

Sophie's Choice Study Guide

Sophie's Choice by William Styron

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Plot Summary

Sophie's Choice tells the story of three young friends who lived in Brooklyn in 1947. Stingo, the narrator, is a Southern boy, born and bred, who moved to New York with the ambition of becoming a writer. His stifling nine-to-five job at a publishing company kills his spirit and his hopes, and the young man quickly becomes jaded. Worst of all, he cannot write; he is blocked. All that changes when Stingo is fired and moves into a boarding house in a Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. There, he meets his fellow tenants, Nathan Landau and Sophie Zawistowski, a volatile but fascinating young couple. Thrilled to be in the company of people his age, Stingo begins to enjoy life again, and finds new inspiration for his writing. But Nathan's unpredictable temper quickly becomes a fly in the ointment. Nathan can be charming one moment and deadly the next. Both Stingo and Sophie deny that there is a problem with Nathan. After each one of his violent blow-outs, they both forgive him and resume their happy little trio. As Stingo, who is secretly in love with Sophie, is pulled further and further into this lover's triangle, he becomes Sophie's confidant when things are going badly with Nathan.

Stingo gets to know Sophie better, and she tells him about the time she spent at Auschwitz during the war. Sophie is Polish and eventually admits to Stingo that her family was extremely anti-Semitic, something she has tried to hide from Nathan. She hides a lot from Nathan, who needs little excuse to hit her. She does not tell him that after her husband was killed, she took a lover from the Polish Resistance - a man who stood for everything her Nazi-loving father hated. Nor does she tell him how she tried to seduce the SS Commandant at Auschwitz in order to save her little boy's life. Sophie hates herself and speaks frequently of suicide. Stingo cannot understand why, since he does not judge her for the horrible choices she had to make at Auschwitz. But Sophie has not revealed all her dark secrets yet.

Meanwhile, Nathan is rapidly losing control. What Stingo first thought was just a bad temper, he later learns from Nathan's brother, is actually a severe mental problem, and in fact, most of what Nathan has told Stingo are lies. Nathan pretends to be a research scientist, although he really just has a low-paying, clerical job in a lab, which his brother had to pull strings to get for him. Whenever Nathan's paranoia and jealousy sets him off on a violent rage, he gets high on amphetamines and ebulliently announces a great new scientific breakthrough. These grand announcements usually spell trouble for Stingo and Sophie, because they are lies Nathan tells with the intention of putting his friends off-balance emotionally so that his rage, when it hits, comes as a surprise.

While Nathan continues his downward spiral into homicidal and suicidal rage, Sophie and Stingo cling desperately to their shared friendship. They both care deeply about Nathan, and on his good days, he is a warm, generous, and magnificently entertaining man. Sophie's suicidal tendencies grow greater as Nathan's temper degenerates, and Stingo lives in constant fear of losing one, or both, of his friends. When Nathan is calm, the friendship remains vibrant, fun, and alive. The three of them enjoy music together, and Nathan gives Stingo enthusiastically supportive advice about his novel-in-progress. Whenever Nathan gets tough with Stingo, Stingo tolerates it because he respects



Nathan's opinion, even when Nathan is calling him a Southern racist. Stingo, like Sophie, comes from a racist family, and is struggling with the demons of slavery's legacy.

At the same time Nathan's temper finally rounds the bend to complete insanity, Sophie feels her death is near, and makes what amounts to a death-bed confession to Stingo. She reveals that on the day she arrived at Auschwitz, the SS officer made her choose which one of her two children would live. She gave up her daughter to the gas chambers, and that is why she feels she does not deserve to live. By now, Nathan has threatened both Stingo and Sophie's lives with a gun, and Stingo flees with his beloved Sophie, intending to return to the South and marry her. His dreams seem fulfilled in their hotel room that night, when Sophie makes passionate love to him. When he awakes, she has gone back to Nathan, a choice that ensures her death. By the time Stingo returns to Brooklyn, he finds them together, dead, in the room they shared. This novel is Stingo's attempt to increase human awareness of tragedy by sharing his story of friendship-gone-bad and love undone.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Chapter 1 discusses the events surrounding Stingo's move from Manhattan to Brooklyn. Stingo is our narrator, who introduces himself to us first as a twenty-two year old Southerner who has moved to New York and is "struggling to become some kind of writer." (pg. 3) The nickname "Stingo" evolved from "Stinky," which is what the kids called him at prep school in Virginia. No one calls him Stingo anymore, but it was the name by which he was known in the late spring of 1947, when the events of this narration begin.

As a young, aspiring writer who left the South to make it big in New York, Stingo was initially thrilled to be working for the publishing firm of McGraw-Hill & Company. His job was to review manuscripts submitted by other aspiring authors. But Stingo found himself hating his nine-to-five job, and wrote scathing reviews of every manuscript submitted to him. He shares examples with the reader of the reports he handed in to his editor, all of which put down the hopeful authors with an almost maniacal glee. Stingo tells us he got away with this because his senior editor, Farrell, was as disillusioned with McGraw-Hill as young Stingo. Stingo not only hates his low-paying job, but also his tiny, cheap, cubby-hole of an apartment in the Village. He describes his unsuccessful efforts to write, alone at night, in that cramped space.

Stingo has the strong sexual and social drive of a twenty-two year old man, but knows no one in the city, and is reduced to peeping out his tiny window at an upscale home across the way. He seeks inspiration and satisfies his lust by relentlessly fantasizing about the woman who lives in that home. One day she looks up towards his cheap tenement building, and Stingo, in a flash, realizes that his peeping has crossed a line into sheer creepiness; he never again looks down into her garden, and soon enough, events conspire to move him out of that hated apartment.

A new editor-in-chief has been hired at McGraw-Hill, whom Stingo calls the Weasel. The Weasel wants Stingo to conform to office standards, like wearing a hat and reading only what the company considers suitable newspapers. Stingo refuses to conform. He did not have the courage to quit on the spot, but instead he stops performing any actual work, and begins reading more radical newspapers.

As a last straw, Stingo lets himself get caught releasing balloons on the roof. It was a creative way to get fired, and the Weasel does fire him. Stingo is happy to be fired, but worried about money. While he packs his personal items from his desk, Farrell assures him he has had "a narrow escape... People have been known to drown in this place. And they never even find their bodies." Stingo realizes Farrell's been doing some drowning himself when Farrell pulls out a bottle and offers Stingo a toot. Farrell is sad to lose him and tells Stingo that he reminds him of his son who died in the war. If he had lived, he would have been a writer, and Farrell imagines he would be a lot like Stingo.



Farrell tells him to write his guts out and pursue his dream. Stingo lingers in his office, both saddened and encouraged by Farrell's story. When he finally leaves, he treats himself to his first steak dinner since moving to New York.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this chapter we meet the narrator and main character, Stingo. We learn of the events that take place prior to and leading up to the story he is about to tell us, and we learn of his burning desire to become a writer. Farrell's character presents us with a mature man of the world, a contrast to Stingo's character, who has yet to find his way through life. Farrell represents what Stingo might become if he stays at McGraw-Hill: a hopelessly jaded man whose misery and loneliness drive him to the bottle. For Farrell, Stingo represents what his son might have become had he survived the war. Farrell encourages Stingo to strike out on his own and pursue his dreams, lest he become a sad, old man like Farrell. The interplay between these characters heightens the author's theme of 'Coming of Age,' established by the narrator, who is looking back on pivotal events from his youth.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Minus the cost of his steak dinner, Stingo's total fortune is just under fifty dollars. Even in 1947, this was not a reassuring nest egg, and Stingo's job prospects are non-existent. But fortune smiles; within a couple of days, Stingo receives a letter from his father containing \$500. A bit of a story-teller himself, Pop's letter recounts the family history behind the \$500, which is not a loan or a gift, but an inheritance. Stingo's grandmother had owned slaves, two female children whom she claimed to love dearly. Apparently the girls had a brother named Artiste, who was never discussed by the family due to circumstances. Artiste had been accused of sexually assaulting a white girl, and the community was at the point of lynching him, so Stingo's family sold the boy to get him out of town. He was purchased for slave labor in some turpentine forests in Georgia, a hard life and probably a death sentence for the boy. When the accusations later proved false, it was too late to recover the child, and Grandma hid the money they made by selling him in a secret cubby in the basement. Stingo's grandmother willed that money in equal portions to her twelve grandchildren, but after she died no one in the family knew where to look for it. Stingo's father reports in his letter that he had recently found some old family correspondence that tells about the money and the secret basement hiding place. Pop is pleased to support Stingo's writing ambitions by giving him his share. Despite the guilt he feels over where the money came from, the money is a godsend, and Stingo decides to keep it.

Now in 1947, \$500 was enough, Stingo figured, to last him through the summer and maybe even into the fall. He gratefully ditches his apartment in the Village and moves into Yetta Zimmerman's boarding house in Brooklyn. Despite the glaring pink paint, which covers both the exterior and interior of the house, Stingo chooses the boardinghouse because it is affordable, has a lovely park view, and Mrs. Zimmerman has - for those days - a pretty open policy, allowing both her male and female boarders to have dates over and even spend the night.

His first morning in his new, airy, sunlit home, Stingo goes out to buy writing supplies. Back in his new apartment, he blankly stares at a yellow legal pad, unable to write a word. For inspiration, he peruses his small but much loved book collection, which includes Roget's *Thesaurus*, *Complete Greek Drama*, and the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. When that fails him, he resorts to examining the contents of his medicine cabinet, which, among more banal items, contains a hopeful, unopened box of Trojan condoms. Having killed only five minutes doing that, he stares out his window and wonders what he is doing so far from home, in the kingdom of the Jews, as he thinks of New York.

With nothing else to do, he wanders around the boarding house, jots down the names of his fellow tenants, male and female. He returns to his bedroom, already creating lustful fantasy images of the female tenants, when he suddenly hears through the ceiling, the



unmistakable sounds of sex in the apartment above him. The narrator uses a writer's colorful vocabulary to describe the gymnastic-like congress so athletic and urgent as to rattle the chandelier and send a fine rain of dust from the ceiling tiles onto Stingo's bed. The encounter is so lengthy, and Stingo so frustrated, that he has to leave the room to take an alka-seltzer. When he returns, he no longer hears lovemaking, but a heated argument, taking place in the room above him. He hears a man's dominant yells, and feminine, submissive murmurs, followed by angry footsteps walking away; finally the lonely sound of a woman sobbing.

When the noise subsides, he realizes he is hungry, and decides to order lunch in a nearby kosher restaurant. As a Southern man, he is curious about Jewish cuisine, and reflects that Southerners tend to feel warmly towards Jews, since they have another minority whom they prefer to put down. Returning from lunch, he meets his neighbor, who doubles as the boarding house janitor, Morris Fink; he hands Stingo mail from his father. Morris' tone is abrupt and curt, as New Yorkers are said to be when compared to Southern standards of hospitality. Stingo is furious, taking Morris' tone personally, but as Morris begins to talk to him, Stingo realizes he had overreacted. Morris informs him that he used to live in Stingo's room, but had to move out, because of the disturbingly loud sexual activity in the apartment above. Morris advises Stingo to ask them to move their bed so it is not right over his, and Stingo says he would not even know who to ask, even if he could ever actually bring up such a delicate subject. Morris tells him the athletic couple is Nathan Landau and Sophie Z., two of the tenants. Stingo is sorry to hear that Sophie is the only good-looking one of all the women tenants.

Stingo opens his dad's letter only to learn that the girl he'd been hopelessly in love with back home when he was fifteen had just died, by suicide, at the age of twenty-two. Maria Hunt, it turns out, had lived right around the corner from Stingo's previous apartment in Greenwich Village. Stingo broods about her tragic loss, and we see his young mind engaged in the contemplation of the more complex aspects of life. The narrator reveals his idealism and concern, as well as a certain despair, while he reflects on everything from the heartlessness of New York, which allowed him to live so near Maria and never know it -to his deep regret over never once having taken any sexual liberties with his beloved Maria, and now having lost the opportunity to ever do so. He broods about whether he could have saved her somehow, and that night in his dreams, he has vivid, lustful fantasies about what might have been. He wakes from his dream to the sound of wild lovemaking from the apartment above and curses Nathan and Sophie. Unaccustomed to such vivid dreams, the next morning he recalls the only other dream which stayed with him so memorably: a dream of his mother's cancer ravaged face staring up at him from her coffin. Stingo wonders if he has made a huge mistake coming to Brooklyn. However, the older narrator realizes that even then he must have known that Maria's death had sparked his dormant inspiration.

Later that day, he returns to the house and is caught in the hallway by a scene between Sophie and Nathan. It is the first time he has seen them in the flesh, and he falls instantly in love with the beautiful Sophie. Nathan is screaming in the hallway for all to hear that she is a liar and a whore for sleeping with that chiropractor. Stingo describes Nathan's face, which would be handsome if not twisted into an evil leer, and his large



build, which terrifies the cringing Sophie. She begs him not to go, and he threatens to have her deported back to Poland. He stalks off down the hallway and stops to greet Stingo. Nathan begins cordially, but then starts to rant about the South and insult Stingo. Before Stingo can form a proper reply, Nathan is gone. Sophie cries on Stingo's shoulder and assures him Nathan is the only man she has ever slept with besides her late husband. Stingo is already planning to move in where Nathan left off when he feels Nathan's icy stare on his back. Nathan tells Sophie to pack up his records and leave them in his room where he will pick them up when he comes back for the rest of his things. After he leaves again, Stingo tells Sophie she is better off without him. But Sophie will not hear of it, defending Nathan, and she tells Stingo that, except for the accusations of infidelity, she deserves all the bad things Nathan says about her. She admits to having stolen restaurant menus for her collection and that Nathan is right to call her a no-good thief. Sophie apologizes for troubling him with her problems. Stingo reassures her that she is not troubling him, and then watches her sexy behind sway under her skirt when she returns to her room. Stingo stays up late that night; he sees Sophie take a box of records to Nathan's room. He finally allows himself to sleep only after he can no longer hear her crying in her room.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Maria Hunt's death is a forewarning to the reader, and to Stingo, of Sophie's ultimate demise. Additionally, the narrator lets us know that her death has unleashed Stingo's dormant writing abilities, and that, tragic as it may be, this inspiration has given his future hope again, of living, of writing, and of finding himself. Meeting the tragically doomed Sophie on this very day, the reader must wonder if it is Sophie that attracts Stingo's interest, or merely the tragic circumstances in which she finds herself. In any case, his passion for life has again been engaged, and that passion is directed both at his writing and at his sexy new neighbor Sophie. Stingo worries about Sophie, but we do not worry about him; this chapter has already established him in the role of observer. Whatever destiny may overtake Sophie, Stingo himself will most likely remain as safely detached as he was from the events leading up to Maria's suicide.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Given the events of the previous night, Stingo is shocked to hear the cheery voices of Nathan and Sophie calling for him to get out of bed and join them on an outing to Coney Island. Nathan mimics a Southern accent with eerie but insulting accuracy, adding several references to Southern racism, until Stingo's heard enough. He opens his door just long enough to tell Nathan to get out, and then tries to slam the door in his face, but Nathan wedges his foot in the crack. Nathan says he wants to be pals. Stingo gets so worked up while insisting he *does not* want to be pals that he sends himself into spasms with an attack of smoker's cough. Nathan, still with his foot in the door, tells Stingo smoking causes cancer and is bad for the heart - in 1947, this information was not widely known, and Stingo is furious with Nathan for telling him what to do. Nathan tones down his attitude and repeats his invitation more sincerely; Sophie joins in until Stingo finally accepts their invitation, but only after insisting Nathan apologize for his remarks about Southerners.

While Stingo shaves and dresses, he reflects on the puzzling turn of events and also checks to make sure his inheritance is still stashed in the medicine cabinet where he left it. Stingo wonders whether Nathan and Sophie are crazy but realizes they have set fire to his imagination, and he finds himself looking forward to the day. He runs into Morris Fink in the hallway just as church bells ring. Stingo is surprised because it is Sunday, and he thought he lived in a strictly Jewish neighborhood. Morris tells him they have "'Jewish, Irish, Italian, Dutch Reformed, and boogies... Boy, do I hate those boogies! Apes!'" (pg. 59) Stingo is saved from having to respond to Morris' racism by the sounds of Handel's *Water Music* echoing down from Sophie's room. Morris tells him he saw the whole scene when Nathan came back early this morning. Sophie, crying, wanders into Nathan's room and curls up on the floor in the fetal position, waiting for Nathan. When Nathan enters he calls her a whore and tells her he is going to kick her ass if she does not get out. She does not move, and Nathan bends down and begins roughly slapping the prone girl. Stingo feels sick; he asks Morris why he did not do anything. Morris admits to being a coward, and says his five-foot, five-inches is no match for Nathan's large physique. Instead, Morris had intended to go downstairs to call the police, but by the time he put his robe and slippers on, the scene in the room had changed. Nathan was now lying on the floor with his head in Sophie's lap crying and begging her forgiveness.

Unsettled by this information, Stingo makes his way upstairs, planning to tell the strange couple that he will not be going to Coney Island after all. When he gets to Sophie's prettily decorated room, it is empty. Suddenly Sophie and Nathan emerge from behind a screen, dressed in matching early 1930's stylish outfits. Stingo is so struck with their enchanting sense of fun that he accepts the beer Nathan offers and settles into their company. Nathan and Sophie outrageously flirt with each other, sometimes forgetting he is in the room, and when Nathan calls her a *shiksa*, Stingo is surprised to realize she is



not Jewish. He thought he was the only person in the boarding house who was not. Nathan tells him that, when he met Sophie, she weighed eighty-five pounds due to her recent imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp, but thanks to his tender loving care she now weighed one hundred ten, and was nearly back to good health. Nathan admits that his master's degree in cellular and developmental biology helped him come to the proper conclusion that Sophie was suffering from iron deficiency. Nathan had taken her to his brother, a doctor, who confirmed the diagnosis and arranged treatment.

With the Budweiser flowing freely, Stingo finds he is elated to be in the company of other young people for the first time since he left home. He notices how Nathan frequently corrects Sophie's English and is amused by some of the awkward phrases that come out of her mouth, which she clearly learned from Nathan. Beneath Stingo's good mood, however, he senses the continual tension between the lovers. Suddenly, Nathan acts restless and begins mercilessly insulting Stingo about his Southern roots. Stingo is infuriated; having accepted their invitation on the condition that Nathan apologize for his previous remarks against Southerners, Stingo now feels as though Nathan lured him in with the pretense of friendship, only to bait him for another attack.

Nathan is a good debater and traps him into an argument about Bobby Weed, a black boy recently lynched by a white Southern mob. Nathan compares the fate of Bobby Weed at the hands of these Southerners to the fate of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. Nathan insists that Stingo face the awful truth about himself and his people. Stingo does not know how to argue against this; he hates what happened to Bobby Weed, but Nathan will not accept Stingo's argument that he is not personally responsible for it. Nathan likens him to a German citizen who did not join the Nazi party but stood by while the Jews were persecuted by his fellow countrymen. Stingo had read about Bobby Weed only a week before, and had been sickened by the paper's description of unthinkable cruelties perpetrated against the young man. Stingo gets so twisted up that he winds up defending the Germans by saying no people, including Germans, should be condemned as a group. He realizes as the words fly out of his mouth that what he has said is considered unpardonable in post World War II America with news of the German atrocities against Jews and Gypsies revealed in greater detail with each passing week.

Sophie swoops in, defends Stingo, and reminds Nathan he does not know anything firsthand about concentration camps. Miraculously, she jollies Nathan out of his mood. He offers a hearty apology to Stingo and promises, with Sophie as witness, that he will never attack Stingo about the South again. The group's spirits soar once again as they head out, gaily costumed, into the sunny day. Nathan keeps them in stitches as they walk with his actor-like talent at mimicry. Stingo marvels at his gift for entertainment, even though he notices some quiet desperation, which underlies Nathan's humor. The older Stingo, the narrator, says Nathan's type of genius is something he "would wait another twenty years to witness, in the incandescent figuration of Lenny Bruce." (pg. 75)

They get acquainted on the subway, and Nathan is delighted to learn Stingo is a writer. Sophie echoes Nathan's belief that they will all become the best of friends. Stingo hides his dislike of the 'friend' label, because he is madly in love with Sophie, or at least his



hormones are. He consoles himself with the thought of Leslie, a 'hot dish' Nathan has promised to fix him up with at Coney Island. During the rest of the ride, he dozes off into visions of Nathan and Sophie having sex on her apricot bedspread. While he recalls the sound effects from the previous night, he suddenly remembers, in a moment of clarity, something Nathan had said to Sophie during their huge blowout. Nathan had cried out in an agonized boom, "'Don't...you...see...Sophie...we...are...dying! *Dying!*'" Stingo sits up with a start, feeling a desperate urge to flee the situation. If he had left then, says the narrator, there would be no story to tell at all. He proceeds to Coney Island and into his new friendship with Nathan and Sophie.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Stingo is drawn into a friendship with the abusive Nathan in much the same manner that a woman is drawn into an abusive relationship. He is bowled over by Nathan's incandescent charm, and, as so many women throughout the world have done, he squelches his misgivings, because he craves a friendship with this fascinating man. Placing the narrator into the abusive relationship along with Sophie allows the author to give a voice to an abused woman. Stingo's reactions to Nathan's attack mirror Sophie's reactions from the previous night; he feels beaten, because Nathan convinces him that he is a terrible person. Nathan's character demonstrates classic signs of the abusive pattern using judgment and condemnation to mentally whip and control those closest to him. Sophie seems to sense that Stingo will be more sympathetic to her, and, through him, she will come to find a voice for the fear and self-doubt Nathan uses to exploit her.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Sophie relates the story of her upbringing to Stingo. With her colorful English, she paints a picture of domestic bliss and harmony in her parents' home before the war. She tells him how she loved the house in which she grew up, and continued to live in after her marriage. Her parents were both professors at the university in Cracow, and she tells of a lovely life spent studying, listening to music, and enjoying the countryside on weekends. She married Casimir, a professor and admirer of her father's, and Sophie planned to study to become a music teacher. Deeply in love with her husband, she thought her sheltered life would go on forever.

Everything changed in September 1939, when the German soldiers entered Cracow. For weeks, the tension built. Sophie, or Zosia as she was called in Polish, was raised strictly Catholic, and one day during Mass, she had a horrible premonition in her gut. She ran into the street and followed the crowd to the university where her father and Casimir taught. By the time she arrived at the university, the Nazis had spirited away all the academics to concentration camps. She was never to see them again. She later learned her father and husband were gunned down on New Year's Day in Sachsenhausen. Sophie says, shortly thereafter, they moved to Warsaw, and then her narration skips the years she spent in a concentration camp and jumps right to 1945, when, after being liberated from the camps, she was sent to a displaced persons' center in Sweden. Here she tried to kill herself but was befriended by a Jewish woman who had miraculously survived the same camp as Sophie. She began teaching English to Sophie in preparation for her move to America. The woman was very religious and prayed often at the synagogue. Sophie did not understand how she could still believe in God after what she had suffered. Sophie told the woman that God had turned his face from her by allowing her to suffer under a horrible burden of guilt. Sophie explains her guilt to Stingo as resulting from an argument she had with her beloved husband, just before he was taken away. She says the guilt stems from never having a chance to make up with him.

Now, in the summer of 1947, Sophie works as a part-time receptionist in the chiropractic offices of Dr. Hyman Blackstock - his last name long ago Americanized from Bialystok when he emigrated from Poland. His patients included other, older immigrants and more recently arrived Jewish refugees. Sophie was able to improve her command of both Yiddish and English in no time and was soon chatting with the patients easily. She worked three days per week and spent her free time taking free English classes at Brooklyn College. Sophie freely indulges her love of music and food in America and has recovered a joy of living, which competes with the guilt and poor health that still plagues her. She spends a lot of time alone and reads voraciously. Recently, she is able to dispense with the German translations and read directly from the English. So recently released from the horror of the camps, Sophie cautiously eases herself into a rebirth.



An incident on the subway one day knocked her off the precarious perch of health and happiness. The lights went out during the train ride, and, while plunged in darkness, Sophie was sexually assaulted by an unknown male hand. This outrage, on top of all her previous pain and suffering, which she had been working so hard to overcome, knocked her physically and emotionally flat. Telling no one of the assault, she took several days off work while she contemplated suicide and listened to Mozart. The beauty of the music helped bring her back to life, and she decided to face her situation. Dr. Blackstock, whom she regarded as a father figure, was the only person in this new country in whom she could confide. Stingo explains in the narrative how difficult it was for Sophie to tell even Dr. Blackstock the truth about this very personal trauma and also gives us the first indication that some of what Sophie has just told him about her past in Poland would later turn out to be lies. Fortunately, Dr. Blackstock was sympathetic and diagnosed her physical ailments as caused by the trauma of the experience compounding her previous traumas. He offers free chiropractic services, which to her horror, actually make her health worse. Sophie cannot bring herself to tell him his treatments are not working and that she wants to see a regular doctor, but the situation resolves the day she meets Nathan.

It was her day off from work, and she had gone to the library to find a volume of poetry by Emily Dickinson, whom she mistakenly thought was a man named Emil Dickens. The man at the desk, who reminds her, somehow, of the Nazis from the camp, loudly berates her for her stupidity in front of everyone. Sophie faints in the middle of this verbal abuse, and awakens a short time later with Nathan bending over her. Nathan gives the mean man a tongue-lashing and tells Sophie to "lie still and let the doctor take care of everything" while he feels her pulse and gives her water to sip from a paper cup. Understandably, Sophie believes him to be an actual medical doctor.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter gives us Sophie's first version of her life before the war. A sympathetic portrait of Sophie is painted, first in her own words, and then later in the chapter, Stingo takes up the story. His retelling is faithful to what Sophie told him, but the narrator breaks into the story with an ominous note when he informs us that Sophie has already told him, several lies, though we will not discover what she lied about until later. With this cryptic remark about Sophie lying, the author is deliberately creating doubt in the reader's mind as to whether Nathan is really such a bad guy, or maybe Sophie is a lying 'slut' as Nathan called her during their argument. At no other point in the narration of this chapter does Stingo interrupt the story with any comments; therefore this interruption stands out in the reader's mind. He chooses to interrupt the story to call Sophie a liar at the first mention of Dr. Blackstone, the chiropractor with whom Nathan had earlier accused Sophie of sexual relations. Since we later learn that Sophie's lies actually have nothing to do with Blackstone, it is merely the narrator's intention to cast doubt in our minds as to Sophie's fidelity, in order to heighten the tension in the story.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

A few weeks later, Stingo receives another letter from his father, again on the subject of death and inheritance. Frank Hobbs had dropped dead in the shipyards at the age of sixty. Despite the fact that his politics were extremely right wing, Hobbs had been a dear friend of Stingo's father's, and the will he left behind gave his farm to Stingo's dad, with the hope that he not sell it, but live there as a gentleman farmer and enjoy the property. Stingo's dad does not want to leave his job at the shipyard and offers the farm to Stingo. His dad tells him there are two Negro farmhands who have the place well in hand, and Stingo could spend most of his time writing, overseeing the farm, and living off the comfortable income it would afford. As a final inducement, his father writes Stingo that the farm is located close to the historic Virginia plantation where Nat Turner led a slave uprising. Stingo's dad knows this will be tempting to his son, who has expressed a fascinated interest in the history of Nat Turner ever since he was a boy.

Stingo is indeed tempted. Had the letter arrived a few weeks before, surely he would have jumped at his father's offer. However, three things had changed his mind about staying in New York: 1) he was writing again, his inspiration had returned; 2) he had met Sophie and Nathan; and 3), uppermost on his mind, he believed he had landed himself a steady sex partner. First Stingo explains his inspiration. He admits to possessing a 'tragic sense' as a writer, and, once the shock of Maria Hunt's death had worn off, Stingo had become inspired by her tragic story. He has already created a cast of characters in his head to populate his new novel, which opens with a dead girl being disinterred from her pauper's grave so that her remains can be shipped back to the troubled home, which she had so permanently left behind. Stingo is caught up in the joy every writer feels when inspiration strikes. The narrator, the older Stingo, fondly reflects on the idealistic days when he had written this first novel.

Next, he reflects on his second reason for staying in Brooklyn, the security he had found in his friendship with Sophie and Nathan, having been starved for so long of any company at all. Stingo would write all day, and by nighttime, feel he had earned a few beers at the local bar with Nathan and Sophie. Also, the couple had moved their sexual trysts into Nathan's room, so Stingo was no longer tortured by the sound of the woman he lusted after having sex with his friend. Stingo managed to hide his desperate crush on Sophie for the first few weeks, and even jealous Nathan saw Stingo as a guardian to whom he could entrust Sophie during his absence. Nathan now looks and acts like a successful biologist and bears no resemblance to the mean ogre Stingo first encountered in the hallway. Subtle signs manifest in Stingo's memory, however. One day, Nathan tells Stingo he admires his courage for writing about the South, and proceeds to wow Stingo with his literary knowledge while convincing Stingo that Southern writing is a dead tradition. Stingo overlooks this meanness, partly because Nathan follows up the remark with extreme generosity, which was also characteristic of him: he offers Stingo unlimited access to his records and his phonograph, which, in



1947, were luxury items most people could not afford. Stingo swallows his misgivings about Nathan, and with a clear conscience and Nathan's blessing, invites Sophie to have lunch with him in the park.

Stingo sits at his desk to write until lunchtime, but his third reason for staying will not let him concentrate. He has a date, that very night, with Leslie Lapidus, with whom Nathan had set him up a week ago at Coney Island. Stingo tells us that last week at Coney Island, Leslie had practically guaranteed him sex on tonight's date. Stingo claims he has in his limited experience, never before been faced with the prospect of guaranteed sex. He praises her sexual liberation and contrasts it with "the nasty little Protestants who had so tortured me in the back seats of a score of cars." (pg. 123) Stingo launches into a monologue about sexual restrictions in the 40s, and how unbearable it was that women's bodies were more on display than ever before, but they still would not put out. This sexual tension, he advises us, forced him, and every other young man of his generation, to go to a prostitute, but, he assures us, usually only once. He further assures us that although he had sex with a prostitute, it did not actually count as sex, because he was too drunk to have an orgasm, and besides, the prostitute had been old, ugly, and mean-spirited.

Besides the prostitute, Stingo had been unable to score with any of the girls back home. Also, since he never heard the girls back home speak of sexual topics, he was stunned by the frank sexual discussions he hears on the beach at Coney Island. He, Leslie, Sophie and Nathan hung out with Nathan's lifeguard friend, Morty Haber, and an intellectual group of recent Brooklyn College graduates, who spoke freely about books like *The Function of an Orgasm* and their analysts' advice about sex. Stingo, the narrator, has kept excerpts from his journal about Leslie using many crude, sexual phrases in her conversation that night, which he presents as proof of her sexual intentions towards him. Her strongly suggestive conversation has kept him on pins and needles all week, waiting for this Thursday night date. Too turned on to write, he thinks of Sophie upstairs and heads for her room. The door is ajar and he enters without knocking. She stands in front of a mirror, back to him, combing her lustrous blonde hair. Stingo stands for a long moment and stares, forcing himself to squelch his desire to sneak up behind her and grab her breasts. Belatedly realizing he is violating her privacy, he coughs to get her attention. She turns and he sees the face of a hag. She covers her mouth, runs into the bathroom, and puts in her false teeth. She emerges her beautiful self, and with a smile tells him it is time for lunch. Together they set off toward the park.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Later in the book we will learn that one of Sophie's lies, which Stingo alluded to in the previous chapter, was that Nathan had been her only lover besides her late husband. Sophie had actually taken another lover in Poland after her husband's death. In the previous chapter, Stingo calls Sophie a liar for making such an omission. This chapter makes an interesting counterpoint, because Stingo tells a similar lie, but does not see it as a lie at all. Stingo tells us in detail about his sexual liaison with a prostitute, while claiming it did not count as sex. This lie becomes elaborated later in the story when

Stingo tells Sophie that he is a virgin. Yet, at no time in the story does the narrator refer to himself as a liar, only Sophie. These subtle contradictions in Stingo's point of view are one way the author explores his themes. As the odd man out in the Nathan and Sophie trio, Stingo is able to observe their relationship, but his observations are colored by his own view of the world. His laid back, Southern, 'boys will be boys' attitude is more normal than Nathan's abusive attitude, but we do see times when their viewpoints about women seem to merge.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Stingo explains that Sophie's superb dentures were procured with the help of Nathan's brother, Dr. Larry Landau, a urological surgeon in Forest Hills, New York. In the park, over lunch, Sophie finishes telling him the story of how she and Nathan met. In the cab, after leaving the library where Sophie had fainted, Nathan continues to refer to himself as a doctor. So when they arrived at Yetta's boarding house, Sophie unquestioningly allows Nathan to undress her and put her to bed. He reassures her and she feels so safe in his care that she dozes. When she awakes, he is gone, and she describes for Stingo the agony she was in waiting for him to come back. She and Stingo feed the swans in the park as they talk; Sophie has grown particularly attached to an ugly duckling she names Tadeusz in honor of her cousin from Lodz, who died at age thirteen from leukemia. Stingo asks her if it was love at first sight with Nathan. Sophie does not believe it was quite love, but admits to feeling bottomless relief when Nathan returned to her room that afternoon, half an hour after she awoke.

Back in her room, Nathan gives her some soup and tells her he bets her problem is simple iron deficiency. Feeling soothed by the broth, she turns on the radio to hear a familiar symphony, and finds herself crying when the music ends. Nathan asks her why she cries, and she tells him she remembers hearing it in Warsaw just before going...she trails off, unable to finish. Before going where, he wants to know, glancing pointedly at the concentration camp tattoo on her wrist. She tells him she cannot talk about it, and he apologizes for poking his big nose in where it does not belong. He leaves, promising to come back that night with a grocery bag full of iron-laden food. He returns, as promised, and cooks for her in her room. He gives her wine, which reminds Sophie of all the pleasures of home. She thanks him in her halting English, and he corrects her grammar. Over dinner dishes he asks what she does, and she tells him she works as a doctor's receptionist. When Nathan learns Dr. Blackstock is a chiropractor, he criticizes Sophie's choice of job. She tells him of her dream to be a music teacher, thwarted by the war. He has figured out that she is not Jewish, and insists he must know more about her experiences, especially in the concentration camp. Sophie decides to give him a very rough outline, hoping to forestall an in depth discussion.

She tells him that in April 1943 she was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in the south of Poland. She had been living in Warsaw for three years, since being forced to flee Cracow. With two years left in the war, Sophie gets caught smuggling a ham home to her sick mother. After a stint in a Gestapo prison, she was transported by train to Auschwitz. She haltingly tells him of the sorting line at her destination which sent people either to the Birkenau side for immediate extermination, or to the Auschwitz side to slave labor. Due to her knowledge of both Russian and German languages, she was able to obtain, for a time, a more favored position than other prisoners. But her good fortune did not last, and in the end she starved and became ill with the other prisoners. She believes if she had been liberated even one day later, she would not have survived.



She recalls now that an American Red Cross doctor had warned her to watch out for signs of anemia. Finally, Nathan tells her she needs to sleep. He watches over her until she drifts off to sleep.

Stingo follows this narrative with an observation that, once again, Sophie had not been straightforward in her account. He wonders why she left out important details when talking to Nathan, but realizes that she suffers from an overwhelming sense of guilt which will not allow her to discuss such things with Nathan, whom she loves so desperately. Gentle Stingo, it seems, has begun to fill the role of priestly confessor for Sophie, who needs to unburden herself of some of her terrible secrets. Stingo refers briefly to her experience with the SS Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Franz Höss. Stingo remarks, almost casually, that if Nathan were to find out about that, he might think Sophie was crazy, or he might even kill her. Stingo describes for us Höss' background in an attempt to understand and explain the nature of evil. He notes that Höss' father had wanted him to be a seminarian, but instead he joined the military and became an early believer in Hitler's Nazi party. He committed his first murder at a young age, and became a farmer after being released from prison. Höss married and had five children. One day he ran into his old army friend, Heinrich Himmler, who offered Höss the comfortable life of an SS officer. Höss jumped at the chance and went on to serve as Commandant of several concentration camps, including Dachau, prior to his tenure at Auschwitz, where he encountered Sophie.

One day on the subway, Sophie saw Höss' picture in a magazine, taken moments before he was hung as a war criminal. In later years, Stingo would discover a document written by Höss prior to his death, entitled *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*. Stingo recommends this be read by anyone interested in understanding human evil and "affecting the consciousness of his fellow man." (pg. 148) The document is a fascinating look into the mind of a mass murderer. Höss pleads duty, authority, and obedience as excuses for carrying out the Nazi's mass murder plans. His sympathy for himself is great, as poor Höss had to "see everything. I had to watch hour after hour, by day and by night, the removal and burning of the bodies, the extraction of teeth, the cutting of the hair, the whole grisly, interminable business. I had to stand for hours on end in the ghastly stench, while the mass graves were being opened and the bodies dragged out and burned." (pg. 153) Also in this written document, Höss congratulates himself for being such a good host and master of house that "No former prisoner can ever say that he was in any way or at any time badly treated in our household. My wife's greatest pleasure would have been to give a present to every prisoner who was in any way connected with our household. The children were perpetually begging me for cigarettes for the prisoners. They were particularly fond of the ones who worked in the garden." (pg. 154) It was to this household that Sophie had been sent in the fall of 1943.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The author is gradually laying the backstory in this chapter, providing the context for Sophie's interaction with Rudolf Höss before he reveals to us what, in fact, occurred between them. Rudolf Franz Höss was a true character in history. He did run Auschwitz,



and over the years was personally responsible for the deaths of over three million Jews. Like many idealistic, young Americans in those days, Stingo is consumed with understanding the Holocaust and reads everything he can get his hands on that might explain how someone could become so evil. The horrors and depth of the mass torture and extermination of the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis were coming more and more to light in 1947. After the war, public knowledge grew, as new atrocities were revealed daily in the papers. Stingo is a perfect confessor for Sophie, because she senses he will be more sympathetic to some of the hard choices she was forced to make while imprisoned by the Nazis. Sophie's secrets, whatever they may be, will be too much for the judgmental Nathan to handle, as Stingo implies in this chapter. The author thus creates tension by dropping dark hints about the consequences to Sophie if Nathan ever finds out the truth while gradually revealing her story. If there are any readers who, by this point in the book, still believe Nathan has a right to his violent jealousy of Sophie, they might consider the fact that Sophie had survived the war, Auschwitz, and Rudolf Franz Höss. She will not survive Nathan Landau, a man whose demons lead him to believe that he has the right to judge what she had to do to survive.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Within two weeks of being rescued by Nathan, Sophie was completely well. While Sophie gives Stingo the details of how Nathan took her to see his brother, Larry, who referred her to a nutrition specialist, Stingo cannot help but keep checking his watch, his mind on his hot date that night with Leslie Lapidus. With his mind on his own romance, Stingo asks Sophie how she felt about her whirlwind romance with Nathan. When Sophie's mood inexplicably darkens, Stingo wonders how the nice side of their relationship somehow led to the violence he has witnessed between them. Instead of dwelling on it, they finish lunch discussing literature; Sophie plans to spend the afternoon reading Faulkner.

Back in Stingo's room, he considers picking up where he left off in *Crime and Punishment* but is too caught up in fantasies about Leslie. Finally, the time approaches, and after shaving for the third time that day, Stingo peels a twenty off the roll of cash stockpiled in his medicine cabinet and leaves his room. In the hallway he passes Moishe Muskatblit, who is being screamed at by Yetta for failing to pay his rent. Stingo knows she is only guiltling him, that Yetta would not actually throw Moishe out, but he is captivated by what he calls the "intense Jewishness of the little scene" (pg. 162), probably because he has been thinking about Jewish culture and worrying about acting properly at Leslie's house that night. He recalls his religious prejudices about Judaism, which he learned in Sunday school. Based on some Biblical parables, he imagined, as a child, that the services at the local Jewish temple involved circumcising goats, burning oxen, and disemboweling newborn lambs. As a boy, Stingo had a hard time reconciling this view with the fact that all his Jewish friends seemed perfectly normal and were well liked in the community. Now as an adult, he is free of such obvious childhood confusions but realizes, the moment he sets eyes on Leslie's house that he still retained some of those early prejudices.

Stingo had been expecting a dark, gloomy house, clean, but smelling of must and gefilte fish. He had pictured Leslie's parents as kerchief-wearing immigrants - a fat, silent mother, and a heavily accented father - who would know nothing of taste or luxury. Imagine his surprise to find he is in a swanky, modern, sunlit home which speaks of taste, elegance, and riches. Leslie's parents are cultured and well-mannered; Dad is patrician, Mom is a knock-out. They serve him imported Danish beer, and he learns that they are on their way out of the house for the weekend with their friend, Ben Field, an art collector. Leslie takes him into the other room to show him a Pissarro painting, and she french kisses him with her parents in the other room. Stingo cannot wait for them to leave so he can have his way with the obviously willing Leslie. He makes a pass at Leslie the minute her parents are out the door, but she wriggles away. Stingo realizes that a classy girl like Leslie needs to be wooed before sex; he cannot just jump her like a common whore. So he pulls out his best Southern charm and settles into an evening of wining and dining. Throughout dinner she speaks freely of sex, 'fucking' as she calls



it, and what breakthroughs she has made with her analyst toward the goal of getting in touch with her body. She tells Stingo he must read *Lady Chatterley's Lovers*, and quotes a male friend who says, "to fuck is to go to the dark gods."

'Then let's go to the dark gods,'" Stingo replies, as he urgently signals for the check."
(pg. 172)

The remainder of that long night is described in Stingo's journal. The long, frustrating make out session on the couch during which every one of his advances is blocked and parried by Leslie. Finally he takes drastic action and places her hand in his lap, which sends her leaping off the couch and into tears. He learns she is a virgin and tells her she is very sick. She spends the next four hours crying and explaining that her analysis has brought her to the point where she is comfortable verbalizing about sex, but she is not ready to act upon those words. Stingo falls asleep while she talks, and finally slinks home after daylight, never to see Leslie again. The older Stingo thinks of Leslie now and imagines that she has become a sleek and elegant woman, in charge of her sexuality, and, he is almost certain, multiorgasmic.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Not until the late 1960s did the federal government become involved in providing access to 'family planning,' a euphemism for birth control. In 1947, diaphragms are available to the average woman; Sophie even has one. The women in America have grown more independent during World War II, having entered the work force, for the first time, in record numbers. Clothing styles have become less restrictive, and women are allowed to wear modest bikinis to the beach, when only thirty years before they had to wear swim dresses down to their ankles. Stingo is of the opinion that if he can see the flesh, the flesh should be made available to him. In this chapter he bitterly laments the fact that modern women are not using their new-found independence to have sex with *him*. He is a bundle of frustrated hormones, and since all he cares about is sex, he is unlikely to get it, and yet, Stingo's descriptions of his frustrations are so vivid that the reader cannot help but sympathize with him. Stingo learns nothing from his thwarted conquest of Leslie; even years later, he presents his diary entries as proof that she had guaranteed him sex, and then reneged on it. He fails to see the irony that his insensitivity deserved her matching insensitivity; they were a perfect couple.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

As the hot summer wears on, Nathan, Sophie, and Stingo increasingly spend their evenings in an air-conditioned cocktail lounge called the Maple Court. There were few bars to choose from in Flatbush, so, despite its faintly seedy atmosphere, the friends came to love the relaxed feel and cheap beer. Nathan preferred to order wine for himself and Sophie, a rare luxury in bar like the Maple Court. Over drinks one night, Nathan apologizes for setting Stingo up with a girl who would not put out. Stingo, embarrassed to admit the truth, lies and assures Nathan that he and Leslie did have sex. When Stingo launches into a big story about their sexual encounter, Nathan realizes he is putting him on. They clink glasses and forget about Leslie.

Stingo reflects on Sophie and Nathan, who seem like an old, married couple now. Were it not for Sophie's occasional dark references to Nathan's temperament, Stingo would have completely forgotten about the violent night when he met them. Nathan is unbelievably charming as he regales them with stories about anything and everything, using his talent for acting and mimicry. It is not cheap charm; Nathan knows when to turn up the wattage and when to relax and be sincere. He is a masterful performer, Stingo thinks admiringly. In addition to being a biochemist, Nathan is an all around Renaissance man who keeps up with both modern and classical music, literature, philosophy, and science. He enjoys talking literature with Stingo, and Nathan's favorite work is *Madame Bovary*, because of its suicide motif. Once, during a monologue, Nathan claimed to be the reincarnation of a Jewish Albigensian monk who believed that life was evil, and therefore, suicide was the best thing one could do. Nathan topped off his story by stating the irony of being reincarnated into the even more evil twentieth century. Despite this, during those evenings, Stingo says he never felt Nathan's depression and despair, to which Sophie alluded during their talks. Stingo admires Nathan's opinion so highly that when Nathan asks to read his work, Stingo is terrified. If Nathan does not like his fledgling novel, Stingo does not think his ego will get past the blow. However, Nathan praises Stingo's writing all night with evident enthusiasm. Stingo rides on a cloud of bliss and says his life could not have been happier, lack of sex aside, until the bad turn of events with Nathan and Sophie.

At six in the evening on the night of his father's arrival, Stingo sits in the Maple Court, waiting for Sophie. They expect Nathan to join them an hour later, which still left Stingo a couple of hours to hang out with them before his father's train arrives at ten. Stingo is touched that his father has decided to visit, knowing how much Pop hates New York. He reads the paper while he waits for Sophie, and encounters the news that Senator Theodore Gilmore Bilbo is in the hospital, dying of cancer. Bilbo is a racist and a petty tyrant who gives Southern politicians a bad name, and Stingo's first thought is that he is glad to see the old sinner go. But the beer mellows him, and he remembers a school essay he had once written, which required him to research Bilbo. He had learned that Bilbo started out in life with a lot of promise, but degenerated under the influences of



power and greed. He feels regret for Bilbo's lost promise, but then recalls the image of Bobby Weed, and wonders to God how long the scourge of racism will continue to plague the South.

He spots Sophie across the bar, sunlight in her hair, when she enters the room. She takes his breath away, but he pretends nonchalance. He notices she is wearing, for the first time since he has known her, a blouse that shows off her cleavage. He wonders if it is because her health is finally restored that she feels comfortable showing more skin, but she tells him that Nathan bought her these clothes that afternoon. Over lunch with Nathan, he told her he would have a big scientific breakthrough to announce this evening, and that she should wear something sexy to celebrate. Nathan told her he would take them all out to dinner tonight to celebrate his amazing new discovery. But Sophie's mood is somber; she asks Stingo if he likes her blouse. In the clothing store, when they bought it, Nathan had acted strange and had come down with a headache that left him pale and perspiring. Stingo assures her Nathan was just acting strange because of the big announcement he would make that night. Stingo's convinced Nathan has discovered the cure for cancer and cannot share in Sophie's misgivings.

Stingo is on his way back to the table after using the men's room when he hears Nathan's voice ringing through the bar, loudly and crudely accusing Sophie of having sex with Dr. Blackstock's assistant, Seymour Katz. Morris Fink had told Nathan that Katz was in Sophie's room yesterday. Sophie explains that Katz had kindly consented to fix Nathan's phonograph as a favor to a co-worker, but Nathan continues to insult her loudly. Nathan sees Stingo standing there, frozen, and invites him to sit down next to the biggest whore on Flatbush Avenue. Stingo sits down next to Sophie and notices that Nathan's face is covered in streams of sweat and that he seemed to be barely maintaining control over himself. Nathan elbows his way to the bar while Sophie worries to Stingo that Nathan will leave her. She swears her innocence, and Stingo snaps at her to calm down. He resolves not to allow Nathan to continue abusing her. The narrator recalls this resolve ruefully; the young Stingo did not know what he was dealing with in Nathan. His attempts to stand up for Sophie might have worked on a friend whose temper had just gotten out of hand, but Nathan is a whole different creature, possessed by paranoia and rage. Sophie asks Stingo if he noticed Nathan's pupils had dilated to the size of dimes.

Nathan returns to the table with a bottle of wine. Stingo is relieved to see Nathan's expression is somewhat calmer. Then Nathan sees the newspaper on the table with the picture of Senator Bilbo. He sneers at Stingo and proposes a toast to the slow, agonizing death of Senator Bilbo. Stingo attempts to change the tone of things by proposing a toast to Nathan instead, to his great discovery. Nathan says his celebration has been ruined by Sophie's treachery, and insists they toast to Bilbo's death. Stingo says he will not toast to anyone's death, so Nathan toasts by himself, further antagonizing Stingo with his animosity towards the South. Nathan gets Stingo to admit that he would toast to Hitler's death, but then Stingo says Bilbo is not Hitler. Nathan wins the argument, humiliates Stingo, and then announces the end of his friendship with both Sophie and Stingo. He launches into a verbal tirade putting them both down in turn, though Sophie gets the worst of it. Stingo is too afraid of Nathan to confront him



physically, so he escapes to the men's room to get his bearings. When he gets back, the wine bottle is overturned and Sophie and Nathan are gone.

Stingo decides he must stand his father up at the train station to deal with this crisis. He considers the effect an apology might have on Nathan. When he gets back to the boarding house, he finds Sophie's room has been stripped. Morris Fink informs him there had been a big scene, after which Nathan put Sophie in one cab and got in another himself. Nathan apparently decided to kick Sophie out of her own home, so he packed her off to a hotel. According to Fink, Nathan kept yelling at Sophie, calling her a cunt, and demanding to know how she lived through Auschwitz. Morris says good riddance about Nathan, but that Sophie was nice and he will miss her.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Nathan's abusive side has reared its ugly head. Like many battered women, Stingo allowed himself to be lulled back into friendship with Nathan, who has been showing none of the threatening menace that lies inside him. But abusers classically run in cycles, and Stingo has been enjoying the 'honeymoon period' of the cycle. After that comes a build-up in tension, which leads to further abuse. Many abusers like to dress their women like dolls and usually avoid sexy clothes that show off their private property. But for tonight, Nathan has bought Sophie a slutty outfit as part of his plan to set her up and call her out for being a faithless whore. She wears the clothes to please him, not realizing that he plans to use them against her. Stingo displays all the classic signs of an abused woman, though he does not know it. His only thought is to fix the relationship with Nathan; it never occurs to him to walk away.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The narrator talks about a book by George Steiner called *Language and Silence*, which Stingo reads twenty years after his summer with Nathan and Sophie. He says it is the most insightful of all the books he has read on the Holocaust over the years, and it stands out in his mind because it was published in 1967, the same year Stingo would publish the novel of which he was most proud. By the time Stingo reads George Steiner's work in 1967, Stingo has already had several books published to wide acclaim. Stingo has found success as a writer, and he says he has always known one day he would write Sophie and Nathan's story. To that end, he spent a great deal of time over the years immersed in literature about the Holocaust, like Steiner's work. What always amazed Stingo most about this literature was the time frame. Through re-reading letters he had sent to his father, Stingo discovered that on the day Sophie walked into Auschwitz, he had been stuffing himself with bananas in hopes of making the marine weight requirement. He had not yet ever heard of Auschwitz. He was joining up to fight the Japanese and, in retrospect, has a hard time reconciling the world he lived in with the nightmare in which Sophie lived. The narrator quotes Steiner's published accusation that fiction writers, like himself, have cheapened the Holocaust by using it gratuitously in their work. Stingo defends himself for writing this book, saying he does not believe that silence is the answer and points out that Steiner also wrote about the subject. He further says that his interest in writing about Sophie is that she was not just a victim, but that she had also been an accessory to the murder of the Jews at Auschwitz.

Stingo points out that while 2,100 Greek Jews were getting the gas at Auschwitz, he was writing home to his dad about whether Duke had a chance at winning the Conference championship, or maybe even hosting the Rose Bowl. At this same time, Sophie was deported to the camp. Thanks to her ability to take German shorthand - a skill she had often been asked to perform by her father - she was able to obtain a position taking dictation for Rudolf Höss. Alone in his attic with the SS Commandant, she spent a week and a half typing up his correspondence before the events of the day she relates to Stingo. Höss had paused in his dictation, searching for the right word, and Sophie had tentatively supplied it. She explains she was trying to get him to talk to her, see her as a person, so when he accepted her suggestion, she beamed at him. He had not really directly spoken to her before, so moments later, when he calls her to the window to see his prized Arabian stallion, Harlekin, Sophie feels she has made some progress with Höss - especially when he brushes her shoulder lightly with his fingertips.

He resumes his dictation and instructs Sophie to type the letters immediately, which she quickly does. While she finishes the final letter, she realizes he has been watching her as she types. He compliments the kerchief that covers her shaved head, and she flutters her eyelashes at him. He leaves the room for a few minutes. Someone in the household turns on a phonograph, the same Haydn symphony that makes her cry the



first night Nathan comes to her room. When Höss re-enters the room, Sophie is standing at the window trying very hard to look sexy despite the tears on her face.

Here, Stingo breaks into her narration to mention how relatively lucky she was compared to others at the camp. Upon arriving, she had been placed in a typing pool, not sent to the gas or to the slave labor part of the camp. She tells Stingo, now, that she had hidden something from him about her arrival at Auschwitz. In the lining of her boots she had hidden for some time, a pamphlet, written by her father, called *Poland's Jewish Problem: Does National Socialism Have the Answer?* She begs Stingo to forgive her for lying; her father was a politically extreme, anti-Semitic, Nazi sympathizer. Nathan, of course, does not know the truth about her father. More than a sympathizer, her father had actively campaigned for the extermination of the entire Jewish race. Sophie had transcribed the pamphlet for him, and when she realized how far her father had gone, she suddenly realized, for the first time, that she hated him. Not only for the pamphlet, but also for all the years he had been cruel and controlling with her. Her husband, she admits, was nothing more than a disciple of her father's, whom she also came to hate. But like a dutiful daughter, she accompanied her husband to the university to personally distribute the pamphlets. Stingo places this story into context for his readers by making a correlation between Poland and his beloved South, between her father's anti-Semitism and Southern racism. Despite her hatred, Sophie felt a moment of anguish when she learned that her father had been gunned down by the very Nazis he tried to befriend. In the end, her father's pamphlet could not save him; he was burned by the same fire he had tried to light.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Stingo's revelation that Sophie had been an accessory at Auschwitz changes the tone of the novel, and, once again, keeps the reader guessing. In exploring complicated themes like domestic violence and the Holocaust, William Styron shows a great deal of human empathy by examining every point of view. But this tactic also has the effect of building suspense in the novel. He only reveals Sophie's secrets gradually, and we are left to alternately question whether Nathan's harsh judgment of her might be correct and whether she was a Nazi. With the revelation of her father's background, we wonder if Sophie was a victim of poor upbringing, who regrets her family's racism as much as Stingo regrets the South's, or if she was a more active and willing conspirator. In time, we will learn all the details of both her past history and her relationship with Nathan, but this gradual revealing allows the author to build and carry the suspense, while encouraging the reader to consider every viewpoint and possibility in the meantime.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

During her brief stay at the Höss household, Sophie slept in the basement along with the other imprisoned servants. There, she was allowed a modicum of cleanliness, because Höss' wife was terribly afraid of contagious diseases in the camp and made sure the household servants' clothes were cleaned with germicide. Sleep was another perk of the Höss home. The basement offered a certain amount of privacy denied the prisoners in the outside camp. She shared quarters with several other prisoners, some of whom were confirmed anti-Semites. One man, Bronek, worked with the resistance group imprisoned inside Auschwitz. Most of the prisoners were kind to Sophie, but she was warned about the housekeeper, Wilhelmine, a German woman serving prison time for forgery.

Bronek brings her food each day, leftover table scraps - a better and much more bountiful supply of food than is available to the prisoners in the camp. In the morning, on the day which she has begun to relate to Stingo, Bronek tells her Höss is about to be transferred out of Auschwitz, and Sophie panics, realizing she must carry out her plan of getting close to Höss right away or lose her chance. That morning he also brought her some contraband figs, a huge luxury, and Sophie ducks into a closet to eat them. The brief delay while eating the figs gives Wilhelmine, the evil German maid, a chance to corner Sophie alone on her way upstairs. She offers Sophie some contraband underwear - a luxury Sophie has not had in months - and pushes her into a shadowy alcove to try them on. Sophie has an idea of her true motives, but hopes against hope she is wrong. In the alcove, Wilhelmine begins pawing at her, sexually, and Sophie remains frozen; feeling helpless, she decides not to protest, and allows the woman to invade her while pretending in her mind that she is somewhere, anywhere, else. Höss suddenly calls out for Wilhelmine, and the maid clutches onto Sophie's thighs until his booming voice disappears. She topples off of Sophie, allowing Sophie to escape to the attic after warning her that Höss will kill them both if he finds out. Sophie squats on the stairs, head in her hands, anxiously trying to figure out if she is better or worse off now - can she hold this against Wilhelmine, or is it more likely Wilhelmine will tell Höss some tale that will get Sophie killed?

She arrives in the attic, five minutes late, determined to carry off her plan that very day. Now in the afternoon, listening to the Haydn symphony and waiting for Höss to return, she considers her chances. He returns in a fury, demanding that she translate a letter written in Polish that he has just received. The letter states that one of his subcontractors will not be able to complete the new death chamber on schedule. Höss is hit with a migraine and demands Sophie bring him his pills, which she does. This is not the first migraine he has had in her presence, but it is the first time he allows her to stay while he lays on a small cot and waits for it to subside. He watches her type until his headache clears, and then asks her how she came here. Sophie launches into her plan, telling Höss that fate brought her to him, that he and she were like-minded and



that he would understand. After a long silence, he asks, "Understand what?" Sophie explains that a mistake has been made. She tells him about her father and how deeply anti-Semitic he was, but Höss tells her that Poles are hardly better than Jews, so it does not matter if she is an anti-Semite or not. She plays every card she can think, and knowing of his hatred for homosexuals, she tells him she came to be in the typing pool after one of the female guards had tried to rape her. Further, she tells him of how a Jewish man had raped her own sister. Despite her lurid talk, Höss is only interested in his own career prospects, which at the moment are dim.

He is furious that he is being transferred and chalks it all up to the delay in building the crematorium. He feels unfairly treated, saying the head office does not understand what difficulties he must overcome in implementing the Final Solution. Sophie bursts into tears during his monologue, realizing her plan has failed. This catches his attention, finally, and he accuses her of flirting shamelessly with him. He compliments her beauty, and informs her that she inspires him to plant his seed within her to create a beautiful baby. He yanks her up against him, his heart beating madly. Just when Sophie is close to success, Höss' wife calls out to him from the landing. Now Sophie knows she is doomed. The timing of Frau Höss' interruption will ensure that Höss does not make another pass at her and might even inspire him to feel vengeful toward Sophie.

Back in 1947 at the Maple Court with Stingo, Sophie weeps into her hands as she tells the story. It is three days after the breakup with Nathan; Stingo fills us in on what has happened since Nathan and Sophie left the boarding house that night. Stingo had spent a couple of days in Manhattan, visiting with his father, and then had returned to the boarding house. Here, he was happily surprised to encounter Sophie packing up the last of her things. Now they sit at the bar, and Stingo notices that Sophie is suddenly drinking large quantities, something he has never seen her do before. She makes a confession...she had a little boy, Jan, who was sent to Auschwitz with her. She tells Stingo that Nathan knew about Jan, but that after today, she never wants to talk about it again.

So that day in the attic, continues Sophie, she had told Höss about her son. She begs Höss to release Jan. He refuses. She threw her arms around his waist and literally licks his boots. She explains to Stingo that many of the people imprisoned by the Nazis were reduced to behaving like animals, and she understands that the Nazis are to blame, and yet she cannot get over her guilt for her behavior no matter how hard she tries. She explains to Stingo that she would have done absolutely anything just for a glimpse of her little boy, the chance to hold him in her arms. Höss commands her to rise to her feet. "Sophie, Sophie, certainly you may see your little boy.' He said, 'Do you think I could deny you that? *Glaubst du, dass ich ein Ungeheuer bin?* Do you think I am some kind of monster?" (pg. 287)

Chapter 10 Analysis

In this chapter we learn that Nathan's accusations may be true, that Sophie did attempt to sleep her way out of Auschwitz. Hopefully the reader also learns in this chapter that



the Nazis were masters of reducing people to shadows, desperate for survival, and without the smallest shred of safety or dignity left to them. Now that we know Sophie had a child, and was willing to use her only asset - her sexuality - to help her child survive, we can only be offended by Nathan's ludicrously unfair judgment of Sophie's actions. We also better understand why Sophie is so easily swayed by Nathan into believing the worst about herself. The guilt she carries, of which we are only just beginning to learn, has convinced her, long before Nathan entered the picture, that she does not deserve to live.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Stingo jumps back in time a few days to the night his father arrived, the same night Nathan had blown up at him and Sophie. On the subway train, en route to catch up with his father at his hotel, Stingo finds himself in mourning over the loss of Nathan and Sophie. He says he had not felt such a great sadness since his mother died of cancer. Fortunately, his father's good mood helped distract Stingo. His father had not been to New York since the late 1930s and finds that, if anything, he hates it even more now. His dad grumbled about the high prices and the moral decay of Times Square. Given Stingo's deep depression, his father's timing is good because he tries to convince Stingo to move back South. His father dislikes New York so much that when a cab driver makes a crude remark about Pop's character, he launches into a tirade; the cabbie guns the gas to quickly get out of there, sending Pop reeling into a 'No Parking' sign. Pop nurses the resulting shiner in a bar with Stingo, continuing to harp on the wonders of the South versus the horrors of the North, but wisely never directly asking Stingo to come home.

The next few days were more of the same; Pop's dialogue is on-going throughout their various trips to tourist attractions. Stingo is sharing a hotel room in the city with Pop during the visit and, at night, is kept awake by the ear-shattering sounds of Pop's snores and memories of his mother's slow decline leading up to her death. When the noise of sex intrudes through the walls, Stingo's mind leaps at this more life-affirming topic. Listening to the couple through the wall, he is overtaken by a powerful lust. He thinks of Maria, of Leslie, and of Sophie, and perversely wonders if he lusts after them so much only because he cannot have them. He masturbates, stopping suddenly when he hears his old man get up to use the bathroom. When the snoring resumes, he continues his fantasies, focused on his true desire, Sophie. He falls asleep and calls out her name during his dream climax. His father shakes his shoulder, asking if he is all right. Does he want to talk about it? Stingo gives him a vague version of his feelings for Sophie, and then they switch to a safer topic, Stingo's writing, which is coming along well. His dad reminds him of the offer to live on the farm and, when Stingo drifts back to sleep, he dreams of Artiste's sacrifice, which has funded his writing thus far.

The next morning over breakfast, nostalgia for home prompts Stingo to announce to his father that he will, indeed, move back home. Stingo will go back to Yetta's and pack up his things, and then join his father. He wonders if he would have really gone if he had not happened to run into Sophie at Yetta's. He thought he had lost her forever, and immediately upon finding her again, Stingo calls his dad from Brooklyn and tells him he has changed his mind and is staying in Brooklyn after all.

Now, Stingo resumes Sophie's recitation of events at Auschwitz. He describes a Nazi program called Lebensborn, which was designed to breed suitably Arian children. German men impregnated only blonde, fair-skinned women in occupied countries, and



also kidnapped blonde children from their homes. When Sophie lived in Warsaw, she sometimes used to hide her blonde son, Jan, in the closet to keep him from being kidnapped. Now that Jan was at Auschwitz, the Lebensborn program was Sophie's best hope for keeping him safe. If she could just convince Rudolf Höss to take Jan out of Auschwitz and put him in the program, she might never see her son again, but at least she would know he was being safely raised somewhere in a German household. Here, Sophie has to take a break from her painful recitation, and vanishes into the restroom at the Maple Court. She is gone a long time, and Stingo fearfully waits. Having lost Sophie, and now gotten her back, he is terrified of losing her again, especially since she told him this morning, when he found her at Yetta's, that she still plans to leave.

So he is relieved when, twenty minutes later, she comes back from the bathroom all smiles. Apparently, she ran into a fortuneteller who told her that everything would turn out well with Nathan. Stingo is amused by her credulity and suggests they take a walk. Stingo takes her to the Parade Grounds, where he tries to cheer her up with idle talk of baseball. Upon returning to Yetta's, Stingo becomes desperate, knowing Sophie plans to leave that very night. He tells her he will miss her, and she assures him they will remain friends. Suddenly, Stingo grabs her arms and starts demanding to know what happened with Nathan. How could Nathan have treated the two of them that way? How Nathan could have been so unbelievably cruel, especially with his accusations about how she survived Auschwitz, was difficult to understand. Sophie begins to weep and tells Stingo it is not Nathan's fault, but rather it is the demon, which controls him. What demon? She refuses to answer him. After a long silence, she asks him to go buy her a bottle of whisky.

With the help of the whisky, Sophie tells Stingo of the night Nathan tried to take her life and his own, at a small bed and breakfast in Milford, Connecticut. It was the first time, she says, that he insisted she justify her actions at Auschwitz. Sophie now explains to Stingo that Nathan has been on drugs this whole time - amphetamines and cocaine. Stingo is stunned; drugs were not a part of his relatively sheltered upbringing. But now he recognizes the signs. Sophie leads up to the night in question by recalling how wonderful Nathan was - how he saved her life, bought her fabulous new dentures, spoiled her with clothes and fine restaurants, and how she loved making love to him. The only fly in the ointment was her job with Dr. Blackstock. Nathan hated chiropractors, so much so that he felt that Sophie was whoring herself out by working there. Despite his feelings, she kept her job. Blackstock had given her work when she was newly arrived and penniless, and he had become like a father to her. Besides, the part time schedule suited her well, and jobs were not easy to come by in 1947 with all the men back from the war. It was not, she said, as if she were married to Nathan; she had to maintain her independence.

One day, Blackstock's precious wife was killed in an automobile accident; Sophie was so moved by his grief she acted as a daughter would, letting him lean on her and verbalize his grief. On the day of his wife's funeral, Sophie rode back in the limo with him to help him sort out a few things at his house. He insisted on driving her home instead of letting her take the subway at night alone. When they got back to Yetta's and Sophie turned to say goodbye, Blackstock had broken down again, and grabbed Sophie



in a tight embrace, crying into her shoulder for a long moment. Unfortunately for Sophie, Nathan was watching this scene from the window.

Sophie returned to her room, glad the funeral was over, and looking forward to a romantic trip she and Nathan had planned for the next day. She went up to her room, intending to pack and get a good night's rest, but when she got there, Nathan was gone. He shows up later, to her great relief, and tells her they are going out to celebrate. When she asks what they are celebrating, he informs her that he has made a big breakthrough at the lab, which will be the most important medical breakthrough in history. He tells her they are going to a party at his friend Morty's, and when she protests that she has not even eaten dinner, he says they will eat at the party. Just before they leave, the radio reports that Hermann Göring has committed suicide in his cell with a cyanide capsule. Nathan calls Göring a clever son of a bitch for escaping the hangman's rope. The story ends, and Nathan fiddles with the dial, looking for more news about Göring. Sophie does not want to hear anything about the Nazis, and pleads with him to turn the radio off so they can go because she is starving. Finally, he does, kissing her first so she can feel how high and turned on he is.

They arrive at the party after eleven, and Nathan immediately announces his big breakthrough to Morty. The partygoers toast and congratulate Nathan. Nathan announces to everyone that he and Sophie are getting married. Sophie is in a daze, thrilled to be marrying such a wonderful research scientist who is so loved and respected by everyone. She did not realize, at the time, that the announcement was just the drugs talking and continued to enjoy the party awhile. Eventually, she goes looking for Nathan and finds him in a room with several others listening to a CBS broadcast about the Nuremberg trials. She notices something frightening in Nathan's face now. One of Nathan's friends, a philosophy major, begins to passionately speak about how the Polish people turned against the Jews and did not help them. Sophie is uncomfortable with the whole topic and begs Nathan to leave. He refuses, so she takes a taxi back home.

Sophie speaks next of Connecticut. In the room with Nathan, he calls her Irma and tells her the cyanide capsule will only taste like bitter almonds.

The morning after the party, Nathan comes home. She happily turns to him, expecting him to want to make love like he usually does when he has been getting high. Instead, Nathan snorts some cocaine through a dollar bill and tells her it is time to leave for Connecticut.

In Connecticut again, she stares at the cyanide capsules in Nathan's hand. Sleepy from the Nembutal he has given her, and in pain from where he kicked her in the ribs, she does not respond when the woman, who owns the bed and breakfast, knocks to ask if they will be coming down for dinner tonight. Nathan tells her they will be down soon. She drowsily thinks about the last few hours, arriving at the hotel after listening to Nathan accuse her of infidelity all the way there. Nathan had driven dangerously, scaring Sophie, but when a cop pulled them over, she talked him out of giving Nathan a ticket. Nathan continues to yell at her, accusing her of being an anti-Semite, and calling



her Irma Griese. She begs him to stop for food; in response, he orders her to give him oral sex while he is driving. The landlady knocks again, interrupting her reverie. Again, Nathan assures her they will be right down.

In the car she had complied with his order, even as he called her despicable names and twisted her hair in his hand, yanking it painfully. She cries when he climaxes. He pulls her out of the car into the woods where he beats her mercilessly and attempts to urinate in her mouth, but he is crashing hard from the uppers and demands she find the barbiturates he had brought along for the ride. Sophie realizes, while he downs the pills, that she pities him. After the pills have calmed him, she asks him not to call her Irma, because Sophie had known the real Irma Griese at Auschwitz, a monster of a woman, who made Wilhelmine seem nice in comparison.

In the hotel room, Sophie starts to think they both might live when Nathan starts calling her Sophielove instead of Irma. He is still toying with the cyanide capsules, but the barbiturates have had an effect, and Sophie is relieved when he drops off to sleep. She takes the cyanide capsules and empties them into the toilet. She curls up next to Nathan but is awakened by his screams in the night; he raves that they must die - not the first time he has used those words with her. He quickly falls back asleep, and she remains there in bed with him for hours, thinking that she must confess her darkest secret to him in order for them to have a chance at a life together. When he wakes up the next day, she tells him about her husband and child, and how she lost both of them. Then she makes him promise never to bring up the subject again. Nathan apologizes for his insanity, and asks her if she wants to have sex with him. Without thinking twice, Sophie says yes, and drowns her pain in the lovemaking.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Even in Nathan's absence, Stingo has been irrevocably drawn into this twisted love triangle. Given the events she has just described, it is obvious that Sophie could never confess her sins to Nathan - not if she wants to live. Thusly, Stingo is pulled deeper into his role as father-confessor. Stingo also realizes the similarity between that night in Connecticut and Nathan's recent blow up. On both occasions, Nathan believes Sophie has been unfaithful, and announces another big scientific breakthrough. Whether this ploy is an attempt to gain the admiration of others when he is feeling down, or if it is only to sidetrack Sophie so that, when he pounces on her, she will be unaware, it is obvious that Nathan is playing a game with Sophie, a very dangerous game.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Sophie is exhausted from unburdening her tale on Stingo and exceedingly drunk from the whisky. He puts her to bed, fully clothed, and then returns to his own room. He wakes in the morning still reeling from the alcohol and finds himself in a lusty mood, as well. He thinks of Sophie, upstairs, and for the first time, seriously considers himself as a potential suitor, worthy of her. Sophie agrees to go to Jones Beach with him, and Stingo gets ready to go while planning his hopeful conquest of Sophie. He does not have Nathan's money and worries about how to support her if she agrees to be with him. He checks his medicine cabinet and is shocked to discover his bankroll has been swiped. His suspicions land on Morris Fink, the janitor who has keys to all the rooms, but Morris has done him several favors and Stingo cannot even bring himself to voice that suspicion to Sophie. He bemoans the fact that the only money he has to his name is the forty dollars he happened to have put in his wallet. Sophie, no stranger to soothing upset men, convinces him that a few hundred dollars means nothing in the scheme of things, that he will be a rich and famous writer one day and that he should forget the money for today and still go to Jones Beach with her.

Sophie insists on bringing along her half-finished whiskey bottle, to Stingo's dismay. He is becoming concerned with her drinking. Sophie speaks of Nathan with bitterness for the first time, which astounds Stingo; he blames it on the alcohol she is drinking and begins defending Nathan by blaming the drugs for his behavior. Sophie says the drugs are an excuse, and she is tired of making excuses for Nathan. She reminds Stingo that he beat her, hurt her, and almost killed her. She talks about hating Nathan's friends with their whiny complaints about non-existent problems. Stingo is overcome with the queasiness of his hangover but listens uncomfortably as she begins to put down Jewish people, saying Nathan acted like a typical Jew, thinking he could buy her love. She cries out in anger that everything she told Stingo about her childhood was a lie - that she really hated the Jews just like her father. Stingo ignores her diatribe, believing that she is upset and could not really mean these things. He knows it is easier for her to criticize Nathan's ethnicity than to criticize the man himself, with whom, despite her anger, she must still be deeply in love. Stingo, listening to her, finds he is thinking of Morris Fink and his recent robbery. He becomes momentarily susceptible to her anti-Jewish speech, and, convinced Fink stole his money, winds up agreeing with her that Jews are greedy.

On the beach, she drinks her whiskey and tells Stingo about the lover she had in Warsaw after her husband was shot. Jozef was his name, and she had never told Nathan about him, knowing that Nathan would be angry about Jozef, even though he was long dead. Stingo asks how he died, and she pulls out some beer she had hidden in her bag and gives it to him. Sophie explains that Jozef was a good and brave man who worked for the underground. His job was to kill Polish people who betrayed the Jews hiding out all over Warsaw. He killed people with a piano wire, and every time he had to kill, he would vomit afterward. Jozef's sister, Wanda, was the one who kept



sending him on the assignments, which upset Sophie, because there were other men better suited to be killers, and she resented Wanda making Jozef do the dirty work. One day, the Nazis found out about Jozef and cut his throat. Wanda had found him bleeding to death on the stairs.

Suddenly Stingo feels Sophie's hand miraculously steal under his swim trunks and touch him erotically. She suggests they take their clothes off, and before he can recover from the shock, she has stripped off her swimsuit and calls for him to get naked and go for a swim with her. Stingo slips out of his trunks but is so emotionally confused by recent events that he just stands there and watches her swim. She returns to the bank and notices that he is in an aroused state. She instructs him to lie on his back, and he is stunned to realize that he is about to experience oral sex for the first time. Cruelly, he experiences premature ejaculation instead. Sophie reassures him it happens with men, especially virgins like Stingo. Stingo admits to being a virgin, pure as the driven snow, and she says not to worry, so was Jozef the first time. She speaks of Jozef some more, and then asks him to hand her the bottle. He tells her the whiskey is gone and depression overtakes her. He soothes her when she starts to cry. They fall asleep together in the sand.

When Stingo awakes, she is gone. He puts his trunks back on and searches for her, only to find her bobbing head far out to sea, swimming further away from shore. He plunges in after her and miraculously catches her before she drowns. He drags her back to shore where she berates him for not letting her die. Sophie yells that she is filled with "badness" and does not deserve to live. He manages to get her dressed and on the bus back to Brooklyn. Over the rest of the weekend, Stingo finally learns why Sophie is so filled with guilt that she wants to die.

Sophie was taken prisoner on a train, smuggling her contraband ham under her dress to look like a pregnant woman. The Germans checked to see if her pregnancy was a fake by ramming a knife into her belly, actually the ham. The irony of her capture infuriated her. The train she had been on was only stopped because the Germans had intelligence that there were members of the underground aboard. Indeed, Wanda and other members of the Resistance were taken off the train and sent to Gestapo headquarters with Sophie. The next morning, Sophie wakes in a holding cell to see Wanda staring at her. Wanda's face is covered in a massive bruise, and she asks what in the world Sophie is doing there - for Sophie had always refused to take part in the dangerous Resistance, pleading fear for her children. It turns out Sophie has two children, a boy and a girl. Wanda tells her that her children, Jan and Eva, were also arrested when the Gestapo swarmed the apartment building where Wanda and Sophie both lived. Wanda had often attempted to prevail upon Sophie to do the decent thing and help the Resistance. Sophie remembers one day in particular, when her guilt over her father's politics nearly caused her to agree. But at that moment, she had looked out the window and seen her children returning home from Eva's flute lesson. The music teacher had stopped in the street to explain one last thing to Eva, and Sophie heard her daughter's flute playing a beautiful melody, which drifted up into the window. She refused Wanda, again, for the final time.



Stingo breaks into the narration with some pertinent statistics about the Holocaust - things Sophie would have had no way of knowing at the time. Before the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Warsaw's Jewish population was 450,000. By 1942, the number of surviving Jews in Warsaw was 70,000. There were 380,000 Jews taken from Warsaw alone - deported in cruelly overstuffed cattle cars to various concentration camps, where the vast majority would die. Of the remaining 70,000, about half were 'legally' living in the Jewish ghetto, to which the Germans had consigned them, after stripping them of their homes and property. The other 35,000 were living clandestinely, hidden in various homes around Warsaw. The Germans had to quickly build their large cremation ovens to keep up with the mass deportations. Mere hours before Sophie's arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, a brand new human incinerator had been put into service at Birkenau. Eva, Jan, and Sophie were herded onto a train containing 1,800 Jews and also Eva's music teacher. Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, all 1,800 Jews were sent straight to the incinerator.

Sophie had arrived at Auschwitz on April Fool's Day. After the 1,800 Jews were taken to the incinerators, the only people remaining on the train platform were a band of Poles including Sophie, Jan, Eva, the music teacher, and Wanda, along with other members of the Resistance. Sophie, Jan, and Wanda were allowed to go to the Auschwitz side. But both Eva and her music teacher were chosen for immediate incineration at Birkenau.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Stingo again reveals his lack of objectivity as a narrator. First, it never occurs to him that Nathan stole his money, although he is the most likely culprit. For no reason at all, other than anti-Semitism, he suspects Morris Fink of the crime. His second error is in the way he sees himself. "Pure as the driven snow." (pg. 361) Stingo's description of himself lacks veracity and highlights the differences between how men and women were judged by society in the 1940s, particularly with regard to premarital sex. Sophie has been with three men: her husband, then Jozef, and now Nathan. She omitted Jozef from that list to make herself look better in Nathan and Stingo's eyes, and for that, Stingo told us she was a liar. However when Stingo omits the fact, when talking to Sophie, that he has had sexual relations with a prostitute, he in no way considers that to be a liar. He has convinced himself he is truly still a virgin, because that paid incident 'didn't count' - he previously told us it 'hardly counted' because he was too drunk to enjoy himself. It certainly would have 'counted' to the prostitute had she wound up pregnant from the encounter. A single such indiscretion was judged more leniently for a man, as evidenced by Stingo's point of view, than it would have been for a woman.

This double standard - held even by a nice guy like Stingo - makes Sophie's predicament with Nathan even more difficult. The sexual double standard can be a very subtle or even unconsciously held belief, as in Stingo's case, but it may lead to the further belief that a woman 'deserves' to be abused as a consequence of her sexual behavior, even if her behavior would be considered acceptable for a man. It is a fascinating double-standard that single men may bed as many women as they please without hurting their own reputations, while the single women they are bedding - each



and every one of them - will be diminished in society's eyes for the exact same behavior. Especially in the 1940s and 50s, this type of thinking has often led society to condone domestic violence.

Stingo is not conscious of this belief, but when Nathan abuses Sophie, Stingo thinks he is "dealing with a beloved friend who simply let his temper get out of hand." (Chapter 8, pg. 203) In other words, Stingo thought Nathan's bullying Sophie was wrong, but understandable, on the grounds that Nathan wrongly thought she had cheated. Men with abusive personality disorders are paranoid and jealous and will beat a woman over groundless suspicions. Nathan, of course, sees her as property, not as a person who has a choice whether to remain faithful on a voluntary basis, so he believes he has a right to beat her to keep her in line sexually. Sophie finally realizes that, since she is doing the time, she may as well commit the crime, and seeks out a lover who will treat her more kindly than the abuser does. Sophie seeks out Stingo in this chapter, believing that he will not beat her even if she has done some horrible things in the past. Given Stingo's occasional failing as an objective observer, it is not inconceivable that he has been fooled by Sophie, and that Nathan's suspicions about her lack of fidelity are accurate. The point Styron seems to be trying to make is that Nathan had no more right to beat her for it than he had the right to judge Sophie for using her sexuality to keep her child alive in Auschwitz.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Stingo asks for the reader's patience as he tells us a seemingly unrelated story from Sophie's life, and promises to shortly explain how it impacts her time at Auschwitz. The story is of a luncheon, back in 1937, when Sophie was still living a normal life in her parents' home in Cracow. Her father, Professor Bieगाński, had managed to arrange a lunch with a powerful German businessman, Dr. Walter Dürrfeld. Dürrfeld, director of a conglomerate called IG Farbenindustrie, is considered one of the captains of German industry. The Professor is a fan of all things German, and brings Sophie along to impress Dr. Dürrfeld with her upbringing. Sophie has been raised with German language, music, books, and cultural ideals of Aryan racial purity. She also happens to be beautiful, and despite the fact that she is Polish, not German, the Professor believes his daughter is a "bewitching replica of a *fräulein* of whom not even the most committed racial purist in the Reich could disapprove." (pg. 382) Sophie, the dutiful daughter, goes along, but hopes that the talk will not turn to politics because she does not know if she can dutifully mouth the words to agree with her father's horrifyingly racist views.

Over lunch, the Professor is at first awestruck, and sucks up to Dürrfeld shamelessly, but as lunch progresses the Professor succeeds in charming Dürrfeld. After all, Sophie's father is a very polished man, accustomed to socializing in the same circles as well-respected academics and other cultured professionals. Using Sophie as an asset, the Professor mentions that she can speak both high and low German and can even mimic the specific nuances of various regional German dialects. Her father has her perform this little trick for Dürrfeld, who is both impressed with Sophie, and sympathetic to her obvious discomfort at being put on display by her father. He graciously ends the demonstration, and Sophie finds herself liking Dürrfeld. At the end of the afternoon, she has a moment alone with Dürrfeld. Despite the fact that they are both married, Dürrfeld hints that she should come to visit him in Germany. There is an undeniable attraction between them, which Sophie resolves on the spot to put firmly out of her mind. It is easy for her to do so, given the odds against her ever seeing him again. Yet six years later, she meets him again; he has become the head of the industrial corporation IG-Auschwitz.

Stingo explains that Sophie would not yet speak more about Eva, other than to say Eva had been taken from her and killed at Birkenau the day they arrived. Sophie quickly changes the subject to her son, Jan, who had survived the selection process. After a few days, Sophie heard, through the camp grapevine, that Jan had been thrown into something called the Children's Camp. Jan's survival kept Sophie going, gave her something to live and hope for during her time at Auschwitz. Hope was in short supply at Auschwitz. The SS officer who greeted them upon their arrival told them, "'You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium, and there is only one way out—up the chimney,' He said, 'Anyone who don't like this can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this group, you have no right to live more than two weeks.' Then he



said, 'Any nuns here? Like the priests, you have one month. All the rest, three months.'" (pg. 389) Fortunately for Sophie, she was not thrown into the general population at Auschwitz until the final few months of the war. For the majority of her stay, she was in the typing pool, thanks to her skills as a translator-stenographer. This job eventually earned her that brief transfer to the Höss residence, but shortly before she went there, she had an important encounter with Wanda.

Wanda had heard about Sophie's upcoming transfer to the Höss house, and told Sophie what an opportunity it was for the Resistance. She insisted Sophie help them by gathering information about SS policy and personnel - more as a morale booster than anything. Wanda felt that access to such information would help keep the prisoners alive because it would give them a sense of hope and empowerment, to resist in this small way. She suggests that if Sophie could smuggle out a radio, it would be priceless to the imprisoned souls. Wanda tells her Jan is still alive, and suggests the plan to get Jan into the Lebensborn program. Wanda thinks, even if Jan is given to German parents, after the war Sophie would have a good chance of tracking him down. Anyway, says Wanda, it is his best chance at survival, but it all depends on Sophie being able to strike up a relationship with Höss. She tells Sophie that sleeping with Höss would not be collaboration with the enemy, it would be espionage. Wanda tells Sophie about Bronek, the Resistance spy already in the Höss home. Nazi experiments left Bronek's mind too addled to pull off much espionage himself, but his heart remains loyal, and he will take any information or equipment Sophie gets back to the Resistance members in the camp.

After only ten days in the Höss house, Höss was being transferred, and Sophie's time was running out to help Jan or the Resistance. On her way downstairs to the cellar, after her disastrous attempt to seduce Höss, Sophie notices that Höss' daughter's room is unlocked. Inside the room, unattended, is a radio. She had known it was in there, and now is her moment of decision; she will not get another opportunity. In the morning, Höss has promised her she will be allowed to visit with Jan in his office. By tomorrow night, Höss will be gone. Sophie eyes the radio inside the girl's room; she "knew she had to move swiftly now and take it, or be forever damned." (pg. 395) But just as Sophie puts her hand out to take it, she is discovered by the Commandant's daughter, Emmi. The girl tells Sophie that she will report her to Höss for punishment. Fortunately for Sophie, Emmi has an interest in junior first aid, and so when Sophie swoons to the floor, the young German girl efficiently goes to work to cure the patient. Her manner is not kind at all; she treats Sophie like a toy, a first aid doll, to practice her hobby. Sophie attempts to distract the child with pleasant conversation. Sophie gets her talking about her interests; Emmi pulls out her photo album to show off her medal-winning swimming career at Dachau where the German children had a heated pool. The girl is so used to her father's job of running concentration camps that she does not even remark on the source of the burning smell drifting in from outside; she merely shuts the window. In that moment, Sophie sees a framed sampler on the wall that refers to God, and she weakly asks Emmi what on earth God's name is doing in that house.

That night, her final night before being sent back to the typing pool, Sophie sleeps, as usual, in the cellar. She has unusual dreams. Due to stress, despair, starvation, etc.,



Sophie has not had an erotic feeling in a long time. But that night she has an erotic dream about an attractive man who looks familiar to her. In the dream, though, the man turns into the devil himself, and yet Sophie, consumed with lust, eagerly has sex with him anyway. The next morning she is awoken by Bronek, who wants to know what happened to the radio. Sophie tells him to forget the radio. The dream still on her mind, she finally remembers who her demon dream lover was - the man from the luncheon six years ago, Dr. Walter Dürrfeld. That very morning she will meet him again. Waiting outside Höss' office, expecting to find Jan inside, she hears Höss inside arguing with another man. The man uses phrases she recalls from her lunch with Dürrfeld, and she hears Höss refer to him by name. Dürrfeld is haranguing the Commandant to convince Himmler to supply him with more Jews to use as slave labor in his coal mines. Höss does not have the authority to help him, but the two men end their meeting on a pleasant note. As Dürrfeld leaves the office, he brushes past Sophie, not recognizing her. She notices that he is no longer attractive; years of decadence have made him soft in face and body.

Sophie never saw Jan again. When she had entered Höss' office that day, he was not there. Höss tells her he has changed his mind, and that it would be impossible to let her see her son. Sophie goes crazy, attacking Höss. The Commandant remains calm as she rages at him, and finally asks what else he can do to make it up to her. Sophie jumps on her opportunity to tell him about her Lebensborn idea. She demands that Höss agree to her plan, insisting he make her this promise. Höss finally agrees to promise, and also tells her he will send her a message once Jan has been removed to live with a German foster family, so that Sophie will know he is safe. "You have my assurance and word as a German officer, my word of honor." (pg. 411) Later Sophie wonders how she could have thought he had any honor, as he broke his promise and she never heard from him again. She did eventually get news regarding Jan's fate - a message from Wanda, telling her that Jan was still alive in the Children's Camp at Auschwitz. A few weeks later, another cryptic message from Wanda informed her that Jan was no longer in the Children's Camp. At first this message filled Sophie with joy, thinking Höss had kept his word and sent Jan to Lebensborn. But after a time, she realized the message could also mean that Jan was dead. Shortly after, Wanda was caught for her Resistance activities in the camp and hanged. Sophie never heard another word about her son's fate.

Well past midnight, Stingo and Sophie walk back to the boarding house. Her story has knocked every last trace of lust out of Stingo, and he wonders if he will be able to sleep tonight. When they approach the front door, a dark shadow emerges from the porch: Nathan. Stingo thinks Nathan will attack them, but instead he calls out quietly for Sophie. She drops her hand from Stingo's waist immediately and runs to embrace Nathan. She sobs as he sinks to his knees in front of her, his arms wrapping around her legs like a worshipful, penitent little boy.



Chapter 13 Analysis

Sophie's attraction to Dürrfeld serves as a metaphor for her youthful attraction to Germany and her father's Nazi-inspired ideals. Growing up with a privileged life provided by a father who subscribes to National Socialism, it is not surprising she would flirt with those ideals herself. Dürrfeld represents the successful image of everything in which her father believes, and prior to the war - prior to the Nazi's attacks on herself and her loved ones - Sophie finds this ideal attractive; she finds Dürrfeld attractive. After the Nazis have stripped Sophie of her father, husband, children, lover, home, freedom, food, and self-respect, Sophie no longer finds him attractive. His lifestyle has ravaged his face and engorged his body. The hands she once found so powerful and graceful are now stubby lumps of sausage-like flesh. Sophie's transformation is complete; she has renounced her former attraction to this devil.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

As if nothing had happened, Nathan, Sophie, and Stingo pick up right where they left off with their warm friendship. A few days later, Nathan presents Stingo with a check for two hundred dollars, and also lets Morris Fink off the hook for the robbery by pointing out to Stingo that the bathroom window had been forced opened, something Morris, with his keys, would not have had to do. Stingo's heart is warmed by Nathan's largesse, but will not accept the money until Nathan agrees to let him repay it when he becomes a published writer. Stingo is thrilled that Nathan is acting like his old self again, but his joy is nothing compared to Sophie's. Stingo is moved by her intense love and passion for Nathan, and believes Sophie would forgive Nathan anything. It is September now, and the gang of three resume their normal routines together. Each morning Nathan and Sophie go off to their respective jobs while Stingo works at his writing desk, picking back up the threads of his novel. His passion for his work and his subject re-doubled, Stingo works in a delirium of joyful inspiration, at a faster pace than normal.

Nathan was again reading Stingo's manuscript, always offering intelligent comments and warm praise. Nathan says he so enjoys the novel about the South that he is thinking of going down for a visit. Stingo leaps at the idea. He suggests the three of them drive down together and promises to show them the sights. They make plans for mid-October. As they discuss the South, Stingo glances at his medicine cabinet and thinks of the money he lost. Artiste's blood money, he thinks, and is almost glad to be rid of it. However, he turns glum, thinking he will never be rid of the legacy of slavery. Suddenly, inspiration strikes Stingo. "Nat Turner!" he cries. Nathan asks who that is, and Stingo explains that in 1831 Nat Turner led a slave revolt which killed about sixty white people. Sophie enters while Stingo speaks excitedly about Nat Turner, whose heroic deeds have been lost to history. Stingo quickly runs out of words, and realizes he needs to research Nat Turner; he needs to write a book about him, restoring his name to history. Now Stingo is truly excited about the trip to the South; they will visit Nat Turner's historic home allowing Stingo to do some research for his next book. Nathan jumps in to tell Stingo that not only will the trip be great for Stingo, it will also be Nathan and Sophie's honeymoon, since they plan to be married in October. Stingo is overwhelmed with happiness for them, completely forgetting, for the moment, that in the past, tragedy has accompanied all of Nathan's happy announcements.

About ten days after the group's happy reunion, Stingo gets a phone call from Larry Landau, Nathan's brother, whom he has heard about but has yet to meet. Larry invites Stingo out to his home in Forest Hills, telling him it is about Nathan, and that it is urgent. Stingo takes a long subway trip to Larry's upscale house in a fashionable neighborhood. He arrives late, but Larry is gracious and offers him a Molson's Canadian ale. He tells Stingo how highly Nathan thinks of both Stingo and his writing. Stingo is warmed by the praise and tells Larry how highly he, too, thinks of Nathan. Stingo points out that it is amazing to find a scientist like Nathan so interested and well-educated in literature.



Larry interrupts gently at this point to inform Stingo that Nathan is not a scientist, not a research biologist, and that, in fact, he has no degree of any kind and has been simply lying to Stingo.

Stingo presses him for an explanation, and Larry tells him that Nathan does have a job at Pfizer, but that it is an undemanding, clerical position in the library; it keeps him out of harm's way. Sophie does not know that Nathan lies about his job. Larry explains that despite Nathan's brilliant mind, his brother says he is quite mad and has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. Stingo expresses his dismay, says he knew something was not right with Nathan, but had not realized how serious it was. He thinks about all the misgivings he had repressed about his friend. Larry's sexy, charming wife briefly introduces herself, says she hopes Stingo can help Nathan, and then leaves. Larry fills Stingo in on the family background. Their father had made a fortune canning and selling kosher soup after emigrating from Latvia to the U.S. The family fortune has allowed Nathan to receive the best possible medical care for his condition. By the time they got Nathan his job at Pfizer, they thought he might be permanently cured. However, little signs started showing up over time, like Nathan lying to make his job sound more impressive - which in and of itself was a minor thing, Larry thought at first. But Nathan's delusions of grandeur inspired him to lie to Sophie as well, leading her on, in Larry's opinion, that Nathan could actually marry her and take care of her financially. At the same time, Larry does not think it would be fair to deny Nathan a chance at a normal life, but he worries that Nathan will never be cured, and if he and Sophie were to bring a baby into the mix, it could be dangerous for the child.

Stingo asks Larry what he can do. Larry says he is not sure. He hopes Stingo can help Nathan stay off drugs, since Nathan respects Stingo so much. Larry also says that Nathan breaks contact with his brother when things are going badly, which makes Larry feel helpless. He asks Stingo to keep him in the loop, aware that he is asking him to spy on Nathan, but only because Nathan's condition is so delicate at the moment. Stingo agrees to all of this, and the two men part with a handshake.

Had Stingo kept to his bargain with Larry, things might have turned out differently. Instead, Stingo takes off for a spur of the moment, ten day vacation to visit an old Marine Corps friend, Jack Brown. Out of the blue, Jack calls and invites Stingo to his home; Jack's living up North, too, with his new bride, not far away. Jack had called Stingo's old home down South and had been delighted to learn that Stingo was living nearby. Jack, Stingo tells us, not only has an incredibly entertaining sense of humor and a fun personality, but also has a spare room in which Stingo can continue to write without interruption during the visit. As a final enticement, he mentions his wife's sister, Mary Alice, who is twenty-one, very pretty, and "eager." Stingo agrees to make the trip, and the night before he leaves, he, Nathan, and Sophie have a going away party for him at the Maple Court.

On the surface, the celebration was lively, but Stingo has concerns. He notices Sophie is drinking as heavily as she had done the weekend Nathan last deserted her. Nathan appears to be as healthy as Stingo has ever seen him, without a trace of his shadow self. But then, toward the end of the evening, Nathan informs them that, by the time



Stingo returns, there will be something else to celebrate; his research team at the Pfizer lab is on the verge of announcing a vaccine against polio. Stingo is heartbroken at these words. For the rest of the evening and during the walk back to the house, Stingo can only listen in silence as Nathan elaborates on his lies about the research lab.

Stingo wishes he could report that his trip at least brought him some consolation, but although everything was as Jack promised, his affair with Mary Alice was as unsatisfying as his affair with Leslie Lapidus. Mary Alice, as Stingo reports in detail in his journal afterwards, turned out to be a "*Whack-off artist*." (pg. 432) Just like Leslie, she will not let Stingo touch *her*, but unlike Leslie, Mary Alice is willing to touch *him*. The mechanical nature of her manual effort to appease his lust leaves Stingo cold; worse is that she does not get this, and continues to provide the service until Stingo becomes physically and emotionally desensitized. His chief lament is that if she is not going to put out, he would prefer to service himself. Mary Alice explains that her former fiancé left her before her wedding day, and she does not want to be burned twice. Stingo responds by telling her off, using the kind of crude language Southern girls find offensive.

The next morning, Jack tells him there is a telephone call. It is Morris Fink, telling Stingo to come home immediately. Sophie is asking for him. Nathan, according to Morris, "'went off his trolley again,'" (pg. 437) had beaten up Sophie, and threatened to kill her. Morris asks if he should call the police, but Stingo insists on no police. Stingo fills his friend Jack in on the crisis, and Jack advises him to call Nathan's brother. Unfortunately, Larry and his wife are out of town, but then Morris Fink calls back to say he has heard from Sophie again. She is in the hospital having her arm x-rayed, and will wait for Stingo to pick her up later at Dr. Blackstock's office. It is nearly five o'clock before Stingo gets to Blackstock's, only to find that Sophie has not yet returned from the hospital. He paces the waiting room until she shows up, looking at least ten years older. Her arm is not broken, she tells him, and when he asks, she tells him she does not know where Nathan is. Sophie suggests they go have a drink.

Sitting at the bar of a Chinese restaurant on Fulton Street, Sophie fills Stingo in on the details. At first, she and Nathan had a wonderful time. He took her shopping for clothes and a ring in preparation for their wedding day, and was studying up on the South to be ready for the trip. So the next day, Sophie ignored the warning signs when Nathan called her from his 'lab' to announce another breakthrough, which they would celebrate that night at Morty Haber's party. Sophie thought he had stopped taking the amphetamines, but by the time Sophie arrived at Morty's party, Nathan was high. He did not begin screaming at her until they got home after midnight. Again Nathan had accused her of infidelity, but she will not tell Stingo with whom. Nathan had stalked out of the house and returned at dawn with a pistol. That decides it for Stingo; he hurries Sophie home and helps her pack her things, intending to take her to the St. George Hotel near her office. While they are packing, the phone rings and it is Nathan, calling for Stingo. Stingo humors him, trying to find out where he is. Nathan accuses Stingo of sleeping with Sophie, and says he is coming to get them both. Sophie hovers by the phone and Nathan says he is not far away. Nathan fires the gun near the phone so that it roars in Stingo's ears. He hangs up the phone, exchanges a look with Sophie, and they immediately flee the boarding house.



Chapter 14 Analysis

Stingo and Sophie have just experienced the 'Honeymoon Phase' of the abuse cycle. Their fear of losing Nathan was so great, that upon his return, they gratefully took him back in, no questions asked. In classic denial, both Stingo and Sophie ignored all the signs that they knew meant trouble because they simply did not want to believe that the Nathan they loved was the same man who had hurt them both so badly.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The next morning finds Sophie and Stingo on a train to Washington, D.C. on their way to Virginia. The train stops for a few minutes due to a power failure, and Stingo takes that time to plan his future with Sophie. He has already called both Nathan's brother and his own father from the train station, and intends to take Sophie down to the farm and marry her. After all, Virginian society would not permit them to live together otherwise. He hugs Sophie and thinks about his nearly completed book - he has only the suicide left to write. He imagines a wonderful life as a writer and thinks of the children he and Sophie will have while he tenderly watches her sleep. She wakes when the train passes through New Jersey and, to Stingo's dismay, starts drinking. She asks him if the train stops soon, because she wants to call Nathan. Stingo reminds her that is over, that Nathan was at the point of killing them both. He tells her Nathan needs to be institutionalized. Sophie sobs and says then she will call Larry Landau or Morris Fink to try to find out what has happened to Nathan. The train pulls into Philadelphia, and Stingo tries to charm her with a cute story, but she starts sobbing again, and begins speaking of Auschwitz. Stingo assures her she was just a victim and should release her guilt over the past. He calls her darling and is on the verge of declaring his love to her when Sophie gets up to go to the bathroom. When the conductor calls 'All aboard' Sophie is still not back. The train chugs off, and Stingo searches its length desperately, finally finding Sophie in the club car, where she had hoped to find a telephone. She tells him, in a sad little voice, she does not think she is going to make it.

They check into a hotel in Washington as man and wife, Stingo pretending to be a reverend. They fall asleep together, and when Stingo wakes, Sophie asks him where they are going. Stingo tells her about the farm again and finally speaks of his love for her and that he wants to marry her. She suggests they just live together for a while before deciding on marriage, but Stingo explains that would not be allowed in their new community. She asks if there will be music, and Stingo promises to buy her a record player. Sophie tells him of a recurring dream in which her father wants her dead, and then she announces that she must tell Stingo something no one else knows. She insists on taking a drink first. The story is of her first day at Auschwitz, but as usual, Sophie takes her time, talking around the main event. She tells him more about Wanda, about how they had briefly had a lesbian relationship, but most importantly, that Wanda kept telling her that none of them were safe while the Nazis were in power. Finally, Sophie returns to the subject of her arrival at Auschwitz.

On the platform, confronted by a Nazi doctor, Sophie acts desperately. She speaks to him in German, tells him she and her children are not Jews, that they are racially pure, and that she is a devout Catholic. The officer quotes scripture to her, "*Did he not say, Suffer the little children to come unto Me?*" (pg. 483) The doctor tells her she may keep one of her children. Sophie does not understand. The doctor clarifies that she must choose which one will live today; the other child will be sent to the gas chamber



immediately. If she does not choose, both children will get the gas. She refuses to choose, and the doctor starts to send them both to the death line. Sophie screams out for him to take Eva, and the child is led away to her death, still carrying her little flute case. Years later, Stingo will find a way to explain the doctor's behavior. Stingo believes the doctor had lost faith in God, had convinced himself the only way to get it back was to force someone of faith to commit a terrible sin.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Stingo is imagining a wonderful future with Sophie, and ironically fails to see that her future is no different than the future he is writing for the protagonist of his novel. He has only the suicide left to write, he tells us, foreshadowing the next, and final chapter, not only of his own novel, but of Sophie's story as well.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Stingo opens this chapter by making fun of his ability to talk, non-stop, about the subjects he knows well. He says his family and friends have shown incredible patience with his wordiness over the years, but adds that sometimes, like on this trip with Sophie, the ability serves him well. His steady stream of talk about the history of peanut farming allows her a much needed break from talking about Nathan or Auschwitz. Listening to him speak of the South, Sophie tells him that she cannot drive and will not be much of an asset to him on a farm. Stingo reassures her that she will fit right in, and begins talking about their wedding. Sophie stops him cold with her reminder that she already has a wedding dress in her luggage, which she was supposed to wear to marry Nathan. Stingo finally realizes the difference between his dream and Sophie's. She squeezes his hand and assures him she does want to go to the farm with him, but she is not ready to talk about marriage. Gloom overtakes Stingo, especially when Sophie adds that she needs a drink.

They find a table in a restaurant and Sophie gets her drink. Stingo asks her about her son. Sophie is relieved to talk about Jan, telling Stingo how many times she has wondered if he is still alive. The names of the Lebensborn children were all changed at the time of adoption, but Sophie does not even think Jan made it that far. She is certain Hoss broke his promise to her and left Jan to die at Auschwitz. She tells him that when the SS heard the Russians were coming to liberate the camp, they debated over the best way to kill the children, and finally decided to freeze them to death. The children were forced to wet their clothes in the river, and then stand for role call in the wet clothes while the winter winds froze them. The children, already so weak from their torturous life in the camp, died easily of exposure that day; Sophie believes Jan was with them, but she will never know for sure.

By the end of dinner, Sophie is pretty drunk, and Stingo takes her back to the hotel room to sleep. Around two in the morning, Stingo is awakened by Sophie, who kisses his ear and undresses him; she wants to make love. That night, all of Stingo's dreams come true, as Sophie initiates him into the pleasures of lovemaking. They are both insatiable; Stingo, because he is twenty-two and 'a virgin,' and Sophie, because - as Stingo realizes later - she was desperately clinging to life. When Stingo wakes it is noon, and Sophie is long gone. She leaves him a note thanking him for the beautiful night but explains she must return to Nathan. She asks for his forgiveness and assures him he will find a wonderful woman to live with him on the farm. Sophie ends the note by denouncing God, Life, and what remains of Love.

Morris Fink would later claim he never saw either Nathan or Sophie return to the boarding house. Larry Landau had entrusted Fink with the responsibility of calling him immediately if he saw Nathan and had given him a fat tip to ensure his cooperation. Fink never placed the call. Fink only realized Sophie was back when he saw her in the



hallway, wearing a 1930s style costume he had seen her wear before with Nathan. She saw Morris and gave him some money to go buy her a bottle of whiskey. When he returned with the whiskey, the classical music was cranked, her door was locked, and she did not respond to his knock. He set the bottle outside the door. When he came back that evening, it was still there, and the door was still locked. He finally called Larry, and the two men broke down the door.

Stingo, meanwhile, had decided not to pursue Sophie. He was utterly crushed and disappointed by her leaving him, and bought a ticket back to Franklin, Virginia. However, en route, his hangover wears off, and he remembers Sophie. Stingo believes he had so quickly resolved to forget her because his subconscious mind must have known she was headed for death, and he could not consciously face that fact. Now, clear-headed again, he thinks of her note and realizes that it was practically a suicide note. He gets on a train heading back toward Brooklyn, but as the train goes in motion, he already knows it will be too late. In the days before cell phones, he could not even call the boardinghouse to warn anyone until the train reached the station. A black woman on the train notices Stingo's pain and offers him her bible. Together, they read aloud from it until the lady exits the train in Newark, telling him everything is going to be all right.

At Yetta's, Stingo encounters police barricades and floodlights. The cops do not want him to enter, but Larry spots him in the crowd and gets the cops to let him through. Stingo heads down the hall to Sophie's room. Inside he finds the bodies of Sophie and Nathan on the bed, dressed in their jaunty, period costumes, holding each other in one final embrace. They were buried, side by side, in a Nassau County cemetery. Larry arranged it all - a quasi-religious ceremony (since both Nathan and Sophie had lost their faith), attended by Nathan's older sister and her teenaged son; the Doctors Blackstock and Katz came along with some female co-workers of Sophie's; Yetta Zimmerman, Morris Fink, and Moishe Muskatblit from the boarding house; and Morty Haber and his group of friends from Brooklyn College, whom Stingo clung to for comfort throughout the service. Remembering that the day Sophie met Nathan, she had gone to the Brooklyn College library to find an Emily Dickinson book, Stingo chooses one of Dickinson's poems to read over the coffin: "Ample make this bed. Make this bed with awe; In it wait till judgment break, Excellent and fair."

Stingo quotes for us a scrap of journal writing he had saved from that time:

"The query: 'At Auschwitz, tell me, where was God?'

And the answer: 'Where was man?'"

Then one final piece of writing, which Stingo calls the only remaining truth: "*Let your love flow out on all living things.*" (pg. 513) Late that night of the funeral, Stingo finally cries. He says he cannot cry for all six million Jews, or the Poles, or the Serbs, or the Russians - he does not have enough tears to weep for all of humanity, but he does weep for Sophie, for Nathan, for Bobby Weed, Artiste, Maria Hunt, and Nat Turner, and for brave Wanda. He weeps long into the night for the people who had become dear to



him. Stingo finally falls asleep very late that night, his dreams tormented. When our narrator awakes, he is on a bright sunny beach, surrounded by the joyful sounds of his own children. Nathan, Sophie, and Auschwitz are all safely in the past.

Chapter 16 Analysis

Stingo, through the art of author William Styron, discovers the same key to unlocking the heartstrings, which film director James Cameron used so brilliantly in making the movie, *Titanic*. The human heart cannot grasp the sheer numbers behind a tragedy like the Titanic, or a worldwide catastrophe like the Holocaust. If we say thousands died on the Titanic, or millions were killed in the Holocaust, the sheer size of those numbers prevents our understanding. They are just numbers, without meaning. It is this lack of meaning, which allows angry, young people in this country today call themselves Nazis, and to deny, through sheer ignorance, that the Holocaust ever occurred.

Literature and film have the ability to educate people, to teach them of the true depths of our most tragic histories so that we will not repeat them. Cameron, in his film, made the two thousand deaths on the Titanic real to the viewer, by making us care about just two people on board the ship. The pain the viewer feels, when these two fictional characters we care about die, helps us understand the numbers - if two deaths are this painful, multiply that feeling by two thousand dead, and you get the depth of the tragedy on the Titanic. Stingo cannot mourn the whole world. Millions dead in the Holocaust is too much pain for one sensitive heart to understand. But he can mourn those few for which he cared. He knows, for every tear he cries over Sophie, another tear is shed somewhere for each of the millions of other victims of the Nazis. By bringing the scope of the tragedy down to an individual, human level, Stingo finds hope and empowerment. If the death of one person can make a difference, then the life of one person can, too. It is enough, and it is all we can do, to let our love flow out into our lives, touching every person who crosses our path.



Characters

Stingo

Stingo is the narrator, and the only one of the three main characters to have survived their association. He is a fitting narrator for Sophie's story, since she is the only one in her family who survived the Holocaust. Sophie entrusts her secrets to Stingo, and he becomes the sole living witness to the truth about her past and to the realities of her relationship with Nathan. As a writer, he feels compelled to make their story into a book. It will be many years after the events of 1947 before Stingo has acquired enough distance and perspective to tell the tale. So it is that when Stingo begins his narration of the life and times of Sophie and Nathan, he is already a much older man, who has achieved success as a writer, and who has found the domestic bliss of marriage and children. This life experience, plus the heavy research he has done into the events of the Holocaust, gives Stingo the ability to tell the story from a broader perspective than he had at the time the events occurred.

The story of his friendship with Sophie and Nathan represents Stingo's coming of age. In 1947 Stingo was a young man with aspirations to become a published writer. His Southern roots were a mixed blessing, gifting him with charm, warmth, and manners, but cursing him with the legacy of slavery. Stingo supports himself in Brooklyn with the money he inherited from the sale of one of his grandmother's slaves. Stingo struggles to love his homeland, despite its fatal flaw of racism, but his heart never allows him to return to the idyllic land of his youth. Stingo turns his back on racism, slavery, and guilt by choosing to spend the remainder of his days up North. Throughout the novel, he struggles with the decision whether to move back or not, and it is his friendship with Sophie that keeps him up North. First he stays because he enjoys the company of his new friends, Nathan and Sophie. But as he, Nathan, and Sophie struggle to come to terms with the Holocaust, Stingo eventually decides that he can never return to the blissful ignorance of his youth.

Nathan Landau

Nathan Landau is a piece of work — a train wreck. His intelligence, culture, charm, and family money would have allowed him to become anything he wanted in life. But Nathan's mind is emotionally disturbed. He has a Jekyll and Hyde personality, which, in those days, was diagnosed as schizophrenia, but in today's more enlightened era of FBI profiling, his behavior would be better described as the type of abusive personality who commits murder-suicide. Because Sophie was actively suicidal, Nathan was not seen as a murderer; she was a semi-willing accomplice to her own murder.

The other reason Nathan is not viewed as a violent criminal is because of his incandescent charm. Had Nathan been able to shake the emotional problems that plagued him, he would have been a phenomenal human being. Stingo describes his



amazing facility with language, his gift for entertaining others, and the deep generosity he shared with friends. Nathan was undeniably interesting and well versed in literature and the arts. Nathan studied anything that fascinated him, including politics, the history of slavery, and, of course, the Holocaust. On his good days, Nathan was a man who could mingle easily with Nobel laureates and kings, or entertain the masses with his gift for humor.

Sophie Zawistowski

Sophie is an enigma. Her beautiful face was the type on which men projected their own dreams. Her father and husband both tried to make her into a vapidly efficient German *fräulein*; the woman of their dreams, not hers. Later with Jozef, he and Wanda tried to make her into a spy. When Nathan entered her life and brought her back from the brink of death, Nathan felt he had earned the right to turn her into whatever he wanted. To that end, he dressed her up like a doll and demanded that she fit his expectations of the ideal woman. Even Stingo projects his fantasies onto her. First, he projects his sexual fantasies on her, and later, after Stingo has decided to sever ties with Nathan, Stingo quickly projects her into his new dream of married life on the farm in Virginia. But what did Sophie want? From all appearances, she never asked herself that question. She knew what she wanted as a young girl - to study music, marry a professor, and live in cultured domestic harmony like her parents. When the war intruded on her idyllic childhood, she realized that her parents' life was never harmonious at all. After everything that happened to her during the war, Sophie hated herself too much to allow herself to consider her own happiness. However, time heals all wounds, and Sophie had begun to rediscover the joy of living by the time she met Nathan. It is likely that, without his deadly judgment, she might have recovered to the point where she could begin to visualize a future for herself that did not include punishment and pain.

Farrell

Stingo's senior editor at McGraw-Hill. A good-natured Irishman who hated his job and felt disillusioned by life. Farrell saw in Stingo a young man, much like Farrell's own son would have been, had he survived the war.

The Weasel

The new editor-in-chief who fires Stingo from his post at McGraw-Hill early in the novel.

Morris Fink

Morris gets a half priced room at Yetta's in exchange for performing janitorial services. He has keys to all the apartments, and, when Stingo's money is stolen, he blames Morris. Morris also functions as an informational relay between the characters. He is the one who calls Stingo when Sophie is in trouble and who fills Stingo in on events that



occurred in his absence. It is no accident his last name is 'Fink' — Morris is the one who tells Nathan that Katz had been in her room, although Morris must have known what Nathan would do with that information.

Moishe Muskatblit

One of the tenants at Yetta's boardinghouse. A rabbinical student.

Casimir Zawistowski

Sophie's late husband, nicknamed Kazik. He shared her father's anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi views, and like her father, was gunned down at the university by the Nazis, along with all the other academics in Warsaw.

Morty Haber

Nathan's lifeguard friend. Morty is a popular, intelligent guy with a lot of friends from his days at Brooklyn College. Unfortunately, his parties usually provide Nathan with an excuse to get high and beat Sophie.

Larry Landau

Nathan's brother; a urological surgeon with a successful practice in Forest Hills.

Rudolf Höss

In real life and in the story, Höss was the head man overseeing Auschwitz. As the camp's Commandant, he was personally responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent Jews. After the war, he was condemned to death for his crimes at the Nuremberg trials.

Professor Bieगाński

Sophie's father, a Nazi sympathizer and author of *Poland's Jewish Problem: Does National Socialism Have the Answer?*

Maria Hunt

Stingo's childhood crush. When he finds out she had moved to New York, living scant blocks away from Stingo, and had committed suicide, he is inspired to write about the tragedy in his first novel.



Objects/Places

Yetta Zimmerman's Boarding House

This is the shockingly pink boarding house in Brooklyn, where Stingo, Nathan, and Sophie all live. Yetta is known for her liberal attitudes about male and female boarders having overnight guests.

Auschwitz

The infamous concentration camp to which Sophie and her children were sent. Unfortunately, it is not a fictional place made up by the author. Auschwitz still stands today, as a monument to the countless souls who were murdered on its soil.

The Maple Court

One of the few bars in Flatbush, it is where Stingo, Nathan, and Sophie like to hang out.

Nathan's Phonograph

Considered a luxury item in those days, only people like Nathan, who had a lot of money, could afford one. Music is important to all three of the friends, and this phonograph provides many hours of enjoyment. The doomed couple died while listening to its music.



Social Concerns

The Nazi Holocaust in the twentieth century has been so overwhelmingly documented and discussed that it is difficult to grapple with the infernal and lasting effects of so incredible an historical event. For Styron it seems a natural outgrowth of his fascination with the individual self and the systems of domination and destruction that threaten to obliterate him. The ineradicable evil of the Holocaust still haunts western society today, and the shivers of disbelief and horror which still attend it — despite or because of the knowledge and ultimate proof of its happening — continue to occupy the imaginations of writers, survivors, and others.

Styron is also still fascinated with the process of growing up in the more insulated and isolated, at times "innocent" world of the America that he had known. Such isolation can lead to a tragic misunderstanding of the way the western world works. The novel not only explores and exposes the effects of the Holocaust on the Polish survivor, Sophie Zawistowska, but also on the American outlook of the budding writer Stingo, a semiautobiographical character based on Styron's own youth.

Stingo's apprehension of what has happened to Sophie, his recognition of his own complicity in her survival, guilt, and self-destruction, and his burgeoning sense of the violent and tragic dimensions to life lived in the twentieth century parallels in Styron's novel America's own recognition of the tragedy of human life, a knowledge most Americans would just as soon avoid. Stingo's South, Sophie's Poland, and Nathan's New York, where most of the novel takes place in 1947, all share a degree of guilt and complicity with the Holocaust itself.

Techniques

As usual Styron structures his novel by re-arranging the time sequences within it to provide the most shocking and dramatic events which are gradually revealed and lead up to Sophie's "final choice" concerning the life and death of her children at Auschwitz.

The older Stingo recalls the Stingo starting out in 1947. The younger Stingo plays brother-confessor to Sophie's narrative revelations which continually shift and change the closer she gets to the complex truth of her nature and of her way of surviving the Holocaust.

Thus the reader must penetrate a nest of narratives beginning with the older Stingo, progressing to the younger, and then leading on to Sophie's revelations.

The effect of this sequence of withholding information increases the necessity of its bursting forth, a kind of return of the repressed that, in being repressed, must all the more come forward and be finally expressed as violently and truthfully as possible. Such a consciously dramatic strategy parallels the use of similar patterns in Gothic novels and mysteries.

The elaborate labyrinth of Styron's technique implicates everyone and everything in various power plays and darker mysteries. Sex, death, language, and even Nazism reflect and partake of one another in so carefully orchestrated a structure that they, therefore, like the narratives themselves, seem intimately and inextricably bound up with one another. Styron's narrative techniques clearly implicate the reader in the process of self-discovery as well and intimate at some broader darker design that generates the master-slave patterns of western society of which we are all a part.



Themes

The Holocaust

Stingo is the outsider in the conflict between the embattered Jewish community and the Nazis. By placing a Southern man, like Stingo, in the story, the author is able to incorporate a unique viewpoint on the Holocaust, as Stingo compares and contrasts it with the evils of Southern slavery. He is only two generations removed from the slave-owners in his family and never forgets that he is currently living off the proceeds of a human being sold into hard labor and probable death. Stingo condemns the Nazis, while secretly feeling he is no better; he carries a level of guilt, which later helps him empathize with Sophie's guilt at the end of the story when she confesses to him. Nathan is able to use both Stingo's and Sophie's guilt against them throughout the novel and often serves as a counterpoint to both of their views on the Holocaust. Ironically, although Nathan is the only main character who is Jewish, his abusive nature makes him more representative of the oppressor than the oppressed in the frequent discussions and explorations of racism in the novel. The author's choice to make the Jewish character an abusive man defies public sentiment in the wake of the Holocaust, as does his choice of making his heroine a reformed anti-Semite, victimized by the very faction her family supported. Styron's unusual character choices demonstrate his insistence on the value of personal responsibility and that the value of an individual outweighs their racial profile. Styron wants to make us empathize with Sophie, whose Polish countrymen were mostly Nazi collaborators, in order to prove the point that it was not only Jews and blacks who are judged by their race. But then he also makes the case that people should be held responsible for the actions of their countrymen, as he agonizes over his personal responsibility for his family having been slave-owners and for the racism he grew up with as a child. Styron's gut-wrenching, personal honesty as a writer is something to be respected, whether one likes his controversial writing style or not. He has the courage to explore various sides of difficult social and political issues. Nevertheless, there are times when Stingo's offensively racial viewpoints seem to prove Nathan right, that the narrator is a representative of a dying breed of racists.

Suicide

Suicide is viewed in the novel as the last resort of human beings who have lost all reason for living. However, suicide is not only the act of a depressed and hopeless individual; suicide can also be the act of a vengeful person. Both Nathan and Sophie are obsessed with suicide in the novel and speak of it frequently. Nathan's suicide falls in the category of a revenge killing. It is his way of telling Sophie, 'See what you've done to me? See what your faithlessness has made me do?' Sophie's suicidal tendencies fall more into the first category - a giving up on life by a woman who cannot bear the suffering she has endured. Sophie's suicide, in contrast with Nathan's, says, 'You're right, Nathan. I don't deserve to live.' When she confesses to Stingo, Sophie has come to believe she is a bad person; she has judged herself and her actions at Auschwitz as



unforgivable. A part of Sophie truly loved life, and had she been able to forgive herself, she would gratefully have done so and gone on to enjoy a full life. Nathan's judgment, then, becomes the noose with which she hangs herself. She was willing to die, but only because Nathan was unwilling to forgive her or ever let her live down her past. His voice was the voice of the devil in her ear, telling her she was a no good whore who did not deserve to live. Sophie, in her desperation, chose to believe that voice, instead of the more forgiving, loving voice of her friend Stingo.

Coming of Age

The events that transpire during the time we are growing up and coming of age lay the foundation of our personal character. Our character is not built solely by the events themselves, but are built by our reactions to these events. Sophie makes reference to this when she speaks of how the Jewish prisoners behaved in Auschwitz. She says that some people demonstrated the most amazing courage and generosity to help others at the risk of their own lives, while other prisoners sold out their friends for an extra crust of bread. Now the laws of the United States of America allow people to take any action necessary to preserve their own lives, and Sophie seems to share that opinion when she tells Stingo that no matter how the prisoners behaved at Auschwitz, the Nazis were the ones to blame, and the prisoners should be forgiven all actions taken in the interest of their own survival. However, Sophie does not really believe this, because she judges herself - actually condemns *herself* to death - for her actions and choices at Auschwitz. So the story of Stingo's coming of age is also the story of Sophie's coming of age. She regrets not renouncing her father's views and hates herself for trying to use his anti-Semitism as her ticket out of Auschwitz. It is not the horrible events of her life that she hates; what she hates are the choices she made in the face of these events. She can never forgive herself for telling the SS officer to take Eva. In bed with Nathan, she often murmurs the words, "Take me," which supposedly are directed at Nathan, but in her mind she is reliving the choice she made at Auschwitz, and telling the SS officer to take her instead of her daughter.

Now we come to Stingo's choices. Raised in a similar environment of racial prejudice, as Sophie was, Stingo chooses to react very differently. He maintains a loving bond with his father, but turns his back forever on his Southern homeland. Stingo chooses to write books about the tragedies that touched his life, with the intention of promoting human understanding. Despite some ingrained racist views, Stingo chooses to transcend his prejudices. Even though the public later condemns some of his books as racist or smug, Stingo can rise above the criticism because he knows he can be proud of the choices he has made.

The power of history to destroy and annihilate the individual self emerges in Sophie's Choice. As a result of Sophie's victimization at the hands of and complicity with the Nazi occupiers of her country, she commits suicide. Nathan Landau, her savior but also her victimizer and executioner, deriding her for her complicity in the Holocaust and at the same time drawn to her beauty and desperate sensuality, commits suicide with her. The



novel is strewn with history's victims, a series of deaths from Stingo's mother to Maria Hunt, the doomed woman from his Virginia youth.

In order to survive as she has, Sophie has had to lie, steal, and cooperate with the Nazi authorities. Her very survival is based upon her cooperation with the enemy, and the guilt and terror that remain as the legacy of such involvement necessarily lead to her self-destruction. Sophie is no mere victim of history. She has also participated in it, if only to survive. Such personal complicity complicates her role as victim and adds to the tragic burdens and fate of Styron's novel.

As a product of the sexually repressed American era of the puritanical 1940s, Stingo is obsessed with sex and spends much of his time fantasizing about and plotting to possess Sophie.

His own thirst for such a conquest suggests his own "Nazi-like" propensities, the need of the western man to dominate and devalue the woman.

Such a master-slave relationship, however sexually expressed, parallels the other relationships in the novel between men and women in Polish, German, and American cultures and reveals an intimate connection between western sexuality, western dominance, and western imperialistic drives.

Styron's assessment of the American avoidance of tragedy and the lessons of history, with America basking in its own post-World-War-II victorious powers and seemingly triumphant optimism, is explored by the narrator, the older Stingo, who looks back on his loss of innocence, his own incredible complicity in the tragic events that have engulfed him, and at the same time tries to explain the seeming inevitability of the Nazi ascendancy. This constant quest in search of the ultimate meaning of Auschwitz propels both the narrator, Styron, and the younger Stingo, but in the end only the fact of evil remains, an enigmatic catastrophe that Americans must constantly try to understand in order never to repeat it.

That awareness comes as the culmination in Styron's fiction so far of his persistent need to keep the tragic and horrifying events of history and the individual's complicity with them forever in the forefront of our minds.

Throughout the novel Styron also explores the process of interpretation and understanding and views them as acts of penetration and violation. Such acts infect the use of language as well, so that the interrelationships between sexual conquest, self-destruction, and murder, along with linguistic interpretation, reflect and eerily parallel one another. No one remains innocent. Both Stingos try to possess Sophie whether through interpretation or sexual conquest, and both lose her. Perhaps Styron is trying to suggest that to possess Sophie, sexually and spiritually, is to lose her, just as in trying to possess the ultimate implications about Auschwitz, the best we can possess is the ultimately inexplicable.



Style

Style

Point of View

Sophie's Choice is written predominantly in the first person narrative style. Our narrator is Stingo himself, several years further down life's road. By making the narrator an older Stingo, the author brings a sense of maturity and thoughtful reflection to the narrator's recollection of his young life, which is often the case in a coming of age tale. Wisdom and maturity are also provided by the character of Stingo's father, who, through his letters, takes over the first person narrative from time to time throughout the novel. The only other character given this privilege is Sophie, whose first person descriptions of her former life are quoted at length by Stingo. Given Stingo's often expressed suspicions of Sophie, it is most likely he quotes her directly on the occasions when he believes she is lying - as if to protect his own reputation, he reports her lies in her own words, to avoid taking responsibility for any misleading information she might provide.

Since Stingo is a writer, the author uses supporting documents such as letters, journal entries, McGraw-Hill work assignments, and writings about the holocaust to weave an ostensibly accurate and thorough retelling of events from Stingo's twenty-second year.

Setting

The story's setting of post World War II New York provides a colorful city backdrop in which the events occur. Much more than that, 1947 New York is a focal point for discussion of the novel's central theme, the Holocaust. With Jewish refugees arriving in New York from around the globe, the personal stories of the Holocaust filter in with details so horrifying as to provoke the greatest outrage among urban New Yorkers.

New York contains a thriving Jewish population, which stretches from the highest levels of city politics and business leaders, to a solid foundation of middle-class, Jewish-owned businesses, to the immigrant population, which grew tremendously after the war as European Jews, robbed penniless by the Nazis, sought refuge in the New World. Perhaps nowhere more than the bustling metropolis of New York did Americans, especially American Jews, feel the aftershocks of the tremendous violence done in the name of National Socialism.

Language and Meaning

Language is important in the story, especially to Sophie and Stingo. As a writer, of course, Stingo values the importance of words. He admires Nathan's gift for mimicry, story-telling, and entertaining turns of phrase. Stingo enjoys Sophie's mixed up English, which is partly textbook and partly a compendium of Nathan's funny phrases, tortured



into unrecognizability by Sophie's accent. Stingo does not mock her faulty English; he is impressed by how quickly she has learned the language, and, for someone new to English, she communicates very accurately, even regarding subtle, emotional matters. Sophie has an absolute gift with languages. Prior to English, she already spoke several languages, including the countless minor dialects of German, which her father made her demonstrate for Herr Dürrfeld. It was her ability to speak, read, and write multiple languages that saved her life in Auschwitz. Had her talents not been so outstanding in this area, surely she would have been sent to the camp to die instead of being offered a safer position as a stenographer. Stingo's use of language also served him well, as his writing skill ultimately brings him a successful literary career. Socially speaking, Stingo was not above using a charming, Southern drawl and telling quaint historical anecdotes to charm the young ladies. Nathan's language becomes important in a negative sense. His blinding rages are always accompanied by the filthiest language, usually sexual and racial slurs directed at Sophie.

Structure

Sophie's Choice is divided into three, inter-related stories: 1) Stingo's coming of age, 2) Sophie and Nathan's relationship, and 3) Sophie's experiences during the war. Although the majority of the book takes place in the summer of 1947, the narrative is not linear, because Sophie's story carries us in a wandering manner through time. Her experiences are too horrifying to approach directly, and so Stingo's recounting of her life meanders back and forth from one time and place to another as Sophie skirts the subject of her darkest moments. Her tale is told in a circular fashion; she keeps spiraling back to recover the same ground, but it gets darker with each retelling, as she admits to whitewashing the past. Warily, she circles the topic of her time at Auschwitz, each time revealing more of the truth, each time circling closer to the pivotal moment of her life, which took place on the train platform at Auschwitz. The present day (1947) events in which Stingo narrates his adventures with Sophie and Nathan serve as a structural underpinning for Sophie's winding narrative. Stingo's story is somewhat linear, although he often tells events in order of importance rather than strict chronology. Even so, this linear narrative is often interrupted with stories of Sophie's past, and occasionally, the narrator interjects with hints about his own future when he shares the historical perspective he has gained in his life since the days, many decades ago, when he knew Nathan and Sophie.



Quotes

"I would never have been able to make remarks like the last, nor allude in such a roguish fashion to the house of McGraw-Hill, had it not been for the fact that the senior editor above me who read all my reports was a man sharing my disillusionment with our employer and all that the vast and soulless empire stood for." Chapter 1, pg. 7

"But then I felt another nail amplify my crucifixion: they were going at it again upstairs on the accursed mattress. 'Stop it!' I roared at the ceiling, and with my forefingers plugged up my ears. *Sophie and Nathan!*" Chapter 2, pg. 45

"'Oh, we're going to be the *best* of friends!' she trilled over the train's rickety noise, and she gave my arm a tight squeeze that was certainly not flirtatious but contained something in it more than—well, casual. Call it the reassuring squeeze of one who, secure in her love for another, wished to admit a new-found companion into the privileges of her trust and affection." Chapter 3, pg. 76

"She told me that she had never been bored. She was determined to put behind her the madness of the past—or as much as a vulnerable and memory-racked mind permitted—and so for her the huge city became the New World in spirit as well as fact. Physically she sensed that she was still badly run-down, but this did not prevent her from partaking of the pleasures around her like a child turned loose in an ice cream parlor." Chapter 4, pg. 88

"'Have you read it?' he asked.

'Certainly,' I said, lying with a bald and open face.

'What did you think of it?'

I stifled a calculated yawn. 'I thought it was pretty thin.' Actually, I was very much aware of the novel, but the petty spirit which so often afflicts the unpublished writer allowed me to harbor only a grudge for what I suspected was the book's well-deserved critical approval." Chapter 5, pg. 116

"Also, I began to see how if the worst parts of the nightmare she had lived through were at once so incomprehensible and absurd as to tax—but not quite defy—the belief of a persuadable soul like myself, they would have found no acceptance whatever with Nathan. He would either not have believed her or thought her mad. He might even have tried to kill her. How, for example, could she ever have summoned the means and the strength to tell Nathan about the episode in which she was involved with Rudolf Franz Höss, SS Obersturmbannführer, Commandant of Auschwitz?" Chapter 6, pg. 147

"She gave me a moist peck on my cheek, exuding a scent of some innocent toilet water that made her smell as fresh as a daffodil, and for some reason twice as exciting as the cock teasers I had known in the Tidewater, those preposterous virgins drenched in their



odalisques' reeking musk. This was *class*, I thought, real Jewish class. A girl who felt secure enough to wear Yardley's really knew what sex was about." Chapter 7, pg. 167

"It's *cancer*, I thought all during Sophie's little soliloquy. I had really begun to burst with happiness and pride, sharing Sophie's own radiant exuberance. It's a cure for *cancer*, I kept thinking; that unbelievable son of a bitch, that scientific genius whom I am privileged to call a friend has discovered a *cure* for *cancer*." Chapter 8, pg. 194

"Finally, well then, Höss come back up the stairs. I could hear his boots on the steps and 'The Beer Barrel Polka.' I make this decision, that in some way I might appear attractive to him, standing there by the window. Sexy, you know. Excuse me, Stingo, but you know what I mean—looking as if I wanted to fuck. Looking as if I wanted to be asked to fuck. But oh, my eyes! Jesus Christ, my eyes! They were all pink, I knew, from weeping, and I was still weeping, and I was afraid this might upset my plan." Chapter 9, pg. 233

"Would it make sense to you, Stingo, if I said that I couldn't help myself and I threw myself against him, threw my arms around his waist and begged him again, saying 'Please' over and over? But I could tell from the way his muscles become stiff and this trembling that ran through him that he was finished with me. Even so I couldn't stop. I said, 'Then at least let me see my little boy, let me visit him, let me see him just once, please do that one thing for me.'" Chapter 10, pg. 285

"A blowjob, that's what I need, one of your five hundred gold zloty Polack blowjobs, hey Irma how many SS pricks did you suck to get out of there, how much master race come swallowed for *Freiheit*?" Chapter 11, pg. 337

"The dreadful bruise inflicted on her face in Warsaw had never really gone away. Conditions in the women's compound at Birkenau were hideous and a chronic bronchial ailment to which she had always been prone had flared up, bringing to her cheeks a hectic and alarming flush so bright that it almost matched her brick-red hair, or the grotesque frizzles that were left of it." Chapter 13, pg. 390

"But his absence and his whereabouts did not seem to matter; in the same way, his devastating attractiveness made it seem of small importance that he had recently reviled Sophie and me in such an outpouring of animosity and spite that it had made us both physically ill. In a sense, the in-and-out addiction which Sophie had so vividly and scarily described to me had the effect of drawing me closer to Nathan, now that he was back; romantic as my reaction doubtless was, his demonic side—that Mr. Hyde persona who possessed him and devoured his entrails from time to time—seemed now an integral and compelling part of his strange genius, and I accepted it with only the vaguest misgivings about some frenzied recurrence in the future." Chapter 14, pg. 416

"'You may keep one of your children,' he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?'

'You mean, I have to choose?'



'You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege—a choice.'

Her thought processes dwindled, ceased. Then she felt her legs crumple. 'I can't choose! I can't choose!' She began to scream." Chapter 15, pg. 483

"Let your love flow out on all living things.

But there are a couple of problems about this precept of mine. The first is, of course, that it is not mine. It springs from the universe and is the property of God, and the words have been intercepted—on the wing, so to speak—by such mediators as Lao-tzu, Jesus, Gautama Buddha and thousands upon thousands of lesser prophets, including your narrator, who heard the terrible truth of their drumming somewhere between Baltimore and Wilmington and set them down with the fury of a madman sculpting in stone." Chapter 16, pg. 513

Adaptations

Sophie's Choice became a successful film directed by Alan Pakula in 1982.

Meryl Streep as the doomed Sophie won an Academy Award in 1983 for Best Actress.



Key Questions

The Holocaust like racial slavery remains a monumental and troubled issue. Some writers have suggested that even trying to write about it only cheapens and "romanticizes" it. Styron's oblique connection with it — he never really takes us into the concentration camps — suggests that he is more interested in the effects of the Holocaust than in actually reproducing and re-creating it. All the characters in the novel are in some way affected by it, and this might be the broadest and deepest issue with which to begin an in-depth discussion about the novel.

1. Is there an unresolvable confrontation between the redemptive conclusions of Styron's novels and the landscape of depression and despair which they create? What do you feel about Stingo's "recovery" at the end of the novel?
2. What do you make of Dr. Jemand von Niemand in *Sophie's Choice*? Styron suggests that he forces the impossible choice on Sophie, to choose which of her children she will save and which she will send to her death, in order to commit such a great sin that his nonbelief in God will self-destruct and return him to a sense of religious vision. He will play God in order to restore his own belief in God. What is the role of religion here? In such a place do religious values even matter?
3. Do Styron's characters in *Sophie's Choice* have free will, or are their "choices" predetermined by the historical context within which they find themselves? Could Sophie, for instance, have come from the American South with her values and attitudes? Are the characters so "trapped" in the fate of their cultures and their histories that no choices are really possible at all? Is there one specific choice that you think best represents the title of the novel?
4. Styron compares the American South to Poland. How similar do you think these two realms are? Is he trying to involve each with the other in the way of E. M. Forster's famous advice, "Only connect"? Do you think the connection is made? And if so, what are the results of it?
5. Is the choice that Sophie makes for suicide inevitable?
6. If Styron's view of human nature is so dark and if he believes that evil is forever loose in the world, how can we think of taking any political or social position to better the general lot of humanity? Styron is himself a political liberal and supports many liberal causes. Does this strike you as a contradiction? Or are there instances in *Sophie's Choice* where direct and personal social action definitely makes a difference?
7. From Styron's assessment of it, do you think the Holocaust is the logical extension of a master-slave vision of domination and submission that exists within the very fabric of western culture? Are there distinct differences here between the Polish, German, and American "outlooks" that would undercut that notion? Does Nazism finally seem the



predetermined outgrowth of tendencies in western thought and culture? And if so, what does that bode for the future?

8. Stingo obviously undergoes a personal quest toward knowledge both of the horror in the world and in himself. Can these two be linked in any way? Is his role as a man comparable to Hess and Nathan and others in the novel? And if so, is Sophie's role as a woman "universally" true, or is she a product of her particular historical era?

Does the relationship between men and women in this novel seem to be one more example of the master-slave ethos?

9. The novel concludes with Stingo's assertion that "someday I will understand Auschwitz." That is superseded by the older Stingo's idea that "someday I will write about Sophie's life and death, and thereby help to demonstrate how absolute evil is never extinguished from the world." Why is there a distinction made between these two points of view? Does the older Stingo think he knows something that the younger Stingo cannot? And if so, what?

10. Why do you think both Sophie and Stingo are so infatuated with Nathan? How does his role bring about the tragedy of the novel? Or is he more of a catalyst than a participant? Why do you think Styron has made him Jewish? Is Styron making a statement about the historical accuracy of Polish anti-Semitism?

11. Consider some of the other minor characters. What does Leslie Lapidus have to do with the scope and vision of the novel? Why is so much made of her sharp and obscene tongue? Why are there so many deaths from so many different sources in the book? And why is there so much sexual activity and fantasizing going on? Does this connect with the Holocaust in any way? Or is this just Stingo's obsession exacerbated by the mores of 1947?



Topics for Discussion

To what degree do you believe Sophie shares her father's anti-Semitism prior to the war? What about after the war?

Give two examples of how the author uses foreshadowing in the story.

Is Stingo a reliable or unreliable narrator? Give examples to support your position.

What are some of the cues that Stingo observes, which warn him when Nathan is losing control?

In the novel, sex is a life-affirming act, often used by the characters to ward off their thoughts of death. Find and discuss three examples of this motif in the story.

The day Nathan met Sophie in the library, do you believe he actually saved her life, or did he act more like a predator, using Sophie's weakened condition to get her into his clutches?

Do you believe Sophie's lies about her past were understandable? Why or why not? Do you believe by the end of the novel that she has revealed the full truth?

Literary Precedents

The second paragraph of Styron's novel mimics the opening of Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851): "Call me Stingo." In doing so Styron points to the confessional character of the novel and of his fiction in general and directs the reader toward a psychic journey and quest that propels so many great American novels such as Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).



Related Titles

Sophie's Choice distinctly parallels Styron's own journey as a writer. Stingo's fascination with the death of a youthful friend, Maria Hunt, suggests Styron's own when he wrote about the doomed Peyton Loftis in *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951). Similarly Stingo has been able to come to New York with the money from the sale of a slave, Artiste, back in Virginia in his family years ago. His fascination with Artiste and the resulting complicity with the system of slavery suggest Styron's own in writing *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).

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Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

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