UNIT 5 TECHNIQUES

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you briefly to some technical aspects of the novel. It is hoped that this will make you more conscious of how the text is structured and introduce you to some stylistic interpretations of the novel. It will also help you note how White alters his techniques to achieve different effects for different characters, especially for the twin protagonists.

5.1 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

"The narrative manner of this novel is, as in all White’s major work, thick with explicit particulars. Everything is embodied and illustrated. Each shade of feeling or quirk of action is solidly realised. …The narrative technique…swoops and turns and flicks from point to point, with a logic different from simple sequence.”, comments William Walsh. He goes on to draw comparisons between White’s narrative technique and D.H. Lawrence’s formulations on “the movement of the emotional mind” which speaks of how “…the mind makes curious swoops and circles. It touches the point of pain or interest, then swoops and circles, coils round and approaches again the point of pain or interest…” In the text, for example, the frame narrative for the ‘Waldo’ section is constituted by a walk the brothers take on Waldo’s suggestion. The same walk during which Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter had seen them in the opening section. Arthur proposes that if they hang around they might meet Mrs. Poulter and walk together to the bus. Waldo refuses the suggestion but the reference to Mrs. Poulter sets off a train of reminisces that go back to his childhood memories. The narrative from there moves back and forth between the walk and snatches from the past – for Waldo, mostly memories tinged with pain and humiliation. Walsh continues, “In The Solid Mandala the procedure is one of shading and emphasis, of varying the point of entrance and sweeping backwards and forwards in a way which impresses the reader as a composition rather than a linear progress.”(Walsh, 86-87)

Walsh’s observations apply more to the ‘Waldo’ section which constitutes the bulk of the text than to the ‘Arthur’ section which is more linear in its narrative progression. In fact Arthur’s narrative opens with an “In the beginning there was the sea…”(215) with its Biblical intonations echoing the opening words of the book of Genesis. Carolyn Bliss too discusses White’s technique of producing an “evocative blending of a novel’s themes and motifs in a single scene, a practice which seems to owe as much to music as to literature.” She cites one of the best examples for this as coming
"from The Solid Mandala, for, in Arthur’s mandalic dance, imagistic motifs associated with each major character and with several thematic concerns are counterpointed in a comprehensive pattern which centres the novel’s meaning in a possible order, harmony and wholeness” (Bliss, 198-9). To bring out the hieratic nature of Arthur’s apprehension of reality, White infuses the narrative with religious allusions, quasi-sacramental motifs and a heightened sense of poetry. This is however juxtaposed with the demotic nature of the icons through which this apprehension of reality is purveyed. The demotic and hieratic, the mundane and the elevated are shown to be part of one whole.

5.2 LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

White’s style and content bespoke a new voice in the Australian canon. It was both ironical and whimsical; not to mention almost surrealist in the ‘Arthur’ section. The novel, The Solid Mandala, is a minor epic about common life infused with the mystical lyricism and pulsating prose poetry of the ‘Arthur’ section. The thick texture in the idiom is evocative of character and social ambience in the narrative framework. William Walsh discusses White’s use of language in the context of the rest of his oeuvre: “To go from Riders in the Chariot to The Solid Mandala (1966), is to move from a novel which is spacious and inclusive to one in which the field of action is confined, in which the language is more abstinent, the metaphorical habit less florid, the manner altogether trimmer and sharper….This spare novel – spare by Patrick White’s standards, that is – is one of the most beautifully organized of White’s works and one marked by an unusual blend of inwardness and control, life and impersonality” (Walsh, 85).

The use of alternative techniques to portray the twins at the centre of the narrative’s dialectic continues at the level of the stylistic and figurative use of language as well. A.M. McCulloch notes how “White describes Waldo with a language that matches the character’s primness, neatness and love of order” (McCulloch, 48). Waldo is etched, with limpid precision of the prose, as a man whose “thin, male steps crunched. He walked primly, in the sound of his oilskin, planning in advance where to put his feet” (27). When he had worked at the Sydney Municipal Library for a while he consciously projected the image of “the neat, the conscientious type, tie knotted rather small, the expanding arm-bands restraining the sleeves of his poplin shirt” (69). He is repetitively described in strong olfactory imagery as being aware of the smell of mucus in his own nostrils, rotting wood and cold fungus (26-7, 56) and in the library of decaying, aged flesh (121).

Thelma Herring warns against seeing the recurrent mordant imagery of the ‘Waldo’ section as all pervasive as “in Arthur’s part the prose is free of it but is rich in images of religious associations” (Herring, 74). She notes however, that “Traversing most of the twins’ life-span of seventy-years, from the time when their parents bring them from England as small children, the story is from one point of view a chronicle of senescence and decay. Both parents die, the weatherboard house that George Brown has built for himself on arrival begins to disintegrate, the young quince trees become wormy and woody, the sea of grass encroaches more and more, the young dogs, like the brothers themselves, grow old and feeble: in Waldo’s part, startling images of squallor and decay (mice nesting in burst leather chair, mutton fat curdling in skeins, and so on enforce the impression of lives petering out in sterile loneliness (but also reflect the mental obliquity of Waldo)” (Herring, 74). This is shown to be a matter of Waldo’s perspective and the point of view he brings to bear on life. The images are indicative of Waldo’s spiritual decay and enervation.

McCulloch commenting on the sensuous imagery used in association with Arthur says, “Arthur seems to be the essence of the senses themselves. White communicates this by descriptions of Arthur which are markedly different in texture from those...
The Solid Mandala

reserved for Waldo.” Arthur is able to hear and “see in advance the splotches of sound” (232); he “would roll on his seat in time with the buggy long before its motion called for it” (234); can “smell the smell of cold mud” (246) and “sing shapeless songs” (251). “The language used for the “Arthur section” succeeds in interrelating the senses when touching the world” (McCulloch, 34). As in the case of Waldo, these images reflect Arthur’s character and the way in which he frames reality.

Moving to a more general apprehension of how the book uses figurative language, Carolyn Bliss offers an interesting intervention on the subject. “White sometimes fashions a continuum of imagery, from the ant on the pavement to the sun in the sky, which sets man as a middle term and suggests that all share the same vital impulse. Alternately, actions may illuminate each other by their contiguity. For example, in The Solid Mandala, Mrs. Feinstein tells Arthur and Waldo about visiting her European relatives:

‘I don’t know what Daddy would have to say to so much Jewish emotionalism. I was thankful we did not have him with us, either in Paris or Milan. Poor things, they are devout.’ Mrs. Feinstein smiled for the sick, though it could have been she enjoyed the illness. ‘Of course we did whatever was expected of us while we were there. We did not have the heart to tell them we have given up all such middle-aged ideas, to conform,’ she said, ‘to conform with the spirit of progress. Daddy, I am afraid, who is more forceful in his expression, would have offended.’

After that she disappeared, trailing the outdoor coat she was wearing. It was so out of place. It was so shapeless it might have been inherited. (p. 132)

Simply by appending the trailed, ‘inherited’ coat to Mrs. Feinstein’s smugly modern point of view, White comments ironically on her hope that the inheritance of faith may be discarded. At the same time, the repetition of the word ‘conform’ suggests that her modernism reflects nothing more than capitulation to a new kind of pressure” (Bliss, 198). Such subtle use of imagery infuses the text with nuances that can be picked up only with multiple and careful reading, as well as creative interpretation. As in the case of Arthur’s marbles, it involves seeing the possibilities of the putatively mundane.

5.3 MYTH, SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY

Patrick White’s avowed desire to rise above realistic writing and discover the poetry and mystery encapsulated in ordinary lives has made him extensively use mythopoeic elements in his works. His works embody a structure or framework linked to myths and parallel motifs. The Solid Mandala is no exception, though how exactly he has employed these elements and to what effect remains a matter of interpretation. He has drawn on Christian motifs, beginning with the Adam and Eve motif in The Tree of Man right through to the crucifixion motif in Riders in the Chariot. Marshall Best sees a continuation of this trend in his interpretation of the relationship of the two brothers. “In The Solid Mandala, still absorbed with aspects of the problem of personal identity, he tried out his own version of the Cain and Abel legend in a story of two contemporary brothers” (Best, 692). Patricia Morely interprets that same relationship as allegory. “On the allegorical level there is the further connotation of the mystery of the relationship between man’s body and soul, identified with Arthur and self-will, identified with Waldo” (Morley, 5).

Equally significant is White’s ability to invest an ambience of myth and cosmic symbolism replete with allusions to many kinds of religions - ancient, modern, Eastern, Western around the most mundane of situations. Life itself becomes a series of epiphanic moments for Arthur. For example, when Arthur delivers groceries, Mrs. Feinstein offers him lemonade and asks him to “drink it slowly and concentrate” so
he can “extract the prana from this lemonade”(241). Some of this is again a matter of interpretation and having an eye for details. For example Walsh says, “The bus journey has in it a certain ritual quality, as though the two ladies were not only beating the bounds of the terrain of the novel but defining its sensibility”(Walsh, 85). Similarly, Thelma Herring comments, “The symbolic use of physical characteristics is in fact a marked feature of the novel. Arthur’s brown eyes link him not only with his gentle father but also with Dulcie, Len Saporta, and their children... while Waldo with his ‘inherited eyes’, pale and cold. is linked with the mother whose aristocratic connections fascinate him, and feels an affinity with other blue-eyed people’(Herring, 79).

5.4 HUMOUR AND SATIRE

In dealing with the serious themes he has in hand Patrick White lapses into the humorous mode very subtly and across a wide range, if at all. There is the social satire of the portrayal of the petty materialism and shallow perspectives of ordinary Sarsaparillites like Mrs. Dun. There is the homely humour of the lesser local characters like the eccentric Mrs. Musto or the snobbish Miss Dallimore when they come to tea with the Browns. There is the element of social comedy in the awkward visits of the brothers to the Feinstein with Waldo desperately trying to maintain a facade of pseudo-respectability and Arthur’s childish candor spoiling the intended effect. There is the confluence of rhetoric and manic utterance, as in the lemonade-prana episode when Mrs. Feinstein just afterwards adds the rationalist caveat “Of course we don’t know exactly if this is a practice which has been scientifically approved of, but it’s a nice idea, don’t you think?” The dark, almost pathetic comedy of Mr. Brown inadequately trying to tell Waldo about the facts of life and ending up telling him about precautions he should take with public lavatories.

Andrew Riemer puckishly points out that the religious intensity of Arthur is at times played out against a backdrop of suburban satire. “White spoke with many voices. What has been difficult for some to recognize is that strain of mordant comedy that accompanies many of his metaphysical peaks, enriching rather than diminishing the intensity of those moments. When Arthur Brown’s concentration on the mystery of things in The Solid Mandala is momentarily diverted by a faring dog, the indecent and the indecorum somehow allows us to accept the validity of this outrageous fable, an account of the quest for salvation in the pedestrian outer suburbs of Sydney” (in Joyce, 158-9).

5.5 VOICES

White, in the novel, employs a patois of voices and narrative points of view. The range extends from omniscient focalization, where the narrator can focalize the point of view of any character, to narration through internal point of view, presented in terms of the feelings and perceptions of characters. So most of the time, the voices are of intradiegetic narrators like Waldo, Arthur and Mrs. Dun who are personally involved in the action being narrated. This is laced with the barely distinguishable extradiegetic omniscient narrator with no involvement in the action but comments on it from the outside. The interpenetration of both points of view acts to establish balance in the composite narrative point of view. It reveals that there are ever so many stories or perspectives that emerge from an ostensibly simple single story.

Carolyn Bliss notes how shifting modes of focalization bring about shifts in our perspectives as well. “The opening section, ‘In the Bus’, consists of nervous small talk which Mrs. Poulter makes while riding the bus with her new friend Mrs. Dun.
We approach the Brown brothers as these women do, at the distance of gossip and by way of a quick glimpse from a bus window. Even the excruciatingly painful and personal events of the final section come to us filtered through the responses of others: horror and nausea of the police sergeant and his young assistant, the terror of Mrs. Dun, the ribaldry of the drunks in the alley, and the unfeeling officiousness of the librarians… In both outer sections, the reader is kept at a certain remove"(Bliss, 101-2). For the inner sections, Caroline Bliss notes, he uses “indirect discourse, in which the narrator’s voice speaks in phrases and cadences which would be used by the character, thereby disclosing feelings, values and reactions…one of White’s favorite methods for maintaining an ironic perspective on character and one of the sharpest weapons in his satiric and comedic arsenal” (Bliss, 102). There are constant shifts between authorially endorsed narrative and indirect discourse. Bliss argues that the use of indirect discourse is strategic for there is no other way to penetrate Waldo’s reserve and Arthur’s ramblings. “Because Arthur is born to his visionary status, he is subjected to very little of the irony White trains on his protagonists. Waldo, on the other hand, is treated with satire more biting and a contempt more unmitigated than any previous protagonist has undergone”(Bliss, 114).

White also reproduces the speech and thought of characters, using the colloquial idiom. The novelist’s cool ironic mocking voice is heard in comments like “The girl Dulcie was probably poor. In her pink, as opposed to white, dress. Not that he doesn’t despise Dulcie as well. In his crusade of bitterness there was only room for one ardent pauper.”(89) or “Nobody remembered her husband, or knew whether she had ordered him out of existence so that she might enjoy a breezy widowhood”(85). White never attaches himself to the flow and pulse of his character’s lives as a result of which he seems to mime their thinking at times making his explicit commentary seem even more supercilious and lacking in magnanimity especially in the case of Waldo.

In the novel, White lends Waldo his caustic wit to make judgements that characterize Waldo’s vindictive malice more than the person on whom the judgement is passed. As when Waldo finally realizes he has lost out on Dulcie and envisions her as Saporta’s wife.

He did look back just once at Mrs. Saporta, increasing, bulging, the Goddess of a Thousand Breasts, standing at the top of her stairs, in a cluster of unborn ovoid children. This giant incubator hoped she was her own infallible investment. But she would not suck him in. Imagining to hatch him out.

…So much for Dulcie Feinstein Saporta and her lust for possession.”(157)

Adrian Mitchell says that these shifts in narrative focus can be read as having a rather postmodernist effect of undermining the ‘truth’ claim of any one perspective. “Ambiguously, the story is the set of events, at yet another level the story is only a record of the set of events, an interpretation. Hence White’s fondness for alternative versions or accounts of central events - most obviously in The Solid Mandala”(Mitchell, 13). This perspective bring into play a combination of voices and points of view allowing the reader to make his or her own assessments, if at all.

5.6 TIME

“The novel swoops backwards and forwards in time… with the fleeting but severe logic of poetry or life.”(Walsh, 86) Time shows an element of repetitive frequency by which same events are narrated several times in the novel. This also falls within the postmodernist contestation of time as linear and unitary.

Carolyn Bliss offers an in-depth analysis of the deployment of the time factor in The Solid Mandala. “The ‘Waldo’ section is told largely as a series of flashbacks
stimulated by incidents that occur while the elderly brothers take their daily constitutional. This walk, which occupies nearly two thirds of the book, takes place probably only a few days or weeks before the murder attempt, with which the ‘Waldo’ section culminates. White accomplishes two things by organizing Waldo’s section in this manner. First, he gives us a sense of the stagnation in Waldo’s life: so much time, so much talk, so little motion. Waldo lodges himself in the imagination, endlessly plodding but never progressing. Secondly, because chronology is utterly disrupted, we sense the incoherence and anarchy which Waldo’s nihilism has wrought.... Narrative method here effects a kind of mimesis of the inner being....

Where the ‘Waldo’ section was disjointed, its events standing isolated and discrete, ‘Arthur’ is cohesively chronological. Even in the case of the occasional brief flashback, the relationship of events to time and to each other is preserved”(Bliss, 106). She continues, “Structurally, the novels tend towards episode and epiphany... The episodic progress of plot, interrupted by frequent and sometimes unexplained gaps in time, suggests a world in which human actions are rarely attuned to nature’s rhythmic constancy... his tendency to disrupt chronology (as in Riders in the Chariot, The Solid Mandala and A Fringe of Leaves)... support a view of human experience as discontinuous and fragmentary”(Bliss, 197).

5.7 LET US SUM UP

This section, it is hoped, has given you some indications of the technical finesse that has gone into the effective presentation of themes and characters. White employed a range of devices and techniques making the text a rich quarry for stylistic analysis. Most of the technical aspects used are directed towards simultaneously comparing and contrasting the twins even as it is shown that they are inextricably linked.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Elaborate with examples how the text uses language and imagery for characterization.
2. Is the use of myths and symbols convincing in The Solid Mandala?
3. Discuss critically Carolyn Bliss’s views on how White has used time as the structuring principle.

5.9 REFERENCES


