

## TRANSCENDENTALISM OF WHITE IN *THE AUNT'S STORY*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT:

Patrick White is the only Nobel laureate of 20<sup>th</sup> century of Australia. He is a transcendental writer with firm motives. Human consciousness is the key point in all his novels. He explores the meanings of life and mysteries of human sufferings in his novels. His fiction depicts the journey of his characters from suffering to redemption. He asserts the need for restoration of faith in life and God. Like a prophet he teaches that life is a mixture of opposites and dualities. He started writing at a time when the world was afflicted with the wave of nihilism and people were directionless. White discards nihilistic attitude of prevalent society and turns to transcendental writers like Emerson as hope. He learns that spirit of man is invincible and sufferings are unavoidable, but lead to redemption, if taken wisely. In his early novels *Happy Valley* and *The Living and the Dead*, the characters suffer and learn to accept fate. But in *The Aunt's Story*, there is a sharp divergence as the sufferings of Theodora are purposeful in leading her to self-realization and peace. It is a challenging novel dealing with the transcendental theme of regeneration of the spiritual power. The novel explores the nature of truth concerning the mystery of life. She communes with the landscape and experiences peace of mind but her journey to Europe and America brings chaos in her life. Through Holstius, she learns the transcendental view that life is a complete whole made up of opposites.

**Keywords:** chaos, Holstius, consciousness, landscape, nihilism, transcendental.

**RESEARCH PAPER:** The present study is aimed at exploring the transcendental faith of Patrick White, the only Nobel Laureate of the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Australia in his novel *The Aunt's Story*. White is a transcendental novelist and his fiction depicts the journey of his characters from suffering to redemption. He got a Nobel Prize for his humanistic vision of life and his genuine concern for the growth and development of Australian literature. In each novel White wants his characters to see, explore and realize the value of life. Patrick White started writing at a time when the world was afflicted with the wave of nihilism and pessimism and people were directionless. Religion couldn't guide them. Wars Depression and the Jewish Holocaust brought about a sense of meaninglessness. Australian people were the victims of the hegemony of the imperial forces. He wrote novels to seek

knowledge by both intellectual deliberation and intuitive identification. His fiction is a vehicle of knowledge and a mode of knowing. He believes that human imagination has Divine powers. In each of his novels, there is a search for ultimate meaning, where a plain, awkward, ugly life acquires a rich escape into idealized selfhood, and the evolutionary development of his characters toward a "superman" state. White's characters acquire spiritual strength and gain enlightenment and their quest is a process to explore the ultimate frontiers of human existence. White believes that the new world can be a place of death as well as life. The spirit of man is invincible and sufferings lead to redemption and self-realization. He borrowed the idealistic vision of life from Immanuel Kant, Emerson, and Thoreau and depicted his transcendental vision in his novels. Throughout his life, White was

confronted with the existential problem to explore reality and the mystery of human sufferings.

In this study, the main purpose is to expound how the protagonists of his novel *The Aunt's Story* (1948) understand their problems or mistakes and undergo suffering that enables them to realize the vision of their strong will. The plot of the novel unfolds moral progress as being dependent upon the law of suffering. He demonstrates the inevitability of suffering affirming the life of spirit and the hollowness of life. His vision reveals that sufferings are redemptive. The search for self-realization and various forms of the concept of knowledge are the major themes; they are linked with the questions of man's free will to decide his fate, to govern his own life. Patrick White had said: Life seems to be for many people pretty deadly dull. I have tried to convey a splendor, a transcendence, which is also there; above the human realities . . . I wanted to suggest my own faith in these superhuman realities (*During 19*).

In his early novels such as *Happy Valley* and *The Living and the Dead*, the characters suffer but their sufferings teach them to accept the immutable fate with stoic resignation. Life is taken as futile and meaningless. But in *The Aunt's Story*, there is a sharp divergence as the sufferings of Theodora are purposeful in leading her to self-realization and peace. H.P. Heseltine (1963) comments that *The Aunt's Story* stands between the novels of non-commitment and the novels of commitment" (71). Elizabeth Loder (1963) observes that "White's *The Aunt's Story* reveals the turning point in Patrick White's philosophy" (83). The plot of the novel unfolds a very long and painful journey of the heroine Theodora Goodman to comprehend the meaning of justice, truth, and peace prevailing in the universe. Patrick White argues that reconciliation cannot be imposed from outside. It grows from within and an individual has to undergo a lot of sufferings to achieve spiritual reconciliation. Like William Wordsworth, Thoreau, and Whitman, White puts faith in

spiritual power and spiritual healing. The protagonists achieve spiritual sublimation at the end of the novel raising above all the petty issues that confront man in his routine existence of life. The critics of Patrick White regarded *The Aunt's Story* as an experimental novel for it moves between realism and horrifying gothic.

White's *The Aunt's Story* is a challenging novel dealing with the transcendental theme of regeneration of the spiritual power. The plot of the novel gives a convincing juxtaposition of present and past, illusion and reality, sanity and insanity. The novel explores the nature of truth concerning the mystery of life. White was frustrated with his unsettled life; he remained homeless as he couldn't settle either in Europe or in America. He wrote novels to fill the spiritual void. White has used the symbolic significance of the natural landscape. White has employed the techniques of stream of consciousness and the elements of surrealism. The novel is divided into three sections indicating the physical and symbolical places Theodora inhabits; Meroe is the name of the home of Goodman. Theodora had inherited this home after the death of her mother. Her sister Fanny always expresses her anger over this inheritance. She spends most of her time in *Jardin Exotique*, the garden of the hotel du Midi in France. She also spends some time in France, where she lives for some time; a small village in America. Here she meets Holstius in a lost hut in the woods.

Morley (1972) observes that White's *The Aunt's Story* is a journey of self-discovery, a Modern Odyssey" (63). Panaghis (1977) argues that the "novel is a search to achieve a state of wholeness" (30) in the mythical sense. Veronica Brady (1978) states that Theodora is a "Ulysses figure, seeking to return home to the land of vision" (Brady 70). Wittman argues that the main purpose of the "journey of Theodora is to achieve spiritual sublimation; she must face the continuous intersecting between the physical and spiritual worlds in search for a final, redemptive harmony" (Wittman 144). Mircea Eliade

opines that the novel is about the discovery of self and exploration of Truth. In the first section of the novel, Meroe is a place of peace and tranquility as there is harmony between people and natural things. Theodora communes with the landscape and experiences peace of mind walking on the paddocks. She feels a unity in the natural order and fully comprehends the spiritual significance of the landscape. But her journey to Europe and America brings chaos in her life; her identity is fractured in her quest for exploration of Truth. She leaves Australia but the memory of her home haunts her. Her mind gets distracted as her communion with the Meroe landscape is broken. The landscape is depicted as dead and desolate with tall hills and solitary tussocks of grass. White uses yellow, black, grey and brown colors in symbolical style. The landscape is harsh and inhospitable but Theodora is not worried about it. The skeletal trees at Meroe are abstractions of real trees. For her, Meroe is a place of spiritual bliss; a sacred place to rediscover herself. Theodora was informed by her father that "there is another Meroe ... a dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia" (25), Theodora believes that Meroe is a "legendary landscape" (25) and she feels unique sensation in touching and feeling. Wordsworth believes that nature is the manifestation of God. Theodora also believes that the Meroe landscape has a deeper meaning beyond external appearances. She cannot explain in words the spiritual significance of Meroe and when asked by Lou, her niece she is unable to answer:

"But, my darling, there is very little to tell" (20).

Meroe is a part of her body and soul though she cannot explain in words the spiritual significance of the landscape. She was very fond of walking alone in the dead landscape among yellow grasses. Theodora has a natural passion to be in communion with the landscape. She takes off her clothes and floats in the water like a skinny fish. She listens to the sounds of life in Meroe. She feels excited to hear the sounds of the birds and

anxiously watches the water running and wind blowing. Her brown body is "the shallow browner water" (40). Indeed she becomes a part of Nature. She has skinny body like a stick as she feels thrilled communicating with the bones of the earth in her efforts to "come a little closer to the truth" (63). Theodora feels that the landscape is both "desolate and soothing" (63). She struggles to explore the "peace of mind" (26). Theodora has a religious mission to know the mystery of nature, life, and existence. She feels and knows the mystery of life and death and yet she needs to see into the life of things. Gail Jones (2015) observes that "Theodora is the mystical saint of Patrick White" (156).

Theodora is the plain daughter of a vain mother and a dreamer father. She is regarded as an outsider in the realm of White's fiction, often despised, derided and ignored by middle-class society. She is a spinster; an elderly woman who has metaphysical visions. She is hailed as a prophetess in a society. She has insight and illumination that she... becomes that institution an aunt" (12). Theodora leaves Meroe's landscape but its influence and her association remained alive in her life. She is tied to it both at physical and spiritual levels. The natural environment depicted in *The Happy Valley* is harsh and hostile but the desolate landscape of this novel is not antagonistic to Theodora because she has merged into it physically and psychologically.

Patrick White has portrayed the character of Mrs. Goodman in different colors. She is a lonely character who remains isolated from the rest of her family. She always sits on a sofa but is unable to touch the sofa with shapes of her bones. Patrick White writes thus: "She sat on her sofa, like a marble statue wearing silk, and read Heredia and Leconte de Lisle. To Mrs. Goodman everything had a form, like bronze or marble. She saw clearly, but not far" (68).

Mrs. Goodman is lifeless and spiritless; a thin frame imprisons her soul. Patrick White gives the images of hard metal and solid things to

portray the hard heartened character of Mrs. Goodman. Marble, bronze, and silk are natural things but they are symbols of hardness and insensitive nature. Mrs. Goodman liked "to arrange things, the ornaments in cabinets, or on little tables in the drawing-room, then to sit and watch what she had done".(26). Patrick White denies her insight. It is she who forces her kind but weaker husband into financial recklessness to satisfy her extravagances, who would twist a knife in his side "to watch the expression on his face and scent the warm blood that flowed", (68) who refuses to sit down to table with her husband's old friend, the Man who was Given his Dinner, and who cruelly rejects Theodora by showing unconcealed and often deliberately wounding preference for the pretty sister, Fanny. She, and others like her, are destroyers, yet society accepts them as normal, whereas Theodora is considered mad. White writes of Frank Parrott, Theodora's brother-in-law: "He was what they call a practical man, a success, but he had not survived"(14). All expect Theodora had superficial existence.

There is no doubt in *The Aunt's Story* who are "the living" and who "the dead", and, as mentioned earlier, the reader's sympathy is with Theodora, who is spiritually alive. Mrs. Goodman is not in communion with the landscape like Theodora. She develops a rose garden alien to the Australian culture: " ... let there be roses" (22) she says. Mrs. Goodman is not aware of the spiritual power of the roses. For her, they are ornaments and symbols of her alienation from the native landscape. Theodora feels very close to the roses even when she is inside the house. She has a strong sense of communication with all forms of natural life. Mrs. Goodman is restless, temperamental, and dissatisfied. She becomes violent to express her inner turmoil. She is possessive, egocentric and domineering. White portrays a frustrated individual and archetypal mother in her character.

There is another character in the novel whose role is important to explore the emotional and psychological depth of

Theodora. Her name is Fanny, the only "real" daughter, being "as pretty and as pink as roses" (23). Fanny marries an affluent landowner but Theodora is a sallow girl in a yellow dress. She has become a middle-aged spinster. But lean and lithe, symbolically equipped to penetrate to the heart of things. On the other hand, Fanny is red and fat in middle-age and cannot respond to the mysteries of Meroe's black volcanic hills. She only sees beautiful things in life, avoiding the ugly, while Theodora accepts the beautiful and the ugly. Theodora is young, believing that ugliness and beauty are inseparable. Mrs. Goodman observes that "Fanny is the *artistic* one" (33), but Fanny is no more than "a whole bright, tight bunch of artificial flowers surrounded by a paper frill" (30). Fanny has no love for music; she is lifeless and soulless. But Theodora "has great understanding" (33). Theodora is drawn towards the natural surroundings of Meroe. Theodora's passion for music is an essential part of her personality. It is a way of her life as she uses music to get relieved from the tensions and anxieties of life. She can play it in her mind to overcome the agony of life. White has depicted the spiritual depth of Theodora in the novel. She embarks on a spiritual "odyssey" through the paddocks of Meroe, to "Ithaca" and "Ethiopia" (25). White has described the depth of her mind thus: "Father did not speak. He respected silence, and besides, whether it was summer or winter, the landscape was more communicative than people talking" (34).

White argues that spiritual awareness comes to those who are silent and the keen observer of life and Nature. No wonder, Theodora and her father can feel the mystery of the natural world. The spiritual awareness of Theodora is not an inactive process; she continues the quest for enlightenment as the plot progresses. White has narrated the hawk episode to depict the sensibility of Theodora. The episode of shooting the hawk is symbolic in the novel. She feels that she has destroyed herself. The hawk killing symbolizes for

Theodora her capacity for evil: "I have a core of evil in me that is altogether hateful" (126), and she equates the killing of the hawk with the destruction of this evil in her: "I shall continue to destroy myself, right down to the last of my several lives" (126). Theodora achieves a kind of fulfillment because she gets freedom from the superfluous emotional volcano. She surrenders her vanities and frailties. Theodora becomes neurotic as the plot progresses. She thinks of killing her mother, whose monstrous ego oppresses her so much. Theodora thinks that by killing her mother she will be able to free herself from the instinct of evil. Theodora does not kill her mother but feels guilty of murder because the idea of murder "is the same thing [as murder itself], blood is only an accompaniment" (128). Unlike Theodora, Mrs. Goodman has never felt it necessary to destroy herself. She has never set out on any spiritual odyssey having always been enclosed by the "shell" of her ego. Unlike her mother, however, Theodora has no "shell" and hence she is open to enlightenment or spiritual awakening. The image of ring, garnet and other jewels in connection with Mrs. Goodman recurs throughout the book.

In the first section of *The Aunt's Story*, the main focus of White is on the spiritual awakening of Theodora. The desolate landscape symbolically mirrors the inner turbulent mind of Theodora. She is seen walking through the yellow paddocks in silence. She is in communion with the hills and trees of the landscape and these elements of Nature teach her the real meaning of life. She explores the real truth of life. Mr. Goodman also helps her in her search for Truth. A similar role is fulfilled by the "Man who was Given his Dinner" (p.45). This anonymous character has a spiritual influence on Theodora. He appears on Theodora's twelfth birthday which is a day of great significance for her. Thrown to the ground when the oak tree in front of the house is struck by lightning, Theodora is symbolically killed, but picks herself up and gives a "pale

laugh" (42). Theodora feels thrilled to find the birth of a calf. Her lost energies are restored and she realizes the generative powers of nature in the new life of the calf. This incident foreshadows Theodora's future. She will achieve peace of mind only through the destruction of herself and "You 'll see a lot of funny things, Theodora Goodman. You 'll see them because you've eyes to see. And they'll break you" (47).

In the third section of the novel, Holstius appears who the embodiment of Theodora's true self is. All these characters contribute to the development of real self of Theodora helping her to explore and comprehend spiritual life. But when she leaves her home and the landscape, she loses these perceptions. Her mother sells the property on Mr. Goodman's death. She stays in Sydney until she becomes a middle-aged spinster. In Sydney, she feels alienated and feels cut off from the landscape of Meroe which had been a source of moral and spiritual strength. Her life is dull as there is no source of inspiration for her. However, after the death of her mother, she resumes her spiritual odyssey being free and alone. Theodora is directionless and she doesn't know what to do and where to go. She has no clear concept of freedom save that "it is a blunt weapon" (18). She embarks upon a quest by going overseas. Her main burden is to seek the real meaning of life and Truth. She is passing through a period of crisis with no friends, no lovers, no religion, and no talent to make money. She is alone as an island but has strong determination and courage to pursue truth. In Europe, Theodora stays at the Hotel du Midi and finds that it is a microcosm of the decayed state of Europe.

Theodora feels liberated after having escaped from the stench of corrupt European society. She abandons her elements of normalcy, her name, and her practical aims. She loses her balanced mind and feels free to explore the core of ultimate Truth prevailing in the universe. This is revealed in the attempt at her mental journey to her home. The house on the top of the hill reminds her of a similar

house in Meroe, a house where a madman lived and died and "nobody knew what his intention had been" (63). She enters the house with pleasure. Theodora is charmed by the landscape when she sees through the window and her mind is dissolved as she experiences the liberation of her spirit. Her mind is drawn by the scenery outside she can only observe that: "... the process of disintegration that was taking place at the foot of the mountains should have been frightening and tragic, but it was not" (286). Here she meets the man called Holstius, that is invisible to everyone else. Holstius reminds her of her father, of "walking with her father on the frost at Meroe, or sitting with him in his room, in which the pines were never quite still" (288). It was her father who had taught her that: "Life was divided, rather, into the kinder moments and the cruel, which on the whole are not conditioned by sex" (34). Just as she listened to her father then, so she now listens to Holstius, who said:

"...there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this" (289).

Her meeting with Holstius comforts her. She rises to the effort of reconciliation with her physicality, slowly restoring sensations to the "working shape" (289) of her body. When she stands "the numbness of her whole body [leaves] her with intensely clear vision" (289). She feels like a child:

"The water made her laugh. She looked at the world with eyes blurred by water, but a world curiously pure, expectant, undistorted. She could almost have read a writing on the bark of any given tree" (290).

The scene of the physical world intensifies her vision of it. She looks at the scenes and sights of nature which provide her spiritual relief: "looking through the trees for the tree walking, which in time would become Holstius" (290). The presence of Holstius here assumes the guise of a nature spirit. Theodora has always searched in her longing for a "wholeness in things" (290). She has not yet reached the stage to understand the notion of diversity.

The second visit of Holstius has a remarkable and soothing effect on Theodora. Holstius's act of symbolic healing, through the laying on of the hands, beneath whose touch "leaves glistened down to the least important vein" (294), Theodora finally and fully gives herself up to whatever her fate entails. "In the peace that Holstius spreads throughout her body and the speckled shade of surrounding trees, there was no end to the lives of Theodora Goodman" (295). Theodora comes in contact with many people such as Moraitis, Mrs. Rapallo, Sokolnikov, Katina who play a vital role in bringing harmony and spiritual comfort in Theodora's life. Theodora comes to see that just as life is a thing which ends, so death is a thing that begins: "George or Julia Goodman [are] only apparently deceased ..." (295). This is the dichotomy of life laid out before her like a map. When she leaves Holstius she leaves him without thought, life goes on; Theodora Goodman is "deathless." As a child, removed from her home to a boarding school, she feels constrained and alienated, and, devoid of artistic or intellectual accomplishments, she is seen as truthful but barren. Theodora's quest for unity in things is therefore a search for something that existed in herself. Theodora experienced reality in an intense but intuitive way. John Colmer (2000) argues that "only the mad are sane" (20). Her reason is sacrificed in pursuit of a thing that defies reason. Her quest is the unifying principle of life. Marjorie Barnard, (1959) in an article on Theodora, says:

"The world is arraigned, not Theodora" (54).

To conclude, Patrick White has dramatized the journey of a saintly woman who is outwardly mad but has the spiritual power to see into the life of things. She enjoys the blessed mood once enjoyed by William Wordsworth when he found himself in the company of sounds and sights of Nature. "Theodora had begun to accept both the contempt and the distances. Because there are also moments of insight, whether with Father, or The Man Who Was Given His Dinner, or even with the Syrian" (52). Lang (2015)

observes that “her journey is not that of a madwoman, but it embodies the “more difficult and worthwhile quest of a visionary in pursuit of authentic being” (Lang 196). Theodora unites in herself the “myriad iridescent fragments” of which we are composed:

“Henceforward we walk split into myriad fragments, like an insect with a hundred feet, a centipede with soft-stirring feet that drinks in the atmosphere; we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, and all things melt into music and sorrow; we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity” (133).

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