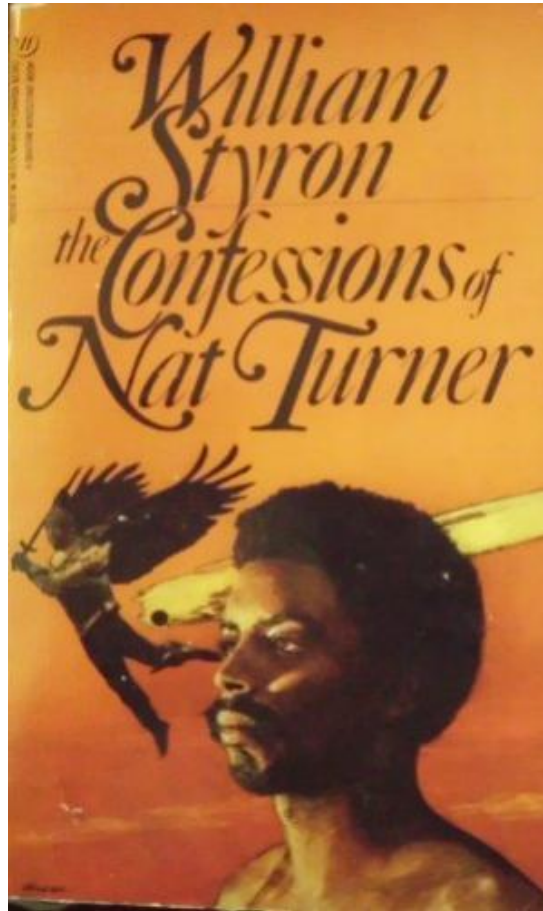


**A Study of Identity Crisis in the Work of William Styron:  
*The Confessions of Nat Turner***

**V. Gopinatha Manikandan and Dr. M. Madhavan**

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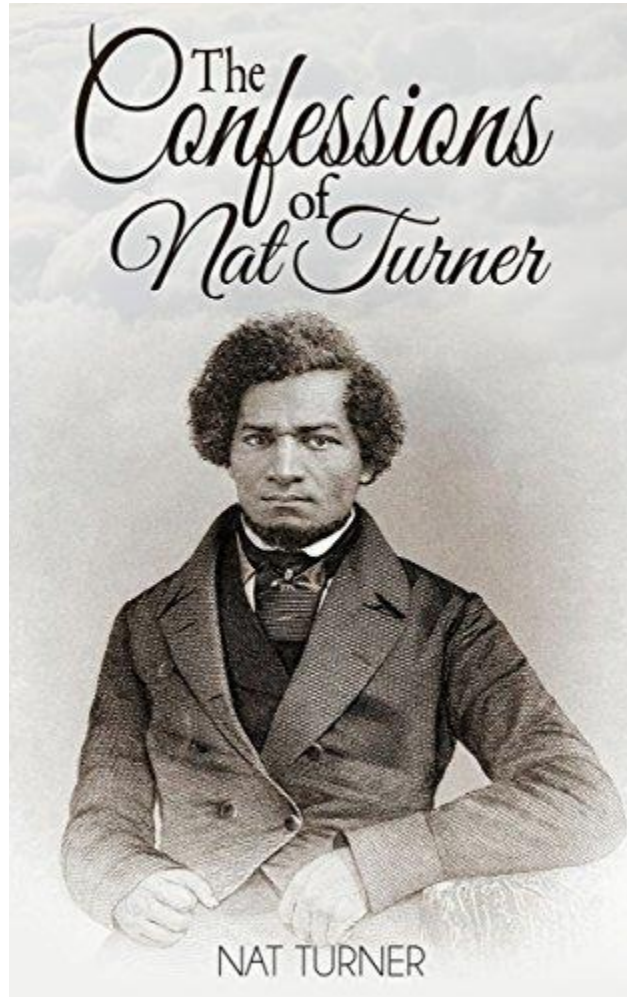


Courtesy: <https://www.abebooks.com/book-search/title/the-confessions-of-nat-turner/author/william-styron/>

**Abstract**

Identity crisis is a term coined by psychologist Erik Erikson. It deals with the issues such as one's physical growth, sexual maturity, creating societal values and self image. In the process of creating identity, the individual faces obstacles in the society by way of existing culture, race

and economic status. This includes financial insecurity, social discrimination, race, fear and guilt. In twentieth century, the people were affected in many ways directly or indirectly by The Second World War. The war destroyed them physically, spiritually and people were dislocated. The mere condition of existing in the world alive became very difficult. The writers of this period were also influenced by the havoc of the war. The characters shown in the literary works of that era were portrayed and affected by factors such as financial insecurity, social discrimination, gender, race and fear. This paper deals with the identity crisis faced by the protagonist in the work of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Most of Styron's works are dealt with the theme of people who suffers a lot for survival and personal identity.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Confessions-Nat-Turner-Illustrated-ebook/dp/B01L7LP02S>

### Introduction

Identity crisis is a term coined by psychologist Erik Erikson. It deals with the issues such as one's physical growth, sexual maturity, creating societal values and self-image. In the process of creating identity, the individual faces obstacles in the society by way of existing culture, race

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### **William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner***

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* is based upon the most significant slave revolt in American history. William Styron's novel about Turner continues to provoke discussion in the decades since its publication because it addresses the complicated relationship between black people and white people. Styron was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1925 and died in 2006 in Massachusetts due to pneumonia at the age of 81. He was trained as a candidate for officer in the Marine Corps while attending Duke University in North Carolina. At Duke, he became interested in literature and was encouraged to become a writer by Professor William Blackburn. Upon graduating in 1947, he worked briefly and unhappily as an associate editor for McGraw-Hill publishers in New York City. *Lie down in darkness, the confession of Nat Turner* and *Sophie's choice* are Styron's famous works. *The confession of Nat Turner* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

His major works are *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951), *The Long March* (1952), *Set This House on Fire* (1960), *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), *Sophie's Choice* (1979), *This Quiet Dust, and Other Writings* (1982), *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990), *A Tidewater Morning: Three Tales from Youth* (1993) and *Havanas in Camelot* (2008). The book *Havanas in Camelot* was published two years after the death of Styron and is a collection of personal essays. Many of his works are concerned about the social issues such as financial insecurity, social discrimination, slavery, gender, race, fear, dilemma and guilt.

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* appeared in 1967. It was the period that the United States experienced a round of riots and other forms of rebellion by blacks who protested their second-class citizenship. The social and political context of the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement shaped the public response to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. At the time, some black revolutionaries embraced black philosopher Frantz Fanon's belief that oppressed peoples could liberate themselves psychologically as well as politically only through murderous violence.

### **Story of Black Slave Named Nat Turner**

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* tells the story of Black slave named Nat Turner and uprising led by him against the white people in the year 1831. Nat led a slave rebellion which ended in total failure. The rebel paved way to the deaths of dozens of white people as well as his own friends. Nat begins to think back on his past life and tells the novel in a series of flashbacks

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.Nat spends his final days reviewing his life and the choices he has made. Styron's Nat Turner is a record of civil rights movements of that period.

This novel deals with the theme of identity crisis. Nat is affected by race, oppression, ethnicity and slavery. "Race" and "Ethnicity", these words are often used interchangeably. Race was used to describe the biological quality of people. Ethnicity was used to describe the cultural phenomenon of the people. Ethnicity refers to groups which share a common identity such as ancestry, language or culture. It is mostly relied on religion, customs, beliefs and also memories of colonization and migration. **Race has played a major role in social category. It was forged through oppression, slavery and conquest.**

### **Nat Turner, the Protagonist**

Nat Turner, the protagonist of the novel is a victim of failure in the process of creating an identity for himself. He fought against slavery and racism to attain self identity. Nat as a house slave leads a comfortable life compared to the field slaves. Nat is allowed to read, write and learn carpentry which is not common for slaves. When he was sold from one master to another master, his condition becomes worse. It was a period that black people were kept ignorant and denied education intentionally by the white masters.

Not since the day years before when I was first sold had I felt such rage, intolerable rage, rage that echoed a memory of Isham's fury as he howled at Moore, rage that was a culmination of all the raw buried anguish and frustration growing inside me since the faraway dusk of childhood, on a murmuring veranda, when I first understood that I was a slave and a slave forever. (241)

Nat's existence during this time was both physically and mentally unbearable, with too much physical labor and nothing to challenge his mind. The worst part, for Nat, was that he had never expected to live out his life as a slave. Nat was one of the learned black men in the country which made him to think as a leader of his people. In the later years these skills helped him to rebel against the white people. It helped him to plan, organize, read a map, and write notes about his plans.

Nat's misery grew deeper. Nat could not tolerate the injustices he saw perpetrated on his fellow slaves every day. Nat had long ago declared himself a Reverend, ordained by God in the church of nature. As a spiritual man, Nat began to see that he had an obligation, as one of the very few literate black men, to help his people. Nat studied strategy, formed a plan for rebellion, and used his status as a preacher to convert other slaves to his cause. When the day came to execute his plan, Nat was determined to leave no survivors; he knew that in order to make an impact on the long-entrenched institution of slavery, the rebellion would have to be huge and bloody.

It seemed clear to me that when our eruption was successful—with Jerusalem seized and destroyed and our forces soon impregably encamped in the Dismal Swamp—and when word of our triumph spread throughout Virginia and the

upper southern seaboard, becoming a signal for Negroes everywhere to join us in rebellion, the fact that it had all arisen on the Fourth of July would be an inspiration not alone to the more knowledgeable slaves of the region but to men in bondage in even more remote parts of the South who might take flame from my great cause and eventually rally to my side or promulgate their own wild outbreaks.(281)

### **Caught Between Slavery and Humanity**

Nat is caught between slavery and humanity. Though he felt that violence is the only way to get freedom from the whites, he was often disturbed by the killing. Not only were the masters, innocent black and white people were killed in the rebel. Nat and his band of seventy-five followers succeeded in executing fifty-five white slave-owners - the largest insurrection of its kind in recorded history. Nat's success came at a steep price, though.

Negro Hark and the others—and we have no clear reason to doubt any of it—that he himself was intimately involved in the proceedings, striking the first blow toward their execution, and repeatedly attempting to wreak murderous acts of violence upon the terrified and innocent victims. (P.74)

In retaliation, the white militia killed over a hundred innocent black people, none of whom were involved in Nat's rebellion, and some of whom were not even slaves. Of the seventy-five slaves actually involved in the rebellion, about a dozen were returned to their masters, fifteen or so were sold down the river to hard labor and certain death, and seventeen, including Nat and his best friend Hark, were hanged.

Nat has become the victim of failure in creating his own identity. During his childhood, he is trying to create an identity for himself by attaining knowledge in education and learning carpentry but couldn't get proper recognition. He tries to become a leader of the group which he forms to fight against the whites. He tries to create an identity by protesting against the white but failed. He fought against slavery, racism, oppression to create an identity for himself but all his efforts became futile.

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