

ANALYSIS

The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967)



William Styron

(1925-2006)

“In the annals of American slavery two figures stand out with unrivaled prominence among the very few who resorted to armed rebellion—John Brown and Nat Turner, one white and one black. The historical importance of their roles is roughly comparable and there is as much reason for enduring curiosity about one as about the other. Of the two, Turner’s rebellion was far more bloody, both in the lives it took and in the reprisals it evoked. As a threat to the security of a slave-based society, Turner’s conspiracy was more momentous than Brown’s. John Brown’s raid never had the remotest chance of success.

Yet there is a remarkable disparity in the amount that is known and in what has been written about the two men and their deeds. On John Brown there exists a vast library, forty-odd biographies, massive monographs, scores of poems, plays, and works of fiction. This is partly explained by the relative abundance of source materials. Brown left extensive (though misleading) accounts of himself and a large mass of correspondence. He was acquainted with some of the most prominent writers of his day. A few intellectuals were personally involved and many were passionately interested in his conspiracy and left their own records. Two congressional hearings and a mountain of archival material multiply the sources.

In striking contrast, the sources on Nat Turner and the scholarly as well as creative writing about him are miniscule. Since there were no white participants in the rebellion and the life of no white witness of the massacres was spared by the rebels, the information about the conspiracy boils down largely to twenty-odd pages of Turner’s ‘Confessions’ in the stilted prose of the Virginia lawyer to whom he dictated them in prison. Mainly on this and on a pedestrian monograph or two rests all we know of the only slave rebellion of consequence in the largest slave society in the nineteenth-century world.

If there were ever a free hand for a novelist, this was it. Yet the obstacles were formidable. There were no models. The only major American novelist to treat a slave rebellion was Melville, and *Benito Cereno* is viewed entirely through the eyes of the white man. Nat’s story would have to be seen from behind the black mask. That was the boldest decision William Styron made. There was little to go on beyond the author’s imagination. What history tells us about slavery is mainly the white man’s experience, not the black man’s—what it was like to *have* slaves, not what it was like to *be* slaves. No one has more than an ill-formed guess about why the greatest slave republic in the New World had by far the fewest rebellions; why smaller and allegedly more benevolent slave societies bred vast insurrections, blood baths involving many thousands of slaves that lasted scores of years, and America had one that recruited seventy-five and petered

out in three days; why servility and submission were the rule and Sambo the stereotype and heritage of American slavery. And most of all, what explains the terrible enigma of Nat Turner, the other-worldly young carpenter of obscure origin and apocalyptic visions who at the age of thirty-one took the road to Jerusalem, Virginia, martyrdom, and immortality.

To complicate the enigma, the rebellion took place not in the brutal Delta cotton fields or the Louisiana sugar cane, but in mellowed, impoverished tidewater Virginia, where even Nat Turner thought there was 'still an ebb and flow of human sympathy—no matter how strained and imperfect—between slave and master.' And Nat himself was a product of benevolent, if unusual, paternalism at its best—fondly educated, trained in a craft, and promised liberation. The picture of Nat's life and motivation the novelist constructs is, but for a few scraps of evidence, without historical underpinnings, but most historians would agree, I think, not inconsistent with anything historians know. It is informed by a respect for history, a sure feeling for the period, and a deep and precise sense of place and time.

Nat was the child of a house servant and grew up in the big house, familiar with 'the chink of silver and china' as well as his 'black Negro world' of the kitchen, but not with the toil of field and mill. His mistress taught him to read and gave him a Bible, of which he learned great parts by heart and knew better than the white preachers of the parish. He discovered his intelligence and his ability to charm, grew accustomed to love from all sides, and never encountered harshness or brutality. 'I became in short a pet, the darling, the little black jewel of Turner's Mill. Pampered, fondled, nudged, pinched, I was the household's spoiled child.' Toward his master, Samuel Turner, he felt a regard 'very close to the feeling one should bear only toward the Divinity.' Between them were 'strong ties of emotion,' in fact, 'a kind of love.' The master responded by giving encouragement, careful training, flattering responsibilities, and, three years before Nat came of age, the intoxicating promise of freedom.

Toward the field hands beyond the big house perimeter little Nat felt a contemptuous disdain, regarding them as 'a lower order of people—a ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth.' He identified completely with his master and looking back later realized that had this life continued he would have achieved in old age 'a kind of purse-lipped dignity, known as Uncle Nat, well loved and adoring in return, a palsied stroker of the silken pates of little white grandchildren.' But that life came to an end when Samuel Turner went bankrupt and moved to Alabama when Nat was twenty. Before leaving Virginia he placed Nat in the care of a poverty-ravaged fanatical Baptist preacher under legal obligation to free his charge in a stated time. Instead, after giving Nat a year's taste of how degrading slavery could be, the preacher sold him for \$460 to an illiterate brute named Moore, from whom he eventually passed into the hands of his last owner, Travis.

Among the many harsh lessons these experiences taught Nat was 'how greatly various were the moral attributes of white men who possessed slaves, how different each owner might be by way of severity or benevolence.' They ranged 'from the saintly,' such as his first owner, 'to a few who were unconditionally monstrous.' Nat never fell into the hands of the last type, and his owner at the time of the rebellion generally behaved 'like every slave's ideal master.' Whatever accounts for Nat's rebellion, it was not the irrepressible rage of the intolerably oppressed. Instead, he observed, 'the more tolerable and human white people became in their dealings with me, the keener was my passion to destroy them.'

Nat was twenty and on the threshold of freedom before he suddenly realized what slavery was, 'the *true* world in which a Negro moves and breathes. It was like being plunged into freezing water.' A year later came his betrayal, the final shattering of the dream of freedom, and his submission to a master he knew to be his moral inferior, stupid, brutal, swinish. For nearly ten years his disciplined defense was to become 'a paragon of rectitude, of alacrity, of lively industriousness, of sweet equanimity and uncomplaining obedience,' the ideal slave. He had learned never to look a white man in the eye, how to smell danger, how like a dog 'to interpret the tone of what is being said,' how to assume 'that posture of respect and deference it is wise for any Negro to assume' in the presence of a strange white man, and how to 'merge faceless and nameless with the common swarm.' He learned how, when necessary, to shuffle and scrape and adopt the egregious, glaucous cornfield accents and postures of niggerness.

He became a discriminating connoisseur of Sambo types, those given to ‘wallowing in the dust at the slightest provocation, midriffs clutched in idiot laughter,’ those who ‘endear themselves to all, white and black, through droll interminable tales about ha’nts and witches and conjures,’ and at the other extreme those who ‘reverse the procedure entirely and in *their* niggerness are able to outdo many white people in presenting to the world a grotesque swagger,’ a posture suited to the black driver or the tyrannical kitchen mammy and butler, who were skilled in keeping ‘safely this side of insolence.’ For his own part, Nat ‘decided upon humility, a soft voice, and houndlike obedience.’ Yet he was always conscious of ‘the weird unnaturalness of this adopted role,’ always counseling himself ‘to patience, patience, patience to the end,’ biding his time.

As he watched the potential recruits for his divine mission of vengeance and liberation he often despaired. His black brother ‘half drowned from birth in a kind of murky middlelessness,’ drifted before him ‘mouths agape or with sloppy uncomprehending smiles, shuffling their feet.’ They would suddenly seem to him ‘as meaningless and as stupid as a barnful of mules,’ and he would ‘hate them one and all.’ But this hatred would alternate with ‘a kind of wild, desperate love for them.’ The ambivalence came out in his feelings about Hark (originally named Hercules) whom he intended to make one of his lieutenants. Hark had ‘the face of an African chieftain,’ a godlike frame and strength, and a mortal grievance against his master for selling his wife and child. ‘Yet the very sight of white skin cowed him, humbled him to the most servile abasement.’ He drove Nat to incoherent rage when in the presence of any white he unconsciously became ‘the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, sniveling servility.’ Hark’s defense was that he was overcome by ‘dat black-assed feelin’,’ and Nat admitted to himself that the expression perfectly expressed ‘the numbness and dread which dwells in every Negro’s heart.’

Nat labored desperately to quell this fear in his recruits and to install pride and confidence and blind faith in their leader. He clung to his faith that in every Sambo was a Nat Turner, that while ‘most Negroes are hopelessly docile, many of them are filled with fury,’ and that servility was ‘but a form of self-preservation.’ In the more desperate of them he counted upon the common postulate that ‘nigger life ain’t worth pig shit’—they had nothing to lose.

It is one mark of William Styron’s genius that he deliberately threw away the Christ symbol, which would have been irresistible to many novelists. For Nat was strictly Old Testament, the stuff of Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, the blood-stained righteousness of his somber Hebrew heroes, Joshua and David. He thought and spoke in the rhetoric of the Prophets and the Psalms and scriptural poetry weaves in and out of his ruminations. He fasted and prayed in the wilderness and waited for a sign. And the sign came: ‘Then swiftly in the very midst of the rent in the clouds I saw a black angel clothed in black armor with black wings outspread from east to west; gigantic, hovering, he spoke in a thunderous voice louder than anything I had ever heard: *‘Fear God and give glory to Him for the hours of His judgment is come....’*

Against the hour of the bloodbath Nat had steeled himself in apocalyptic hatred, ‘hatred so pure and obdurate that no sympathy, no human warmth, no flicker of compassion can make the faintest nick or scratch upon the stony surface of its being.’ He had achieved this exaltation, he thought, by ‘knowing the white man at close hand,’ by becoming ‘knowledgeable about the white man’s wiles, his duplicity, his greediness, and his ultimate depravity,’ and most of all by ‘having submitted to this wanton and arrogant kindness.’ Then when the moment came and the dread axe was poised over his master’s head, Nat’s hand palsied and the blow missed. Again and again between violent seizures of vomiting he tried to kill and failed. Initiative fell to a demented black monster maddened by a master’s brutality. The only life Nat was able to take, among the scores slaughtered, was that of the one white person he still loved, a simple-hearted and sympathetic girl.

This is the most profound fictional treatment of slavery in our literature. It is, of course, the work of a skilled and experienced novelist with other achievements to attest his qualifications. It is doubtful, however, if the rare combination of talents essential to this formidable undertaking, a flawless command of dialect, a native instinct for the subtleties and ambivalences of race in the South, and a profound and unerring sense of place—Styron’s native place as it was Nat Turner’s—could well have been found anywhere else.”

C. Vann Woodward

"The Confessions of Nat Turner"
The Critic as Artist: Essays on Books 1920-1970
ed. Gilbert A. Harrison
(1967; Liveright 1972) 388-94

"It stirred much controversy, mainly from blacks, who considered the interpretation of Turner to be inaccurate. Told in the first person, yet, in the author's view, 'less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history,' the account of an actual person and event is based on the brief contemporary pamphlet of the same title presented to a trial court as evidence and published in Virginia a year after the revolt of fellow slaves led by Turner in 1831. Imagining much of Turner's youth and early manhood before the rebellion that he headed at the age of 31, Styron in frequently rhetorical and pseudo-Biblical style has Turner recall his religious faith and his power of preaching to other slaves. Embittered and frustrated by the evils of slavery, including the failure to obtain the freedom promised by his first master, Turner is portrayed as unable to find surcease in human relations, black or white, sexually or spiritually. Impelled by supernatural visions, the basically kind Turner becomes the leader of a small band of Southampton County slaves, who raise a violent insurrection in which many white men and women are killed but which is put down with great speed and brutality so that more than twice as many blacks die. Those captured and hanged include Turner."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 158-59

"No event in recent years has touched and stirred the black intellectual community more than this book. They are of the opinion, with a few notable exceptions, that the Nat Turner created by William Styron has little resemblance to the Virginia slave insurrectionist who is a hero to his people.... Why did William Styron make Nat Turner a celibate with rising lust for what he has called 'a pure white belle with swishing skirts? Why did he ignore the fact that Nat Turner had a wife whom he dearly loved? Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Colonel of the famous Black Regiment that distinguished itself in the Civil War, in his writings about Nat Turner, thirty years after the event, established the fact that Nat Turner had a wife—a slave wife on a plantation separate from that of his master. Higginson further points out that the very separation and helplessness of a man to protect his mate was part of the explanation for Nat Turner's revolt against slavery and the plantation system. Great literature is made out of this kind of material. Why did William Styron fail to use it?..."

The motive for this distortion could be William Styron's reaction to the racial climate that has prevailed in the United States in the last fifteen years. Nat Turner, a nineteenth-century figure, seems to have been used to make a comment on a twentieth-century situation. Why did the character of Nat Turner in Styron's novel vacillate between being a rebel and an uncle tom? Why in spite of his noble calling was he unable to conquer his lust for a white woman? Is there a difference between William Styron's stereotyped portrayal of Nat Turner and the current racial bigots' opinion of civil rights leaders?

In addition to reducing Nat Turner to impotence and implying that Negroes were docile and content with slavery, Styron also dehumanizes every black person in the book. Nat's mother, according to Styron's account, enjoys being raped by a drunken Irish overseer. In a review in the magazine *Psychology Today* (January 1968) Dr. Lloyd T. Delany warns readers that 'These are the confessions of Styron, not Nat Turner, for there exist significant historical discrepancies....' The book's implication about human motivations, he continues, 'contain not only serious error, but subtly support certain stereotype views of the most ardent racists.'

Why has the book received so much applause from the established press and a large number of well known 'scholars' who, in praising the book, display their ignorance of the true story of the Nat Turner revolt? Have they failed to see Nat Turner as a hero and revolutionist out of fear that they might have to see H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael the same way?..."

There were hundreds of uprisings and conspiracies preceding the Southampton, Virginia, uprising led by Nat Turner. The largest of these was the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston, South Carolina, in

1822. This rebellion was betrayed before it could be put into effect. The startled slaveholders discovered more than 15,000 slaves organized for combat throughout the area. The scene was already set for the Nat Turner revolt. During the years preceding the Nat Turner revolt there were major uprisings all over the South. The situation in South America and in the Caribbean area was not much different. The slaveholders of Virginia had called for federal troops to support their state militia. In the spring of 1831, federal troops were dispatched to Virginia in time to see service against Nat Turner's rebels. If, as William Styron asserts, the state of Virginia was on the verge of freeing its slaves, why did it assemble so much military might to keep them in bondage?" [fear]

John Henrik Clarke, ed.
Introduction

William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond
(Beacon 1969) vii-ix

"Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) is distinctly part of the 1960s; for black-white confrontations and civil rights, questions of job equality, relationships between the sexes are reflected in this account of the 1831 slave rebellion led by the Reverend Nat Turner. We must perceive the novel as Styron's ruminations on the sixties, as that decade, in turn, reflects our past, black reflecting white, white reflecting black. In racial terms, the 1960s were as significant as the 1860s. Calling his work a 'meditation on history,' rather than a historical novel, Styron made his goal a grand one, an effort he would repeat in his novel of the 1970s, *Sophie's Choice*. In the later novel, he meditated on World War II; in the earlier, on the background to the Civil War.

Because Styron was attempting something so difficult in *Nat Turner*, he made several strategic mistakes, which seriously affect the ideological level of the novel. The response of ten black writers to the novel is revelatory: for while it pinpoints Styron's errors, it also establishes several assumptions, part of a black aesthetic, which are destructive for fiction as a whole. One of the basic assumptions of all the writers except John A. Williams is that a white author should skirt black themes. Only one of the ten suggests that Styron's Turner is a tragic figure almost on the scale of Othello, and that his murder of Margaret Whitehead in the fields, by piercing her side twice with his sword and then smashing her head with a post, has the power and feel of Othello's murder of Desdemona....

These black responses are significant not only for their antagonism to Styron's presentation of Turner, but for their particular ways of viewing black-white relationships in the novel... I am concerned throughout with the pressure such a response puts on any writer, black or white, who tries to write about racial relationships, or generally about blacks. In the decade and more since then, whites have written only rarely about blacks, chiefly Malamud in *The Tenants* and Updike in *Rabbit Redux*, the latter a noble effort at understanding which touches upon no reality. One point the Nat Turner 'ten' fail to respond to is why no major black writer has tackled the Nat Turner rebellion. Baldwin, Williams, Morrison, Killens, Demby, and others all passed up the opportunity, as did the most obvious choice, Richard Wright. Since the subject was also a 1960s theme not preempted by blacks, the implication that white writers should leave black subjects alone is not well taken....

The errors Styron made—the worst of which is to have an unmarried Turner lust after white flesh, when his own Confessions indicate no such thing—do not affect many of the powerful segments of the novel. The buildup to the insurrection itself, the rationale for the slave revolt, and Turner's own hesitation—these do not demean blacks, but, on the contrary, give great weight and thrust to black aspirations. Rather than justifying the 'kind master' theme, Styron makes us accept that the slaves under Turner would murder even the kinder slave owners—Travis, for example—in order to assert their own humanity. One must read the book this way.

Styron's novel is concerned, broadly, with the tragic destiny of American history wherever it touches on black-white relationships. His assumption of Turner's voice as his narrative device was, I think, an attempt to bridge the gap between black and white, by ingesting the slave experience within himself and then manifesting the result in literary terms: exaggerating or distorting here, following Turner's Confessions there, allowing himself the play of interpretation fiction permits. He would do something similar in *Sophie's Choice*, ingesting there the concentration camp experience.

Yet the crux of the matter is that that assumption of Turner's voice, whatever Styron intended by it, was a strategic error. For the very reasoning that led Styron into attempting an 'I' narration in the voice of Turner should have dissuaded him: questions of language, mentality, point of view, and motivation. As soon as Styron used Turner as his 'I' he became involved in questions of verisimilitude beyond the distortions a literary genre permits; he became involved in his own credibility, which is one of the very areas the black critics questioned.

If Styron made strategic errors in assuming Turner's narrative voice as the novelist's own, he also erred in matters of sex. Turner's Confessions reveal a Christ-obsessed young man, someone who senses he has been chosen and awaits the call, a God-driven man swollen with pride and consciousness of his separation from others. Turner, in fact, equates himself directly with the crucified Christ, at least as his words are conveyed to us by Gray's transcription. Question: 'Do you not find yourself mistaken now?'—that is, after the failure of the insurrection. Answer: 'Was not Christ crucified?' Jesus speaks directly to him, having even told Turner things before his birth, so that he appeared as a prophet, embodying certain stated truths. He combines Old and New Testament qualities: the sternness of the prophets and the insistence of Jesus urging his mission.

There is no stated sexuality here, certainly none of the lusting after white flesh that Styron makes part of Turner's masturbatory fantasies. 'It was always a nameless white girl between whose legs I envisioned myself—a young girl with golden curls.' This is repeated in response to a particular white girl, Miss Emmeline, 'whose bare white full round hips and belly responded wildly to all my lust.' Later, just before the rebellion starts, Turner sees Margaret Whitehead as a rape victim, although the young girl shows some willingness. 'I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration.'

None of these episodes has any basis in the Confessions, and one wonders why even for fictional dimension Styron inserted them, since they serve no function in his development of Turner. In actuality, Turner was married, his sexuality contained. Styron even provides a mild homosexual episode, in which Turner and another young black friend mutually masturbate. The black-white fantasies appear a serious miscalculation, although Styron's critics appear as equally intent on castigating any mixed sex as attacking Styron for fictionalizing the record. But they are essentially correct in stressing that the episodes above fall into racially derogatory patterns, based as they are on the myth that the black lusts obsessively after white flesh. Connected to this is Styron's repeated suggestion that several of Turner's followers saw the rebellion as a means toward raping white women—although Turner's Confessions contain no such implication.

Styron's miscalculations here—and they are serious racially, as well as a subversion of Turner's reality—are connected to...his assumption of Turner's voice. For once he did this, he became involved in terrible inner tensions: his own Southern background, its values still held, together with those transcended, his need for historical distinctions, all of which involved him in several false steps. Here the body of the novel is seriously affected. Questions of language arise immediately, for Turner has been given two languages in the novel, that of the self-educated slave, and the approximation of Southern black dialect, used when he speaks to the other slaves. Neither is authentic; neither could be.

When Turner speaks with Styron's accents, the voice has such literary echoes from the Southern novel, with particular reference to Faulkner and to early Styron, that Turner's sensibility is drowned in a rhetoric not his. The rhetoric is often noble and very moving—this is a beautifully crafted and written novel. But from the first, authenticity is lost. Very few of Styron's black critics are responsive to how strong many passages are, and how sympathetically these passages present Turner because they are so well written. But in the larger sense, Turner drowns in another man's language; and when Turner speaks in his 'common voice,' there is little that is distinctive.

Once we move beyond language, to details themselves, Styron's use of Turner as narrator created several inconsistencies, some of them racial, some literary. In Turner's Confessions, there is no indication of slaves who fought and killed for their masters, although there is mention of Joseph Travis as being a 'kind master' to him. Once the insurrection begins, Styron makes much of loyal slaves who fired at

Turner's army, kicked wounded blacks, and served their masters with zeal. Although Styron is not bound by Turner's words, this phenomenon appears once again like a miscalculation in literary terms, for it derives more from Styron than from any necessary fictional need. It would appear to serve as little literary function as Turner's masturbatory fantasies over white girls. Whether these are racial slurs or not, they make the novel fall into racial stereotypes: in this instance, the idea of the loyal slave. The only 'loyal' slave would be the brainwashed slave, and to make that real literarily involves a different perspective from Styron's. A comparable analogy, appropriate for Styron's next novel, would be the concentration camp inmate who fights alongside the camp commandant. To show that literarily, one must make deep preparation; to state it without explanation is a desecration.

There is still another voice floating around, that of Thomas R. Gray, the lawyer who elicits Turner's confession. Gray's voice plays throughout the novel, very subtly intertwined with Turner's at certain points, the seams expertly closed up by Styron's skill in handling the narrative. Yet Gray's voice could have been the commentary. Styron might have used his narrative as Conrad did Marlow's in *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad chose not to tell Marlow's tale directly, but inserted an 'I,' who in turn related Marlow's story, so that it becomes the inner voice.

To avoid the narrative miscalculations already cited, Styron's positioning should have been by way of Gray, whom he could have distorted as he wished in terms of language, observations, response to Turner. As a Southern white lawyer, Gray would have spoken in Faulknerian terms. He might have imagined whatever he wished about Turner as a result of his confession, and he could have displayed whatever racial sympathy or animosity Styron wished to insert. Such a distancing of author from main event, by way of Gray, would have permitted Styron an additional voice, his own, which now is lost. So much is moving in *The Confessions* that 'rewriting' becomes a temptation. A more acute awareness of modernist techniques would have served Styron well literarily.

Paradoxically, Styron's sexual inventions regarding Turner, while suggestive of racial platitudes, provide one of the most compelling scenes. In his Confessions, Turner speaks matter-of-factly of his slaying of Margaret Whitehead; it takes only a few lines, some repeated blows with a sword and then a further blow to the head with a fence rail. In Styron's recreation, Turner's resolve to continue with the insurrection is sorely tested by his need to slay the sympathetic young girl. There is less sexual memory here than humanistic consideration: To what extent can children of slave owners be held responsible for their parents' deeds? Can the sacrifice of innocents be justified by the need to eradicate a poisonous social and economic system? Can revenge against children compensate for the misdeeds and personal horrors suffered under even kind masters? Is there, indeed, such a thing as innocence, when the very system is poisoned? Even the sexual motif makes sense here, since Turner's piercing of Margaret's side with his sword has sexual connotations. As he runs after her, he cries: *'Ah, how I want her,'* an ambiguous phrasing which suggests his dualism. The episode pulls together a great deal of the novel, since this murder is the sole one Turner commits, the only one he is able to commit.

His compassion here gets Styron and us into thickets of problems, most of them concerned with novelistic license. How does one see the Negro in general as a tragic figure or as a man with characteristic frailties and desires? Was Turner a larger-than-life figure of tragedy, someone who moved amidst slavery as Greek tragic heroes moved among their people, doomed and liberated by their mission? If we view Turner as tragic—that is, so intent on his function that all other considerations fall away—then Styron's portrait is a disservice from nearly every aspect. If, however, we observe him as a man with mission who was also riddled with human frailty, then his pathos and hubris can be granted.

Then we can possibly even accept Will, a man so driven by hatred of his cruel master that his mind has been warped. Styron presents Will as turned bestial by repeated whippings and inhuman treatment. Will is beyond the pale and makes Turner fear for his own leadership, for Will kills readily whereas Turner vacillates. If we seek heroic figures, then Will is not animalistic, but a man driven to another level of existence by ill treatment. If we seek less than tragedy, then Will has become a crazy man, intent on nothing but destruction as retribution for his own destruction. The question is one of Greek tragedy or modern psychology. Such questions, which apply as much to a slave situation as to a concentration camp,

apparently led Styron into his next book, *Sophie's Choice*, where the camp experience of Sophie (the inner story, her 'Congo') relives the slave experience of Nat Turner.

Historical detail is another matter. In the Author's Note, Styron indicates that Turner's revolt is 'the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery.' The black critics responded the way Jews react to those who claim European Jews went to their deaths without protest. The 'ten' cite other instances of revolt, Cato's in 1739 or Denmark Vesey's in 1822 as examples, but there are many others mentioned in documents, either incipient revolts or rumors of plots. Their point is that Styron has assumed the docile Negro slave, almost happy with his lot under masters who were often kind, a bourgeois 'Sambo' disinclined to upset his situation. In their view, Styron's Negroes would fear freedom more than slavery.

Once again, Styron seems to have gained nothing by citing this as the only sustained revolt, unless he was prepared to demonstrate fictionally that the slaves were happy with their lot, which he does not do. His portrait of slavery is not of happy Negroes, his critics notwithstanding, but of a horrible institution which sucks spirit, mind, vitality. Yet by claiming Turner's revolt was singular, Styron left his flank open, and the charge that slaves therefore accepted their lot inevitably followed. One can understand the attack, but the novel is not quite what the attackers claim.

From a sixties point of view, Turner should be heroic; not a man torn by human doubts but a fiery, retributive figure leading the slave revolt against inhumanity. The black critics take a social-political position on Turner, claiming him as their own; whereas Styron took an almost purely literary position, claiming him for both whites and blacks. Styron's Turner is not the black Turner, and for that reason the author should not have personalized his protagonist, but should have located him in the mind or imagination of a contemporary of Turner's, such as Gray, or even the judge, Jeremiah, an interesting but undeveloped secondary character. By such location, Styron could have presented the black Turner as well as the Turner who fitted his own literary conception. Instead, he lost distance, and his Turner loses credibility, neither the Turner of history nor the Turner of an imaginative recreation.

From his first conception of his character to the reception given by both the black and the white press, Styron's writing of this novel took on extraordinary dimensions. Whereas the white press was almost universally approving—views often based on ignorance of Turner's own Confessions and black history—the black reception from the start was antagonistic. Although these responses must have been painful for Styron, they did expand the novel's social relevance. That is, they stirred up, far beyond the novelist's apparent intention, the issue of race, whose agonies the novel was to reflect. In a sense, the response, antagonistic and virulent in turn, was part of the dialogue of the 1960s; and the 'black aesthetic' which the ten black writers manifested was directed toward creating a 'social literature' rather than a 'literary literature.'

Whenever the Styron novel departs from Turner's own Confessions, the critics consider it racist—quite a fearful catchall term of criticism in the late 1960s [and thereafter], which consequently soon lost its force—especially since most of the ten believed that for Styron even to write about a black hero was potentially racist. Yet many of their criticisms, as we have seen, pinpoint ideological and racial difficulties in the novel—some of them not even fictionally important to Styron and therefore, perhaps unconscious reflections of stereotypical attitudes. Even so, the critics on one hand did not allow Styron sufficient literary license; whereas he, on the other, undermined his own position with poor narrative decisions and unexamined racial attitudes.

Still, the book is a powerful statement—for blacks perhaps only to the extent that it called for such a virulent response, comparable to the Jewish response to Hannah Arendt's book on Eichmann's trial; for all readers, however, for its attempt, often moving and compelling, to enter into a black consciousness that black writers themselves had been reluctant to assay. There is, unfortunately, only one black equivalent of this, Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936), a large-scale effort to catch the slave revolt directed by a leader named Gabriel. Bontemps's novel aside, it is a curiously empty area. Williams in *The Man Who Cried I Am* (published in 1967, the same year as *Nat Turner*) wrote his own gloss on the black protest novel, in the person of a very modern black who is still trying to reject the label of slave imposed by a white world. But the Nat Turner material, nevertheless, has been revealed only by a white writer, and one

must sharply disagree with the black critics who find sympathy for slavery or its institutions in Styron's novel.

More than nearly any other work of fiction since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it makes slavery come alive, removes it from statistics and history into a vital area of universal concern, foreshadowing *Roots* and a whole series of studies devoted to black history. That Styron, with all the flaws we have noted, could do this is to suggest that his novel had its impact, painfully for him, painfully for his black critics and readers, but also painfully, because of its content, for all readers."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 340-44

"In 1967, one of the most controversial novels of the decade appeared. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* precipitated an immediate uproar. The work is based on an actual rebellion in Virginia in the early 1800s; Styron took a historical document, some twenty pages of 'confessions' of Nat Turner, the leader of the rebellion, and extensively fictionalized the account. The work won for Styron the Pulitzer Prize, and he received both critical and popular acclaim. At the same time, a number of black readers strenuously objected to the work for several reasons: They did not approve of Styron's characterization of Nat Turner, who, they asserted, was emasculated and ineffectual and generally inaccurately portrayed. They also found the character too motivated by the desire to rape a white woman rather than to correct the evils of slavery. Styron responded to these charges in part by quoting from the 'Author's Note' to the novel, in which he had written that *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was meant to be 'less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history'."

Carl Singleton
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 4
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1445-46

"He has a right to write about whatever he wants. To suggest otherwise is outrageous. What they [black critics] should have criticized, and some of them did, was Styron's suggestion that Nat Turner hated black people. In the book Turner expresses his revulsion over and over again... He's so distant from blacks, so superior. So the fundamental question is why would anybody follow him? What kind of leader is this who has a fundamentally racist contempt that seems unreal to any black person reading it? Any white leader would have some interest and identification with the people he was asking to die. That was what these critics meant when they said Nat Turner speaks like a white man. That racial distance is strong and clear in that book."

Toni Morrison (1993)
The Paris Review Interviews II
(Picador 2007) 373

Michael Hollister (2015)

