

“When will we lie down in darkness and have our light in ashes?” A Reader-Response Analysis of William Styron’s *Lie Down in Darkness*

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the literary achievement of William Styron’s (1925-2006) debut novel *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951) from a reader-response approach. The novel’s plot, characters, and themes evoke relatable emotions in the readers’ minds. By studying the emotional developments of the protagonist Peyton, through her thoughts, words, and symbols, this paper examines the emotional response the novel’s aestheticism provokes in readers. The research gives a brief background and explains the main premises of the reader-response theory according to the American critic Louise M. Rosenblatt. The study elucidates the tools of imagery and symbolism used by Styron to make readers reflect on their personal experiences in relation to issues like sin, guilt, loss, nostalgia, and failure. Through an exploration of the characters, themes, and narrative structure, this analysis reveals the novel’s capacity to resonate on a deeply personal and individual level. The Loftis family’s complex dynamics and internal struggles serve as a mirror through which readers reflect on their own experiences, forming unique connections and interpretations. The narrative’s shifting perspectives and temporal shifts invite readers to actively construct meaning, further fostering a dynamic reader-text relationship.

Key words: Emotions, *Lie Down in Darkness*, Louise Rosenblatt, Reader-Response, William Styron.

images.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Lie Down in Darkness was released in New York in September 1951, right after the Great Depression (1929-1932) and by the end of World War II (1945). The first half of the 20th century witnessed the eruption of the two world wars which resulted in around 60 million dead and tens of millions injured or maimed (Spielvogel 710). America’s intrusion in the wars left permanent marks on the lives of American citizens, especially in World War II after the events of Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on

August 6 and 9 in 1945. These events made the early 20th century an age of uncertainty as the wars made modern man skeptical about his psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual entity. Philosophies such as skepticism, empiricism, and existentialism prevailed in the country; people questioned the purpose of existence (Cotkin 3, 4).

The reader-response theory solidly appeared in the 1970s and 1980s, stemming from early questions about what happens when a human being encounters written texts (Harkin 411). By examining literary works with these questions in mind, the emphasis shifted from the text being the center of attention to the reader being regarded as a conscious participant in the reading process. That is, the reader-response approach directs literary criticism to focus on how the text personally appeals to the readers in terms of feelings and thoughts. It pays attention to how readers respond to a text. This view contradicts other prominent theories—such as Formalism, Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, New Historicism, Post-colonialism, and Feminism—which study texts as pure art forms of rhetoric and interpret meaning in relation to either other fields of study,

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linguistic and stylistic prowess, or historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts.

I. A. Richards' book *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* expands on the method that readers assess the truthfulness of a particular literary work by paying attention to how the story affects their own feelings and experiences. According to Richards, readers develop "an attitude" or perspective towards the story, and they also experience an "accentuation of interest" which is heightened engagement, characterized by personal sentiments (53). Thus, language serves as the means to convey these emotions and interests.

Since its publication, *Lie Down in Darkness* (LDID) has received both acclaim and critique. The book's first title was *Inheritance of Night*. James L.W. West III provides a comprehensive account of Styron's extensive four-year journey during the process of writing the book. In the novel's early drafts, Styron confessed to having neglected the fundamental structure of the book, which serves as the essential framework supporting the intricate elements of character development, and events. However, he eventually managed to build a unified architecture, completing the work in 1951.

The novel revolves around the Loftis family in post-World War II Virginia. The story delves into the dysfunctional dynamics of this Southern family, exposing dark secrets, emotional turmoil, and the tragic consequences of their troubled lives. The conservative, religious mother of a crippled first daughter named Maudie is Helen Loftis, a daughter of a former Army officer. Her husband, Milton Loftis, an ambitious yet unfulfilled lawyer, is passionately attached to their second daughter, Peyton. As Peyton's life unravels, the narrative explores themes of isolation, despair, and the impact of the past on the present, ultimately leading to a tragic climax. On August 10, 1943, 22-year-old Peyton kills herself by leaping from a Harlem building in New York. The narrative commences with Milton and Helen awaiting Peyton's coffin, and from this point, the events leading to her death are gradually revealed.

By highlighting the novel's effect on readers from aesthetic and emotional standpoints, the reader is placed in the center of the work's criticism. The reader-response theory provides a relevant framework that gives the reader an active, instead of passive, role in deciding the value of the literary work. *Lie Down in Darkness* stands as a novel that evokes a cathartic emotional effect in readers due to its plot and themes, as reflected in the author's use of imagery and symbolism.

The term "imagery" describes the use of sensory-engaging, vivid language that evokes a mental image or sensory experience in the reader. Writers employ imagery to enhance the vividness, interest, and

emotional resonance of their works (Abrams 121). A literary or artistic device known as symbolism uses an item, person, location, or idea to signify something other than its literal meaning. These symbols are frequently used to subtly express difficult concepts, topics, or feelings, enabling a more in-depth and nuanced reading of a piece. Symbols can be found in literature, art, religion, and other forms of human expression (Abrams 314). Thus, imagery engages the senses through descriptive language, while symbolism involves the use of objects or concepts to represent abstract ideas or themes. Both devices are essential tools in the arsenal of writers and artists to convey deeper meaning and create more evocative and thought-provoking works.

Literature Review

Styron is considered as one of the best writers of the age that followed William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway by both critics and readers. Literary scholars such as James L. W. West and Louis D. Rubin have written extensively about William Styron's works and literary contributions over the past decades. Robert K. Morris and Irving Malin's *The Achievement of William Styron* (1981) provide a comprehensive study of Styron's literary accomplishments. What makes the book exceptional is that it contains a series of interviews conducted with Styron and several important essays that approach his various works. Among these essays are critical reviews of *Lie Down in Darkness*, such as "Notes on a Southern Writer in Our Time" by the renowned critic Louis D. Rubin, and Jan Gordon's "Permutations of Death: A Reading of *Lie Down in Darkness*."

In his review of *Lie Down in Darkness* (1991), Samuel Coale acknowledges Styron's modern techniques, such as the stream of consciousness in Peyton's monologue, the rich symbolism, paradoxes, ironies, ambiguities, and effective imagism and claims that the novel's success and power are the result of its form and style (42). Nonetheless, he argues against the thematic success of the novel, limiting the themes of the novel to the Southern experience, social dissolution, Episcopal Virginia culture, and Southern literary tradition (44). In that light, this research approaches the thematic aspect of the novel from a different, intrapersonal perspective.

Another central book to Styron's works is Daniel W. Ross's *The Critical Response to William Styron* (2005). Ross considers LDID as "one of the most successful debut novels in the history of American literature" (Ross 1). It received attention, which was rare for a first novel and Styron received immediate recognition in which he was being compared to prominent literary figures (1). In this book, Ross brings together essays and reviews that

deal with Southern, religious, and emotional aspects of LDID. In the essay "Domestic Tragedy in Virginia" Maxwell Geismar regards LDID a "remarkable" and "fascinating" novel and one of the few "human and mature novels published since the Second World War" (17).

No exclusive work has been written about reader-response analysis of the novel. For this reason, the reader-response approach achieves the purpose although the theory has been marginalized in academia and literary studies in the past couple of decades. According to Patricia Harkin, one of the reasons reader-response theory received criticism is that it gave the power of meaning to the reader, instead of the author (Harkin 416). She argues that there are political and socioeconomic implications to its refusal. In addition, the approach has stipulated that no literary work is ruled out as worth studying.

Methodology: Reader-Response Theory

An influential modern critic who had a strong interest in the reader's response to a text is Louise M. Rosenblatt. Rosenblatt's purpose was to make the reader visible after the reader had been deemed a passive component of the literary experience. The transactional theory of the American critic Louise M. Rosenblatt is adopted to emphasize the reader's importance in establishing the novel's literary worth. In her book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1994), she adopted a theory that granted contemporary literary criticism a valuable addition. She explained that the shift to the reader was the result of New Critic's social-political implications rather than its aesthetic theory (4). For centuries, Rosenblatt argues, the reader was invisible, and readers were viewed as a mass, as "the audience" or "the reading public" (4). What she insisted upon was to view the literary work of art as a "whole scene—author, text, and reader" (5). She presents fresh and new perspectives on the role of the reader in literature. The reader, as an individual, has generally been unacknowledged and their role marginalized. Rosenblatt recognizes the essential function of the reader—without diminishing the value of the author and text.

According to Rosenblatt, there are two kinds of reading a text: nonaesthetic and aesthetic. Differentiating between them depends on the reader's focus of attention during the process of reading. Nonaesthetic reading has to do with "the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" after reading the text (23). Therefore, when reading nonaesthetically, the reader

focuses on information, concepts, and guidelines to be used when the reading is over. As the reader responds to the printed words or symbols, his attention is directed outward toward ideas to be tested and actions to be performed after the reading (24). Rosenblatt uses the word "efferent" because she believes the primary concern of the reader is what they carry away from the reading (24). Such reading generally occurs in cases of reading scientific, medical, instructional, or technological texts, where the reader is only concerned with the utilizable and practical results of the reading.

During aesthetic reading, on the other hand, the reader's primary concern is what happens during the actual reading process (Rosenblatt 24). The reader pays attention to "associations, feelings, attitudes, and ideas" and what their "referents arouse within him" (25). Therefore, the reader's focus, as Rosenblatt clarifies, "is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (25). The aesthetic reader pays attention to particular words and their referents, rhythm, overtones, sound, sense, idea, and association. In consequence, the reader goes through sensing, imagining, feeling, thinking, and synthesizing to grasp events and concentrate on a complex structure of what he or she is experiencing (26).

She states that her theories enhance literary experience and do not underestimate the importance of literary concerns such as feelings, characters, events, tensions, dialogues, and actions which poems, novels, and plays rely on (28). She insists that the reader's attention to actual experiences signaled by the text is an "essential prerequisite" for these literary concerns (28). Hence, Rosenblatt concludes, "If a literary work of art is to ensue, the reader must turn his attention as fully as possible toward the transaction between himself and the text" (28). The significance of *Lie Down in Darkness* is hence emphasized through a close reading of the employed verbal implications and their effects on the aesthetic experience of the reader.

Lie Down in Darkness

William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* garnered a significant number of reviews, with most reviewers commending its potency and lyrical quality. However, a minority expressed concerns about its "morbidly" and the perceived moral shortcomings of its characters. (Lehmann-Haupt 1). The novel also won the Prix de Rome award. Initially, the story was presented as an internal monologue through the perspective of Maudie, the handicapped daughter. However, Maudie's role in the narration was subsequently discontinued, as Styron aimed to establish Peyton as the central character from

the outset of the story. Interestingly, Peyton symbolized Anna, a young woman in Styron's community, who battled severe depression. The night Styron completed his novel, he received the devastating news of Anna's suicide (West, *A Life* 151-203).

The events in the novel unfold across two separate and distinct periods. The first-time frame in the novel encompasses the present, spanning several hours from the arrival to the departure of the train carrying Peyton's corpus. The plot begins with the arrival of the train, which symbolizes the undeniable proof of fate and circumstance. This train also carries evidence of both Milton's mistakes and his deep love, for he cherished his daughter above all else. The sudden realization that he will meet her that morning, in silence and hidden within a coffin, fills Milton with profound horror (LDID 16). The melancholic mood of death and loss is set early on.

A sequence of flashbacks is included in the second time frame, which is nested within the main time frame spanning from 1932 to 1945. The writer skillfully guides the reader through a continuous narrative journey, adeptly shifting between the present and past. Each event in the novel is presented with its own distinctive narrator and narrative technique. In addition, the family's gradual disintegration is epitomized by five extended, intense dramatic scenes, each symbolizing a significant rupture in their foundation. When examining the novel closely, these dramatic scenes are discernible within the following events: the incident where Maudie is tied to a tree by Peyton and the children, Peyton turns sixteen, Maudie falls down the stairs, it is 1941 Christmas, followed by her wedding celebration. Tension and heated discussions, especially between Peyton and Helen, characterize each of these incidents.

Imagery, Symbolism, and Aesthetic Reading in *Lie Down in Darkness*

Imagery plays a vital role in strengthening the reader's engagement with the text and enables them to immerse themselves in the depicted events and emotions. Styron skillfully employed various forms of imagery, including visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory, and gustatory, throughout the novel. Notably, the sense of smell is frequently linked to feelings of nostalgia. Olfactory information, unlike that of other sensory stimuli, passes through two brain areas that involve emotion and memory: the amygdala and hippocampus (White). Studies have shown that memories triggered by an odor are accompanied by great activity in the limbic system and areas associated with visual vividness (White). In LDID, scents functioned as evocative stimuli of memories on more than one occasion. Specific scents held significant meanings in some events, so the significance of some of

these olfactory images will be delved into.

After getting Peyton's coffin back, the hearse's motor accidentally stalled. While waiting for the engine to be fixed, Milton sat inside the limousine, he restlessly observed the bay area surrounding him. Here, the "smell of salt and tar lingered on the air, rankly suggestive of sea, heat, stagnation" is described (LDID 50). These images convey connotations of heat, mortality, and materialism. Later, Styron adds "hot, laden with the odor of dead fish and rotting grass" to the air described, Milton heard, "the sound of metal falling, riveting hammers, the whistle of a train" (LDID 51). What's particularly striking is the scent that hints at "stagnation," which can be interpreted as a representation of the sense of stagnation that overcame Helen and Milton following the death of their second daughter. The use of auditory and olfactory imagery serves as a reflection of Milton's emotional and psychological state during that period.

Another notable image emerges on the night when Peyton offers her an apology for her involvement in wrapping Maudie in a rope around the tree. From Milton's point of view, he describes the situation, "Night enclosed them—night, fragrant with gardenia and rose, yet with a smell of medicine rising through the darkness, an unpleasant vapor faintly threatening, suggesting weariness and infirmity and disorder" (LDID 73). This image blends beauty and exhaustion within a single context, as the contradictory mixture of pleasant and unpleasant scents mirrors the contrast between the robust Peyton and the fragile Maudie. For readers who have encountered the presence of an unwell loved one, whether at home or in a hospital, this image carries a weighty resonance with the emotions and sensations of such experiences.

The novel also incorporates various other types of imagery, including visual and auditory elements. A significant instance of imagery occurs during 16th birthday of Peyton, and from Helen's viewpoint, the incident is depicted as, "The terrace echoed to gay music, sad music, sad as a flute, and the air above festooned with red bunting and white paper bells, was full of soft laughter and young sweet melancholy" (LDID 89). The music has both a delightful and a sad feature, infusing the air with both joy and sorrow. These are summer night vibes that carry with them denial as the family members of a house threatened to choose to enjoy the moment and put their disputes aside for a few hours. The promise of an enjoyable night, however, does not eliminate the temporarily buried truth that things are not going well. That creates a sense of melancholy hovering in the air, threatening peace of mind.

Another significant image is evident in 1941 on

Christmas Eve, as soon as Peyton leaves with her boyfriend to revel elsewhere. Milton tries to detain her, but she escapes before he even notices. Suddenly, he is by himself, “with the touch of her late light kiss upon his cheek, young laughter. . . hovering in the air around him, as he blinked stupidly at the chill black night, the open door, the lopsided wreath, still trembling” (LDID 181). The various sensory images described here, including the gentle kiss, youthful laughter, cold darkness, ajar door, and quivering wreath, collectively paint a vivid and poignant picture that conveys a sense of deprivation and bleakness. That feeling of abandonment overcame Milton, just like it overcomes any parent when they finally realize that their children eventually leave.

Therefore, some readers of LDID might empathize with Peyton due to their own personal experience been raised under similar circumstances of machinelike parenting styles. On the other hand, readers with a healthy or negligent upbringing compare their experiences and Peyton’s. This action of relating to the text and comparing one’s life makes the process of reading aesthetic and unique.

The novel frequently associates birds and drowning with themes of sin and guilt. As readers become attuned to this recurring motif, it intensifies their emotional response each time it appears in the narrative. Wilfred L. Guerin elucidates that form can encapsulate the theme, and the theme extends beyond the confines of the individual work. Symbol involves utilizing an element intrinsic to the work to extend its reach beyond the confines of the work itself and connect with the broader realm of values in the world (Guerin et al. 106). Through the strategic use of specific objects as symbols that mirror the underlying themes, Styron effectively enabled the novel to surpass its own boundaries and resonate with the world of values in a seemingly value-deprived era.

The dominant symbol throughout the novel is that of birds. Leonard Lutwack called the birds in the novel “avenging birds” (210), and this recurring symbol of birds serves to underscore the central theme of guilt. Styron altered the typical symbolism of birds, which often represent freedom, to convey a different meaning in the novel. As Peyton observes the clouds from her bed, she sees the disappearance of the dust, “leaving blue sky, and the rabbit became a duck with feathers drifting off its back. There was a duck in the dream, too, either big or small, floating somewhere on the river” (LDID 372). The images and symbols are intricately intertwined with one another.

Later, Peyton notices the rustling and chuckling of the pigeons outside, “throats swelling like bladders,

iridescent, throbbing; if you cut them with a knife, the blood would rush out” (LDID 376). Those violent images reflect Peyton’s psychosis. Furthermore, they evoke the perception of death. Peyton’s obsession with the idea of death, Lutwack asserts, was led by “sexual inadequacy” and guilt.

Peyton’s stream of consciousness is haunted by various images of birds. She thinks, “I tried to think. There were birds in my mind, landbound birds whirling about, dodos and penguins and cassowaries, ostriches befouling their lovely black plumes, and these seemed mixed up with Bunny” (LDID 377). In this context, the birds are associated with Milton, and there are implications in the novel, noted by some critics, suggesting he may have had incestuous desires towards his daughter.

In the monologue, Peyton alludes on multiple occasions to memories that could suggest possible instances of Milton attempting sexual misconduct with her. For instance, when she recalls the way Harry referred to her as “blessed Beatrice,” she instantly recalls where Milton had carried her to a strange bed in Richmond. Presently, she thinks, “I knew I mustn’t think of this” (LDID 393). It appears that she had been consciously avoiding or repressing that memory for quite some time, as she had not allowed herself to think about it previously.

With an understanding that flight is a recognized Freudian symbol for sexual intercourse, Lutwack interprets Peyton’s flightless birds as a representation of her sexual struggles with multiple partners, which may have been influenced by her intense relationship with her father. To compensate for her dissatisfaction, she engaged in promiscuous behavior with various men (Lutwack 210).

In a later image, the pain in her womb because of menstruation is associated with the birds. She closes her eyes and thinks, “There were moas now, and emus, big birds with arched gobbling necks and beneath their legs, as big as stilts, and prissed around in the sand. . . . stood flightless in my mind and noiseless, leaving me alone” (LDID 378). Immediately, she turns on the radio and listens to the news of the nuclear bombs they dropped the day before leaving tens of thousands of dead. The broader context that adds poignancy to the moment for readers is that the birds symbolize the agony and blame from both her immorality and the collective guilt of America.

Readers’ responses to Peyton’s tragedy depend on various circumstances such as their familial backgrounds, mental health experiences, religious beliefs, perspectives on suicide, life, and death, and other factors. Readers who have encountered the

damaging influence of parental love, hatred, or both, might discover their own challenges vividly depicted in the novel. On the other hand, those who have not experienced such hardship may come to appreciate their stable relationships or feel sympathy for Peyton due to her lack of what they have been fortunate to possess. In both scenarios, the initial response can yield either positive or negative outcomes.

Styron purposefully abstained from assigning blame for the family's tragic destiny, leaving it within the reader's view to make such determinations. The reader's inclination to either esteem or censure Peyton is essentially inconsequential. What holds significance is the capacity of the narrative to provoke emotional reactions within the reader. Styron's accomplishment resides in his ability to elicit these emotional responses, irrespective of their specific nature. This underscores Styron's emphasis on the reader's role in evaluating a work of literature.

CONCLUSION

Readers and their responses are essential to establish a work's value, and aestheticism has not lost its verve and is an ever-present aspect of modern life. William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* offers a reflective exploration of the complexities of human relationships, the shadows of the past, and the deep impact of emotional wounds. Through a masterful interplay of language and emotion, the novel delves into the lives of its characters, revealing their vulnerabilities, desires, and struggles. As the narrative weaves a tapestry of love, longing, and despair, it prompts readers to reflect on the inextricable link between darkness and light within human experience. The characters' shortcomings across personal, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions serve as catalysts prompting readers to pause and contemplate their own mistakes and failings. In the novel, Styron creates an emotional experience that induces responses within the reader. Referring to Rosenblatt's theory on aesthetic contemplation and transactional reading, the verbal implications of the text, as conveyed by the major themes, result in the evocation of emotional responses. Hence, a reader-response analysis of the novel reveals that its influence extends far beyond its pages. The novel's complicated characters, themes, and narrative structure invite readers to engage in a deeply personal and emotional exploration of their own experiences and perceptions. Through their interactions with the text, readers forge a unique connection with the characters and themes, making *Lie Down in Darkness* a lasting and significant work that continues to evoke diverse and introspective responses

from its readers.

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