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**Project Information**
Course number and title of course for which project was completed (if applicable):
**ENG 354 - The American Novel**

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Title of Project:
Sophie's Choice as a Cathartic Novel: An Analysis Using the Theories of Paul Ricoeur

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Title of Project: Sophie's Choice as a Cathartic Novel: An Analysis Using the Theories of Paul Ricoeur
The purpose of my paper is to examine the narrative structure of the novel *Sophie's Choice*. As the novel progresses, events are portrayed in an increasing lack of order parallel to Sophie's character development. In other words, the more the reader begins to see of Sophie, the more events are shown because they are key to understanding her character and why she makes the choices she does. It is worthwhile to analyze why this is so.

To accomplish said analysis, I will be using Paul Ricoeur's philosophical theory on time and narrative. In his theory, Ricoeur explains that narrative is important because it can alter the consciousness of both an individual and the world. In his work, *Time and Narrative*, he discusses why it is important to move from imperfect knowledge to clarity and how highlighting events from a story's plot horizon can provide the connection between real time and fictional time. There are multiple sectors of an arc of operations that every storyline follows. The events of that narrative can then be told simultaneously forward and backward, which is important for understanding the connection between narrative structure and reality. This is perfect for explaining the convoluted structure of *Sophie's Choice* because both Sophie and the reader spend the majority of the novel trying to come to (what is for them) an unseen conclusion. Arriving at this conclusion is what alters the reader's consciousness. In essence, *Sophie's Choice* almost has to be told in a non-linear structure.
Sophie’s Choice as a Cathartic Novel: An Analysis Using the Theories of Paul Ricoeur

William Styron’s novel Sophie’s Choice is written in a unique narrative structure that becomes increasingly non-linear as the characters develop. By the novel’s end, Stingo’s own life story and Sophie’s tale of her time spent in Auschwitz seem to compete in a whirlwind of flashback and confused narration. Paul Ricoeur’s theory on time and narrative may serve to explain why this is so. Studying this theory has determined that the very structure of a narrative can provide a cathartic experience for readers. For a book like Sophie’s Choice, in which the narrator (and reader) must deal with the aftermath of the Holocaust, narrative structure can operate as a way to help readers understand human action and to release the emotions that come with those actions.

The novel is set in New York, specifically the Flatbush area, directly after World War II. The narrator is a Southern writer named Stingo, who tells of his experiences with a Polish woman called Sophie and her lover, Nathan. Sophie’s history of her life in Poland and time in a concentration camp becomes entwined with Stingo’s own personal story and what develops is a telling of the two stories simultaneously. Eventually, the two stories collide and end in Sophie and Nathan’s joint suicide and Stingo’s broken heart. To convey this complexity, Stingo has both Sophie and himself use flashback to fill in gaps as they appear in relation to the characters. Stingo’s choice to narrate in this way creates an environment in which the reader can recognize and express emotion.

Paul Ricoeur is, essentially, a philosophical anthropologist. His theory, Time and Narrative, is an in-depth look at a broad range of ideas centered on the narrative and
human experience. The part of his theory that is useful here is the section dealing with narrative and human consciousness. Ricoeur believes that the way human beings understand one another is through some form of narrative. The structure of these narratives then forms a unique reality he calls the “horizon of storyline,” in which fiction and reality intermingle. It is here that readers can find catharsis from certain works. Catharsis is defined as, “the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions” (Oxford Dictionaries). The confusing narrative structure of Sophie’s Choice pushes readers to look at their own actions and emotions and thus helps them to recognize the meanings and motives behind them.

First it must be understood that Ricoeur sees narrative as the way humanity expresses its understanding of the world. He also believes that narrative cohabits with life, in a way, because there is a collective unconscious within all human beings that narrative attempts to portray. This connection turns stories into, “a chain of causal implication that must be traversed in time, and in a state of partial or imperfect knowledge, before there dawns any intimation that these same events might also be seen as a unity of action” (Dowling 8). In essence, narrative provides a background of human consciousness to what would otherwise merely be a series of events. Narratives are also unique in that they provide the reader the feeling of a real-life cathartic experience without coming to any harm or loss. Sophie’s Choice allows the reader to simultaneously experience what it was like to be a Jew during World War II and how non-Jewish Americans dealt with them after the Holocaust. This unique experience, should the reader
understand the meaning attached to the narrative as a whole, could help a reader deal not only with his or her own personal experiences, but with those of humanity in general.

In this way, *Sophie’s Choice* is particularly moving because the understanding that comes from it makes the reader realize that the actions and sentiments involved in the novel are a part of humanity’s collective unconscious. Thus, the story shows incredible potential at the most basic level to alter the consciousness of the reader before one even delves into the structure of it. The genre of the novel in itself has more impact on a reader simply because it involves ordinary people, rather than the epic heroes of the ancient tragedies. By expanding the social sphere, novels in particular give their readers stories that can be more emotionally involved than other forms of narrative. Hence the combination of events and the structuring of them in *Sophie’s Choice* presents a powerful story that is certain to cause readers to experience an emotional release and hopefully a deeper understanding of humanity. To do this, the complicated temporality of *Sophie’s Choice* pulls the reader through a range of emotions very quickly by blurring the lines between Stingo’s account and Sophie’s. This occurrence may be one unique to the novel.

On a broad scale, *Sophie’s Choice* is a series of events held together by an underlying tension Ricoeur calls “*telos*” (Ricoeur 1). Ricoeur defines *telos* as the movement of a narrative toward a destined end. In this case, that end is the catharsis felt from reading the novel. In order for the reader to reach catharsis, *telos* provides him or her with a “moment of clarification” (Dowling 9). This is when the reader moves from a state of imperfect knowledge to clarification, which is then followed by an alteration in consciousness. In *Sophie’s Choice*, the moment of clarification happens upon the novel’s
end. When the novel is over, a character’s identity ceases to develop and since understanding Sophie is pivotal to finding catharsis from the novel, readers can only achieve this when there is no more to discover. Bernard Dauenhauer and David Pellauer explain that, “taken by itself, an element of a story is of interest only if it is surprising. But when it is integrated into a plot it appears as a quasi-necessity” (Dauenhauer). If a reader were to read Sophie’s Choice in a clear, chronological order, he or she would merely see a string of facts about someone’s life without the subsequent plot that the novel’s structures helps provide. Ricoeur supports this idea by stating that, “beginning, middle, and end must be viewed as effects of the ordering…rather than features of some real action” (Dowling 8). For example, had Stingo only told the events of Sophie’s life as they truly happened without first describing the false version Sophie initially depicted, the reader would not have to make an effort to understand the lies in the first place; and the lies (and why she told them) are crucial in understanding Sophie’s character. The various versions of these events are told as they become necessary to aid the reader in understanding Sophie, not before or after. Once the reader comes to comprehend her character, they can also understand the story as a whole and thus the meaning attached to the story. This is why Stingo’s story becomes increasingly about Sophie and less about himself.

However, the idea of a non-linear structure is not unique to Sophie’s Choice. Every narrative is in a sense told out of order. According to Ricoeur, each story is essentially told forward and backward at the same time. The narrator already knows what happened, for the very definition of narration implies recalling past events. However, the
characters of a story do not have any previous knowledge of the events within it. This means that, in a narrative, there is a form of time Ricoeur refers to as “third time”, in which events can happen in both past and present tense, depending on the perspective (Dowling 35). The narrator sees the story from the perspective of someone looking into the past; to the characters, the story is moving forward into the future. It is also in this time that the consciousness of the reader discovers the possibility of a reality belonging only to the mind or soul. For a novel like Sophie’s Choice, this means that the reader can experience concurrently the trauma of a concentration camp and dealing with someone who has been in one without the consequences of those events transferring over to his or her own life. What makes the narrative structure of Sophie’s Choice so uniquely complex is the confusion of tenses that occurs when Stingo is narrating Sophie’s story and his story simultaneously, i.e. when Stingo explains her monologues while also sharing his thoughts about them. Ricoeur states that a narrator already sees the story as a whole and thus has already judged the events that took place. However, because the narrative structure of Sophie’s Choice is so interconnected, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether Stingo truly understands what happened. For instance, one can see descriptions of Stingo’s troubles with Leslie Lapidus sandwiched in between Sophie’s first encounter with Nathan and Nathan’s wrathful episode at the bar. In a chronological sequence, none of these events happened anywhere close to one another, yet they are presented one after another, giving the idea that some aspect of the three incidents is connected in Stingo’s mind. In this case, the reader arrives at Ricoeur’s “moment of clarification” at the same time Stingo realizes this connection (which comes at the end of the novel). It is easy to see this because of the change in narrative style Stingo uses throughout Sophie’s Choice.
What begins as a steady tale of Stingo’s life in New York gradually fills with Sophie’s personal history. However, his own story must be told as well and thus the reader finds several instances in which his narrative is disrupted by hers.

It is absolutely imperative to realize that none of the events in *Sophie’s Choice* happen as the result of another event; they are only ordered that way because it gives the reader a way to understand human identity and experience. That is why Stingo’s story and Sophie’s story are so intertwined and out of order. It cannot be stressed enough that, had the story had a linear structure, the range of emotions experienced would not be as broad, the characters would not be so difficult to understand, and *Sophie’s Choice* would cease to have the ability to provide catharsis for readers. It would not press readers to really *experience* the novel; rather, it would return to becoming a series of events with little *telos*.

Additionally, there are times in the novel when Stingo narrates differently. Instead of having Sophie tell her history to him in a dialogue fashion, he describes the events in his own words and sometimes adds commentary. This usually happens when Sophie’s time in the concentration camp is being described. The change in narrative style implies that Stingo himself is struggling with the meaning implied behind each action of Sophie’s and forces the reader to deal with it as well. For example, when Stingo narrates an event involving Sophie and Nathan, it usually follows this form:

So maybe you can see, Stingo,’ Sophie told me that first day in the park, ‘how Nathan saved my life. It was fantastic! Here I was, very ill, fainting, falling down, and along comes—how do you call him?—Prince Charming, and he save my life... (Styron 168).
However, when Stingo narrates the events involving the concentration camps, the account sometimes progresses similar to how he tells his own personal story:

She stood in the shadows of the hallway, only a few feet from the bottom of the attic stairs. The radio was playing soft murmurous schmaltz. Above, there was a sound of the booted feet of Höss’s adjutant, thumping about on the landing (Styron 429).

Stingo becomes much more descriptive and speaks for Sophie, almost as if he is trying to distance her from what happened. For the reader, this turns Stingo into the unreliable narrator. Ricoeur defines this as a narrator who foils the expectations of a reader who assumed that, “in the journey they are embarking upon they need not bother about false hopes or groundless fears concerning either the facts reported or the implicit or explicit evaluations of the characters” (Ricoeur 3:163). With an unreliable narrator, the reader realizes that what is presented to them is not the end-all explanation; there is often more that must be discovered on one’s own. When Stingo changes his approach, he ceases to be the explanatory link between the reader and Sophie. This change in style then tells the reader that there is more to what is being narrated and causes uncertainty for the reader until he or she reaches the moment of clarification.

Ironically, it is when the novel’s structure is the most convoluted that everything becomes clear on that deeper level. It must be stressed that, “the process of following a story at the level of Mimesis is irreducibly temporal, involving that state of partial or imperfect knowledge on the part of both characters and audience that would lose its entire point if the moment of anagnorisis as sudden clarification had been known from the outset” (Dowling 15). Mimesis, Ricoeur explains, “marks the intersection between the
world of the text and the world of the listener or the reader” (Ricoeur 3:159) It is in Mimesis, (or the horizon of storyline) that the reader is able to release the emotions felt towards acts of cruelty and find catharsis from that release. Basically, Sophie’s Choice must be told in a non-linear order that circles back on itself while simultaneously moving forward because otherwise it would cease to be a cathartic narrative. The reader would not understand Sophie and would thus see everything that happened to her in the same light in which they might view a historical account.

The narrative structure of Sophie’s Choice is essential in fully understanding the effect the novel can have on a reader’s consciousness. After all, the reader is on some level responsible for completing the work because the telos of the text is otherwise deficient. The events are there, the plot is there, but for full emplotment to take place, the reader has to allow for the world of the narrative and the world of reality to intersect. For example, Sophie’s suicide seems to be an unexpected ending until anagnorisis; then the reader realizes that it was inevitable after all. Both the narrator and the reader come to this conclusion, Ricoeur says, only the reader is bordering the horizon of the story while the narrator is fully within it. Once the reader has arrived at this conclusion, he or she has reached the level of Mimesis, and thus a state of catharsis. What a reader receives from this is the sense of experience that narrative brings to the world and the temporality that comes from it (Ricoeur 1:78-79). Without a structure that concerns itself more with understanding connections rather than linear order, Sophie’s Choice would not really create a world that blends reality and fiction and give the reader that experience and catharsis.
Doubtless, William Styron needed catharsis in his own life after living through World War II and used Sophie’s Choice as a way to achieve it. Styron was certainly affected by learning about the events of the Holocaust and says he felt the “imposition of guilt past bearing” (Styron, A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle). The fact that people at the time may still have been struggling with the aftereffects of the war is incredibly relevant to understanding the structure of Sophie’s Choice, for it helps explain why the novel may have been written at all. The first generation to read Sophie’s Choice would certainly have included people who were alive during World War II and may have needed the same emotional release Styron did. Styron says in an article that, “it was plain that both of us were fascinated by those wellsprings of human nature out of which there boils over the need for subjugation and oppression” (Styron, A Wheel of Evil Come Full Circle).

The other person of whom he is speaking is Hannah Arendt, a friend who supported him in writing Sophie’s Choice. Hannah, Styron explains, was also upset by the treatment of Jews and shared his aggravation with the misunderstanding of the literary world. It was Hannah who pushed him to write Sophie’s Choice, regardless of the “authenticity” of an account of Auschwitz given by an author who had not experienced it. Perhaps she also helped him realize that suffering is not unique to any particular group of people and inspired him to create a work that would give catharsis to those who have suffered in any form. Clearly, Styron wanted to understand the part of human nature that drives people to brutality and has written a narrative that pushes others to understand it as well. The narrative structure of Sophie’s Choice is what accomplishes this feat because, “what is ultimately at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function as well as in that of the truth claim of every narrative work, is the temporal character of human
experience” (Ricoeur 1: 3). The Holocaust was certainly an experience that expanded human understanding.

When a reader picks up a book, he or she takes up the burden of understanding the narrative behind it. Understanding a book like Sophie’s Choice can help a reader understand the deep underlying motives behind worldly affairs and the individual actions present in everyday life. For the generations alive during World War II, Sophie’s Choice may help to assuage guilt and other feelings felt about it. Thus, Sophie’s Choice is not so much a cause-and-effect novel as an examination of the deep human characteristics instilled in us all. The confusing structure of the novel allows the reader to discover the connection between feelings felt about Sophie’s life and what has happened in his or her own life because it pushes them to muddle through a plot that is increasingly non-linear and involves stories within stories. Understanding the structure then proves to be a cathartic experience. By trying to understand Sophie and the world in which she lived, readers come to understand and learn from their own human experiences. According to Ricoeur, that is the point of all narratives…to alter the consciousness of the reader. Though this may not always be an inevitable consequence, it is highly unlikely to come away from a reading of Sophie’s Choice and feel nothing at all.
WORKS CITED


I was first drawn to this topic after reading the novel *Sophie’s Choice* in an English class on the American novel. I approached my professor about the intriguing narrative structure of the book and he suggested I read the theories of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur to better my understanding of how narrative structure affects a story.

The Jack Tarver Library had all three volumes of Ricoeur’s work, *Time and Narrative* as well as an extremely helpful guide, which was written by William Dowling, that I used to understand the theory. Of course, I immediately checked out all four books and read through them. I found the guide and the first volume of Ricoeur’s work to be the most pertinent to my topic.

I searched for scholarly papers and articles on similar subjects dealing with either book, but I was only able to find minimal research available on the use of Ricoeur’s theory and no articles at all that use Ricoeur to analyze any part of *Sophie’s Choice*. The librarians were very helpful in my search. I frequently sought their aid and, though we were not able to find much about *Sophie’s Choice* and narrative structure, their assistance was crucial to the formation of this paper.

Having exhausted that particular trail of research, I then turned my attention to the authors who had written the two works I was attempting to put together in a worthwhile analysis. The library’s online catalog provided me with a fascinating article written by William Styron himself on the making of his novel. This gave me the fresh perspective I needed to understand the broader context of the narrative structure of *Sophie’s Choice*. Because of it, I could look into why Styron wrote the novel the way he did.

To better understand Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical theories, I searched the library for information on him and found several excerpts in encyclopedias. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* was particularly useful. Because my paper focused on the application of his theory to the novel *Sophie’s Choice*, I felt research on how *Time and Narrative* had been applied to other works of differing genres might actually be counterproductive by pressuring me to follow a formula for using his philosophical theory. Hence, I decided to end my research there. My time in the library, however, continued.

I spent several hours at Jack Tarver Library poring over Ricoeur’s work, occasionally consulting various library personnel for advice, from the
construction of my paper to the application of what I had learned. Gradually, my paper began to take shape and the more I explored Sophie’s Choice, the more I uncovered about the power of narrative structure. It is truly a fascinating subject and one I am considering pursuing further.