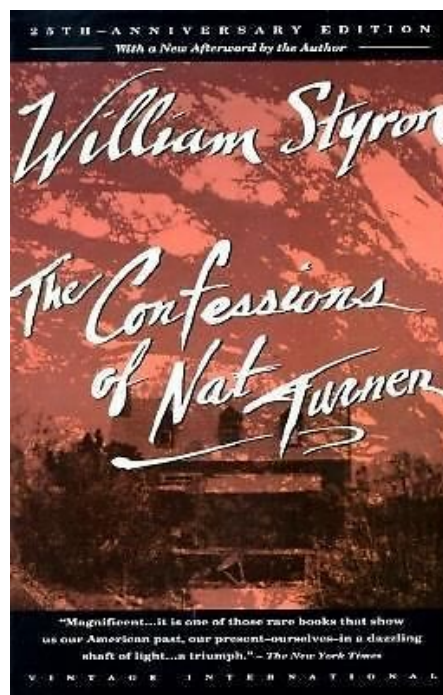




The Confessions of Nat Turner

William Styron

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The Confessions of Nat Turner William Styron

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

In 1831 Nat Turner awaits death in a Virginia jail cell. He is a slave, a preacher, and the leader of the only effective slave revolt in the history of 'that peculiar institution'. William Styron's ambitious and stunningly accomplished novel is Turner's confession, made to his jailers under the duress of his God. Encompasses the betrayals, cruelties and humiliations that made up slavery - and that still sear the collective psyches of both races.

The Confessions of Nat Turner Details

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From Reader Review The Confessions of Nat Turner for online ebook

Karen says

Much has been made of this book, with criticism ranging from the extreme charge of racism to the milder implication that Styron, as a white man, could not capture Nat Turner's "blackness" the way a black writer could have. I don't wish to address this book within the context of these controversies. Styron may not have been able to capture Turner's blackness the way a black writer could have (as an Asian-American woman myself I will never know), but he did capture Turner *the man* in a way only a great writer can.

The figure of Nat Turner is a compelling one: even though we can sympathize with his cause, we are still somewhat appalled by the bloodbath he created and the terror that followed in his wake. His motivation, too, adds to our fascination with him: had he claimed to be attempting a political overthrow or simply to be acting out of revenge, he would not be so intriguing. Instead, however, he claimed to be acting on the direct orders of God. And it was this claim that must have burned like a brand into the hearts of the white slaveowners, many of whom had already bent their minds into knots in their attempts to justify black slavery from a Christian perspective. Nat the avenging prophet challenged not only the system of slavery, but also the divine justification for it on which slaveowners relied to assuage their own consciences.

Turner could easily have been presented as a deluded religious fanatic, but some instinct told Styron not to portray him so. And indeed, if we as a culture could convince ourselves that he was simply a religious fanatic I doubt we'd be as fascinated by him as we are. Instead Styron portrays him as dark and brooding, deeply conflicted, torn by ambivalences, driven by a love that eventually becomes indistinguishable from hate. He loves his fellow slaves, but despises them for their ignorance; he even loves some of his masters, but hates them for their inability to act on their convictions; he loves Margaret Whitehead, but hates her for making him love her in a world where such love is forbidden; he loves God deeply, but in the end comes close to hating Him for calling him to such a dreadful task; and, most of all, he loves himself, but hates himself for being caught between worlds - too educated to belong to the slave community, but too dark-skinned to belong to the white community.

Some have commented on Styron's failure to give Turner a wife, but it is precisely Turner's *loneliness* that is his defining characteristic. He does not belong *with* anyone, or *to* anyone. He does not fit in *anywhere*. It is this frustration that ultimately drives him to slaughter, but it is also this frustration that leads to his undoing. He sought to use his fellow slaves to destroy the white world to which he could never belong, but he also realized that, even with the whites gone, he could never belong to the rag-tag group of slaves who would remain. Critiques that Styron hasn't captured the "black experience," I believe, rather miss the mark: Styron wasn't attempting to speak of the black experience, but rather he was attempting to speak of the experience of a lone man who sat on the margin between slave and free, who refused to be trapped into the world of slavery even when he knew that the free world would never let him in. In the context of race relations, Styron's book can be seen as having done a great service in showing that, at those points where the boundaries between black and white, slave and free, begin to blend and blur, danger and destruction to both races lurk. In such cases there are only two options. We can do as the slaveowners did and redraw the boundaries even more rigidly, a task which is bound to fail as the boundaries once again begin to merge over time. Or we can eliminate the boundary altogether - a task which I am sure Styron would support, and one which we are still in the process of completing.

Diane Barnes says

I didn't even have to think about the 5 stars given this book. Powerful writing, powerful characters, powerful themes; this is what great literature is meant to be. I consider the controversy surrounding this book to be an indication of it's excellence. I won't bother to give a synopsis of the plot, but I will say it paints a painful and depressing view of the institution of slavery and it's effect on white and black people, creating less than human roles for both races. I'm glad I finally got around to reading this novel, thanks to my GR group, "On the Southern Literary Trail".

Lawyer says

William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

THE GATHERING

Whereupon all members of the congregation are seated.

THE LECTIONARY

First Reading

On Being Brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Phyllis Wheatley, a slave poet, 1753–1784

To be continued...

Larry Bassett says

This book was published in 1967. It was at the time of black power and the civil rights movement. The book was a big hit and won the Pulitzer Prize and then ran into the headwinds of controversy. I had forgotten that in the many years that passed. How could this rich, white, southern man write about the experience of a black slave?

Soon, though, a group of African American writers attacked the book, accusing Styron of distorting history, of co-opting their hero, and of demeaning Turner by endowing him with love for one of his victims, a young white woman. These critics saw Styron as usurping their history, much as white people had usurped the labor and the very lives of their ancestors. They rejected the notion that a white southerner—or any white person, for that matter—could fathom the mind of a slave.

Source: <http://www.enotes.com/topics/confessi...>

What did the white populous say of the Turner rebellion?

Yet, your Honors, I will endeavor to make it plain that all such rebellions are not only likely to be exceedingly rare in occurrence but are ultimately doomed to failure, and this as a result of the basic weakness and inferiority, the moral deficiency of the Negro character.

As with any worthwhile book, there are useful bits of knowledge scattered throughout. You may know that it was illegal for slaves to read but there were ways this was ignored, such as the labeling of spices and ingredients in the pantry. Thus the world is filled with uncut diamonds.

Although I have come late to the joys of reading and still cannot properly “read,” I have known the crude shapes of simple words ever since I was six, when Samuel Turner, a methodical, tidy, and organized master, and long impatient with baking alum turning into white flour and cinnamon being confused with nutmeg, and vice versa, set about labeling every chest and jar and canister and keg and bag in the huge cellar beneath the kitchen where my mother dispatched me hourly every day. It seemed not to matter to him that upon the Negroes— none of whom could read— these hieroglyphs in red paint would have no effect at all: still Little Morning would be forced to dip a probing brown finger in the keg plainly marked MOLASSES, and even so there would be lapses, with salt served to sweeten the breakfast tea. Nonetheless, the system satisfied Samuel Turner’s sense of order, and although at that time he was unaware of my existence, the neat plain letters outlined by the glow of an oil lamp in the chill vault served as my first and only primer. It was a great leap from MINT and CITRON and SALTPETRE and BACON to *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, but there exists both a frustration and a surfeit when one’s entire literature is the hundred labels in a dim cellar, and my desire to possess the book overwhelmed my fear.

Setting aside the controversy that the book created in the days following its publication is not easy for me. I want to hold it accountable for the troubles it deserves and earned. But there is a section midway in the book that sticks with me regardless of the politics of the story, then or now. Let me share that section in my own words:

The plantation where Nat has lived for many years has failed. Nat is a teenager and holds a promise from the master of being freed by the age of 25. The plantation has been dismantled and sold off, including all the

slaves. There is much emotion and tension about the changes. The past life is viewed with some sentiment and the promises of the future are nervously considered. Nat ponders his existence in a way that is hard to imagine. He is a black slave who has been promised a future that strains his imagination and his trust. The writing is powerful but is overpowered by consideration of what the situation must have been like when it was a reality and the book characters were flesh and blood. Styron gets some credit for a stunning portrayal but it is the reader who has the power of recreating the scene mentally from the mere words. The power of the controversy magnifies the reality into an Imax-like scene and it explodes from the pages.

Another aspect of the book is Nat's description of how he consciously assumes the attitude and demeanor of a slave even though it is not his true being. The effectiveness of this is nearly impossible for me, a white male, to evaluate. Similarly, it is impossible for me to know how well author Styron has accomplished that task. It is on the basis of alleging the impossibility of a white male succeeding in that task that Styron was taken to the woodshed by his critics in the 1960s. The validity of that criticism resonates with me.

As for myself, I was a very special case and I decided upon humility, a soft voice, and houndlike obedience. Without these qualities, the fact that I could read and that I was also a student of the Bible might have become for Moore (he being both illiterate and a primitive atheist) an insufferable burden to his peace of mind. But since I was neither sullen nor impudent but comported myself with studied meekness, even a man so shaken with nigger-hatred as Moore could only treat me with passable decency and at the very worst advertise me to his neighbors as a kind of ludicrous freak.

...

At such moments, though Moore's hatred for me glittered like a cold bead amid the drowned blue center of his better eye, I knew that somehow this patience would get me through. Indeed, after a while it tended to neutralize his hatred, so that he was eventually forced to treat me with a sort of grudging, grim, resigned good will.

So all through the long years of my twenties I was, in my outward aspects at least, the most pliant, unremarkable young slave anyone could ever imagine. My chores were toilsome and obnoxious and boring. But with forbearance on my part and through daily prayer they never became really intolerable, and I resolved to follow Moore's commands with all the amiability I could muster.

I am sometimes motivated by political correctness. Reviewing this book may be one of those occasions. For the furor this book created in 1968 when it both won the Pulitzer Prize and the castigation of a number of Black writers, does have an impact on me. I am a white male, always have been, always will be. As such, I have benefited from many unearned privileges. I am embarrassed by that. I remember 1968 and my privileged position as a college student exempt for a time from the draft when others were going to Vietnam.

My white, liberal self wants to be made uncomfortable reliving the experience of a black, nineteenth century slave in Virginia. Virginia has its own ignominious history in the struggle for black racial and civil rights. That ignoble history comes up close to the present time when the town where I currently live filled its public swimming pool with dirt rather than integrate and staunchly defended separate but equal. Nat Turner is a part of that Virginia history as is William Styron.

At the end of the Kindle Edition of the book there is an Afterword titled "Nat Turner Revisited" that apparently, based on the copyright date, was written in 1976. Written by Styron, it is probably described as both insightful and inciting.

I find the story of the controversy that surrounds the book almost more interesting than the book itself! If you have an interest in the dangers of historical fiction writing or in the Black Power movement of the 1960s,

you should look into this controversy. I have several failings. One is that in a debate I often lean toward whatever is the most recent thing I have read or heard. The last word often unfairly carries the heaviest weight for me. In this case, my last word is this Afterword by Styron. He makes a compelling case for several decisions he made in writing the book that tread on issues of accuracy.

However, in the Last Word contest I have yet to read the 1968 book "William Styron's Nat Turner" in which ten black writers severely criticize Styron. I have that book on order and look forward to reading it. There is also an interesting exchange of Letters to the Editor online from the NY Review of Books that is alluded to in Styron's Afterword. You can find that at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archi...>

I am not certain that it is fair to grade this book based in part on the controversy it created. But it was in my mind as I read the book and as I wondered about the legitimacy of the criticisms. I read this book a long time ago and was mostly unconscious that I was a white male reading a book by a white male putting himself in the mind of a black slave. I liked the experience of reading this book in my younger, less sensitive years. Now I read it with more empathy for the criticisms that were piled on the book and I feel obligated to downgrade the work from four to three stars. Subject to revision based on what I glean about the controversy in the future. But three stars for the moment.

Jonfaith says

By sword and ax and gun you run a swath through this county that will be long remembered. You did, as you say, come damn near to taking your army into this town. And in addition, as I think I told you before, you scared the entire South into a condition that may be described as well-nigh shitless. No niggers ever done anything like this.

During my arrogant youth I signed up for a History of Slavery course, you know, so I could marshal evidence against The Man. I went the first day, inspired by Huey Newton, wearing a Ziggy Marley t-shirt, cargo pants and my Barca soccer cleats. I entered the room with Wretched of the Earth prominently displayed and discovered that the class was 80 percent black. This is southern indiana, mind you. I tried to participate and often did, the undertow of history kept clipping my thoughts and outbursts. The instructor was also white and spent most of the semester bursting into tears. The term project required reading a literary treatment of the period (Gone With The Wind, Beloved) and comparing it to slave narratives. I chose William Styron's novel, well, because it concerned Nat Turner. I did listen to Public Enemy after all.

I did enjoy the novel and can remember a number of aspects. Reading the critical responses to such, i can certainly empathize with those that felt that were being disinherited or disabused somehow by this nuanced portrait. The chanteuse Abbey Lincoln proclaimed on Ken Burns' Jazz, in this country they'll steal your ancestors. That's a great deal of baggage for a goodreads review.

L says

[Review written by my younger self]

Why is a novel that won a Pulitzer Prize in 1967 on my "Hate" list? Author Styron has no question about the important presence his novel has; he states that he is giving readers a fictional presentation of the actual history surrounding our title "character" in 1831. With this, Stryon takes on a certain authorial latitude that can be easily misconstrued with actual history.

I can understand the message Styron wishes to communicate. He presents the historical precursor for the problems and prejudices that haunt urban African-Americans today. But, with this, is it necessary to add his own altering of the actual history of this slave rebellion?

Here are some of the true facts Styron presents either directly or indirectly: 60 white persons killed, 17 perpetrators hung, 12 more sent to Alabama to die in slavery, and 131 free and enslaved Americans killed by a mob. With 220 dead and America's laws at the time becoming increasingly harsh (think of the Fugitive Slave Law), how much more latitude does Styron need to express his point?

With such a novel that uses an actual person and event, how much responsibility does Styron hold to historical accuracy? Many would say that he holds none at all. There is, indeed, the anonymously-written *Primary Colors*, among others, that takes its own version of history and "tweaks" it for entertainment appeal. So let's consider Styron's purpose? Is it entertainment? In the book's afterword, Styron writes that the real Nat Turner was a person of "conspicuous ghastliness" and "a dangerously religious lunatic". So what does Styron want to do? He wants to change this person of demonic fanaticism with one of "stern piety".

Thus Styron wants to alter this man's personality. With this, the story becomes one of a tortured man who feels that being cut off from God is a fate worse than death. Throughout all his brutal and grotesque violence, he claims himself in the fictional parts of this novel to be a man of God. Has Styron acted responsibly in doing this? More importantly, does this alteration make it easier to swallow this historical event, and should that even be a consideration?

This event is just a small slice of the over 60 million slaves whose lives were lost. What if these and other figures were altered in other historical events? What if the numbers and events were altered regarding the over 12 million lost in the Holocaust? What if authors decide they want to take some authorial license over the recent events in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Kosovo?

I do not discount the fact that the actual historically-accurate circumstances regarding Nat Turner are of great significance today. But can readers benefit from a story that claims to present important history and yet is not wholly accurate? In a book entitled *Ten Black Writers Respond*, the title persons say that both they and their white counterparts would have better benefited from an unbiased assessment and chronicling of history as it is truly presented. In fact, in one of the most obvious historically-accurate omissions of Nat Turner being married with at least two children, activists and black writers accused Styron of adding firewood to the white racist view that black men are obsessed with white women.

By taking liberties with the story and the man, Styron seemed to brush off the fact that slaves' lives were actually worsened by Nat Turner and his rebellion. The fact that Turner seems almost as prejudiced against field slaves as well as masters is soon overshadowed by the fact that he later becomes a champion of slaves nationwide. Styron overlooks the fact that the real Nat Turner had a wife, and that his last few masters were actually relatively kind in a system of slavery that did not afford many kindnesses.

These overlooked historical facts could have only added to the human complexity that Styron was aiming for. Noting all of these fallbacks, it seems the author was seeking a preposterous self-aggrandizement by claiming unabashedly that his novel is a complete "meditation on history."

As a historical novelist, Styron did not do what historical novelists should do--i.e., investigate the facts. Therefore, *Confessions* is not an accurate portrayal of Nat Turner, and dangerously takes a controversial figure of race relations and distorts him. Only by presenting true accounts can historical novelists hope to honor and understand the complexity of the past and present this importance to their readers.

Jim says

I'm tempted to give this 1 star, but it does hold some historical perspectives that are worth reading. Just be aware that Styron twisted some facets of history around & subscribed unsupportable motivations to Turner, a religious fanatic & a lunatic, by his own words to Thomas Ruffin Gray. Gray was the lawyer who sat down with Turner while he was awaiting execution & wrote the first 'Confessions'. It's available as a free download here. (2/15/2018 update of the original link, old one busted.)

Turner thought himself destined for great things due to visions that he ascribed to his god & filtered through a distorted religion. His twisted confession is a chilling look at life through the eyes of a serial killer, a seriously deranged man. His 'rebellion' was nothing more than a wild killing spree without any other real purpose. They killed at least 10 men, 14 women, and 31 infants and children. His name should go down in history along side the likes of Hitler, Jim Jones & David Berkowitz - nut job murderers.

Unfortunately, Styron's fictional account tends to excuse many of Turner's actions & even shows him in a heroic light. I don't see how this obviously intelligent & charismatic man (Turner) could have so badly bungled a true rebellion. His confession to Gray tells us that he was directed by the holy spirit toward some sort of judgment day. It reads nothing like a man who wanted his physical freedom (he'd escaped & come back on his own, unlike his father who escaped & never returned) but more like a deranged man aiming for a baptism in blood.

Reading some history on the reprisals that took place after this 'rebellion' makes for even more chilling reading. The immediate executions & beatings were horrible, but the effects on the anti-slave movement were devastating. Turner managed to destroy the growing sentiment that Jefferson had worked so hard to bring about & finally seemed to be coming to fruition in VA.

Mark says

Nat Turner was a negro preacher, an educated slave, born and raised in Virginia. He felt he had been ordained by God, to fight a cause and start an insurrection against the horrors of slavery.

This is a fictionalized account of this story, narrated by Turner, as he lies in his cell, shackled, awaiting his execution.

There was rampant controversy surrounding this novel, on it's release in 1967. America was in revolt at the time, over civil rights issues and having a white southerner pen this story, caused an uproar. I can not address those allegations, with any authority but I found this to be a deep, ambitious examination of a man, fighting against injustice. He did not get the results he hoped and many people were brutally killed, but I think this planted the seeds that led to the events, thirty years later.

This was my first book by Styron and I was impressed by his vision and his craft.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

You see the quotation marks down there? And I really am not going to dance around spoilers....

I've not read *Nat Turner*. I've not read *Sophie's Choice*. In fact I've (likely) never read word one by Styron.

And don't really care to. Aesthetic reasons....

But there's a brief discussion I ran across in Frederick R. Karl's *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* about a collection of responses to Styron's book :: William Styron's *Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. I can't say I've mastered the issues, but I do value Karl's emphasis ; that it is not so much a matter of appropriation (property) as it is a matter of articulation (aesthetics). Them's my words. [in the following quotation, I reproduce Karl's footnote as a footnote...]

"Because Styron was attempting something so difficult in *Nat Turner*, he made several strategical 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 suggest 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. 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 mast' 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 devices 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 strategical 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 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."

*[Karl's own footnote] A very valuable document printed in 1968 (Beacon Press) *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, edited by John Henrik Clarke. 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 will take up their various points later, but 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."

Karl goes on to say that what Styron *should have done* :: “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 Cobb, 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.”

Warwick says

This book caused quite a controversy when it came out in 1967, and judging from some of the reviews here and on Amazon, it's continuing to do so. I didn't know about any of that when I started it, but the more I read the novel, the more dissatisfying and even irresponsible it started to seem.

Some have traced the outcry which followed its release to the simple fact that a white Virginian author was writing his way into the mind of a 19th century black slave, but that is hardly the issue. The book may have won the Pulitzer, but for me it has two major problems: the narrative voice is wildly inappropriate and the characterisation is on ethically shaky ground.

The book is narrated by Nat Turner, the poor and uneducated slave who led a rebellion against white society in 1831. Nat has scabbled together a self-taught literacy through a study of the Bible. Yet the register of his narration is jarringly elevated:

It may be the commencement of spring or perhaps the end of summer; it matters less what the season is than that the air is almost seasonless – benign and neutral, windless, devoid of heat or cold.

This is from his introductory remarks on the first page. By the end of the book, as he really tries to ratchet up the sense of drama, he is writing things like this:

I heard from afar, across the withering late summer meadows, the jingle of a cowbell like eternity piercing my heart with a sudden intolerable awareness of the eternity of the imprisoning years stretched out before me: it is hard to describe the serene mood which, even in the midst of this buzzing madness, would steal over me when as if in a benison of cool raindrops or rushing water I would suddenly sink away toward a dream of Isiah....

Does this really seem like the way a psychopathic uneducated slave would talk? Not to me it doesn't. What it sounds like is an overeducated middle-class 20th-century writer. Of course this is fiction, and there is no real reason why Styron can't just abandon verisimilitude and write however he likes – and if the writing were beautiful I would probably not care. But I'm afraid I didn't find it especially beautiful – just overblown and consciously literary in a way that distracted from the story.

Nat Turner writes suspiciously like William Styron – and identifying author with character turns out to be of particular concern in a book like this. Where this moves from literary concerns to moral ones is the way Nat's stylistic flourishes are contrasted with the dialectal speech of other slaves. Not only do other black characters

have their patois transcribed in detail (and to the point of caricature), but Nat himself is made to see it in the worst possible terms.

‘Yam, me tek 'ee dar, missy, me tek 'ee dar.’ I listened closely. It was blue-gum country-nigger talk at its thickest, nearly impenetrable, a stunted speech unbearably halting and cumbersome with a wet gulping sound of Africa in it.

It seems like this represents not the thoughts of a fellow-slave, but rather the kind of racist white society around him. That's not to say that no slaves internalised this racism and looked down on other black people: I'm sure that happened. But for an author to stress this element so strongly seems rather precarious, and taken with how much Styron's own writing seems to speak through Nat's narration, leaves the author in a slightly awkward position.

If it were just the language it might be surmountable, but it isn't. In so many ways Nat is given exactly the feelings that anti-emancipationist, pro-slavery militants liked to imagine black people had. Despite leading a slave rebellion, Styron's Nat Turner is himself the most fervent despiser of black people. He sees them as ‘a disheveled, ragged lot [...] filled with [...] laughter high and heedless, and loutish nigger cheer’ – ‘faces popeyed with black nigger credulity’, ‘sweat streaming off their black backs in shiny torrents, the lot of them stinking to heaven’.

So after a few passages like this I couldn't help feeling that Nat's identification with the author was starting to have sinister overtones. Nowhere is this more unnerving than in sex. Racist activists liked, then and later, to portray black people as sexually voracious, lusting wildly after god-fearing white people's wives and daughters. In that context it seems vaguely irresponsible to give exactly these impulses to Nat. Disgusted at the rest of his own race, our narrator disappears into sexual fantasies of raping white girls:

It was always a nameless white girl between whose legs I envisioned myself – a young girl with golden curls [...] when I stole into my private place in the carpenter's shop to release my pent-up desires, it was Miss Emmeline whose bare white full round hips and belly responded wildly to all my lust and who, sobbing ‘mercy, mercy, mercy’ against my ear, allowed me to partake of the wicked and godless yet unutterable joys of defilement.

Again, I'm not saying these psychological dynamics never happened, only that representing them in a balanced way is an incredibly delicate job and I don't find Styron up to it. To speak the question, then, that lies behind these criticisms: if Nat's high writing style is more representative of the author than the character, then could the same be said of Nat's unpleasant opinions on race?

That's ridiculous, right? That's ridiculous. Obviously. But at the same time, it's not the sort of question I want to be worrying about. Styron's intention may have been to show how the system of slavery brutalised everyone, but the fact remains that he has come up with a portrait of a black man which would have pleased the most unpleasant proponent of white supremacy. This is a real problem. Add to that a writing style I could never believe in, and you have one of the few books that left me with, to put it mildly, serious misgivings.

Christopher Conlon says

At the height of his fame, William Styron was one of America's pre-eminent novelists, his name invariably present in any list of the luminaries of the post-World War 2 generation of Big Male Writers: Saul Bellow, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote et al. Yet like some of that group (James Jones comes to mind), Styron's star has to a large degree faded. Some of the diminishment may be due to the fact that he was never prolific, and his reputation must stand or fall on a tiny handful of books. Too, he suffered a very long decline as a writer in his later years, with his fourth and final novel, the celebrated "Sophie's Choice," appearing in 1979; from then to his death in 2006 he published very little other than a brief memoir of his struggles with depression, "Darkness Visible," and a brief collection of stories, "A Tidewater Morning." Both these books were published in small formats with large print and wide margins in an obvious attempt to make them look more substantial than they were. In fact, neither was really book-length (even with all the formatting tricks, "Darkness Visible" still only runs 85 pages). While both "Darkness Visible" and "A Tidewater Morning" contain powerful and even beautiful writing, it's fair to wonder what in the world happened to William Styron. Offhand the only similar fade to silence I can think of from a major artist is that of the composer Sibelius, who released no new music in his last thirty years, though rumors of another symphony were always rife—just as rumors of a new William Styron novel (it was to be called "The Way of the Warrior") were too.

I discovered Styron at the tail end of what turned out to be his heyday. This would have been in 1985, when I was a student at the College of the Redwoods in Arcata, California. I'd heard a great deal about the novel "Sophie's Choice," and even more about the movie, but was unfamiliar with either. Burning to know more about this writer, part of my favorite generation of American literary figures (I was already deeply immersed in Capote, Vidal, Baldwin, and Mailer), I went to the school library only to discover that the single copy they had of "Sophie's Choice" was checked out. But they had another Styron title. It was called "The Confessions of Nat Turner." I took it home and read it in, I think, two days flat, awed by the power of its theme and language. Styron immediately soared to the top of my must-read list, and I quickly devoured everything else the man had ever published. He remains a key writer in my life.

"The Confessions of Nat Turner" was controversial from the beginning. In the novel Styron chooses to write in the first-person voice of Nat Turner himself, perhaps the greatest rebel slave of the nineteenth century—the man who led a band of Virginia slaves in 1831 to murder over fifty whites. Styron's choice of first person may not seem like an issue today, but it's important to realize that the book was published in 1967—at the very height of the Civil Rights movement, and at virtually the very moment the movement began to harden and become more militant with the rise of Black Power. While the novel was an enormous commercial success and won the Pulitzer Prize, some in the black intellectual community were angered by it to such a degree that a kind of counter-commentary, "William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond" was published in 1968, the sole purpose of which was to attack, denigrate, and ridicule the novel—and Styron himself—in any way possible, reasonable or not.

Reading a historical novel from another era results in a kind of double vision. On the one hand we can admire Styron's gorgeous evocation of Virginia in 1831—his prose is as sure-footedly lyrical as Capote's or Baldwin's; on the other, we can't help but see how this narrative is very much a product of a 1960's white man's imagination. Styron is masterful at depicting Turner's mental anguish at being enslaved; this book marked what was surely the first time most white readers had ever seriously contemplated the horror of the idea. This was, remember, ten years before "Roots" seared its way into the national consciousness. Styron's Nat Turner is a brilliantly conceived character, and his inner turmoil is fully convincing on its own terms.

But it must be admitted that some of those "terms" are, read today, a bit odd. Styron's Nat Turner often seems more preoccupied with sex than liberation, and in a crucial move that brought down much of the black critical ire on him, the author invented a tension-filled, love-hate relationship (not a love affair, as some

claim) between Turner and Margaret Whitehead, the lovely young belle who was, according to the historical record, Turner's only actual victim—the only person he himself killed. I find the several scenes between them powerful and even painful to read, with Margaret's nascent humanism struggling to overcome her lifetime's teachings about the worthlessness of black people. But these scenes are also easy to misinterpret, to read merely as another "Birth of a Nation"-like depiction of a black man lusting after a white woman. Styron also left himself open to criticism by eliminating most of the black influences in Turner's life—although the historical record indicates that Nat Turner was close to both his parents as well as his grandmother, Styron all but eliminates these figures from his story, instead focusing almost exclusively on Turner's relationships with his various white masters. I can't help but wonder how conscious this decision was on Styron's part; it may simply have been that he felt more comfortable depicting scenes between blacks and whites than in trying to imagine black family relationships.

In 1968, Styron published an essay, "'O Lost! Etc.'" bemoaning the fact that the reputation of one of his literary heroes, Thomas Wolfe, had "sunk so low." Poor Wolfe, he wrote, "if not dead is certainly moribund, and the matter of his resuscitation is certainly in doubt." Little did William Styron know that within a few years of his death, much the same could be said of his own literary legacy. In any event, "The Confessions of Nat Turner" remains an admirable attempt to bridge the racial divide—a divide that in 1967 surely seemed more like an endless chasm. It's the book that first sparked my interest in American slavery, an interest that led to my teaching a course on the subject for some years as well as, eventually, writing a collection of poems about a different historical event of the slavery period (see my book "The Weeping Time"). For those reasons, I can only give "The Confessions of Nat Turner"—whatever its flaws—five stars.

Carol Storm says

Terrible book. Just as dishonest as Margaret Mitchell's GONE WITH THE WIND -- but not nearly as entertaining.

William Styron's problem is that he's rotten with self-disgust, and trying desperately to vindicate the guilty south. This book isn't really about "discovering" a new truth about "the Negro," but rather about trying desperately to keep his own illusions intact.

Here's what William Stryon wants to believe:

Slavery, while a terrible curse on both races, cannot be blamed on the South. Especially not on Virginia, and most especially not on Virginia's ruling elite, who were all well-meaning and decent people of the highest social breeding. The real tragedy is not that blacks suffered under slavery, but that the wise, tolerant, and truly enlightened Virginia elite were never allowed to end slavery in their own way. Blacks were too impatient for freedom and acted irresponsibly, egged on by the fanatical agitators of the North.

Are you convinced? I'm not. But William Stryon really wants to believe this stuff.

So what he does is to give us the Nat Turner he can live with. Not merely a weakling, a physical coward and a fool, this so called "rebel" is an almost comically enthusiastic cheerleader for Old Virginia. He boasts that his first master hosts lavish parties for guests "with names like Byrd and Cartwright." Oh, boy! All the upper class Virginians are well-meaning, sensitive, educated. It's only the poor whites and meddling Yankees who cause all the trouble!

Nat Turner is a terrible liar. He blames all the wrong people for slavery. And he keeps saying that "God is

absent." What he means is that he wants God to take the rap for slavery. Now, something tells me that it's Styron who's looking for someone to blame for slavery. The real Nat Turner knew who to blame, and acted accordingly.

This is a terrible book. Yet it's so full of despair and pessimism that in a sense you get the impression that writing it was its own punishment. Styron was a deeply troubled man and he collapsed artistically after writing this book. Almost as if he knew it was all lies, and knew that he was going to be judged for what he'd done.

Just like all the other slaveowners.

Karen Chung says

Leave it to Styron to write a first-person perspective narrative of a black slave. If you want to revisit the offensive stereotype of a black man constantly fantasizing about sexually assaulting innocent white women, then go ahead and read it. I have no idea why this book won a Pulitzer.

Tim says

Of William Styron's four main works of fiction (meaning, in this case, full-length novels), the Pulitzer-winning "The Confessions of Nat Turner" is my least favorite. It's still pretty damn good; that should give you an idea of what I think of Styron.

People have thrown stones at Styron for years over his portrayal of Turner, who supposedly was acting on a mandate from God in leading a slave uprising. You know, white guy writing in first-person as a black man, taking liberties with history. The book seems less controversial today, what with find-your-own-slant-and-run-with-it novelizations of history and historical figures all over the bookshelves. That said, if you can only take your historical fiction straight and with no embellishment, steer clear. For instance, if you hated Russell Banks' "Cloudsplitter" (I loved it) you'd probably hate "The Confessions of Nat Turner."

Keep in mind that Styron isn't making an attempt at straight history, and you'll enjoy this. Much of it is moving and powerful. As always, Styron writes so damned well that his subject matter often doesn't matter that much.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

I have so many thoughts on this. It is a powerful novel. Early on, I thought if they had awarded two Pulitzers in 1968, this could have won it twice. Reading it now close to 50 years after publication, and with 21st Century eyes, I don't understand the controversy.

The edition I read opens with an author's note. The first sentence tells the basis for the novel. *In August, 1831, in a remote region of southeastern Virginia, there took place the only effective, sustained revolt in the annals of American Negro slavery.* This introductory material is brief, and ends with his statement *it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel" in conventional terms than a meditation on history.* There is also a lengthier afterward in which he

discusses how he came to write the novel, some of the controversy, and his reasoning for some of the positions he took regarding Nat Turner.

Turner was definitely a religious fanatic, and, while Christian, is not that different than the religious fanatics operating elsewhere in the world today. If the controversy had centered on this fanaticism rather than accusing Styron of racism, it might have been fair. But Turner wasn't killing people because their religion didn't conform to his religious views, he was killing them because whites treated blacks like animals. (The truth is that Turner's reason for his actions is unknown, so my interpretation of this reason comes from reading the novel. This might not be correct, but I believe a quite reasonable interpretation.)

Apparently there was dissent that a white man could write in the first person of a black man. To me, that is about as narrow-minded as saying that a woman can't write as a man. And then there was the controversy of a black man lusting after a white woman. I didn't read this that way. Turner was celibate. Part of his response to Margaret Whitehead was hatred of being thought to be an animal, not a man. The following perhaps describes both what I found to be superior prose and how Turner's rage could easily bubble to the surface. He is describing a man with whom he became very close, and who exemplifies how the slaves were reduced to something sub-human by white slave owners.

He had the face one might imagine to be the face of an African chieftain -- soldierly, fearless, scary, and resplendent in its bold symmetry -- yet there was something wrong with the eyes, and the eyes, or at least the expression they often took on, as now, reduced the face to a kind of harmless, dull, malleable docility. They were the eyes of a child, trustful and dependent, soft doe's eyes mossed over with a kind of furtive, fearful glaze, and as I looked at them now -- the womanish eyes in the massive, sovereign face mooning dumbly at the rabbit's blood -- I was seized by rage. I heard Cobb fumbling around in the cider press, clinking and clattering. We were out of earshot. "Black toadeater," I said. "snivelin' black toadeatin' white man's bootlickin' scum! You, Hark! Black *scum*!"

Turner's "Confession" exists. Though Turner could both read and write, this confession was taken down and written by his defense attorney, Thomas R. Gray. Although Styron questions whether this "confession" might be Gray's interpretation, he concludes that the insurrection happened as presented in this document. But there is nothing else in the official record or document that tells us about Turner's early life, nor anything further about his personality. This is a work of fiction - superb historical fiction to my thinking.

It is not for everyone. I will not quote the many parts that readers today might find offensive in referring to blacks - and those potentially offensive words are not just sprinkled occasionally on the pages. Some of it is very raw, but, as such, feels very historically accurate. To me, it is unfortunate that Styron left us so few works of novel-length fiction. I hope to read those that exist.

Chad Bearden says

I won't really go into whether or not Styron has the right, as a rich white guy, to tell the story of the black slave, Nat Turner. Nor will I engage with those who cry foul at the historical accuracy of these "Confessions". Those that harp on such things are missing the point of this work.

To the extent that 'the point' is obvious (which it isn't, necessarily), Styron seems to have set out to explore the true story of a fascinating event in the history of American slavery, and to use it to describe and illuminate the life and culture of that time, and whether it is right to do so or not, the psychological goings-on of a slave living in the midst of that dark era of US history.

The author makes no claims to definitive historical accuracy, and indeed, says in a very straight-forward introduction, that most of what is written is conjecture.

I judge this novel, then, based solely on how it says what it says, and what impression it leaves upon me. And on those merits, I grant it an easy 5 stars.

What does it say? Well, it mostly shows how horrible and degrading life was for slaves. The black characters in this volume are treated with such sub-human apathy, and have been for so long, that they themselves begin to buy into their less-than-human status. Nat begins to show open disdain for the less educated slaves, not because he hates who they are in any racist sort of way, but because they have accepted the popular white notion that they are inferior to white people. Nat, having unwittingly stumbled into a slightly higher condition of living, has a unique perspective, complete with literacy and a modest dignity that even he reluctantly relinquishes when he finds himself in certain social situations.

The most startling thing I found while reading was that not all the white characters were slave-driving villains. Many of the white characters are quite sympathetic in their liberal beliefs that slaves could possibly be educated and raised to a higher status. Indeed, it is through such a benefactor that Nat attains his education. But rather than creating a dichotomy between 'good' white people and 'bad', it merely creates a burdensome grey area, as even the sympathetic white characters do much to progress the cause of emancipation. After the slaughter that he instigates is over, this fictional Nat seems only to regret one of the killings, and that is of a beautiful young white girl who seemed to treat him with great kindness and respect. But even she treated Nat almost more as a pet than as a human being.

It is easy to see how a black man from the 1830's would find such vengeance in his heart after being given a chance to take an honest and raw look at the situation as it stood. The magic of this book is that William Styron leads the reader through these thought processes, and shows how the heroic and religious Nat Turner could come to the conclusions he did.

Finally, after reading this work, as well as the rather fascinating "The Bondwoman's Narrative" (a novel written by an actual escaped slave in the 1860's), and seeing how ingrained into popular thinking were slavery and its racist justifications, it is almost impossible to imagine that we, as a society, found our way out of it. It's no wonder that 150 years later, there is still dormant biases lying just under the surface.

Is this book historically accurate? Only in so far as Nat Turner was a real man and he lead a real rebellion and murdered real people. Does that take away from the power of this novel? No. "The Confessions of Nat Turner" is an enlightening read that shines a light on a very dark aspect of our national past. I'm very glad I read it.

Bradplumer says

My gut first reaction to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was something like *wow, holy f---, this is brilliant*. Then I started flipping through some of the contemporary reviews, the historians who thought Styron's portrayal of a slave revolt in the 1830s was "psychologically sick" and "morally senile," who said Styron himself possessed a "vile racist imagination."

Oh no.

So... after thinking about it for a bit, here's what I'd say. One way to look at the long, angry controversy around *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is to start with a few basic questions: Why do historical novels exist.

What are they for. Why read them. etc.

One possible answer is that the main value of the historical novel is to conjure up people and moments from history to life. Historical novels fill in the blanks that non-fiction can't, by adding thoughts and texture and moments of humanity to the known facts. If that's what you're after, then it's signally important that the novelist get those facts right—or at least justify any liberties taken.

But not everyone agrees with that view of the historical novel. Georg Lukacs, for one, said it didn't matter if historical novels stayed glued to the known facts. "On the contrary," Lukacs wrote, "the novelist must be at liberty to treat these as he likes, if he is to reproduce the much more complex and ramifying totality with historical faithfulness."

This is all from Lukacs' book, *The Historical Novel*. He went on to argue that "the writer's relation to historical reality—be he playwright or novelist—can be no different in principle from his relation to reality as a whole." A historical novel isn't supposed to be history refashioned with a novelist's tools; it's a novel written with historical material.

I'm only bringing this up because it seems that a lot of critics over the years have accused William Styron of writing bad history with *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Whereas Styron thought he was following Lukacs' advice. And that seems like a key distinction here.

So here are some known facts. The real Nat Turner was a gifted black man who led a slave revolt in southern Virginia in 1831, killing 55 white people before he was eventually captured, interrogated, and hanged. What evidence we have about his life comes from a brief 21-page "confession" that Turner dictated to a white lawyer in the days before his execution. The lawyer's recollections of Turner may be unreliable.

Styron took that scant material and went about re-imagining Turner's life—his upbringing, his life as a slave, and what led him to mass murder. The liberties Styron took with Turner's life infuriated critics. One of the earliest detractors was Lerone Bennett Jr., who catalogued the distortions in an October 1968 issue of *Ebony*. A sample:

--In the novel, Turner has an infatuation with a white teenage girl that only incenses his hatred of whites more generally, even though there's no historical evidence to suggest this affair ever happened. Plenty of critics thought Styron's invention played on long-standing racist stereotypes and fears of black sexuality.

--In the novel, Turner's mother is a complacent house slave, whereas there's evidence to suggest that she was, in real life, virulently anti-slavery.

--In the novel, Nat Turner's rebellion is eventually halted by other black slaves who fight for their masters. Styron seems to be enthralled by the idea that other black men were the reason Turner failed. But there's no historical support for this.

And so on.

For Bennett, these distortions were a mortal sin. "Instead of following the traditional technique of the historical novelist, who works within the tension of accepted facts," he wrote, "Styron forces history to move within the groove of his preconceived ideas." You can read similar dissections of the novel in the *New York Review of Books* [here](#).

One thing to note is that these critics are arguing history. Not fiction. Not the aims of novels or the uses of the imagination. They're saying that Styron's novel failed to bring the real Nat Turner to life—or, at least, the proper Nat Turner. Scholars have been trying to claim Nat Turner for various purposes for years. And Styron

was setting that process back.

The reaction from novelists was different. James Baldwin, for one, famously admired Styron's novel: "The book meant something to me because it was a white Southern writer's attempt to deal with something that was tormenting him and frightening him," Baldwin said. "I respect him very much for that."

Baldwin wasn't even sure the book had been executed flawlessly. He conceded that Styron's attempt to see things through Turner's eyes "may have been a great error." But Baldwin was interested to see how a white man from the South—whose own grandmother had owned two slave girls in the 1850s and lamented bitterly their emancipation by the Union Army—how that white man would confront the "complex and ramifying totality" of slavery.

Bennett, for his part, was less sympathetic on this score: "Styron is writing for his very life, throwing up smokescreen after smokescreen to hide himself from the truth of the American experience," he wrote in *Ebony*.

I'm not actually sure who's right, Bennett or Baldwin. Sorry. What I can add, feebly, is that this a beautifully written book. Here are a few small snippets selected at random:

able to disgorge without effort peals of jolly, senseless laughter.

dreams of giant black angels striding amid a spindrift immensity of stars.

deafened as a little boy by a blow on the skull from a drunken overseer, he had since heard only thumps and rustlings.

there lurked in his heart a basic albeit leaden decency

grasshoppers stitched and stirred in restless fidget among the grass

Beautiful writing isn't always enough. But it'd be a shame to let it go unnoticed.

Ned says

A tremendously talented writer is Styron and a fascinating portrait of human bondage, madness and religious fervor gone amok. Very relevant to today on these topics, though set in early part of 19th century Virginia. Great research, exquisite detail and stupendous character development. One of the best "historical" novels I've read, and perhaps my favorite read of the year so far. Looking forward to reading all Styron.

Jennifer Hughes says

I think I'm giving up on Pulitzers. I've seen so many now that have very few redeeming qualities and just are rotten reading. So here are "The Confessions of Jennifer Hughes":

Section 1: Hmm. Seems like a really interesting novel based on true historical events of the only effective, sustained revolt in the history of American slavery. I'm thinking 4 or maybe 3 stars here.

Section 2: Confusing, circular method of story-telling. I'm losing interest. Down to 2 stars.

Section 3: Aagh! Horrifying, gruesome, and nasty details. Quick, skim! Eek, just turn to Section 4! 1 star!

Section 4: Poignant. I feel for the real man Nat Turner but want to avoid any future contact with author William Styron!

If you want an excellent book on slavery in America, read *Roots*; it's fabulous. Save yourself 428 pages and read this Wikipedia entry instead about the real Nat Turner. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nat_Turner

Scott Axsom says

By turns breathtakingly beautiful and heartbreakingly poignant, William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* ranks among the most beautiful novels I've read. Though unavoidably polemical, the book is nonetheless a deeply stirring contemplation of man's place in the universe and his duties to his fellow man.

The story is told through the eyes of a man convicted of leading one of the most notorious slave revolts in US history. He is a man of God, and the book explores the circumstances that brought him to the decision to lead a rebellion that, by design, resulted in scores of murders. I must admit that I found my interest flagging at the point in the story where the revolt was actually launched. I found much more compelling the tale of how a man of the cloth could be brought to the conclusion that mass killing is the only viable solution. What series of events, what sequence of circumstances ultimately leads a person or people to conclude that killing is the solution? This book seeks to answer that question, among others.

The crushing dehumanization of the slave system is placed on vivid display by Styron here but the indomitability of the human spirit is the novel's true lodestar. Certainly, one of the most controversial aspects of the story is Styron's treatment of the love that exists between Nat and a slaveholder's daughter. In Shakespearean fashion, he draws the lines of a socioeconomic system that stripped an entire class of people of their humanity and, in the process, unavoidably diminished humanity itself.

He describes a scene, late in the book, where Turner is in a position of power over a slave master and Turner realizes with some shock that it is the first time he's ever looked into the eyes of this man he's known for over a decade. Such moments punctuate Styron's work here, along with Turner's thoroughgoing meditations on why a just god would allow such a system in the first place. The author manages to thoroughly address the two fully-intertwined, yet independently dangerous, subjects of Christianity and slavery, while conducting a searching exploration of our individual humanity when faced with a patently immoral system.

Though a painful read at times, this is a hauntingly beautiful novel and I guess I come down in the camp of people, such as Styron's friend, James Baldwin, who felt it was a work that needed to be done, regardless of the writer's race. In Baldwin's own words,

"Each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, white in black, and black in white. We are part of each other."
