UNIT 2 OPENINGS AND PREOCCUPATIONS

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

This section attempts to suggest the significance of the epigraphs to the text and briefly go over some of the themes evolved in the text. It also looks at the way Sarsaparilla is evoked as a setting to the text's themes and narratives. The aim is to introduce you to some of the textual frames of reference relevant to making a reading of The Solid Mandala.

2.1 OPENING GESTURES

Patrick White places four epigraphs as pointers to chart the course the narrative will take en route its odyssey of exploration. All four of them weave together a similar thread of thought. They are the opening notes to a concerto of the soul that sees the possibility of mandalic totality in putatively mundane marbles, and intimations of salvation in a supposed simpleton. Below I have juxtaposed the epigraphs and some of the observations they have evoked to help you capture the ambience White wished to evoke at the threshold to The Solid Mandala.

There is another world, but it is in this one
Paul Eluard

"Patrick White is pre-eminently a novelist of consciousness. Whatever the archetypal metaphors of the unconscious, whatever the structures of image, symbol or theme from which he or his critics might claim his novels are constructed, they find their meanings outside these closed systems - in the world. The epigraph to The Solid Mandala - "There is another world, but it is in this one" - does not necessarily mean that there is some magic or archetypal or even unconscious reality behind these appearances. All possible worlds are immanent to consciousness" (Ashcroft, 124).

"The essential insight, without which all endeavour will be in vain, is that the metaphysical is recognized as illusory. There is no "other world", "no beyond", no "real" world: the "apparent world", our world, transitory, meaningless, continually becoming, never reposing in being, is the only world. ... White's elected characters act out White's struggle to find transcendence which occurs within the world....The god that Arthur sees is ...in the world" (McCulloch,32-33).

It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within.
Meister Eckhart
"A whole universe is summoned up in the novel's slim beginning, a world which includes the clotted paddocks of Terminus Row, and the world in which people lived, belonged to Fellowships and Lodges, and are not afraid of electric gadgets. That world is the context for the tragedy of the Browns, parents and children, which is itself a comment on the words of Meister Eckhart quoted as an epigraph, "It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within" (Walsh, 86).

... yet still I long
for my twin in the sun...
Patrick Anderson

"The Solid Mandala dramatizes a search for Divinity in the art form itself; it is a quest for wholeness which seeks to contain an energy or power that may ultimately give expression to another world that White perceives as being "inside" and "wholly within" the visible one" (McCulloch, 27). According to McCulloch, the novel postulates "the question of whether or not art is able to constitute the religious activity of man" and that White envisages the "pursuit of the perfect art form, in quest of the marriage between Apollo and Dionysos ("...yet still I long for my twin in the sun")" (McCulloch, 28).

It was an old and rather poor church, many of the ikons were without settings, but such churches are the best for praying in.
Dostoyevsky

Carolyn Bliss posits that in the denouement Arthur becomes a type of Christ-figure. This motif is gradually built up in the text with references to 'The Grand Inquisitor' and the central finale of Arthur's mandala dance that reenacts the Passion of Christ. "Subsequently, he sets Waldo's death on a Thursday and Arthur's reappearance at Mrs. Poulter's on the Saturday. Thus Arthur is absent for the traditional three days, although the timetable of the Passion has been slightly skewed" (Bliss, 112). Bliss reads echoes of the epigraph from Dostoyevsky into the evocation of the police sergeant's memories "of a boyhood smell of cold, almost deserted churches, and old people rising transparent and hopeful, chafing the blood back into their flesh after the sacrament" (313).

2.2 THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS

The Solid Mandala, is densely overlaid with thematic interpretations and readings of the narrative. Most of these themes are textually worked out through the twins, Waldo and Arthur. As a result, much overlapping of thematic possibilities takes place. As a framework to explore the possibilities this novel lays open, several of the thematic preoccupations of this novel have been listed. It is for you to add to or take away from this list as your own reading breathes life into this thematic skeleton and fills it out with the flesh and blood of the character's actions and thoughts.

- The human sense of isolation and the search for meaning. This constitutes an abiding thematic concern in White's oeuvre. Waldo and Arthur embody an almost Nietzschean theme of the lonely agnostic's agonized quest for the capacity of insight into the very nature of things. Waldo's futile struggle to exert his sense of identity leads him further and further along the path of alienated isolation. Arthur takes up the pursuit of meaning against the enervating rationalism of his family and reaches for a greater understanding of mankind, the nature of existence, pain and totality. He manifests a longing for truths beyond material knowledge - the nature of redemption, the large meaning and design of life. The semi-mystical vortex of the narrative
climaxes at a final epiphany that leaves them both tormented by their vision and humanity.

**The malaise of empty materialism.** Emotional incapacity, unrequited desire, spiritual numbness, an analysis of social pretensions, the startling human capacity for savagery and hollow narcissism are thematically explored through Waldo and other denizens of Sarsaparilla. Thelma Herring comments about White, “He is still concerned with the necessity for love and humility in human relationships, with the inadequacy of reason and the superiority of the mystic’s intuition of reality, but the division into the elect and the damned no longer seems so drastic” (Herring, 72). This is especially seen through White’s portrayal of Mrs. Poulter who inhabits the spheres of the enlightened Arthur, as well as the narrowly materialistic and judgmental spheres of Mrs. Dun and her husband. However, McCulloch is of the opinion that the divisions are clearly marked especially in the case of the two protagonists. “Arthur is presented as authentic man, that is archetypal man cleansed of the illusion of culture. He is more truthful than Waldo who represents civilized man. The contrast between the truth of nature and the pretentious lie of civilization can exist as an analogy of contrast between the eternal core of things, and the phenomenal world” (McCulloch, 34).

**Religion.** “Religion. Yes, that’s behind all my books.”, averred Patrick White. “What I’m interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God…. I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to open up to him” (McGregor, 218). In a letter to Beatson, White explained, “I suppose what I am increasingly trying to do in my books is to give professsed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed factor. I believe most people have a religious factor, but are afraid that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals” (Beatson, 167). He adds elsewhere, “In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I’ve made use of religious themes and symbols. Now, as the world becomes more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way” (1990, 19). *The Solid Mandala* is suffused with a confluence of religious motifs drawn from across the spectrum of Oriental tantric mandalas to Occidental allusions to Judeo-Christianity. This theme of religious responsibility is played out in the relationship between the two brothers. “White works out an intimate connection of transcendental and rationalistic attitudes in the twins Arthur and Waldo. The intimacy and inescapability of the relationship between them produces a constant and destructive collision of viewpoints, and confronts Arthur again and again with his responsibility toward a temperament hostile to the values his mysticism has led him to cherish. He cannot voluntarily renounce his brother … because he has not voluntarily taken him on. And it is from this agonizing, tense contiguity of opposites that the book derives part of its disturbing power” (Edgecombe, 62).

**Failure.** This theme manifests itself variously – as Waldo’s sense of failure as a writer, his failure to win Dulcie – quotidian and worldly failure. To this Carolyn Bliss adds, “The failure of love to be strong enough to save is a familiar vehicle for the theme of failure in Patrick White’s fiction” (Bliss, 110). Arthur feels this sense of failure when he finds his love fails to integrate Waldo fully into the mandalic dance, to negate the consuming power of Waldo’s hatred – spiritual and cosmic failure. White’s preoccupation with failure as a theme draws from his belief that, “The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming” (in Joyce, 47).
Literary creation. “The recurring subject in *The Solid Mandala* is literary creation. Arthur’s experiences are an enactment of life’s essence, its joy and its suffering which ideally could be the source of Waldo’s creative literary capacities. But Waldo turns from the source and is left with dry empty form” (McCulloch, 30). McCulloch sees the novel as using Waldo and Arthur as “plausible embodiments of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality” (McCulloch, 28) where Apollo is the god of individuation, dream and illusion, and Dionysos is the god of intoxication and the forces of nature. He goes on, “Waldo is potentially the provider of Apollonian form. Arthur is the source, the wild inebriated Dionysian force that requires form. Waldo must accept Arthur’s love, his source, before he can create and become one with the universe. The goal is unity” (McCulloch, 28).

2.3 A SENSE OF PLACE

The imaginary suburbs of Sarsaparilla, which appears also in *Riders in the Chariot* written just before the *The Solid Mandala*, acquire the status of the fictional landscape of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, Joyce’s Dublin, Hardy’s Wessex or Arundhati Roy’s Ayemenem. The role of the everyday folk in Sarsaparilla, like Mr. Poulter or Mrs. Dun, is to represent the dull, commonplace, ignorant averageness that made for ‘the Great Australian Emptiness’ as White saw it. Sarsaparilla inscribes or captures the sterility and materialism of White’s vision of a spiritual wasteland. According to Ken Goodwin, the place is modeled on the Castle Hill suburb, which used to be the home of White and Lascaris before they moved to the heart of the city (Goodwin, 169).

When the narrative opens it is in a “a place once a village now a suburb, in which the remnants of the country die in the suburban landscape”(Walsh, 85). In this mildly caustic idyll of suburban life, Australia is center stage. The larger world impinges in the form of the Jewish question and the allusions to the World War and the holocaust. But these are worked into the lives of the Brown brothers in such a way as to condense the macrocosmic upheavals — such as the holocaust or the Peace — into the microcosms of their personal failures, tragedies of rejection or acceptance. The narrative keeps them within the perspective of the lives of the twins. The Jewish question becomes coalesced with attempts to establish a relationship with Dulcie Feinstein, and the end of the Second World War is marked for both brothers by encounters with prostitutes.

According to Walsh, White evokes “not only the exact registration of the physical appearance of the place, but also a sense of the community’s reaction, its ethos and feeling. There is a considerable stress on the rougher and more abrasive elements of Australian common life. The names of the people and places, for example, are redolent of a kind of truculent glumness: Wally Pugh, Mrs. Purves, Mrs. Musto, Mrs. Mutton, Norm Croucher, the dogs Scruffy and Runt, O’Halloran Road, Ada Avenue, Sarsaparilla, Barranguli, Shadbolt Lane, Gippa Gunyan, Mungindribble. The ugliness these names stand for is confirmed by the half aggressive idiom which is the common idiom of communication and the two together convey, negatively and positively, the feeling of a society which is both traditionally and visually uneducated, and possessed of an openness and freedom untrammeled by the weight of an oppressive inheritance” (Walsh, 88). As Mr. Brown said once to Waldo and Arthur, “There’s too much you boys, reared in the light of an empty country, will never understand. There aren’t any shadows in Australia. Or discipline. Every man jack can do what he likes” (161).

Sarsaparilla is debunked in the final section when the modern idea of comfort and material progress in the suburbs is reduced to “the electricity...the phone...the electric frying-pan...the telly”(295). It’s a closed world, where human relationships
The Solid Mandala

become just habits and the television is a substitute for friends. Mrs. Poulter muses, "If she didn't have any friends without the ones she yarnd with over fences, in buses, or the street, she didn't need any. She had the telly, the nice announcers, and world figures in your own lounge. She could afford to mind her own business, without Mrs. Dun reminding her of it"(295). The outer socio-political reality barely impinges on this microcosm of self-complacent containment. The real world is transformed into a hyperreal source of diversion from moments of unpleasantness in local life – for example when Mrs. Poulter's pigs are butchered. Mrs. Poulter waited most for “the real programmes, when they let off one of the bombs, or an aeroplane caught fire at the moment of crashing, or those guerillas they'd collared, of course they were only Orientals, and once it showed you the bodies they'd shot....the news items so real, you only sometimes overheard the squeals of a stuck and bleeding pig"(299). Only after she sees the dead and mutilated Waldo, at the end of the narrative, do these become realities she can connect with; even if in her imagination they metamorphosize into a kind of armageddon. “She knew now. All the films, all the telly, all the black-and-white of the papers was turning real, as the great clouds, the great tanks, ground up groaning over Sarsaparilla....Hope was faint. She knew now. The flat faces of all those Chinese guerillas or Indonesians, it was the same thing, dragged out across the dreadful screen. All those Jews in ovens, that was long ago, but still burning, lying in heaps. Lone women bashed up in Mosman, Maroubra, Randwick, places you went only in your sleep"(302).

Veena Noble suggests that “Perhaps the most common theme of Australian literature is the lack of intensity, passion and spiritual consciousness in middle-class life”(Noble, 31). However, this is a theme that has begun to wear thin and sit uneasily with an Australian audience. Adrian Mitchell traces this phenomenon with reference to “that collective state of mind or mindlessness, called Sarsaparilla. When White first began writing of this social territory, his readers shared his savage delight as he slashed his way through the values, the speech patterns, the affectations of mid-suburban Australia. The consensus is that he was wickedly accurate. He had the mannerisms down....and he knew just how to expose the private vulgarities. The public vulgarities were easy game....He had discovered the subtleties of the demotic, he knew the vulnerable spots....he understood the true function of gossip in a social group, the definitions that small talk established.... Sarsaparilla has become a convention”(Mitchell, 14-5). While admitting that White’s work has put Australian literature on the world map, Kirpal Singh says that he would not add “that White’s work gives us the Australian character or, indeed, is even a representative of Australian society! Even Sarsaparilla which appears to be firmly located as some recognisably Australian suburb could just as well have been situated in any of the big European cities. Subtle nuances and cadences aside, there is nothing particularly Australian in an ethos whose chief characteristics are a vulgarity of living and an emptiness of soul”(Singh, 119).

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have been given a textual frame of reference within which The Solid Mandala can be approached. The epigraphs point towards the leitmotif of a spiritual quest within the quotidian and the themes play upon variations of this leitmotif. The wasteland-like setting against which this narrative is plotted, however, has been a site of criticism of White’s vision and presentation of Australia.

2.5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significance of the epigraphs to the main narrative.

2. Elaborate on the thematic strands that frame the characters of the twins.
3. Discuss White's comment on the effectiveness of evocation of Sarsaparilla.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Apollo: God of music and light in classical mythology; the symbol of reason and culture manifested in writing as a serene orderly quality

Archetypal: Referring to the concept of recurring archetypes or cross-cultural images, figures or narrative patterns that reflect the collective unconscious

Contiguity: The relation of belonging to the same or associated group

Dionysos: God of wine and revelry; signifying impulsiveness, irrationality and passion in writing

Hyperreal: A term used by Baudrillard to speak of a condition in which the distinctions between real and imagined, reality and illusion are eroded

Leitmotif: Recurring image that subtly unifies a text

Oriental tantric mandalas: Symbols of auspicious wholeness in tantric oriental belief systems such as Buddhism and forms of tantric yoga

Passion of Christ: Suffering of Jesus Christ after the Last Supper and during the Crucifixion

2.7 REFERENCES


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