

The Criterion

December 2012

ISSN 0976-8165

Vol. III. Issue IV

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed and Indexed Open Access Journal

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Illumination of Elizabeth Hunter: A Study of Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*

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Patrick White (May 28, 1912- September 30, 1990) was an Australian author who is widely regarded as one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century. He is the first Australian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. His mature works include two poetry collections- *Thirteen Poems* (1930- under the pseudonym Patrick Victor Martindale) and *The Ploughman and Other Poems* (1935), thirteen novels, three short story collections- *The Burnt Ones* (1964), *The Cockatoos* (1974) and *Three Uneasy Pieces* (1987), four plays- *Return to Abyssinia* (1947), *Four Plays* (1965), *Big Toys* (1978) and *Signal Driver* (1983) and three non-fictions an autobiography, *Flaws in the Glass* (1981), *Patrick White Speaks* (1990) and *Letters* (ed. David Marr, 1994). His thirteen novels are *Happy Valley* (1939), *The Living and the Dead* (1948), *The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955), *Voss* (1957), *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), *The Twyborn Affair* (1979), *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986) and his thirteenth novel *The Hanging Garden* (2012) was left unfinished and published posthumously. This article entitled *Illumination of Elizabeth Hunter: A Study of Patrick White's The Eye of the Storm* attempts to show how Elizabeth Hunter, the heroine of the novel who is very selfish in the beginning attains illumination in the course of the novel.

The Eye of the Storm is one of White's most intriguing novels, and Elizabeth Hunter is one of White's most complex characters. The entire action of the novel revolves round the life of Elizabeth Hunter. The story begins with Elizabeth Hunter, ends with her death and is throughout concerned with her. In her last days confined to her bed, she is surrounded by a swarm of nurses and her children. She is referred to as "a wealthy senile woman" (545) and "a very passionate woman" (550). Mr. Arnold Wyburd, the solicitor comments on Elizabeth Hunter that she is the most complex woman character he ever knows.

Elizabeth's life in the novel begins at a point when she is bedridden and completely at the mercy of those who attend on her. She is the only person who sees herself so clearly. Others see what she wishes them to, or what she becomes to them when she touches their lives. Her three nurses meet her after she has grown old and helpless. Through her children and the solicitor, Wyburd, and by her own excellent memory, the readers get glimpses of the past impinge on the present.

Wyburd describes her to the night nurses when he is interviewing them for the post:

Mrs. Hunter was something of a beauty in her day. Oh, she still has her looks. She is much admired. Many have depended on her for opinions and advice. (9)

Anne Macrory, the tenant who stays in the old Hunter's homestead, speaks of Elizabeth to her children, Dorothy and Basil:

... We only saw your mother once... I'll never forget her. She was wearing white.... she liked to flirt. With either sex. And although you knew what she was upto, it didn't matter. You let her reducer you with her eyes. What great persuaders her hands were. And her lovely voice (506).

Elizabeth Hunter therefore has an undeniably powerful effect on people.

The antagonism between Elizabeth and her children is deep seated and has many facts. Dorothy hates Elizabeth as she fails to match her mother in looks. Wyburd dismisses Dorothy as "a horse-faced version" (43) of her mother. The nurse, who is in Elizabeth's room when Dorothy rushes in, says: "A princess shouldn't run... and she shouldn't have a horse face" (38). Dorothy is a princess by value of her marriage to a French nobleman, Hubert de Lascabanes. While her marriage was something of a social event, she has never been happy. Hubert's family despises Dorothy. Unlike her mother, she is a misfit everywhere. She feels French in Australia and Australian in France. There is a sharp sexual jealousy between mother and daughter, awakened by Dorothy's resentment of her mother's charm and good looks.

Basil, the son of Elizabeth, who has his knighthood, is a failure in his married life. As his mother fails to care him in his childhood, he is unable to come to terms with his sexual opposite. He is supposed to love his mother but out loves himself.

Elizabeth Hunter kills the very love and life in her husband Alfred and her children, Basil and Dorothy. Neither as a wife nor as a mother, she is faithful. An interesting aspect of her martial relationship is her guilt feeling towards Alfred, her husband in his last illness. She is eager to look after his comfort, as though to compensate the wrongs she has done him. Even in her old age, she is surcharged with emotions and zest for her life. She, at her old age, loves make-up:

Mrs. Hunter said, 'I like to feel I have been made up. It fills me with - an illusion -of beauty.'(33)

She loves her jewel box. She has always been greedy for food and people. Elizabeth has got two lovers- Athol Shreve and the family solicitor, Arnold Wyburd. Though her husband Alfred had known about them, he had hidden his knowledge from her.

Dorothy and Basil have come to Elizabeth because they need money. They think that too much money is being spent by her, and Basil hates the atmosphere of reverence she seems to have created around her. Dorothy is annoyed at the hiring a car to fetch the charwoman and the wastage done by the cook, Mrs. Lipman. Both Dorothy and Basil decide to put their mother into the Thorogood village, an institution for old women. But they underestimate Elizabeth, who is far more alert than they realize:

... I shan't die-or anyway, not till I feel like it. I don't believe anybody dies who doesn't wany to-unless by thunderbolts. (54)

Elizabeth very well understands the motive of her children. She says, "Then why does everybody come flying from the ends of the earth?" (55)

Basil and Dorothy announce their proposal to shift her to the Thorogood village for old people. Both feel awkward and guilty. Basil speaks first:

... Don't you feel - Mother darling-living alone in this great house full of associations, not all of them happy..." (400)

According to Dorothy, Elizabeth misses the company of her contemporaries. But Elizabeth is not disturbed by this proposal. She has her own strength. Her own strength comes to her from an unforgettable experience that she once had:

Something I found out... on that island-after you had all run away-nothing will kill me before I am intended to die. (401)

It is at this point that Elizabeth evokes the memory of the eye of the storm.

The incident takes place on Brumby Island, where both Elizabeth and Dorothy have been invited for a holiday by Elizabeth's friends. Dorothy realizes very quickly that she has been invited only as a companion for her mother. Irritated and hurt, she strikes up a friendship with a Norwegian named Pehl, also one of the party. He is unpopular with the other guests because of his heavy academic personality. Elizabeth sets out to capture Pehl's attentions for herself, and succeeds. Dorothy feels angry and helpless. She watches with despair while her mother takes over the situation. Elizabeth cooks for Pehl, plays him music. Dorothy listens to her mother weaving a magic web of words around the unsuspecting Norwegian. Elizabeth's behaviour is unforgivable because she is perfectly aware of what she is doing. Dorothy runs away without telling her mother. Pehl escapes too.

Caught in a storm island, Elizabeth takes shelter in a cramped bunker and has to stay there all night. When she comes out, she is privileged to witness a strange phenomenon. The storm still rages, at a distance, but she herself is caught in a dream of glistening peace at its still centre. Thousands of sea birds are at rest on the water and seven wild black swans stretch out their necks for the handful of sodden bread that she finds on the shore. She catches sight of a bird impaled on a tree and is awakened from her trance to a sense of her own contingent state. She goes back to her shelter since the storm threatens to continue, but she never forgets. She tells Dorothy about the storm, which has completely altered her viewpoint of the incident with Pehl:

It was the island I loved, Dorothy. After you left I got to know it. After I had been deserted - and reduced to shreds-not that it mattered: I was prepared for my life to be taken from me. Instead the birds accepted to eat out of my hands.... What saved me was noticing a bird impaled on a tree... I think I was reminded that one can't escape suffering. Though its only human to try to escape it... (397)

Michael Cotter in an article "The Function of Imagery in Patrick White's Novels" observes:

Elizabeth Hunter's life after the storm is devoted to the attempt to regain the clear sense of herself that has been granted to her in the storm: an awareness of herself as being a conscious functioning being, sharply distinct within a universal order.(23)

During the storm, Elizabeth is patient and forbearing. She experiences the Eye-God or Whatever supernatural Power.

She could not visualize it. She only positively believed in what she saw and was and what she was too real too diverse composed of everyone she

had known and loved and not always altogether loved it is better than nothing and given birth to and for god's sake"(411).

Thus, Elizabeth Hunter's instant of illumination becomes the central point of her experience in the novel. The storm is set as a background to impart clarity and vividness to human moods and situations and serves to intensify human emotions. White wants to suggest that nature thought as stern, fierce and destructive, could be at the same time benign, gentle and peaceful. It contains the contrasting qualities of loving kindness and devastating anger, sweet reasonable and ferocious strength.

The storm produces a slumbering effect on Mrs. Hunter. It is revealed as an active even a sentient force. The external disaster seems to insinuate the possible inner resurrection. Mrs. Hunter realizes her limitations and acknowledges the terrifying inadequacy of her nature. She is filled with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. She wades out into the debris, feeling shorn of her identity.

Just as she was no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood had been exploded by the storm. She was instead a being, or more likely a flaw at the centre of this jewel of light... (411).

Elizabeth comes face to face with her own destructive handiwork. She recognizes "her own type of useless beautiful woman, ... who had encouraged her lovers' lust" (402). Elizabeth recollects how she had dragged the bodies of men to her bed and how she was responsible for the under nourishment of Basil:

Perhaps it is you who are responsible for the worst in people. (410)

The storm is all pervasive. It brings out the worst and the best in Mrs. Hunter. As Michael Cotter opines that the storm most fully unifies the work:

The main character's past, present and future experiences are gathered within it into a single moment, so that the storm episode becomes a microcosmic enactment of the whole novel.
(23)

Elizabeth confesses her faults. The storm produces in her "a rare sense of freedom" (403). She is put to test harshly. She herself confesses that she is a hypocrite. For the first time she is disturbed by the mystery of her strength. She is delivered from the bondage of senses. The storm is to cleanse her from all unrighteousness, negations and self-deceptions. It functions effectively as an instrument of harmony. The natural element, the storm appears as the agent of purification and transmutation. Elizabeth Hunter emerges "physically battered but spiritually leaner" (162-163). In her new humbleness, she discovers that the desire to possess has left her.

The storm ruthlessly destroys everything and brings about a new order and dispensation. The destruction ultimately leads to regeneration. The destroyer becomes the healer. Mrs. Hunter's extraordinary mental state leads her to the realization of truth:

All else was dissolved by this lustrous moment made visible in the eye of the storm, and would have remained so, if she had been allowed to choose
(412).

She surrenders her physical self :

She lay and submitted to someone to who she had never been introduced. Somebody is always tinkering with something. It is the linesman testing for the highest pitch of awfulness the human spirit can endure Not death. For yourself there is no question of dying. (411)

After that she suffers a physical break down, followed by collapse of the will. It is her initiation into death:

After I had been deserted and reduced to shreds not that it mattered: I was prepared for my life to be taken from me. (397)

She realises the basic unity between life and death and understands that life is but a preparation for death. Hence for her death is no longer a regrettable event or an inescapable evil by a boon in disguise. She seems to have experienced “transcendence by virtue of that visit to the Warmings “island” (195).

Elizabeth is confused and asks herself why she is given to experience the Eye even when she is unworthy and did not possess any extraordinary qualifications to deserve it. Nature she feels is, generous and bountiful to her. She survives the storm and is reintegrated into the fabric of the society. She looks back and sees that she has benefited greatly through the experience, though painful and unpleasant.

Dorothy is infuriated at this “vision of an island conjured up by a senile mind” (397). It seems to her a piece of “deceitful evasion” (397). In her anger “she understood the urge to commit physical murder” (397). She is incapable of realizing the significance of her mother’s experience. To her, it remains a fairy tale spun by her mother.

Dorothy dismisses Elizabeth’s account of her extraordinary experience in the storm. She feels outraged, because Elizabeth talks about Pehl’s dismissing him as having been too self-centered for Dorothy. The daughter is really upset at her mother’s willful mishandling of the facts.

Basil and Dorothy have obviously more than one reason to hate their mother. So they decide to send their mother to an old age home. But Mr. Wyburd expresses Elizabeth’s wish to Dorothy and Basil that she need to spend her last years in her house surrounded by dependents whom she is attached. He even tells them that Elizabeth would rather die rather than have her way of life dictated to her. The reactions of the three nurses, cook and Wyburd’s wife, Lal, indicate how upset all are about the plan of Dorothy and Basil to take their mother to an old age home.

Flora Manhood, who is jealous of Elizabeth’s wealth, who has even wanted to kill the old woman at times, tells Wyburd nervously that she wants to leave:

Anyhow, if I stay what goodwill it do Mrs. Hunter when you dump her at the Thorogood Village? (268)

Mary de Santis is willing to relax her rigid principles and try to plead with Basil. Nurse Badgery makes her displeasure clear to Dorothy simply by looking and says that “she personally would have no part in anything reprehensible anyone else might be plotting” (354). Lotte Lippmann, the cook-housekeeper, neglects to collect two weeks’ pay and feels very depressed. Wyburd’s wife Lal says, “I was so upset,... not that I ever greatly cared for Mrs. Hunter... she was always too selfish, greedy, in spite of being over endowed... And cruel,... But I suppose I also looked up to her as somebody beautiful, brilliant-occasionally inspired” (274). She also says that she was shocked that the son and the daughter are “discarding this old creature” (274).

In spite of being domineering and difficult, Elizabeth commands respect. She treats those around her with understanding. She has paid for Flora Manhood to take a course on wigs. She is sensitive to Mary de Santis’ devotion to duty. She says to Mary, “you seem to me complete, Mary” (449). But it is Lotte Lippmann who adores her personality. When Basil accuses her mother of being evil, Lotte defends her passionately:

‘Yes. She is all you say’, ‘her housekeeper agreed; ‘but understands more of the truth than most others’. As her hands fell away from the table, she added, ‘And if I cannot worship, I have to love somebody’ (141).

Finally Elizabeth has to undergo some real test of inner discipline and outward courage before the final salvation. The final trial comes in the form of her children’s suggestion to move to Thorogood village. However, she is not entirely unaffected by the suggestion. She begins to refuse food and she snaps at Nurse Manhood, who comes to take her temperature.

Only Flora Manhood realizes that Elizabeth has taken a decision, but even she does not understand the full implications of it. Elizabeth first prepares the ground by asking Flora whether she loves her. She has just signed a legal document handing over a pink sapphire ring to Flora. Flora has seated her patient on the commode. Flora chatters with unusual frankness about herself till she is interrupted by Elizabeth’s “Do you love me nurse?” (445). She asks for the sleeping pills from the nurse. It shows how deeply the decision to move her from her home has affected Elizabeth: she would rather die.

Elizabeth realizes that Flora is not going to give into her entreaties. She withdraws. Flora does not understand the importance of her next statement:

My will shall withdraw, if I decide it’s necessary. (443)

Flora thinks that the old woman will not be able to make her will work, but she underestimates Elizabeth. Elizabeth now prepares, deliberately and calmly, to die. After the visit of Lal, Wyburd’s wife, she asks for her face to be made up and Flora decks the old woman in all her jewellery. Lottie dances for Elizabeth. After the dance is over, Elizabeth is placed on her commode. Alone Elizabeth faces her decision.

Elizabeth is back in the eye of the storm, longing to walk down to the water and the swans. The only human being who can be with her there is Alf, her husband, whose memory has protected her on the night of the storm. She calls out to him at this juncture:

Alfred my dearest dearest you are the one to whom I look for help however I failed. (535)

She imagines that she is walking over the sand, towards the water, where the swans are stretching out their necks towards her.

Finally Elizabeth’s will does triumph, she feels her life slipping away. Mrs. Hunter voluntarily renders her children the service: “I alone must perform whatever the eye is contemplating for me” (535). It is the gift of herself. Mrs. Hunter’s earthly defeat is transformed into a spiritual triumph. Dorothy and Basil fails to attend their mother’s funeral. Mr. Wyburd tells his wife, ‘I can’t think how she would feel if she knew her funeral had been a funeral’ (562).

Lotte Lipmann commits suicide and achieves the same bodilessness and feeling of permanence that Elizabeth does. Sister De Santis continues in her career of service, by going on to nurse the young crippled Irene Fletcher.

The storm scene becomes the moment of illumination in Elizabeth’s life. The storm appears to be a dynamic force that wipes off all the forces of antagonism and conflict. It is a turning point in Elizabeth Hunter’s life. She undergoes a transformation and learns to forgive and forget and love instead of giving way to resentment. A.R. Venkat in an article “Patrick White’s *The Eye of the Storm*” remarks:

Patrick White’s *The Eye of the Storm* is less ambiguous than

his earlier novels such as, *Riders in the Chariot* and *The Solid Mandala*. (25)

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