering up the fact that most of the people who endure it manage to come out on the other side with few permanent wounds. Unfortunately, those who have been afflicted once will experience a recurrence but will know better how to manage it because of the initial experience.

The author calls on the friends and relatives of depressed people to never give up the vigil of validating the person's worth and boosting the sense of self which is so critical to managing through to a healthier state.

The cause of depression has never been formally declared but the author can trace the roots of his own illness to that of the loss of his mother when Styron was only thirteen. Complicating the scenario, Styron's own father had been afflicted with bouts of depression speaking to a hereditary component as well.

The phenomenon of loss precipitates a state called "incomplete mourning" in which young victims of loss harbor guilt and rage for their entire lives and it is hypothesized that these strong emotions are triggers for the depressive condition.

Styron visits once more the concept that artistic people are more prone to depression and gives examples of some of the greatest artistic creations of all time as examples; Van Gogh's frenetic painting, Virginia Woolf's haunting prose; Emily Dickinson's poetry tops the list.

In closing, Styron quotes Dante as the noblest effort to try to capture the overwhelming magnitude of depression but the disease continues to be a mystery to the scientific community. Styron offers one last hope before closing in that suicide is not the answer, that the disease is conquerable, and that the return to peace and serenity is the reward for the hellish journey.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

As an essay, this piece is notable for its honesty and introspection but because it is not a journal or other revelatory piece, there is a sense of not having cracked the surface of the real story behind it. Subtitled with *A Memoir of Madness*, there is an expectation that more information would have been shared to show the depths of anguish experienced by the author. Clearly Styron suffered immensely but leaves the reader wanting more in order to share, at least in a small way, the agony of his experience in order to feel some empathy.

Stylistically, the piece moves along like a brief chronicle of the high points of Styron's depths. It would have been more gratifying to have explored some of the author's

relationships and the impact on the lives around him, but, ultimately, depression is a very solitary disease and perhaps Styron painted the picture perfectly after all.

Characters

Albert Camus

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a well-known French writer and philosopher who greatly influenced Styron's writing and thinking about the human condition. Camus ran a theater company during the 1930s and was a leading voice of the French Resistance. His books include *The Plague, The Fall, The Rebel,* and *A Happy Death*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. Styron writes that Camus' novel *The Stranger* influenced his approach to *The Confessions of Nat Turner,* Styron's psychological portrait of an American slave. Styron also mentions Camus' book, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* saying that it gave him great courage to continue in the face of his own struggles. Styron sums up the book's message: "In the absence of hope, we must struggle to survive□by the skin of our teeth." Romain Gary had planned to arrange a dinner to introduce Styron to Camus, but Camus died in an automobile accident before that could happen.

Simone del Duca

Simone del Duca is the wife of Cino del Duca, a wealthy Italian immigrant, after whom the Prix Mondial Cino del Duca is named. Styron describes her as "a large dark-haired woman of queenly manner." She is at the center of Styron's emotional breakdown while the writer is in Paris to receive the Prix Mondial Cino del Duca. His state of mind deteriorating at the time, Styron refused, then accepted, to appear at a luncheon with del Duca.

Francoise Gallimard

Gallimard is Styron's publisher in France. Styron makes a luncheon date with Gallimard instead of appearing at a luncheon in his honor with Simone del Duca.

Romain Gary

Romain Gary, a Russian Jew born in Lithuania, was a writer and close friend of Styron and Camus. Gary's works include *The Life Before Us, Promise at Dawn, European Education, Goodbye Gary Cooper,* and *Lady L*. He was married to the actress Jean Seberg. Styron describes Gary's life, his battles with depression, and his suicide as a way of thinking through his own depression.

Dr. Gold

Dr. Gold is Styron's Yale-trained psychiatrist, introduced in chapter five. Styron compares his relationship to Dr. Gold with Emma Bovary's relationship to the village priest in Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary*. Just as the priest had no cure for Madame Bovary's malaise, Dr. Gold could offer only platitudes to Styron. Gold met with Styron twice a week but was largely ineffectual in his treatment of the writer. Gold's primary attempts to help him were through the prescription of antide-pressants, especially Nardil. Gold is symbolic of contemporary medicine's de-humanizing approach to depression, which considers the ailment almost exclusively in physical terms.

Abbie Hoffman

Hoffman was a counter-culture figure and one of the founders of the Yippies, a group of pranksters and political activists who wreaked havoc at the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. Styron testified on his behalf in 1970. In 1989 Hoffman died after taking more than 150 phenobarbitals. Styron thinks that Hoffman's death, like the death of many other celebrities and famous writers he mentions, was the result of depression and could have been prevented with the proper treatment and attention.

William James

James is the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* which Styron cites as an example of a book that tries unsuccessfully to describe depression.

Randall Jarrell

Jarrell was an American poet and critic who battled depression and mental illness for most of his life. He died after being hit by a car in 1965. Styron uses Jarrell, like Hoffman, as an example of someone who committed suicide because the pain of living with debilitating depression was too much. Styron discusses the stigma of suicide and how those close to suicide victims often attempt to represent their deaths otherwise.

Howard Kushner

Kushner is the author of the book *Destruction in the Promised Land*. In the book, Kushner, a social historian, holds that incomplete mourning is a contributing cause of depression and suicide. Styron uses Kushner's theory as a way to think about his own childhood and the difficulty he had mourning the loss of his mother, which may have contributed to his depression as an adult.

Primo Levi

Primo Levi was an Italian writer and Auschwitz survivor who died after a fall down a stairwell in Turin in 1987. Levi had been ill and was said to have been depressed. Styron, who himself wrote about Holocaust survival in his novel *Sophie's Choice,* speculates that Levi committed suicide as a result of his depression. He wrote a letter to the *New York Times* saying that suicide will never fully be prevented until people understand the intense pain of those who suffer from depression. Styron details the intellectual community's refusal to acknowledge Levi's depression as a legitimate cause of his suicide, suggesting that others cannot possibly understand the torment of one experiencing depression.

Jean Seberg

Seberg was Romain Gary's wife. She was an Iowa-born actress who committed suicide after battling depression. Styron describes her during her depression: "All her once fragile and luminous blond beauty had disappeared into a puffy mask. She moved like a sleepwalker, said little, and had the blank gaze of someone tranquilized... nearly to the point of catalepsy." Her description is important, for Styron uses it to illustrate how an outsider can never know at the time what someone experiencing severe depression is going through. His awareness of Seberg's suffering comes to light only after Styron tries to make sense of his own depression.

Rose Styron

Rose Styron is the author's long-suffering wife who accompanies the author to Paris and is always at his side. The author describes her as, "The endlessly patient soul who had become nanny, mommy, comforter, priestess, and, most important, confidant-a counselor or rocklike centrality to my existence whose wisdom far exceeded that of Dr. Gold." Styron never describes her appearance.

William Styron

William Styron is the central character in his own story about his battles with depression. He chronicles the major events of his depression, from the onset of a major episode in October 1985 to the beginning of his recovery in February 1986. Styron is sixty years old when the full force of his depression hits him, and he details his battles with it and the effects it has on his body and his relationships with other people, including his wife, Rose, and his friends. He describes his gradual withdrawal from his friends and the life he had known, his inability to work, the loss of his voice and his libido. Everything readers learn about other characters is through Styron's responses to them. He is alternately meditative and nostalgic, wistful and indignant, as he reflects on the illness of depression and how it sapped all life and hope from him.

Therapist

The unnamed hospital therapist is well-intentioned yet almost comical in her behavior. Styron describes her as "a delirious young woman with a fixed, indefatigable smile, who was plainly trained at a school offering courses in Teaching Art to the mentally ill." She is relentless in her praise of those in group therapy, almost to the point of idiocy. Her therapy consists of having group members draw pictures and make clay models of themes in which they were interested. Styron felt infantalized by many of the activities but nonetheless grew to "become fond" of the woman.

Virginia Woolf

Woolf is a well-known British feminist and writer who also suffered from depression and extreme mood swings. Her novels include *To The Lighthouse, Mrs. Dalloway, A Wave,* and *A Room of One's Own*. She committed suicide by drowning herself in the River Ouse. Woolf appears in Styron's list of famous writers and artists who have committed suicide because of their depression.

Themes

Medicine

Darkness Visible illustrates the controversies at the heart of treating depression. On the one hand, many of those afflicted do not want to be treated with drugs, believing that the root of their illness is not necessarily in their bodies but either in the world in which they live or in their spirit or mind. People in this camp often seek psychotherapy for treatment. On the other hand, a large part of the medical community itself staunchly defends the use of phar-maceuticals, arguing that depression is a result of faulty brain chemistry and that drugs are the most effective form of treatment for sufferers. Styron himself weighs both of these positions, writing:

The intense and sometimes comically strident factionalism that exists in present-day psychiatry□the schism between the believers in psychotherapy and the adherents of pharmacology□resembles the medical quarrels of the eighteenth century (to bleed or not to bleed) and almost defines in itself the inexplicable nature of depression and the difficulty of its treatment.

Styron never resolves the conflict for himself, partaking of both psychotherapy and antidepres-sants at various points. Although he "conquers" the disease by the end of his story, his claim that "the disease of depression remains a great mystery " remains his final word on depression. Depression, for Styron, is as much an affliction of the soul as it is of the brain, and he compares those who have endured the "despair beyond despair" to poets who have trudged up from hell into the daylight of emotional health.

Meaning

In a way, *Darkness Visible* is a meditation on loss and meaning. When his depression hits, he writes that he feels his "mind dissolving" and that his brain is full of "anarchic disconnections." He loses his voice, his sexual desire, his physical energy, his ability to work, to communicate, to love. He has even lost the capacity to dream. All of the elements that conventionally define human behavior and identity are compromised. He describes himself as existing in a trance, unable to participate in the world in any meaningful way. The relentless whittling away of his world leads Styron at one point to contemplate suicide, the ultimate loss of self. Styron reflects on the relation between suicide and depression, making connections between the deaths of friends and acquaintances and their own struggles with depression or mood disorders. Such reflection, however, at least in retrospect, strengthens his conviction that many of these deaths could have been prevented if the victims (for example, Abbie Hoffman, Primo Levi, Albert Camus) had sought treatment for their depression. Meaning, Styron suggests, comes from the very act of surviving, of human courage in the face of a possibly meaningless universe. And cultivating meaning is more an act of human will than anything else. Styron recoups a degree of his own losses during his recovery from

his writing about the disease. In the act of attempting to understand the experience of his depression, he reflects on the loss of his own mother during his childhood and speculates that his inability to mourn her death adequately may have contributed to his illness as an adult.

Style

Style

Darkness Visible is written from the first-person point of view and is a type of memoir. Memoirs are autobiographical accounts of a particular part of the writer's life. They entail the narrator looking back on an experience or period of time and trying to make sense of it. The narrator is Styron himself, who recounts six months of his life when he battled severe depression, writing from the vantage point of four years later. All of the characters have relevance to the theme of the story, which is the ability of the human spirit to endure and triumph in the face of severe adversity. The story is of *his* depression, and all other characters and their stories have relevance to Styron's own. Styron tells his story in a straightforward, literal manner with very little figurative language. This approach befits a nonfiction account of a medical illness.

Flashback

Flashbacks are frequently used to present action or fill in information that occurred before a story begins. Styron begins *Darkness Visible* by "flashing back" to the time when he first visited Paris, some thirty-three years before in 1952. By comparing his attitude when he first visited Paris to his mood when he is visiting the city in 1985, Styron dramatizes the change in his emotional state. Whereas once he was young, curious, full of possibility and hope, now he is old, exhausted, and consumed with despair.

Tone

Tone is the attitude of the speaker toward the subject matter. Styron's tone in *Darkness Visible* befits the very title of the book. As he recounts his experience with depression, his language embodies the very nature of the disease. His sentences are languid, often sterile, and he repeats himself at times, as if struggling to get his mind around the very experience he is attempting to describe. But readers trust Styron's voice because he is at a distance from the experience. Though his prose is at times sluggish, it is also measured, rational, and□ as much as he can be□objective.

Setting

The setting of a story refers to the when and where of the narrative's action. Most frequently, the setting is physical; for example, Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* takes place on and along the Mississippi River in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although Styron describes a few different physical places and geographical locations, the primary setting of his story is the author's mind itself. He describes Paris, his home in Connecticut, Martha's Vineyard, and the hospital to which he admits himself, but these descriptions

are sketchy and not important to the story's development. What *is* important is Styron's emotional health, the interplay between his behavior and the trajectory of his depression and his cure.

Historical Context

Styron's mental breakdown in 1985 preceded by two years the release of Prozac, the most popular antidepressant in the history of the world. Before pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly developed Prozac, people with depressive disorders were treated with monoamine oxidase inhibitors and tricyclics such as Nardil, which Styron was prescribed. These drugs, however, often had debilitating side effects. Prozac, the brand name for fluoxetine hydrochloride, acts in a different way on the brain than the previous generation of antidepressants, regulating the action of serotonin. It needs to be taken only once daily, and its side effects, Lilly claims, are minimal. In its first ten years, Prozac was prescribed to more than ten million Americans for everything from depression and anxiety to personality disorders. Since its arrival on the market, Prozac has been a media phenomenon appearing on the cover of maj or magazines such as *Newsweek*. The drug's continued popularity and widespread use has also been the source of much controversy rooted in issues of human identity and money. Many opponents of the drug claim that it is being overprescribed, that increasingly doctors are using it to treat personality quirks, making it the equivalent of a designer drug. They argue that, though many may recover their emotional health, they often lose their sense of self in the process. Other Prozac naysayers, such as Peter Breggin, author of *Talking Back to Prozac,* claim that Eli Lilly rushed the product to market even though tests were inconclusive. Breggin suggests that Lilly is more concerned with profits than human health and that adverse side effects, such as decreased libido, nausea, and insomnia, are more common than has been reported.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increase not only in the use of new antidepressants such as Prozac but also in the use of other so-called prescription designer drugs such as Halcion, a sleeping aid, which Styron himself used and for which he in part blames his depression; the diet drug phen-fen; and, in the late 1990s, Viagara, a drug also from Eli Lilly, which treats male impotence. While Americans were flocking to prescription drugs in record numbers to improve their lifestyle, the United States government was waging a war on illicit non-prescription drugs. Cocaine, much of it smuggled in from Latin American countries such as Colombia and Peru, became the recreational drug of choice for many middle- and upper-class Americans. Crack, a smokable and very potent form of cocaine, was often used by poorer people, who became easily addicted to the drug. Ronald Reagan's administration emphasized the danger of drug use to the family and to the moral fabric of society, as well as the cost to business. Attempting to influence consumption patterns before they happened, Nancy Reagan's "Just say No" campaign targeted children. Seeking to continue where his predecessor Ronald Reagan left off, President George Bush initiated his own "war on drugs" in 1989 when he outlined the federal government's strategy for ending drug use. The bulk of Bush's $8 billion plan went toward law enforcement, whereas only 30 percent went to prevention, education, and treatment. Such emphasis has resulted in a record number of people being incarcerated for drug-related crimes, most of them victimless.

Critical Overview

Styron penned *Darkness Visible* when he was sixty-four years old, after a successful career in which he had gained a reputation as a prose stylist who wrote engaging stories that emphasized enduring human themes. Its critical reception is to a large degree based on Styron's established reputation and the respect it affords him. With few exceptions the book was praised for its insight and candor. Reviewing the book for *Newsweek,* Peter Prescott wrote that "*Darkness Visible* ... is an essay of great gravity and resonance. Never has Styron used so few words so effectively." Jon Saari of *Antioch Review* agreed, writing: "[Styron's] memoir should become a valuable addition to the understanding of depression, confirming again the role the literary artist plays in bringing light to the darkest secrets of the human psyche." Writing for *Magill Reviews,* R. Baird Shuman concurs: "His account of this struggle is candid and balanced. As an anatomy of the kind of severe depression that often culminates in suicide, *Darkness Visible* is a deeply personal statement."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition at Chemeketa Community College. His fiction, poetry, and essays appear regularly in literary magazines and journals. In this essay, he examines Darkness Visible *in relation to themes of existentialism*.

The contradictions inherent in understanding the phenomenon of human depression parallel the contradictions inherent in understanding human existence itself. It is no surprise that Styron claims that Albert Camus, more than any other writer, has influenced his writing and his life. Camus' existentialism is rooted in the idea of the absurdity of human existence and the inscrutability of the world in which humans live. Comparing existentialist themes to themes of depression will show that the latter is an appropriate, if not necessary, condition for the former. After all, it is seldom that one hears about a happy existentialist.

The cornerstone of existentialist thought is that existence precedes essence. This position emphasizes human beings' material nature, their place apart from any system of predetermined behavior or nature. Human beings make choices, and their lives are the result of those choices. This idea is particularly evident in Camus' novel *The Stranger,* which tells the story of a man who commits murder for reasons he cannot fathom but who ultimately takes responsibility for the act. Styron's own refusal to see his depression as the result of any one cause *and* his admission that he himself might have brought on his condition (through his years of alcohol abuse) show his awareness that his own choices helped bring about the illness.

But if systems of thought, morality, and meaning are themselves bankrupt, to what does the individual anchor himself? For existentialists such as Camus, what remains is the void, an absence of meaning and meaning-making structures. Emptiness itself forms the background against which life is lived. Styron's own life in the wake of his depression mirrors this emptiness. It's as if the onslaught of full-blown depression enables him to realize the emptiness of his existence. Again and again in *Darkness Visible* he writes of the losses in his life during his depression, his inability to see beauty in the world, to make love to his wife, to write, even to hold a conversation. All of these things become impossible because of his depression. What remains is the feeling of loss itself, the emptiness at the root of his despair. Often accompanying this feeling of loss, for existentialists, is the feeling of alienation from one's own self. Karl Marx has described alienation as resulting from contradictions inherent in society. Human beings' desires are created by societal structures, which themselves are not capable of fulfilling those desires. Styron describes his own alienation from himself when he says that he often felt haunted, as if a "wraithlike observer... not sharing the dementia of his double, is able to watch with dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster, or decides to embrace it." Styron's relentless self-conscious only adds to his pain, as he watches himself sink further and further into the bleakness, without the ability to halt it.

Accompanying Styron's feeling of loss and alienation are anxiety and dread, the overriding emotions that color existentialist thought. In existentialism, anxiety and dread undergird life itself. Human beings are anxious because they're aware that life has no meaning, that nothingness, non-being, is the ultimate reality. Systems of thought that posit happiness or salvation as the goal of human activity are naive because they give people false hope. Styron describes his own anxiety as a "brainstorm," saying that he could rarely sleep and that he was frequently overcome with a "positive and active anguish." Such anxiety is common in those diagnosed with depression, but it is almost always attributed to a neuro-chemical imbalance and treated with drugs. For "professionals," who themselves are a part of the system that attempts to give meaning to the lives of others, to admit that anxiety is a universal human condition is to admit defeat. (It would also put them out of a job.)

For existentialists, what can be more empty than death itself, the final nothingness that hovers over all life? Death, the absence of consciousness and continuity of the self is something that most human beings do not think about often. Yet existentialism, especially that strain put forth by German thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietszche, holds that it is only when contemplating one's own death that one can achieve authentic existence. However, taking one's own life, the ultimate existential act, is taboo for most and, in many societies, a crime. The very absurdity of that law underscores the (unspoken) anxiety that society has about life's meaning(lessness). Styron spends a great many words reflecting on suicide, particularly the suicide of others, suggesting that the deaths of many writers and artists, such as Virginia Woolf, Primo Levi, Romain Gary, and Abbie Hoffman, among others, might have been prevented if only these people had been aware of and sought help for their depression. But this very attitude by Styron contradicts another strain in his writing, which sympathizes with the choice that those very people made in taking their lives. In discussing Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus,* which asks whether life is worth living, Styron himself asks whether Camus' statement about suicide, "and his general preoccupation with the subject, might have sprung at least as strongly from some persistent disturbance of mood as from his concerns with ethics and epistemol-ogy." Styron himself contemplated suicide and indeed went so far as to destroy his diary, speak with his lawyer, and begin to compose a farewell letter when, at the last minute, he chose to check himself into a hospital.

Styron's inability to name his state of mind, his constant refrain that depression is "indescribable" and "beyond words," mirrors the ways in which existential philosophers have approached the idea of existence. Just as language cannot adequately represent depression, it also cannot represent the experience of existence itself. However, the difference between Styron's story of illness and recovery and the human condition as seen from an existential point of view is that he *has* found the language to represent depression. It is a language rooted in simple faith that there is meaning in the world. The meaning-producing system from which he finds the language to describe his experience is the discourse of art and artists. Just as Styron draws on a legion of artists and writers to illustrate the links among creativity, depression, and self-destruction, so too does he draw on the same figures to illustrate the redemption that comes from enduring suffering. These are Styron's words for those who have been healed of

depression by time: "For those who have dwelt in depression's dark wood, and known its inexplicable agony, their return from the abyss is not unlike the ascent of the poet, trudging upward and upward out of hell's black depths and at last emerging into what he saw as 'the shining world.'" Such a description, drawn from Dante, does not attempt to explain the nature of the illness or even to offer strategies for surviving it. Indeed, nowhere in his narrative does Styron provide a real reason to refute existentialism's claim that the universe is inherently meaningless and that life is not worth living. His only solace for those suffering from depression is that "depression is not the soul's annihilation ... it is conquerable." The world that the sufferer returns to may not be more meaningful, or more rational, but it is, for Styron, more tolerable. Faced with a world in which meaning is not evident and in which communication often seems impossible, existentialists are often consumed with trying to find reasons to live, to justify *not* taking one's own life. For Styron, who endured an illness that surely magnified the absurdity of the human condition many times over, these reasons, like depression and existence itself, are beyond language.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on *Darkness Visible,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the contributions that Darkness Visible *makes to the layperson's understanding of depression, particularly as the illness is experienced by the sufferer*.

In 1985, author William Styron suffered a bout of depression so severe that after months of misery, barely able to sleep, engulfed by a "gray drizzle of horror," convinced there was "no escape" from his devastating situation, he stood on the brink of taking his own life. Although Styron managed to withdraw from the abyss and commit himself to a psychiatric ward where he regained his mental health, questions remained for him. What had caused the depression? How was he able to recover from it? How does society, including the medical community, react to its depressed members? Styron explores these issues through the deeply personal chronicle of his experience, *Darkness Visible*.

With remarkable candor, Styron shows that the depressed person lacks any belief that circumstances will get better. His close brush with suicide came when he had "reached the phase of the disorder where all sense of hope had vanished, along with the idea of a futurity." By December 1985, Styron was certain that "no remedy will come—not in a day, an hour, a month, or a minute." Any "mild relief" he might feel was "only temporary," leading him to the state of hopelessness that "crushes the soul." However, on the eve that Styron prepared for his suicide, he heard a snippet of Brahms, which "pierced my heart like a dagger." Although he had been "numbly unresponsive for months" to any form of pleasure, Styron reacted unexpectedly to the music as it made him recall "all the joys the house had known"—the children, the love, the hard work. "All this I realized was more than I could ever abandon," Styron remarked. "And just as powerfully I realized I could not commit this desecration on myself."

After battling back to health, Styron openly discussed his illness. In *Darkness Visible,* he shares a stark and truthful account of the downward journey from which many other gifted but troubled authors have been unable to emerge. Perhaps his main accomplishment is to help people who have not suffered from depression get some inkling about how the debilitating disease feels to its victims. Drawing on his own experiences, Styron provides several compelling and convincing examples of the healthy person's inability to comprehend depression. A devotee of the French novelist and philosopher Albert Camus, Styron strongly responded to "the cosmic loneliness" of the hero of Camus' *The Stranger;* when he read Camus' *The Fall,* however, he only "admired it with reservation" because "the guilt and self-condemnation of the lawyer-narrator, gloomily spinning out his monologue in an Amsterdam bar, seemed a touch clamorous and excessive. " Having read the book before his own illness, Styron did not recognize that Camus had drawn an accurate if distressing portrayal of a man suffering from clinical depression. "Such was my innocence of the very existence of the disease," the post-sickness Styron acknowledges.

Even coming face-to-face with severe depression did not bring about any greater comprehension in Styron. He recalls a visit with a close friend, the novelist Romain Gary, and Gary's ex-wife, actress Jean Seberg, which took place only a few years before his own lapse into depression. Styron was "shocked and saddened" to see Seberg who "moved like a sleepwalker, said little, and had the blank gaze of someone tranquilized (or drugged, or both)." Despite this grim picture and despite Gary's mention of "something about antidepressant medications," Styron failed to realize the seriousness of the situation. "This memory of my relative indifference is important," he writes, "because such indifference demonstrates powerfully the outsider's inability to grasp the essence of the illness." Seberg committed suicide the following year, and when Styron subsequently visited with Gary in Paris, he noticed that his friend manifested physical symptoms of a malady□trembling hands and a voice that sounded prematurely aged. The culprit was revealed when Gary bluntly stated that "his loss of Jean had so deepened his depression that from time to time he had been rendered nearly helpless." Recalls Styron of the encounter and his reaction, "But even then I was unable to comprehend the nature of his anguish." Shortly thereafter, Gary shot himself through the head. The implications of Gary's suicide still did not truly reach Styron; not until he neared helplessness himself, when "the pain descended," did Styron finally begin to grasp what Gary and Seberg had experienced□the certainty that "on some not-too-distant tomorrow□I would be forced to judge that life was not worth living."

Styron occupies a unique perspective; he has seen close friends undergo the torture of severe depression and has undergone it himself□and lived to tell. Because of these credentials, Styron can be trusted when he explains that the illness of depression is "a sensation close to ... actual pain." The adjectives he continuously comes back to in repeated attempts to explain depression to healthy people are such words or phrases as "incomprehensible," "beyond description," and "unimaginable." Healthy people, he writes, have a "basic inability ... to imagine a form of torment so alien to everyday experience."

As Styron's own case of depression further illustrates, it takes time even for the sufferer himself to develop self-awareness of the disease's manifestation. Styron's onset of depression was heralded only by a "subtle" change. His "surroundings took on a different tone at certain times," and he experienced "a moment during my working hours in the late afternoon when a kind of panic and anxiety overtook me, just for a few minutes." Though in hindsight he believes that "it should have been plain to me that I was already in the grip of the beginning of a mood disorder," at the time, he only felt "unfocused stirrings." Not until October 1985, while he was in Paris to accept an illustrious literary prize□one "which should have sparklingly restored my ego"□did Styron finally realize the seriousness of his situation.

The general lack of understanding of depression on the part of laypeople often results in others' refusal to accept the reality of depression-induced suicide. People close to a suicide victim who deny the truth about this death make the sufferer "unjustly ... appear a wrongdoer." Suicide victims are viewed as acting out of cowardice, personal weakness, or "moral feebleness"; in truth, the individual most likely was "afflicted with a depression that was so devastating that he could no longer endure the pain of it." When

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the well-known 1960s radical Abbie Hoffman died from a major overdose of sedatives, Hoffman's brother still appeared on television "to deflect the idea of suicide, insisting that Abbie, after all, had always been careless with pills." Italian writer Primo Levi poses another striking example of a suicide casualty that others did not want to accept. After living through, and writing about, the horrors of the death camp at Auschwitz, years later the sixty-seven-year-old Levi threw himself down a flight of stairs. Styron notes that many participants at a conference on Levi "seemed mystified and disappointed" by the author's actions:

It was as if this man whom they had all so greatly admired, and who had endured so much at the hands of the Nazis□had by his suicide demonstrated a frailty, a crumbling of character they were loath to accept. In the face of a terrible absolute□self-destruction□their reaction was helplessness and... a touch of shame.

Styron strongly disagreed; it was not weakness that killed Levi but an "anguish [that] can no longer be borne."

"[T]he disease of depression remains a great mystery," writes Styron. Significantly, it remains this way to many people, including those who suffer from it, those who witness it, and those who attempt to cure it. For instance, until becoming ill, Styron was unaware that "in its major stages [depression] possesses no quickly available remedy." He originally thought that his new doctor "would whisk my malaise away with his miraculous medications." Such naivete later shocked Styron: "I... am hardly able to believe that I possessed such ingenuous hope, or that I could have been so unaware of the trouble and peril that lay ahead."

Unfortunately, Styron's psychiatrist, whom he calls Doctor Gold, turns out to be little more than a quack. The only help he offered Styron, aside from "ineffective" platitudes, was an antidepressant that made Styron "edgy" and "disagreeably hyperactive." When informed of these and other medical problems, Doctor Gold then prescribed Styron a new medication, one that did not actually take effect for several more weeks. He also prescribed a dosage that was three times the normal amount and particularly dangerous to someone Styron's age. (Styron later came to believe that this medication, taken in such large dosages, led him to become suicidal.) Perhaps even more shocking, when Styron broached the suggestion of checking into a hospital, Doctor Gold discouraged him from doing so, merely "owing to the stigma I might suffer." With this action, Doctor Gold obliquely but firmly upholds the erroneous idea that the depressed person is to blame for his problems. In the end, Styron had to rely on some hidden quality within himself to draw back from suicide. Like the "austere message" that Camus held out in *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Styron knew that "in the absence of hope we must still struggle to survive, and so we do□by the skin of our teeth."

After his recovery, in an effort to better understand depression, Styron hypothesizes as to the incipient cause of his condition. Though he categorizes his depression as "atypical," Styron nonetheless attributes it to standard causes, ones that are generally supported by research and science□primarily a genetic predisposition and an unresolved childhood trauma:

The morbid condition proceeded, I have come to believe, from my beginning years from my father, who battled the gorgon for much of his lifetime, and had been hospitalized in my boyhood after a despondent spiraling downward that in retrospect I saw greatly resembled mine.... But I'm persuaded that an even more significant factor was the death of my mother when I was thirteen; this disorder and early sorrow ... appears repeatedly in the literature on depression as a trauma sometimes likely to create nearly irreparable emotional havoc.

"Loss," Styron writes, "in all of its manifestations is the touchstone of depression in the progress of the disease and, most likely, in its origin."

Despite the many positive attributes of *Darkness Visible,* some readers will take issue with certain of Styron's assertions, namely his depiction of psychiatrists, therapists, and therapy; Styron seems to attack the state and practice of psychiatry in the United States. Though Doctor Gold certainly acts both immorally and hazardously, many readers will have a hard time accepting that he is representative of the American psychiatrist; countless people who have suffered from depression both in its major and minor forms have been greatly helped through psychiatric therapy as well as through medication. Though Styron boldly states that "many psychiatrists ... do not seem to be able to comprehend the nature and depth of the anguish their patients are undergoing," he provides no proof aside from his own experiences he neither cites other people who have suffered from depression nor these maligned psychiatrists themselves. A hospital psychiatrist with whom Styron has some sessions also comes under attack. Styron finds this doctor, who ran group therapy, to be "an odiously smug young *shrink* [emphasis mine]." Both "condescending and bullying," he seems to draw perverse personal satisfaction from making his patients cry. Further, the hospital's art therapist is described as "a delirious young woman," one who was "plainly trained at a school offering courses in Teaching Art to the Mentally Ill." Only in a brief, parenthetical aside does Styron acknowledge that he found most of the hospital's psychiatric staff "exemplary in their tact and compassion."

Styron's evocation of therapy is similarly dismissive. "Group Therapy, I am told, has some value," he writes; "I would never want to derogate any concept shown to be effective for certain individuals." However, he goes on to offer his own impression of it: "Group Therapy did nothing for me except make me seethe... Time hangs heavy in the hospital, and the best I can say for Group Therapy is that it was a way to occupy the hours." Styron also was made to attend classes in art therapy, which he characterized as "organized infantilism." Feeling "humiliated rage" at having to participate in this activity, Styron deliberately and successfully mimicked the "intermediate stages of recuperation" through his artwork, culminating in his creation of "a rosy and cherubic head with a 'Have-a-Nice-Day' smile." His gulled therapist was "overjoyed" at the supposed "example of the triumph over disease by Art Therapy."

Styron credits the "real healers" of his illness as "seclusion and time." If the depressed person can "survive the storm itself," as Styron did, "its fury almost always fades and then disappears.... Mysterious in its coming, mysterious in its going, the affliction runs its course, and one finds peace." The hospital merely served to facilitate this process,

because in the institution "one's only duty is to try and get well." Styron seems to claim that his recovery stemmed completely from his own efforts and his ability to hold on to life in the face of despair.

Still, Styron's final chapter is a testament to the sense of hope that he and other sufferers may yet find within themselves. Like Styron, many of those afflicted with this grave disease have recovered, conquering this despondency of the soul. Further, Styron believes that many of these people have also been "restored to the capacity for serenity and joy." He ends his essay with a quote from Dante's *Inferno:* "And so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars." Writes John Bemrose in *Maclean's,* "That note of hope is *Darkness Visible's final,* moving gift."

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Critical Essay #3

Thompson is a freelance writer who writes primarily in the education field. In this essay, she explains how Styron creates for readers a vicarious journey into insanity through the style of his memoir.

Traffic snarls as motorists crane their necks toward an automobile accident, movies continually surpass each other in the amount and nature of graphic violence they depict, and real-life crime sells well in books and on television. Why is that so? Psychologists do not agree on the motivation behind such macabre interest. Many individuals cannot explain themselves the force that makes them look at things they would rather not see. But the answer as to *why* they look is not preeminent. What is important is that they *do* look. Reading William Styron's slim volume *Darkness Visible* is the literary equivalent of witnessing an indescribable act of violence. Whether readers devour it in amazement because they find within it the gruesomely accurate record of their own sufferings, or they endure it in thankful relief that their own situation does not approach the depth of despair voiced within it, they read it. When they have finished, they have in their minds a surprisingly accurate presentation of one man's descent into the abyss of a depressive disorder.

The book is not remarkable in that Styron found a way to describe the mental illness that is depression. He admits early on that there are no words for what he endured. His choice of title alone should be enough to convince potential readers that he does not have the words to describe his mental demise. The oxymoron "visible darkness" describes nothing at all. Styron reiterates in the final pages of this book that "since antiquity .. . chroniclers of the human spirit have been wrestling with a vocabulary that might give proper expression to the desolation of melancholia." He acknowledges that to those who live with it, "the horror of depression is so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression, hence the frustrated sense of inadequacy found in the work of even the greatest artists." Though he attempts to describe certain symptoms of his disease, his description of the symptoms should not be equated with a description of the disease any more than a description of fever and aching joints should be equated with the description of a particular malady. The way this book succeeds in sharing an intimate experience with depression is not through a description of depression; it is through its form. The book's stark prose, fixation on death, and egocentric viewpoint that underscores the isolation of depression combine to create a hellish metaphor□a simulation rather than a snapshot.

The book is written in a style that mimics the starkness of being trapped in a depressed state. Stark in one sense can mean lifeless (as in lacking animation or vividness), and the prose in this work is definitely lifeless in that sense. The book begins with a scene remembered from a dark, rainy October evening. Styron was in France to receive a prestigious award and under normal circumstances would have relished the award, the vacation, and the company of his wife in one of the world's most romanticized cities, Paris. But the beauty, both real and mythical, of Paris was lost on Styron. He describes the "damp, plain" hotel where he first stayed as a young man visiting Paris thirty-five

years earlier and remembers its "drab bedroom" and "ill-lit hallway." As the book progresses, Styron stays in Paris and dines at a pair of exceptional restaurants. Yet in keeping with the stark nature of his depression, he describes neither ambiance nor cuisine. There is no color and no flavor in this writing.

The starkness of the book's tone is further developed in Styron's conscious or subconscious use of particular words. In the first sentence of the book he uses the word "fatal" in the sense of meaning "deadly." He admits that his depression gradually reached a point at which he realized the outcome might be deadly. Almost immediately, he uses the word again, this time to describe a feeling of coming full circle, of literally ending his experience of Paris where he had begun it, at the Washington Hotel. His meaning of the word in context is quite clear; he means "fatally" as in "fatefully" or "a fulfilling of fate." Yet he ends the paragraph with the statement that he feels he will never see Paris again, that when he leaves it will be "a matter of forever." In other words, he has modulated into the initially used meaning of fatal as in "deadly."

Styron's use of the various meanings of the word *fatal* supports the statement that the book's language and thus its tone is stark, but it also prepares the reader for another characteristic of this book: It dwells largely on death. Primarily, Styron dwells on suicide in the book. From his first pages there can be no doubt that Styron believes his mental state to be grave. He is haunted by the continual specter of death: "thoughts of death had long been common during my siege, blowing through my mind like icy gusts of wind." Very soon the rather general preoccupation with death becomes a preoccupation with suicide. He wrote that, at one point, "many of the artifacts of my house had become potential devices for my own destruction." Included in his list are "the attic rafters (and an outside maple or two) a means to hang myself, the garage a place to inhale carbon monoxide, the bathtub a vessel to receive the flow from my opened arteries. The kitchen knives in their drawers had but one purpose for me." Styron did seem to make, as far as this book is concerned, a rare attempt at humor by adding, almost in the way a comedian would, an aside about "an outside maple or two." However, this attempt serves only to highlight the total absence of any humorous or light-hearted elements in the rest of the book.

In addition to being overwhelmed by Styron's pervasive thoughts of death, readers are subjected to a ponderously long list of Who's Who among suicides. Additionally, numerous suicides are chronicled in detail. In those cases readers learn about possible motivating factors leading to the suicide, the observable signs of the deceased's irreversible slide into depression, and even the means by which the suicide was carried out. The effect is to leave the reader, once he or she has finished the book, crushed under the weight of the Grim Reaper as surely as if the black-cloaked figure was sitting upon the reader's chest.

A third way that this book manages to convey the experience of mental disorder is in its total egocentricity and the isolation represented by ego-centricity. Saying that a person suffering from mental illness is egocentric is not to criticize that person for being vain or selfish. It is simply to say that a deeply depressed person loses the capacity to think of anyone or anything else. This may explain why hypochondria often accompanies

depression. Styron explains this phenomenon quite deftly by explaining that it is part of "the psyche's apparatus of defense: unwilling to accept its own gathering deterioration, the mind announces to its indwelling consciousness that it is the body with its perhaps correctable defects—not the precious and irreplaceable mind—that is going haywire." Thus a depressed person's attention becomes consumed by the depressed person's mental and physical health. Each symptom elicits either paralyzing fear because it is a symptom of mental illness or joyous welcome— no matter how serious—because it is an identifiable symptom of a physical illness.

Another element of this work that suggests the self-centered nature and therefore isolating nature of depression is the way in which secondary figures in the book appear as no more than one-dimensional caricatures. This book was written as a memoir, after the fact of Styron's depressive episode. The reason none of the secondary people in the book achieve more than a cutout status is that Styron has no information about them on which to draw for his memoir. During his depression he was completely focused on himself. Thus Madame del Duca, who according to Styron plays a pivotal role in the story's pivotal scene, never becomes a three-dimensional figure. Rather she is as flat as the Queen of Hearts in Alice's Wonderland. Styron's wife, Rose, whom he clearly loves, never achieves more than a marginal status. She is a disembodied voice that encourages him on his road to recovery and never an identifiable individual. Dr. Gold (one has to wonder if his made-up name was the result of Styron's attempt to discredit him even more by tying him to the crazed alchemists) is a comic book figure. A casting director would wish to resurrect Groucho Marx complete with cigar to play the much-maligned psychiatrist. Styron was attended in the hospital by a Barbie doll art therapist and a Machiavellian group facilitator. The only human who emerges from this book as a complete character is Styron. Clearly he felt, during the worst periods of his depression, that no person in the world could provide relief from his torture. He was completely isolated in a dark world.

All this having been said about the way a certain degree of self-fixation is understandable in a depressed individual, Styron cannot be completely absolved of his egocentricity. Certainly he should be excused to a great extent because this is, after all, an autobiographical work. By definition a writer must be the hero in his or her autobiography. But here it must be reiterated that this is a memoir, written after Styron's worst depression. Styron's preoccupation with self that results from his condition often gives way to sheer egotism. This happens in much the same way it happens in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues in which an unsuspecting narrator reveals quite unintentionally undesirable aspects of his or her own personality. Frequently, Styron draws attention away from his subject, depressive disorder, and onto himself. For example, when he relates the story of a piece he wrote for the *New York Times* concerning suicidal impulse and the unfairness of reproving posthumously those who commit suicide, he makes a sophomoric mistake: "It had taken, I speculated, no particular originality or boldness on my part to speak out frankly about suicide and the impulse toward it...." Young writers learn early on that essays need not contain references to the self. Writers should state their opinions without announcing that they are their opinions. Readers can understand for themselves that the opinions expressed in the essay are, in fact, the opinions of the essay's author. To continually refer to the

self as in "I believe" or "It is my opinion" is to pull attention away from the thought and place it upon the thinker.

In addition to constant and unnecessary references to himself, Styron reveals a great deal of egotism concerning his own accomplishments. He says in one paragraph (in which he used the pronoun "I" more than fifteen times) that

throughout much of my life I have been compelled... to become an autodidact in medicine, and have accumulated a better-than-average amateur's knowledge about medical matters (to which many of my friends, surely unwisely, have often deferred) and so it came as an astonishment to me that I was close to a total ignoramus about depression.

As an isolated incident, a description of his own attainments in such straightforward terms would be seen as simple honesty. But once readers are subjected over and over to Styron's special attainments, whether they are literary awards, exceptional knowledge, or famous acquaintances, readers become impatient with Styron's constant waving of his own banner. His parenthetical mention that his friends may have deferred to his medical advice unwisely does not have the effect of downplaying his amateur medical knowledge or his intellectual attainment. It is a failed attempt to lower himself to the plain of the ordinary individual and it smacks of false modesty.

Despite this annoying egotism, *Darkness Visible* presents a fascinating vicarious journey through the spiraling depths of depression. Had Styron simply presented a case study of himself as a victim of uni-polar depression, the result would have been one more well meaning but ineffectual attempt to explain the vice grip of depression to those who have not been afflicted. What he ultimately produced was not a work of explanation but rather of inundation. Readers are enshrouded, much as victims of depression are, in the stark, lifeless existence of a person in the throes of a clinical depression. They are assaulted by the constant specter of Death in its most paradoxical form, suicide. Finally, they are aware of the isolation imposed upon the depressed person by his or her own mind□a mind that cannot feel beyond its own pain, see beyond its own suffering, or hope for freedom from its self-imposed prison.

Source: Karen D. Thompson, Critical Essay on *Darkness Visible,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review, Iannone questions Styron's depiction of depression as a disease over which sufferers have little control.

When an individual suffers the honors of Auschwitz, survives to write inspiringly about man's ability to endure in extreme circumstances, but years later takes his own life over what many would deem no more than the ordinary unhappiness of the human condition, the event seems bound to become at the very least a source of sorrowful wonder. Such was the death of the Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi in 1987, and such was the mixture of shock, dismay, disappointment, puzzlement, and confusion expressed by admiring writers and critics at a conference held some months after his suicide.

But the response of the American novelist William Styron was quite different. When he read a report in the New York *Times* on the Levi conference. Styron was offended to learn that the participants seemed to feel that

this man whom they had all so greatly admired, and who had endured so much at the hands of the Nazis□ a man of exemplary resilience and courage□had by his suicide demonstrated a frailty, a crumbling of character they were loath to accept. In the face of a terrible absolute□self-destruction□their reaction was helplessness and (the reader could not avoid it) a touch of shame.

Styron countered this "touch of shame" by writing an op-ed article for the *Times* setting out an argument that is further substantiated in his latest, very slim, book, in which he also tells of his own battle with severe depression and suicidal behavior. "The argument I put forth was fairly straightforward, " Styron now writes of his op-ed piece:

The pain of severe depression is quite unimaginable to those who have not suffered it, and it kills in many instances because its anguish can no longer be borne. The prevention of many suicides will continue to be hindered until there is a general awareness of the nature of this pain. Through the healing process of time□and through medical intervention or hospitalization in many cases□most people survive depression, which may be its only blessing; but to the tragic legion who are compelled to destroy themselves there should be no more reproof attached than to the victims of terminal cancer.

Styron has made something of an avocation out of promulgating this view of depression-as-disease, and he sees his new book, combined with lectures and television appearances, as an effort both to help others similarly troubled and to help change social attitudes. But of course the "disease model" is nothing new in today's discourse; in fact, it has become the major means of characterizing numerous problems, like drug addiction and alcoholism, that were once seen as lapses in character or morality. So far from being new revelations, such characterizations may be passing their prime of acceptance; facing Kitty Dukakis's recent tell-all *Now You Know,* even a New York *Times* reviewer could write with a trace of weary condescension that

"the sins and nasty habits of old are now labeled diseases ... beyond the control of [their] victims. The idea of taking the moral blame and responsibility for failings has become passé." On the other hand, the fact that Styron's book has rocketed to the very top of the bestseller list seems to indicate that the disease model is still very much alive and well.

Behind the disease model, and behind the reverse moral righteousness of its purveyors, is a presumption that this approach lessens suffering, helps effect cures more readily, and alleviates the burden of inner worthlessness borne by depressives and others with similar disorders. But is it really such a liberation to adopt this model? Is it truly more helpful? Styron's own book offers plenty of grounds for doubt.

Take, to begin with, the book's tone. Significantly, Styron says that at one time he attempted to write a novel about his ordeal, but "the work ended up feeling artificial, and I abandoned it." The reader of *Darkness Visible* can easily see why. A lot of the time, Styron sounds like a second-rate Poe or Coleridge as he attempts, sensationalistically, melodramatically, to conjure up the horrors he experienced: "Doubtless depression had hovered near me for years, waiting to swoop down. Now I was in the first stage□premonitory, like a flicker of sheet lightning barely perceived□of depression's black tempest." Or: "Then, after dinner, sitting in the living room, I experienced a curious inner convulsion that I can describe only as despair beyond despair." Although Styron regrets the "indescribability" of depression, he seems actually to be relying for effect on the awe and sympathy that can accompany "the basic inability of healthy people to imagine a form of torment so alien to everyday experience." As with the Dukakis book and other celebrity tell-alls, one begins to feel uncomfortably that by writing about the experience the author is satisfying the very craving for attention and pity that was part of the problem to begin with.

But what about the physical elements which to a great extent form the basis of the disease model? Styron reports: "It has been established with reasonable certainty" that depression "results from an aberrant biochemical process" in the brain, a complex chain reaction among neurotransmitters, chemicals, and hormones. But this does not stop him from pronouncing as well that "the disease of depression remains a great mystery," on that "strident factionalism .. . exists in present-day psychiatry□the schism between the believers in psychotherapy and the adherents of pharmacology." It has not stopped him from disbelieving in the efficacy of either psychiatric school in advanced cases. And it has not stopped him from conjecturing inconclusively about a host of other factors as possible components of his own trouble□from turning sixty, to childhood loss, to alcoholic withdrawal, to tranquilizer overdose, to dissatisfaction with his work.

No more, one might add, has it stopped the proliferation of theories about the etiology of depression in the medical profession, where heredity, temperament, childhood deprivations, and life experiences in addition to hormonal imbalance are all invoked a contributors to the disease. With such a combination of elements, it seems that we know everything and nothing. In other words, to say the cause is physical seems ultimately to be saying very little. Styron's own greatest hope lies in the passage of time

and "the passing of the storm.... Mysterious in its coming, mysterious in its going, the affliction runs its course, and one finds peace."

But the course of Styron's own emergence from depression and suicidal behavior makes us wonder, not only at this characterization of time as the main healer, but at his confident insistence that to understand and deal with depression, we must abandon the moral dimension. Two key scenes stand out in the drama of his recovery.

The columnist Art Buchwald was a close friend who kept in contact with Styron during his trouble. Among the ways Buchwald helped was in continually "admonishing me that suicide was unacceptable." Now, "unacceptable" may not be quite the equivalent of the "Everlasting" having "fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter" *(Hamlet),* but it's something. Thus, Styron's own resistance to suicide may have been strengthened by the very sort of moral consideration□however attenuated in the word "unacceptable"□he takes pains to decry in his book. Suppose Buchwald had counseled him□as Styron would have us all be counseled□ that, given the situation, suicide was entirely understandable?

At another moment, at the very crisis of his ordeal, actually on the verge of suicide, Styron hears the Brahms *Alto Rhapsody.* The sound "pierced my heart like a dagger," he writes in one of the book's few animated passages,

> and in a flood of swift recollection I thought of all the joys the house had known: the children who had rushed through its rooms, the festivals, the love and work, the honestly earned slumber, the voices and the nimble commotion, the perennial tribe of cats and dogs and birds.... All this I realized was more than I could ever abandon, even as what I had set out so deliberately to do was more than I could inflict on those memories, and upon those, so close to me, with whom the memories were bound. And just as powerfully I realized I could not commit this desecration on myself. I drew upon some last gleam of sanity to perceive the terrifying dimensions of the mortal predicament I had fallen into.

What was happening here? Did not this flow of thoughts and impressions bring Styron to a choice in favor of life over death? What, then, at this point, were all his neurotransmitters and chemicals and hormones up to? Did those merciless gods turn their heads at the fatal moment? Clearly what happened was that Styron's self-absorption was suddenly broken, permitting the entrance of healing thoughts, and, importantly, of concern for others. Similarly, Buchwald, himself a recovering depressive, had reported that helping Styron was "a continuing therapy for him," but from this Styron draws entirely the wrong lesson□that "the disease engenders lasting fellowship." What helped Buchwald was getting out of himself, feeling the blessedness of being useful to another. This release from self is the process at work in Tolstoy's Levin in *Anna Karenina,* who loses his morbid preoccupations when a peasant tells him that he must not live for himself but for God, or in a woman I know whose long depression was lifted when she heeded the admonition of an aunt to think of her children instead of herself.

Thinking in terms of choice, responsibility, or even "sin" is not a means of self-condemnation, which is after all another sin, but of liberation and redemption. Though

the idea of sinfulness seems to make people furious nowadays□we are supposed to be wonderful in all points□really sin is simply a way of describing the essential flawedness of human nature and the human condition, reparable by recourse to the transcendent, or by opening oneself to an order of experience larger than the self. Thousands of years ago the Psalmist sang of this experience, while also incidentally evincing an awareness of the very physical symptoms of depression Styron writes about:

... When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. / For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. /I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin ... / Many sorrows shall be to the wicked: but he that trusteth in the Lord, mercy shall compass him about. /Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart.

Another basis for the disease model□not invoked by Styron□may be Alcoholics Anonymous, but the AA program shows a deep understanding of the human character that much current discourse does not. It is true that AA calls alcoholism a disease□the term has been applied as well to the many other disorders, including depression, treated through the AA twelve-step program□but it does so mainly for the purposes of relieving the alcoholic of useless self-condemnation, of any tendency to blame others for his drinking, or of the temptation to spend fruitless energy searching for the cause. It is not meant to relieve him of responsibility for his plight. Once the "disease" has been acknowledged, the individual then embarks on a program of recovery in which he must"take his inventory," or, as it would have been called in another age, examine his conscience, a process that can be demanding enough to satisfy a puritan saint. The individual must also make amends for past behavior that has been hurtful to others. Behind all this is the notion that faulty moral and characterological habits do indeed lead to the confusions and messes that can make a person escape into drink or drugs or depression.

Another apparently neglected aspect of these programs is the requirement of anonymity. It may be thought that this requirement was originally designed to protect the alcoholic from the glare of a disapproving society, and that now, in our radically altered social climate, it is no longer necessary. But there is yet another important reason for anonymity, and that is the need for humility, something severely compromised when one draws widescale attention to one's problems. The celebrity revolving-door-clinic, book-tour, and media-appearance approach seems to show little awareness of these aspects of the twelve-step program, concentrating exclusively on the disease concept which, by itself, can be efficacious only to a limited point.

It is really quite amazing how Styron manages to protect himself from any awareness along these lines. To describe his depression he boldly uses the famous opening stanza of the *Inferno* ("In the middle of the j ourney of our life /I found myself in a dark wood, / For I had lost the right path") and closes his book with the hopeful closing line of that same canticle ("And so we came forth, and once again beheld the stars") while studiously managing to ignore completely what comes in between.

The "sullen," as they are called in John Ciardi's translation of the *Inferno,* are Dante's version of the depressive, and they float beneath the surface of a muddy ditch in one of the upper circles of hell, gurgling: "Sullen were we in the air made sweet by the Sun; / in the glory of his shining our hearts poured / a bitter smoke." At a much lower circle Dante comes upon the wood of the suicides. There he experiences deep compassion with the poignant plight of Pier delle Vigne, and is overcome by emotion (as often happens when he is more in sympathy with the sinner than with divine justice). But ultimately Dante will not revoke the moral law which represents his own salvation and the salva tion of all, and which he knows is intricately connected to the sufferings men endure and inflict. After *this* knowledge, there *is* forgiveness.

Before we heed the prophets who try to comfort us with assurances that our fate is entirely out of our hands, we should at least become aware of the alternatives.

Adaptations

Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* was made into a motion picture in 1982, starring Meryl Streep as the survivor of Nazi concentration camps and Kevin Kline as an American Jew obsessed with the Holocaust.

Styron has a bit part as an actor in the 1994 comedy *Naked in New York.*

Styron's daughter, Susanna Styron, directed the 1999 film *Shadrach,* adapted from one of her father's short stories. The film stars Andie MacDowell and Harvey Keitel and was released by Columbia Pictures.

Dick Cavett interviewed William Styron on PBS in 1979. The tape is available from the Public Broadcasting System.

Topics for Further Study

Styron suggests that the onset of his severe depression came after he stopped drinking alcohol. Research the links between alcoholism and depression and discuss the ways in which the former may contribute to the latter.

Write an essay exploring common psychological or physical diseases commonly associated with artists and writers.

After interviewing people afflicted with emotional illness, write a short essay comparing their pain to the pain of those afflicted with physical illness. Draw on your own experience or that of people you know, if possible.

Research the lives of Virginia Woolf, Randall Jarrell, and Vincent Van Gogh, then discuss what you see as the relationships between their emotional illnesses and their creative lives. In what ways do they influence each other?

Read one of Styron's novels such as Lie Down in Darkness or The Confessions of Nat Turner. Describe the tone of these novels. What, if any, connections can you make between Styron's depression and the novels themselves. Keep in mind that Styron wrote that a dark mood has accompanied him through most of his life.

What Do I Read Next?

The Stranger (1942), Albert Camus' classic existentialist novel, illustrates the terrors of human decision-making in a godless world. Styron names this book as a major influence on his own writing.

Marty Jezer's 1992 biography of 1960s' rebel and Styron's friend Abbie Hoffman, *Abbie Hoffman: American Rebel,* attempts to reconcile Hoffman's public persona with his personal life. Styron speculates that Hoffman's death was a suicide linked to mental illness.

Howard Kushner's 1991 study, *American Suicide: A Psychocultural Exploration,* explores the cultural fabric of American life and speculates on its relationship to the phenomenon of suicide in the United States.

Hermione Lee's exhaustive 1999 biography, *Virginia Woolf,* provides theories and accounts of Woolf s bouts with depression.

William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) chronicles the lives of a southern family and describes the events that culminate in the suicide of Peyton Loftis. This is Styron's first published novel.

Elizabeth Wurtzel's 1997 memoir, *Prozac Nation: Young and Depressed in America,* chronicles the life of a young and privileged woman suffering from depression who is treated with Prozac, an antidepressant.

Psychiatrist Peter Kramer's book *Listening to Prozac* (1997) explores the status of the antidepressant Prozac in America. Kramer examines the use of Prozac to "cure" personality problems as well as depression.

Further Study

Ross, Daniel William, ed., *The Critical Response to William Styron,* Greenwood, 1995.

This collection of criticism offers essays from the 1950s to 1995 on novels such as *Lie Down In Darkness, The Long March,* and *Darkness Visible.* The essays treat themes such as Styron's place in the literary canon and the influences on his work.

West, James L. W., *William Styron: A Life,* Random House, 1998.

In this definitive biography of Styron, West details the creative process behind each of Styron's novels. The attention to Styron's life outside of writing, however, is lacking.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

�classic� novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of �classic� novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members�educational professionals� helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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