UNIT 3 DENIZENS OF THE AUSTRALIAN EMPTINESS

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This section will look at some of the premises and practices that underlie White's mode of characterization on a theoretical and pragmatic level. It will also deal with some critical perspectives on White's techniques of characterization and the characters in The Solid Mandala. The delineation of characters in the novel will be examined at length.

3.1 CHARACTERIZATION

"Characters interest me more than situations. I don't think any of my books have what you call plots... I always think of my novels as being the lives of the characters. I have the same idea with all my books: an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial. The realistic novel is remote from art. A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn't set out what you already know."(1990: 21)

In 'The Prodigal Son' while Patrick White decried "the Great Australian Emptiness", he explains that it "was the exaltation of the 'average' that made him panic and feel impelled to write. So when he began writing his next novel, The Tree of Man, his mode of characterization drew on an epistemological stance with reverberations of the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads. "Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to suggest...every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people"(1990: 15). He concluded the autobiographical piece he did on the occasion of the Nobel Prize with the words, "Here I hope to continue living, and while I still have the strength, to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able"(1990: 44).

This aspect of White's characterization holds true also for The Solid Mandala. The Brown brothers, on the surface of it, are far from extraordinary. And it is this almost nondescript aspect of the brothers that White first presents to the readers in the opening section of the book, where they are apprehended through the eyes of an
The central sections unfold the interior drama of their lives, paradoxically plumbing the mystic depths of Arthur who to an outsider's perspectives seems well below 'average'. Yet it is he who is "the keeper of mandalas"(240).

This is a paradox - of extraordinary ordinariness - that Adrian Mitchell too notes. "White's characters are an extraordinary set of figures, not at all (initially) prepossessing. Most of them ... are awkward, angular, uncomfortable, brittle, though some of the lesser figures may be big, billowy, wheezy...". Mitchell however penetrates this surface reality to ascertain the way character functions in White's novels and comes up with some interesting observations. "My interest is in the nature of character in White's novels. Character, as I read it there, is a "given"; it is fixed right from the beginning. There isn't change in character itself, but change in understanding. The protagonist discovers by painful experience something about the nature and extent of his spiritual resources....But the character of the protagonist does not in itself change. ...Arthur and Waldo Brown dance around each other; they don't evolve, they revolve. White...conceals a relatively simple sense of character within the complexity of his patterns of symbols and metaphors, the literary allusions and the enigma of his mandalas"(Mitchell, 6-8).

Mitchell argues that because of this static characterization, the visionary status of his illuminati or enlightened characters becomes just a verbal artifact. Spiritual perception is rarely reciprocated or acted upon, according to him. "Mrs. Poulter appears to understand Arthur's dance, but that is something we have to take on trust because it doesn't seem to accomplish much. Unless to say that Arthur is sometimes comprehensible. The Solid Mandala (1966) measures not only the difference between the twin's knowledge of each other, but perhaps too easily sets up the inadequacy of Waldo's knowledge, the misunderstanding that his kind of intelligence precipitates"(Mitchell, 9). Continuing about White's mode of presentation of his characters Mitchell notes, "We discover that beyond what we might call the poetic excitement of these privileged moments of perception, White will frequently insert his moral visions into the fabric of the story, to explain what the characters cannot explain. Their visions ultimately lack conviction, because they can only be communicated by assertion"(10).

Others too have commented on the forced nature of White's characterization. "His novels tend to move from outer reality into the disturbed or fragmented mind (a process influenced in later works to some extent by his reading of Jung), and, for a few central characters, the unsuccessful spiritual impulse to understanding. Despite the jerkiness of parts of the narrative, the thematic construction is always carefully molded, sometimes seeming to be imposed on the characters irrespective of their natures"(Goodwin, 167). One major reason for this is that the dramatis personae have to function humanly as well as symbolically. Besides which, narrative is filtered through the minds of characters revealing their nature. While Kirpal Singh agrees that White's characters seem "flat, pre-fixed and pre-determined to act out a certain sequence of events" he places this within the classical Aristotelian frame of reference where action has precedence over character. "Like the tragic heroes of ancient Greeks, White's protagonists are consistently exploring and bursting through their hubris to arrive at a newer, fuller, richer, revelation of themselves"(Singh, 120).

### 3.2 THE CORE OF REALITY

#### 3.2.1 Waldo

Born with his innards twisted, Waldo is emblematized by the taw with a knot at the centre. Tense and rigid, he is an involuted misanthrope marked by a self-enclosed fastidious disgust for people and things. He rejects love and relationships as a sort of threat to his personal identity as a potential artist. Besides a guilt-ridden obsession for
Denizens of the 
Australian 
Emptiness

the necessity of loneliness, he is unwilling to yield to sensuousness. His is a retreat into isolation. His powerful egocentricity is not open to compassionate treatment. In the end there is no redemptive transfiguration for him. He strives towards an indelible individuality but ends up with obscurity. His self-limited interest makes him remote and self-absorbed, even callous. "Waldo carries this fierce sense of his own identity and his resistance to the intrusion of others to a point where it is pathological and, since it is invariably connected with self-love, evil. ...he is a spiritual and emotional solipsist. Life and experience seem to him a violation of his enclosed perfection, an assault on his privacy" (Walsh, 93). Moreover, Waldo is even as a youth aware of the malaise that condemns him to anomie. The narrative voice in the novel reveals, "On the whole, though he would only have confessed it to himself, he did not understand people, except those he created by his own imagining. If it hadn't been for his own visions he might have felt desperate"(98).

He resents, but is sustained by his bondage to Arthur. Putatively superior, he fails and ends his life hating Arthur, his only contact with real life. He and Arthur are presented in Manichean opposition. Waldo's is a quest for personal identity while Arthur's is for insight into the very nature of being. Waldo's ego imprisons the spiritual sense as materialism can do. His relationships breed frustration and a sense of inadequacy. Arthur with his open display of affection, his intuitive irrationalism is a constant repudiation of his failure. "Waldo is disappointed in love and in authorship and is increasingly resentful of his half-witted, incomprehensible brother" (Goodwin, 173).

Waldo's rationalist approach to life was a legacy his parents had left him. "Waldo had not been taught to pray, because, said Mother, everything depends on your will, it would be foolishness to expect anything else, we can achieve what we want if we are determined, if we are confident that we are strong"(77). As a substitute to the apotheosis of a transcendent entity, Waldo places himself on an imaginary pedestal and from his vantagepoint presumes to look down on all else. "If any, his religion had become a cultivation of personal detachment, of complete transparency — he was not prepared to think emptiness — of mind. In this way he suffered no immediate hurt"(177).

He had a taste for the intellectual life and had literary aspirations. His fragmentary attempt at writing a novel - *Tiresias a Youngish Man* - became the stigma of his anemic sterility. "I want to, and am going to write about myself"(94) he wants to tell Dulcie when she enquires about his writing. His writing achievements include several articles, a fragment of a novel, membership of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, and reading a paper on Barron Field to the Beecroft Literary Society. In old age he imagines that a fragment of Tennyson's "Fatima" that he has copied out, is the product of his own muse. "Waldo is the sterile artist without a source, without connection to the source of life. He is a representative of twentieth century intellectual man who has cut himself off from love and the mystery of the universe"(McCulloch, 50).

McCulloch points out how Waldo's relationship with his brother is paradoxical. Waldo's need, hatred, love and jealousy of Arthur distort and twist his perspective of the world. Superficially, he lives and acts out a life nourished by the belief that Arthur is an idiot, an inferior being. But the closeness he has with Arthur draws out from within him admissions: "Perhaps he dreaded Arthur most of all, because of something Arthur might tell him one day"(167) (McCulloch, 40). Even Waldo muses at the ineffable and yet inextricable interpenetration of their existence; "With Arthur it was different. There was no escaping Arthur. At best he became the sound of your own breathing, his silences sometimes consoled....Life as he began in time to see it, is the twin consciousness, jostling you, hindering you, but with which at unexpected moments, it is possible to communicate in ways both animal and delicate"(76). Arthur would remain an inescapable taunt to Waldo's very existence. "He has hated Arthur for everything he is: for his ability to love people, for his capacity for
experiencing, for his insight into the truth of things, for his appearance, and most of all for the fact of his existence” (McCulloch, 52).

Narcissism and insensitivity become a response to Waldo’s failure to love. The fullest expression of his self to the world is consequently superficial and egocentric. His self-absorbed belief in his greatness leaves him in silent competition with Arthur. “Waldo didn’t believe it was possible to have more than one genius around”(35). When Mrs. Brown doesn’t allow Waldo to squeeze the butter and knead the dough because Arthur has according to her “a particular gift for it”, Waldo is piqued, all the more so, when Arthur calls these homely occupations his “vocation”.

“Waldo was more jealous of that word than he was of Arthur’s privilege. He wondered where he had got it from. Because words are not Arthur’s line. It was Waldo who collected them, like stamps or coins. He made lists of them. He rolled them in his mouth like polished stones. Then Arthur went and sprang this vocation thing of his.”(35-6)

This jealousy also manifests itself as a defense to keep a part of him inviolate. When Arthur asks him if he can act in Waldo’s play, Waldo refuses. He realizes his creative life “was something he could not bear to share with his brother, whose breathing he used to listen to whenever he woke in the night, the brother who looked almost right inside him when they opened their eyes on twin pillows in the morning”(39). This resentment ossifies into hatred as the fear of being upstaged resurfaces when he finds Dulcie and Arthur together, finds Arthur reading The Brothers Karamazov in the library and reads Arthur’s poem. It envelops him in hatred. “He hated his brother Arthur, although, or perhaps because, Arthur was the thread of continuity, and might even be the core of truth”(186-7).

“Waldo’s is a polished, metallic surface, impermeable to others, whether in the community or the family”(Walsh, 93). He can’t commune with his father, “Sitting in the train Waldo suddenly looked straight into his father’s face....Waldo might have leant back to continue the escape he had made, if his clothes tightening hadn’t constrained him, together with the fear that freedom might be the equivalent of isolation. So that in the end he would have liked to touch his father’s goodness, but could only be touched by it”(79). Similarly, “Mrs. Poulter was one of the fifty-seven things and persons Waldo hated”(58). His passionate loathing becomes in White’s prose a laughably precise and constractive tabulation that lumps inanimate things and people in a way that imbues the comic with pathos. Even his curious relationship with Arthur as a child was half histrionic, half natural - “So they moved through the landscape of boyhood, two figures seen at a distance, or too close up...he learned to give them what they wanted. Occasionally, in passing, after returning the scones to the table, he would very carefully brush the crumbs which had fallen on Arthur’s knees, with a candid though ostentatious charity which moved the observer - as well as the performer”(75-6). Even when he contemplates marriage to Dulcie just prior to anticlimactically finding her with Arthur, he figures most prominently in his considerations:

Waldo went over the way in which he would benefit by marriage with Dulcie. On the financial side they might have to skimp a bit at first, because he would refuse to touch anything Dulcie brought with her until he proved himself as a husband. Nobody would be in a position to say theirs was not an idealistic marriage...Then the home. Undoubtedly he would benefit by having a home of his own. A bed to himself....But it was his work which would benefit most. The atmosphere in which to evolve a style. The novel of psychological relationships in a family, based on his own experience for truth, illuminated by what his imagination would infuse. One of the first things he intended to do was buy a filing cabinet to install in his study. (149-150)
His colleagues - Miss Glasson, Cornelius and Parslow - at the library too are repulsed - as he keeps up the pretense that marks the dichotomy of his split existence:

Because Mr. Brown of the intellectual breathers in the Botanic Gardens must never be confused with the subfusc, almost abstract figure, living on top of a clogged greasetrap, and the moment of creative explosion, under the arches of yellow grass, down Terminus Road. Waldo Brown, in whom these two phenomena met on slightly uneasy terms...looking out from behind his barricade of words and perceptions... his less approachable self.... So Waldo, who was in frequent demand, continued to refuse, on principle, by formula.

To submit himself to the ephemeral, the superficial relationships might damage the crystal core holding itself in reserve for some imminent moment of higher idealism. Just as he had avoided fleshly love – while understanding its algebra, of course – the better to convey eventually its essence. (183)

Thelma Herring feels, “The novelist systematically undermines all Waldo’s pretensions, and his final judgement on him, conveyed through the dog’s symbolic mutilation of his corpse, could not be harsher: yet the reader who remembers the all-too-human embarrassment of the young Waldo, writhing under the physical protection of his imbecile brother, the diffident warnings of his unworldly father, the patronage of the wealthy Mrs. Musto, is likely to retain for him, even in his desiccated and self-cherishing old age, some grains of sympathy that may soften without fundamentally changing the verdict that White clearly invites us to make” (Herring, 75).

3.2.2 Arthur

The intensity of Arthur’s vision creates for him his own mystical drama, until he is lost in its many rich moments. He lives out a vivid individual life. White attempts to show the failure to combine two ways of seeing and hence of life into one complete whole through Arthur and his brother. Failure to reconcile and integrate their differences results in an intense love-hate relationship. Even though the twins are, as the blurb says, “two people living one life. .... They shared everything – except their view of things. Waldo, with his intelligence, saw everything and understood little. Arthur was the fool who didn’t bother to look. He understood.” Arthur is vignetted as a holy fool that is judged by all, save perhaps Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter, as a madman. Paradoxically, Arthur’s outer seeming derangement bespoke of mystical intimation within.

Presented as a sort eccentric seer that sees into the heart of the matter, his inner life merges memory, creative memory and the present in a soft-edged shifting pattern in which the motif of the mandala stands out. His character is developed by sacramental images and sibylline language redolent of a luminous vision. Wordlessly, because he finds that language can be a menace alienating even those whose lives are intertwined inextricably.

‘Words are not what make you see.’
 ‘I was taught they were,’ Waldo answered in hot words.
 ‘I dunno,’ Arthur said, ‘I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I’ve learnt.’ (56)

He smiled, though for all those pairs of twins with no word between them to express the truth. (280)

But language and its reified form of art do have meaning and immense potential in his schema. During his encounter with a piqued Waldo who feels threatened to see his ‘dill’ brother at the library encroaching on what he has come to deem his domain
of words, language and literature, Waldo asks in jealous exasperation of Arthur who has been explaining his difficulties with *The Brothers Karamazov*:

What will it do for you? To understand? The Grand Inquisitor?...

‘I could help people,’ Arthur said, beginning to devour the words. (199)

Knowledge is not a source of self-congratulation or for superior perception for Arthur, but a means of altruism and selflessness, of responsibility. This perception also defines what Arthur considers the purpose of writing and its subjects. When he tells Waldo he should write about Len Saporta the reason he gives is that, “simple people are somehow more... transparent... you can see right into them. Then you can write about them... it doesn’t matter what you write about, provided you tell the truth about it”(29). According to Rodney Edgecombe, Arthur’s is not an esoteric closed notion of literature like his brother’s, but a more mimetic view, utilitarian and socially relevant as opposed to self-justifying culture or egoistically self-expressive aesthetics (Edgecombe, 75).

He seems to be positing a transparent nature in opposition to a nature that contrives to be opaque with screens of privacy and pride. After Waldo’s gruesome death, Arthur returns to the Library in the course of his confused ramblings and realizes that life has taught him more than literature can.

he squared his shoulders, he put on the cloak of an air, and swirled inside the Public Library, squelching over the polished rubber, trailing his identity round the room in which he had begun the struggle to find it. If he no longer felt moved to take down a book, it was because in the end knowledge had come to him, not through words, but lightning. (307)

White in *Flaws in the Glass*, admits he has come to believe that truth may be “the property of silence – at any rate the silences filling the space between words”, over which he only “sometimes” has control (1981: 42).

Through understanding and identifying with others he shows a capacity to love which is not mawkish as the hieratic elements in his character are emphasized. The spontaneous and unaffected profound inner tranquility of the supposed ‘imbecile’ rejoices in the palpable actuality of common life and communicates the intimations of other realities which lie locked within quotidian experience. William Walsh notes that the societal response to Arthur’s simplemindedness, varies between the horror of worried parents when Arthur is young – ‘I warn yer, Mr. Brown,” Mr. Haynes was saying, and his usually jolly chins were compressed, “you’ll have to restrain him. Yer don’t realise a big lump of a boy like that can turn violent. In his condition. It’s hard, I know, for the parents to see.’(47) – to the exaggerated bonhomie of the men hiding their embarrassment at the Speedex Service Station when Arthur is old – ‘Hi, mate! Hi, Arthur! How’s the Brown Bomb?’(59)(Walsh, 88-89). Arthur has as his creed the trust of everyday tangibles:

Arthur eventually added Mr. Allwright to what he knew as truest: to grain in wood, to bread broken roughly open, to cow-pats, neatly freshly dropped. If he did not add Mrs. Allwright it was because she did not fit into that same world of objects, she never became distinct, she was all ideas, plots and tempers. In myth of life, he never ever took to Hera. (227)

His is the arena of simple, down-to-earth practical abilities – milking the cow, making bread, and enjoying his work as a delivery boy with the Allwrights. He is good with animals, has a prodigious gift for sums, an openness and unaffected candor which enamour him to Dulcie Feinstein, Mrs. Poulter and his mother. He empathizes and emotes with others genuinely. William Walsh comments, “Arthur passes almost effortlessly into the lives and feelings of others, but he is entranced by the images of
these as he is infatuated with the glints and clouds and lights in his glass marbles" (Walsh, 92-3).

Ken Goodwin feels that Waldo's "sterile, jaundiced view of life is balanced by Arthur's. Confused and inarticulate, he nevertheless has a radiant goodness and insight that are represented by his four mandala-like marbles. He realizes that most of those around him cannot appreciate them or their meaning, that 'It was himself who was and would remain, the keeper of the mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light.' The struggle to guess their meaning is symbolized by the 'red gold disc of the sun', which he strives to hold, but also by the icebergs, that 'moaned and jostled one another, crunching and tinkling... to splinter into glass balls which he gathered in his protected hands'" (Goodwin, 173). Arthur's solid mandala is a symbol or image for his insight and need for an encompassing totality. Walsh remarks, "Arthur contemplates his marble almost in a religious sense, seeing in it mysteries, realities, symbols and significances - an endless range of reality enclosed in a miniature universe" (Walsh, 92).

After seeing a performance of Gotterdammerung, he wonders "Who and where are the gods? He could not have told, but knew, in his flooded depths" (217). The question of god is one of the thematic preoccupations of the book worked out extensively through the persona of Arthur at several narrative junctures. Thelma Herring notes, "Brought up by parents who are conscientious unbelievers, Arthur is untroubled by religious questions until in old age he becomes perplexed by the problem of pain and the Christian emphasis on "the blood and the nails", and begins the search for his identity, which he finds, however, "not through words, but by lightning". To Dulcie Feinstein, with whom he experiences spiritual union, he is the instrument through whom her dying father is reunited to God; and to Mrs. Poulter...he becomes the object of faith when her God is brought crashing down by the shock of the discovery of Waldo's defiled body" (Herring, 78). Mrs. Poulter is restating the message of the text's epigraphs and perhaps of Arthur's very persona when she declares, "This man would be my saint...if we could still believe in saints. Nowadays...we've only men to believe in. I believe in this man" (214). McCulloch concurs, "Arthur the Divine fool, the holy idiot, is developed to bring forth, by means of contrast with Waldo, the concept of the sterility of the intellect when it is divorced from the spirit and from love" (McCulloch, 39).

His faith and love however cannot redeem his alter ego. He realizes, "Waldo had always hated people, but always rather, well, as a joke. Waldo had done his block at Arthur, but always more or less as a brother. Till it was made plain as a bedstead that the life, the sleep they had shared, must have been jingling brassily all those years with the hatred which only finally killed" (305). Waldo's death is a revelation about their relationship, but it also cuts Arthur loose. "All his family gone, he was threatened with permanent manhood" (306).

McCulloch argues, "It is important to realize that neither Arthur or Waldo can exist as a whole individual without the other. Consequently there is a logical reason for Arthur ending up in a "nut house" at Waldo's death.... Waldo should not be viewed merely as a character who exists as a contrast to the true seeker, Arthur. It is through the form and structure of "Waldo's section" that we can understand "Arthur's section". Although structured separately the two parts interact, and the interdependence of the two sections reflects the necessary interdependence of the two brothers" (McCulloch, 50).

### 3.3 CIRCLES OF EXISTENCE

The other denizens in the world of The Solid Mandala constitute the web of interactions that frame the lives and thoughts of the Brown brothers. They are
sparingly etched and our perception of them is deeply colored by the personas that filter through the consciousness of the two brothers. White, in this novel, employs a combination of indirect and direct modes of characterization. In the indirect mode of characterization, the traits and thoughts of a character are revealed through an omniscient narrator who seems to have complete access to the thoughts and actions of the character or through what other characters in the novel think or say about the character concerned. In the direct mode of characterization, the reader is allowed to draw his own conclusions from the concerned character’s actions and words. Thus the characters are constructed, as much by their actions or words as how those actions are perceived by the slightly veiled omniscient narrator. For the sake of analysis, I have divided some of the remaining characters in the text into two categories—the inner circle of Mrs. Poulter, Mrs. and Mr. Brown who have the most direct contact with the twins; the outer circle of other people who appear in the novel and frame some of its perspectives.

3.3.1 The Inner Circle

Mrs. Poulter is revealed as an ordinary suburban housewife in the first section, ‘In the Bus’. Portrayed with a degree of condescension reflected off the perceptions of the supercilious Waldo and patronizing Mrs. Brown in the second section, the final two sections filtered through the consciousness of Arthur and the narrator add dimensions of unsuspected mysticism to her portrayal.

She is initially established as a sympathetic character when she defends the twin brothers from Mrs. Dun’s disapproval of their holding hands and Mr. Poulter’s denigrating references to them. “Attempts on herself seldom hurt Mrs. Poulter; it was the attacks on other people. The Mister Browns, for instance. Unable to decide how they might be protected she would take them a baked custard. And return the better for it”(18). Though no intellectual, her unaffected simplicity and openness allows her to comfortably talk to and enlighten Arthur. Filtered through the disdainful perspective of Waldo, this translates differently – “Arthur...loved to talk to Mrs. Poulter. He loved to ask her questions, and Mrs. Poulter, curiously enough, although an inalterably stupid creature, usually seemed to find an answer”(61). Thelma Herring comments on the function of such focalization within the text. “That Mrs. Poulter, through her simple humanity that enables her to find answers to Arthur’s questions and respond to his goodness with affection, can earn a mandala and burn with Arthur “in a fit of understanding or charity”(p. 310) seems to imply that a measure of illumination is attainable by most people”(Herring, 81).

Her portrayal oscillates between the mundane and the quasi-mystic. She is the lonely, sixty-seven year old housewife “who still liked a bit of colour” and takes great pleasure in her new “watermelon cardigan” (296). When she remembers that she had not seen the Brown brothers, curiosity and subterfuge coalesce in her special brand of good naturedness. “It was a Saturday afternoon, when Mrs. Poulter, trying to mind her own business, failing to outstare the hedge opposite, decided to bake a nice custard. After all, someone could be sick, and the neighbourliness was another thing to curiosity”(301). Thus, it is that she discovers the sordid and mutilated corpse of Waldo which shakes her faith and sense of secure distance.

Until then she had clung to “faith, which her husband Bill didn’t altogether approve of, but it was what she was brought up to, if she didn’t always understand, but hoped to in time, not through the ministers, she would never of dared ask, but somehow. She had her Lord Jesus”(298). However, after she sees the desecrated Waldo, Armageddon is unleashed and her iconization of Christ is shown to be insubstantial, “And He released His Hand from the nails. And fell down, in a thwack of canvas, a cloud of dust”(303). Arthur becomes the testament of a more vital faith. “Since her Lord and master Jesus had destroyed himself that same day, she had been given this man-child as a token of everlasting life”(312). Her discovery that “we’ve only men to believe in”, echoes the sentiment of the epigraphs to the novel. The novel closes with
The parents of the twins are largely narratively mediated by the gossipy exchange between Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun in the first section, and then by their sons' points of view in the central sections. We learn their social value for the gossiping women comes from their being bonafide English in origin - having "come out from Home...when the boys were only bits of kids"(15), - and the material wellbeing indicated by their house having a veranda. The hint of class superiority connoted at by Mr. Brown being a white-collar worker who works at a bank and reads books in his spare time is neutralized for them by Mrs. Poulter's, “Mr. Brown senior was a gentleman...[b]ut not any better than us”(15). It's an introduction that tells us as much about the speakers as the spoken.

A shy bookish bank clerk and renegade Baptist, Mr. Brown, is described as a man of principle and kindness by his wife on his demise. He had a taste for, but not the circumstances for an intellectual life. He insists on having a Greek pediment in the classical style on his roof and attempts to learn Norwegian to read Ibsen in the original. The image Waldo paints of him is of a conscientious bank clerk dulled by entrapment in a life of mechanical alienation.

It was, he thought, the occasion of their last visit to the bank as children, that Waldo noticed his father looking out from the cage in which he stood. Their father's eyes were brown, which Arthur had inherited. Their father's stare was at that moment directed outward, and not...Suddenly his shoulders hunched, to resist it seemed, compression by the narrow cage, his eyes were more deeply concentrated on some invisible point. More distinctly even than the morning he found their father dead Waldo would remember the morning of their last visit to the bank. (54)

The effete and pallid character of Mr. Brown is drawn with a measure of delicate compassion. Enervated he lives a life of silent disappointment and mild self-delusion.

After he retired, Dad would sometimes recall...his escape by way of Intellectual Enlightenment, and the voyage to Australia, ... but in the telling, he would grow darker rather than enlightened, his breathing thicker, clogged with the recurring suspicion that he might be chained still. (145)

Anne Brown, is the product of a colonial upper-class milieu. Mrs. Poulter in describing the Browns says, “Mr. Brown was a good man. Now Mrs. Brown...she was always doing a favour. Even to her husband. She was good too mind you, but she never stopped letting you see she had thrown herself away”(16). Proud of her Quantrell heritage she proves an indelible and mildly baleful influence. Having "Married Beneath Her"(35) she manages to cling to vestiges of bygone days and mores even as she copes with the realities of working class life in Australia. There is in her the aloofness of gentility bruised, a screen for the humiliation of her simpleton son, decline in status and polite poverty. Self-deception is another psychological defense she employs. Waldo recounts, “Mother never grew disappointed to the same extent, because if she wanted to, she could dare the truth to be the truth. For a long time after everyone else realized, she persuaded herself Arthur was some kind of genius waiting to disclose himself. But Dad was not deceived” (35). Even when her husband dies and she has to deign to use Mrs. Poulter's phone to call the doctor, divested of spontaneity there is sense of put on theatre in her reaction, an emotional legacy she leaves Waldo:
Waldo followed her because she was technically their mother. Whereas their mother crossed Terminus Road because she was their father's widow.

... 'It's my husband, Mrs. Poulter. I should like to ring for the doctor. If you will allow me. Though we must realise nothing can be done.'

Her pure, inherited voice erected a barrier not only between herself and Mrs. Poulter, but those she had conceived in an adulterated tradition. Though Waldo could imitate voices, even adapt himself to situations, if they didn't threaten to extinguish his individuality.... After briefly rehearsing the part, he was running springily in, ignoring Bill Poulter in his own house. (72)

As she aged, sinking into querulous and at times imperious inebriation, the pinched gentility barely softened. Decrepit, in a tipsy moment, she asks Arthur if he feels she has failed him, only to turn back from the moment of revelation. 'No!' she said, quickly in her own defense. 'Don't tell me! Nobody normal ever enjoyed settling their accounts...Nobody likes to be told. That they have got a spot. On their nose. On the night of the ball' (271).

Assessing them William Walsh concludes, "Nourished by the most anaemic of abstractions of high-minded rationalism and genteel socialism the Brown parents live a dully desperate life, balancing in the air - just - their hopeless aspirations, their painful memories, their present disappointments, their insoluble problems with the twins. ... Each in his limited way is a good person, each is a failure, each inadequate for the strains put on them" (Walsh, 91).

3.3.2 The Outer Circle

The outer circle of characters in The Solid Mandala holds an assortment of people. Most of them are marked as inhabitants of 'the Great Australian Emptiness'. Mrs. Dun's is a mundane existence untouched by the need to seek meaning and vitiated by concerns of society and the flesh. The narrator comments on her relationship with Mrs. Poulter: "The private life of other parties act as the cement of friendship. The Brother's Brown could be about to set the friendship of the friends" (14-15). In the text, she is early established as an unsympathetic character when she disapproves of the Brown brothers holding hands and predicts something horrible will happen. Curiously throughout the opening section, she dwells on the possibility that "they could come and murder you in broad daylight" (14) or that a hedge like the Browns have might be a hindrance "when someone's got you by the throat" (15) almost prefiguring the gory denouement of the narrative.

The pragmatic quotidian existence of Mr. Poulter too eschews the need for seeking deeper meaning in life. He is portrayed as a representative of the phlegmatic dailiness of life. Going by his wife's account, apparently the war changed and hardened him. He describes the brothers as "A couple of no-hopers with ideas about 'emselves'" (18). He functions as a foil and context for the delineation of Mrs. Poulter. Just as the Feinsteins, who with their Jewish cultivation and intelligence, allow White to generate superb social comedy from the encounter between the callow twins and the sophisticated but gentle family. Others like Waldo's colleagues at the Municipal Library, the Allwrights who kept the shop Arthur worked in, and the rich eccentric Mrs. Musto form the backdrop of humanity against which Waldo and Arthur are delineated and live out their destinies.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have been shown that White's characters function within a narrative paradigm that seeks to rise above realism. As a result, at times they seem flat and
forced by certain modes of critical assessment. This however, can and has been
defended by using alternative frames of reference. The narrative agenda to reach at
the core of human reality and White’s mythopoeic conceptualization of the nature of
that core, frame and determine the light in which he depicts his characters, as does the
perspective through which they are focalized.

### 3.5 QUESTIONS

1. What is your assessment of Patrick White’s characterization with reference to
   *The Solid Mandala*?

2. Compare and contrast the characterization of Waldo and Arthur Brown.
   How does White use his characters as vehicles for the novel’s themes?

### 3.6 GLOSSARY

- **Armageddon**: A Biblical reference to the scene of the last deciding battle between good and evil
- **Brothers Karamozov**: The final novel of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, it presents a search for faith, for God as its central idea. The famous ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ embodies and dramatizes Ivan’s repudiation of God. In *The Solid Mandala* the novel becomes a signifier of Arthur’s ability to appreciate literature of this calibre and the questions it raises
- **Dill**: Slang for mentally retarded
- **Gotterdammerung**: A music drama by Wagner, which concludes with the end of the gods being marked by the crashing of the beams and rafters at Walhalla. The drama is used in the novel to bring to the fore Arthur’s first inklings of interest in spiritual questions.
- **Greek pediment**: An ornamental triangular roof structure over a doorway; in the text it is symbolic of Mr. Brown’s slightly misplaced taste for what is classical and intellectually superior.
- **Manichean opposition**: Binary opposition between two quantities seen as being in complete contrast to one another
- **Mythopoeic**: Relating to the creation of myths or a mythic framework for a literary work

### 3.7 REFERENCES


