

Chapter III

THE TREE OF MAN and VOSS : *Marriage, Physical and Symbolic*

I

The Tree of Man

From a lonely spinster as a protagonist Patrick White moves on to a married woman as a co-protagonist in The Tree of Man. I call Amy Parker 'a co-protagonist' for very valid reasons : After the first chapter which is devoted to building up of Stan Parker as a representative of early Australian pioneers, hardworking , pious farmers taming the wild bush country in the spirit of God-given mission, in the second chapter Amy Fibbens enters and dominates the rest of the novel. In fact, we find that White devotes two-thirds of the novel for Amy Parker, who is foregrounded most of the time in terms of her doings, feelings and emotions. One gets a feeling that White is more at ease while depicting her character than Stan's. R.F. Brissenden, in his Patrick White, says, 'White's presentation of Amy Parker is one of love and sympathy.'¹ It is possible to add that White does this with great insight and inwardness.

The Tree of Man is an epic of 'ordinary' life, which Patrick White tries to elevate to the level of the extraordinary by using a Lawrentian language 'rich, adaptable, and mimetic',² a highly charged interpretative language which plumbs the unknown modes of being and by adding a dimension of 'the possibility of illumination and transcendent wholeness.'³ White also uses Biblical symbols of Genesis, depicting Stan Parker as an Australian Adam and

Amy as an Australian Eve, and one of their children, Ray, as Cain; and he highlights the five elemental powers, *panchamahabhutas* - earth, sky, water, wind and fire -in this epic of the creation of a new world. The title, 'The Tree of Man', too, suggests that the novel deals with something universal.

Interestingly enough, Patrick White wanted to call the novel 'A Life Sentence on Earth', which would have been, as David Tacey says, 'too depressing'.⁴

When we first meet Amy Fibbens in a dance hall at a coastal town called Yuruga, she is a thin girl, dressed in an 'anxious' blue dress and a narrow sash 'that had been tied too many times'.⁵ She tells Stan Parker very candidly, "My mother and father is dead. I'm an orphan, see? And I live with Uncle and Aunt, who are those Fibbens at Kelly's Corner" (p.20). We have been told that " Amy had not been loved except by her mother fretfully for a short time before she died"(p.23). Stan Parker does not decide to marry the Fibbens if decision implies pros and cons. He simply knows that he would do it (p.24). The marriage takes place at a little church at Yuruga, and Mrs. Erbey, the parson's wife, gives Amy a Bible, a blouse as good as new and a little silver nutmeg grater, the loveliest thing that Amy has ever seen. After the wedding Stan drives her into the bush country to Furlong Creek, a very windy place, where he lives. On her first journey she begins "to hate the wind, and the distance, and the road because her importance tended to dwindle"(p.27). But she is happy with the house that Stan Parker has built with his own hands. Amy and Stan soon learn the language of flesh under the moonlight.

"The man took the body of the woman and taught it fearlessness. The woman's mouth on the eyelids of the man spoke to him from her consoling depths. The man impressed upon the woman's body his sometimes frightening power and egotism. The woman devoured the man's defencelessness." (pp.29-30)

Early in the novel, there is a suggestion that there is some unknown hiatus between her good husband and her materialism and greediness. " She was rather greedy for bread and, once discovered, for his love ... Her skin devoured the food of love"(p.32).

Amy is not a religious person like Stan. To her the sad Christ is an old man with a beard who spits death from full cheeks, and she never receives the grace of God. Therefore, when she is alone she is alone . She is a practical woman with skills in peeling potatoes, milking cows, mending things and so on. When a stranger, who sells Bibles and talks of Shakespeare, stays with the Parkers for a day, she feels her inexperience of life. The next day when the stranger is gone. she finds that her silver nutmeg grater is gone, and she is besides herself with anger. But Stan takes it easy, since it wasn't of much use. Other people start settling in the area, and Amy's loneliness becomes a little less, when she has a talkative neighbour, Mrs. O'Dowd, whose husband is on the bottle.

As days go by, Stan and Amy realise that there are some loose ends in their relationships. Amy is very unhappy because she has had two abortions.

The first great event is the blowing of gusty winds, with pouring rains, and it is the rain that gets on Amy's nerves. On the other hand, Stan Parker is

extremely happy with the world of water. As David Stacey says, "Stan Parker is married to nature...and he enjoys an ecstatic communion with the Earth Mother....Whenever the mother appears to him it is always in tyrannical outburst of love... His dark need is longing to be overwhelmed by an archetypal force."⁶ After the rains are over, the great river is in floods and Stan and O'Dowd go rowing in a boat in order to help people who have been afflicted by the disaster. Amy Parker is also exalted out her dull life by her experience of danger. She and Mrs. O'Dowd wait for three days for the return of their husbands with terror and anxiety. During her rescue work Amy finds a child of five or six , who is not able to tell his name. She takes him home and she means to keep him if nobody comes to claim him. Stan, who has brought a bath tub from the floods, feels a little guilty about it, whereas Amy doesn't feel guilty at all. She plays with the child the whole day, but is tremendously disappointed when he is gone the next day morning. Stan and Amy carry on in spite of the fact that she is keen on producing a child - "some tangible evidence of the mystery of life"(p.97). They are very close and their lives have grown together, and 'they will continue in that way because it was not possible to divide their common trunk'(p.98).

The second part begins with Furlong Creek getting an official name, Durilgai, where there is now a store and a post office, with the postmistress Mrs. Gage. There is a rich butcher nearby called Armstrong, who has a gig and a big house, and a debonair son called Tom.

Amy Parker , in course of time, gives birth to a baby boy, and the future starts 'growing in the house, making a tangle of the present', and her life is full. It becomes fuller when, in a year or two, she gets a baby girl too. When she is alone with her children, 'not even her husband could have denied her sovereignty'(p.118).

The daughter, Thelma, grows up into a neat smart girl, whereas the son, Ray, who suffers from the rejection complex shows signs of delinquency. When once Ray drowns the puppies, Stan senses Ray's agony and guilt, but he is too inarticulate to help him. Amy loves him, but Ray is not keen about getting loved, whereas Thelma, overprotected and stifled by the mother, develops asthma.

Amy has in her a kind of romanticism, which makes her crave for things not within her reach. The farm work engages only part of her mind unlike Stan whose soul is entwined with Mother Earth. Amy is fascinated by women like Madeleine, a girl from County Cook who has come to Durilgai as Mr. Armstrong's guest. Madeleine is a creamy girl, very beautiful and cultivated, with a foreign air about her, because 'she had also been Home and to various foreign countries, hawking her looks around' (p.132). The young Armstrong moves heaven and earth to marry her. For Amy, she is a 'dream figure', and White, too, describes her from the outside, from a distance, without letting us know what she is actually like. Even later when Stan Parker rescues her from fire and has a tremendous erotic experience with Madeleine,

his anima, in his arms, we learn very little about her. 'Madeleine is one of the few hardly realised figures in the novel', says William Walsh, 'more an unconvincing gesture than a solid creation.'" ⁷

One of the biggest events in the novel is the bush fire which spreads to the town burning down houses. The Armstrongs' mansion falls a victim to the conflagration, and everybody is out of the house except Madeleine, their guest. It is Amy who prods Stan to go into the burning house and fetch the lady out. In a moment of madness Stan rushes in. When they are groping for a way out, with Stan holding her hand, 'suddenly he wished he could sink his face in her flesh...' (p.180), and she, too, feels drugged by his sweat and wishes that she could enter his eyes'. He picks her up and they writhe through fire - 'they were not living. They had entered a phase of pain and contained consciousness' (p.180). Stan rescues her, with her beautiful hair burnt clean off her head. Tacey's psychoanalytical interpretation goes like this : ' Madeleine is seductive, anarchistic, and intent on erotically toned violence...Stan rushes into the fire not to save but to unite with her ...in a mythical communion with the divine woman.' ⁸ It is a strange union indeed! Poor Amy, who wants to know what his and Madeleine's experience was like, asks Stan about it, but Stan keeps quiet and she has to be content merely with the bravery of the act.

The First World War is on, and Stan and O'Dowd enlist along with many others, and, Part Two ends with them going across the waters to fight in the trenches of Europe. The war breaks Stan's rhythm of life and his living

relationship with the earth. When he comes back, therefore, he is a changed man. Amy finds that a kind of remoteness has developed between Stan and others. Amy whiles her time standing at the gate and talking to the passers-by. Thelma and Ray grow up self-absorbed, have their schooling under their mother's care. Ray is all the time restless, and he wants to do something - ride in a race or walk across Australia. Stan thinks of developing a healthy relationship with Ray, who has started hating his father, and takes him on a ride in a motorcar which he has recently bought. Ray resists all Stan's attempts to make a conversation with him. Thelma has an adolescent crush on Con the Greek, the farm hand that the Parkers have employed. Luckily, it turns out to be a passing affair. She grows up into a responsible girl who graduates from the business college, and takes up a job in a shipping firm. She moves on to another job with the firm of solicitors, where she meets a young solicitor called Dudley Forsdyke, who, ultimately, marries her. Ray, on the other hand, lives a shady kind of life, which lands him in a world of crimes.

Amy Parker accepts the absence of her son. Whenever she thinks of him in love, it is only his childhood which comes to her mind. She has no contact with Ray, the man. It is terrible for her to think that she has never loved her son as a man.. With her daughter, her love is intermittent. Often it is as if she has had no children. With Stan, she feels, love has dwindled into a drudgery. Friendships with the neighbours has become just a habit. Mortality takes toll of the husbands of her friends. For instance, the postmistress's

husband hangs himself, leaving behind him a number of interesting paintings, most of which are of different kinds of trees in various positions.

Stan Parker, a broad and upright man, sometimes wonders what is expected of him. He feels that something is wrong, but cannot explain by methods of logic. Even though he has lead a life by which he has been consumed, there are times now when doubts press up.

One autumn a blue car comes down from Durilgai bringing a commercial traveller, who has a few lines of dress materials, stockings, lingerie and fancy buttons to sell . Amy Parker likes the way he talks in praise of the things that he has with him, which he throws in a turmoil at her feet, on the veranda. Their conversation gradually becomes a snare in which both of them are caught. The dormant lust in her flares up and the clever merchant who senses it takes advantage of her loneliness. They go into 'that straight bed on which Amy Parker had slept out her sum of her life'(p.302). She tries to enter his mind but she cannot. She has a feeling that the head on her shoulder is her husband's head. The man, Leo, kisses her, and her body responds. "It was as if she had spat into the face of her husband, or still further in the mystery of her husband's God ...She was fighting her disgust and crying for her own destruction before she had destroyed, as she must destroy. Long waves of exquisite pleasure were carrying her condemned body towards that point"(p.303). Once Leo goes away, he ceases to be of importance to her. When Stan comes home, she brazenly tells him a half-truth about the

commercial traveller, from whom, she says she didn't buy anything, since she didn't need any frills at her time of life.

Leo comes once again. But this time it is different. 'As if the revelation of passion is not revealed twice' (p.312). This time there is laughter and sensuality, repulsion and lust, obscenity and dictatorship of the body. The next time he complains of ulcers and goes away coldly. The brief encounter is over, leaving in her a bitter sense of guilt.

William Walsh says, "Amy is capable of creative, exotic experience, [as] in her bouts of sensuality with the repulsive salesman."⁹ On the other hand, David Tacey says that 'Amy has been made a moral scape-goat',¹⁰ even though Stan's situation in respect of Madeleine is similar to Leo's. "White converts the adultery episode into a gigantic moral argument, an attack upon Amy's integrity."¹¹

It is not right to complain against the author nor to simplify and say that Amy was merely indulging in sensuality. We have to take the novelistic facts as they are, and then we will realise that Amy, who is in her late forties, does not cease to love her husband, but there is in her some part of her romantic self which is dissatisfied. To begin with, she wants to achieve 'a revelation of passion' and the later attempt becomes sensuality and lust, and, inevitably, she withdraws. Since Christianity, as Tacey says, 'sits heavily upon the foetal ground of *The Tree of Man*,'¹² we have to consider Amy's behaviour in that

light. We have to remember that Amy does not believe in religion and is a down-to-earth woman. She doesn't have a sense of guilt in the Christian sense, and she is, in a way, faithful to her husband as the latter part of the novel shows. Her affair is an experiment which falls outside the matrix of the husband-wife relationship. In the context of the novel, White has made this quite evident.

Amy realises that she has never been worthy of her good and honourable husband. "This illumination of her soul left her weary, but indifferent. After all she had done her material duty in many ways"(p.317). "In time the knowledge that some mystery was withheld from her ceased to make her angry or miserable for her own void. She accepted her squat body, looking out from it, through the words of canticles, in dry acceptance of her isolation"(p.318). It shows that now she has learnt to accept her own limitations, which, one feels, is the first step to wisdom.

The Parkers' one great concern is Ray, and his wayward ways. Ray serves short jail sentences for house breaking and theft, loses money at the races. He, ultimately, gets killed when he is with a woman called Lola. Stan wonders how two good people have produced a bad man. The Parkers are seemingly happy about Thelma's bourgeois life of complacency with her husband, Dudley Forsdyke. We see that the struggles of the pioneers have resulted in the rise of a shallow materially prosperous civilization.

Stan, who is aging now, has a stroke and recovers from it. He insists on going to the Communion Service at their church, and Thelma takes him with her mother. During the service, Amy realises that she would never succeed in 'opening her husband and looking inside and that he was kept shut for other purposes' (p.415). Stan receives the communion with humility and gratitude, whereas Amy does it in confusion, and Thelma is worried about catching cold. Later when an evangelist comes to Stan's house and uses his eloquence on proving the existence of God through books, Stan spits and points to the gob of spittle and retorts, in a moment of illumination, "That is God." "The gob of spittle" has raised a controversy, but what Walsh says is illuminating: "The old man's utterance is an observation capable of proof or disproof. It is the climax of a life and issues from a hard-won wisdom. What he sees, and what the gob shares with God, is the quality of pure being."¹³

When Stan sits in peace and understanding, Amy goes to him and tells him of how she has found her silver nutmeg grater under the rose bush. She is immensely pleased, whereas Stan has forgotten all about it. Stan is actually dying, and the moment he realises that "One, and no other figure, is the answer to all the sums"(p.478), he breathes his last in Amy's arms, and escapes from her. Symbolically, he dies in his garden, in the arms of Mother Earth. Amy does not cry much; she says, 'Stan is dead. My husband. In the boundless garden'(p.478).

In the novel Amy Parker is denied the possibility of illumination, but does it matter? To White, it does, probably. But in Amy, White has created a completely credible, well-rounded character who dominates the novel with her earthiness, loves and hates, dreams and passions, goodness and sin, her wisdom of acceptance of her limitations and her awareness of her failures - in short, with her vibrant humanity. John Weigel rightly says, "She survives Stan, because she accepts her limitation sooner and more fully than Stan can accept his."¹⁴ Tacey thinks that White has a conception of woman as a demon who stifles and consumes lies behind Amy's characterisation. "The demon in Paradise is Materialism", he says. "In The Tree of Man, Amy Parker is represented as constantly thwarting her husband, preventing him from achieving his spiritual goal."¹⁵ This is totally wrong. On the other hand, it is Stan who leaves her behind. What is important is that she is a complimentary character to Stan, always at his side, in spite of her awareness of the spiritual breach in their personalities. In fact, we cannot think of a better wife for Stan than Amy. We get a feeling that, after he returns from the war, he becomes remote even in respect of his wife, leaving her high and dry. It is this indifference of his which is one of the reasons for her deviation from the norm, to which she is quick to return.

Almost every critic speaks of Amy's materialism, as if there is something wrong with it. Carolyn Bliss, for instance, says, "Amy's vision remains resolutely material throughout the novel...She is repeatedly associated

with the imagery of grasping, confining, engulfing and devouring.”¹⁶ But she is also associated with acts of friendliness, maternal affection, caring and loving. She is a solid earthy woman who is primarily a home-maker. That her son goes astray is as much a fault of Stan’s as the mother’s. In fact, Ray’s delinquency is a pointer to Stan’s basic shortcomings - his ignorance and self-absorption, which results in a sort of blindness. Amy longs to love Ray as a man and worries about him, but Ray, with his undeveloped super-ego, for which the father is responsible, goes down the hill, and poor Amy helplessly watches her son’s disintegration.. Carolyn Bliss says: “In fact, in Stan and Amy Parker, White gives us two studies in failure, the one illuminating and the other obscuring.”¹⁷ One cannot agree with this remark, too. Actually they are not ‘failures’ in the sense Bliss means. They have done well as human beings: both have been creative and both have achieved their own kinds of wisdom.

In The Aunt’s Story, the protagonist reaches her illumination through suffering and madness. In this novel, Amy reaches her kind of wisdom through living her life as fully as possible within her basic limitations, which she learns to accept. White has succeeded in demonstrating the living universal depths of apparent ordinariness. White explores the inner depths of Australian ordinariness the way Lawrence does in respect of English midland ordinariness. Amy is the Australian Eve who endears herself with her common humanity, with her passions, aspirations, dreams, successes and failures, and commonsense and wisdom.

II

Voss

In Laura Trevelyan of Voss we have a major woman character who is totally different from Amy Parker and Theodora Goodman. If Amy Parker is a common peasant woman, Laura is a highly sophisticated young woman who belongs to the affluent bourgeois society of Sydney. If Theodora Goodman is a woman belonging to country gentry who leaves Australia in quest of a meaningful life, Laura, a girl born in England, tries to find her 'salvation' in Australia, her adoptive country. Laura Trevelyan is not, however, a protagonist like the other two, but a major figure, who is the spiritual associate of the protagonist Voss. William Walsh says, "The Tree Of Man burrows into the common place; Voss reconstructs the extreme."¹⁸ Voss - Laura relationship partakes of the extreme that Walsh speaks of, because it does not belong to the normal world but the world of the spirit, or, one might say, of parapsychology.

Walsh suggests rightly that there are two narrative lines in Voss: The first "has to do with the world of 'semblance' or reality, the physical progress of [Voss's] expedition ..., the second has to do with the world of 'dream' and the life of the spirit."¹⁹ The second narrative line deals with the relationship of

Voss and Laura. Since it is the second level of the novel which lends a significant dimension to it, this relationship is very central to the plot of the novel.

The novel begins with Laura meeting Voss, the German explorer. Laura is a young girl well educated and independent minded. She is a rationalist, an agnostic who is 'suffocated by the fuzz of faith,'²⁰ and does not believe in going to church on Sundays. On this particular Sunday when Voss visits Mr. Bonner, one of the principal sponsors of Voss's expedition, Laura, Mrs. Bonner's niece, is alone in the house, and, inevitably, she has to entertain him. Though she doesn't like the shabby stranger very much, she is fascinated by his determination to explore the Australian desert. To her he is 'vast and ugly', but he arouses her curiosity and later casts a sort of spell on her. Laura, who is generally contemptuous of men, has not accepted any proposal of marriage so far, and her aunt thinks that she is cold, stubborn and egotistical.

The Bonners throw a party in honour of Voss and some of his colleagues, and it is at this party that the Laura-Voss relationship takes roots. It is important, therefore, to look at this meeting a little closely: To begin with, Tom Radclyffe, Bell Bonner's suitor, conspicuously exhibits his devotion to the well-dressed Belle. When Voss is talking to Miss Hollier about Germany and its beautiful summer, Mrs. Bonner produces a book of German verse, from which Voss is inspired to read out some poems.

“He began to read. It was again a dream, Laura sensed, but of a different kind, in the solid egg of lamplight, from which they had not yet been born. Voss read, or dreamed aloud.” (p.77)

Voss reads a German poem, and when Miss Hollier wants him to translate it, he says, “Poetry will not bear translation. It is too personal”(p.77). Laura now turns her back and exchanges smiles. She feels that his nostalgia for Germany has made him look rather sickly. At dinner Laura is annoyed to find that she is fascinated by his method of using a knife and fork. When Tom Radclyffe asks her what she has been thinking, she retorts with deliberate eloquence : “If I take you at your word, you may regret it, because I have been thinking of nothing; almost everything,” and she then goes on to give details of what she has been observing and thinking at that moment—the dish of jellied quinces, Miss Hollier’s garnet brooch, inherited from an aunt, which is edible like the quinces, the drumstick on Mr. Palfreyman’s plate, which reminds her of the bones of a dead man; and she ends up with “it is the thought of death that frightens me. Not its bones”(p.78).

Voss keeps looking at Laura on and off during and after dinner and tries to make conversation with her, which she avoids. Later in order to avoid listening to Tom Radcliffe’s singing she goes out to the terrace to breathe fresh air, and bumps into Voss in ‘that nihilistic darkness’ in which conversation becomes inevitable. Voss provokes her by saying, “ I tried to visualise your life in this house ...Do you count the linen? ...Do you make pastry ? Hem sheets?” and such other questions about her routine. Laura is piqued: “ We indulge in a

little of each but in no event are we insects, Mr. Voss.” She wonders whether he being an extraordinary man is curious of poor domesticated women. At one point she boasts that she can enter into the mind of most men. Voss quickly asks what then she thinks of him. Provoked by this question she blurts out :

“You are so vast and ugly,” Laura Trevelyan was repeating the words; “I can imagine some desert, with rocks, rocks of prejudice, and, yes, even hatred. You are so isolated. That is why you are fascinated by the prospect of desert places, in which you will find your own situation taken for granted, or more than that, exalted....Everything is for yourself....” (p.83)

Voss naturally asks her whether she hates him.

“I am fascinated by you,” laughed Laura Trevelyan, with such candour *that* her admission did not seem immodest. “ You are my desert!” One or twice their arms brushed, and he was conscious of some extreme agitation or exhilaration in her. “I am glad that I do not need your good opinion,” he said. “No,” she said. “Nobody’s opinion.” (p.84)

Voss wonders whether she would like to pity him and mention him in her prayers. Laura retorts that she does not pray. Voss speaks of atheists as those people who are mean enough not to be able to conceive of a Divine Power, and of atheism as self-murder. With her hands eating into his wrist, she remarks that both of them are damned for their pride, which irritates Voss, who blurts out, “For some reason of intellectual vanity, you decided to do away with God.” And he says that he worships God with pride, not with humility. He hates humility and says, “My God ...is above humility.” It is now that Laura pities him and says she would learn to pray for him. Voss sees through her

when he says, "You are an Apostle of Love masquerading as atheist." Voss holds her by her shoulders and realises the folly of floundering into each other's private beings.

This is the strange beginning of their strange love. Interestingly enough there is no further physical togetherness in the novel. This is the first and the last of their physical love that does not even include a kiss!

It is possible to think, as Edgecombe does, that Laura's agnosticism is her crisis of faith, which has made her 'a creature of reserve and inner complexity', and alienated from the run of humanity, which alienation or dissociation she shares with Voss.²¹

It is easy to realise that Laura is, as Brian Kiernan says, 'attracted to, and disturbed by, this overreacher.'²² In a sense, both Voss and Laura are engaged in the process of self-definition through each other in terms of the psychic union that follows.

The next time she sees Voss is at the farewell given to him and his colleagues at the wharf from which they are to sail northwards. In the crowd there is no time for him to speak to her. He just raises his hat to the ladies without raising his eyes higher than the saddle flaps. Laura does not censure this behaviour; she is, in fact, 'bitterly glad.' and find that she is perspiring a lot. Even as Voss promises to write regularly to Mr. Bonner, Laura sits on her horse with a hard pride, rather than 'with that humility which she had desired to achieve' (p.108). When Voss finally says good bye to the members of the

Bonner family, he reaches up and takes Laura's hand, which the glove has made quite impersonal. Later she climbs to the balcony and sees the 'Osprey' carrying Voss and others towards the Heads. Laura feels that 'those moments which had been of most importance were both indistinct and ugly....indescribably ugly, untidy, painful'(p.117).When her dear cousin, Belle, clings to her and asks, 'What is it?', she cries, "But I cannot, when there is nothing—nothing to tell" (p.118).

Laura cannot tell, because from this point onwards the relationship of Voss and Laura moves on to the higher Platonic level. From Rhine Towers, the place from which they will go inwards into the wilderness, Voss writes a letter to Laura which he sends with his letter to Mr. Bonner. The letter , couched in apparent formal language, makes a direct proposal of marriage:

"...I have been aware of your friendliness, and sincere interest in our welfare, as well as the great value I myself place upon our connexion....I would hesitate to express my feelings in such personal terms, if I were not aware already of your moral strength and discernment, and that you have happily grasped certain grounds of my character. The gifts of destiny cannot be returned....Materially, I have nothing to offer....I would ask you to join me in thought, and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you, the victor" (pp. 148-149).

He also seeks her permission to write formally to her uncle, Mr. Bonner, for her hand. When Laura reads the letter, she is bewildered., but she

is very happy inside. She responds to the letter in the spirit of modest acceptance.. She says that she has given the deepest possible consideration, but is a little confused, because of her awareness of her frailty—of her pride, her insignificance and isolation. She feels that she has been called upon to consider her destroyer as her saviour. But she is ready to “wrestle with our mutual hatefulness, but mutually,” though she is aware of her unworthiness. And she says that she is willing to “pray together for salvation, if he still intends.” (pp. 180-181)

Voss is happy to receive this letter, and he feels that she suggests that “Human relationships are as vast as deserts; they demand all daring.”(p.187) Voss and his companions are well into the interior now, and his reply which he sends with Dugald never reaches her. He already considers her to be his wife and speaks of the great happiness her letter has brought him. He says, “ That we should love each other, Laura, does at last appear inevitable and fitting.” There is a touching emotion that pervades the entire letter, particularly when he says he feels her presence in all that he is doing there in the vast desert: “So we are riding together across the plains, we sit together in this black night, I reach over and touch your cheek... You see that separation has brought us far, far closer.” He also says he would be sending a letter to Mr. Bonner along with this letter to her asking for her hand. He further says that this love is “the gold that I have found in these rocks, in these desert places.” He chats with her about the details of what he has seen and experienced during his adventures,

because he wants her to share everything with him. He ends by saying,
“Distance has united us thus closely. This is our true marriage, I know. We
have wrestled with the gristle and the bones before daring to assume the flesh.”
(pp. 211-212)

Laura, who is very happy now, becomes creatively active and looks
after their servant Rose who is unlawfully pregnant - it is not told by who,
though one guesses that it is Mr. Bonner - until she gives birth to a baby girl,
who is named Mercy. After a few days Rose dies and Laura adopts Mercy and
brings her up as her own daughter. Laura writes a letter to Voss — it never
reaches him — in which she speaks of Rose and her pathetic death, and
Mercy. She says, “Together with yourself, she is my greatest joy. Can you
understand, dear Ulrich? She is my consolation, my token of love.” She further
says, “Finally I believe I have begun to understand this great country, which we
have been presumptuous enough to call ours, and with which I shall be content
to grow since the day we buried Rose.” She talks of her attempt to humble
herself and would like to see her husband, too, humbled in the heartless desert
that he must have now entered. (pp. 214-215)

There in the Australian wilderness, there is a rebellion against Voss, the
leader, and the group is split. Voss enters a period of suffering, which makes
him humble, the way it is described in the poem “Conclusion” that he finds in
his kit: “Humility is my brigalow, that must I remember....Then I am not God,

but Man. I am a God with a spear in his side. ...O God, my God, let them make from it [my body] a vessel that endures." (p.292)

Voss is greatly exhausted, physically, but his Will, the royal instrument, remains. He feels that Laura has come and taken his head in her hands, the way a mother holds a child against her breast.

Thus their togetherness in dreams continues, until they start being together telepathically. When Voss is facing unknown dangers in the desert, Laura cries out, "My darling, my darling, I am so afraid"(p.301). She prays over and over for Voss, until 'through the bread of words, she did receive divine sustenance'(p.30). Outwardly she does her duties, attends the Pringles' party in honour of Belle and Ted Radclyffe who are to be married soon, attends Bells's wedding, but she is always separate in the roomful of human beings. During all these events Laura knows that Voss is lost.

Laura falls desperately ill, and the doctors are unable to diagnose her illness. and one of them says that it is brain fever. Once Laura cries out in her fever, "You need not fear, I shall not fail you" (p.353).. Voss, there, rides through hell, with Laura touching him, telling him, "I shall not fail you"(p.358).

Laura asks him, he feels, "Do you see now? Man is God decapitated. That is why you are bleeding" (p.358).. At the height of her illness, she begs, "O Jesus, have mercy. Oh, save us, or if we are not to be saved, then let us die. My love is too hard to bear. I am weak, after all"(p.368). Dr. Kilwinning thinks

of bleeding her the following day. After the fat leeches are taken off her, she opens her eyes and says, "How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into Man. Man. And Man returning into God."(p.380).

In the desert, tragedy overtakes most of Voss's companions, except Judd. Voss, who is caught by the aborigines, is beheaded by Jackie, who deserts him and joins the aborigines, with whom he has found his identity. Once Voss dies, Laura cries out, "O God, it is over. It is over." And Aunt Emmy says, "The fever has broken."(p.389)

The relationship between Laura and Voss is shown as transcending space as this constant awareness is highlighted through juxtaposing paragraphs in the later chapters of the novel. William Walsh puts it very effectively: "The imagination of each, moved by deep emotional hunger, constructs a pattern of feeling of great richness, delicacy and conviction.....The relationship of Voss and Laura...progresses from its simple beginning by means of a sympathetic parallelism into a 'fearful symmetry'." ²³

When we meet Laura next she is a middle-aged resident mistress at the Misses Linsleys' Academy for Young Ladies and she is held in universal respect. Colonel Hebden, who has been inquiring into Voss's expedition, meets Laura, a friend of the lost explorer. Laura tells him that she but knew him very slightly as a guest at her uncle's house. The Colonel presses on and she becomes very upset: "Mr. Voss is already history," she says. The Colonel tells her briefly his findings. When he mentions Jackie, Laura asks, "What of

Jackie?" Colonel Hebden does not succeed in tracing the elusive Jackie, who meanwhile dies during a thunderstorm.

At a ceremony honouring the dead Voss, organised after a number of years, when Laura has become headmistress of the Academy, Laura talks to the sole survivor, Judd, about Voss. Judd tells how Voss died and how he himself closed his eyes. Judd says, "He was a Christian, such as I understand it." Laura says, "I am convinced that Voss had in him a little of Christ, like other men. If he was composed of evil along with the good, he struggled with evil. And failed.(p.438).....Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be." (p.442)

Voss is a difficult novel in that White uses, as in The Aunt's Story, some abnormal psychology to make his point. Like Theodora Goodman, Laura undergoes a psychic deviation for achieving her integrity and salvation. In the case of Laura whether it is salvation or liberation is doubtful. If we take into consideration David Tacey's analysis, it is liberation. According to him, the central relationship is based upon the *puer*/Mother myth, in which the relationship is destructive. "From the woman's side the *puer* image is the Ghostly Lover of ancient folklore who leads the woman into madness and disintegration."²⁴ Tacey suggests that Laura is also "an enchantress who drowns her lover in a sea of Eros...and captivates him to draw him toward an ecstatic death."²⁵ In his analysis of Voss's and Laura's characters, he points out that "Laura's journey into the country of the mind is as a darkly ambivalent

as that of her fantasy lover - lured into disintegrative regions of the unconscious, by which time her ego is all but obliterated.”²⁶ When Voss is killed, Tacey says, she is released from the Ghostly Lover.

We have to see in what sense Laura is connected with the Christian theme which is implicit in the novel. James McAuley says, “The Christian framework is assumed in the book for the purpose of stating the issues, and up to a point for resolving them.”²⁷

Voss is generally looked at as a Nietzschean Superman, who believes in the omnipotence of Will, and who wants, in a sense, to become God. It is his relationship of love or Platonic love with Laura which leads him towards humility. Laura, too, who is arrogantly agnostic in the beginning, learns humility through love and suffering, and she learns to pray for Voss’s safety as well as his attainment of humility. In the last ‘verdict’ chapter, Colonel Hebden says, “Voss was, indeed, the Devil” (p.434), to which Laura answers, “Voss could have been the Devil, if at the same time he had not resembled a most unfortunate human being.” Later Judd speaks of him as a Christian, who tended the sick and washed the sores of the men. And the Colonel awkwardly tells Laura, “Your saint is canonized..” Laura also believes that Voss had in him a little of Christ, and adds “like other men” (p.438). Apart from being Voss’s instrument of salvation, Laura, because of her love which fills her with Christian charity and compassion, she sees Rose through her pregnancy and later adopts her child as her own daughter; but like Theodora Goodman, she

remains forever in a state of sterile spinsterhood. As an old woman Laura has attained wisdom and certain insights. She knows now, for instance, that "All truths are particoloured. Except the greatest truth of all" (p.438), that history is all lies, that while there are men there will always be lies, that she does not know the truth about herself, unless she sometimes dreams it (p.407). Finally she says this about Australia:

"I am uncomfortably aware of the very little I have seen and experienced of things in general, and of our country in particular,...but the little I have seen is less, I like to feel, than what I know. Knowledge was a never a matter of geography. Quite the reverse, it overflows all the maps that exist. Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind." (p.440)

She also says something equally significant :

"Some of you will express what we others have experienced by living. Some will learn to interpret the ideas embodied in the less communicative forms of matter, such as rock, wood, metal, and water. I must include water, because, of all matter, it is the most musical." (p.440)

White's women protagonists are, we have seen, carriers of unusual wisdom and illuminating flashes of insight.