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NATURAL SYMBOLISM AND IMAGE IN THE TREE OF MAN

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Abstract:

Australian literature can be understood as literature of the settler colony representing a complexity of the formation of both Australian cultural identity and its culture. Culture of the original Aboriginal inhabitants was based on oral tradition which was either suppressed or could not compete with Australian literature based on a written tradition. During the colonization of Australia, when the country was established as a British penal colony in 1788, Australian literature was influenced by the British literary tradition. The first systematic attempts to form Australian literature that would reflect unique Australian experience were made by the authors who were either contributing to or were the editors of the radical egalitarian and nationalistic journal the Bulletin in the 1890s.

Australian colloquial speech, vernacularism, yarn, short stories, the bush experience, bushrangers as symbolic representatives of the resistance towards British colonialism and realistic writing method were the common attributes of the authors. With a growing independence Australia became a dominion, less dependent on Britain when the country became a Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, economic progress and modernity, realistic writing method started to be understood as old-fashioned and unable to express new Australian experience in the 20th century. They were especially such authors as Christina Stead and Patrick White who became the most influential modernist writers attacking traditional and nationalistic concepts of Australian literature based on the bush myth and realistic method of writing associated with it. Some critics say that some of Patrick's White works going event further postmodern narrative techniques such as self-reflexivity, symbolism and imagery.

Natural Symbolism and Image in the Tree of Man:

The Tree of Man deals with natural Symbolism and Image, where the ramifying imagery of a spreading tree provides the ideal controlling pattern. The force of life is naturally symbolized by the growing configuration of a tree, man must be assured that his world is a cohesive unity; he cannot exist in chaos. Moments before his death, Stan Parker finds himself at the centre of a cosmic Mandala, to whose outermost circle, God is relegated. Stan thus experiences his most magnificent vision of totality.

The novel opens with the central character Stan Parker walks into the virgin bush land awed by the simplicity of true grandeur, where the silence was immense. From the novel's beginning, the bush assumes religious dimensions comparable to a cathedral. A crucial passage of *The Tree of Man* describes a powerful storm that strikes the area and the flood that follows. Such unpredictable weather characterizes Australia, where bush regions suffer drought for years then heavy rains flood the parched earth. The raging water heightens the drab landscape and figures as a pivotal experience in Parker's quest for understanding.

It was White's task to attempt to fill the emptiness and to terms with the bourgeois philistinism, the material ugliness of the country itself. *The Tree of Man* is the result of eight years work which appeared in 1956, and met with wide critical acclaim in Great Britain and the United States, even venturing into American best seller lists. This novel appears to be a radical departure in all ways from the techniques and themes.

White has turned away from the closed world of one individual's mind to a lengthy and sustained exploration of two main characters and a host of minor ones, together with the society they evolve and the forces that control them. When we compare the conciseness and brevity of *The Aunt's Story*, *The Tree of Man* is long, rambling and without the complexity of image and the ambiguity of idea which characterizes the earlier novel.

The setting of *The Aunt's Story* is the country of the mind; that of *The Tree of Man* is quite definitely Australia a tract of straggling bush land which over fifty years or so becomes slowly swallowed up by the metropolis of Sydney. The style is less convolute and less obscure, and is directed towards an epic simplicity. In short, White turns away from the strange, curious and the pressure of abstract ideas to the elementals. Two words used frequently by reviewers in describing *The Tree of Man* are epic and elemental. The contrast here set up seems to be one between the subjective visions, as is the case with *The Aunt's Story*, and the broader, less selective vision which animates *The Tree of Man,* but such a contrast suggests itself only when means rather than ends are taken into account. Technically, the two novels present sharp contrasts, as in style and point of view not because the underlying visions of the two novels are opposed, but because the same vision is being approached from another direction, in order to be further clarified. The problems posed in *The Aunt's Story* center round the integrity of the self and the nature of its relationship to the outside world; the vehicle for White's exploration of these problems is a singularly imaginative, and at the end, deranged, woman, and the story ends with her complete retreat from objective reality.

In *The Tree of Man* the problems are the same, but the vehicle has changed: in this case the main characters are two quite ordinary people, who, it is clear, will not suffer Theodora's derangement, but who will enable White to pursue his question as to whether the self is indeed an isolated entity, or whether it cannot exist in a solitary state, but must seek communion with others like it. The same problems of the self, the distinctions between the reality and the dream, the inevitable corruption by time, the possibility of transcendence these problems occupy White as much in *The Tree of Man* as in the earlier novel, and are just as central to it. It is the foreground that differs.

Stan Parker carves himself a home out of the wilderness, and brings to it his wife Amy. They raise two children, both of whom bring disappointment and mortification. They experience the calamities of flood, fire and drought. They drift apart Stan goes to the war, Amy commits casual adultery. They come together again; they grow old and die. If these are the elementals loneliness, hardship, sorrow, joy, deaths then they are equally present in *The Aunt's Story*. The difference lies in the fact that Theodora is her own world, and the different patterns that emerge are those of her own mind and imagination; in *The Tree of Man* these elementals are given their embodiment in a change less yet ever changing setting, an outer world whose exterior reality regulates to a great extent the interior reality, and with which the individual must come to terms. Such, in effect, are the qualities of much epic and frontier literature the omnipresence of the land, the elements, the external world the immutable forces which must be fought and lived with, if the individual is to remain persuaded of the significance of his own existence. Otherwise madness will result not the final, clear vision of Theodora Goodman, but the sort of madness which afflicts the two Parker children, the debased and inferior visions of reality which are born of resentment and fear.

Central to *The Tree of Man* is an underlying animism. To a certain extent this quality informs all of White's work, but it is strongest here, and it explains perhaps why this novel was so popular in the United States, where the myth of the frontier has

persisted with unusual strength. The idea of a vast, virgin land, of men heroically wresting from it their living, carries an appeal not only in Australia, but in any country where the predominant shift has been from rural to urban life. Inherent in the conception of the frontier is a belief in the pre-eminence of man, man as an individual fighting with determination tempered with stoicism to establish himself, and man as a social unit, linked to his fellow men by a simple, rigorous, and usually Christian code of values.

There may be any empirical justification for such a mystique, but to apply its principles to *The Tree of Man*, as most reviewers and critics have done, is to simplify dangerously the meaning of White's animism and his belief in the sustaining role of nature in the individual life. To begin with, there is no place in White's world for moral simplicity, at least in so far as this simplicity consists of unthinking adherence to any rigid distinctions between good and evil. His concern throughout the novel is for the individual consciousness and not the group consciousness. The moral issues of the novel stem from the individual's attempt to reconcile with him rather than with the outer world. In marked contrast to the frontier myth, the individual, rather than struggling with and finally dominating the environment, is far more frequently reduced to an ineffectual and ant-like stature.

Finally, of course, Durilgai is far too close to Sydney to be any sort of real frontier, and on this proximity depends much of the basic rhythm of *The Tree of Man.* Floods and fires and other natural disasters play a large part in the novel, and these do indeed impart an elemental quality but the focus is always on the individual characters, so much so that frequently the disaster at hand seems really to be a projection of the individual's own inner crisis. This relationship between inner and outer worlds gives strength and significance to what in Australian literature is too often mere sentimental effusion and naive nature worship.

White's animism is no simple God-in-Nature, but a belief in the tremendous power in nature and the natural forms not only to order and elevate the conscious life, but frequently to terrify and reduce it. As was apparent in *The Aunt's Story*, the forms of nature are never stable: they constantly threaten to break open and dissolve, to overwhelm and to divide into an incomprehensible multitude of sensations. By these forms the conscious life becomes infinitely meaningful, because capable of projection in a virtually limitless outer world. The city, with its constant nightmarish qualities, can provide no meaningful counterpart to the inner life because it is a sort of incestuous progeny, destructive of itself and of those who create it and live in it.

White uses the presence of trees throughout the novel, but most particularly at the beginning and end, indicate his belief in the continuity of human life when placed in its natural context, that of things which themselves are born and are destroyed. Ray Mathew states that "The Australian writer's emphasis on the bush is part of his search for simplicity: the symbolism is so obvious man alone with woman, or stock, on earth, on a great stage under the sun's spotlight."

It would be misleading, however, to regard the natural symbolism in *The Tree of Man* as the clue to the final meaning of the novel. This natural symbolism, intimately connected with White's animistic-impressionistic descriptive techniques, should be divorced from the more literary symbolism of the other novels. The dividing line here is necessarily indistinct, but generally speaking the symbolism in the other novels is of two basic kinds either some ordinary, hitherto undistinguished object or event is given a heightened significance in terms of the novel's development, or certain objects or events have recognizable parallels with extraneous bodies of thought or invention

(mythology, religion, etc.). These two methods, the single heightened image or image pattern, and the allegory which brings to the novel added significance from outside, are used in *The Tree of Man*, but to a lesser degree than the natural symbolism, the sort of symbolism which is inherent in all natural things, and which resists formalization by the intellect.

This perception of natural symbolism amounts to a touchstone in any discussion of White's characters, and it is particularly relevant to a valid account of Stan and Amy Parker; it also explains the formal qualities which distinguish *The Tree of Man* from the other novels.

To state that the natural symbolism does not lead directly to the final meaning of the novel is not to imply that it is unimportant. Floods and bushfires and droughts are major watersheds in the lives of the Parkers and their neighbors, but they do not reveal for Stan and Amy the inner core of significance which both is seeking within the limits of their own lives. The extraordinary phenomena of nature merely counterbalance the ordinariness of the cabbage patch and the daily ritual of milking; the upheavals and violent changes within the natural order serve to underline its essential sameness and continuity. The natural process is haphazard, ragged and diverse, and derives from no order which is based on a pattern of fixed and regular repetition even the cycle of the seasons is at most a series of unpredictable fluctuations, and this lack of definable pattern is mirrored in the abrupt transitions from winter to summer, from flood to drought, which occur in the action of the novel.

Hope's antagonism to Patrick White is a epitome in Australian literary circles, and to reduce the fires and floods to "stock ingredients" is merely irresponsible, but White's tendency to rise to the apocalyptic, particularly in these 'set pieces', does detract to a certain extent from the slow, full movement of the novel, and, more important, it removes the reader from the avowed center of interest.

Neither Stan nor Amy, though given consolation by each other and by the land and the house they are settling into, can escape their own essential solitude, the same barriers of the self which Theodora Goodman finally succeeded in breaking. The release they find in each other is temporary and in the end inadequate, not through any selfishness or egotism, but because the man and the woman seek in two different directions their release and fulfillment.

Conclusion

White's imaginative reach, ambitious themes, and elaborate imagery showed him surpassing nationalistic limitations. His major novel, *The Tree of Man*, had an epic scope. His short stories and plays and his later novels explored more completely the ambiguity of character and the troubling question of belief. White not only demonstrated the richness of the Australian experience for imaginative writing but drew the attention of the world to it.

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