

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

October 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-V

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## Immanence and Transcendent Vision of 'The Other' Through Suffering in the Selected Novels of Patrick White

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### ABSTRACT

Patrick White, the grand old master of Australian literature, is a novelist, a short story writer and a playwright whose writing is endowed with comprehensively tackled big themes. He was a genuinely aristocratic writer who views all intellectual activity in Australia with a sardonic eye, and the inner hollowness of Australian life is felt intensely in his fiction.

According to Patrick White, the purpose of any work of art must not be simply pleasure giving, it must preach something to the individual. He himself defined the purpose of art as: "Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes the human being and makes him its instrument . . . It is something necessary for him to sacrifice happiness and everything that makes life worth living for the ordinary human being". His vision is closely akin to the deep-seated nature of the spiritual yearnings of human beings and the need for recognition of the psychic potential of the human spirit of which the conscious rational processes are only a fraction of the totality. He was particularly sensitive to the precarious nature of human identity and his work continues to challenge our perception of ourselves and our reality. An individual construct himself, his subjectivity, through the operation of language on memory and received ideas. When these received ideas are under challenge, personal identity necessarily remains fragile. White demonstrates this fragility through his exploration of the relationships of the fictional protagonist.

Everything he has produced bears the impression of an authentically creative imagination; and nowhere is this creative power more apparent than in his treatment of the Australian scene. He has achieved in his novels a vision of life which is both distinctively individual and generally relevant, a vision which illuminates in a fresh, sometimes strange, but always revealing manner the familiar universe, and which at the same time adds a quickening and transforming element to our experience of it. This paper entitled "IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENT VISION OF THE OTHER THROUGH SUFFERING IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF PATRICK WHITE RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT, VOSS AND THE SOLID MANDALA" is a study of White's novels in which the protagonists achieve the vision of realising 'the other' by undergoing suffering. The suffering they undergo enables them to realise their strong self and opens up new avenues of positive hope for humanity.

**Keywords:** Patrick White, Vision of the other through suffering

### INTRODUCTION

Patrick White is the most prominent, literary guru of the Australian literary circle, and his arrival marked the most important stage in the growth and development of Australian literature.

White himself had stated, “*I always like to write three versions of a book. The first is agony and no one would understand it. With the second you get the shape, it’s more or less all right . . . The third gives some enlightenment out of that suffering . . .*” (Driesen 72). Patrick White depicts in his novels, man in his struggle to escape that emptiness which surrounds and envelops him. To him suffering, salvation and atonement are leading concerns and, he argues throughout his works that, “the purer the suffering, the greater the progress”. The novels taken for study explore the immanence and transcendent vision of the other through the sufferings of the central characters. Not merely the sufferings are dealt with but it also depicts the kind of vision or realisation achieved through that suffering. He further makes clear through the select novels that, through immanence or transcendent, pain leads to spiritual growth.

Realising the presence of God generally fall under the rubrics of immanence and transcendence. Immanence refers to philosophical and metaphysical theories of divine presence in which the divine is seen to be manifested in or encompassing the material world, whereas transcendence refers the thing which is beyond perception, independent of the universe, and wholly ‘other’ apart from this world. An imminent God, is one which exists within - within us, within the universe, etc. - and, hence, very much a part of our existence. But, it can rightly be stated, God is both immanent and transcendent. The transcendent tends to identify God as ‘out there’ or normally distant and God reveals himself through big events and moments. The immanent tends to identify God as ‘in here’ and intimately related to us, present in every moment and action. The novels, *Riders in the Chariot*, *Voss* and *The Solid Mandala*, deal with the immanence of God. In the select novels the protagonist/protagonists find the divine presence through the menial sufferings of the fellow human beings.

## RIDERS IN THE CHARIOT

*Riders in the Chariot* is White’s largest attempt to deal with the lostness of the twentieth century and is said to be a record of existence in what White called “The Great Australian Emptiness” and an attempt “to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people . . .” (Driesen iv). The novel takes the form in being able to perceive the infinite in everything, or some presence, that is larger than ‘the self’ and deals with the idea of being-in-the world and realising the ‘other’ by participating in the suffering. Being an exceptionally ambitious novel it is based on the story of the lives of four loosely connected people, whose common link is the mystic experience of ‘the chariot’ and traces their lives towards the point where they realise they share the same vision. Each experiences the same vision of four horses drawing a Chariot into a shining future. White is aware of the forces beyond apparent reality and in order to make the only existence of his ‘elect’ meaningful; he sends them out on the oaths of suffering.

The main concern of the novel is to render the alienation of the cultivated sensibility in an age that is vulgar and bereft of values. It is clear, that the main attempt of the novel is to find some correspondence between the world ‘within’ (of ego, memory, aspiration) and the world ‘without’ (both the social world of other selves and the natural world) wherein the major characters are involved. In an interview with Craig Mac Gregor, White admitted his belief in God and concern for religion and says that, *the world is growing more pagan; one has to lead people in the same direction but in a different way* (Driesen 72). Throughout the novel White

makes clear, God driven world without God is at its most desolate and he rightly used the religious experience in this novel to show man's struggle to transcend the dreary, everyday life.

*Riders in the Chariot* is White's clearest and most comprehensive statement of the necessity of understanding that, religious or metaphysical enlightenment comes in the very heart of ordinary everyday life and is itself inseparable from it. The title of the novel invites one to discover which of its characters are intended by the author to be seen as 'Riders', and to what kind of fulfillment or exaltation they are being carried. There are four central characters, 'the riders': Miss Hare, Mrs. Godbold, Mordecai Himmelfarb and Alf Dubbo, and it remarkably deal with these characters that hardly seem at all remarkable. All the four are recognisable as types and they are all isolates. What they share is their awareness of the infinite in everything, and also the vision, the vision of the fiery chariot, in which the awareness manifests itself in its most intense form.

White first introduces an eccentric woman Mary Hare, a lonely isolated spinster living in the increasingly run-down family mansion at the outskirts of Sarsaparilla. The second main character is a scholarly German Jew, Mordecai Himmelfarb, a Jewish intellectual and scholar, a middle European refugee from World War II who works in a bicycle lamp factory for lack of opportunity and to fulfil a desire of humility and he leads the story in a sad spiral of decay. His neighbour, Mrs. Godbold takes in his washing as a kindness. She is a working class woman from England who works in Sarsaparilla as a laundress. She is a type whom White often idealises - the servant who exhibits "the most positive evidence of good". She is a placid English country girl, who raised her young siblings after her mother's death, moves to Australia to work as a maid, made a bad marriage, and runs a home laundry to support herself and her children.

Finally, White introduces through Mrs. Godbold, an aborigine, Alf Dubbo, who revealed a passionate talent for painting. He works in the same factory as the Jew, and they mutely recognise each other as fellow outcasts. The climactic scene in the novel is the pseudo-crucifixion of Himmelfarb, the old Jewish refugee, by his workmates at Rosetree's Brighta Bicycle Lamps factory. The novel is the record of the personal and spiritual histories of the four characters, for which 'the chariot' is the only relieving factor and a vehicle of redemption. It is the vehicle of God's 'elects', for those who have seen or experienced something beyond the worldly. So, each of them move towards their moment of insight in very personal and culturally - specific ways and what marks each of them as the elect is their recognition of this quality in others.

Mary Hare is a nature mystic who experiences a sense of union with natural objects and creatures. Xanadu becomes the object of her noble love and upon animals, birds, and plants she expends her great, but pitiable love. Husbandless and childless, like Theodora Goodman, she takes the wild creatures to her heart and rears a nestling in her bosom. Through the relations with the other 'Riders', Mary does learn to love human beings. But her own special gift is to discover the *loving kindness* exist at the roots of trees and plants. Obviously there is also a presence of another quest. Her continuing problem or the goal of her quest is how to distinguish with certainty between good and evil. She also seeks to discover what is at her own centre, and trusts that this will be revealed when enough of her is *peeled away*. Here the quest turns *inward*.

Himmelfarb's experience, like that of all White's protagonists, follows the fourfold pattern of spiritual development. His way is 'inward', as like the route taken by all White's

questing characters. In Jew's life the crucifixion is used twice, in Germany and in Sarsaparilla. The European episode has several parallels with the historic crucifixion, although these are more in evidence in the factory yard at Barranugli. He considers his failure to be with his wife and his people as a betrayal, something for which he can never atone. The solitary confinement provided by the Stauffers' secret room is a time of rest and spiritual rebirth for the Jew, after his psychic death. He refrains from suicide because he is unable to see any point in dying twice. The little, tomb-like room becomes a symbol of death and rebirth, a place to continue his search for a solution to the problem of atonement.

Ruth Godbold, introduced through her care for Miss Hare when the latter is a laundress, nurse, mother, neighbour, and servant to all who are in need. This third 'Rider' illustrates the truth of Himmelfarb's comment to Miss Hare that the simple acts of daily life may be the best protection against evil. These acts are Mrs. Godbold's protective shield, in the same way as the Jew is protected by his daily ritual of prayer, and Miss Hare by her little rites with the creatures of Xanadu. Like the other 'Riders', Ruth is engaged in a quest, a search for that most elusive need of salvation. Each of the 'Riders' experiences a feeling of failure. Ruth is tormented by her mistress's refusal to see the truth for herself, and, even more poignantly, by her husband Tom's alienation from the Christian faith. Her refusal to turn away from suffering for his sake, even to protect her from his blows, fills her husband with horror and disgust.

Alf Dubbo, the half-caste, is known to each of the other 'Riders'. He has been recognised by Miss Hare, in a brief encounter on the road below Xanadu, as a fellow illuminate. As Mrs. Godbold's acts of devotion are her works of art, so Alf's paintings become his acts of devotion and his special contribution to the sum of truth. They serve as both a means towards achieving the understanding for which he longs, and an expression of that understanding in a way which makes its communication possible. As a youth Dubbo has suspected that his immature vision will be completed eventually by revelation. Maturing, he finds this revelation to be not purely transcendental but dependent upon his struggle with daily becoming, and experience of suffering.

The effect of Himmelfarb's 'crucifixion' upon the reader is channeled through the abo. When the Jew has been hoisted above the crowd, Dubbo knows that he would never, never act, that he would dream, and suffer, and express some of that suffering in paint-but was, in the end, powerless. Through the window of Godbold's shed, Alf sees the women caring for the dying Himmelfarb. This is his vision of the Deposition, seen as the supreme act of love. Some days later, the abo reaches the point of compulsion or commitment. He paints the Deposition, with Ruth Godbold as the 'First Mary', Mother of God, the immemorial woman whose breasts run with milk. The madwoman of Xanadu is the 'Second Mary', the Second Servant of their Lord, and the Christ is the tattered Jew from Sarsaparilla. Finally, in the paradisal state in which everything is a source of wonder and love, he paints his last picture, 'the Chariot' which has haunted him for so long but which he has never before fully understood. As the Four Living Creatures of Ezekiel's vision is joined to one another by wings, White's four protagonists are joined by silence and dedication. Their faith is expressed in acts, nor words. Manfred Mackenzie describes *the Four* as "the sides of the soul of a giant Everyman, which is seen here as a divine quaternity". The experience of the four *Riders*, however, shows that suffering can be transmuted into joy.



## VOSS

The novel *Voss* is recognised as the crowning achievement of White in re-creating the land, the settlers and the aborigines, and in presenting a separate Australian identity. This novel can rightly be termed as a study of Man and depicts the alienation of the individual from society and the nature of 'reality' perceived behind appearance, in a much more complex way. It is a 'human epic' which portrays the power of Man in all his naked glory and, the study of a human being with a strong desire to be 'God' and lead 'ordinary' mortals to salvation, but in the process the human being is destroyed by Nature and other men. Here pride is humbled by external sufferings and realisation of the real spirit is obtained.

*Voss* mainly revolves around the protagonist Voss and, deals with the life of Australian aborigines and as well as their emerging life, society and culture, and strives to explore the vital wholeness that can be found in human relationship by undergoing suffering. It is White's most demanding and most impressive novel is about an exploration in general and as much an exploration in particular. It is the tragic story of a terrible journey and it clearly portrays throughout, the individual's struggle to find 'self', his search for a deeper understanding and a realisation of his potential. The hero of this novel remains exploring in an Australian environment, a mind, a way of thinking, which is foreign territory to most Australians.

The protagonist Voss, in his mad ambition to ascend to become God, is busy cutting himself off from all that is merely human, or rather, personal and that is his pride in imagining himself as God, he is blind to the reality. As the novel progresses, he was left in a desert for exploration of the land and there, the desert becomes the place of salvation. The desert defeats Voss's claim to be God and awakens in him a knowledge of the true God who is not merely a projection of Voss's image of himself but something totally another from the world, cruel to the extent that He is absent from the world, but kind enough that, He releases Voss at last from self - seeking.

The desert which Voss went in exile for exploration is the key to his success of achieving the vision of realisation of God. The journey is set as both physical and a spiritual one, not only an expedition into the interior of the continent, but a quest into the inner being of his own self. At first, he is shown as arrogant, complacent, and is determined to follow his own ideas. He concedes rarely to the opinion of his fellow expeditioners, and is always guided by his "pure- will". Voss along with his explorers cross draught plagued desert, and then water - logged lands until they retreat to a cave where they lie for weeks waiting for the rain to stop. As the expedition progresses, the travelling party splits in two and nearly all members eventually perish. In course of the journey his pride is humbled by being one with suffering in all directions and when caught by native aborigines he lends his hand in a friendly way, but mistook by one of the native settlers, is killed. Though Voss is killed, he attains the realisation of vision of God being human. Traditionally, desert is a place of suffering and hardship and in *Voss* it is a place where deep truths are revealed. For Voss, a journey through the landscape results in a journey to the core of his true inner self. For Voss, enlightenment comes only when his pride is humbled and suffering blunts the ego.

Whether one is illuminated or consumed is according to White determined not by God, but by the quality of one's own life and that is what White clearly recreates in *Voss*. After great anguish, Voss dies. But, his soul is reborn in others as he expands into a legend. Voss does not change in himself; rather, he changes his notions about himself, due to the sufferings he undergone and in the end successfully thrives in achieving his vision of realisation of God in the suffering of others.

Whether one is illuminated or consumed is, according to White, determined not by God but by the quality of one's own life, and that is what he clearly recreates in *Voss*. Throughout the novel White is pictured as the healer of the age and Voss is his representative character through which White demonstrates how through suffering the disastrous rift in humanity can be healed.

## THE SOLID MANDALA

*The Solid Mandala* explores another world, the world which its first two epigraphs describe as being 'in this one' and 'wholly within'. Starting from the facts of death and suffering, the novel examines the meaning of life, permanence, and freedom. This great theme is developed through probing man's twin consciousness or the apparent duality of his nature. The twin brothers, Arthur and Waldo Brown, embody man's flesh and spirit, reason and will, and more importantly, the interdependence and essential unity of these attributes.

In *The Solid Mandala* the inner life assumes personified form in the figure of Arthur Brown, the 'retarded' shadow-brother who urges his 'intellectual' twin, Waldo, to see exactly what is taking place in the inner world. Arthur strives to show Waldo that he is caught up in the hidden complex-the subtle 'knot' at the centre of the glass marble-and that he must extricate himself from it before any spiritual maturity can be achieved. Arthur suggests a way out of the bondage by means of a careful consideration of inner contents.

Characteristically, Arthur's need to unite with his brother, to bring him support and loving-kindness, is interpreted by Waldo as a negative seduction into incestuous non-existence. When Waldo gives in to Arthur he surrenders to his own mother-complex, not to Arthur's mandalic vision. While Arthur works to the benefit of the ego, the ego works to its own demise. It is pitifully unaware of what the shadow-figure requires it to do.

Waldo's death signifies the dissolution of masculine consciousness into the mother-world. After Waldo's death Arthur is alone, and his own rationality and orientation appear to disintegrate with the death of his brother. He too descends into the matrix, not in death, but in madness, a kind of psychological death. After fleeing from the scene of Waldo's death he embarks on a journey into the underworld. He becomes an idiot child bulb-bering on street corners. He sleeps in dark alleys, under towering grass, and is urinated on by wandering drunks, one of whom mistakes him for a rotting corpse. He contemplates appealing to Dulcie for help, but realises that his tragedy is too great for her to bear; he must journey alone through his desolation, and through the desolated streets of nightmare suburbia. It is during this phase that he loses the glass marble with the knot insider in a clump of weeds, indicating that the mandalic vision is lost forever.

Part of Arthur's burden at this stage is what can only be described as a psychosis of guilt. He imagines that he had killed his brother. In one sense this is true. As the shadow-figure who forced the ego into an encounter with the inner forces, he is partly responsible for Waldo's death. But Arthur was merely attempting to urge his brother to 'see', to realise the contents of his unconscious mind. If Waldo was shattered by the encounter the tragedy was brought on by himself, by his own refusal to come to terms with the inner reality. Arthur's overwhelming guilt is symptomatic of his present disintegration; the psychic engulfs him in a wave of self-pity, sentimentality and infantilism. He is now a helpless pure, wrecked by experience.

Arthur encounters the ecstatic Mrs. Poulter at the end of his horrific journey through the streets of Sarsaparilla. After the personality is dismembered, it experiences the oceanic comfort of the Great Mother: she soothes all wounds and promises never to betray the heart that loves her. When Sergeant Folye came in, there was that Mrs. Poulter kneeling beside Arthur Brown. There she was wiping and coaxing that nut, as a woman will cuddle a baby, provided it is hers, after she has let it mess itself. As Arthur goes off to an asylum, muttering aloud that it will not be so bad if Mrs. Poulter brings him his favourite lollies every Tuesday, the reader does not feel that Sergeant Foyle or society is doing him an injustice. His insanity is treated gently and sympathetically, but it is inanity nonetheless. This novel can be seen as an optimistic reading and that system was based on the illusion of the spiritual elevation, an illusion originally initiated and upheld. There is something final, if also fatal, about *The Solid Mandala* and it seems to pose a desperate ultimatum: develop, or exit from centre stage.

*Where has God got to?*, asks Peter Beatson in an essay on the later novels of Patrick White, and he answers that *He is still there, only His presence is not so obviously apparent*. This is what the entire crux of the select novels revolves around. In all these novels God is not literally apparent, but his presence is made obvious by participating in the sufferings of fellow human beings, nurturing love and affection towards others and by understanding and accepting others.

## CONCLUSION

If the individual is able to co-operate with the rebellious indwelling soul then he may attain real life. Transformation is achieved not by the soul alone, but by the soul in co-operation with the conscious mind of the individual and that is clearly represented in the select three novels. In weakness lies the strength. In suffering lies realisation. White makes clear through all these three novels that, pain leads to spiritual growth. These novels traces not only the obvious necessity of vision of 'the other' through suffering, but also points out equally discernible difficulties. In the select novels, there is a successful portrayal of the vision, which the protagonist yearned for, but, they can attain it only by using suffering as a means. 'Suffering' in all his novels bring in the positive result of quenching the spiritual quest. All the three select novels makes clear, that realisation through suffering is the only apt answer to the gimmicks life play on us. The protagonists of these novels, through their sufferings not only transcend themselves into the vision of realisation of their quest, but also, put self-transcendence within everybody's reach.



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