

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLMOUCI
Filozofická fakulta

Bakalářská práce

2022

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UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI
FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA
KATEDRA ANGLISTIKY A AMERIKANISTIKY

WHITE AND BLACK READINGS OF NAT TURNER'S REBELLION

Bakalářská práce

Olomouc 2022

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem veškeré použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne: *datum*

Podpis.....

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has supported me on this uneasy journey, especially my supervisor Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc. for all his involvement in every step throughout the process, for his useful feedback, encouragement, and his prompt reactions; to my family members and boyfriend, who endured this long process with me and who were trying to make every aspect of my life easier during this creative period of mine.

White and Black Readings of Nat Turner's Rebellion
Bakalářská práce

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Počet normostran: 35

Počet znaků: 62 864

Olomouc 2018

Abstract

In 1967, William Styron released a novel based on the 1831 slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, in the United States of America. Nat Turner, a thirty-one-year-old African slave that believed he had been destined to free his people, led the insurrection. The public was intrigued by the uprising. This bachelor's thesis focuses on the character of Nat Turner with the eyes of William Styron and the criticism and controversy associated with this name. My research compares Styron's literary output to Turner's testimony. It also looks at the range of Styron's imagination in his work.

Key words

Nat Turner, slave rebellion, William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner, Ten Black Writers Respond, controversy, Thomas R. Gray

Anotace

V roce 1967 vydal William Styron román založený na vzpouře černošských otroků v Southampton County ve Virginii ve Spojených státech amerických. Ono povstání vedl Nat Turner, jednátřicetiletý africký otrok, který věřil, že byl předurčen osvobodit svůj lid. Tato bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na postavu Nata Turnera v očích Williama Styrona a rozebírá kritiku a kontroverzi spojenou s jeho jménem. Dále také zkoumá, do jaké míry se Styron inspiroval historickou předlohou a které části literárního díla jsou pouze fiktivní.

Klíčová slova

Nat Turner, kontroverze, William Styron, Doznání Nata Turnera, Thomas R. Gray, černošské povstání

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PART ONE

1 Introduction - Slave Insurrection

The slave insurrection started on August 21, 1831, in Southampton, a county in the southeastern region of Virginia in the United States of America. A group of African slaves planned to conduct a "crusade against bondage" and murder all white people of any age including children, women, and men.

The slave revolt began in The Cross Keys, a village located fifteen miles from Jerusalem, where the insurgents planned to get weapons and ammunition. Subsequently, they intended to seek safety in the Dismal Swamp, a haven for fugitive slaves. Nat Turner, a thirty-one-year-old African slave who felt chosen for a great purpose, was the leader of the Southampton Insurrection; a revolt that enthralled the public. This rebellion was one of the largest slave revolts in the history of the United States of America. (Styron 1967)

1.1 Nat Turner

Nat Turner (1800-1831), son of an enslaved woman native to Africa, was born on the plantation of his mother's owner, Benjamin Turner, in Southampton, Virginia. Sequentially, he was the property of Samuel Turner, Thomas Moore, and Putnam Moore. However, by 1830, Turner was hired out to Joseph Travis. (Bergman 1969)

Turner could read and write; he was highly talented. Since Turner was surrounded by several religious people, religion affected him greatly. Turner went through a lot of revelations and began to believe that he was "ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty." (Gray, Andrews, and Gates 2000)

On 12 May 1828, while Turner was working in the fields, he heard "a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to [him] and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that [he] should take it on

and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.” (Gray, Andrews, and Gates 2000, 235)

After this incident, Turner informed four loyal slaves about his plan for an insurrection. They chose to join him. The date of commencement was chosen for 4 July, American Independence Day. This decision resulted in them being cursed as they had wished to “pervert that sacred day.” Turner was unwell on this day, so the conspirators waited for another sign, which came on 13 August in the form of the sun's “greenish blue tint”. (Aptheker 2012, 44)

A fiery preacher he soon acquired leadership among the Negroes of the Travis plantation and believed himself chosen to lead them from bondage (Bergman 1969).

The plotters' penultimate meeting before the attack took place in the woods of Turner's master's plantation on Sunday afternoon, 21 August. Hark Travis, Henry Porter, Sam Francis, and Nelson Williams, among his fellow slaves, had already been inducted; new members included Jack Reese, who was thought to be influenced by Hark Travis and Will Francis, who stated that “his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him,” and Turner believed both of them. (Gray, Andrews, and Gates 2000, 254)

The plan, which was in the works for six months, was to travel to Jerusalem, Southampton County's main town, obtain guns and ammunition, and then seek sanctuary in the Dismal Swamp, a haven for escaped slaves from the surrounding districts. “It was swiftly determined [that] we should begin at home on that night, and that until we had armed and equipped ourselves, and assembled sufficient force, no age nor sex was to be spared.” (Gray, Andrews, and Gates 2000)

By the day of the insurrection, Nat Turner and his men's primary target was Joseph Travis and his family. Per the original plan, they began their approach to Jerusalem, and as they did, more and more slaves [from every plantation] began to join them. During their pursuit, they were bold; brazenly killing any and every white person they encountered. Some slaves were equipped with muskets, axes, and scythes, while others rode atop their masters' horses. “These negroes had been systematically brutalized from childhood; they had been denied legalized or permanent marriage; they had witnessed a habitual licentiousness that could only exist under slavery; some of them had seen their wives and sisters habitually polluted by the husbands and brothers of these fair white women who were now completely in their power.” (Higginson 1971, 57)

Although audacious, the “crusade against bondage” did not endure long. By the 23rd of August, the revolt had been quelled. Despite Turner's concerns, his supporters wanted to

recruit Parker's slaves. This decision turned out to be a perilous error. Eighteen whites attacked those who waited for them. General Eppes, the leader of the soldiers in Jerusalem, said that he had captured 48 people. What happened to these folks is unknown. (Aptheker 2012). Because they were defeated within forty-eight hours, R.P.Howison reacted: "But when within a few miles of the place, [Jerusalem] they were met by a small body of white men, armed with guns generally loaded with birdshot, and at the first discharge, the cowardly wretches turned and fled to the swamps behind them" (Aptheker 2012, 53).

As precedent, majority of slave revolts were poorly organized, but Nat Turner's Rebellion stood out. According to some historical accounts, the Revolt was headed by poor whites, a class also ostracized "which has so often been depicted as the evil of slavery [because] they did not consider it as disgrace to work side by side with the slaves." (Drewry 1971, 77) However, according to a majority of other accounts, it does not appear that any white people were involved in the revolt's planning (Aptheker 2012).

1.1.1 Nat Turner's Sexuality

Nat's sexuality was one pronouncement that sparked considerable controversy. Why didn't Styron make a connection between Nat and a black woman? Nat's marriage was never mentioned in any of the sources; therefore, it is straightforward enough to assume that Styron regarded Nat as a frustrated celibate. Such speculation made psychological sense because chastity combined with unwavering devotion to a cause has been a hallmark of religious rebels and reformers throughout history. Yet, Styron's inventing of a relationship between Nat and a teen-aged white girl, the daughter of a small landowner, sparked the most outrage. However, Turner himself admitted to only murdering one young white woman, Margaret Whitehead, called "the belle of the nation," and after which, his insurgency stalled. What does a novelist do with this information, as opposed to a historian? During the time of insurgency, Virginia was considering abolishing slavery. It's possible that the Civil War could have been averted if Virginia had abolished slavery. (Sirlin 1998)

Margaret Whitehead and Nat Turner had a relationship that Styron sought to understand. Perhaps she had sexually enticed him, causing him to become enraged. Regardless, Nat's heinous murder served as a dramatic metaphor for slavery's annihilating force, which suffocated both black and white people. (Sirlin 1998)

1.1.2 Nat Turner's Religious Background

Understanding Nat Turner's deep and dynamic religious background is critical in order to understand what moved him in the revolt. Styron was fascinated by these motivational grounds behind Turner's uprising against white slaveowners. As it appears, Turner's actions were motivated by religion rather than tyranny. He was well knowledgeable about the Bible, he could even interpret it, as substantiated by the white man's baptism. And according to historical documents, his employers did not treat him as harshly as compared to other slaves.

At first, Turner's faith played a role in his sentiments toward his friendship with Willis. Turner tries to convert him to Christianity, and succeeds: "I was able eventually to bring him into an awareness of God's great handiwork and the wonder of His presence abiding in all the firmament." (Styron 1967, 203) Faith confirms the majesty and beauty of existence as divine presence in this case. Shortly following their conversion, the two men are fishing and experience religious euphoria. During which, Willis pricks his finger and unconsciously swears. This prompted Nat to attack his comrade. Nat immediately regretted his actions and expresses his guilt by softly touching Willis; this empathetic response leads to their sexual encounter: "I reached up to wipe away the blood from his lips, pulling him near with the feel of his shoulders slippery beneath my hand, and then we somehow fell on each other, very close, soft and comfortable in a sprawl like babies; beneath my exploring fingers his hot skin throbbed and pulsed like the throat of a pigeon, and I heard him sigh in a faraway voice, and then for a long moment as if set free into another land we did with our hands together what, before, I had done alone. Never had I known that human flesh could be so sweet." (Styron 1967, 204)

Turner's devout faith drives him to look for anything in the Bible that would justify his sexual connection with Willis. Turner allows himself to take in the beauty and satisfaction of the event yet adhering to an affirmative version of faith: "My skin still tingled with pleasure, a tired gentle luxurious feeling." Willis' sexual closeness is in line with his religious beliefs, which elevate earthly experience. (Styron 1967, 205)

1.2 William Styron

Styron was born and raised in a Virginia still fragmented by racial injustice. For better or worse, the controversy surrounding one of Styron's most famous works, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, stained his image. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in April

1968, that novel, which was a huge hit at the time of its release, became the target of assaults. Nonetheless, as Styron frequently contended when the dispute erupted, his work introduced many Americans, black and white, to Nat Turner's lost past. (Ross 2012)

“When William Styron died on November 1, 2006, the South lost one of its last voices of white Southern liberalism” (Ross 2012, 88). There is no denying that Styron was trying to see Turner through his own experience of being a white, anti-segregationist Southerner. (Ross 2012)

1.2.1 Pulitzer Prize

William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was released in October of 1967. Styron's fictionalised account of Nat Turner's 1831 slave insurrection in the author's home state of Virginia quickly became a best-seller, receiving the Pulitzer Prize in 1968 and the Howells Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1970.

Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was the first biographical book to really challenge the Pulitzer committee. The Pulitzer Prize committee debated the biographical novel for a long time before finally accepting it. The committee's difficulties in judging the biographical novel was exacerbated by the fact that it lacked a sufficient language or conceptual framework for making systematic sense of it. “The Fiction Jury could not reach a unanimous opinion” concerning this work, according to the 1968 report, therefore it provided a form containing “a minority and a majority opinion and a possible compromise selection.” (Fischer and Fischer 2007)

1.3 History

When William Styron started writing his novel in 1960, the US was in the midst of the civil-rights struggle. “*The Confessions of Nat Turner* came out in 1967 before the Vietnam War overtook the civil rights movement as the leading preoccupation of liberal America, the timing is propitious.” (Towers 1979) Although the year 1962 was a time of hope and racial reconciliation, harsher facts surfaced throughout the five years it took to finish the book: “Birmingham, Selma, the assassination of Medgar Evers, and churches set on fire - the fire about which James Baldwin warned in his landmark 1963 book, *The Fire Next Time*.” (Sirlin 1998, 57) Styron says in *Nat Turner Revisited* that his naivete or blindness prevented him from foreseeing the wrath that would follow his work. In this essay, Styron is trying to deal

with the question of why this novel still makes people riled up, why they think it is politically incorrect in some quarters, and why this piece of historical fiction made a mark in history and moved into the public consciousness of political discussion that coloured the most intense debates of its time. (Styron 1992)

“In the 60s, white Southerners commonly complained that they should not be held accountable for the sins of their fathers. Styron's novel, in this light, represents a bold attempt to make modern Southern whites confront their own complicity in continuing the saga of racial oppression. For Styron, Turner's history could not be separated from his own.” (Ross 2012, 93)

When the novel was released in 1967, Styron was invited to speak at Wilberforce University, one of the few all-black universities in the North, named for British abolitionist William Wilberforce. The audience greeted him enthusiastically. At Wilberforce, Styron voiced his hope that a greater understanding of African history, including enslavement, would help blacks and whites reconcile their racial animosity. In 1967, he believed that his immersion in history had helped him dispel many of his racial prejudices as a southerner and allowed him to see the causes that had produced a shared destiny for blacks and whites. Styron was completely unprepared for the nearly utter estrangement he would subsequently experience from black reviewers and scholars as a result of the positive reaction he got. He was regarded as an archenemy, and the rejection by African Americans was especially painful for a man who had struggled since childhood to comprehend individuals whose lives were intricately linked to his, but whose identities remained concealed during his infancy in Jim Crow Virginia. (Sirlin 1998)

Styron thought that his historical book would shed light on the tragedy of race in the United States, revealing how the past is intertwined with the present. He is still pained by the black boycott of his work because it depicts “continuation of that grim apartness that has defined racial relations in this country and that seems, from all signs and portents, to have worsened over the twenty-five years since *The Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared.” (Styron 1992)

Nat was given humanity by Styron, who made him severely pious rather than demonically fanatic. It was his job as a novelist to figure out what might have prompted a thirty-one-year-old guy to take such a heinous path. Nat was put by Styron an affluent plantation, which would not have existed in 1831 Virginia but was a common feature of antebellum southern life. This plantation, he believed, was required as a symbol for economic exploitation. (Sirlin 1998)

1.3.1 Ambiguity

There are still certain aspects of the revolt that remain unknown. We don't know how many slaves were involved, but it's estimated that there were around sixty to eighty of them. The number of white persons slain has also been questioned. "The highest estimate, two hundred killed, appeared in one of the earliest contemporary guesses. It appears that more than fifty-five but less than sixty-five were killed in Southampton County within the approximately 40 hours that the Revolt raged" (Aptheker 2012, 50).

The names of fifty-five white people who were killed are given by Thomas Gray in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, although the overall number may be greater. It's unclear whether any Negroes were slain during the Revolt, albeit if they were, the number was modest (Aptheker 2012).

Many people speculated about Turner's motivation for the uprising. Upon these speculations, there were three theories. The cause is stated to be unknown; that the plunder was the goal, or that liberation was sought (Aptheker 2012). Many people believe that Turner's master, Joseph Travis, was "more humane and fatherly to his slaves than any other man in the county" and that the terrible treatment was not a motivator (Higginson 1971).

On one hand, people think that his primary motivation was to provide freedom to African Americans. Turner's address to his followers before the uprising, according to G. W. Williams, is further more proof that the insurgency was motivated by a yearning for freedom. "Remember that ours is not war for robbery nor to satisfy our passions; it is a struggle for freedom. Ours must be deeds, not words" (Aptheker 2012, 45). On the other hand, what is motivation for one person does not have to be a motivation for others.

PART TWO

2 Controversy and Criticism

2.1 Styron's Controversy

I would like to analyse the controversy that arose following the release of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The discussion will have two waves: the first comprises the immediate reactions following the publication of Styron's novel; and, the second wave follows the publication of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, which includes not only ten black writers, but also the people who replied to the critical articles they authored.

Styron's work was praised by critics and became the best-selling novel for a few months, according to *The New York Times*. However, the novel drew criticism, particularly from black authors. According to them, the work was divisive and perpetuated preconceptions about black and white Southerners, as well as the South as a whole. The novel's historical veracity was the main point of contention. Not only was historical accuracy questioned, but so were other significant problems, such as: Can a white novelist write about the black experience? Are there any guidelines that writers should follow? The answers to these issues differ greatly.

Styron maintains that “no firm can be established from such an incoherent text, or from the silhouette of the man, and, therefore, Nat has been the subject of wildly varying interpretation.” (Styron 1992)

This controversy around Nat Turner was not the last time Styron was chastised by a section of his readership. Despite the fact that his work *Sophie's Choice* (published in 1979) won the American Book Award for fiction, he received scathing criticism for the choices he took in the novel, as well as for daring to write about the Holocaust at all, given that he was neither Jewish nor a survivor of this catastrophe. Some black philosophers repeated this critique, believing that Styron, a white man, had no right to fictionalise Nat Turner.

Styron wrote an essay called *A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle - The Making of Sophie's Choice*. In this essay he describes his friendship with Hannah Arendt, social critic

and historian. Arendt's novels, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, were highly respected by Styron, both had a significant influence on the creation of *Sophie's Choice*. Arendt as well as Styron had been heavily criticised. Styron for *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and Arendt for her idea of the banality of evil, which she introduced in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. (Styron 1997)

Hannah Arendt supported Styron “An artist creates his own authenticity; what matters is imaginative conviction and boldness, a passion to invade alien territory and render an account of one's discoveries. That was the task of a writer, she said, and I [William Styron] was heartened, though still doubtful. When I demurred a little - I remember saying that I could foresee dodging an assault entitled *Ten Rabbis Respond* - she kept up her encouragement, though not without conceding that I'd probably receive flak from those who might feel, as certain blacks had, that I was, as she put it, poaching on their turf.” (Styron 1997, 396–97)

Unfortunately, Hannah Arendt died before his work *Sophie's Choice* was completed. “I often have regretted that she never read it and was unable to observe its reception.” (Styron 1997, 399) Even though it did have its opponents, *Sophie's Choice*, unlike *Nat Turner's Confession* was spared the wrath of the critics.

2.1.1 1967 Controversy

The Confessions of Nat Turner prompted many questions regarding American culture and character, as well as history and literary tradition. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Nat Turner wonders “just how much of the truth I was telling [Gray] might find its way into those confessions of mine that he would eventually publish.” Styron fills in the gaps in this “truth” throughout the novel by presenting a variety of explanations for why Turner did what he did. (Styron 1967, 415)

Turner's motivations began in his childhood, with sequences presenting him as a victim of the persecution he was born into. Turner's youth was marred by adversity, not least the rape of his mother by an inebriated overseer. Turner becomes a pariah in Styron's imagined Southampton plantation life as he grows older; yet he remains a powerful, though misguided, leader. Turner's motivations are based on the Old Testament, and he is shown as a wise preacher at times and a foolish zealot at other times. (Styron 1967)

Turner's precociousness benefits and hinders him during his youth. He also has thoughts of becoming white. Turner's young sexual experience with Willis, a fellow slave, is one of the most contentious moments in Styron's work. Turner sees the joys that come with

this experience as “a danger and a warning,” and he baptises himself and vows his devotion to God as a result (Styron 1967, 227). Turner, played by Styron, follows his pledge, and never marries, but begins to fantasise about having sexual relations with both black and white women. Turner's suppressed yearning for Margaret Whitehead, according to Styron, eventually leads to her butchery, the sole killing Turner is guilty for. (Styron 1967)

Turner portrays himself as “the most pliant, unremarkable young slave anyone could imagine” in his adult life, working as a carpenter on numerous estates all whilst preparing the insurrection. Turner's radicalism, according to Styron, was influenced by Napoleon Bonaparte stories he heard as a boy. Turner regales his audience with tales of “a seven-foot black prodigy and the scourge of white creation... a nigger Napoleon” according to Turner. As the planning begins, Turner instils “absolute obedience” in his soldiers and follows directives he overheard during mounted militia training outside the Jerusalem arsenal. Turner, despite his dominating lead, has periods of weakness, as his “clammy apprehension” causes him to get unwell. Turner's failure to kill Travis does not stem from the fact that his axe is dull, as he explains in the original Confessions, but rather from the fact that “I was not ready.” Turner's hesitancy is subsequently described by Styron as “womanish failure.” Despite these brief depictions of Turner's guilt, Styron's Turner is eventually portrayed as demonic in his refusal to repent, telling Gray, “I feel no remorse for anything. I would do it all again.” (Styron 1967)

2.1.2 John Brown

Higginson contrasts Turner's revolt strategy to John Brown's, pointing out that only one wrong step might lead to defeat. Both of these men, who were born in the same year, have ties to Virginia. “John Brown invaded Virginia with nineteen soldiers and pledged to take no life except in self-defence, on the other hand, Nat Turner attacked Virginia from within with six men and vowed to spare no life until his rule was established.” Nat wanted to take Southampton County, as the white men did in the Revolution, and then escape, if necessary, to the Dismal Swamp; while, John Brown, intended to march quickly through Virginia and then retreat to the mountains. (Higginson 1971, 57)

According to Sirlin, Styron decided to write about Nat Turner partly because so little was known about him, leaving a lot of room for the imagination. Styron claimed that he would not attempt to write a historical novel on abolitionist John Brown because there is too much material accessible. The sole significant document relating to Nat's uprising was a 7,000-word transcript by a court-appointed lawyer, Thomas Gray, that contained the title of his work. (Sirlin 1998)

“Obviously, the accuracy of his “confession” must be questioned, but this document did serve as a loose guideline for Styron's novel. Besides a few news articles, there was little else to shed light on Nat as a person or on the uprising.” (Sirlin 1998, 58)

2.2 Ten Black Writers Respond

In reaction to William Styron's book, Beacon Press commissioned John Henrik Clarke to compile articles by the black intelligentsia. Clarke addressed letters to several important men in November 1967, selecting them for the unique viewpoints they would offer on a review of Styron's book. In 1968, a book called *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* came out.

Journalists and authors Lerone Bennett Jr., Mike Thelwell, John A. Williams, academics Vincent Harding Alvin F. Poussaint, Charles V. Hamilton, Mike Thelwell, novelists John Oliver Killens, Loyle Hairston and the archivist of the Schomburg Center, Ernest Kaiser, contributed pieces to the book, which was edited and introduced by John Henrik Clarke.

John Henrik Clarke was a Pan-Africanist who was working to rewrite the history of Africa and African Americans. Clarke in his Introduction to the book *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* described that “No event in recent years has touched and stirred the black intellectual community more than *The Confessions of Nat Turner*”(Clarke 1968, VII.). Clarke moved to Harlem in 1933, near the conclusion of the Harlem Renaissance, after being born in 1915 in Alabama to a sharecropper family and raised in Georgia. Clarke deeply embedded himself into the intellectual life of the black community, enrolling at both New York University and Columbia University but failing to graduate. He produced and edited around thirty volumes as a mostly self-taught historian and writer who travelled extensively throughout Africa. (Golus 2018)

The majority of the early critics were white, although a few black reviewers praised the book. The writers of this polemical book held that the novel was a malicious work that purposefully distorted history which was an insult to all black people. Styron was dubbed “morally senile” and “psychologically sick.” (Clarke 1968, 65)

In *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond (1968)*, which detailed the major points of the assault, the work was repeatedly attacked by the black community. Its

writers insisted on addressing most topics as a group, and their pieces overlapped. (Genovese 1968)

Clarke attacked Styron's *Confessions* as an “insult to Blackmanhood...The Heroic Nat Turner is now a latent homosexual a lustre [sic] after white women and a rebel who could not make up his mind whether he was a rebel or an Uncle Tom,” in an early review. Styron dehumanised Turner, according to Clarke, by denying him “a good familial attachment.” He concluded that the book's inaccuracies required “honest writers and historians” to refute them. (Clarke 1967)

Styron commented in his essay *A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle - The Making of Sophie's Choice*. “A book of essays had been published William Styron's *Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* - in which I'd been accused of racism and of falsifying and distorting the story of the rebel slave leader. This assault had left me with a residue of indignation, although I was cooling off.” (Styron 1997, 395)

Martin Duberman (born August 6, 1930), an American historian, described the work of black critics that it resembles an assault rather than criticism. Duberman noted that the criticisms of the black critics were based on theological and cultural fundamentalism, with the black critics insisting that “most of the essayists seem to believe that the original confessions are Absolute Truth and that every account which deviates from them partakes of malignant intent, it is surprising they did not chastise Styron more severely for underplaying the one character trait of Turner's that emerges most clearly from those confessions — that he was a religious fanatic of terrifying, perhaps psychotic, proportions.” (Duberman 1970, 115)

Ernest Kaiser, one of the black writers, labels Styron as “an unreconstructed southern racist” and describes *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as the product of “Styron's vile racist imagination” (Kaiser 1968, 56–57). Such attacks sparked a chain reaction of criticisms and defences of the novel, which Albert E. Stone refers to as “complex interplay.” Due to this, *Nat Turner's Confessions* became known as “the most controversial novel of its tempestuous decade.” (Stone 1992, 3)

In 1965, Styron wrote an essay titled “*This Quiet Dust*,” while researching his novel. Styron discusses his trip to Southeast Virginia, his home state and the site of Turner's insurrection, in this article. The article reveals that Styron's quest for the historical Turner and his own personal history were one and the same, and that this is a significant matter for white and black Americans' shared history and identity. (Styron 2012)

The ten writers' contributions were chockfull of references to Turner's family—and the black community in general—having no impact on his personality, the rejection of his wife's existence, and in particular, the stereotype of the black man's desire for white women.

In 1981, Styron described: “A book entitled *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* was published. It was the first time in this country that an entire book was devoted to an attack on novel; and without analysing it in detail. I was a racist and that was that.” (Styron 1985, 245)

2.2.1 Lerone Bennet, Jr.

For Bennet, this book was “America’s ancient and manic pattern of de-balling black men,” as well as “a pattern of de-structuring the black family and the black group.” (Bennett 1968, 8)

According to ten writers, black is ontologically unique from white, hence blacks must fight the urge to merge and thereby dilute their blackness. What makes Styron's novel so offensive within this paradigm is the fact that his Turner is white, which is “not only the antithesis of Nat Turner,” but also “the antithesis of blackness.” (Bennett 1968, 5) Human identity can and should be defined along racial lines, which is why *The Confessions* fails.

Instead of using the typical approach of the historical novelist, which works within the strain of recognised facts, Bennett thinks, Styron compels history to move inside the tight grooves of his predetermined beliefs. (Bennett 1968) Styron stuck steadfastly to his biased ideas about black people and avoided the facts rather than dealing with it.

Bennett also criticises Styron's selective approach to the available data on Nat Turner's life, notably his considerable imagination in adding detrimental and prejudiced facts to the black rebel's life. Bennett believes that Styron's modifications and manipulations of historical events have serious repercussions, and that the writer's portrayals merit harsh censure. “We are not quibbling here over footnotes in scholarly journals. We are objecting to something more insidious, more dangerous. We are objecting to a deliberate attempt to steal the meaning of a man’s life,” he says, emphasising the gravity of the issue. (Bennett 1968, 5)

Another point from Lerone Bennett is that Styron lacks a deeper psychological grasp of the situation which is the reason for such a simplistic approach to Turners’ insurrection where Styron depicts Turner and the other slaves unambiguously as savage killers. “Styron evades this dynamic; he refuses to come to grips with the institutionalized violence of an oppressive status quo and the inevitable counter violence of the oppressed,” he writes. Bennett also mentions Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner as an insurrection leader, who in

Styron's work is a terrified, reluctant, and panicked coward incapable of striking a blow against his captors when the time comes. (Bennett 1968)

2.2.2 Alvin F. Poussaint

Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, a psychiatrist and Civil Rights activist who joined Harvard University two years later, was requested to contribute to *William Styron's: Ten Black Writer's Respond* by Clarke, too. Clarke described him as “a psychiatrist and essayist with an interest in the image of our people in literature and other media.” (Clarke 1867a, 1)

Poussaint said in his six-page article “Styron may be guilty of projecting on to Nat Turner many of the classical white stereotypical notions about black people.” He also stated that “Styron’s reconstruction of events is an example of the stereotyped belief that black people rebel primarily because of an unfulfilled psychological need to be white and not because of a sense of their own inner dignity” (Poussaint 1968, 18–20). Poussaint subsequently admitted that the work was full of white-worship language. (Poussaint 1968)

This author also emphasises that Thomas Gray's original Confessions never said that Nat Turner had sexual desires about white women or that he and Miss Margaret had a personal connection. According to Poussaint, the author's manoeuvre supports the negative notion that the acquisition of a white woman is the ultimate fulfilment of black manhood. (Poussaint 1968)

Turner has an ambiguously “homosexual” experience “with another young black slave,” Poussaint claims. Poussaint rhetorically asks, “What does this experience inform readers?” in light of this interaction. His response is as follows: “Naturally, it implies that Nat Turner was not a man at all. It suggests that he was unconsciously really feminine.” As homosexuality totally undermines efforts to combat slavery and racism; Poussaint concludes that the “depiction of the young rebel as a would-be deviant carries the implication that the whole revolt against slavery and racism was somehow illegitimate and “abnormal.” (Poussaint 1968)

2.2.3 Vincent Harding

Vincent Harding, who authored an essay for the collection, criticized Baldwin’s positive appraisal of Styron’s novel: “It was Baldwin who praised his friend’s [Styron] work highly, Baldwin who saw himself in Styron’s Turner, and Baldwin who dared to say, “This is the beginning of our common history.” (Harding 1968, 31–32)

Harding, like Poussaint, believes that Styron's fictitious portrayal of homosexuality has a clear and unmistakable meaning: "Styron has used this event too, but in such a way as to continue the demeaning of Nat Turner." This author also reminds us of the scene of the book where Nat and his young friend have a joint baptism with a white man: "Nat has been engaged in homosexual mutual stimulation with a young black friend." The fact that he is baptised with a homosexual is what makes this moment so repulsive, and a natural continuation of Turner's experience with Willis. We can agree, Harding says, that homosexuality is a universal metaphor for discrediting, delegitimizing, and degrading a person's character. (Harding 1968)

"His life, robbed by Styron of its roots, is somehow neither black nor white, and suffers from the loss of particularity as well as power," Vincent Harding said of Styron's historical and literary crime against Turner (Harding 1968, 26). Styron irreparably damages Turner's historical memory and figure by combining black and white, or by transcending race entirely.

Vincent Harding blames Styron for ignoring the facts revealed in Thomas Gray's original Confessions, which served as the major source of material for Styron's work. According to him, the author did not care to make a sincere effort to recreate the historical Nat Turner and give his best attributes to his courage, resolve, and religiousness. The upshot of such deceptive alteration of the black rebel's identity is what Harding refers to as "the whitened appropriation of our [blacks'] history." He emphasises that Styron's portrayals are just another example of a white guy ignoring the historical reality about black people and robbing them of their right to be great, powerful, and influential. (Harding 1968)

Harding also points out that white Americans overwhelmingly approve of Styron's novel however historically inaccurate and biased his portrayal was; claiming that the only way for blacks to gain popularity and increase interests of the public in the United States is for them to be depicted in a negative, demeaning, and stereotypical in manner. Harding describes this phenomena as "part of our [blacks'] awful quandary," emphasising the futility of a black man's situation in the American white supremacist environment. (Harding 1968)

Harding insists, "there can be no common history until we have first fleshed out the lineaments of our own, for no one else can speak out of the bittersweet bowels of our lackness." (Harding 1968, 32) According to this viewpoint, not only is it feasible to write a distinctive and unique black history, but it is also necessary for black empowerment.

2.2.4 John Oliver Killens

John Oliver Killens, author of various novels and publications, also contributed a critical article to the compilation *Ten Black Writers*.

“Nat Turner, in the tradition of most black Americans, was a man of tragedy, a giant, but William Styron,” wrote Killens, “has depicted him as a child of pathos.” (Killens 1968, 34)

This author doubts the original Confessions of Thomas Gray's authenticity and reliability, believing that the white lawyer who took down the confessions could not have been free of prejudice and bias toward a black man, especially one who murdered over sixty white people. He does not think Thomas Gray's version was an accurate description of Nat Turner's comments spoken in the cell while awaiting execution, but he does point out Styron's contradiction by claiming that he based his story on Gray's paper while significantly departing from the facts contained in it. It was Styron's deliberate attempt, according to Killens, to minimise the historical Nat Turner, who was a symbol of strength and emancipation for the black community. The writer brings up a topic of white Americans creating myths and the reality that the black experience has always been portrayed from the white man's perspective. He believes that the dominant white group fabricates and modifies portrayals of black people in order to retain its superior position and the maintain the status of black people as second class citizens in the US. “Americans loved this fake illusion of reality because it legitimized all of their myths and prejudices about the American black man, and further, because it cut yet another great American black man down to the size of a boy,” Killen says. (Killens 1968)

Killens mentions Styron's grandfather so as to prove that there are confessions that show that Styron has gone just a short distance from his grandfather's attitudes. He is still in dire need of independence from the mindset of his slave master. He is still an unreconstructed southern rebel to this day. (Killens 1968) Styron also talked about his family in *Conversations with William Styron*: “I don't feel guilty in the least when it comes to slavery... My family owned slaves, but I don't believe that guilt can be transmitted through generations. On the other hand, one fact has made me sensitive and attentive to the subject: my great-grandparents had slaves, and I still have the list of the people they owned. Long list of names, often biblical names like Reuben, Jacob.” (Styron 1985, 244)

Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner “reveals more about the psyche of the ‘southern liberal’ Styron, direct descendant of ol’ Massa, than it even begins to reveal about the heart and soul and mind of black revolutionary Nat Turner,” according to John Oliver Killens. “A

colossal error, one that required tremendous arrogance. And naiveté,” Killens says of Styron's decision to portray the event from the perspective of Nat Turner. (Killens 1968, 36)

The fundamental reason for Styron's *Confessions*' failure is his brave choice to open up the psyche of a black revolutionist, as well as his refusal to recognise the black rebel and his act of resistance and desire for freedom as a natural result of living in slavery. (Killens 1968)

Kaiser describes another error made by Styron when he made the decision not to include any of the other revolutionary black slaves, who quite possibly served as Turner's inspiration and desire to defy the established quo. Instead, Styron assigned Napoleon, a great historical hero for the white world, as the likely driving factor for Turner's actions. “And I would ask, why did not Nat think to inspire them with an example of black militancy in the person of black Toussaint, who liberated a nation of black folk from the colonial rule of the same Napoleon?” (Killens 1968, 41–42)

2.2.5 John A. Williams

John A. Williams says that a novelist who concentrates on a historical subject “is required to be both a novelist and a historian” (Williams 1968, 46)

Styron is accused by John A. Williams of transmitting sentiments in the novel that indicate slavery is a benevolent system that benefits black people. He uses the character of Isham, a free Negro, as an example of one of Styron's characters, whose living condition is catastrophic: he doesn't have enough money to feed himself and his family. Styron's message, according to Williams, is that “free Negroes suffered far more than did slave Negroes. Therefore, the implication goes, slavery wasn't all bad; a slave had food, clothes, and shelter.”(Williams 1968, 48)

The only author in Clarke's essay collection who embraces the concept of a white artist attempting to portray the experience of black people in the United States is John A. Williams. “Works by white artists on black people are considered to be more palatable and acceptable to the nation at large than similar works by black writers,” he claims. Nonetheless, Williams casts doubt on Styron's sincerity in portraying the black revolutionary, as well as the novel's overall honesty. Williams agrees with Thelwell that Styron was unable to separate himself from his Southern roots and his deep-seated belief in a black man's inferiority. According to the critic, this resulted in the caricature of a slave who is regarded as a national hero by the black community. (Williams 1968)

Taking into account all of the criticism of Styron's first-person narration, all black critics, with the exception of John A. Williams, believe that Styron had the necessary skills to grasp the complicated psyche of a black slave, especially one who is a symbol of resistance to American slavery. They all concur that Styron's entire thought system is so shaped by his lifelong exposure to the Southern apparatus' racist practises and general belief in black inferiority that he was unable to fathom the slave resurrectionist's mind. The conclusion may thus be drawn that black authors believe that only a black writer can truly understand another black man's thoughts and multifaceted experiences in America, and so to accurately depict him in a literary work. (Williams 1968)

2.2.6 Ernest Kaiser

“A witches’ brew of Freudian psychology, Elkins’s ‘Sambo’ thesis on slavery and Styron’s vile racist imagination that makes especially Will and Nat Turner animals or monsters,” Kaiser said of this novel. (Kaiser 1968, 57)

According to Kaiser, black people have been accepting white conceptions of blackness for far too long. This viewpoint echoes Carmichael and Hamilton's argument in their book that black people have accepted these beliefs of blackness for too many years: “When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes –that is, lies – that our oppressor has developed, will begin in the white community and end there. The black community will have a positive image of itself that it has created. This means we will no longer call ourselves lazy, apathetic, dumb, good-timers, shiftless, etc. Those are words used by white America to define us. If we accept these adjectives, as some of us have in the past, then we see ourselves only in a negative way, precisely the way white America wants us to see ourselves.” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 37) This demonstrates to us that white people create feelings of prejudice toward black people, necessitating a revision of black people's self-image and identity.

Kaiser also thinks that Nat Turner’s insurrection was the pinnacle of escalating slave dissatisfaction that began about 1827 and ended in 1832. (Kaiser 1968) On the one hand, he claims that Styron made it impossible for slaves to revolt because “American slavery was so oppressive, despotic and emasculating psychologically that revolt was impossible and Negroes could only be Sambos.” On the other hand, Kaiser writes: “[Styron] states boldly that Americans believe that the slave system, though morally wrong, was conducted with such charity and restraint that insurrection and murder were unthinkable.”(Kaiser 1968, 57)

Ernest Kaiser also criticises Styron for telling his story through the eyes of Nat Turner, claiming that Styron does not even know black Virginians who lived next door in the

twentieth century but risked and attempted to speak in the name of the nineteenth century's most significant voice of rebellion to the white oppressive system. Styron's manoeuvre is described by Kaiser as “unspeakable arrogance.” (Kaiser 1968, 56)

2.2.7 Loyle Hairston

Loyle Hairston was another writer and strong participant in the civil rights movement. He characterizes Nat Turner as “the prototype of the white American writer’s concept of the “Negro” (Hairston 1968, 69). Styron's portrayal of Turner's revolution as a horrifying act of slave cruelty and of black rebels as savage barbarians, according to Hairston, might infer that the rebellion was far more awful and horrible than slavery itself. (Hairston 1968)

Turner's gay encounter is casually referred to as “grotesque” by Hairston. William Styron joyfully castrates his slave by making him a holy celibate. Turner's lone sexual experience is, regrettably, gay. (Hairston 1968) In *the Confessions*, Styron describes many times Turner’s sexual fantasies. In his childhood, he imagined himself between the legs of “a nameless white girl... with golden locks” when masturbating. Other times, his religious armour is temporarily pierced by fleshly desires, prompting him to an uncontrolled urge to “violate” a white lady! (Styron 1967)

Styron's steadfast devotion to romantic views of slavery was another prominent characteristic of the black writer's critique, whereas opponents accuse him of being an ally for the system of slavery. Styron, according to Hairston, follows in the footsteps of white slaveowners who twisted the truth and facts to make slavery appear to be desirable and an essential practise. Styron, in his perspective, goes even farther, painting the black uprising as even more heinous than the system of slavery itself. Hairston goes on to say, “among other things, we learn from this celebrated novel how benign the ‘peculiar’ institution was; and that slaveholders were among *civilization’s* most cultured and compassionate souls who endured great remorse over the role in which history had cast them.” (Hairston 1968, 67)

2.2.8 Charles V. Hamilton

Charles V. Hamilton feels that Styron's stereotyped portrayal of Nat Turner is detrimental to Turner's reputation; that he will be remembered as a slave criminal suffering from theological lunacy and perverted sexual urges rather than as a black rebel.

Because so many of the contributors to this book agree on what homosexuality means, Hamilton feels comfortable making a proposal on behalf of the whole black community:

“Styron’s literary mind can wander about homosexuality and the like, and his vast readership can have their stereotypes strengthened by an image of a black preacher who is irrational and weak (unable to kill, except some white woman he loves) and uncertain. But black people should reject this; and white people should not delude themselves.” (Hamilton 1968, 74)

Styron, according to Hamilton, failed to grasp that the concept of freedom, a natural desire to be free and independent, is a basic need for all humans, regardless of race or rank. “The important thing is that the desire for human freedom resides in the black breast as well as in any other. No amount of explicating about the harshness of slavery or the gentleness of slavery, about the docility of the masses of slaves, etc. can keep that desire from exploding. Man – black or white or yellow or red – moves to maximize his freedom: THAT is the lesson of Nat Turner that Styron did not deal with.” (Hamilton 1968, 74)

Nat Turner is a symbol of liberation to Hamilton. A great revolutionary who opened a path for future black leaders to battle against the unfair and unjust regime for their treatment of African Americans. As a result, Hamilton urgently advises the black community to speak out against such deceptive and perverted images of their freedom warrior in order to prevent yet another instance of white man-made black history manipulation. (Hamilton 1968)

Black people were still mistreated. Some of them were able to leave the ghettos and begin new lives in middle-class civilization but this required integration to white standards and norms, which not everyone was inclined to do because “this adaptation means to disassociate oneself from the black race, its culture, community and heritage, and become immersed (dispersed is another term) in the white world.” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 30) The adaptability had nothing to do with white understanding of black people as persons with unique needs and experiences, as well as their culture, history, and other needs. Whites compelled blacks to integrate or live in deplorable conditions outside of civilization. (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967)

The unhappiness of blacks led to more radical groups that attempted to resolve the problem in ways that were far different from Martin Luther King's and others' nonviolent activities. A new movement arose known as the Black Power movement as a result of these disputes — this movement was an umbrella word for various extreme groups fighting for the same purpose: “Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the depredation of self-justifying white guilt. We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society and to have these terms recognized.” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 34–35)

Styron was asked whether he thinks that his novel would be well received by blacks. Using the term “Black power radicals,” he answered: “It depends. I asked James Baldwin to read it and he liked it. But I imagine that the Black Power radicals will hate it.” (Styron 1985, 82)

The fundamental goals of the Black Power movement were to preserve black people's culture, history, tradition, pride, and identity. Members opposed integration into mainstream white culture and beliefs, favouring separatist views instead. They aspired to form their own institutions, political parties, and other social organisations devoted to the advancement of black ideas. Hamilton and Carmichael were the leaders of the Black Power Movement. In their manifesto, they concretely reject integration. They say: “Thus we reject the goal of assimilation into middle-class America because the values of that class are in themselves anti-humanist and because that class as a social force perpetuates racism. We must face the fact, that in the past, what we have called the movement has not really questioned the middle-class values and institutions of this country. If anything it has accepted those values and institutions without fully realizing their racist nature.” (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 41)

2.2.9 Mike Thelwell

Mike Thelwell also dismisses Styron's capacity as a white Southerner to comprehend the black slave hero's personal experience of creating a convincing novel from his point of view. Such an endeavour, he believes, would be “the miracle of empathy” that would need “an imaginative leap not only into history, but across cultures.” (Thelwell 1968, 80)

“If this book is important,” Thelwell observed, “it is not so because it tells much about the Negro experience during slavery but because of the manner in which it demonstrates the persistence of white southern myths, racial stereotypes, and literary clichés even in the best intentioned and most enlightened minds.” (Thelwell 1968, 91) According to Thelwell, this seems to be highly unlikely because Styron would have to “devise a literary idiom through which to record his insights, since the gentleman and the slave lack common language or experience,” and he would have to totally separate himself from his southern roots and pertinacious thoughts about blacks. (Thelwell 1968, 80)

According to Thelwell, the true “history” of Nat Turner, and of black people in general, has yet to be written. (Thelwell 1968)

“When black people were brought to America they were deprived of their language and of the underpinnings in cultural experience out of which a language comes. It is clear that they developed two languages, one for themselves and another for the white masters. The

latter has been preserved (“parodied” is a better word) as the ‘Sambo’ dialect in the works of southern dialect humourists.” (Thelwell 1968, 80)

Turner's language and William Styron's usage of first-person narration displeased Thelwell. Thelwell concludes that Styron's Turner does not speak convincing language, and that Turner's dialect, like his consciousness, is white: “And as his language is white, so are his values and desires.” (Thelwell 1968, 82)

2.3 James Baldwin

John Henrik Clarke also wrote a letter to James Baldwin saying “because you are one of the few Negro writers that has had a favourable view of William Styron’s book, we are especially interested in having this view expressed in an essay or this volume” (Clarke 1867b, 1). However, Baldwin refused to take part in the novel's written response. Because of this and because of the fact that he was one of the few African-American academics who defended Styron and his historical fiction, Baldwin is without a doubt the most divisive advocate for Styron's work. Styron’s critics considered Baldwin a traitor who, by endorsing Styron's work, publicly engaged in the subjugation of black Americans in the twentieth century.

James Campbell wrote a book called *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* in which he mentions “While it [Baldwin’s affirmation of the novel] reconfirmed Baldwin in his independence, in the eyes of his black critics it offered proof that the worst names he had been called has substance: that he was an Uncle Tom, that he was a deserter, that he was out of touch with the new moves in the struggle.” (Campbell 1991, 215)

According to Styron's biographer, James L. W. West, one can realize “Baldwin's presence in Nat's thinking and speech - in his periods of 'black-assed' melancholy and his contradictory attitudes towards white people” (West 2016). Baldwin, too, had been nurtured in a deeply religious tradition and had even taken to preaching while in his teen (Ross 2012).

In 1960, William Styron offered James Baldwin a guesthouse at his home in Roxbury, Connecticut. Baldwin stayed with the Styron’s and their three small children, working on his novel *Another Country*. The two writers kept separate schedules and got together at dinner with Rose each evening. Baldwin and Styron were friends, but their friendship was more friendship than literary partnership. (Tanenhaus 2016) “We never spoke about our work, or

very rarely. It was a wonderful time in my life, but not at all literary,” said Baldwin in interview. (Elgrably 1984)

When the interviewer asked Baldwin whether he took a position on book about Nat Turner, Baldwin answered: “My position, though, is that I will not tell another writer what to write. If you don’t like their alternative, write yours. I admired him for confronting it, and the result. It brought in the whole enormity of the issue of history versus fiction, fiction versus history, which is that he writes out of reasons similar to mine: about something which hurt him and frightened him. When I was working on *Another Country* and Bill was working on *Nat Turner*, I stayed in his guest house for five months. His hours and mine are very different. I was going to bed at dawn, Bill was just coming up to his study to go to work; his hours going on as mine went off. We saw each other at suppertime.” (Elgrably 1984)

“Ironically, however, Styron's friendship with Baldwin did not help his cause with black readers in general, most likely because many of them had grown uncomfortable with Baldwin's frank exploration of black homosexuality. Even John Hope Franklin's praise of the novel did not soften the criticism.” (Ross 2012, 93)

Also, Styron's decision to have his fictionalised Turner immerse himself in Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic thought was most likely influenced by Baldwin. (Ross 2012)

2.4 Other People Dissatisfied with the Wave of Criticism

In a review of *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* published in the *New York Review of Books* on September 12, 1968, historian Eugene Genovese also supported Styron. Against all rationality, Genovese claimed that the work was historically accurate and decried “the ferocity and hysteria of the attack.” He refuted Vincent Harding's claim that Nat Turner was a part of “living traditions” among black people. “If Nat Turner is now a name widely known to black and white America, and if the existence of armed resistance to slavery is now generally appreciated,” Genovese concluded, “William Styron deserves as much credit as any other writer.” (Genovese 1968)

Styron of course noticed his supporters. “Baldwin was on my side, along with a few others... My novel stood on its own. Historians defended me. A Marxist like Eugene Genovese – who may well be the best historian in the South – undertook to defend me in the

New York Review of Books by refuting all the charges at great length. As for myself, I had a clear conscience.” (Styron 1985, 245)

Two of the book's contributors, Harding and Mike Thelwell, as well as novelist Anna Mary Wells, reacted to Genovese, who in turn gave a response to them in a subsequent issue. “Professor Genovese’s contention that black Americans should be grateful to Styron for having rescued their hero from oblivion even though he has perverted him in the process seems to me equated only by the argument of slave-owners that blacks ought to be grateful for slavery because it enabled them to have instruction in the Christian religion,” Wells concluded. (Wells, Harding, and Thelwell 1968)

Despite all this controversy, Styron remains hopeful and continues to break down boundaries of colour, gender, and ethnicity. He concludes his article by quoting Baldwin's strong words: “Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other—male in female, female in male, white in black, and black in white. We are part of each other.” (Styron 1992)

3 Conclusion

In this bachelor’s thesis, I tried to introduce the theme of Nat Turner’s slave rebellion through the eyes of William Styron and his critics. Styron as well as the “Ten Black Writers” perceive Nat Turner’s character differently, but where is the historical truth? It is problematic to answer this question and difficult to take a united stand because it seems that both sides have their part of the truth and have the right to state it.

One of the most disputed passages in Styron's writing, which is mainly criticized by the black authors, is Turner's youthful sexual experience with Willis, a fellow slave. In the primary historical source from Thomas R. Gray, there is not a mention of it, so Styron probably wanted this book to have a political, psychological and maybe also an economical framework, too. Styron is obviously not only coming to terms with his family's history but also with himself. On the other side, Styron created a fictional character that can have its own life with respect to the primary source by T. R. Gray. This controversy is a reflection of the black and white relationships that remain uneasy.

The historical accuracy of the work was the primary issue of debate as well. The writers of this polemical book held that the novel was a malicious work that purposefully distorted history which was an insult to all black people. Not only was historical accuracy called into question, but so were other major issues like: Can a white novelist write about the

black experience? Is there a set of rules that writers should adhere to? The responses to these questions are quite diverse.

It may be difficult for a white writer to write about the black experience. There are a number of factors that should be considered before a writer decides to write a piece of work in the voice of a black person. As can be seen, white-authored literature has been chastised for a variety of reasons, including misrepresenting black culture and perpetuating preconceptions about black people. This is hardly unexpected, as black critics frequently point out because whites who reject or neglect black art and culture have a huge effect on mainstream culture. Dissatisfying black and white relations lead to disputes, which are represented in the debates. The controversy described in this bachelor thesis merely demonstrates that the issue of repression and stereotypical views of black people has not been settled and that these concerns are deeply embedded in society. Race equality remains a concern.

4 Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce nás seznamuje s historickou postavou Nata Turnera, o které napsal William Styron knihu *Doznání Nata Turnera (The Confessions of Nat Turner)*. Práce je rozdělena do dvou částí.

První část popisuje, jak postavu Nata Turnera vnímá William Styron. V krátkosti je také napsáno, co se podle Styrona stalo roku 1831 v Southamptonu. Dále je zde rozebrán historický kontext díla a krátká biografie Williama Styrona. V první části tato práce také poukazuje na nejasnosti spojené s tímto literárním dílem.

V druhé části se nachází analýza esejí černošských autorů, kteří kritizovali Styronovo dílo. John Henrik Clerke tyto černošské autory spojil a napsal knihu *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Na konci najdeme i názory lidí, kteří se Williama Styrona zastali.

Cílem práce bylo popsat tyto dvě strany a pokusit se zjistit, která ze stran má pravdu. Hlavním tématem tohoto sporu je nejen historická pravdivost románu, ale také otázka sexuální orientace Nata Turnera. Kontroverze vyplývají především z neuspokojivých černobílých vztahů. Tyto problémy jsou ve společnosti hluboce zakořeněny a rovnost ras je stále problematická. Ukázalo se, že jak William Styron, tak černošští autoři mají v některých částech pravdu, a proto je těžké zaujmout jednotné stanovisko.

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