UNIT 4 MESSAGES IN MOTIFS

Structure
4.0 Objectives
4.1 Androgyny Motif
4.2 Mandala Motif
4.3 Let Us Sum Up
4.4 Questions
4.5 Glossary
4.6 References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will discuss in detail two motifs that are central to the narrative. It will examine the occurrence in the text of the androgyny and mandala motifs and some implications they have for the interpretation of the novel.

4.1 ANDROGYNY MOTIF

The allusions to Tiresias and the hermaphrodite Adam are the strongest manifestations of the androgynous figure in the text. A weaker version of this motif is seen in textual representations of transvestitism. "The union of opposites, a distinctive feature of many of White's novels, here takes the image of androgyny, the attraction-repulsion relationship of the twins for each other" (Goodwin, 173).

Androgynous figures in the novel can be read as symbols of wholeness and inextricable connection.

When Mr. Brown asks the young Arthur if there is "any character, any incident, that appeals" to him from his reading of Greek Myths, Arthur answers 'Tiresias' but knows he can not explain the full intensity of his feelings.

They would laugh to be told how shocked he was for Tiresias when Zeus took away his sight at the age of seven - seven -for telling people things they shouldn't know. So Arthur kept quiet. He was only surprised they didn't notice how obviously his heart was beating when Zeus rewarded Tiresias with the gift of prophesy and a life seven times as long as the lives of ordinary men. Then there was that other bit, about being changed into a woman, if only for a short time. Time enough, though to know it wasn't all that different. (224)

To Arthur, then, Tiresias is a motif of the visionary who 'sees' and is confusingly punished for it. There is a measure of personal identification implied in the palpitation he experiences. Tiresias points to the fate of the visionary for the young Arthur. At another level, the Greek figure, who had been both a male and a female in his lifetime, plays on the unifying potential of androgyny, one that is elaborated in Arthur's apprehension of the significance of the hermaphrodite Adam.

A.M. McCulloch points out that Waldo borrows Arthur's love for Tiresias for the title of his work, 'Tiresias: A Youngish Man'. However according to him, it is the more sordid aspects of Tiresias that Waldo finds a personal analogy with. "Tiresias is the character in Greek mythology who, having looked upon the lovemaking of the gods, becomes wise but blind. Waldo is given a window view of Mrs. Poulter at her
The Solid Mandala

ablutions and about to be seized by her husband”. Furthermore, McCulloch opines, it is not the androgy nous potential for understanding or totality that rubs off on Waldo, but the figure’s sterility. “Waldo, in projecting his identity into the Tiresias figure, does so with a rigidity that curtails any possible passionate expressions of life. His “creative” concerns are arid areas of grammar” observes McCulloch.

On one occasion he wrote: In the extreme of his youth, which was fast approaching, Tiresias suffered difficulties with his syntax and vocabulary, he found that words, turning to stones would sink below the surface, out of sight”
He did not care for that, but kept it. He kept everything now, out of spite for Goethe, or out of respect for posterity. (211)

McCulloch goes onto say that in contrast to this, Waldo recognized that Arthur’s poem contained “warmed stones of words”(213) and that Arthur was capable of touching the essence of tragedy that his unresolved syntax could not reach. However, this is a realization that Waldo could not admit openly; instead he calls Arthur’s poem a “disgusting blood myth”(213). Waldo attempts to accept the rationalist viewpoint towards mythology expressed by his father when reading the Greek myths to his children: “None of this is real, none of this is true”(223). He denigrates the liberating potential of myth even further by convincing himself that he’d known, right from the beginning, that “All this reading from Greek myths was really for Arthur”(33)(McCulloch, 38-9). In the end, after the near cataclysmic realization that was brought on by Waldo’s discovery of Arthur’s poem, Waldo becomes the cursed and doomed Tiresias of his plagued imagination as he prepares to burn his writing – “About four o’clock he went down, Tiresias, a thinish man, the dress-box under his arm, to the pit where they had been accustomed to burn only those things from which they could bear to be parted”.

Thus the same motif has almost dichotomous implications for the two brothers whose lives are marked by two ways of seeing the same thing. At this level the Tiresias motif becomes yet another structural element used to reinforce the paradoxically linked dichotomy of sensibility manifested by the two brothers. The other variation of this motif, the hermaphrodite Adam, emphasizes the interpenetrating destinies of the two, as opposed to their incomplete and almost impossible union.

Once while in the library as Arthur ‘wrestled with the Books’, he came upon the other motif that was to portend wholeness for him. The passage has been identified by Thelma Herring to have been taken out of Jung’s Psychology and Alchemy (Herring, 80).

On one occasion, in some book, he came across a message. Pinned to the back of his mind, it rattled and twitched, painfully, hopefully, if obscure:

As the shadow continually follows the body of one who walks in the sun, so our hermaphrodite Adam, though he appears in the form of a male, nevertheless carries about with him Eve, or his wife, hidden in his body.

...And if one wife, why not two? Or three? He could not have chosen between them. He could not have chosen between them. He could not sacrifice his first, his fruitful darling, whose mourning even streamed with a white light. Nor the burnt flower-pots, the russet apples of his second. Or did the message in the book refer, rather, to his, third veiled bride? (281)

According to Carolyn Bliss, “The implication is that Arthur, like the hermaphrodite, could embrace within his single life and being these conflicting opposites, that he could bring quaternity and sexual duality into controlled but dynamic juxtaposition which the mandala symbolizes. Arthur nearly does this, if only briefly, in the mandala dance he performs for Mrs. Poulter. In this ritual celebration of his fullness,
he dances the essence of the four beings who shape his life." (Bliss, 109) The first wife is identified with Dulcie, the second Mrs. Poulter and his veiled bride is revealed to be Waldo when the motif is repeated as Arthur leaves the library, "his shadow following him in the sun, as he carried away inside him – his brother."(285)

That both Tiresias and the hermaphrodite Adam are linked motifs with shifting emphasis is indicated when Arthur answers Waldo’s accusation that he thinks nothing and has no worries in his head thus:

‘If you want to know, I was thinking about Tiresias,' Arthur said to interest him. 'How he was changed into a woman for a short time. That sort of thing would be different, wouldn’t it from the hermaphroditic Adam who carries his wife about inside him.'(282-283)

Transvestitism is yet another manifestation of the androgynous motif. It does not however, signify a genuine wholeness but a kind of put on identity, a shadow of reality. When Waldo puts on his mother’s old dress, it is an attempt to connect with a "sense of moral proportion” and of a heritage he feels he can take pride in. He is imaginatively transformed into a personification of Memory: “although memory is the glacier in which the past is preserved, memory is also licensed to improve on life”(191-3). This trope can also be an oblique pointer to the position that identity itself is a construct. This may be significant in the light of The Twyborn Affair which has been described as “the fictional swan-song in which White mythicized his homosexuality” (Craven, 50) and employs the motif of transvestitism to denote more explicitly themes of sexual ambiguity and narcissism.

4.2 THE MANDALA MOTIF

“In its simplest form a mandala is a circle enclosing a square. While the outer circle constrains, the inner square seems to strive to escape. A solid mandala is three-dimensional; in its simplest form it is a sphere enclosing a cube. The cube, however, may add striations of color or become a randomized shape, such as one finds in glass marbles and paperweights.”(Jones, 66)

The mandala, the eponymous motif of the novel recurs throughout the narrative as a symbol of totality and wholeness, especially in a spiritual sense. The way it is used in the novel, places added emphasis on the accessibility of this completeness and its presence in the simplest and most mundane aspects of life. This is quite a displacement from its conceptualization as an esoteric and exotic Oriental religious motif. The mandala is first mentioned in the text in a typically abrasive exchange that brings out some of the tensions between the two brothers at the centre of the narrative.

‘Oh,’ cried Waldo Brown in anguish, but I have not expressed half of what it is in me to express!’
‘Don’t worry,’ he blubbered. ‘There’s time, Waldo, isn’t there? ... You can write about Mr. Saporta and the carpets, and all the fennel down the side roads.’
Just then that Mr. Dun straightened amongst the stakes up which he had been coaxing up his peas. He looked away quickly though, from what he saw. Waldo Brown saw a small mean face recognizing.
.... ‘One of the carpets had,’ Arthur whimpered, ‘right in the centre, what I would say was a mandala.’
Waldo could not walk too fast. He had hoped originally for intellectual companions with whom to exchange the Everyman classics and play Schubert after tea.
‘Come on!’ he mumbled
He hated his brother. (30)
The Solid Mandala

The sterile and subjectless Waldo excludes Arthur from intellectual equality with him and Arthur's suggestions are only met with bitterness and the discontent. Waldo feels he is being made a spectacle of in public and as a result responds to Arthur not with quietude but taunting asperity. In many senses this passage is a capsule of the text's tensions. The tension between the intellectually inaccessible or aloof and the inspiration immanent in quotidian realities as well as mundane personalities. The motif attempts to hold both these in one entity, resolving the tension into a wholeness.

The motif appears or is chronologically prefigured in the narrative in the child Arthur's fascination during their cruise from England with "the red gold disc of the sun". Arthur ran to the rails only to be pulled back and told he might fall into the sea and "be lost forever" by his mother.

He looked at her and said: "Yes, I might. For ever."
Feeling the cold circles eddying out and away from him. (215)

The words describing the waves evoke a vignette of receding mandalas, as if symbolic of the possibility for totality reflected in everything. Again they reappear in his desire to see the icebergs which appear only in his dreams:

Only in sleep the icebergs moaned, and jostled one another, crunching and tinkling. The moons of sky-blue ice fell crashing silently down to splinter into glass balls which he gathered in his protected hands. Somehow at least he knew from the beginning he was protected. (218)

When he is a schoolboy, Arthur finds solace in the marbles which become central mandalic motifs in the novel. Once again, the ordinariness of this motif is underscored in being linked to the marbles and to Arthur to whom it would easily be assumed the finer things in life were inaccessible.

He was different then, in several ways. But did not mind since he had his marbles.

However many marbles Arthur had - there were always those which got lost, and some he traded for other things - he considered four his permanencies. There were the speckled gold and the cloudy blue. There was the whorl of green and crimson circlets. There was the taw with a knot at the centre, which made him consider palming it off, until, on looking long and close, he discovered the knot was the whole point.

Of all these jewels or touchstones, talismans or sweethearts, Arthur Brown got to love the knotted one best, and for staring at it, and rubbing at it, should have seen his face inside. After he had given two, in appreciation recognition, the flawed or knotted marble became more than ever his preoccupation. But he was ready to give it, too, if he were asked. Because this rather confusing oddity was really not his own. He seemed more the coil of green and crimson circlets. (228)

The emphasis on permanence is significant. As also the knot in the marble meant for Waldo that indicates the knot of opaqueness in his nature which makes him inaccessible to others, while Arthur manifests a nature of complete openness. At times the iterative symbolism seems intrusive. Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter are given one marble each, the flawed or knotted one is intended for Waldo, rejected by him and finally lost in a dark alley after Waldo's gruesome end, the one with whorls in it is kept by Arthur. According to Ashcroft, "Arthur sees that the "flaw", the "knot" at the centre of his marble, is the "whole point". The mandala shows that man is "surrounded" by perfection in the sense that it remains the ultimate horizon of his existence, and while wholeness is unenclosable by consciousness, man "obtains" infinity when he becomes aware of its intimation in ordinary experience" (Ashcroft,
Waldo's mandala lost in a back alley the night of his death thus, becomes an
image of unrealized hope.

There are also variations on the mandala motif that interpretations have thrown up.
For example, William Walsh posits, "Waldo sees himself as a crystal core to be held
in reserve. Arthur's favourite glass marble, susceptible to light and touch, the image
of the depths and contradictions of human nature, as it exists in the community, in the
family, in a pair of friends, or lovers, or brothers, or in the single individual and
stirred soul that Waldo and Arthur together compose" (Walsh, 96). Similarly, Ken
Goodwin comments, "His 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). The realization that the nature of
the mandala he held made them open to misinterpretation as 'simply marbles' and
him as just 'simple' was not lost on Arthur who strove to protect the mandalas and
their observers from the crassness of such observations. He realizes he cannot force
his vision upon others, least of all his own brother. The mystery and magic of the
mandalic marbles were safeguarded by him, preserved for people and relationships
that would honor their value and be touched by their totality.

Messages in Motifs

Sometimes ... he took out those marbles left over from the school yard. Not
to play with. It had developed into something more serious than play. For the
circle of the distant mountains would close around him, the golden disc
spinning closer in the sky, as he contemplated the smaller sphere lying on the
palm of his hand.
He would put it away quickly, though, on hearing anyone approach from
behind. He was less afraid of theft, or even total destruction, than he was of
damage by scorn. (233)

To Arthur the marbles become symbols of momentary centrality and meaning that
keep gaining significance with time. "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) This is
reinforced by the text's allusions to Jung's concept of mandalic totality. Arthur
stumbles upon this textual validation of what he had always known when he is
visiting Mrs. Musto's house. Arthur read from the encyclopedia of Mrs. Musto's
husband Ralph:

'The Mandala is a symbol of totality. It is believed to be the "dwelling of the
god". Its protective circle is a pattern of order super-imposed on -- psychic
-- chaos. Sometimes its geometric form is seen as a vision (either waking or in
a dream) or --'
His voice had fallen to the most elaborate hush.
'Or danced,' Arthur read. (238)

This brings out the validity of this personal vision to mankind at large and prepares us
for the dance which has like Jung's mandala four corners to himself. He asks his
father what the meaning of totality is, and Mr. Brown can only fumble with a
dictionary meaning which made Arthur realize "Dad would never know, any more
than Waldo. It was himself who was, and would remain, the keeper of mandalas, who
must guess their final secret through touch and light"(240). The motif is brought to a
sort of climax in Arthur's mandalic dance.
So Arthur Brown danced, beginning at the first corner, from which he would proceed through stages to the fourth, and beyond....

In the first corner, as a prelude to all that he had to reveal, he danced the dance of himself. Half clumsily, half electric. He danced the gods dying on a field of crimson velvet, against the discords of human voices. Even in the absence of gods, his life, or dance, was always prayerful. Even though he hadn’t been taught, like the grocer, to go down on his knees and stick his hands together. Instead, offering his prayer to what he knew from light or silences. He danced the sleep of sleep, their secrets locked prudenty up, safe, until their spoken thoughts or farts, gave them away. He danced the moon, anaesthetized by bottled cestr um. He danced the disc of the orange sun above icebergs, which was in a sense his beginning, and should perhaps be his end....

In the second corner he declared his love for Dulcie Feinstein, and for her husband, by whom, through their love for Dulcie, he was, equally possessed, so they were all three united, and their children still to be conceived. Into their corner of his mandala he wove their Star, on which their three cornered relationship was partly based. Flurries of hydrangea - headed music provided a ceremony of white notes lflatting exactly into place, and not far behind, the twisted ropes of dark music Waldo had forced on Dulcie the afternoon of strangling. There she was the bones of her, seated on the upright chair, in black. And restored to flesh by her lover’s flesh. The inextinguishable, always more revealing eyes....

... In Mrs. Poulter’s corner he danced the rite of ripening pears, and little rootling suckling pigs. Skeins of golden honey were swinging and glittering from his drunken mouth. Until he reached the stillest moment. He was the child she had never carried in the dark of her body, under her heart, from the beat of which, he was already learning what he could expect. The walls of his circular fortress shuddered...

He had begun to stamp, but bitterly rigid, in his withering. In the fourth corner, which was his brother’s, the reeds sawed at one another. There was a shuffling of dry mud, a clattering of dead flags, or papers. Of words and ideas skewered to paper. The old, bent, over-used aluminum skewers. Thus pinned and persecuted, what should have risen in pure flight, dropped to a dry twitter, a clipped twitching. He couldn’t dance his brother out of him, not fully. They were too close for it to work, closest and farthest when, with both his arms, he held them together, his fingers running with candle-wax. He could not save. At most a little comfort gushed out guiltily, from out of their double image, their never quite united figure. In that corner of the dance his anguished feet had trampled the grass into a desert.

... Till in the centre of their mandala he danced, the passion of all their lives, the blood running out the backs of his hands, water out of the hole in his ribs. His mouth was a silent hole, because no sound was needed to explain.

(265-6)

The varied symbolism of the mandala dance - the Chinese woman under the wheel tree, the evocation of the dying gods, the moon, the orange sun, the Star, the pears and pigs and golden honey, the blood of the Passion points to the truth not of any one creed but of a perennial philosophy “offering his prayer to what he knew from light and silences”(265) - are narrative resonances that make divinity seem immanent in Arthur’s very being.

According to Edgecombe, the dance begins with a Walt Whitmanesque paean to an inclusive encompassing self that brings together the formative influences in his life and conceptualization of religion. “His religion is one that transcends all religions” (Edgecombe, 84). The dying gods of Gottterdammerung are reduced to a theatrical rite, the dogmatic and formulaic creed of Mr. Allwright, the sterile and forced agnosticism of his rationalistic family and the solar and lunar portents symbolic of the mandalic wholeness. The “androgynous trinitarian unity” which includes Dulcie, her
husband and Arthur are connected by love to the former’s children yet to be conceived. Thus the second corner presents the “representatives of the continuity of life” (Edgecombe, 85). The Star of David, two triangles inverted upon each other becomes a mandallic symbol choreographing religion and unity into the dance. Mrs. Poulter’s corner “is a Keatsian hymn to ripeness” (Edgecombe, 85), it enacts and through childlike simplicity rectifies the childlessness of its medial figure. It also recalls the sterility of Waldo’s plastic doll that engendered only negative emotions of vulnerability in Mrs. Poulter. Waldo can’t be integrated as easily. “The tragedy of Waldo’s life, its meaningless and vacancy, is contained in the imagery of skewered words and of language crumpling up in sterile self-enclosure” (Edgecombe, 86). Arthur experiences a sense of failure and responsibility. Finally, there is “the coda in which the sacrifice of Christ is reenacted, fixing and steadying the four corners of the dance by its centrality, and exorcising the misery woven into the pattern, not by evading it but by transfiguring it” (Edgecombe, 86).

Edgecombe connects this to the poem of Arthur’s that precipitates the novel’s denouement. “It is finally this search for a transcendent, passionless significance in suffering that Arthur tries to convey through his poem” (Edgecombe, 86). The dance encompasses in its choreography his insights, knowledge and experience, the poem encapsulates his vision of the place of pain in human reality.

my heart is bleeding for the Viviseckshunist
Cordelia is bleeding for her father’s life
all Marys in the end bleed
but do not complane because they know
they cannot have it any other way(212)

Thelma Herring comments, “The main device for linking characters is, however, the central symbol of the novel, Arthur’s four marbles or “solid mandalas” which signify the integrity of the self. (The Sanskrit word “mandala”, denoting the ritual or magic circle used in Lamaism and in Tantric yoga as an aid to contemplation, is used to signify the self or totality.) ... But the mandala symbolism extends much further. Jung points out ... that lamaistic mandalas are based on a quaternary system (hence the number of Arthur’s marbles and the four corners of his mandala dance) and that the figure of the square often gives the idea of the house or temple – which surely explains the insistence on the shape of the Brown’s house with its Greek pediment. ... In fact, by imagery and allusion White constructs a network of mandala symbols”(Herring, 79). The wheel, the lotus, the rose (it is perhaps significant that Arthur refers to a wreath of roses framing Waldo when he puts on his mother’s dress, since this cryptically described incident seems to suggest a vain search for totality through family heritage), the Star of David which Len Saporta gives to Dulcie, the central design in Saporta’s carpet, the rock crystal, the sun, the orange colored jujubes which the orange-haired Arthur asks for are all part of this constellation of mandalic totems according to, Herring.

Some like Joseph Jones have extended the motif to the structuring of the novel as well. “The novel is divided into four parts, the first and the fourth parts framing the second and the third parts. The body of the novel consists of two long flashbacks in which the histories of the other main characters, twin brothers are explicated and dramatized both together and individually. The four-part structure and the central search for the meaning of the novel, which the novel self-consciously pursues, make it resemble a solid mandala”(Jones, 67).

4.3 LET US SUM UP

The androgyny and mandala motif recur in the novel, either directly or obliquely. Both point mainly to the theme of wholeness and the possibility of totality in this world.
4.4 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the use of Tiresias as an archetypal motif with special reference to the antithetical implications the same motif has for the two brothers in the novel.

2. How does the mandala motif work in different ways, at the level of theme and structure, in the text?

3. Discuss the effectiveness of the use of Arthur’s mandala dance in the text.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Androgynous: Possessing the underlying potential to develop both traits thought of as masculine and those thought of as feminine

Hermaphrodite: an entity in which the male and female organs are found simultaneously

Lamaism: A form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet and Mongolia

Star of David: A six-pointed star formed of two overlapping equilateral triangles; a symbol of Judaism

Transvestitism: The act of cross-dressing or dressing in the attire of the opposite gender

4.6 REFERENCES


