UNIT 1 THE NOVELIST AND THE NOVEL

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to Patrick White, to give you some insight into the links between his life and some of the issues that colour his literary status, in general, and The Solid Mandala, in particular. This section will, thus, introduce some of the contexts within which a reading of The Solid Mandala can be made.

1.1 THE PLAY OF DICHOTOMIES

“The life and novels of Patrick White provide a classic example of the divided loyalties that have afflicted many sensitive Australian writers.”, wrote Geoffrey Dutton in Patrick White (1962: 5), a study that came out before White published The Solid Mandala. The formative years of White’s life and literary career were marked by cleavages in expectations and realities that coloured his decision to become a novelist as well as the initial reaction of the Australian reading and critical public to his work.

Patrick White (1912-1990) came from settler stock. His great-grandfather had come to New South Wales in the early nineteenth century and received a grant of Crown land. However, Patrick was born on 28th May, 1912 to Victor White and Ruth Withycombe in London. He grew up in Sydney and studied in Australia till he entered his teens. He writes, “When thirteen I was uprooted from Australia and put at a school at Cheltenham, England, as my mother was of the opinion that what is English is best, and my father, though a chauvinistic Australian, respected most of her caprices” (1990: 40). Near dichotomous pulls, such as these, were to leave their imprint on his sensibility at several junctures in his life.

Reminiscing about his youth, Patrick White comments, “Almost all the Whites remained wedded to the land, and there was something peculiar, even shocking, about any member of the family who left it. To become any kind of artist would have been unthinkable. Like everybody else I was intended for the land, though vaguely I knew this was not to be”(1990: 39-40). On his return to Australia after completing school, White worked for two years as a jackaroo to see if he could adapt himself to “life on the land”. His first year left him with the impression that the mountainous terrain of New South Wales was “the bleakest place on earth”. Nor did the rough life during his second year in the “flat, blistering north”, leave him enamoured of the wild Australian outback or the much celebrated camaraderie of the bush. He says, “The life in itself was not uncongenial, but the talk was endlessly of wool and weather”(1990: 40). During this time, he is said to have first tried his hand at the
The Solid Mandala

White went on to read modern languages at King’s College, Cambridge, graduating in 1935. The interest he had taken in the European tradition of Ibsen and Strindberg in his school years was supplemented by his introduction to French and German literature. After graduation, his father agreed to send him an allowance while he tried to make a living out of writing. His writing career started with the publication of smaller pieces in revues and literary magazines. Happy Valley (1939) was the first of his novels to be published in London. The novel was eventually accepted by the Viking Press in New York as well. The Living and the Dead (1942) like its predecessor appeared both in England and the United States. During the Second World War, White served as an R.A.F. intelligence officer in Africa, the Middle East, the Western Desert and Greece.

The Aunt’s Story (1948) was published before he finally returned to set up home at a farm in Castle Hill outside Sydney with his Greek partner, Manoly Lascaris. Interestingly, James Waites notes that White was, in his later years, to describe Manoly as his own “solid mandala”. His autobiography pays tribute to Manoly Lascaris as the “small Greek of immense moral strength, who became the central mandala in life’s hitherto messy design”. (in Joyce, 170)

This was a period marked by several displacements in White’s life and career. For a few years he stopped writing. He says of this period, “If anyone mentioned Writing, I would reply: ‘Oh one day perhaps.’ But I had no real intention of giving the matter sufficient thought. The Aunt’s Story … had succeeded with overseas critics, failed as usual with the local ones” (1990: 14). He goes on to reveal what had precipitated this sense of stagnation. “Most of them [Australians] found the book unreadable. Just as our speech was unintelligible during those first years at Castle Hill, I had never felt such a foreigner. The failure of The Aunt’s Story and the need to learn a language afresh made me wonder if I should ever write another word” (1990: 42-43). However, the reconnaissance into amateur farming and animal breeding couldn’t hold him for long, just as his earlier stint as a jackeroo failed to help him develop conventional bonds with the land. He admits quite candidly, “[W]riting novels was the only thing I could do with any degree of success; even if my half-failures were some justification for an otherwise meaningless life” (1990: 15).

White also found himself coming into the open about some other choices, this time with respect to his attitude to Australia and how that would evince itself in his writing. His now 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” (1990:15), resound with echoes of the modernist critique of philistinism. It was a critique of “the exaltation of the ‘average’” that was to lead to the conceptualisation of The Tree of Man as a book in which he wanted to suggest “every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman”. At the same time he wanted to “discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return” (1990:15).

When The Tree of Man was published in America in 1955 and in England the following year, it won accolades on both sides of the Atlantic. Australian critics were not as forthcoming. With the exception of Kenneth Slessor who called it a ‘timeless
work of art’, the reactions were negative. A.D. Hope went as far as to dismiss it as ‘illiterate verbal sludge’. White returned the slight by referring to his detractors as ‘howling dingoes’. *Voss* (1958) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) too drew hostile reactions in Australia and praise outside it. In the autobiographical essay written in association with the Nobel Prize, White reminisced on this trend which showed the first signs of turning with the *The Solid Mandala*.

Then about 1951 I began writing again, painfully, a novel I called in the beginning *A Life Sentence on Earth*, but which developed into the *The Tree of Man*. Well received in England and the United States, it was greeted with cries of scorn and incredulity in Australia: that somebody, at best a dubious Australian, should flout the naturalistic tradition, or worse, that a member of the grazier class should aspire to a calling which was the prerogative of school-teachers! *Voss*, which followed, fared no better: a newspaper printed its review under the headline *Australia’s Most Unreadable Novelist*. In *Riders in the Chariot* it was the scene in which Himmelfarb the Jewish refugee is subjected to a mock crucifixion by the drunken workmates which outraged the blokes and the bluestockings alike. Naturally, ‘it couldn’t happen here’ - except that it does, in all quarters, in many infinitely humiliating ways, as I, a foreigner in my own country, learned from personal experience.

A number of Australians, however, discovered they were able to read a reprint of *The Aunt’s Story*, a book which had baffled them when first published after the War, and by the time *The Solid Mandala* appeared, it was realised I might be something they had to put up with. (1990: 43)

In 1964, as the Sydney suburbs began encroaching on the country, White and Manoly shifted to a house by Centennial Park in the heart of the city. This was to remain their home to the end of White’s days. He writes, “Looking back, I must also have had an unconscious desire to bring my life full circle by returning to the scenes of my childhood, as well as the conscious wish to extend my range by writing about more sophisticated Australians, as I have done in *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm*” (1990: 44). Published respectively in 1970 and 1973, these two novels were to lead up to the Nobel Prize in 1973. Since then White published two more novels – *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) and *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) – not to mention the plays, short story collections, verse collections and some of the other writings that constitute his oeuvre. White’s participation in the 1972 rally to protect the Centennial Park too saw him emerge as a public figure who joined cause on many issues such as nuclear arms, the monorail and the Bicentenary celebrations. The tide had begun to turn.

### 1.2 INSIDER / OUTSIDER: SOME PERSPECTIVES

White had always felt the insider / outsider dialectic at play in his life – both as a man and as a novelist. His continental education and cultural exposure to the European tradition in modern literature left him out of sync with the cultural ethos and literary traditions evolving in Australia. His years abroad had rendered him, he says, “a foreigner in my own country” (1990: 43). There have been many attempts to analyze “the peculiar mixture of fascination and respect, of hostility and dislike which his work evokes amongst his country men; his own peculiar love-hate relationship with his native Australia” (Driesen, 119).

At times critics have diagnosed the source of the problem as being largely one of form and White’s closer familiarity with European literary traditions in genre, subject and stylistics. “White’s symbolic novels, with their sometimes slow openings, their many new starts, their frequent time and place shifts, their fastidious fascination with bodily functions and oddities, and their homiletic passages, took some time to gain
acceptance”, remarks Ken Goodwin. He argues that White’s familiarity with twentieth century French and German experimental writing set him apart from the mould of the social-realist writing that was in vogue during the 1930’s in Australia (Goodwin, 167). However, in ‘The Prodigal Son’, White admits to being consciously “determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism” (1990: 16). Joseph Jones also notes how White inspired others like Randolph Stow to depart thematically from an Australian literary tradition that concentrated on “The Spell of the Bush” and “The Great Australian Dream”; soon in their works, “adventures are subordinated to interiorized events” (Jones, 57). “White had offended against the unwritten law of Australianism”, writes Geoffrey Dutton, elaborating, “stringy-bark and green-hide may have been the mainstay of Australia, but here was a man insisting that now it is time for imagination and humility to take their place; amongst those who laughed and gave it a fair go he cried out in agony and looked without sentiment at tragedy” (Dutton, 9).

Others see White’s inability to capture the zeitgeist of Australia at the heart of the matter. “A vast majority of White’s Australian readers would appear to be ambivalent in their acceptance of his work. On the one hand a sense of patriotism prompts them to embrace White as one of their own kind, while on the other their anxiety over the nature of his work gives them cause to be less than enthusiastic in hailing him as a genuine Australian writer” (Singh, 117). Kirpal Singh cites as factors contributing to this phenomenon the “strong influence of a European background” and a “lack of sympathy or lack of a fundamental rapport with the way of life of most Australians” (Singh, 117). He continues, “White’s is not merely the case of the alienated artist. For him alienation takes on a greater meaning... White’s problem springs from an excruciating dissatisfaction with the superficiality of existence around him... White suffers from an impoverished spiritual kinship with the society in which he lives; both artistically and spiritually White writes in a vacuum” (Singh, 117-8).

Paradoxically, White spelt out that he made it his literary credo, to not only consciously work against the Australian literary tradition that celebrated realism and naturalism, but also that he meant to continue “to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able” (1990: 44). What White saw as his oeuvre’s greatest strengths were being vaunted as the very sites that undermined his acceptance with the reading and critical public. According to Adrian Mitchell, “White has never been really comfortable, imaginatively, with the local. He has worried at the fact of Australia, and tussled with its spiritual geography, but the strongest statements have again and again been negative” (Mitchell, 15). Who indeed, can forget White’s caustic vignette in ‘The Prodigal Son’ of

the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from average nerves (1990: 15)

Cynthia Vanden Driesen attempts to collapse this paradox by placing White within the Jungian framework of mapping the relationship between the artist and the spirit of the epoch. She sees White as being sharply divided from the life of his contemporaries because he purports to respond to what he diagnoses as a deep spiritual need for the ‘average’ Australian to break free of the hold of materialism and superficiality. Quoting Erich Neumann’s elaboration of Jung she posits, “Compensation for the cultural canon means opposition to it – that is opposition to the epoch’s consciousness and sense of values. The creative artist whose mission is to compensate for consciousness and the cultural canon is usually an isolated individual who must destroy the old order to make possible the dawn of the new” (Driesen, 121).
How plausible these positions are remains for you to decide. What is even more interesting is how these positions tap into thematic veins in *The Solid Mandala* as it maps the equally paradoxical love-hate relationship between the twins, Waldo and Arthur and obliquely delves into the nature and purpose of art. “The tension in White’s relationship with his own country is a revealing facet of that profound quarrel with himself (to adapt Yeats’ phrase) out of which his fiction comes” (Barnes, 3).

1.3 *THE SOLID MANDALA*

“In tracing the development of a major writer one perceives continuity as well as growth: each new work is organically related to its predecessors, yet this does not preclude the possibility of surprise.”, comments Thelma Herring. She goes on to point out these links when she opines, “Presenting, with a compression equaled only in *The Aunt’s Story*, two lives as simple and ordinary to outward view as those of the Parkers in *The Tree of Man*, *The Solid Mandala* uses them to explore further the theme of man’s potential divinity already treated on an epic scale in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*” (Herring, 72). However, even as the novel marks continuities, the points of departure remain significant. Peter Craven notes, “From the late 1960s there was a drift away from the mythopoetic, away from the symbols of the bush country. This is discernable in the later work of Patrick White. *The Solid Mandala* (1966) is a story of two brothers, one cosmically inclined and ‘mad’, the other schizoid yet ‘sane’. The book displays not only White’s interest in the ideas of Jung, but his willingness to experiment with black comedy and kitchen-sink realism. After *The Solid Mandala* White never again sounded the biblical note of *The Tree of Man*.” (Craven, 46)

One finds in this novel no synoptic vision trying to encompass expansive macrocosms. In the sense that on the surface of it, the novel does not try to hold within its narrative canvas extensive timeframes, an enormous cast of characters or an extremely convoluted widespread narrative. It is concerned with two twins and their consciousness that defines the world they live in and colors their interaction with people. *The Solid Mandala* is about two twins - Waldo and Arthur. However, in a strange and poetic journey, we realize that it can transcend the bounds of their microcosm to envelop more cosmic strains. Into the ostensibly simple tapestry of the lives of two nondescript men from the suburbs of Sydney, are woven threads linked to questions such as the nature of artistic creation, the search for spiritual and emotional wholeness, the holocaust and an impinging ethos of materialism.

The narrative is divided into four unequal parts. Brief opening and closing sections have Mrs. Poulter as the principle actor. According to Thelma Herring, these sections “form a frame which puts the timeless theme in a contemporary context” (Herring, 73). The expository section introduces the bachelor twins through the perspectives of Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun as revealed in a conversation that they have as they ride the bus between Sarsaparilla and Barranugli. The exterior sections impose the outside world’s perspectives on the narrative even as it subtly critiques that world’s materialistic values and narrowness of vision. The two central parts recount the lives and thoughts of Waldo and Arthur from Waldo’s perspective first and then more briefly from Arthur’s perspective. These sections deal more extensively with two seemingly antithetical approaches to life in that society, which through the device of the twins, are shown to be also almost inextricably linked.

The narrative takes off with a bus journey in which Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun are introduced directly and the Brown brothers obliquely through their conversation. In this section called ‘In the Bus’, the Brown brothers are shown stumbling along the road between Barranugli and Sarsaparilla with their blue terriers, Runt and Scruffy. There is a combination of the omniscient narrator commenting on the thoughts and nature of the two women, the women being characterized through their overt actions
The narrator hints repetitively at the narrow and materialistic perspectives Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter are able to bring to bear on the things they talk about. For example, when Mrs. Poulter comments that some women end up spending a shilling in order to save the occasional half-penny, the narrator reveals to us how Mrs. Dun mentally fixates on this piece of information. Having made the appropriate calculations for the half-penny, she is fascinated that some women may actually be losing one-and-eleven on a shopping trip between Sarsaparilla and Barranugli. The significance of these minute details in their lives is underscored time and again, throughout this first section. Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun had met for the first time only recently on a similar bus ride, in spite of them both having lived on the same road for years. As they discuss what brought them both to Terminus Road, Mrs. Poulter mentions her neighbours, the Mister Browns. Mrs. Dun is simultaneously put off by the possibility that the Browns may be her social superiors and pacified by the fact that they are from England. The pettiness of her focus is evinced when she picks out for negative comment things like the strangeness of Waldo’s name and the fact that the two aged brothers are holding each other’s hands. The former is to her indicative of snobbish elitism and the latter of the possible perversity of the two men. Her observations reveal her insecurities and the limited nature of her mental horizons. This section also presents through these two women the socio-cultural frame within which the story of Waldo and Arthur unfolds.

The Brown brothers are concretized by these two ladies as at once repulsive but intriguing, almost hideous and pitiable to the outsider or onlooker. On Mrs. Dun the impression is totally negative. She ‘resentfully’ notices ‘the two old men, stumping, trudging’ almost ‘tottering’ along worn down by ‘their age and infirmities’ and ‘holding each other by the hand’ (18-19). The sense of repulsion she feels, but cannot quite quantify, has been echoed earlier in Mr. Poulter’s contemptuous dismissal of them as a ‘couple of no-hopers with ideas about themselves’ (18). Their only demotic ally, Mrs. Poulter, too finds herself unable to go on defending them and disowns them reiterating Mrs. Dun’s ‘They’re nothing to me’ (19). The exposition sets the dismal tone for a narrative which reveals, as William Walsh puts it, that the two bothers, “are handcuffed, as they grope down the path negotiating the irregular bricks, by love and hate, memory and genes, horror and misery”(Walsh, 86).

The second and third sections, named ‘Waldo’ and ‘Arthur’ respectively tell the same story through two perspectives. Here again the characterization is through a combination of the omniscient narrator commenting mostly on the brother used to focalize the text, direct characterization of the brother concerned through his thoughts and actions and his indirect characterization of the other players in the drama of his life. As in the other sections, even when the author privileges a particular point of view by giving it almost complete say in ‘telling’ the story, he also uses the omniscient narrator to balance that point of view by revealing its own biases.

Relationships form the thematic content of the two intermediate sections. Thelma Herring points out that one can read the predominant emotion dominating the ‘Waldo’ section as hatred born of deep seated insecurity and increasing isolation (Herring, 75). Waldo has a deep sense of being chained in a disadvantageous relationship to his twin brother. As a result of this, he either has to suffer being excluded when Arthur is patronizingly preferred over him because of his disability or the equally strong sense of mortification of constantly being associated with Arthur. His greatest sense of humiliation and anger however, is to see Arthur actually doing and surpassing him in the way he deems his territory. Thus, that Arthur manages to capture and hold Dulcie’s affection, that Arthur reads literary classics and is disturbed by the larger questions of life they raise and that Arthur actually writes, are blows that quite devastate Waldo’s construction of a superior self-image in relation to his brother. The loss of this image, both gradually throughout his life and more suddenly
towards the close of his narrative infuse his being with palpable abhorrence for things and people, springing from personal despair as the success and place in life he had envisaged for himself slip further out of his reach.

If hatred for others and an incipient self-hatred are part of Waldo’s constitution of himself, then the third section devoted to and entitled ‘Arthur’ is infused with the thematic concerns of positive relationships and an almost religious spiritual search for wholeness. Most of the episodes that figure in the Waldo section are reinscribed here through the mellow perspective of Arthur. What were sources of humiliation for Waldo, become sources of affection and part of a continued process of personal enlightenment for Arthur.

Although they are twins, and although “the lives of the brothers fused by consent at some points”(81), they are opposites, physically, mentally and spiritually points out Thelma Herring. Waldo is depicted as a pseudo-intellectual, who excels at writing English essays and becomes a librarian. He assumes a sense of superiority that fuels and legitimizes his hatred of and scorn for the people around him. Waldo, however, has aspirations to be a novelist when he eventually hopes to find something to write about. The elitist and esoteric view of art and himself, he holds fails to keep him in touch with the realities that could have nourished his aspirations into fruition. Arthur is portrayed as an alleged simpleton, who is a failure at school except for a surprising flair for figures, becomes a grocer’s assistant and humbly accepts the realities around him. He loves and is loved by people (and dogs) and seeks to share a redemptive totality with the lives of those he touches. “Their experiences, however often coincide: they love the same woman (after their different fashions), both write "poems" and read books, each acquires a dog, both on occasion play the woman, both give Mrs. Poulter a "child"(Waldo in the form of a plastic doll, Arthur by accepting the relationship himself), each is accosted by a whore on the night that the Second World War ends, each becomes in a sense the other’s murderer.” To Mrs. Dun, watching from the bus as they walk hand in hand, “It was difficult to decide which was leading and which was being led. But one was the leader, she could sense”(19). Waldo, of course, believes himself to be the leader, and the protector of Arthur; Arthur feels from the beginning that he is protected, and is the protector of his whole family. (Herring, 73-74). The denouement reveals that both visions of life though seemingly at odds with one another interpenetrate one another, constituting parts of a whole.

The final section, like the opening section, imposes the perspective of the outside world onto the narrative. As in the opening section, the closing section entitled, ‘Mrs Poulter and the Zeitgeist’ combines negative impressions of the fate of the Brown brothers and a more positive apprehension of the same by Mrs. Poulter. Only this time her perspective holds sway over the denouement giving it a stronger sense of thematic coherence.

To touch upon some more autobiographical and personal notes that impinge upon the book: “White testifies in Flaws in the Glass to his own anxiety at the time he was writing The Solid Mandala. He and his friend Lascaris had decided to move from “Dog woods,” their home of many years, because the suburban nuisances were becoming oppressive. He feared that the uprooting might be fatal to his writing, that The Solid Mandala might be his “swan song”. Inevitably the novel “was infused with an amount of fatality and foreshadowing.” For those interested in the sources of White’s inspiration and possible prototypes of his characters, he identifies the twins as “my two halves,” with Waldo as “myself at my coldest and worst.” Mrs. Poulter “grew out of” a neighbor lady, and Dulcie “has both the goodness and the smugness of a fulfilled Jewish acquaintance”(Jones, 72-73). Patrick White counted the novel as one among his favorites. “I like The Aunt’s Story and The Solid Mandala best – the first because for so long nobody would pay attention to it,...and The Solid Mandala because it’s a very personal kind of book, I suppose, and comes closest to what I’ve wanted.”(1990:21-2)
1.4 LET US SUM UP

Patrick White's life and career as an Australian novelist are marked by paradoxes and tensions that are subtly evinced in his novels in general, and *The Solid Mandala* in particular. The tension between tradition – be it familial or literary – and the proclivities of his individual talent that consciously strove against more rigidly defined horizons of national and literary expectations lead to the paradox of accolades abroad and ambiguity in reception in Australia. *The Solid Mandala* taps in on these ambiguities in its portrayal of the twins – Waldo with his abhorrence of the society in which he lives and fear that it will contaminate his art; Arthur with his love that seeks to open the eyes of people to the potential for redemption and totality.

1.5 QUESTIONS

1. What were the dichotomous pulls that were in play during the formative years of Patrick White the novelist that have a bearing on *The Solid Mandala*?

2. Discuss what you think of some of the positions that have been taken to account for White's paradoxical reception in Australia.

3. Give a brief analysis of the structural and narrative paradoxes in *The Solid Mandala*.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Antipodean margin: Parts of the British Empire on the opposite side of the earth, used to refer to New Zealand and Australia

Black comedy: A type of comedy that employs black, cynical or wry humour

Colonial centre: The centre of colonial power, England

Denouement: The outcome or unraveling of the plot of a narrative

Dialectic: Oppositional ideas or that pervade and unify an argument, work or system

Dingoes: Australian wild dogs, used here metaphorically

Expository section: The initial part of a literary work that explains the situation at the beginning of the narrative action or establishes the context for the action

Jackeroo: Colloquial Australian term for a man arrived from England to gain experience in the bush often as a novice at a sheep or cattle station

Jungian framework: A psychoanalytical framework of criticism that places emphasis on how a work embodies archetypes, the collective unconscious and the spirit of the age
Kitchen-sink realism: A genre of realism that focuses on the mundane realities of daily existence, having as its setting areas in the home, often the kitchen.

Liminality: The state of being on the border of two conditions and as a result not fully a part of either.

Outback: The sparsely settled flat arid inland area of Australia.

Pom: A derogatory term for an immigrant from Britain still snobbishly clinging to the cultural values of the mother country.

The bush: The Australian wilderness raised to the status of a national myth related to the pioneering ethos of British settlement on the Australian continent.

Zeitgeist: The spirit of an age or the trend of thought and feeling in a period.

1.7 REFERENCES


