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## UNIT 5 AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE : INTERROGATING NATIONAL MYTHS

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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The primary objective of this unit is to introduce you to Australian Literature that some of you may be reading for the first time. We will, therefore, familiarize you with the geographical, socio-political and other contexts that shape the literature of this island-continent and the various kinds of writing that fall under its rubric. Your textual study within the scope of the course is confined to the study of a white canonical writer, Australia's Nobel Prize laureate, Patrick White, but it is important to learn that there is a wide body of literary creation in Australia today that includes Aboriginal, women's and immigrant writing. Besides, it is important to understand the history of the country and how its changing dimensions have left an impact on the way national myths have been created and contested in the creative realm.

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### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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Australia, the smallest of continents, the largest of islands, fifth among the world's nations in area, had indigenous peoples living there for thousands of years before the British claimed the land as *terra nullius* - empty land - following Captain James Cook's invasion in 1788. It established a penal colony and named it New South Wales. Other colonies of the British empire were gradually added such as Tasmania (1825), Western Australia (1829), South Australia (1836), Victoria (1851) and Queensland (1859). They had their separate constitutions till January 26, 1901, when the several states decided to come together and form a federation under the Commonwealth of Australia.

For a long time the narration of the history of Australia began with Cook's invasion and the Aboriginal people were considered mere wards of the state rather than as full citizens in their own right. It was only in 1967, after a national referendum, where ninety percent of the white population voted in their favour, that the Aboriginal people got citizenship rights. Initially Australia followed a white-only immigration policy but the years from 1947 to 1964 witnessed a policy of assimilation of Chinese war refugees, for instance, and later of integration from 1964 to 1973. In 1973 the Whitlam government declared Australia as a multicultural society and ever since the country has tried to maintain that character in letter and spirit.

These changes in the national policies have had a decided impact on the way the history of Australia is being told and the literary voices that are gaining precedence in recent times. The starting points in the narration of the history of Australia no longer necessarily erase the Aboriginal narratives that existed before the arrival of the colonizers. What was originally presented in many mainstream white historical narratives as a peaceful settlement stands revealed as a traumatic invasion that led to the intentional and unintentional decimation of large numbers of Aborigines through conflict, disease and so-called welfare policies. The impact of later immigration policies on the socio-cultural atmosphere as well as the change in attitudes to women in Australian society too is being reflected in the literary canons of Australia. The changing demographic make-up Australia has introduced many counter-narratives that are challenging traditional national myths in some ways and endorsing new ones of a multicultural social milieu. These diverse voices especially of Aborigines, women and immigrants in Australia are rewriting the way Australia's national identity has been constructed.

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## 5.2 HISTORY AND IDENTITY

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### 5.2.1 Tracking the Course of Australian Literary Studies

Oral traditions within the Aboriginal as well as white settler communities of Australia formed the bedrock of early Australian writing. Oral forms such as Aboriginal song cycles, colonial ballads and bush songs were dominant influences that came to be part of the early written forms of the Australian nation and its cultural consciousness. At this formative stage of the Australian nation as we know it today, categories of writing that would not necessarily be considered 'literature' in the traditional sense—such as letters, journals and travelogues—formed a significant corpus of work that represented or gave insight into the construction of the sense of an Australian identity.

One issue central to this process of the construction of a national identity has been whether to adopt a stance of affiliation or difference vis-à-vis the British and European colonial models of literature and culture. The initial trend was to constantly either use the European models as a point of reference or comparison. However, convict and bush traditions, especially in short stories and ballads, culled out a more distinctive paradigm as they focused on the specific responses of the new denizens of the land to the natural and social environment of the Australian penal system and the outback. The thematic drift of writing falling within the convict traditions often focused on a sense of resistance to authority and the system, while that belonging to the tradition of the outback dwelt on the pioneering spirit of survival. To this period belongs the *Bulletin* school of writing which peaked in the 1880s. Writers like Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson, who belonged to this school, drew on these Australian nativist traditions in their verse and prose. They elevated the Australian Bush and the concept of mateship to cultural symbols and stood in distinction to colonial cultural values of the metropolitan centres in Europe. The wild environment of the Australian continent and the need this generated for the pioneers and bushmen to stick together in a strange sense of interdependence and egalitarianism became hallmarks of what it meant to be Australian to many.

In time the very Australian canon that had been used to forge a new identity of Australia distinct from its colonial legacy by white Australian writers came to be challenged for its conceptualization and presentation of a monolithic Australian identity. The fact that it favoured male white writers and excluded the voices of other sections of Australian society was seen as evidence of how it was replicating in many ways the same trends of the British canon that it had been trying to disassociate itself from. As a reaction to this, at one level the focus started to shift to representations of Australia by women writers such as Judith Wright, Barbara Bayton and Elizabeth Jolley. They revealed through their work that the conceptualisation of the Bush and mateship as symbols of Australianness had hitherto in either very prominent or subtle

ways excluded the role women played in the pioneering phase and in the later establishment of the nation. They also showed how from their perspective these symbols had romanticized the settling of the Australian nation.

A new dimension to Australian studies was added in due course of time with indigenous writing being included in the purview of the Australian writing. Thus a growing body of Aboriginal writing came to be included and studied and this includes early versions and English translations of Aboriginal song sequences and folk tales. In some instances an indigenous word 'Koorie' is used to designate this literature. The publication and popularity since the 1960s of Kath Walker's poetry, the plays of Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis, the novels of Colin Johnson, the autobiographical work of Ruby Langford, Sally Morgan and Glenyse Ward have proved the strong literary presence of Aboriginal voices in Australia. Their work revealed how what had been presented as the peaceful settling of the island-continent, had in fact been a very destructive and traumatic invasion and forced occupation of the Aboriginal spaces. This writing is directed at throwing light on these historical realities and situating the present position of Aborigines within that framework so that redressal can be made. The political and personal element in this kind of writing thus is very strong.

Another kind of writing that finds a place today in Australia is immigrant/diasporic writing and writers such as Judah Waten, David Martin, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Yasmine Gonneratne, Adib Khan, Satendra Nandan, Beth Yahp are just some of the representative figures in this field. Once again their writing is part of the steady flow of revisions to a simplistic conceptualization of the Australian identity. As the multicultural nature of Australia's population becomes politically and socioculturally accepted, these voices and what they have to say are gaining precedence.

As far as considerations of genre go, during the initial phase of literary production in Australia, forms or genres of literature that had strong roots in oral traditions held sway in a significant way. Thus poetry and ballads as well as short stories, which were the literary versions of the songs and fireside yarns formed a prominent segment of the literary output that came out especially during the period when the *Bulletin* had its heyday. 'Banjo' Paterson, A.D. Hope and Judith Wright are perhaps among the best known white proponents of the ballad and poetry genres. Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' is a ballad that has even attained the status of an unofficial national anthem. Early Aboriginal writing too had a strong poetic component. Kath Walker (later known as Oodheroo Nunukul) and Colin Johnson (later known as Mudrooroo) are the best known exponents in this area. The Jindyworobak movement founded by Rex Ingamells in the late 1930s deserves mention here as an attempt to bring together these two streams by appropriating or introducing elements of the Aboriginal traditions as understood by white writers, into their poetic practice.

In more recent times it is more difficult to trace trends in the field of poetry because of the proliferation of the variety of voices and themes in this field. The same applies to the other genres as well. While it was comparatively easy at one point in time to pick out a Henry Lawson or Barbara Bayton in the field of short stories, the academic resistance to canonization and the diversity of writers and texts makes that much harder today.

The genres of fiction and personal narratives, however, have grown from strength in Australia as they have in the rest of the world as well. Writers of fiction like Patrick White, Xavier Herbert and Randolph Stow have been followed by renowned writers such as David Malouf, Archie Weller and Thea Astley. Sally Morgan and Ruby Langford are two Aboriginal writers whose contributions to the genre of personal narratives have not only popularized the genre, but also given a broader audience to a perspective on Aboriginal issues in Australia. The main thematic preoccupations remain intricately linked with the conception of the nation space. What has changed

is the diversity of perspectives brought to this and included within the purview of the Australian literature.

### 5.2.2 Issues of National Identity

We have already stated a few things about Australian literary history. In this section we will see how different sections of the Australian people have looked at these questions. The Bicentenary celebrations of 1988 raised questions about how the beginnings of 'Australia' as a nation have been portrayed in history, literature and popular culture. While for the white settlers of British origin it was a commemoration of the beginning of British colonial settlement two hundred years ago and, therefore, called 'Australia Day', for the Aborigines it meant destruction of their cultures, civilization and relationship with the land, and is, therefore termed 'Invasion Day'. To the former, it is marked by the need to create the myths of national foundation and beginnings that justify their presence on the island-continent. To the latter, it underscores the beginning of a history of loss and the need to question those myths of the Australian nation. The debate is part of a larger debate on the way national identity has been constructed in Australia. The fact that the Aborigines, their history, stories and their political positions have been successfully elided for so long has put a question mark on how and at what cost the Australian identity has been so constructed.

On account of the early history of convict transportation (about 1,50,000 who came in chains) the population comprised of those from the lower strata of British society and civil and military officials to administer the penal colony. The 'pioneers', those from the aristocracy who were free migrants and enjoyed the cultural benefits of education and higher social status focused on what was novel and curious for them, viz., the landscape and the flora and fauna, as well as the indigenous people of the land, that is, the Aboriginal people.

In terms of literary production it meant describing the strange sights and experiences through early journals, letters or other pieces of writing. With the beginning of the gold rush in 1851 resulting from the discovery near Bathurst being made public and subsequent discoveries at Clunes, Ballarat and Bendigo in the state of Victoria (capital Melbourne), intellectual and professional pursuits began to flourish in the cities. This raised a demand for popular literature though the early group of writers, mostly British born, wrote for the larger audience in Britain that enjoyed the exotic flavour of their works. Among this early group of writers who wrote about Australian life and landscape were Catherine Spence, Marcus Clarke and Boldrewood. While Catherine Spence occasionally had the cities as her theme, Marcus Clarke wrote about the penal system and Boldrewood had the Bush as his theme. It is the Bush theme that emerged as one of the important characteristics of Australian writing.

As the ideals of socialism, unionism and nationalism spread by 1890s and Federation took place in 1901, the year that was witness to "White Australia" legislation, the publication scene too changed. Journals and papers, such as *The Bulletin* and *the Worker*, were not tied to the metropolitan centre and catered more to the local reading public. Henry Lawson was a popular writer who published his prose and verse in *The Bulletin*. Angus and Robertson also started publication in 1895, starting with the publication of Banjo Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River*.

The Aboriginal people who had become dispossessed and diasporic in their own country took a long time to get together, after the 1960s only, and start working for a pan-Aboriginality, their people's common identity. This allowed the construction of an effective counter discourse, articulation of their 'Aboriginality' – their common identity. Thus they articulated an oppositional consciousness, a consciousness that defied the dominant white representations of, as Daylight and Johnstone suggest, one, science and anthropology, which saw them as primitive people; two, of law, which saw them as wards of the State rather than as citizens; three, of religion, which saw

them as pagan or heathen. Thus an identity politics became possible. The focal point is the empirical experience and in written literature it takes on the extra dimension of linguistic representation. For example, Cliff Watego (1988), while explicating several socio-cultural questions behind the production of Aboriginal literature, begins by quoting Jack Davis:

We used to speak in those days when we were talking about politics – black-politics – of how we were going to make ourselves heard within the white Australian society. And even in those days when we went back to our little dingy rooms, we said (referring to, among others, Kath Walker, Faith Bandler, and Ken Colbung), ‘well we’ve got to write about this, we’ve got to tell the people’. (Watego 11)

Jack Davis is referring here to the 1960s – the time when leading black activists could strike a note of consensus to enlighten the white public about their grievances and aims through literature. Around the same time Kath Walker’s first two volumes of poetry, *We are Going* (1964) and *The Dawn is at Hand* (1966), sold extremely well making her one of the highest selling poets in Australian history, and thus setting a promising example for other black writers to follow. This budding literary movement (which can also be seen as a supplementary system to the larger Aboriginal movement) gained further momentum in the year 1971 with the publication of Kevin Gilbert’s *End of Dreamtime* which celebrated the very concept of ‘Aboriginality’ and denounced white Australia for its maltreatment of the Aborigines. It is interesting to note here that most of these prominent literary figures were associated with the larger Aboriginal movement. Both Walker and Davis, for example, were associated with the efforts of Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), which spearheaded the Aboriginal movement throughout the 1960s. These people were also part of the famous Aboriginal tent ‘embassy’ set up in front of Parliament House in Canberra on Australia Day, 1972, to peacefully demonstrate and draw wider attention to the Aboriginal cause. This in turn directed attention at the way national identity was being envisaged. No longer could white Australia afford to ignore that it had a ‘black’ history in more ways than one. Just as the indigenous people of Australia are contesting the white identity of Australia, other groups are taking a look at national myths and pointing out how the constant need for revising them to incorporate the increasingly multicultural faces of Australian society.

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## **5.3 NATIONAL MYTHS AND CONTESTATIONS**

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### **5.3.1 Constructing the National Image**

Every nation constructs a national image through its histories, national traditions, myths and legacies. These are passed on through the popular consciousness and consistently reinforced by public institutions like and discourses such as literature, the media and academia. This construction of the national image is a long drawn out and subtle process. In Australia, though there were myths linked to the land of Aboriginal origin this was rarely incorporated in the narration of the nation. The predominant impulse in the earlier phase of Australia’s history was to create a national image that set it apart from the colonial legacy of being a penal colony. The myth of settlement was a convenient national narrative that places under erasure both the Aborigines and the historical realities of the founding of the Australian nation. It valorized the spirit of the people, especially the men, who played a significant part in the founding of what was in time to evolve into the Australian nation.

Myths of the new land took formal literary shape by the end of the nineteenth century in the works of the early settlers. These sought to idealise the men and women who confronted the new environment, so different from what they were accustomed to in

popular image of the Bush. He celebrated the spirit of the white bush folk but depicted the outback as bleak and unrelenting. This celebration was at the expense of the city though ironically it was often the city dwellers only who propagated this myth and used it to construct a national cultural identity that was different from the urban ethos celebrated by the imperial centre. The early ballads and stories presented the image of the traveling bushman, the figure of the Outback (the Australian word for remote settlement in the interiors of the land).

Also important in the formation of a national identity, different from that of Britain, was the Australian participation in World War I (1914 – 18) and the tragedy of Gallipoli. Many soldiers from Australia and New Zealand died in the tragedy of Gallipoli. The interwar years, the years of the great world Depression, left about one-third of the Australian workforce unemployed by 1931. This war marked a crucial point at which the umbilical cord linking the British imperial center and the Australian antipodes was severed. Following this there was a growing tendency to associate differently on the international front. World war II (1939 – 1945) brought the theatres of war closer to the Antipodes due to the threat from Japan and was another watermark in the nation's history. It accelerated industrialization and opened Australia to alliances with America and a growing awareness that it was part of Asia. The Vietnam War of 1965 brought together these trends and heralded the repercussions they would have for the nation and its construction of a national identity. The influx of immigrants from Southern Europe and South-East Asia that followed in the postwar years set the stage for a change towards a more multicultural paradigm of national consciousness and social policy.

### 5.3.2 Contestations

Two strong opposing impulses have been seen to pervade much of Australian literature and popular creation on account of this historical course in its attempts to establish a distinct identity. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra in their Preface to *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind* argue that Australia's postcoloniality itself is subject to debate. This is because it is a settler colony where the white settlers continue in some measure the colonial oppression and dispossession of the original inhabitants of the continent. At the same time it wishes at least in the public imagination to break free of the colonial seal and its allegiances.

It is a lapsed colonial power locked in an unresolved and undeclared struggle with the original possessors for legitimacy and land, producing a neocolonial form of literature from a neocolonial mentality that is still obsessed with the exploited Other. Into this complex is embedded a flourishing oppositional postcolonial development in politics, culture and literature. (Hodge and Mishra xiv)

They discuss how this double-bind is part of the construction of the "Australian stereotype, the so-called 'typical Australian', and the 'typical' space that he occupies the Australian Bush, or outback" (xv). According to them the stereotype is a "Caucasian adult male, an itinerant rural worker of no fixed address". Though the values, language and cultural ethos of this stereotype are "widely claimed to represent Australian authenticity" and to be a "touchstone of Australian identity ... a yardstick of Australianness in literature and other arts, as though truly Australian literature should be written by, for and about this character"(xv). The fact that Banjo Patterson's bush song "Waltzing Matilda" – a ballad about a wandering swagman (farm worker) in the Australian outback which celebrates the spirit of survival in the harsh landscape and the bold pioneering spirit – is the unofficial national anthem of Australia is another pointer to this phenomenon.

The paradox they point out is that Australia is in reality a highly urbanized country where this figure is not and was not ever a truly representative figure. Hodge and Mishra estimate that this figure could never have constituted more than fifteen

percent of the population even in the heydays of the pioneering movement. And yet this, the figure that is at the center of the Bush myth, has become so central to much of traditional canonical Australian literature. This is the representative figure of Australia in the popular imagination. Examining this phenomenon they analyse the erasures it makes. Hodge and Mishra argue

At the most superficial level, this figure exists to suppress from the national image recognition of what he isn't. He encodes a class, race and gender identity which classifies women, aborigines and new migrants as un-Australian, a potent fact which is immediately recognized by all those who are subjected to this symbolic annihilation. (xv)

The early myths of the Australian nation whether they were drawn from the experiences of mateship in the Australian outback or the travails of Gallipoli had a tendency to not only elide the perspective of the Aborigines in the narration of the nation but also of the female gender. In more recent times those articulations of the national myth are increasingly being replaced by new myths of a more inclusive multicultural Australia. The biggest impulse for this has come from the sudden upsurge of writing by women and Aborigines. Even within the realm of Aboriginal writing women have taken the forefront with writers like Sally Morgan and Ruby Langford making a big impact on the increased public acceptance of Aboriginal narratives. The increase in autobiographical and biographical texts has also blurred the line between fact and fiction, between genres and disciplines such as history and literature. As a matter of fact, these voices have often made the personal narrative the vehicle of political protest and awareness raising. Immigrant writing too takes a look at the way multiculturalism actually works in Australia. The anomie faced by the immigrants of various backgrounds and the historical legacies and narratives they bring with them challenge versions of multiculturalism that are trying to assimilate differences under a simplistically homogenous 'Australian' umbrella.

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## 5.4 OUTSIDE AND INSIDE THE CANON

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Increasingly there is no consensus on national canons as far as literature goes. This applies to Australia as well. The term 'Australian literature' has been used to refer to a body of genres and texts that has always been determined by social and political factors with different orientations to the dominant groups wielding political power at different times in Australia's history. Originally the desire to establish an Australian literary canon was deeply linked with a desire to create an alternate tradition for study and public consumption that saw itself as distinct from the British canon. The construction of the canon involved the designation of the great Australian writers and their works as at once worthy to be set along side canonical figures of the imperial canon and yet in opposition to them. This canon was to make clear the colonists' and settlers' rights to belong to the ranks of the imperial center as well as to the land they had invaded and colonised. The paradox was that at the same time they were trying to earn the seal of approval from the very colonial system whose values they were in supposed opposition to.

There are two ways the Australian canon is being contested. The first involves revealing what the canon does not include. This implies revising the canon to include new texts that remove the imbalance of a literary tradition that gave preference to white male writers depicting a particular image of Australia. The other involves taking another look at so-called canonical authors and texts and revealing how they inscribe challenges to the traditional conceptualization of what is Australian literature. This involves a process of rereading.

Patrick White, one of the best known and most taught of Australian writers, is interesting in the way he is both positioned inside and outside the canon. Today he is

considered very much a canonical figure for Australian literature. In a certain sense he is the equivalent of what Shakespeare is to British literature. Ken Goodwin in *A History of Australian Literature* feels strongly that the eleven novels of Patrick White constitute the most impressive oeuvre in Australian fiction, a judgment verified according to him by White being the only Australian writer awarded the Nobel Prize. The paradox is evident here: it is the external and international recognition that bolsters Patrick White's position in the canon. For much of the time that he did write the reception his work got in Australia was anything but flattering.

Patrick White came from settler stock, so in a sense he was bonafide 'Australian'. However his temperament and his higher education at Cambridge exposed him to the literature, the values and the ethos of the imperial center and Europe in a strong way. He evinced in many ways the taut tension between the cultural values of the Antipodean margins of Australia and the colonial center. He generated as a result quite a lot of hostility and drew critical flak for his vocal aversion to what he saw as Australian philistinism or lack of genuine culture. His most (in)famous words about seeing "in all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions ... and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves"(15) struck a raw nerve in the popular psyche.

From one point of view this kind of an opinion was predictable in that it was very much a part of the modernist critique of postwar society in Europe and America. White's use of symbols as a recurring technique in his writing also drew upon European traditions of twentieth century experimental writing in Europe. This however worked against the Australian celebration of the spirit of the average man, the success of settlement and survival in the face of odds. Throughout his career, while White's works were recognized and applauded on both sides of the Atlantic where they fell into predictable moulds, in Australia critics and the reading public did not evince such a positive outlook. What White was creating went against the grain of the national image and myth. It debunked what the Australian's prized and valorized most. The Nobel Prize winner who is today a celebrated canonical figure was at one time designated as 'Australia's Most Unreadable Novelist' and had the likes of A.D. Hope dismiss his work as "illiterate verbal sludge".

The thematic preoccupations and techniques employed by White were out of synch with the more canonically acceptable social realist writing that celebrated the spirit of survival in the Outback and the Bush, the camaraderie of mateship in the face of all odds. Thus when White explored the interior dilemmas of alienated characters seeking totality and internal wholeness, or when he set his narratives in urban milieus and abundantly used symbols and motifs he seemed to be breaking the unwritten laws of Australianness. This was seen in some quarters as evincing a lack of rapport with the life of the average Australian. A novel like *The Solid Mandala*, set in the suburbs of Sydney and focusing on the interior drama of existence in the face of decay and loss, could have been set, it has been argued, in any urban location in the western world – it was not conventionally or typically Australian.

Paradoxically, White consciously set out to work against the Australian literary tradition of naturalism and realism. He says he wanted "to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able to" (44). What the outside world and White himself saw as the greatest strengths of his writing were for a long time an affront to the Australian national image. As a result it undermined his popular and critical acceptance until the Nobel Prize made him a very desirable addition to the canon. Rereading even a supposedly canonical writer in this light reveals the many ways in which the horizons of national and literary expectations have been and continue to be redefined in Australian literature today.



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## 5.5 LET US SUM UP

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Australian literature, like the national literature of most countries has been a vehicle that has both endorsed and contested the national myth and desire to construct a distinct identity. It is useful to explore the possibilities this has opened in terms of interrogating the premises that went into constructing canons and the ones that are now being used to revise them.

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## 5.6 QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss some aspects of the course Australian writing has taken.
2. Discuss aspects of the inclusion and exclusion of Aborigines, and other groups within the framework of the construction of the Australian national identity.
3. Analyse how Patrick White stands both inside and outside the Australian canon for literature.

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## 5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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