

Unity in Incongruity: A Study of Selfhood in Patrick White's Fiction

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Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, Patrick White is now acclaimed as a world novelist. Although he became an icon of Australian literature, some critics, mainly Australian, continue to cast doubts upon the "greatness" of White to this day. He is the most controversial writer in the history of Australian literature.

The present thesis takes up five novels from White's oeuvre and examines the development of major motifs such as a mirror, adoption, prostitution, procreation and the spiritual family. We especially focus upon the formation of selfhood to reveal that his protagonists' self search is closely related to the desire to escape from dominant national images and social norms. White's texts critically reexamine the normative status of the modern family based on heterosexuality and genetic lineage, and propose alternative human bonds instead.

White's novels written in the middle phase of his career disguise self-destructive urges in the protagonists by presenting visions of unity, whereas, particularly since The Solid Mandala, faiths in gods, human reason and the modern ego collapse, and the structure of the novel and the protagonists' selves start fragmenting accordingly. Our examination reveals the polarised impulses inherent in his texts, that is, a simultaneous craving for integration and fragmentation. Equivocality which evades any categorisation is a crucial attribute of White's texts.

Patrick White depicts the identity of individuals in conjunction with the ambiguous identity of Australia as a modern Western nation. Simultaneously, by consistently focusing on outcasts, he erodes the national image of Australia and the masculine ethos of the country. His concern extends to sexual minorities and physically challenged people, and consequently his novels turn our eyes to the diversity within Australian society. Thus, White is a forerunner of postcolonial/multicultural writings in Australia.