Sophie's Choice: Conflicting Values Under Time Pressure

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How does it affect your life if you’re forced to make an impossible choice? That question lies at the heart of *Sophie’s Choice*, both the novel and the film.

In 1947, a young man named Stingo takes a bus to New York City, the place his father calls ‘the Sodom of the North,’ to become a writer. He is totally unprepared for what he’s getting into.

**Unacquainted with love and a stranger to death.**

This will change, however, in the course of the story. He finds a room in a boarding house in Brooklyn. His landlady is a Jewish widow. The upstairs neighbors, Sophie and Nathan, ask him up for dinner the first night. Sophie and Nathan are intense; they do not shy away from emotions. They seem to thrive on them, in fact. That afternoon, Stingo hears them having loud sex and then a loud fight. Nathan abruptly leaves with Sophie running down the stairs after him, pleading.

**Please don’t go. Don’t go away from me, please! You know we need each other. We need each other!**

But Nathan responds with a series of half insults and more.

**I need you like death... Go back to Krakow, baby...**

So dinner’s off that night. To apologize, Sophie brings a tray of food to Stingo’s room. He asks her whether his typewriter bothers her. But it won’t, she assures him.

**That sound of typing do make me think of my father… and of his goodness.**
Later that night, Nathan returns home and makes up with Sophie. The next morning they take Stingo to Coney Island. The tone is set immediately. Sophie, originally from Poland and good at language, is an unstable woman who tends to avoid conflict. Nathan, a young man of Jewish descent, is smart – a Harvard graduate – but moody and volatile. Both are very open, telling Stingo about their backgrounds and how they met. After the war, they tell him, Sophie was a wreck. Nathan seduced her, took care of her, loved her and introduced her to Emily Dickinson’s poetry. Stingo doesn’t mind when they mock his southern roots. The three get along well.

When Nathan has stormed out again in a bout of aggression, Sophie and Stingo talk about loss.

*It is what is so terrible... outliving the people that we love. I mean... the guilt... my father, my mother, my husband.*

You were married?

*Yeah, to a disciple of my father...*

Her father and her husband, both of whom worked at the University of Krakow, were arrested and taken away by the Germans. Her mother died from TB. When she was still alive, Sophie was caught trying to buy meat for her on the black market.

They saw that I was afraid.

Later she tried to commit suicide by cutting her wrists. She did it in church, so the attempt failed.

The next day, Stingo hears from an insider at Brooklyn College that Sophie is the daughter of Professor Bieganski, famous for his anti-Semitic writings (‘his goodness ’?). Her husband was indeed his disciple. Stingo confronts Sophie with his knowledge.

Yes, I lied. You know why? I was afraid I’d be left alone.

Stingo, who is falling in love with Sophie, promises he’ll never leave her. Her response
is categorical.

**No one should ever promise that.**

Her father and her husband wrote that the *Vernichtung* (destruction) of the Jews was necessary. Sophie normally assisted as their typist, but when she came across these writings she refused to help spread their ideas. The two men ostracized her; in practice this was the end of her marriage. She started an affair with Joseph, a resistance fighter. He was caught by the Gestapo and she was soon arrested too. The Nazis sent her to Auschwitz along with her children.

**Jan, my little boy, was sent to Kinderlager… and my little girl, Eva, was sent to Crematorium II. She was exterminated.**

Sophie tells Stingo she managed to find work as a typist for camp commander Rudolph Hess. She tried to persuade him to place her son somewhere outside of the camp, but Hess refused to play along. Sophie never saw Jan again; after the war, she was a broken woman.

**That's why I didn't want to live no more, 'til Nathan came.**

Stingo gets in contact with Nathan's brother. From him, Stingo learns that Nathan was a brilliant child who was diagnosed early as a paranoid schizophrenic. This explains his episodes of paranoid delusion combined with occasional charm and intelligence. He is keeping up appearances. It turns out Nathan doesn't have a degree after all, and doesn't work as a researcher but as an assistant in a company library.

Shortly after this scene, Nathan falls prey to another bout of aggression, prompting Sophie and Stingo to leave New York City for a while. They take a short trip south, where Stingo may be able to get a house of his own. They take the train and spend the night in a hotel in Washington D.C., where Stingo loses his virginity. More importantly, Sophie tells him the whole story about her arrival in Auschwitz.

All the prisoners were lined up next to the train to await selection. A German officer addressed Sophie because she looked so Aryan. She said she wasn't Jewish but Polish, or rather, blond, fluent in German and 100% Roman Catholic. The officer agreed that she deserved a certain privilege.

**You may keep one of your children. The other one will have to go.**

At first, Sophie was stunned.
I can't choose, I can't choose... I can't!

Hurry up and choose, or I'll send them both over there.

No!

You have to...

Don't make me choose. I can't choose!

The officer turned to his soldiers.

Send them both over there. Move!

Eventually, Sophie spoke up.

Take my daughter... take... the girl...

Little Eva was taken away screaming. Sophie looked on in horror.

When Stingo awakes in the hotel bed the next morning, Sophie is gone. Her note makes clear their fling is over. She's gone back to New York City to look for Nathan. They need each other now.

By the time Stingo returns to the house in Brooklyn, the police are at the door. Sophie and Nathan have killed themselves with cyanide. Their bodies lie spooned on the bed. On the table in their room, a collection of Dickinson poems lies open. We hear Stingo read the poem that Nathan read to Sophie before.

Ample make this bed.
Make this bed with awe;
In it wait till judgment break
Excellent and fair.

Be its mattress straight,
Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise’ yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.

Sophie’s Choice, 1982, USA, 150 minutes


Film written and directed by: Alan J. Pakula

Actors: Meryl Streep (Sophie), Kevin Kline (Nathan), Peter MacNicol (Stingo)

Virtues and values

A real moral dilemma is always a conflict between two weighty values. You have two options, each representing a moral value you hold dear. No matter what you choose, it will hurt. If you have a few hours to make up your mind, there’s room for reflection and dialogue, for a moral assessment. If you have less than ten seconds to decide, you have only your own morality to fall back on, the virtue of your own moral character. That can be a painful revelation for both yourself and others.

Relevant Connections in Genre

The main protagonists in the movie die, so an outside narrative voice is needed. *Sophie’s Choice* is a classic, first-person narrative; we identify and empathize with the narrator. This is also part of the impact of the story, both in the novel and the film. Within Stingo’s first-person perspective, we find Sophie’s first-person perspective, which sometimes hijacks the narrative. And rightfully so, because her story is much more captivating than Stingo’s. A special, tongue-in-cheek variant of this kind of first-person narrator is the dead narrator. Famous movies with narrators who tell the story...
from the grave are *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *American Beauty* (2000).

**Relevant Connections in Terms of Content**

The crux of Sophie’s moral dilemma is that she has to choose between having her son or her daughter killed. This dilemma goes back to Albert Camus’ 1946 lecture on *The human crisis*. As a guest speaker at Columbia University, Camus gave several examples of morally reprehensible conduct during the Second World War. One of these took place in German-occupied Greece, where three Greek brothers were taken prisoner. Their mother pleaded with a German officer to spare their lives. The officer gave the woman a monstrous choice: you choose who I should let live… In her agony, she chooses her oldest son, who was already married. The other two sons were executed on the spot. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt refers to this as an example of the impossible choices the Nazis forced their prisoners to make during their reign of terror. William Styron adopts this idea of the impossible choice. In his story too, the oldest, the boy, is favored.

Sophie and Nathan commit suicide by taking sodium cyanide, which was fairly readily available during the war. Cyanide is the basic ingredient of Zyklon B, an agricultural pesticide developed by Degussa manufacturers in the 1920s. It required extremely careful handling due to its toxicity. In the early 1930s, the patent on Zyklon B ended up in the hands of IG Farben, a chemical company with close ties to the Nazis. From April 1941 on, the SS were officially authorized to use the chemical. From August 1941 to November 1944, Rudolf Hess was camp commander of Auschwitz. He developed the pesticide into an effective gassing agent: bringing the chemical into contact with humidity and warmth in an enclosed space ensured no one survived for more than 20 minutes. Hess was known as an obedient officer who always carried out the Fuehrer’s orders and lived in the camp with his wife and children. And this is the man who Sophie tries to persuade to make an exception.

Initially, images from the death camps were reserved for government investigators and lawyers working for tribunals. The first documentary aimed at a wider audience was Alain Resnais’ literary film *Night and Fog* (1955). Around 1980, the following visual narratives made an impact: Marvin J. Chomsky’s *Holocaust* (1978), an influential TV drama series about the Jewish Weiss family, featuring Meryl Streep. Arnold Schwartzmann’s *Genocide* (1982) focused on the long history of the persecution of Jews culminating in the Nazi camps. Claude Lanzmann gave us *Shoah* (1985), a nine-hour documentary based on interviews on location about the Nazi death camps and their context.

Translation: Word’s Worth