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Chapter 10 ~~Deserts~~ Deserts of Suburbia and Achieved Serenity:

Patrick White

The explorer Voss journeys into the heart of the continent to discover his vision as he dies in the everlasting desert. Patrick White implies that in some way this vision redeems the empty society of suburban Sydney of that time. After Voss, however, he places his visionaries in the contemporary desert of the suburbs of the twentieth century, in Sarsaparilla, Barranugli and their environs. The later novels are closely involved with contemporary events, and the characters in them attempt to achieve their vision through their involvement. At stake in these works is not only the salvation of the individual, his choice between the way of the living and the way of the dead, but the conflict in society between the forces of life and of death. Society is not redeemed because one man ~~achieves~~ finds his own understanding of truth, but because those who understand maintain their vision in the <sup>face</sup> ~~teeth~~ of the forces of evil which would ~~destroy~~ destroy them. This conflict is implicit in the earlier works, but <sup>in them</sup> has been subordinated to the personal struggle.

Now it ~~is~~ becomes the major theme.

It is in these novels, too, that Patrick White creates a world unmistakably his own. The elements of it, like the language in which it is embodied, have been present from his earliest work.

could be seen as

~~TheodoraxGoodman~~ The Quongs, the Chinese storekeepers in Happy Valley, ~~are~~ the first in <sup>a</sup> his line of holy fools which stretches through

~~JuliaxFallenx~~ Theodora Goodman and Bub Quigley to Harry Roberts in Voss. Theodora, however, has to embark on her own quest in The

Aunt's Story, ~~where~~ and the others are subsidiary characters, or images, whereas Miss Hare, the holy fool or holy innocent of Riders

in the Chariot, like Arthur Brown in The Solid Mandala, is already certain in her knowledge at the commencement of the novel. She has

to undergo not a quest but a trial. The tormented but visionary artist, also a theme in these novels, has already appeared in The

Tree of Man, in which the geography of Durilgai is virtually that of Sarsaparilla. White has also explored this suburban world in his

short stories and plays, <sup>2</sup> which belong to the same period of his writing. The world of these works <sup>is distinct from</sup> ~~is distinct from~~ the traditional

Australian imagery of desert, bush and country town which provides <sup>most of</sup> ~~the~~ the substance of the ~~earlier~~ earlier works, but has a density which was

missing from the cosmopolitan but brittle setting of The Living and

the Dead. Sydney, and its analogous Sarsaparilla and Barranugli, are both setting and image.

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has not been described before.

The suburban setting of these novels itself indicates some of the change in White's concerns. Instead of one person's quest, he is now interested in the network of human relationships which is found in a city. Instead of merely contrasting the visionaries with the trivial mass of society, he studies the relationships between them. He still ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ draws a contrast between his living and his dead, but the two categories are now ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ involved in each others' lives more deeply than in any since his first two ~~XXXXXXXX~~ books. Whereas Theodora and Stan Parker and Voss all in their own ways withdr<sup>a</sup>ew to follow their own concern<sup>s</sup>, the riders in the chariot and Arthur Brown offer themselves to society, and Hurtle Duffield, the artist in The Vivisector, struggles with society to wrest from it the raw materials for his art.

The world of Sydney suburbia also provides an image which binds these later works together. The bus travelling from the suburb <sup>of Sarsaparilla</sup> to the <sup>city</sup> centre, like the track linking Sarsaparilla with Kanadu, both connects and separates the sterile centre and the environ<sup>s</sup> where nature still struggles against brick and mortar to preserve room for living. These three focal points represent three of the choices available to human life. <sup>in Riders in the Chariot,</sup> ~~Similarly,~~ the suburban walls behind which Mrs Flack and Mrs Jolly, or Harry and Shirley Rosetree, hide from others represent ~~both~~ the imposed isolation which produces sterility, cutting men off from the source of their being as surely as gentility separates Harry, born Haim, Rosetree from his Judaic origins. They also, however, represent citadels from which the sterile can snipe at the living.

Note spelling:  
Jolley or  
Jolly?

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In creating this world, White has moved ~~from~~<sup>beyond</sup> the traditional concern of Australian writing with the question of defining and exploring the quality of living in Australia, and beyond his own particular concern with the way in which Australia could furnish man with the ~~maximum~~ opportunity to discover himself. In one sense, the fact that these later novels are set in Australia is irrelevant to their searching ~~for~~<sup>for</sup> the nature of human existence in a modern world devoid of acceptable ~~spiritual~~<sup>to</sup> moral or spiritual teleology or even epistemology. Yet Australia, because of its lack of any concrete reminders of earlier civilizations, with their created systems of belief, is peculiarly suited to a study of the plight of modern man. The anonymous city, which is the reality of life in Australia, is the image of life in the twentieth century. But the edge of the Australian city is still encroaching on the bush, with its reminder of the subtler rhythms which are subdued by civilization, but which White's visionaries rediscover. The edge of this encroachment is also the critical point of man's struggle to find new patterns of behavior <sup>u</sup> to suit the new circumstances. The crumbling ruin of Kanadu with its reminders of gothic splendor <sup>u</sup>, the pretentious Grecian portico on the Brown cottage, the ~~xxx~~ grandeur of the Courtney home, "Sunningdale", are ~~xxx~~ symbols ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> ~~both~~ the attempt <sup>and failure</sup> to establish old patterns of significance on the new soil of Australia, ~~and of the failure of these attempts.~~ The cosy sterility of the new suburban cottages is an image of man's ~~retreat~~ destructive retreat from forces he cannot understand. Even this urban landscape, therefore, maintains in the midst of its



universal concerns the specific reminders of old dreams destroyed by reality. Australia remains a social laboratory, but not now for ~~testing~~ <sup>trying out</sup> dreams, rather for discovering a significance beneath a barren reality. The hostile nature which had once been the obstacle to the fulfilment of the dream now becomes ~~the image of the dream~~ an image of the hope of finding an enduring pattern of meaning.

The epigraph to Riders in the Chariot is taken from William Blake's conversation with the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, when both assure him that their quest has concerned the discovery of the infinite, for themselves and for others. Isaiah adds ~~that~~ his belief that the voice of indignation is the voice of God. The indignation which moves White is <sup>directed</sup> against the destroyers, Mrs Jolly <sup>e</sup> and Mrs Flack and Blue, and <sup>against</sup> those, like the Rosetrees, who allow themselves to be destroyed, but his perception of the infinite is repeatedly in terms of nature. It is <sup>their</sup> affinity with the natural world which seems to guarantee his visionaries. The visions of the chariot and the marks of redemption come to them as further signs of grace rather than as the source of their wisdom.

The image of nature appears in the first pages of Riders in the Chariot, where we see Miss Hare walking "through a smell of moist nettles, under the pale disc of the sun." \* The nettles, suggestive of poverty and pain, also symbolize the simplest forms of natural vitality, and the sun adds an aureole of sanctity to which seals the accord between nature and divinity. The morning thus promises "the millen<sup>ium</sup>", but it also contains threats of the enemy, in the lifeless but menacing forms of burnt-out blackberry bushes like strands of barbed wire. The theme of the book is thus embodied in the imagery before it emerges in action.



In all of his novels Patrick White is concerned with the discovery of the vision which justifies man's life, but in Riders in the Chariot and its successors he places a greater emphasis than previously on the ~~xxx~~ redemptive force of this vision. <sup>within the ordinary world of men.</sup> The two <sup>crit</sup> ~~critical~~ problems raised, therefore, are whether the vision of infinity itself is made real to the reader, and whether ~~the~~ <sup>it</sup> vision is shown to operate as a force within the world of ugliness and evil which is the <sup>setting</sup> ~~locale~~ for the action of the novels. Patricia Morley has argued that the achievement of White's novels is to make real a dimension of "spiritual activism" which fuses being and becoming, and to show a "world that is fit to live in . . . despite pain and evil . . . as well as a constant flux which is moving in accordance with some great design." <sup>3</sup> This is the world which Holstius revealed to Theodora Goodman, which Stan Parker found in a globule of spittle, and which Voss finally discovered in his dream in the desert. In Riders in the Chariot, however, it is <sup>embedded</sup> very much ~~a part~~ <sup>in</sup> ~~of~~ the ordinary world of day-to-day living. It is found by Mary Hare in the wild garden through which she crawls on her knees to ~~the~~ Xanadu, where she "came home, as always, for the first time." It is nurtured by the simple <sup>u</sup> ~~succor~~ <sup>u</sup> which the peasants give to Himmelfarb after his escape from the gas ovens, and which restores him to life on the third day. This transcendent world becomes <sup>inherent</sup> ~~immanent~~ in the simple acts of kindness which Mrs Godhold renders <sup>S</sup> ~~to~~ <sup>S</sup> Himmelfarb and, later, to Alf Dubbo. This last act draws Alf back into the fellowship of the riders ~~it~~ - it is in the following chapter that he and Himmelfarb discover their common enthusiasm for Ezekiel - and so gives him the power to make the final paintings which again ~~reveal~~ <sup>reveal</sup> the immanent as the transcendent.

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of their past which the present actions evoke remind the reader of the eternal biblical myths of the prophet, the disciples, the scapegoat, the crowds of witnesses on the banks of the river of life. The imagery is drawn from Ezekiel and Blake, from the <sup>Revelation of</sup> Gospel and St John, but the scene is memorable first of all because it is the actual culmination of the real events of the novel. The imagery serves to place the circumstantial event in the context of the eternal symbols of meaning. By keeping the event in the forefront of our consciousness White does ~~therefore~~ <sup>therefore</sup> succeed in making the eternal and the transcendent ~~xxx~~ <sup>inherent</sup> in the concrete actuality of everyday living.

Nevertheless, although this is the integrating point <sup>for</sup> ~~in~~ both ~~the plot of~~ <sup>stages</sup> ~~the~~ action and the spiritual significance of the novel, it does not succeed in giving a unity to the four separate plots. The moment of vision is fully realized, but its significance is dissipated. Mary Hare disappears at the conclusion of the <sup>death</sup> scene, and is denied even a definite end. ~~††~~ Alf Dubbo goes off to paint his vision, and then ~~dies~~, but the paintings disappear, or perhaps do not. <sup>to</sup> White seems to be hedging his bets in both these cases. On the one hand, he implies that the vision, the moment of realization, is all that matters. On the other hand, the possible continued existence of Miss Hare or of the paintings contains the suggestion that the vision is only complete if it is rediscovered and continued by others. This <sup>open-endedness</sup> ~~openness~~ is not just a part of the inherent ambiguity of all mystical experience - is it of God or <sup>of</sup> man? - but an indication of the author's uncertainty about what he is actually describing.

Similarly, Mrs Godbold's continuing existence and retention of the vision seems to be given more weight than it can bear. She sees the Chariot again on her return to the site of Xanadu, Morbert Hare's house, which is now a new housing estate. ~~to~~ as she walks, she is surrounded by images of the continuing life of which she herself, eternally fertile mother of men, is the ~~image~~ symbol. Yet this continuing life is rooted firmly in the same suburban milieu which has given birth to the evil of Mrs Jolly<sup>e</sup> and Mrs Plack, to the Judas-like betrayal of Himmelfarb by his comatriot and employer, Harry Rosetree, and to the actual crucifixion of Himmelfarb. The original vision of Morbert Hare may have been betrayed by his own weakness and suicidal pursuit, but the momentary appearance of the Chariot in the sunset seems too little to redeem <sup>that vision</sup> ~~it~~ from the suburban bulldozers which finally have destroyed it. Similarly, the momentary union of the four riders at Himmelfarb's death<sup>e</sup> seems too little to unite their four separate stories in a single work of art.

In Riders in the Chariot, White grapples with the problem of bringing his saving vision into the real world which is filled not only with the insidious evils of petty suburbia, but also with monstrous evils of war, persecution and prejudice. The novel shows clearly the identity of evil, the way nazism and racism stem from the same roots as the mean-minded but destructive vindictiveness of ~~the~~ Mrs Jolly<sup>e</sup> and Mrs Plack, and the coarse mateship of ~~the~~ men at the factory. His vision is made real in this world, but it still appears only to individuals, and does not seem to give them any redeeming strength among their fellows.

The contrast of the two brothers is not new in White's novels, and was made explicit as early as The Living and the Dead. Waldo Brown, the self-regarding intellectual, is the same sterile, potentially destructive, figure as Elvot Standish. Arthur is in White's line of ~~the simple-minded~~ <sup>those</sup> who, by accepting, achieve the vision. Arthur, however, belongs not so much with the eccentrics, like Theodora Goodman and Mary Ware, as with Julia Barnett and Ruth Godbold. His vision is realized in active goodness, in the simple tasks he carries out for the grocer and his wife, in the way he looks after Waldo's material needs, in his friendship for Mrs. Poulter. His simplicity, too, must not be misinterpreted. Certainly, the people of Sarsaparilla regard him as "loopy", but ~~their~~ <sup>their</sup> judgment is not to be trusted. He is not a holy fool, for he enters into understanding relationships with Dulcie Feinstein and Mrs. Foulter; he reads Dostoevsky; he handles practical affairs. His simplicity is rather a lack of concern about the world's opinion, a readiness to accept the judgment of others on himself, than the true idiocy of, say, Bub ~~Quigley~~ Quigley. Neither, however, is he the plain, ordinary man like Stan Parker. Rather, he combines a childlike <sup>responsiveness</sup> with an adult responsibility to others. We are therefore more easily able to accept both the reality of his vision, embodied in a child's toy, but representing also the ~~xx~~ dance of the ages, and its efficacy, which White shows operating within the everyday world.



Arthur Brown is associated not only with the mystic image of the mandala, but also with ~~the~~ simple images of sustenance, with milk, bread and butter. His role in the household is to milk the cow and to make the bread, <sup>like Judd's wife, to prepare the butter.</sup> and <sup>these</sup> ~~these~~ become the vehicles of his love. After his father's death, he brings his mother "warm milk in her favourite bowls with the pattern of cambrile sprigged." In this scene the psychological realism ~~of the novel is exemplified~~ with which White ~~portrays~~ Arthur's need of acceptance becomes ~~the central~~ <sup>the contrast</sup> ~~also~~ an image of the central moral contrast in the book <sup>of</sup> between Arthur's love and the withdrawal from life <sup>of</sup> his mother and brother. The metaphysical implications arise naturally from the realistic observation of the detailed patterns with which people build their lives. The Brown parents have built a ritual of intellectualism ~~which~~ which protects them from the pain of living. Waldo's personality develops in response to his parents' aspirations, ~~and~~ his embarrassment at his own awkwardness, ~~and~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ encouragement of his brother. The realistic surface of the novel is, however, deepened by White's constant awareness of a moral pattern which comes not from the way people are shaped by circumstances but, <sup>from</sup> ~~by~~ the nature of their response to life.

These contrasting responses are epitomized in the personalities of Arthur's two employers, Mr and Mrs ~~Allwright~~ Allwright. Mrs Allwright scarcely accepts the Browns as human beings. When Arthur surprises her discussing his family, she covers her embarrassment by retreating into the superiority which adults can always use against children. To Arthur's natural compliment about her watch, she replies, *W* "I would of thought, Arthur, your mother would of taught you that ladies don't appreciate bold behaviour in little boys." *W* The words catch perfectly the stiffness of her false gentility. Mr Allwright, however, prays to God and accepts the world, including Arthur, who in turn responds to "some power which Mr Allwright possessed", and adds him to "what he knew as truest: to grain in wood, to bread broken ~~open~~ roughly open, to cow-pats, neatly, freshly dropped." *W* Mrs Allwright is excluded because she does not fit into the "world of objects." *W*

The conjunction of natural objects is characteristic of white. The goodness in Arthur does not come from some romantic equation of simplicity and natural good, *W* it is achieved only through a conscious effort to accept the whole world, excrement as much as nutriment. Mrs Allwright, like Waldo, wants only that which is easy to accept, and therefore misses on everything. She observes the world only from the *W* protection of an enclosed veranda, where she sips tea with her equally sterile sister, and passes judgement on what they see. Arthur and Mr Allwright, however, pass no judgement, yet it is on them that the others finally depend.

The moral pattern of the book is in turn deepened by ~~the~~ <sup>13</sup> central mythical or mystical structure. Arthur Brown is the protector and healer. He provides the ~~xxxxxxx~~ milk and bread of life for his family, he ~~xxxxxxx~~ protects Waldo from playground bullies in their childhood and comforts him in his arms later in their lives. His love gives strength and meaning to Dulcie Einstein and to Mrs Poulter, and in turn he receives strength and understanding from them. He would have done the same for his brother, but his brother rejects the love and its symbol, the mandala.

The mandala image which Arthur finds in his marbles is <sup>one</sup> ~~an image~~ of a totality in which all the contradictions of life are resolved while still ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ retaining their separate identity. The specks and clouds and whorls and knots dissolve into themselves yet remain eternally the same. From them Arthur derives the strength which issues forth in his love for others. Through them he eventually discovers the dance which he performs for Mrs Poulter, which unites all the ~~ixixx~~ elements of the separate lives of himself and his brother, and of Mrs Poulter and Dulcie Einstein. <sup>one</sup> At the centre of this dance he becomes the Christ-figure, through whom the others derive their life.

It is at this element of the novel which bears the greatest strain. <sup>Whereas</sup> Arthur's love relation is demonstrated, his mythical significance remains unclear. He is shown as Lett Tinesias, the prophet who has known life as both man and woman, while Waldo remains only the husk of his potential, "~~Tinesias a Youngish Man~~", the title of the novel he never completes. Arthur is also, however, <sup>an</sup> ~~an~~ ~~brother~~ Adam bearing his brother inside him, and, finally, the God who replaces Mrs Foulter's fallen Christ. There are a number of hints that he was wholly or partly emasculated at birth, but he is his <sup>father's</sup> lover, the child Mrs Foulter never had, and the spiritual progenitor of Dulcie Einstein's abundant brood. By a vernacular pun, his ~~mandalas~~ become the mandalas which are his gift to the world. ~~He~~ <sup>He</sup> is physically sexless but spiritually fruitful. As both child ~~and~~ <sup>brother</sup> becomes ~~therefore~~ a symbol for the whole of humankind, fulfilling itself by love but still divided against itself, as ~~Arthur~~ Waldo remains divided against his twin. From the division comes the hatred which is realized in the slaughter of war and the sterility of suburbia, and which leads eventually to Waldo's death, and consequently to Arthur's loss of the mandala which Waldo had refused to accept. This mandala, containing the knot at the centre, has been Arthur's preoccupation, and its loss represents the limit of the unity which ~~Arthur~~ <sup>he</sup> is able to achieve.

(NP) →  
parent lover  
'brother'



Arthur's role as the bringer of life is fully realized in the novel through his simple acts of sustenance. His role as prophet and reconciler, bringing meaning to life, is less satisfactorily conveyed. It is symbolized in the images of the mandala, both in the marbles and in the dance, and in such natural objects as the wheel-tree where he sees the Chinese woman <sup>↖</sup> reminiscent of the plum-tree under which Himmelfarb tells Mary Hare his story in ~~the~~ Riders in the Chariot, or of the the mulberry tree in The Tree of Man. These images have in common the quality of <sup>of surrendering</sup> both enclosing life and ~~opening up~~ <sup>↘</sup> to it, the same quality which is embodied in Arthur Brown as a figure of myth. He is himself all <sup>and woman</sup> ~~man~~, but he also gives of himself to all *humanity*. ~~man~~ Yet the only time this visionary giving is fully embodied in the action is during his last visit to old Mr Feinstein, when the worldless communication of the mandala to the dying man ~~does~~ <sup>S</sup> seem to open him to the "complete surrender to love" which "might have let in God". <sup>S</sup> Mr Feinstein's secularism has contained a quality of openness to life which distinguishes it from the atheism of the elder Brown<sup>S</sup>, and Arthur's marble does therefore seem a fitting means of reconciling his principles with his feelings. The major manifestation of the mandala is, however, the dance, and this remains apart from the action. As an expression of Arthur's own vision, it is convincing, but as an agent of redemption for others we have to take it on trust.

The problem in accepting Arthur as redeemer is that of his sacrifice. In the dance, he himself is the Christ, his own wounds bleed.<sup>26</sup> In the action of the novel, however, he is only the servant, not the suffering servant. He gives of himself to others, he tends to their needs, in the end he even wipes up Waldo's excrement.<sup>27</sup> Waldo, however, finds this love hateful, and so it nourishes in him only further hate. Arthur's acceptance extends even to death, but Waldo, turning away from life, is terrified of death. He is therefore unable to <sup>tolerate</sup> follow Arthur's study of The Brothers Karamazov and his questioning of the grand inquisitor, and is mortally offended by his poems of bleeding and death. This <sup>last</sup> ~~effort~~ leads to his burning of his own life's papers, and to the outburst of fear and hatred which kills him.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, therefore, Arthur is literally correct when he tells Mrs Foulter that he has killed his brother.<sup>29</sup>

If the end of the novel ~~leaves~~ <sup>does leave uncertain</sup> the nature of the redemption effected by Arthur, it makes clear the existential ambiguity of the kind of love he displays. While it is potentially liberating, when it is received in the proper spirit, it is also destructive to those who are unable to accept the vision on which it rests. The visionary is therefore also the "vivisectionist" of Arthur's poem.<sup>30</sup> The inherent destructiveness of the vision appears only at the end of The Solid Mandala, and <sup>seems</sup> ~~leads~~ to question the simpler interpretation of the preceding action. It is the central theme of Patrick White's next novel, where the vision issues not in love but in art.

The ending of The Solid Mandala challenges all the values which the novel seems up to this stage to have endorsed. Arthur's vision has expressed itself in love bringing healing. Even his parents, who have retreated from life, are physically sustained by Arthur's efforts. His purchase from his own resources of his mother's daily bottle of sherry during her last illness is a sign of a compassion which can accept all. This same compassion is extended towards Waldo, even although he continues to refuse it. Arthur's love is fulfilled in his daily work and in the family of Dulcie Feinstein. It seems to bring reconciliation to Mrs. Poulter's waking dream of the modern age, with its trivia, cruelties and contradictions. Yet at the end it ~~ixxxxx~~ destroys Waldo, leaves his body to be torn at by the mangy dogs. The loving god who would give himself becomes the god of vengeance.

Waldo's response of hate to Arthur's love is effectively dramatized, ~~as~~ we see it first as the culmination of his <sup>Waldo's</sup> own frustrations and then, ~~as it comes to Arthur,~~ <sup>as it comes to Arthur,</sup> as a horrifying revelation of how his kindness <sup>has</sup> ~~had~~ destroyed his brother, crippling him with hate. <sup>27</sup> The significance of Arthur's figurative association with blood, however, and the way in which this final epiphany fits him to become Mrs. Poulter's god is less clear. Arthur dies in Waldo's death, and so completes his role as Christ. But the death also reduces him from protector to the child whom Mrs. Poulter must protect, <sup>and</sup> in accepting this role Arthur, acknowledging his helplessness, achieves the inner unity of the mandala. <sup>32</sup> This



unity, however, is based not on the love which it has been Arthur's function to bring to the novel, but on the final act of destruction.

The achievement of understanding through destruction, including self-destruction, is the theme ~~to~~ to which Patrick White returns in The Vivisector.<sup>3</sup> The epigraphs to the novel set <sup>the theme as</sup> the problem of the <sup>romantic</sup> artist whose vision is the ~~same~~ understanding ~~of~~ and realization of infinity which is at the heart of religious experience, and which can be achieved only by searching the fiery depths of the human soul. The seeker must be an outcast, and his vision must affront those whom it reveals. This vision is what Arthur Brown finally learns from his brother rather than what he embodies in himself. There is, therefore, in The Vivisector, little of the reconciling love which was found in the ~~earlier~~ <sup>preceding</sup> novel. For the central character, Hurtle Duffield, the artist, human relationships are ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ necessary but enslaving, and he successively frees himself from each in order to pursue his search for understanding. The vision which he finally achieves - of god, or infinity, or perhaps just pure color<sup>u</sup> - exists in and for itself. Unlike Alf Dubbo's paintings of the Deposition and the Chariot, this will continue to exist as a work of art, and may therefore have meaning for others beside the artist. Also unlike Dubbo's paintings, however, this meaning is not in the discovery of a principle or force actively at work in the world, but just in the discovery of what is. This development was already inherent in the shift from the image of a chariot and its riders to that of a still mandala, but the mandala was shown as, until the end of the novel, the source of fruitful activity. Hurtle Duffield's paintings, however, are not made for

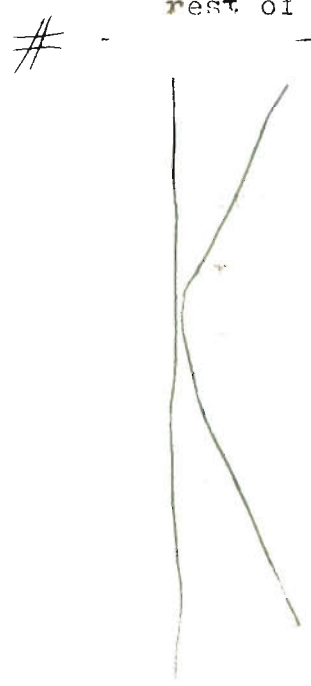


others, but out of the lives of others. The book seems to systematically deny the possibility of the love which was at the basis of Arthur Brown's vision, and to exalt instead the kind of vision which Waldo Brown would have found had he had the courage to embrace life rather than hide from it in words.

The ~~Yivixxxxx~~ life of Hurtle Daffield begins in that atmosphere of natural love which in White's work is frequently associated with the fringe-well-to-do society. Hurtle's natural mother is another Mrs Godbold, fecund and hard-working. Hurtle, however, does not fit easily into this environment. The family is descended by way of a remittance man from English gentility, and Mrs Daffield has aspirations that Hurtle might make a way back to a similar status. He himself has a precocious interest in books and in drawing. These factors combine with the Daffields' financial <sup>needs</sup> ~~exigencies~~ to lead them to accept the offer of the squattocratic Courtneys to adopt, or buy, Hurtle and raise him as their heir. Hurtle has gone to the ~~xxxx~~ Courtney household with his mother, who works there as laundress, and has been intrigued with its air of elegance and refinement, and with Manan, the presiding mistress of the house. After his adoption, his natural family plays no further major role in his life, yet he does not fit completely into the world of the Courtneys either. His artistic career therefore becomes an attempt to recover the <sup>natural</sup> wholeness which characterized life with the <sup>Daffields,</sup> ~~Courtneys~~ while ~~xxxx~~ maintaining the achieved <sup>sense of</sup> ~~precious~~ order, the tradition of civilization, which is, however precariously, a part of the Courtney world. His partner in the endeavor <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ Rhoda,

misshapen daughter of the ~~Courtneys~~ Courtneys, who plays for Hurtle something of the role Arthur plays for Waldo Brown.

This does not mean that Rhoda in any way shares Arthur's protecting and nourishing ~~and~~ functions. On the contrary, she is <sup>self-</sup>centred, suspicious <sup>and</sup> rather bitter. Hurtle comes as an intruder on her domain, a rival for her parents' affections, and she resents him for this. Yet out of her own pain and loneliness she calls to him, and he responds. On the day of his arrival in the Courtney home as a member of the family she takes him into the garden, ~~into her~~ garden, sharing with him her knowledge and their difference from the rest of the world.



Rhoda led him deeper into the darkening garden. There were stone steps, the moss so thick in places his feet felt they were trampling flesh. It disgusted him, but she couldn't see it. She was interested only in what she had to show him. Each time she spoke he could feel her moist little fingers twitching on his hand.

"These are guavas." She tried to make it sound like a secret.

He picked one from the sooty leaves, but it made his mouth shrivel up.

She was enjoying it all so much, she didn't notice.

"And custard apples. They're too green to steal. The boys can't see them amongst the leaves." <sup>pp. 86-7</sup>

# (NP) This is the relationship of outsiders. Rhoda's hump, and her parents' indifference, make her as much a misfit as Hurtle's vulgar background makes him. The garden they now own in common provides security against their own doubts, and this security can form a bond between them. But, being based on exclusion, on the distinctions of exclusive ownership as compensation for exclusion from love, the bond is

sterile. The apples which fall on the grass must be left to rot, not shared with the "larrikins" who might need them, because "They're ours!"

In moving from the world of the Duffields to that of the Courtneys, Hurtle both finds and betrays himself. He escapes from the "prison" of drudgery to which his mother is condemned, into the "Other world: of silence and beauty." But this is also ~~the~~ world removed from the real concerns of living, from the concerns not only of Pa and Mumma Duffield but also of Harry Courtney, the master of the house who is also lost in it, divorced <sup>here</sup> from his real life of horses and properties. This world is formed in the languid image of Maman, who collects beauty but <sup>who</sup> removes it from any living matrix. Its symbol is the lonely Rhoda. For a time it can nourish young Hurtle, educate him into a civilization from which the Duffields are excluded, but eventually he must reject it <sup>and</sup> return to the sources of his own life. By this time, however, he has formed a relationship with Rhoda which is to be the most lasting in his life. When he surprises her beside the billet during their European tour, she becomes his Pythoness, the prophet who is also the centre of the world. At the centre of his picture is the red tuft of her sex, an eternal symbol of her womanhood because her hump will prevent it ever being fruitful. This burning centre is threatened by the cold sponge of morality about to descend, ~~to~~ deny the life which is offered. Through this episode, Rhoda supplants his own mother and becomes his true bride. His life is a struggle to realize the flame and release it from the constrictions of society ~~xxxxxx~~ which would extinguish it.



When, at the end of his life, Rhoda returns to him as a bedraggled eccentric devoting her life to <sup>care for</sup> ~~the~~ ~~rearing~~ of stray cats, he is complete and able to turn to his final work. The fire which is denied in her body is released in his paint. Having turned his back on the living concerns of the Duffields, ~~she~~ <sup>his</sup> ~~is~~ <sup>is Rhoda</sup> ~~his~~ ~~only~~ ~~child.~~ ~~and~~ ~~art~~ ~~is~~ ~~his~~ ~~only~~ ~~child.~~

The betrayal <sup>of another person's</sup> ~~of~~ the Duffields is only the first in Hurtle's career. With the Courtneys, he learns first of all dishonesty, how to "learn when not to recognize. He could easily get the words and tone of a language: the difficult part was to know what you leave out." <sup>that</sup> He learns, however, ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> can "see inside the faces of people who fail to get behind your own." ~~is~~ This is the basis of his life as an artist, but the aim of this career has to be to again unlearn, to give the whole of himself, not indeed to people, but to his art. Only thus can he ~~discover~~ find the whole truth.

The truth is not, however, comforting. It comes from the destruction of others, as in the image of the dog stretched out on a board with its guts spilling out, <sup>from</sup> from which Hurtle learns his art of "better ways of being nasty." <sup>is</sup> His career is summed up in the words he records on the wall of his last dunny:

God the Vivisector  
God the Artist  
God ~~at~~

#  
Centre  
#

From destruction comes creation, and from creation comes the final vision. This vision is in itself, however, cruel, a betrayal of those from whom it is constructed, as <sup>Hurtle</sup> ~~he~~ betrays in turn each of his mistresses. Nancy, the <sup>+</sup> ~~prostitute~~ <sup>prostitute</sup>, dies on the rocks below his hut, ~~which he paints.~~ <sup>42</sup> Here, having failed to find God with him in



Greece, ~~commits suicide~~<sup>43</sup> dies of cancer and neglect. Only Kathy Volkov, the child-mistress of his age, is not betrayed, for she takes from him the strength to release <sup>herself</sup> in her own act. Rhoda is betrayed through the cruelty of his paintings, yet she remains with him. His final illumination comes from the conjunction of the afflicted, of the grocer Cutbush, <sup>of</sup> his own sister, who has the strength of the earth, and <sup>of</sup> Kathy's mother. ~~The~~ The letter which explains this also gives him the strength for his last painting.

In this novel we have, therefore, White's harshest testing so far of his belief in the possibility of illumination against the grim facts of existence. Of the qualities of love and resignation which have sustained ~~himself~~ the visionaries in his earlier works, only acceptance remains. Hurtle Duffield and Rhoda accept everything, and achieve an illumination which is denied even to the Mrs Godholds. This illumination is made real in the act of Duffield's painting, which comes alive in the words on the page. This is particularly so as he learns again to paint after his stroke, when he is in fact commencing his last work.

#



. . . Before he could contemplate his vision of indigo, he had to paint out the death which had stroked him. Some at least of the brush strokes, he recognized, were alive. His painfully electric arm performed extraordinary miracles; though not often enough. The white core had begun to glow, but there were the flat dead stretches leading to it. <sup>15</sup> (pp. 587-8)

#

It has been objected that no known painter today works in this way, but even if true this objection is irrelevant. White takes us here into the consciousness of a particular painter, ~~make~~ allows us to feel both the physical action of his brush and share the appraising

judgment of his eye. The work therefore becomes real to us, not because we see it, but because we share in its creation.

Our trust in the authenticity of Duffield's creation has been developed by the manner in which White has conveyed his response to the world in visual terms. <sup>his</sup> His first encounter with Nancy, the prostitute who first ~~xxxxxx~~ released the full powers of his art, even the sounds become visual images.

#

K

. . . the sounds of ~~day~~ were solidier than the shapes or night: opaque fluorescence of a foghorn somewhere in the harbour; drawn-out squeal of a leaping train; empty bottle slapping fat water . . . he realized someone was approaching, following the curve of the sea-wall, stubbing and rubbing . . . it sounded as though a thigh was cannoning off some upholstery . . . (p. 177)

#

Then, when they return to her room, he watches her undress.

#

K

. . . a roselight had begun to pour out of the ~~xxxxxxx~~ straining camisole; her natural, moist mouth had worked off the cheap veneer; the whites of her eyes, rolling and struggling in her fight for freedom from her clothes, were brilliantly enamelled with naked light. (p. 178)

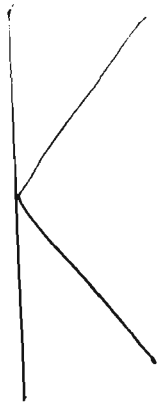
#

The <sup>movements</sup> ~~xxxxxxx~~ of Duffield's emotions are transformed into the ~~xxxx~~ colors and objects which form his paintings. There is therefore no need for us to have his final vision rendered for us in concrete terms. It is enough that we share with him the moment of its realization.

#

K

Whether it was she or he who knew better he took his broadest, though frankly feeble brush, and patted the blue on: brush was leaving its hairs behind, he noticed. All his life he had been reaching towards this vertiginous blue without truly visualizing, till lying on the



pavement he was ~~xx~~ dazzled not so much by a colour as by a longstanding secret relationship.

Now he was again acknowledging with all the strength of his live hand the otherwise unnameable I-N-D-I-G-O.

Only reach higher. Could. And will.

...

Light follows dark: not usually bound by the iron feather which stroked. ~~48~~ (pp. 641-2)

#

This is another epiphany or revelation of the kind which comes to Mrs Poulter, to Alf Dubbo, to ~~Stax~~ Vase and to Stan Parker. We can accept this <sup>more</sup> readily, however, because it comes not from outside the action, but as the final act of the artist. It belongs to his way of visualizing and of expressing the world. We therefore accept <sup>it</sup> ~~the~~ fact as a fact that Hurtle Duffield achieves his life's aim in his last moments.

<sup>However,</sup> accepting that the novelist has made convincing to us the career and vision of a particular artist, ~~however~~ we still have the problem of whether <sup>his</sup> ~~this~~ career in any sense justifies the mean and often hateful world in which it is set. The Vivisector does differ from its predecessors in that no such explicit or implicit claim is made. The symbolic dimension of the earlier books has been replaced by the artistic, and so the question is not whether Hurtle has some general <sup>redeeming</sup> significance, but only whether his response is the only possible and proper one to the circumstances.

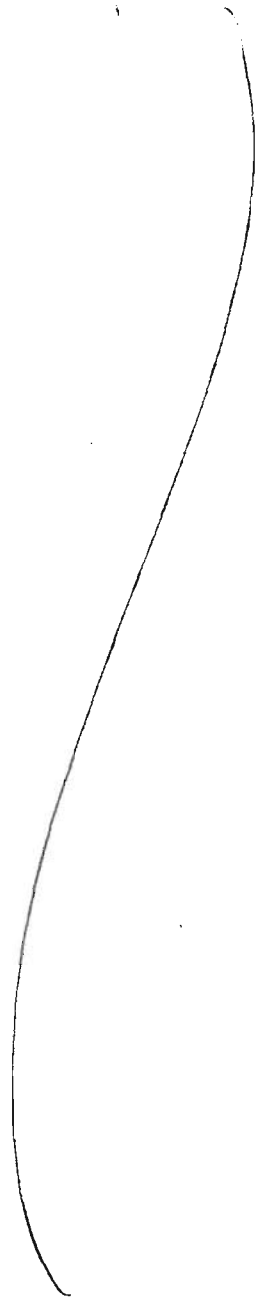


I suggested earlier that Hurtle Duffield's career is that which Waldo Brown never ~~was~~ realized. In a sense, this novel is the reply to Arthur's discovery that his giving of himself to others has created in Waldo only the most destructive hate. Hurtle Duffield does not give himself to others, but to his art, to his own search for meaning. Those whom he destroys are those who try to use him for their own salvation. Out of their destruction he wrings a truth which is available to others if they wish to use it. He takes no responsibility for ~~the~~ anyone other than himself, but he does give density to the world in which he lives. The implication of the book would seem to be that this is all that a man can give in exchange for his own inevitable destructiveness. The novel is therefore one of White's most pessimistic, but it is also <sup>one of</sup> his most convincing. In ~~eschewing~~ <sup>avoiding</sup> symbolic overtones he has made concrete the metaphysical search which has been at the heart of his whole body of work.

Although the same themes and settings, and even very similar characters, recur in White's novels, each has an entirely distinct attack on reality. ~~It is therefore completely impossible to guess where his next book may take us. At the time of writing, however,~~ he has taken us on a complete circle from moral realism through the furthest reaches of metaphysical ~~and~~ symbolism back to concrete, if sordid, realism again, lit only by the artist's vision of color and rhythm in chaos. Yet in the most symbolic of his works there is still a clear realization of character and setting, both social and physical, just as in the most realistic there is still a concern for the ultimate questions of ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> value and purpose of human life. White is



~~does therefore lie firmly within the Australian literary tradition,~~  
 trying to make real within a particular human and physical environment  
 the dreams which man feels should be possible. His distinct  
 contribution to ~~the~~ *the Australian literary* tradition is the way in which he makes the  
 dream real in existential and spiritual dimensions.



Chapter 000 13

~~Achieved Serenity - Patrick White's The Eye of the Storm.~~

NP

|| Patrick White's most recent novel, The Eye of the Storm,<sup>†</sup> forces his readers to reconsider not only the nature of his achievement in his series of works, but also the <sup>whole</sup> ~~whole~~ tradition from which they have sprung. This reconsideration is furthered by the volume of critical work which is appearing about his <sup>novels</sup> ~~work~~, most of which it is not possible to give detailed attention to here.<sup>10</sup> The effect of <sup>his</sup> ~~the~~ critical discussion has been to direct attention to his religious and metaphysical concerns, and to <sup>emphasize his place within</sup> ~~place within~~ the more universal context of European intellectual traditions rather than within the narrower ~~confines~~ confines of the specifics of Australian society.

On first reading, The Eye of the Storm would seem to ~~reinforce~~ <sup>confirm</sup> the correctness of this judgement. Instead of dealing with outsiders clinging to the ~~merely~~ geographic or moral fringes of Australian society, this novel takes us into the centre of establishment Sydney. The novel is concerned with the death of a wealthy old woman who has dominated Sydney society, and her own family, for half a century. Around her deathbed ~~her~~ circle her two now aging children, both <sup>of them</sup> publicly successful and privately conscious of failure, and various minor attendant planets. The issue at stake is not the quest which occupied Stan Parker or Voss or Theodora Goodman throughout their lives, but rather the question of whether Elizabeth Hunter will be able to carry through to death the success which she has achieved throughout her adult life. Moreover, this success is one of the will. Her unity has been achieved not by openness to experience, not through love, <sup>as</sup> embodied in earlier novels, but by her ruthless subjection of those around her to her own needs and desires. Finally, she is <sup>now</sup> determined to make <sup>even</sup> death itself bow to her will. In turn, the lesser characters are occupied with the question of whether they can lead, or establish, lives independent of Elizabeth Hunter. The raising of these ~~same~~ issues seems to question the basic assumptions of the earlier novels. Their <sup>of the problems</sup> personal urgency, and their setting in a wealthy home with ample resources and cosmopolitan links, seem to transcend the specifically Australian context. Moreover, the sureness of the language <sup>seems</sup> to direct our attention away from the merely

n.p.

local and indiosyncratic towards the universal.

It is, however, in the <sup>language</sup> language of the novel that the continuity with White's earlier work is most manifest, as is ultimately its link with an Australian as well as a European tradition. The first sentence of the book catches the reader up into a situation which is both individual <sup>dual</sup> and universal, defined and yet tentative.

#

K The old woman's head was barely fretting against the pillow. She could have moaned slightly. #3 (p.9)

#

The use of the impersonal phrase "old woman", rather than her proper name, Mrs Hunter, which is given in the next sentence, both gives a generality to the scene and links it to such earlier books as The Aunt's Story and The Tree of Man. The change of grammatical mood in the second verb reinforces the image of a head barely fretting <sup>against</sup> the pillow, of physical reality barely tied down in words, and of a person barely held by physical reality. The mood of the verb also determines the involvement the novel demands of the reader. He is an observer, not allowed to identify with the old woman who is pointed out for his attention, but not allowed either to escape altogether from passing a judgement. ~~His~~ His doubt ~~is~~ may be that of the nurse, who may be the one who is ~~not~~ unsure whether or not Mrs Hunter moaned. But it may also be the author, the impersonal narrator, who is not quite sure of the fact, or even Mrs Hunter herself. This tentativeness towards the precise definition of experience, towards the status of any knowledge, is central to this, as to <sup>much of</sup> White's earlier ~~work~~ work. His



achievement is to place us ~~me~~ firmly in the midst of a concrete situation at the same time as he forces us to question the apparent completeness of our experience. The prose questions the ~~very~~ <sup>same</sup> facts it embodies.

White makes explicit the dangers of words in the meditations of the solicitor, Arnold Wyburd, while Mrs Hunter's children are urging him to "talk to Mother" and condemn her to ~~extreme~~ death in a home for the aged. — — — — —

As for Arnold Wyburd, he realized he had lost his ~~faith~~ <sup>faith</sup> in words, when his life of usefulness had depended on them: they could be used as fences, smoke-screens, knives and stones; they could take the shape of comforting hot water bottles; but if you thought they were about to help you open a door into the truth, you found, instead of a lighted room a dark void you hadn't the courage to enter.

Perhaps <sup>as</sup> you had come closest to illumination in some of those talks with Bill Hunter in front of the fire in the library at "Kudjeri" after Mrs Hunter had gone to bed . . . There was, in particular, the night Bill told about the earthquake he had been through as a young man travelling in Baluchistan, and which you were soon experiencing together, while the house shuddered and crumbled about you, smoke rising not only from the immediate hearth but from the shambles of rubble with its clusters of dark bodies lying limp or struggling calling sinewy arms stretched begging for mercy sometimes out of the cracks in the earth. After Bill had come to the end of his "story", you both remained precariously suspended, it seemed, while dark fingers still raked and clawed at your ankles from the smoking chasm. Words, as Bill had already realized, were pitiful threads to dangle above those whom actions had failed, and God was swallowing up.

*man on* This passage, peripheral to the action, could stand as an image of the whole novel. Like the victims of the <sup>Indian</sup> earthquake, all the characters are being swallowed by God, by death and by time which brings death. They use words as "fences, smoke-screens, knives and stones; . . . hot water bottles", but they want to find the words which will "open a door into truth." But if words will not reveal truth, they will bring back events in which the truth may be found. Just as Bill <sup>Hunter</sup> is able to bring the shambles of the ~~Indian~~ earthquake into the smoke of rising from ~~the hearth~~ <sup>the hearth in the library at "Kudjari",</sup> ~~Bill Hunter's hearth,~~ so Mrs Hunter and her children bring back the events of the past, not so much to examine them as to relive them, to re-weave them into the texture of the present. Ultimately, it is those who have come through the earthquake, like Bill, or the eye of the storm, like Elizabeth Hunter, who have the strength to command their present. The others remain attendants and acolytes, like the household staff, or just lost souls like the children, Basil and Dorothy.

The will which strengthens is seen, however, also as a quality which isolates. Bill Hunter is known to his wife only as Alfred. In refusing to use what he calls his ~~friend~~ "friendly" name, Elizabeth separates herself from his real life, even from knowledge of his character, his interests. Yet paradoxically this separation becomes a source of strength for each of them. White shows us little of Bill Hunter, provides little inner life for the man who <sup>hides</sup> behind his disguise as "one of ~~those~~ the costive, crutch-heavy ~~males~~ who came to discuss wool and meat: so

slow and ponderous. He does, however, give us a glimpse of his inner life through his choice of books, and of his strength in his capacity for friendship, his lack of demand, his apparent acceptance of the terms of his life.

His importance in the novel is his relationship with Elizabeth Hunter. He gives her the wealth to maintain her position in life, two children, and her freedom. He also gives her certain sentimental memories of unpassionate affection during their separation, and of her opportunity to play the nurse during his final illness. The episode of Alfred Hunter's death is particularly interesting for its human tenderness and for the undertone of regret for the relationship, which was simulated during these last weeks of his life, but never achieved in their marriage. Her husband's death serves to confirm Elizabeth Hunter's choice to live as a person alone. The novel, which occupies only the last few days of her life but adds the rest in retrospect, is a chronicle of her attempt, finally successful, to knit together the separate parts of her being, to make sense of the whole. In this respect it is rather like The Tree of Man, but, instead of tracing a man's life from its prime to its end, we watch the earlier events from the perspective of the last days. This chronicle is set in the context of ~~similar~~ attempts by her immediate family and attendants to come to terms with the fact of Elizabeth Hunter and her meaning to them, and these attempts by contrast reveal her as a woman who is finally justified by the mere fact of being herself.

NP





Mary de Santis can accept this only in an intellectual sense. Her upbringing has, as her name suggests, removed her from the love of possessions and given her, instead, a love of service. <sup>Q</sup> . . . I've only wanted to serve others - through my profession - which is all I know how to do. Oh, and to love of course, she laughed constrainedly; but that is so vast it is difficult to imagine - how - how to achieve it. <sup>Q</sup> The hesitation of her words is not ~~the hesitation~~ of one who is <sup>unable</sup> ~~not able~~ to phrase what she feels, but a <sup>one</sup> ~~hesitation~~ about her own feelings which is induced by the fact of her employer, Elizabeth Hunter. This hesitation arouses the older woman's anger, which then turns to a suspicion that the nurse is accusing her of not loving her husband. This suspicion turns to contrition, as she ~~xxx~~ acknowledges that <sup>Q</sup> There is this other love . . . And I still can't reach it. <sup>Q</sup> She lays her head on the nurses hands, thus turning her "to a stick, though an exalted one." <sup>Q</sup>

9

run on

~~The~~ This episode has resemblances to the <sup>exchange on marriage</sup> ~~relationship~~ between Mrs Godbold, then Ruth Joiner, and her employer, Mrs Chalmers-Robinson, in Riders in the Chariot. Mrs Chalmers-Robinson tries to compensate for her own deficiencies by probing her maid's inmost thoughts, ~~xxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxx~~ about both her religious beliefs and her future husband, and she too attempts to assuage her guilt by offering the maid a gift, although the offer never becomes reality. In <sup>the earlier</sup> ~~this~~ novel, however, it is clearly the maid who is morally superior, whereas in the later work Mrs Hunter retains her superiority. Sister de Santis' devotion has its reward, she is exalted, but she remains "a stick", essentially sterile. Elizabeth Hunter's search for a larger love ~~ix~~ ~~seems~~ not merely self-indulgent, but a sign that she will achieve more than is <sup>permitted</sup> ~~allowed~~ to her nurse.

The difference between Mrs Chalmers<sup>R</sup>Robinson and Mrs Hunter does not lie in their external actions, for both are self-indulgent women who exploit<sup>out</sup> others for their own satisfaction, but in the language by which White places their actions. Mrs Chalmers<sup>R</sup>Robinson is an empty woman whose actions correspond to no inner reality. She uses religion, or her maid's emotions, as she uses brandy, as an escape from her own void. "And was hitting her head against the hot pillow. She could not quite succeed in running down<sup>g</sup>" The theatricality of the gesture is confirmed by the carefully qualifying phrase, "could not quite succeed". All of Mrs Chalmers-Robinson's actions have this quality of just falling short of authenticity. By contrast, Elizabeth Hunter's actions fail to achieve, not <sup>e</sup> affect, but object<sup>o</sup> ~~Howe~~ but they arise from an inner necessity. "When she turned she was burning with a blue, inward rage; but quickly quenched it, and drew up a stool at this girl's feet." <sup>≡</sup> The gestures hide the inward state which is the true reality. In sitting at her nurse's feet, and laying her head on the nurse's hands, she is ~~not~~ not only indulging in gesture, although this is part of the truth, but also seeking by external actions to discover for herself a truth which will answer the inward rage. It is this quality of inward life which distinguishes Elizabeth Hunter from the many other selfish and self-indulgent creatures who have figured in White's pages. In studying the inner anguish of the <sup>socially superior</sup> ~~exalted~~, White extends a compassion which previously he has shown only to the humble.

Elizabeth Hunter does not, however, merely represent an extension of White's ~~sympathetic~~ sympathetic range, for she is the standard by which the other characters in the novel are measured. She is therefore not <sup>just</sup> merely someone who can also be pitied, but someone in comparison with whom most of the characters are found wanting. In this ~~novel~~ <sup>novel</sup> she plays the part which has been played in ~~White's~~ White's earlier work by those who have given of themselves, whether to others or to art or, like Voss, just to their vision.

(NP) Elizabeth Hunter would seem to give of her<sup>s</sup>self to nobody. Certainly, she may appear to have some moral superiority to her children, who wait to profit by her death, and <sup>who</sup> prove mean-minded even about the fortune they inherit. <sup>10</sup> But <sup>By comparison</sup> ~~In terms of accountant's morality,~~ the action of the Princesse de Lascabanes in ~~depriving~~ depriving a cleaning woman who was "brought by hire-car - from Red-fern" of four hundred much needed dollars is probably of much less significance than her mother's denial of marriage to her husband for perhaps twenty years of his life. The moral difference lies, however, precisely in the nature of the action. Elizabeth Hunter may hurt others, but she remains true to herself. Her daughter <sup>however,</sup> lives merely by words. Why drag in sincerity? A sense of reality is what is called for! The princess spoke so vehemently she had to hang on to the handbag sitting on her lap." The vehemence is all on the surface, and is condemned by the nature of the support she seeks - a handbag, both an item of dress and a symbol of possession. The Princesse de Lascabanes, Dorothy Hunter, is ~~condemned~~ defined by externals, whereas her mother subjects external including other people, to the demands of her inner nature.

The <sup>S</sup>ame distinction separates Elizabeth Hunter from her other child, the actor Sir Basil. Basil awaits his mother's death so that he might have the money to back the production in London of a new play, <sup>which</sup> ~~but~~ he does not wish to stage ~~the play~~ for its own sake, but to gratify a current ardor<sup>u</sup> for Mitty Jacka, an ardor<sup>u</sup> which he himself recognizes as false. He could feel his mask grinning up at her, the teeth grown jagged in its mock flesh: that of the Second Conspirator. Or was it the First Suicide? <sup>u</sup> The animal image places Basil outside humanity, his uncertainty of role deprives him of identity, and in its confusion places him as pure destroyer, both of himself and others. It is <sup>appropriate</sup> ~~appropriate~~ that through the novel we discover his aspirations to play Lear. The real Lear is, like Basil, a man who, at least at the beginning of the play, cannot go beyond his allotted role to discover his true self. The play, however, forces Lear to search himself, and so presents to the actor a challenge which Basil lacks the ~~manly~~ <sup>vital</sup> ~~manhood~~ <sup>indicated</sup> manhood to accept. The centre of <sup>Basil's</sup> ~~his~~ self is a ~~hollow~~, symbolized by his casual encounters, his broken marriages, and his jet-setting about the world.



The event of death, <sup>on</sup> ~~en~~ which all the characters in the novel attend, reveals also the true quality of the life of each. In a manner reminiscent almost of a <sup>med</sup> ~~med~~ieval morality, each is judged by what he seeks for himself, or rather by the end to which he turns himself. Basil seeks a perfect display, Dorothy recognition. Arnold Wyburd seeks merely to fulfil an allotted ~~part~~ social role. Elizabeth's husband chooses the comparative seclusion of the rural property of ~~Kudjeri~~ "Kudjeri", near the town of Gogong, which is reminiscent of Lawson's Gulgong, but in this backwater he dedicates himself to the limited but real perfection of sheeph<sup>e</sup>breeding and book-collecting. His books are collected not for display but to aid his search for truth, a search in which Elizabeth vicariously participates while nursing him through his last weeks. Alfred's <sup>his</sup> last word is "Whyyy?"

The three nurse<sup>s</sup> who are <sup>most</sup> ~~most~~ closely associated with Elizabeth Hunter's final illness similarly judge and are judged by their own lives. Sister Badgery is the least interesting, living on the surface of gossip and material triviality. Sister Mary de Santis is, as her name implies, a devotee for whom Mrs Hunter becomes a god to be served. In so totally giving herself she also, in a reversal of the gospel morality, loses her true self. We learn that her <sup>parents,</sup> ~~from the different Mediterranean cultures of Greece and Italy, created through their mutual love a self-sufficient world from which the daughter was excluded.~~ Her life is a search to fulfil the unrequited love for her parents, and particularly for her father, through service to others. The arrival of Sir Basil awakes in her, however, a feeling ~~for~~ sense of her own loneliness, and she is temporarily overcome by

lust, <sup>which</sup> She attempts to expiate ~~this lust~~ by ~~the constant task of~~  
~~mopping up spills from the floor~~ kneeling in prayer to her  
mistress, but is sharply recalled to a sense of earthly reality. ~~It~~  
She then sublimates her lust through the menial task of mopping up  
old spills on the kitchen floor and through the celebratory duty of  
gathering roses from the garden. Her recovery of a sense of the  
transcendent in the real is confirmed by the words of the peasant-  
migrant, in her mother's tongue, "Ti ximairoma kanomay! . . . What a  
sunrise we are making!" ~~Sister~~ This descent to the depths of  
humiliation and loneliness and recovery is interwoven in the novel  
between Elixabeth Hunter's recollection, or dream, of her husband's  
illness and death.

Sister Manhood ~~searches~~ similarly searches for her true direct-  
ion in the hours following Basil Hunter's return. ~~Her character is the~~  
~~reverse of the night~~ She is the <sup>opposite</sup> reverse of Mary de Santis,  
for she is energetically and demandingly loved but fears to give  
herself. She is unable to <sup>return</sup> join her cousin Snow's lesbian affections,  
but rejects Col Pardoe's offer of love for fear that ~~it is~~ he wants,  
not to possess her, but to make her into something she is not. If  
Sister de Santis is able to be herself at the price of feeling  
incomplete, Sister Manhood's desire, and ability, to complete herself  
with another threatens to disintegrate the self she has to offer.

While White never lets us forget that each of the nurses is an individual person, each also represents one <sup>aspect</sup> ~~aspect~~ of the character of her mistress, Elizabeth Hunter. Sister Badgery's delight in the material is reflected in Mrs Hunter's delight in clothes and the apparatus of fashion. The older woman has given herself to many lovers, just as does Sister Manhood, but she has also preserved and strengthened an inner self which she has no more revealed to others than ~~has~~ <sup>has</sup> Sister de Santis revealed her inmost life. Moreover, while Mary de Santis must worship, Elizabeth Hunter is content to be worshipped. ~~Finally~~, her life is directed ~~not to~~ <sup>n</sup> ~~either~~ <sup>to</sup> her lovers nor to her earthly self, but to a spiritual self which is also one with the larger creation. Like her cook, her life is directed to the creation of "one whole human being." But while the cook is conscious that she will not achieve this <sup>aim</sup>, Elizabeth Hunter steadfastly pursues it. ~~her aim.~~ <sup>aims.</sup> Paradoxically, it is her husband, Alfred, who perhaps knows her least, who makes ~~her~~ <sup>Elizabeth Hunter</sup> most conscious of her aim. Its first expression in the novel comes after her adultery ~~with~~ <sup>with</sup> Athol Shrieve, after she ~~walks~~ <sup>walks</sup> with her husband in the park and realizes that she cannot return his affection and ~~return with him to~~ <sup>again</sup> share his life, and immediately before his letter which makes the noble and pathetic gesture of offering her her freedom.

NP

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K . . . I am neither compleat wife, sow, nor crystal, and must take many other shapes before I finally set, or before I am, more probably, shattered. <sup>27 (p. 102)</sup>

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It is in keeping with the nature of their relationship that she is not able to share with her husband this understanding, which he has prompted, of the direction in which she must lead her life.

A similar understanding of the aim of her life is prompted by the letter which faces her with the imminent fact of her husband's death.

#

K

As light as unlikely probably as painful as a shark's egg the old not body rather flimsy soul is whirled around sometimes spat out anus-upward (souls have an anus they are never allowed to forget it) never separated from the brown the sometimes tinted spawn of snapshots the withered navel string still stuck to what it aspires to yes at last to be if the past the dream life will allow. <sup>18</sup> (p. 194)

#

The difficult syntax and elusive denotation of this passage, ~~typical~~ characteristic of ~~White's~~ some of White's earlier books, is untypical of this novel. Its lack of precision is, however, appropriate to its placing in the narrative of Mrs Hunter's return to "Kudjeri" to nurse her husband. It is an isolated piece of reflection between her outpouring of grief on her receipt of the news and her ~~arrival~~ actual departure for her husband's property. The reader is therefore left uncertain whether to take it as a reflection prompted by the actual event or by Elizabeth Hunter's recollection of the event on her own death-bed. Whichever, it remains an apprehension in her mind, not an idea which can be exactly defined. Its imprecision is, moreover, a precise definition of the border between being and non-being, spiritual and fleshly, self and universe, which is where the goal of the search lies. The images of the paragraph are simultaneously images of Elizabeth Hunter's actual life and of her true self.



The quality which seems to separate Elizabeth Hunter from the other characters in the book, with the possible exception of her husband, is wholeness, a unity not only within herself but between herself and her universe. Sister de Santis seems to share this quality, but her encounters with Basil reveal ~~in~~ her lack. In a surrender to lust, she throws off her clothes after his first arrival, and scatters "wasted basil seed" on the floor in a kind of <sup>m</sup>sybolic but barren rape.<sup>19</sup> When she goes to his hotel to confront him over his intended betrayal of his mother, it is she who betrays, who is seduced by his person and ~~his~~ voice and abandons her mission for the luxury of lunching with him. The lunch is not, however, a success. She behaves variously in a silly, brash or affected manner. The unity of minds they both seek is not attained, and the final ~~symbol~~<sup>memory</sup> of the sophisticated lunch is a drunken businessman falling through a chair and the floating body of a strangled dog, symbol ~~of~~<sup>of</sup> physical decay and of the human cruelty they are both prepared to be a party to.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Basil senses his own incompleteness and failure ~~when his encounter with Sister de Santis awakens him to an awareness of the unreality of his dream of making at last a successful marriage with the nubile and young Sister Manhood. His awareness culminates in his recognition that, while his aspiration is to Lear, his success is as Horner. This awareness, however, he keeps to himself, and his offering of himself as Lear falls as short as his actual performance. "She was honest enough, poor thing. He was the dishonest one. AND And a bloody superficial Lear."~~<sup>despite her honesty,</sup> Mary de Santis <sup>is</sup> limited as much by her failure of comprehension as he is by his failure of achievement.

01

The two pivotal episodes in the novel are the visit of Elizabeth Hunter and Dorothy to Brumby Island and the return of Dorothy and Basil to "Kudjeri". The first episode is <sup>wi</sup>entwined in the narrative with the children's plans to dispatch their mother to the old people's home, while the second is their attempt to escape from the consequences of their decision. Each episode tests the characters concerned by removing them from their normal social environment and confronting them with unsubdued nature.

The episode <sup>de</sup> on Brumby Island gives the novel its name, for this is the occasion on which Elizabeth Hunter passes through the eye of the cyclone. She has been deserted on the island by her hosts, by her daughter, who has been outraged into jealous anger by her mother's wooing of ~~the Hunter~~ Professor Edvard Pehl, and by the professor himself. She is therefore left alone to face the storm. It is perhaps because of Basil Hunter's constant allusions to his futile desire to succeed in the role of Lear that we are reminded of a parallel between Elizabeth Hunter's situation on the island and that of Lear when he rushes into the ~~storm~~ storm. Basil will never succeed as Lear because he will never <sup>C</sup>confront his true self. Elizabeth Hunter, however, submits herself to the storm as to a lover, "to someone to whom she had never been introduced". As a consequence, she goes beyond death to a state of total belief in herself, "in what she saw and was and <sup>what</sup> ~~what~~ she was was too real too diverse composed of everyone she had known and loved and not always altogether loved it is better than nothing and given ~~birth~~ birth to and for God's sake." <sup>24</sup> In their very acknowledgement of incompleteness and inadequacy the words convey the totality of her life.

In the storm, therefore, Elizabeth Hunter, like Lear, gains a true knowledge of herself, and also like him this knowledge leads her to a feeling of kinship with all creation, although in her case animal rather than human. While the eye of the storm is overhead, and time is suspended, Elizabeth Hunter offers bread to the wild swans, who take it, "Expressing neither contempt nor fear." Her <sup>moment of triumph</sup> apotheosis is like that of Voss, but is fully realized in naturalistic terms. It takes place within natural time, during the cyclone, but also in a moment suspended from time. Similarly, her return to time is accomplished both naturally and grotesquely through ~~her~~ catching sight of a seagull which has been impaled by the wind on a spiky branch. This reminder of the transience of life and of the suffering within it both corrects the exaltation of the moment and restores her to her senses in time to secure her ~~own~~ physical safety. Yet the moment remains with her, both as an assurance of her superiority to the fates, and to her children, and as a reminder of the gulls which lie in wait "to ~~be~~ plunge their beaks and empty your sockets." <sup>22</sup> ~~22~~ The reference is to the impaled gull, but also to the children who blinded Gloucester and who will <sup>eat</sup> ~~eat~~ on the substance of this parent. It is ~~in~~ her knowledge of the cruelty as well as the sublimity of life that gives Elizabeth Hunter her strength. She defeats her children by being not only the Lear who triumphs over their cruelty, but also the Cordelia to whom Basil has not the strength to yield. His simultaneous awareness that he cannot afford to yield to his mother, and that his professional failure was a sentimental <sup>yielding</sup> ~~yielding~~ to a stage Cordelia, is his own judgement. <sup>22</sup> ~~23~~

If Brumby Island is the scene of Elizabeth Hunter's greatest triumph, it is also the scene of her daughter's greatest defeat. Dorothy Hunter has returned to find solace for the collapse of her marriage with the Prince de Lascabanes. She feels the lift of secret joy in the helicopter which takes her from the normal life of the mainland, but is afraid to respond to it, and thus fails "to animate the stick she was changed into." <sup>24</sup> While her mother courts the island and all on it, <sup>and</sup> is seen as an "idol", the ~~warnings are~~ <sup>warnings being</sup> "adoring", her "devotees", ~~but~~ <sup>remains</sup> Dorothy ~~remains~~ aloof, and, finally, ~~finally~~ defeated by her mother for the attention of Professor Pehl, flees the island. Her loss is not merely the loss of a foreign professor who could teach her something of the science of nature, but the loss of nature, and thus of herself. ~~For a moment she is able to~~ sense an escape from her emptiness, and from the only reality she acknowledges, her <sup>own</sup> ~~own~~ unhappy past and the trinkets of maids' bedrooms, representing a life she cannot share, into a world where Professor Pehl will strengthen her against the joyful fear induced by the brumbies' dangerous but exultant spirits of the island. This hope is, however, ~~destroyed by her mother's seduction of the professor.~~

The actual contest between the two women for the attention of a man who is himself a stranger is described sardonically, largely as seen by Dorothy herself. It is given its overtones, however, by its natural setting. The professor himself talks of the mysterious natural economy of the deep, and of the untamed woods of his native <sup>or</sup> Norway. Their encounter with the brumbies occurs on the beach ~~at~~ the sun is setting: "this bronze tyrant lowered into the flamingo litter and encircling host of haze-blue trees. The splendours which were being



enacted kindled tongues of expectancy in her, for the dissertation he -  
 Edvard, had promised for the evening. White carefully checks the  
 romantic flames of the sunset and Dorothy's answering passions with  
 a dry scientific discourse, just as at a similar moment later, on the  
 brink of the storm, Elizabeth's enraptured absorption in the bush is  
 corrected by ~~xxxxxxxx~~ her encounter with the workaday reality of men  
 chopping it down.

This dialectic of the human and the natural is the key to the  
 function served by ~~the natural~~ <sup>natural</sup> in this novel. The greater part of the  
 action ~~of the novel~~ takes place in the ~~entirely~~ <sup>entirely</sup> man-made environment  
 of fashionable Sydney. This action is linked with the greater theatre  
 of Europe, where Sir Basil rehearses his Lear and Dorothy agonizes in  
 her church and her French housekeeping. The source of the drama of  
 the book is this European ~~tradition~~ <sup>tradition</sup>, of which we are constantly  
 reminded not only by the facts of the children's lives but by the  
 language of Lear, the imagery of the struggle of the generations, and <sup>by</sup> ~~of~~  
 the aspirations to power and immortality which are the substance of the  
 European tradition. Even on the island, Elizabeth woos Edvard with  
 Brahms, or his slick substitutes, and Dorothy seeks to absolve her  
 unhappiness through the redemptive work of menial tasks.

This drama is, however, ~~the~~ counterpointed with memories of childhood in the country, which is where not only Basil and Dorothy <sup>feel they have their roots,</sup> but also Elizabeth. The fashionable home in Sydney is built by Elizabeth to escape from Gogong, and her dull yet unknown husband, and it is as much a symbol of ~~her~~ her failure <sup>at</sup> marriage, at parenthood, at the inmost elements of life <sup>as</sup> as it is of her success in external things. Yet if the countryside is presented as being the natural world, it is not presented as being man's natural home. On the contrary, man ~~remains~~ <sup>remains</sup> an alien. In retrospect, Alfred Hunter may have seemed to have achieved harmony with his setting, <sup>although only as a "monument in bronze,"</sup> but when the children revisit Gogong the present reality is ~~one~~ one of dogged poverty <sup>and decay</sup>. Similarly, the Warnings may enjoy their visits to Brumby Island, but they do not belong there, any more than the forestry men who ~~only~~ <sup>only</sup> have ~~only~~ a ~~permanent~~ camp ~~only~~. The natural environment is not a home where man can recover himself, but a place where he can encounter a reality greater than himself. ~~Unexpectedly~~ The graces and culture of Europe, displayed by Elizabeth in her carefully staged dinner party, are tested against the reality of the brumbies, which ~~represent~~ "wheeled and spun into spiralling shadows." At another level this reality is the storm, when Elizabeth lay and submitted to someone to whom she had never been introduced. . . It is the linesman testing for the highest pitch of awfulness the human spirit can endure." ~~26~~

By submitting to the storm, to the greatest of her lovers, Elizabeth earns the calm which comes to her in its eye, and which grants her a kind of immortality, or at least the chance to choose the moment of her own death. This resolution is explained in moral as much as in romantic or mystic terms. The storm tests Elizabeth in the sense of forcing her to contemplate all her life, her betrayal of her children, her lack of <sup>physical</sup> nurture for them, her loves. Before the storm ~~she~~ she goes by herself into the bush and, at the scene of human <sup>destruction</sup> destruction, where the woodfellers are at work, anticipates the natural destruction and healing to come. "Peace and light were flooding in <sup>where</sup> where violence had recently exploded." She must then discover her own loneliness, with the discovery that both Dorothy and Edvard have left her, although she believes the other is still at his work on the island. Her final act of redemption, which saves her from destruction in the house and delivers her naked to the storm, is her act of compassion when she runs out of the house to find Edvard, "thinking less of selfpreservation than of finding and shepherding her deadly companion." <sup>29</sup> It is this act of compassion which grants her the ~~Biblical~~ calm in the eye of the storm, when after the violence, she enjoys for a moment the unity of all living things, ~~and even the wild swans come to take bread from her hands.~~ <sup>29</sup> From this ~~she is recalled, to the further violence of the storm and of life, by~~ <sup>before being brought back, by</sup> the sight of ~~an~~ <sup>the</sup> impaled gull, which ~~brings her back~~ to the suffering from which she has only momentarily been released.

The combination of the natural, the moral and the mystic in this episode makes real ~~the~~ in this novel the transcendental element of life which has been implicit in all of White's novels, and which he has variously symbolized in art, in madness or simplicity, and in such moments of vision as come to Stan Parker, to Voss, and to the four riders of the chariot. Each of these visions is of course as different in its particular manifestation as are the lives of the characters to whom it is manifested. Elizabeth Hunter lacks the ~~devotion~~ <sup>devotion</sup>, the vision or the goodness of earlier characters, yet it is her moment of insight which is most real, because it is most completely realized in natural terms. The unity which Elizabeth finds in the eye of the storm is also a unity which brings together all planes of this novel. It is because she achieves this vision that her life stands in the book as a judgment on the lives of the others who refuse life's final challenge, to be lived for itself.





This judgement is made explicit by the contrast between the climax of Elizabeth's visit to the island and the failure of Basil and Dorothy to recover their childhood or to find a future during their return to "Kudjeri". The property itself is now run down, in the hands of two failures, ~~the Macrorys~~ Anne <sup>Macroroy</sup> ~~Macroroy~~ and her husband ~~Rory~~, formerly a stockman for Alfred Hunter. The farm family accepts Basil and Dorothy, but tension remains - they cannot be at home in a house no longer theirs; differences of class, wealth and sensitivity prevent the blossoming of an incipient affection between Dorothy and one of the children. In the background to their visit is the knowledge of ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> surprising pleasure their father took in Stendhal's The Charterhouse of Parma, <sup>through</sup> which Dorothy browses ~~through~~ during her stay. This novel becomes, however, a "cheap novelette" in its English translation, and a symbol of aspirations to European manners and romance which are mocked by the sombre Australian reality. On the second day of their stay, Basil attempts to recover an identity with the country and with his childhood. Macroroy drops him by a dam where he had broken his arm as a child. The <sup>memory</sup> ~~memory~~ of this episode is itself an indication of the ability of the Australian countryside to thwart human hopes:

" . . . put his arms around the tree, instinctively shinning up its shagginess, grasping it with his knees, while a stench from the ants he crushed and the motions of his chafing limbs drowned the scent of gorse . . . the cries of a desperate magpie . . . He hoped he would find a nestful of reds: what he hadn't got was a magpie red. Perhaps he never would." There is no romantic glow here, only harshness and failure which extend ~~in~~ beyond the human world to the magpie and the tree.

NP

delete

25

There is a nostalgic glow in Basil's memory of his father's affection, "trying to love", and of the security he felt ~~against~~ in his father's arms as he <sup>was</sup> picked him up after the accident and carried him home on his <sup>father's</sup> horse. The glow is tempered, however, by the recollection of the ~~rarity~~ <sup>rarity</sup> of the moment, of its tentativeness, and of the way it was dissolved by the contest ~~against~~ for affection between Alfred and Elizabeth, a contest which led to the defeat of both.

Similarly, the momentary success of Basil's attempt to integrate his life and art in this landscape is thwarted by the physical environment itself. He wades into the soft, accepting mud of the dam, and there, absurdly, ~~delivers a lecture~~ he "aimed at the Australian daylight" the Shakespearian tribute to romance, "In such a night". "He listened again: as the circles widened around him on the muddy water, magpie's wings were clattering skywards; but the silence burning into his skin was the applause he valued. That his art should have come to terms with his surroundings gratified Sir Basil Hunter." <sup>32</sup> ←

( The slightly arch tone of this passage betrays ~~his~~ the absurdity of Basil's delusion, and indeed it disappears almost as soon as it ~~starts~~ comes. Basil starts to think of Macrory's return, and then of his mother's rejection of his childhood attempts at affection. Then the dam itself destroys him, when he receives a gash from some sharp object concealed in the mud. The rhetoric of his posturing is replaced by a crude physical fear of death.

*Basil and Dorothy's stay is disastrous.*  
~~The remainder of their stay is similarly disastrous.~~ The

attempts by Basil to recover his past, by Dorothy to find affection in the present or to fantasize for herself, with the aid of The Charterhouse of Parma, a relation<sup>ship</sup> with Rory Macrory, are equally defeated by ugly reality. Finally, on a bitterly cold night, the two retire to each other's arms as a desperate escape from the world into a family or a womb they have never known. From this point, the only significant action in the novel is their mother's defeat of their plans to incarcerate her in a nursing home by her choosing of her own moment of death, thus both forestalling them and completing the pattern of her life, carrying out the will of the eye. The success of Elizabeth Hunter's death is counterpointed by the mean<sup>ing</sup> mindedness of her children to those who attended her in life. The judgement of the mystical plane is thus comple<sup>ment</sup>ed by the moral judgement on the human plane.

The paradox of this novel is both characteris<sup>tic</sup> of White's writing and peculiarly Australian. Although the book is set largely in an urban setting, with values and manners drawn from Europe, ~~these~~ ~~xx~~ the characters draw their personal<sup>ities</sup> from the countryside, and it is in a natural setting that the two<sup>centrally</sup> judgemental episodes occur. The judgement is not, however, as in English pastoral writing, that ~~is~~ implicit in a vision of human and natural harmony. ~~The judgement~~<sup>it</sup> arises from the response of the individual to a nature which is at best aloof, at worst hostile. Only Elizabeth Hunter, by surrendering herself to the moment, achieves a harmony of all the elements of her life. The others remain isolated and thus, ultimately, hollow.