

Patrick White - 'A Woman's Hand'

The theme of this novella is reminiscent in some ways of John Morrison's 'The Dutch House.' It is concerned with the way in which a man's individuality can be destroyed even within an apparently happy marriage. But whereas Morrison gives the reader a detailed picture of the ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ life of his house-proud married couple, and then shows us the husband's personality reasserting itself, not after his wife's death, but after the subsequent destruction of the house which had become the object of their joint affections, White spends most of his time on his characters before the ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ marriage. We are left to infer what happens in wedded life from two letters, and then we are presented with the disastrous end, which destroys not only the married couple but ~~xxxxxxxx~~ the other husband as well. The reader has to go back over the few clues which White has dropped in order to establish any coherence in the sequence of events with which he has presented us.

At the commencement of the novel, the two living characters would appear to be the men, and the two dead the women. Harold Fazackerly is not actually doing anything, nor has he ever, but he might at any time. His wife Ev, ~~xx~~ however, reveals herself very quickly as a White woman.

'Evelyn was squinting back at the glass faces of the huddled houses. In the general dazzlement of the landscape and the physical exhaustion of an unnecessary but virtuous walk, she felt that warm surge of desire which only material things can provoke.

"How vulgar they all are!" she said.

'And was automatically absolved.

"Nothing wrong with being well-lined."

'If he sounded tired, it was not from their walk - he had remained a physically active man - but from remembering the ganglion of plumbing on the neo-Tudor wall across from their neo-Tudor flat.'

Evelyn - whose name is abbreviated during the ~~xxxxx~~ story to Ev - is condemned not by her materialism, but by her dishonesty. She refuses to be aware of her own materialism, but Harold is prepared to acknowledge his while keeping to himself ^{the} genuine weariness ^{induced by} of bad taste.

¹'A Woman's Hand,' in Australian Letters, Vol. VII, no. 3, August, 1966.

²John Morrison: 'The Dutch House,' in Country,

The distinction is made clearer a couple of lines further on, where, in relation to ~~xxxxxx~~ one of Evelyn's comments, it is said that she 'was one who knew. Harold knew too. Only he didn't ~~a~~ care enough.' Evelyn is too certain of her rightness, and we anticipate the evil effects of her shallowness.

Yet we do have doubts about Harold. He is involved with 'The mystical problem of his own retirement.' For a man who is going to read Tolstoy and Dostoievsky, even write for Blackwood's, this is rather a shallow problem to be dignified with the title of mysticism. We feel that Harold is potential rather than actual, and that possibly this potential has been suppressed by his wife. Our doubts are not relieved by his thought that he is lucky to have Ev, whose thoughts and conversations run determinedly along the path of the ordinary, the trivial, and the nasty - the latter symbolized by the lunch they had eaten in the cemented rockery, and which ~~had~~ somehow symbolizes the failure of reality.

Our assessment of the two characters is confirmed by the encounter with ~~a~~ Clem Dowson. Even before we meet him, Ev is ~~dis~~quieted by his noise, but Harold accepts. Clem, when he appears, proves to have this same quality of acceptance. When asked what he does, he replies 'I sit and watch the ocean.' ~~xx~~ Harold finds this reply perfectly normal, but Evelyn is moved to protest.

The consequence of the pattern which White introduces early in this story is to determine our reaction to ^{Evelyn's} ~~her~~ friend Nesta Pine when, after a regression to their time in Egypt, which further accentuates the same pattern, Evelyn decides that Clem and Nesta should be married. Nesta's relationship to Evelyn, the fact that her previous companion had attempted suicide, her own qualities as cook and comfort, all suggest that she will turn out another 'cheery soul' of destruction. Yet Clem, despite his apparent insight and self-sufficiency, falls to the seige very easily, and even denies Evelyn the satisfaction of her victory by getting married without her knowledge or permission. Nor will he hear anything said about Nesta. The denouement follows quite soon, but we are not permitted to imagine that it is entirely due to Nesta. To find out what has happened ^{between the two} we have to unravel White's symbols, but we are shown quite clearly ~~xxx~~ ^{the} ~~its~~ effect ^{of the disaster} on Harold Fazackerly, who has his moment of truth. Unlike Stan Parker's truth, however, Harold's ~~xxxxx~~ vision leaves him dead.

In fact, the relationship of Clem Dowson and Nesta Pine is used to test the quality of Harold and Evelyn as people. It has little substance in itself. ~~For~~ To Evelyn, it is symbolized by Nesta's fish pudding (p.30). This satisfies her because it ~~xxxxxxx~~ reduces Nesta to her proper, subordinate position, and so removes the potential threat to her security. During their days in Egypt, Nesta had been safe in her role as lady's companion, and the fear which her physical maturity had aroused in Evelyn at school was securely in the past. The threat in these times had come from Clem Dowson, who had a self-sufficient quality which challenged the interlocking superficialities of ~~xxxxxx~~ Evelyn's world. So, when Clem appears again in Australia, once again threatening because of his self-sufficiency in his little cliff-house, Evelyn sees Nesta as a means of subduing him to the social decencies. The opportunity of doing good to Nesta in her declining years is an added incentive to match making.

Harold, with more sensitivity, refuses to have anything to do with Evelyn's plans, but perhaps his betrayal is the greater because he is able to understand the source of Clem's strength in his silence. He senses the error of Evelyn's scheming, but is content to do nothing.

Yet finally the blame, if there is any, for the marriage must lie with Clem and Nesta themselves. They actually offend Evelyn with the speed with which they overtake her plans and make their own arrangements, so that when she and Harold are invited to tea she is worried about taking a wedding ~~xxxxxx~~^{gift} because it 'might shame them to receive a present after their neglect and deceit.' (p.31). The deceit is that they have gone their own way instead of leaving their affairs in Evelyn's hands.

~~To find out what happens after the marriage~~
~~which is the subject of the book~~

White gives us only five glimpses of the Dowsons during their marriage - the visit of the ~~Harold and Evelyn~~ Harold and Evelyn, ~~and~~ a letter each from Clem and Nesta, and the ~~photograph~~ photograph which Mrs Perry sends. Each of these episodes emphasises the way in which the couple remain separate, although apparently mutually admiring.

The first letter is from Clem to Harold. It announces the fact of the marriage, and explains the modest expectations which each partner has brought to it. The main substance of the letter, however, is Clem's regret that he and Harold have not 'met more often.' Clem then goes on to say 'I suppose I have always been most influenced by what can never be contained. The sea, for instance. As for human relationships of any importance, what is left of them after they have been seived through words.' (p.31)

On the literal level, this statement can be taken as an expression of Clem's inability to explain what his relationship with Nesta really means. Harold had been the literary one when they were at school together, and if the two of them had kept in touch Clem might now be able to put his feelings into words. The phrasing, however, tells us more about Clem, explaining the source of the strength which even Evelyn found in him during the Egyptian days - a knowledge which she has since put deliberately aside. Clem had had the disturbing quality of detachment when she had first met him on the ship - or rather, the quality of attachment to more important things, the engines which connected him to the sea. 'But she had never cared for engineers. . . ~~engineers~~ ~~engineers~~ engineers, even when shouting you a white lady, seemed to remain below with their engines, or whatever they were called.' The last phrase is characteristic of the way in which Evelyn dismisses anything which disturbs. The same disturbance recurs when she meets him again in his precarious house by the sea - precarious, but his own creation, and linking him again with what his letter reveals as the source of his strength.

The letter serves also, however, to suggest the quality of ~~the~~ ^{those} human relationships ~~with~~ which Clem finds most important. The four relationships with which we see him involved during the story are with Harold, with the Greek professor, with Evelyn, in Egypt, and with Nesta. The first is undeveloped - they do not meet more often, and so it does not go beyond the auspicious beginning during adolescence. Harold now recalls it with some slight embarrassment, but assures himself that there was nothing in the relationship to be ashamed of (p.16). The important thing about the relationship, however, is that it did not develop. The secret between them remained, Harold's ~~poems~~ later poems were not written and his volume of 'War and Peace' remains unopened during his retirement. Similarly, Clem has never found the gift of words, but we wonder ~~whether~~ whether this matters, for he has the ability to say what is necessary. Unlike Evelyn, he does not feel it necessary to sieve everything through words, which in her case serve to ~~deceive~~ deceive and destroy rather than to explain or confirm.

~~His~~ ^{Clem's} relationship with Evelyn is not so much undeveloped as unstated. On a hot steamy day in the Nile Delta, and in the absence of Harold, who is away attending to the pump, Evelyn throws herself at Clem, who manages the whole episode with an air of detached amusement. Evelyn appears to be motivated by a mixture of jealousy for the relationship between Clem and Harold, dissatisfaction with her own lot, and the desire for 'the kind of debasement she would return to in sober moments with all the drunkenness of remorse' (p.22). Evelyn goes through the motions of deeply sincere talk about human relationships, but her words only hide her true self from herself. Clem, on the other hand, sees both where the conversation is leading and what is behind it, but constantly steers it back to solid fact. When Evelyn, stirred by her own feeling of sterility and by the hope of ~~earning~~ ^{earning} an emotional dividend, refers to her dead child, Clem, ~~instinctively~~ quite instinctively, returns the conversation to the safety of fact by asking how old the boy was. (xx p.22). Clem is characterized in this interview by the young mango tree against which he leans at the height of Evelyn's emotional ~~orgy~~ ^{orgy}. (p.22). The tree represents strength and virility, a prop for the weak, but untouched in its own being. The interview finishes, however, ~~with~~ as 'Dowson the fish was still goggling, and

she still dissolved in the misery of deceit.' (p.23). This is white's own comment, not an insight of the characters, but the fish goggle represents ~~what Evelyn sees Clem~~ ^{how Evelyn sees Clem} after his refusal to become entangled in her shallow emotions. She dismisses him as a lesser being, refusing to recognize that his refusal to engage in social normalities is strength, not ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ a lack of couth. The fish, however, suggests once again Clem's relationship with the sea. The fish goggle is all that is seen by outsiders, but the fish strength remains. The 'misery of deceit,' on the other hand, is the definitive comment on Evelyn.

more is part of the relationship between Clem and the professor is barely stated in the ~~xxxxxx~~ story, and tells us more about the Fazackerlys than it does about Clem or his friend. ^{It is his relationship with Evelyn that an episode in it own right.} Evelyn rejects the professor, refusing to allow him to stay with them, because he is Greek, and therefore, as she has stated earlier, something less than human, that is, something other than Anglo-Saxon (p.18). He is also, indirectly, disturbing, for he has given Clem a book ~~which~~ of Cavafy's poems which Evelyn discovers him reading. (p.20).

'At last she reached the point where she couldn't resist taking it from him. To satisfy her curiosity.

"You'll ruin your eyes," she said, not ungently, "reading in such a dim light."

'It was a translation from the Greek, she discovered. Poems. By someone called Cavafy.

"Surely you're not an intellectual!" she said, and smiled a healing smile.

"Not exactly," Dowson said.

"Harold has moments of fancying herself as an intellectual. Oh, I'm not trying to belittle him. He's much cleverer than I. I'm only a little scatter-brained woman."

'She waited for him to handle that, but he didn't.

"What very difficult-looking, not to say peculiar, poems!" she said, handing back something she would have to make up her mind about. "If you understand those, then it makes you most horribly intellectual, and I shall have to adopt a different attitude toward you."

Clem's association with Harold had also been marked by ~~xxxxx~~ an offering of poetry, in that case Harold's own. In both cases, Clem's contribution is his ability to accept, but this is precisely what disturbs Evelyn, and she must intrude, categorize, and then 'hand back' rather than 'make up her mind.' Her mind is in fact shut to new experience, and defended only by her ability to employ words

to keep life at an acceptable distance. In this passage, the label 'intellectual' serves both to contain the disturbing tendencies within Harold and to dismiss Dowson and his peculiar interests. Each act of assassination is immediately ~~followed~~ concealed as she rearranges her persona of 'the little scatter-brained woman,' but a certain disturbance remains. She continues to be irritated by the way Clem and Harold call each other by their Christian names, indicating ~~an ease~~^{an ease} of relationship she cannot comprehend with her neat categories, and she is betrayed back to the poems, which betray her with their too palpable flesh and scent. Their reminders of rape are put aside with another neatly categorizing phrase, 'There was no rape, she felt, which could not be avoided,' but they lead her directly to her attempt to seduce Clem among the mango trees. The irony is that it is his strength, not hers, which avoids the rape. This strength comes not from any successful mapping of experience into defined categories, but from an openness to life which gives him both his strength and his detachment. He avoids her half-unconscious advances by constantly returning to the reality of fact, whether about the subject of the conversation, the possibility of Harold having an accident, ~~or~~ the immorality of men, ~~or~~ or the chance of finding a scorpion in her school. He does not judge, but in each case his words cut through her emotional self-deception to the bedrock of the actual situation. (p.22). Possibly, if she had been direct with him and honest with herself, he would have granted her request, but is upset by her desire for self-mortification. When her ~~seductress~~ role as seductress fails, and she turns to that of bereaved mother, he again cuts through her dissimulation by taking her perfectly seriously and pursuing his enquiry at the level of fact. (p.22-3). This time she is saved from herself by the return of Harold, and she is able to leave Clem reduced to a goggling fish.

In each of these episodes, Clem is, as Harold describes him (p.23), someone who 'hasn't lived a life of any interest himself. But absorbs - and reflects - experience.' Not only does he himself remain untouched, but he is a source of strength to others. What, then, goes wrong in his relationship with Nestor? The clue possibly lies in the first image Harold has of Clem's house on the cliff, as 'a hutch,' within which one could imagine 'large soft animals turning on straw, or enormous satiny birds contemplating the ocean from Behind wooden bars' (p.14).

The problem is that both the animals and the birds get into the hutch at once, and destroy each other.

Nesta Pine shares ~~many~~^{some} of the characteristics of Clem Dowson. Like him, she has been a spectator ~~and~~ rather than a participator in life, and like him she is retiring and unobtrusive. She dresses in greys and browns, knits, and is a person who cooks well and whom 'people allowed to shop for them' (p.25). Her career is that of ladies' companion. There are, however, suspicious hints about her suitability for Clem Dowson. Harold ~~and~~ wonders whether Clem could stand 'the kindest, the cotton-woolliest intentions of a Nesta Pine' (p.25). Her closest companion, Addie Woolcock, the Princess from Melbourne, had twice attempted suicide. Nesta's knitting, when she ^{was a girl at school with Evelyn,} had had a threatening aspect ~~which~~ as she prepared for the ritual and then applied the 'frill to Evelyn's bare, prickling neck' (p.26). The offer of the knitting, combined with the glimpse of Nesta's ~~breasts~~ almost fully-formed breasts 'like milk buns' comes as a threat to envelop her personality. The pines with which she is associated, both by her name and because it is there that Evelyn finds her knitting, do not have the life of Clem's ~~and~~ young mango, but are associated with ~~them~~ 'the windy side at Mt. Palmerston,' and the 'slippery needles under foot' (p.25). ~~There~~^{These} sound 'haunted Evelyn terribly as soon as she became involved again' (ib.) The needles take up the image of Nesta's knitting, and it is 'through the scent of resin and the sound of pines' and 'over the slippery needles' that Evelyn flees from her after the offering of the knitting (p.26). *Another*

threat emanates from her fashion of ~~smoking~~ holding her cigarette in silver tweezers, 'attached by their ring to an index finger, the cigarette slightly quivering, like a hawk on a falconer's ~~finger~~ wrist' (p.27). The ~~not~~ idea of something sinister, however, coalesces about the image of the peacocks. This is first introduced in the letter which Nesta writes to Evelyn after her marriage, but which, to Evelyn's dismay, she still signs as 'Nesta Pine.' (pp.32-3). Four points are made in this letter. First, Nesta regards the people she has lived with all her life as peacocks. Secondly, peacocks can redeem. Thirdly, the redemptive peacocks are such as those she saw silently settling to roost in the cedars. Fourthly, Clem does not need redemption, because he has a crystal-like flawlessness.

The last paragraph of the letter, however, throws these clear statements into confusion, as Nesta draws an association between peacocks and the sunset, except that the peacocks are now not silent, ~~but shrieking~~ but shrieking. ~~It is~~ ' . . . it mostly shrieks with the throats of peacocks - though sometimes it will open its throat, offering its blood from love rather than charity' (p.33).

The collapse of the unlikely marriage between Nesta ~~and~~ and Clem is brought about quite swiftly. In keeping with their detachment from convention, the two marry privately, almost secretly. The Fazackerlys visit them, and Nesta breaks a cup. Clem and Nesta have an argument about which bin the pieces should be thrown in, Nesta asks to be put in a home for treatment, ~~Clem~~ ~~himself~~ Clem is killed by a bus, having probably deliberately thrown himself under it.

Some ~~indications~~ ^{indications} of ~~what~~ ^{the first is} what has happened are given during two conversations which Harold has before his death, ~~one~~ with Evelyn, when he announces that Nesta is in a home, and she notices that 'he was not peacock enough to have thought of slashing his wrists.' (p.33). He has been hurt, but he has not been ready to offer himself as a sacrifice to Nesta's need to give herself. In the second, he explains to Harold that 'we had each lived at the same level. It was too great a shock to discover there was someone who could read your thoughts. . . That put an end to what should never have happened in the first place' (p.34). The rest of this conversation ~~re~~ ^{emphasizes} the mutuality of their destruction. Nesta is not merely another 'Cheery Soul' who destroys by the contagion of her own intrusive deadliness. She herself is destroyed by Clem's strength - it is notable that their wooing occurs while he is ill, and thus is able to accept the love she tenders in the form of a fish pudding (p.29). But the peacock, instead of passively offering itself in redeeming sacrifice, wants to maintain its own order and independence. It is not willing to share its life, and so Nesta's faith in peacocks is destroyed. When he goes to visit her (p.34) she is ~~xxxxxxx~~ spiteful instead of generous, and complains ~~xxxx~~ ~~xxx~~ of a screech of peacocks. Although Clem explains this as being the noise of the traffic, the context suggests that it is rather the noise of the other people, from whom she would once have taken her salvation. But Clem himself is destroyed in the same manner, for it is the peacock sunset which suddenly destroys his remaining composure ~~and~~ and prompts his final confession. '. . . the sun struck, slashing . . . the underbelly of the waves, so that the peacock-colours rose again in shrill display on the depths.' (ib.). The colors no doubt remind him of the sunsets he had watched from his hutch, and by association of the relationship with Nesta in that home, but the savage

language takes up the image of Nesta's own words. It is as if she has now become the peacock, but it is his blood which is spilt.

The story differs from many of White's because there is no clear distinction between the living and the dead. Evelyn is obviously destructive in her secular zeal to have everything organized, but she plays no more than a precipitating role in the final tragedy. Moreover, Harold, who had seemed to be potentially creative, and at least passively willing to accept the world, acknowledges his own responsibility for Evelyn. "I'm to blame. We never got a child. But I got you. I made you - more than likely! My only creative achievement!" (p.38). His passivity has betrayed his perception, and Evelyn is his monument. Following this outburst, Harold has his moment of truth, but thereafter he and Evelyn are both completely spent, content to go on their trips and sit out the travelogue of their remaining days (p.40). They have become as one with the dead mass of humanity, and only once more does Harold ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ return to 'the solitary condition he remembered as normal,' (ib.), but he instantly conquers the moment by turning back to the trivial. Yet this solitary condition is the one that promises life, the opportunity to touch the 'faces of those who were missing.' The answer to solitariness is not acquiescence in the ordinary, but can only be in the sort of relationship which Nesta promoted - she and Addie, or, by implication, she and Clem, "must have burnt each other up. But what does it matter, provided you blaze together - Blaze," he was searching, "- in peacock colours," (p.38). By contrast, Harold and Evelyn are dead because they never experience the agony of this blazing.

Nesta and Clem, however, offer no simple contrast to the Razackerleys. Nesta may give of herself, but she is also destructive. Clem appears throughout the early part of the story as the simple figure of strength who frequently appears in white's work, yet he is responsible for the final quarrel which leads to Nesta's breakdown. It seems that, although he accepts what life has to offer, and so is able to lend strength to such people as Harold in their moments of crisis, (p.31), he cannot give of himself - he is still the great, self-contained bird or animal moving in its hutch, where it needs to be alone. His outward strength is eventually proved to be an illusion, and Harold reminds us that, after all, he had had one breakdown before (p.34).

Finally, it remains unclear just what white is attempting to do in this story. This is partly because ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ Nesta is not as fully realized as the other characters, but appears rather as a symbol, and partly because the ~~XXXXXX~~ pattern of imagery is itself confused. Harold's strength lay in his ability to use words, and his failure in his failure to create anything from this ability. Yet he is also a failure because, unlike Clem, he through which words and experience run like water (p.31), leaving nothing. Clem, on the other hand, complains that he cannot use words, and in fact distrusts them, for they sieve away all that is important in a relationship. Yet, compared with Evelyn, who uses words to protect her from reality, he has a facility with words which cuts through surface convention to the concrete actuality. When he comes to his relationship with Nesta, however, it is partly his lack of words which prevents him handling the situation.

Similarly, White's image of the birds and animals is left deliberately unclear. The birds could be both peacocks and falcons, and the peacocks themselves are both destructive and sacrificing. Nor can we associate either Clem or Nesta with either bird or animal. Furthermore, while the women appear to act more destructively, it is possible that in both cases the ultimate blame lies with the man. Harold does blame himself for Evelyn, and it is Clem who causes Nesta's breakdown. Perhaps the ultimate significance of the story lies in the title, for in each pair of characters it is the woman's hand interfering which brings about disaster. ~~yet~~ The final impression of the story is of the ambiguous quality of human nature.

Each ^{character} character is both being and destroyer.