
UNIT 1 RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will look at the development and rise of the Australian Novel, the primary issues and concerns of the writers of that period and try and place *Voss* within the cultural, literary, socio-economic and political milieu in which Australian Literature particularly fiction developed. Once you go through this unit you will be in a position to:

- trace the background to the Australian novel
- discern the concerns of the novelists
- summarise the developments of the Australian novel and
- place Patrick White's *Voss* in perspective

1.1 INTRODUCTION

For the purpose of creating order and providing semblance to our study material we shall divide the past two centuries into different periods – namely the first phase of novel writing in Australia (1800s) and the second phase (1900s). The other topics include the beginnings of the modern Australian novel, the gradual growth of self-identity, the various developmental phases and major issues and concerns of Australian writers. Let us now begin with the socio-cultural background to Australian fiction.

1.2 AUSTRALIA: SOCIO- CULTURAL CONTEXT

Australia was discovered by Captain James Cook in 1770 and colonised by the British eight years later when the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay in 1788, under the commandship of Captain Arthur Phillip. This historic landing occurred on 18 January 1788, but Captain Phillip and his crew did not settle there. The fleet sailed further north and landed eventually at Port Jackson (Sydney) eight days later. To commemorate the landing of the First Fleet, January 26 is celebrated annually as

Australian Day. Once a colony was established at Port Jackson, other colonies sprang up at Hobart (Tasmania), Swan River (Western Australia), Adelaide on the Gulf of St Vincent (South Australia), on the Brisbane River (Queensland), while Melbourne was established on Port Phillip Bay (Victoria). The primary objective behind the colonisation of Australia by England was the need to relieve its overcrowded prisons. The secondary objective was to provide a base for the Royal Navy in the Eastern Sea. When the first historic naval expedition was undertaken it was not for the glorious purpose of establishing trade links or civilising the natives. Botany Bay, destination Terra Australis/Australia, was meant to be a convict settlement, a prison for "disgorging from the mother country to keep the remaining population sound and pure;" [p.2, quoted: Samuel Lorenzo Knapp [American Cultural History 1607-1829, when talking about Australia and Australian Literatures vis-à-vis American Literature]. In fact the first fleet comprised 1373 people of which 732 were convicts. As a result of which, the transportation of convicts continued till 1868. In total, more than 160,000 convicts were transported to Australia within a span of 80 years. By the 1850s Australia had 405,000 people of European descent, mainly rearing sheep, while those who worked on sheep farms were largely convicts. Following the great depression of the 1890s, these six colonies formed an alliance amongst themselves because of common economic needs, a growing sense of nationalism and increasing defense concerns. By mid-nineteenth century, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania and Victoria had emerged as independent states paying nominal allegiance to the monarch of Great Britain. The Commonwealth of Australia was formed as a result of the alliance of the colonies on January 1, 1901.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Australia was largely a WAS (White Anglo Saxon) settlement, most settlers being of English or Irish origin. It was only in the latter half of the twentieth century (after World War II) that several nationalities migrated to Australia and the island continent is now home to about 19 million people, with nearly 30% belonging to non-British stock. The new settlers in Australia were faced with several problems like, a strange, new environment, hostile physical conditions that necessitated adaptability, whereby survival depended on innovativeness and adaptability. The original inhabitants of Australia- the Aborigines lived with the land whereas the whites lived from the land and thus encountered many difficulties. This vital issue of survival in the new colony forms the theme of much of the early fiction of Australia where there are several recurring images of early settlers taming the land, of harsh and hostile scrub, of lonely outbacks.

But all this changed when gold was discovered in Australia. In 1851, Edward Hargreave, a gold digger from California discovered gold in New South Wales (NSW). Gold miners from Europe, America, China, the British Isles, arrived in NSW. The golden era had dawned in the 1850s. Hitherto the image of life in Australia was hard and difficult, with the gold rush the image changed overnight to that of excitement, prosperity and adventure. Free settlers came to Australia as a result of the gold rush and between 1852 and 1861 more than one million people had migrated to the "land of opportunity". It is believed that the gold rush more or less marked the end of the pioneering phase of Australian society. By the mid 1860s the European population of Australia itself was about 150 000. The 1891 census depicts two-thirds of the population as Australian born of which 20 % were of Irish descent. With the growth of the sugar industry as many as 62 000 Pacific Islanders were encouraged to migrate to Queensland. In 1901 the Australian population stood at five million. The Aborigines were granted citizenship rights only in 1967 and Australia began following a multicultural policy as opposed to its hitherto 'white only' policy in 1973.

Among the transported convicts were several educated people. These intellectually inclined individuals did not find an atmosphere congenial enough for extensive literary expression, but were however, able to produce documentary writing in the form of journals, memoirs, letters, annals and diaries. Not only was the penal

settlement not physically conducive for literary expression, even the period when the colony was created was not academically appropriate. The 1760s witnessed the end of the Augustan period. The Romantic Movement was yet to gain ground. This "chronological accident" (Mitchell, *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, p.3) that lead to the settlement of the colony, at the end of one great tradition and on the eve of the other, is believed to have contributed to the uncertainty of early attempts at writing. The artistic influences of the mother country were so strong that Vance Palmer commented: "it almost imposed an attitude of detachment, a sense of alienation from the country that they had now come to inhabit". The difficult task ahead of these men and women of letters was the adoption and adaptation of eighteenth century English literary tradition, to suit their own literary purposes so far away from home. But they faced the challenge. The poet's role as "observer, moralist, philosopher and critic" was adapted to suit this new colony and its intellectual needs. These early settlers instantly adopted the new classical preoccupation with the taming of the wilderness and the cultivation of specialised virtues. Various literary modes like the ode, elegy, lyric, satire and the "English tradition of landscape poetry" found merit in this new land. While these influences worked for poetry, in fiction, Scott and Dickens were the paradigms.

1.3 THE AUSTRALIAN NOVEL

As mentioned earlier we have divided the beginning of novel writing in Australia into two sections: the First Phase (1800s) and the Second Phase (1900s). Let us begin with the First Phase.

1.3.1 First Phase (1800s)

In the beginning, fictionalised accounts of colonial life, mainly for the use of future migrants, were produced. These early writings (mainly memoirs, annals, diaries etc..) were factual accounts of colonial life. However, *The Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux* (1819) marks the initial transition from factual accounts to fiction. *Vaux's Memoirs* is in the tradition of the English picaresque novel of the eighteenth century. Vaux was one of the first to take the trouble of creating a "vocabulary of the Flash Language" a dictionary for translating the idiom of the felons/ convicts to plain English. *Savery, Rowcroft and Harris* all began writing in the fictionalised mode. Henry Savery's *Quintus Servinton*, the first novel to be published in Australia is largely derived from English fiction. He wrote with a targeted readership- namely the lower class of migrants. He has given us the first romantically drawn convict character. *Ralph Rashleigh* (1844-45) by *James Tucker* sheds light on convict life. It deals with horror, brutality and even the picaresque experiences of Ralph. The novels chief charm lies in its historical interest and a growing taste for the romance of adventure.

From 1850s onwards, such documentised writing took the shape of novels and short stories. *Henry Kingsley's The Recollection of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859) is the story of a migrant pastoralist family who having made a fortune in Australia wish to return home in order to enjoy the fruits of their labour in a civilised country. It is important because Kingsley began a new tradition whereby he appropriated the memoir style and adapted it to romance so well that henceforth romance became the dominant form in Australian fiction. His later novel *the Hillyars and the Bartons*, presents a contradicting picture of colonial life. A family of blacksmiths from England, who being low on the social ladder, have come to Australia, the land of equality and opportunity with the desire never to return to class bound and hierarchy conscious England. Within a short time we see the evolution of Australia from a penal settlement to the land of opportunity, (where one can make a fortune) and the land of equals (where rigid social conventions have ceased to exist).

Much of this literature was however for an overseas market, particularly England, which had developed a curiosity for life in their colonies. Whereas Kingsley used the figure of the convict as an agent of fiction, by the 1870s, both **Marcus Clarke** and **Prince Warung (William Astley)**, were making attempts at understanding both the system and the convict experience. The convict system provided two aspects of sensationalism – brutal horrors and prolonged suffering. At the same time attempts to re-investigate/re-assess this aspect of colonial life was also being made by several writers. This was largely due to the contributions of a wide spread European interest in questions related to “crime and punishment”. Hence what we still find at this stage (in the development of Australian fiction) is a eurocentric Australia. Clarke was quick to realise that the convict system could be treated seriously, and that it could provide him with a platform for addressing questions of good and evil, issues of moral and social responsibility, the notion of accountability and suffering. [p.55]. *For the term of His Natural Life*, *His Natural Life*, was published as a novel in 1874. Clarke initiated the delineating of characters with psychological astuteness and great subtlety. **Rolf Boldrewood (T.A. Browne)** was a popular and prolific writer greatly influenced by Henry Kingsley and Sir Walter Scott. He is largely remembered for his *Robbery Under Arms* (1888), - [it appeared as a serial between 1882-83]. Boldrewood combines the narrative of reminiscence and the conventional romance of adventure in this novel.

Though these early writings are not considered to be of great literary merit, they are nonetheless examples of the various literary forms, the annalists and the early writers experimented with. They tried hard to reconcile their day-to-day experiences in an alien land with the great literary traditions they had left behind in England and Europe, but they were still very euro-centric in outlook. Other significant works of the early period are **John Lang's** *The Forger's Wife* (1855), **John Frost's** *Horrors of Convicts Life* (1856), **Marcus Clarke's** *For The Term of the Natural Life* (1874), **Prince Warung's** *Tales of the Convict System* (1892), and **William Hay's** *Escape of the glorious Sir William Heans* (1918). The early phase of writing novels was an attempt at historicising individual experiences.

Mention must also be made of the women novelists of this period. In the convict tradition is **Caroline Leakey's** *The Broad Arrow* (1859). **Catherine Helen Spence (Clara Morison)**: *A Tale of South Australia During the Gold Fever*, 1854) was opposed to the romance tradition, particularly the romance of the bush as she regarded it as a false impression created by certain writers to further their own literary careers. What Spence wanted to do was write about life in the colony, what she called “a faithful transcript of life in the colony” (p. 45). The novel is set in Adelaide. It deals largely with the conventions of colonial life. What Spence may have been trying to do, was emphasise the fact that the life of the community actually goes on inside people's homes and not in the great outdoor/the bush. She maps out the character of Adelaide life in the period of the gold rush (1951-52). Her novel is important for two reasons, one, it accords more importance to opinions, while treating plot and character as subordinates, and two, the setting which was normally, a mere backdrop in the earlier writings emerges as a foreground in the novel. The setting again is not a physical description of Adelaide but the cultural context and the very essence of the community. **Mrs. Campbell Praed's** best work is *Policy and Passion: A Novel of Australian Life* (1881). She concentrates chiefly on “the inner workings, the social interests” of Australian life (p.64) and uses the conventional romance mode to achieve this end. **Ada Cambridge** and **Tasma (Jessie Couvreur)** were some of the early women writers of the period. Tasma's best novel is *Uncle Piper of Piper's Hill: An Australian Novel* (1889) in which she analyses the cultural pretensions of the age.

These women writers were all writing about a particular class of society, who belonged to settler and rather affluent families with limited social life, their main concerns therefore being marriage and property, the required social behaviour and

affectations of the bourgeoisie. From here onwards we find a slight shift in focus. All these novelists though conventional in their writing style, narrative technique and range of vision, were also reflecting the aims, aspiration, dreams and points of view of a considerable section of the Australian public. The next tradition of writers who largely ascribed to the great outdoors - the Bush, were also extremely popular. They promoted the doings away with idealism and propagated the reality of life in the bush that was not 'idyllic'.

1.3.2 Second Phase (1900s)

In much of the early writings of the early period, we find the establishing of an Australian identity and the endorsing of it. In later works however, we find the complexities of rural life as against urban living being explored for instance in the short stories of **Henry Lawson** and the poems of **Christopher Brennan**. Hitherto Australia was a conglomeration of several independent penal colonies. What the Australians now wanted was a Federation. The political move towards demanding and creating a Federation necessitated the emergence of an Australian consciousness and an authentic Australian Literature that did not recognise English conventions, manners, social behaviour or literary achievement. What they needed was a body of literature that moved away from English and the Anglo-Australian literary tradition. What emerged therefore was a set of conventions glorifying the great outdoor, the romance of the Bush. It is generally believed that the Sydney Bulletin (hereafter referred to as the Bulletin) (1880) was responsible for the promotion of the great Australian outdoor, but local colour, the currency lad, and Bush ethics had already made an appearance in the writings of people like Kingsley and Boldrewood, while **Furphy**, **Miles Franklin**, **Katharine Susan Prichard**, and **Frank Dalby** dealt with bush ethics in a romantic, sentimental manner. What the Bulletin did however, was bring about narrative changes, - and what now emerged was a dry, laconic style and an Australian voice, particularly in the bush ballads and the short stories. It was during this era that the *Bush* became truly Australian and indicative of the Australian Nation. The literature of this period reflects the values of rural life and small communities, while promoting independence and the right to equality. At around the same time, towards the last decades of the nineteenth century, political momentum garnered support and ultimately culminated in the formation of the Federation in 1901, and is reflected by works like Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*.

This does not mean or in any way indicate that the early writers failed to pass the test of English literature, what they did however, fail at, was in satisfying or fulfilling what some critics perceived as Nationalistic Literature. Commenting upon the use of the English language E.A. Badham says as early as 1895 (Mitchelle, p.14) that the language inherited from the mother country should be localised to the land of popular usage in Australia. She writes, "we have to choose between the language of the Bible, of Shakespeare, and of Milton, and that of the comic penny-a-liners. By adopting the latter we should, no doubt, considerably hasten the birth of our National Literature, and when it came it would have the further advantage of being distinctly Australian for the Australians, for it is quite certain that no civilized nation would condescend to notice its existence." It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that writers like Henry Lawson and **A B Banjo Paterson**, were able to use local idioms with considerable skill and dexterity. Early writings documenting life in the new colony produced a mixture of fact and fiction, of information and romance, poetic diction and local colours. These early works were later succeeded by works dealing with Australian tradition, idiom and images that was largely "rural, proletarian and vernacular,"[p,15].

The short story too developed during this period and Henry Lawson, **Steele Rudd** (**Arthur Hoey Davis**), **Edward Dyson**, **Barbara Baynton**, **William Astley** were the chief exponents of this literary form. We shall not go into any further detail at this stage in our discussion of the novel because the short story has already been dealt with in the previous block (Block III). Suffice it to say that all types of literary

activity that flourished towards the end of the nineteenth century were not sustained. It flowered again only in the late 1930s in fiction and the early 1940s in poetry.

1.4 THE MODERN AUSTRALIAN NOVEL: BEGINNINGS

From amidst the short story writers emerged Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* in 1903, an "unreadable" classic that flouts the literary convention of the nineteenth century novel of character. It is a pretty complex mixture of the eighteenth century novels particularly those dealing with the comedy of intellectual life and journey of the road, in combination with the nineteenth century novel of social realism. *Such is Life* explores the various dimensions of the bush code – the political, the practical and the moral issues contained therein. Furphy is known as a 'novelist of strategies'. He is very serious in his concern with the relationship between life and literature. He deals with the recent past. His sedentary narrative style, reflective mode, use of language and his attitude towards local idiom, confirms the immediate past as recorded in diaries. Distinguished as he was, Furphy did not contribute much to the literary progress of the early twentieth century. In fact **Henry Handel Richardson** (*The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, 1917-29) whose works are derived from the nineteenth century European novel, is better placed as a link to the literature of the turn of the century. Like Mrs. Praed, Tasma, **Boyd** and **Christina Stead**, she (Richardson) too was an expatriate novelist, who helped free the novelists from the pressure to 'write Australian'. She learnt how to handle theme objectively from the works of Flaubert and Jacobsen. In *Maurice Guest* (1908), she moves away from naturalism towards psychological impressions, and tries to follow the paradigms set by the psychological and the stream of consciousness novels that deal with the fine workings of the inner mind. Her other novels include *The Getting of Wisdom*, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, (1930) *Australia Felix* (1917), *The Way Home* (1925) *Ultima Thule* (1929), *The Young Cosima* (1939), an incomplete autobiography *Myself When Young* (1948) and a volume of short stories – *The End of A Childhood and Other Stories* (1934). She gave Australian fiction, its first sustained analysis of character. Her themes are romantic and she was the doyen of realism in Australian fiction. She is also the first substantial Australian writer to convey a large consistent vision of life.

William Gosse Hay's *The Escape of the Notorious Sir William Heans (and the mystery of Mr. Daint): A Romance of Tasmania* (1919), *Captain Quadring* (1912), *The Mystery of Alfred Doubt* (1937), was one of the minor writers of the same period. Round about the same time, a literature of the city experience too began to emerge, in which 'the bush was exchanged for the push' - **Louis Stone's** *Jonan* (1911) is a mixed study of street life in the inner suburbs of Sydney, in which Stone manages to catch the idiom of the area, the manners and values of the people. Miles Franklin *My Brilliant Career*, (1901) was fiercely loyal and totally committed to the distinctively Australian. Her narratives are heavily romantic both in theme and treatment. Her other works include – *My Career Goes Bung Purporting to be the Autobiography of Sybylla Penelope Melvyn* (1946), and, *All That Swaggers* (1936). **Norman Lindsay** though a short story writer is largely remembered for his encouragement of and influence on many of the budding writers of the earlier part of the twentieth century. His novels took great pleasure in scandalising middle class morality and his characters are largely cartoon figures, known for their eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. His writings were however free of the obsession with landscape realism and its preoccupation with bush life. His other words include *The Magic Pudding* (1918), *Redheap* (1930) and *Salurdee* (1934).

1.4.1 The Growth of Self- Identity

In the earlier section, we have already considered the gradual growth of the Australian novel. Our major concern here will be to emphasise the growth of self-

identity in the field of fiction. But this development of self-identity is the result of a continuous struggle with extraneous influences, of distinct socio-political changes appearing in Australia. This traditional notion of Australia may be noticed in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). Here is a bit of conversation between Cecily and Algernon:

Cecily: I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

Algernon: Australia? I'd sooner die.

This conversation may lead us to consider some of the important aspects of the rise and development of the modern Australian novel. The initial phase of the Australian writer is characterised by a sense of divided loyalty. On the one hand the Australian writers used to pay allegiance to British mainstream tradition; and on the other hand, they tried to establish a distinctive sense of self-identity. Judith Wright, an eminent Australian poet has ably discussed this point. She has pointed out that the Australian writers have wavered between Australianism and Europeanism. The problem was thus reflected in the form of a question: How can the Australian writers write in English and go against British mainstream tradition? In her essay "*Romanticism and the Last Frontier*" she refers to the problem of the Fallacy of Engagement and the Fallacy of Disengagement. The Fallacy of Engagement refers to the condition of the early phase of colonial settlement, when writers used to work in small strife torn European colonies, distanced from their original homeland and with no claim on Australia by birth. These writers were yet to acknowledge the country in its totality. The Fallacy of disengagement recognises the distance between Australia and the European countries. In this way Australia was negated in terms of the European present. It therefore entered a phase of silence in its history and space. In keeping with these two levels of Fallacy, the Australian novelists began to suffer from a crisis of self-image. Thus a character in *Cockatoos* says, "they all go away - all the young ones with any promise." But gradually there is a distinctive change in attitude amongst Australian writers. The writers gradually tend to come back to Australia. Katherine Susannah Prichard went to Europe for six years and came back to Australia. Jean Devany started from New Zealand in 1929. She meant to go to Europe and came to Australia as a halting station and finally settled there. Even Patrick White returned to Australia in 1948. But the consciousness of a home away from home is a prevalent feature among the Australian writers. This notion is largely apparent in Martin Boyd's *The Cardboard Crown* (1952) and Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*. Again Christina Stead left Australia in 1928 only to return to Australia in her old age in 1974. But she concentrated on Australia in her novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) and she looks at the problem of expatriation critically in *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940).

We should also consider the fiction of the interwar years. Australian involvement in the two world wars, the sending of Australian troops to these wars on behalf of the mother country, the gradual emergence of the Communist Party of Australia, Australian participation in the Vietnam War and the ascendancy of American influence led to the writing of many war novels dealing with Australian social realism. Thus Prichard in *Winged Seeds* (1950) gives us a telling picture of how Australian participation in World War II was announced over the radio on September 3, 1939. Carole Ferrier in her essay "*Fiction in Transition*" gives us an idea about the impact of the world wars on Australian novels. "In the goldfields trilogy (of Prichard) and *The Tree of Man* (of Patrick White), the narrator remains behind in Australia with the women, and those who did not go. The same is true of Franklin's *Cockatoos* in which Ignez reflects on her aunt Rhoda, who has raised her son to be a soldier:" She thought her darling son looked lovely in uniform, a short-distance intellectual that could not visualize his going far away to kill the lovely darlings of other women." Eric Lambert's *The Twenty Thousand Thieves* (1951) does visualize the going far away, and follows Australian and other troops to Palestine in 1941."

The impact of World War II was really intense. Thus in **Eleanor Dark's** *The Little Company* (1945), we come across a dramatic presentation of the air raid warning. Again **Dymphna Cusack and Florence James'** (joint authorship) *Come in Spinner* (1951) gives a very grim picture of wartime conditions. This is also noticeable in **Xavier Herbert's** *Soldiers' Women* (1961).

The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was also gradually gaining ground. Many members of the CPA began to visit Russia and other places of Party activity. The members of the CPA included writers like Jean Devany, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Judah Waten, John Mansfield, Eric Lambert, Frank Hardy and Dorothy Hewett. This gave way to a new consciousness of realism. Jean Devany was an extremist who went as far as claiming that writers are workers and that her *Sugar Heaven* (1936) was "the first Proletarian novel of Australia." The members of the CPA largely canvassed the principle of "socialist realism" and this is particularly evident in Prichard's *Working Bullocks* (1926). The World Wars and the impact of the CPA (but the influence of the CPA gradually declined in the 1950s) however generated a new sense of engagement among the Australian writers. They are no longer afflicted by the burdens of the past. Prior to this their only concern was their attempt at tracing themselves to their original heritage in Europe. However, other influences have come to be merged in their creative activity. Despite this plethora of influences the Australian writers began to rediscover themselves in terms of formulating a sense of history and national consciousness. Thus Dark's novel *The Timeless Land* (1941) is largely based on a well-researched historical framework. She says in the Preface to the novel: "This book has borrowed so much from history that it seems advisable to remind readers that it is fiction." Dark again says in the Preface to *Storm of Time* (1948) that the novel is based on accurate historical details. **E V Timms** also writes historical sagas in novels like *The Pathway of the Sun* (1949), *The Beaconing Shore* (1950) and *The Valleys Beyond* (1951). Similar questions of historical consciousness and national identity have been addressed in **Nancy Cato's** *All the Rivers Run* (1948), *Time, Flow Swiftly* (1952) and *But Still the Stream* (1962). This problematising of history and identity is equally emphasised in **Patrick White's** *Voss*.

Patrick White seems to be the central protagonist in this story of the rise and development of the Australian novel. White established the fact that Australian reality can be handled with a touch of metaphysical intensity. But after 1965, in his novels like *The Solid Mandala* (1966), *The Vivisector* (1970), *The Eye of the Storm* (1973), *A Fringe of Leaves* (1977), he begins to concentrate on the post war reality of Australian society. In fact Patrick White became the path maker for such great contemporary writers like **Elizabeth Jolly, Thomas Kenneally, David Malouf et al.** The revival of writing begins only before World War II with the works of Christina Stead and Patrick White. It continues thereafter into the 40s and the 50s with the poetry of **R D Fitzgerald, Judith Wright, James Mc Auley, Douglas Stewart, A D Hope and David Campbell**, right through, till the rise of the Australian Drama in the 1960s and 70s. Thereafter Australian fiction came to be known as distinctive Australian, with little or no direct European / English influence. In the nineteenth century the past meant convicts, bush-rangers and gold rushes. However, after the 1940s the past began to appear more remote and as yet at the same time more prominent, giving birth to a new range of writing that explores and interprets the history of Australia. An interest in personal history has also gained prominence in the last thirty to forty years – the origins of which may be traced to the memoirs, diaries and accounts of early writers. In a sense history becomes of utmost importance as it helps place and locate Australian in time and space.

Voss was written in 1957. It is described as "the most florid of White's novels, and perhaps the most triumphant because of the rhetorical excess". (p.151). *Voss* is believed to have "established the mythic potentialities of Australian history, set a fashion for heavily symbolic and imagery-ridden writing, and localized the journey of exploration as spiritual metaphor." (p.150, Adrian Mitchell: *The Oxford History of*

Australian Literature, ed. Leonie Kramer, OUP: Melbourne, 1981). The world of Patrick White, his works and *Voss*, the novel under scrutiny will be dealt with in the next unit. Australian literature particularly fiction as we have discovered by now, was born of the convict legacy, its history dating back to the First Settlement in 1788, Botany Bay. Let us now look at the various phases in the development of the Australian Novel.

Rise and Development of the Australian Novel

1.4.2 Phases of Development

The different phases of the development of the Australian novel in the twentieth century is given below:

- **Romance Fiction:** "The coming race" in Australia is the major theme of the early novels, as evident in Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903). The romance mode in such novels contextualises the theme of settlement and is often centred round an exotic and imaginary land. This is particularly noticeable in **H Rider Haggard's** *Fugitive Anne* (1902).
- **Melodramatic Fiction:** The melodramatic mode is largely projected in novels dealing with the contrast between the settlers and the Aborigines, the gaolers and the convicts, the landed and the lawless and so on. Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) and Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) are pertinent examples. The melodramatic mode once again renews itself in the recent fiction of **Thomas Keneally** and **Kate Grenville**. But this neo-melodramatic mode is largely prompted by a sense of loss of identity by the hegemony of the European powers in present times.
- **Historical Fiction:** The fiction belonging to this category historicises the theme of settlement and exploration. Thus Martin Boyd in *The Cardboard Crown* (1952) shows the decline of lumpen-bourgeoisie. **Robert Drewe** in *The Savage Cows* (1976) shows the gradual extinction of the Aborigines of Tasmania. Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) and *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) deal with the complex theme of exploration and relationship. Again **Murdooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson)** in his *Long Live Sandawara* (1979) concentrates on the oppression of the Aborigines. In recent times, **Peter Carey** presents a comic conspectus of the Australian colonial history in his *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988). These historical novels may be regarded as an attempt to rewrite Australian national history. In other words, these are fictional authentication of colonial memory.
- **Realistic Fiction:** The growing sense of realism in terms of sordid down-to-earth life also comes to be the subject of many Australian novels. Thus Louis Stone's *Jonah* or **Kenneth Mackenzie's** *The Refuge* presents a moving picture of the urban life of Sydney as also its working class life. There are even traces of creating certain forms of psychological realism. Elizabeth Jolly, for instance, in her *Milk and Honey* (1984) formulates a type of meta-fiction in which the central character Jacob recounts his past in a mental hospital.
- **Aboriginal Fiction:** The Aboriginal novel is also a remarkable segment of Australian literature. Despite the fact that the Aborigines have long been regarded as representing a subaltern social category, they have come to register their protesting voice. Murdooroo Narogin's *Long Live Sandawara* (1979) and *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) are significant examples. In both novels, Narogin tries to use history as a source of symbolic action. Narogin has meticulously portrayed the pretensions of mainstream white society in these novels. Women are also lending their voice to this spirit of protest. **Monica Clare** in *Karo Bran*

(1979) powerfully presents the story of an Aboriginal girl. These Aboriginal novelists try to project what **Jack Davis** (another Aboriginal writer) calls "the real Australian story"

This brief history of the developmental phases of the literary history of the Australian novel makes us aware of the general trends in fiction. At the same time it also creates a perspective for the study of Patrick White's *Voss*. Moreover some general remarks on White's novels have been made for substantiating his position as a novelist. Let us now take a quick look at the major issues and concerns of the Australian writers.

1.5 MAJOR ISSUES AND CONCERNS OF AUSTRALIAN WRITERS

The earliest Australian novels deal with a new environment, the ability or lack of it to adapt to this strange land. It is concerned with the issues of survival, and life depends on the innovativeness and adaptability of its people. Emerging from this concern the convict tradition gained prominence and was followed by the creation of a romantic convict character, who though a wronged man was nonetheless morally upright. The legend of the vast outdoors, the sense of freedom on the one hand, the building of friendships and bonding of males in the outback, life in the outback, the plight of women in the bush were other favourite themes with writers in Australia. With the discovery of gold and the progress made by urban centers, the distinction between life in the bush and city life captured the imagination of quite a few writers of this period. A growing consciousness of nationalism in the political world is equally reflected in fiction. With every major political change, the concerns of Australian fiction kept changing – when Australia adopted a 'multicultural policy' this was reflected in emigrant writing. Just as with the granting of citizenship to the Aborigines, Aboriginal literature has found a voice. By the early decades of the twentieth century (1930s) the **Jindyworobak** movement had started. These literary men and women believed in cleansing themselves and their literature from all European influences in an effort to promote and present the real Australia. Judith Wright, an eminent contemporary poet, later claimed "We are beginning to write, no longer as transplanted Europeans, nor as restless men who reject the past and put their hopes only in the future, but as men with a present to be lived in and a past to nourish us." The two world wars contributed in various ways to Australian fiction as a strong sense of anti-war sentiment developed. Not only this Australian fiction has always been concerned with its narrative style. In fact some of the novels deal with the very theme of narrative style. It has played an important role in the development of the modern Australian novel and has dictated terms to writers like **Frank Hardy**, **Christina Stead** and **Patrick White**. The other major concern of Australian fiction is the question of reality. The inevitable choice that the writer makes while working on his novel is a "device" that shows that "the chief consideration of Australian fiction has persistently been man's suspended disbelief in the world of his experience." [p.172]

Having gone through the major issues of the age we have now come to the end of the unit. Let us now sum up.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

A re-reading of the past, mythologising of the history of Australian development are important aspects of Australian Literature in the aftermath of World War II.

Australian Literature has come a long way, since 1788. At this stage, we can afford to look at the memoirs, the journals of the early writers trying to come to terms with

their new environment, the early short stories and later works of fiction that shows the creation of the legend, the breaking of them, the building of a national literature and a nation the usage of the Australian idiom and the real flowering of Australian prose, poetry and fiction in contemporary times. We have also seen the change of themes through the development of Australian literary history. We may spend a few moments recapitulating all that we have said so far about the Australian novel and on the little that we have said about *Voss*. We are now equipped to tackle the novel and the novelist. It would help if you could get hold of some of the books mentioned at the end of the block and read up the history of Australian literature in detail. The next unit will introduce you to the author and the novel *Voss*.

Rise and Development of the Australian Novel

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Why were the earlier writers Eurocentric in outlook?
2. What were / are the chief concerns of Australian writers?
3. What role if any did the women novelists of the period play in the development of the novel?
4. How would you trace the development of the Australian novel?

UNIT 2 AS WE FIRST READ: *VOSS*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The World of Patrick White
- 2.3 Some Themes and Issues in Patrick White
- 2.4 The Making of *Voss*
- 2.5 A Reading of *Voss*
 - 2.5.1 Voss and Australia
 - 2.5.2 Voss and Laura
 - 2.5.3 Exploring Australia
 - 2.5.4 Agony and Ecstasy
- 2.6 Human Relationships in the Novel
 - 2.6.1 Voss and the Bonner Family
 - 2.6.2 Voss and his Fellow Travellers
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Glossary
- 2.9 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we traced the history and the development of the Australian novel. As Australian Literature is absolutely a new area, it is also extremely necessary for you to form at least a working knowledge about the land and people. It is therefore essential to consult a map that gives you a basic idea about the country. This topographical knowledge is to some extent useful because *Voss*, as you will see later on, is largely related to the problems of land and topography. In this unit, however, we will start a reading of the text and in course of this reading we shall try to explore some of the main features of the interweaving patterns of relationships, events and characters. Naturally this Unit may be looked upon as a preparatory phase.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

When we read *Voss*, what strikes us most is the essential concern about the theme of exploration. In other words, the novel's central emphasis is on a soul-searching journey into the heart of Australia. Patrick White seems to historicise a distinctively real pattern of events and offers a kind of symbolic explanation. This novel is supposed to be based on the true record of Ludwig Leichhardt who died in the Australian desert in 1848. The German explorer's endeavour to cross the Australian continent has been interpreted in terms of significant symbolic movement. It is therefore appropriate to approach the novel from the standpoint of Voss's character in the context of the complex nature of relationships. As we read the novel, we should try to discover how, as a stranger to the country, Voss reacts to the unknown land. Patrick White's intention is to show how Voss gradually reacts to this strange land and how he is also able to involve others in the process. Laura Trevelyan, for instance, gets emotionally involved with Voss as also with the adventurous mission that he is going to undertake. Again Mr. Bonner, the uncle of Laura, is immensely interested in the adventuristic project of Voss. It has been already decided by him that Voss will undertake his journey in a ship called *Osprey* that will carry him to

Newcastle. He will then proceed towards Rhine Towers where Mr. Sanderson will meet him. Finally he will reach the last outpost Jildra where Mr. Boyle will welcome him. These arrangements initiated by Mr. Bonner show his intense involvement in the entire project. In fact the entire settlement of New South Wales seems to be absorbed in the project of Voss's journey. If we analyse the responses and reactions generated by Voss's project carefully, it seems that it is perhaps the most oblique initiation of the Australian dream – the dream of reaching into the very heart of the country. Mere colonial settlement seems inadequate in essentialising a total identification with the land.

As We First Read:
Voss

As we read the novel, we are always conscious of the fact that it is set in the post-convict period and that it is a phase when men coming with an overt intention of making money inhabited Australia. It is a time when Australia has not yet been fully explored. The importance of Voss's character lies in the fact that he simply intends to explore the mystery and intensity of this strange country. In this first reading, we may go on raising certain thematic issues embedded in the novel while examining at the same time some of the major problems of inter relationships. White has further created a sense of complexity in the nature of the expedition. He has presented different degrees of contrast and division. There is constant tension between the whites and the Aborigines. Again the division among the explorers further complicates the entire perspective of the journey. But it is through the multiple facets of experience that an idealised Australian dream is substantiated.

2.2 THE WORLD OF PATRICK WHITE

Patrick White was born in 1912 of Australian parents in England. He was just six-months old when he was brought to Australia. He was educated in Australia till he was thirteen. The next phase of his education started at Cheltenham College, England. But it was a public school that was more renowned for producing famous soldiers than great scholars. He however never really liked this British phase of his education. He described this college as a place to be "ironed out". After the British phase of his education, he came back to Australia. He started working as a jackaroo (portmanteau of Jack and Kangaroo- meaning a new chum or a new immigrant, a greenhorn) on sheep stations.



This particular experiential pattern has been reflected in his earliest novel *The Happy Valley* (1939). Patrick White's intention to be acquainted with continental literature is evident in his return to England to study French and German at King's College. His life is one of journey and travel. During the early phase of his life, he frequently travelled between Australia and England. After this he also travelled through Western Europe and America. He also served in the Middle East and Greece as an intelligence officer in the Royal Air Force (RAF). These travels through the world naturally widened the experiential dimension of his life.

Patrick White epitomises a sustained effort at fictionalising the Australian experience. His first novel *The Happy Valley* is projected against the background of the snow country of New South Wales. In this novel he concentrates on the intensity of human suffering in relation to the archetypal problems of love and jealousy. It deals with the monotonous and dissatisfied life of a local practitioner Dr Oliver Halliday, and his failing marriage that prompts an affair with a music teacher Alys Browne. This emphasis on various aspects of human passion is further examined in his next novel *The Living and the Dead* (1941). Here Patrick White once again reorganises the acceptance of human sickness as also its ecstasy. In his next major novel *The Aunt's Story* (1948), he exploits his experiences of travel through many parts of the World. In this novel, the story revolves around the heroine Theodora Goodman who travels through three different Continents -- Australia, Europe and America. Here Patrick White's philosophy of life becomes more intense and pronounced. His central concern seems to be an examination of permanence in a world of multiplication and division. Another significant novel of Patrick White is *The Tree of Man* (1955). In this novel, the shifts and changes in Australian society are depicted. The story is about the Australian farmer family of Stan Parker and presents the transformation of a pastoral society into a world of urban complexity. The gradual movement of time seems to lend a special dimension to the novel, thereby creating a sense of enchanting sense of mystery and ecstasy. *The Tree of Man* shows "that fulfillment lies in liberalization, lies in transcendence," and he examines the same theme in his other major novel *Voss* (*V Chatterjee*, p. 23). As he gradually developed into a mature novelist, he increasingly showed leanings towards establishing a sense of mystical philosophy. This is largely evident in *Riders in the Chariot* (1961). Here White deals with the mystical consciousness of four different characters--a lady residing in the dilapidated house of her father, an aboriginal artist, a Jew who has managed to escape from Nazi Germany, and a laundress married to a drunkard. Moreover the novel is replete with mystical associations of Greek, Hebrew and Roman-Christian culture. The search for mystical meaning is all the more intensified in his novel *The Solid Mandala* (1966). The title of the novel itself generates much curiosity among Indian readers. The word "Mandala" is a Sanskrit word used with reference to Oriental esoteric religion. Patrick White looks upon it as a symbol of totality. Here White examines the interweaving relationship of the twin brothers-- Arthur and Waldo Brown as "embodiments of the living and the dead" (*A Readers Guide*, p. 209), whereby Arthur remains a disenchanted individual failing in his quest for totality.

This sense of quest is a significant theme in most of the novels of Patrick White. *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), to that extent, is an outstanding novel. Like *Voss*, this novel is also based on an authentic historical event. It is based on the actual experiences of Eliza Frazer. She was a nineteenth-century English woman who accompanied her husband to Van Diemen's Land to visit his renegade brother. But they were shipwrecked off the Queensland Coast in May 1939 and the aborigines captured her. While rewriting this historical event, Patrick White interfuses reality and romantic mysticity. Patrick White was also a poet and a dramatist. Even before he began writing novels, he produced a collection of about thirty-three poems-- *The Ploughman and Other Poems* (1935). Most of these poems were written during his undergraduate days. But these poems lack maturity and depth. These are marked by inordinate lyrical extravagance and bear the influence of Keats and the Georgian poets. But poetry never really left him. Many of the passages from his novels, if

extracted at random, may be enjoyed as splendid specimens of poetry. The following passage from *The Tree of Man* is a case in point:

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Voss

The darkness was full of wonder. Standing there somewhat meekly, the man could have loved something, someone, if he could have penetrated beyond the wood, beyond the moving darkness. But he could not could not and in his confusion he prayed to God, not in specific petition, wordlessly almost, for the sake of company. Till he began to know every corner of the darkness, as if it were daylight and he were in love with the heaving world, down to the last blade of wet grass.

As a dramatist, Patrick White is not very remarkable. The beginning of his career as a dramatist may be traced back to the staging of his play *Return to Abyssinia* (1947). His collection of plays entitled *Four Plays* was published later. One of his significant plays -- *The Ham Funeral* -- seems to belong to the first phase of Australian drama that expresses a craving for an independent "nationalist" theatre. In this play, White has splendidly used the myths of national identity.

Patrick White was also an excellent short story writer. In the early part of his creative career, he wrote short stories like *The Twitching Colonel* (1937) or *Cocotte* (1940) that were published in significant journals of London. *The Twitching Colonel* is particularly important because here we come across a character like colonel Travellick who may be regarded as a forerunner of the later visionary characters of Patrick White. His later short stories have been published in a collection called *The Burnt Ones* (1964). This collection contains eleven stories. Four of these stories are set against the background of Greece; the rest of the stories are replete with varying moods and temperaments -- farce, pathos, surrealism, and psychological analysis. What is essentially noteworthy is that most of the central characters are alienated individuals suffering inwardly. This theme of alienation is equally noticed in six novellas and stories collected in *The Cockatoos* (1974). In this collection, only four stories have Australian settings or characters.

2.3 SOME THEMES AND ISSUES IN PATRICK WHITE

Patrick White's achievement as a novelist lies in the fact that he for the first time creates a distinctive Australian consciousness. Novelists writing before White could not properly substantiate a dignified Australian vision. In 1925 **George M Barnard** wrote a novel called *Looena: A Story of Bush Life in Tasmania*. But it fails to establish a dignified impression of the Australian Bush and its people. Again **Nevil Shute** in novels like *A Town like Alice* (1950) and *The Breaking Wave* (1955) creates Australian settings, but his chief intention was to cater to the taste of the British and the American readers. Patrick White was however able to perceive the predicament of the Australian tradition which was striving to establish its identity as a homogeneous culture. It is a pity that White was badly reviewed and criticised by a group of Australian critics. In fact he was not even warmly received in Australia as he had been in England and America. **John Hay** in his *Brief Memoirs of a Ravenous Reader* writes: "He seemed to produce controversy with every novel, as his work was exploratory and different to the Frontier Tradition of Australian Literature". His position as a novelist was however firmly established when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973. Every novelist begins with a search for an individual idiom. Naturally the early phase of a creative writer could be more or less imitative. It is through imitation that he finally discovers his own creative voice. Patrick White's early novels therefore bear the influence of such eminent writers as **D H Lawrence**, **James Joyce**, **Virginia Woolf** and **T S Eliot**. But his original talent

as a novelist begins to come to the forefront from *The Aunt's Story* onwards. White considers the act of writing as a "struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words". In this struggle he has again and again discovered multiple forms and visions.

In order to understand the central complexity of White's novels, we should try to comprehend the opposition of two antithetical visions. White always curiously combines the worldly and the metaphysical. This specific principle has been appropriately projected in the epigraph of *The Solid Mandala*: "There is another world, but it this one". It has been therefore pointed out by the critics that White combines **Swiftian** satire and **Blakean** vision. White has always concentrated on the sordid reality of the mundane world. In *Voss* he has splendidly recaptured the colonial reality of New South Wales in the context of the house of Mr. Bonner. In *A Fringe of Leaves* Ellen's experience among the aborigines brings us close to the subaltern native tradition of Australia. This awareness of social reality is largely evident in *The Prodigal Son*: "In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the school master and the journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glossier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerve". But Patrick White at the same time switches over to a metaphysical world. White has described himself as a religious artist. He has therefore always tried to create "a splendour, a transcendence which is ... there above human realities". He of course shows a commitment to the material, rationalistic level of reality. But he also exhibits an intense attachment to the spiritual level of experience. Patrick White's world is therefore characterised by a principle of dualism. In other words, he creates a tension between spiritual and non-spiritual, reason and metaphysics, body and spirit, good and evil, male and female, life and death, dream and actuality, time and eternity. Patrick White has generally tried to live a life of seclusion. But he has often made public statements involving the socio-political situation of Australia. This distinctively shows his intense concern for the well being of his country. He has therefore never strayed away from crucial national issues. He criticised the war in Vietnam very sharply. He made thoughtful comments on the environmental crisis in Australia. He was also largely moved by the condition of the aborigines in Australia. He was intimately associated with the 1972 federal election campaign and this resulted in the formation of the Labour government. When it was dismissed in 1975, he strongly registered his protest. He also withdrew from the Order of Australia because he could not approve of the policies of the government. He established the Patrick White Literary Award.

Patrick White died on 30 September 1990. But his works are a constant source of inspiration to future generation of readers and writers. V. Chatterjee has therefore rightly pointed out that "Patrick White has taught us to suffer with dignity and to find strength in loneliness. This I believe, is no mean achievement".

2.4 THE MAKING OF VOSS

As *Voss* should be studied in detail, it is necessary that you know how the novel was written, how it was published and how it gradually established Patrick White as a great novelist. In fact the writing of a novel is as difficult as it is complicated to make it acceptable to both the readers and the critics. Patrick White always wanted to write a novel about explorers and exploration. But he put the idea aside especially in view of the failure of *The Aunt's Story*. But the idea was there at the back of his mind since the early days of the War. In the summer of 1954-55, he was suffering from a

terrible attack of asthma. As a result, he lay in the public wards of Sydney hospitals. It was during this time that he conceived the idea of writing *Voss*.

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London Dandy as the undiscovered playwright of the late 1930s

The progress of writing the novel was moderately swift. He started the novel in 1955 and he completed the work in 1956. In one of his letters to Ben Heusch (a partner in the Viking Press and publisher to the American *avant-garde*), Patrick White writes, "I have almost finished the first version of a new book. Am pleased with it only by fits. I have never been pleased with anything really. I think it will be a long time before the one can be called finished. I shall have to rewrite it at least once, probably twice". He had completed the final version of *Voss* in December 1956 and he was greatly relieved. He writes to Naomi Burton (his agent in New York), "Today I sent you by registered air mail the MS of the new book *Voss*. ... I shan't write any more now. Finishing the book has put me behind with all my Christmas correspondence." He worked on *Voss* for eighteen months. But he did not make any public statement about writing this novel. Only some intimate friends like the Kriegers came to know about it. In fact, he hated talking about the books he planned. He said: "As you

know, I hate talking about books before they are ready." It was a novel in which he tried to create a fusion of history and passion. When he came back from the War, he decided upon writing a novel on Australia; and having explored the old records, he concentrated on the figure of the German explorer Leichhardt. He explained his own conception regarding the novel in one of his letters to Huebsch: "When I returned here (Australia) after the War and began to look up old records, my idea seemed to fit the character of Leichhardt. The latter was, besides, merely unusually unpleasant, whereas Voss is mad as well. I always wanted to write the story of a grand passion." *Voss* appeared in New York in 1957. The New Yorker praised the novel in the following manner. "His prose... tends to set up an obstinate and exasperating barrier between his subject-matter and the reader. Nevertheless, this is a heroic and sometimes brilliant novel." *Voss* appeared in London in December 1957. The appearance of *Voss* established White's position as a literary celebrity in London. The critics even went to the extent of placing him by the side of such great authors as Hardy, Conrad, Lawrence and Faulkner et al. The reaction from the Australian critics came rather late, though *Voss* became a best seller. Sometimes the Australian reviewers even tried to undermine the importance of the novel. Thus Douglas Stuart wrote: "One thing is certain. Overseas praise does tend to be excessive, and ... lacking in the fundamental knowledge of the subject which alone can give real authority." But the apathy of the Australian reviewers gradually changed into admiration.



Sidney Nolan whose friendship White valued above all others:
"I feel I have known him all my life". White also asked Nolan to do the jacket of *Voss*

White's biographer David Marr writes, "That it was greeted at first with a general air of reproach was a source of great anger to White, especially as the critical verdict in Australia was reversed after a few years and the explorer novel came to be revered almost to the point of tedium." But White's position as a novelist came to be officially recognised as he won the Miles Franklin Literary Award for *Voss*. This award was given to him because *Voss* was considered to be a novel of "the highest literary merit, which must present Australian life in any of its phases." It was a £ 500 award. David Marr, (his biographer), narrates a remarkable anecdote in this regard: a journalist asked White what he planned to do with the money. "I'm going to buy a hi-fi set". He replied, then, added after a moment's reflection, "and a kitchen stove." With this we shall move on to our reading of *Voss*.

2.5 A READING OF VOSS

I hope you have read the text because we shall be making references to the text as we analyse the novel.

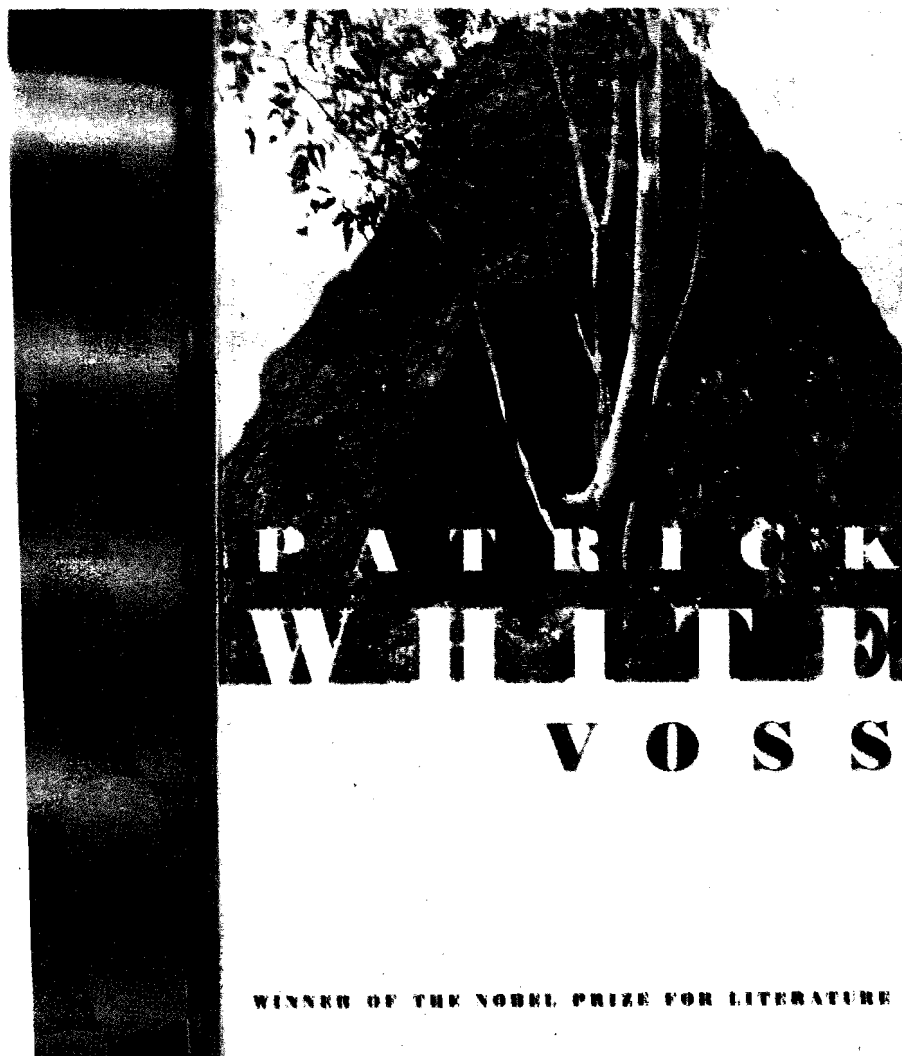


White – Cambridge Freshman with Moustache

2.5.1 *Voss* and Australia

In a sense, the central protagonist of Patrick White's *Voss* is Australia. Just as in Shakespeare's history plays the central protagonist is England itself, so also Australia as a strange country seems to be the focal point of this novel. The title of the novel seems to emphasise the character of Voss. At one level, the title is justified, because the novel is essentially concerned with the experiential phase of Voss in course of his journey. In other words, we discover a linear progressive pattern of Voss's expedition -- the preparation of the journey, the journey on the ship *Osprey*, their progress through Rhine Towers and Jildra, the beginning of their expedition through an arid landscape, varying degrees of predicament, the encounter with the Aborigines and the death of Voss. But at another level, it may be read as an epistemological construct in relation to Australia. But we absorb this level of experientiality through the personality of Voss. It is always emphasised that the central concern of *Voss* is Australia. He is in Australia only for "two years and four months" (Chapter 1). But he has already formed a greater understanding of the land than the settlers of New South Wales. When Laura complains of the land being extremely monotonous, he finds himself quite at home. "I am at home ... it is like the poor parts of Germany" (Chapter 1). Though Laura fails to be intimate with her new home in New South Wales, Voss discovers the intense complexity of the country: "Your country is of great subtlety" (chapter 1). In Voss's analysis, the expedition should not be merely considered at the concrete level of human experience. It is not just an adventurous inclination that has drawn him to this precarious pursuit. In attempting to explore the country, he gradually begins to locate an element of infinity. Patrick White has always reiterated this theme of sublime infinity in most of his novels. The theme of topographical exploration is gradually sublimated to the level of a spiritual experience. This is possible because White is essentially preoccupied with certain notions of religious mysticism. He has said: "Religion – that's behind all my novels." Voss's knowledge about Australia therefore generates an awareness of infinity itself. Thus Voss says to Le Mesurier: "But in this disturbing country, so far as I have become acquainted with it already, it is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite". Patrick White's *Voss* ends with a series of death. But how should we interpret this idea of death in the context of Voss's exploration of Australia? Does Australia itself symbolise a land of insurmountable obstacles? And those who try to concretise its strangeness in terms of an exploration may not come back to the normative pattern of reality. After Voss and his party leave

Jildra (Chapter 8) they are gradually confronted by different forms of adversity. It may be suggested that Jildra is the last terminating point of the normative civilised world. When the explorers are exposed to the ruthlessness of the Australian landscape, they gradually begin to develop multiple shades of feelings and reactions.



At the concrete level, their journey begins to be disturbed by the Aborigines. The loss of the compass is the preliminary signal of their gradual separation from the civilised world. As they lose the compass, they begin to unlearn the norms of traditional paradigms of reality. Again the Aborigines continue to attack them, trying to jeopardise their progress. They steal their cattle, terrorise them and render them helpless. But at the level of abstraction, it becomes a journey through dream, visions and emotive responses. In Jildra, for instance, there are elaborate references to the moon in its different phases and this seems to be congenial to dreams and visions. White has significantly presented this interweaving relationship: "Heavy moons hung above Jildra at that season. There was a golden moon, of placid, swollen belly. There were the ugly, bronze, male moons, threateningly lopsided. One night of wind and dust, there was a pale moonstone, or, as rags of cloud polished its face, delicate glass instrument, on which the needle barely fluttered, indicating the direction that some starry destiny must take. The dreams of men were influenced by the various moons..." (Chapter 8). Palfreyman who is an ornithologist feels the intensity of emotive experience. Thus Patrick White writes: "Their stay at Jildra had become for the ornithologist a season of sleep-walking, dominated by his dream-- it could have been -- of tortured moonlight and rustling shadow" (Chapter 8). We may also refer to the scene where Palfreyman and Voss are enraptured by the freshness of the flowers. On the last night before their departure from Jildra Voss finds Palfreyman making a

sketch of a "big, dramy lily propped in a tin mug". After having talked about the freshness of the Australian lily, Voss gradually undergoes a dreamy experience: "Written words take some time to thaw, but the words of lilies were now flowing in full summer water, and dark hairs of roots plastered on the mouth as water blew across. ... Tear out the black thing by the roots before it has taken hold. She was humbly grateful for it, however. In her kneeling position, she continued to bathe her hair in all flesh, whether of imperial lilies, or the black, putrefying, human kind" (chapter 8).

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Voss

2.5.2 Voss and Laura



Patrick White at war in Egypt

Apart from the theme of expedition, there is also a complex emphasis on the relationship of Voss and Laura. It may be said that the novel operates at two different levels. At one level, it may be enjoyed as a novel of adventure, gradually taking us deep into the mysterious heart of Australia and inviting us to join this sense of quest starting from New South Wales and ending with the death of the explorers in the wilderness. But at another level, the theme of love runs parallel with the theme of expedition. This particular interweaving creates a distinctively critical design in the novel. Initially it seems that Voss and Laura seem to belong to two different worlds. They seem to have no compatibility as far as their specific inclinations are concerned. In this context, it is worthwhile to remember their first meeting in the house of Mr. Bonner. On their first meeting, they talk about different perspectives of Australia.

When Laura comes to know that Voss has walked all the way from Sydney to New South Wales, she finds it extremely ridiculous. When Voss compares the land with the poorer parts of Germany, she rigidly says: "I was never in Germany. But I find the road to Sydney monotonous, even from a carriage" (Chapter 1). But despite this external incompatibility, an internal or spiritual interconnection between the two is always emphasised. This curious mental parity is noticeable when, after their initial meeting, both of them suddenly lie embedded in their past. Here we notice a parallel pattern in their mental reactions, because both of them plunge into their past memories simultaneously. Thus Laura remembers how she came to New South Wales to live in the house of Mr. Bonner, she also registers her reactions to this strange land. Similarly Voss remembers his days in Germany and his final decision to come to Australia as an explorer.

While all others seem to misunderstand and misinterpret Voss, Laura alone can appropriately perceive the inner being of Voss. Laura points out that the settlers have not yet been able to assimilate themselves into this strange country, and will not say it: "We are not yet possessed of understanding" (Chapter 1). This country seems to be "foreign and incomprehensible". As all of them feel alienated from the country, they do not possess the right to be identified with the country. Laura realises that Australia is not her own country though she has lived in it. It is further problematised when Tom Radclyffe rudely points out that the German also does not possess the right to claim it as his own country. But immediately Laura says: "It is his by right of vision". This is substantiated when Mr. Bonner makes an elaborate statement: "Here we are talking about our colony as if it did not exist until now. Or as if it has now begun to exist as something quite different". Laura's inner perceptions gradually bring her closer to Voss. At the picnic, they become more mystically aware of each other. They begin to span the silent gulf operating between them. It is a curious gap that can be linked up with the mysterious stretches of time and space. Patrick White writes: "It was not exactly clear what they should do, only that they were suddenly faced with a great gap to fill, of space, and time ... Words, silences, and air had worked upon them subtly, until they had undergone a change" (Chapter 3). In the garden scene (Chapter 4), Voss and Laura begin to discover each other. Laura finds the personality of Voss especially enigmatic. While in the garden, they inspect the flowers, the "marbled flowers". Contrasted with the flowers, the personality of Voss seems to be identified with the Australian desert. She says: "You are so vast and ugly. 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" (chapter 4). For Laura, Voss is as strange as the Australian desert. She therefore exclaims: "You are my desert". But the real intensity of Laura's emotion may be noticed after the departure of Voss's ship. She visualises the ship Osprey proceeding through the blue waters and the little white waves.

It is only through his separation from Laura that Voss discovers the intensity of his feelings for her. In his letter written to Laura from Rhine Towers, he for the first time acknowledges the need for an idealised relationship with her. He writes: "I would ask you to join me in thought, and exercise of will, daily, hourly, until I may return to you" (chapter 6). Both Laura and Voss begin to experience mysterious visions. Laura often begins to visualise Voss progressing in his journey. She also finds herself accompanying Voss: "... and they rode northward together between the small hills, some green and soft, with the feathers of young corn ruffled on their sides, others hard and blue as sapphires" (Chapter 7). This vision is nothing but a strange form of inexplicable knowledge. Although she cannot see Voss, she feels the existence of Voss in her very inner being: "I do truthfully believe that you are always lurking somewhere on the fringes of my dreams, though I seldom see you face, and cannot even distinguish your form" (Chapter 9). It may seem that this relationship is essentially tragic, because Voss and Laura never meet again. But Patrick White never intended to make it a tragedy. It is true that Voss dies at the end. But Laura continues to cherish the idea of Voss as a symbolic being. For Laura, Voss becomes

part of history. She believes: "He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually by those who have been troubled by it" (chapter 16).

As We First Read:
Voss

2.5.3 Exploring Australia

If we search far into the essential core of the novel, we find that the basic concern of the novel is the exploration of Australia. Every novel may be interpreted at two different levels: nuclei and indicial. At the level of the nuclei, the novel simply presents the structure of the story. But at the indicial level, we may locate the pattern of suggestion: in other words, it reveals the concealed intention of the novelist. Thus in Patrick White's *Voss*, the level of the nuclei projects the bare design of the story. But the indicial level of the novel unravels the hidden emphasis on the theme of exploration. In *Voss* most of the characters interrogate and interpret the meaning and significance of their existence in Australia. In the initial overture between Voss and Laura, they always concentrate on their reactions to this strange land. While Laura considers it to be a monotonous country, Voss discovers in it a distinctive notion of subtlety. It is also a country where people come to try their luck or make fortunes out of this country. Thus Laura says with reference to Voss: "He does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men. He is not all money talk" (chapter 1). As a country of settlers, it is gradually developing. Thus Mr. Bonner substantiates this Australian dream in the following statement: "We have only to consider the progress we have made. Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land" (Chapter 1).



(above) Sue as a dumpling in ballet shoes
(below) Lizzie Clark their Scottish nurse and Paddy's real mother'



The boy at twelve, with big ears and sharp eyes

It is the consciousness of this Australian dream that makes them say: "This is the country of the future". But this Australian dream can only be fulfilled when the land itself is appropriately explored. Though they are settling the country, yet the true Australian dream can be realised only when they identify themselves as truly Australians. They still cling to the early memories of England. Thus Laura proudly affirms: "it is not my country, although I have lived in it" (Chapter 1). Again Tom Radclyff goes deeper into the psychosis of the settlers: "Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding" (Chapter 1).

But Radclyff's reference to understanding is nothing but a problem of knowledge. It is by knowing the land that one can substantiate this Australian dream. When Le Mesurier calls it a "damned country", Voss says: "Yes, I will cross the country from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart" (Chapter 2). Voss further philosophises the whole concept of exploration by saying that "It is possible more easily to discard the inessential and to attempt the infinite" (Chapter 2). Mr. Bonner looks at Voss's mission as an expedition. But there is a distinctive demarcation between expedition and exploration. Expeditions merely involve the concrete aspects of this adventurous project. He therefore simply concentrates on the organisational part of Voss's journey. But Voss intends to explore, to know and perceive the infinite strangeness of the land. For him it is very much like walking upon the bottom of the sea. The proposition of walking upon the bottom of the sea may be unreal, but it, can be experienced in a dream. Voss says: "I have not, except in dreams, of course. That is why I am fascinated by the prospect before me. Even if the future of great areas of sand is a purely metaphysical one" (Chapter 3).

2.5.4 Agony and Ecstasy

What strikes us most is the interweaving of agony and ecstasy in *Voss*. The element of agony is manifest in the emotive aspects generated by the novel. It may be particularly studied in the context of the relationship between Voss and Laura. Again the element of ecstasy may be analysed from the standpoint of complex reactions arising out of the process of the expedition. Voss and Laura come close to each other, and develop a spiritual relationship. But this leads to an agonising experience. Laura remains confined to her limited world of New South Wales and begins to suffer during the absence of Voss. Again Voss, despite his experience of the tribulations of the journey, remains absorbed in his memory of Laura. Even though they spiritually communicate with each other, they undergo a process of an intense agonising experience. But Voss's journey itself conduces to an ecstatic experience. Voss directly participates in this experience of ecstasy arising out of his close encounter with the immense strangeness of the land. Laura stands distanced from this direct participation in Voss's experience, but she is equally involved with the ecstatic idea of exploration. In fact the experiences of agony and ecstasy create an interweaving pattern that largely explains the basic implications of the novel. These two different phases of experience are artistically assimilated to create a unified emotive design.

2.6 HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NOVEL

As we try to explain the multiple facets of a novel, it is always important to consider the various human relationships. Naturally it will be pertinent to analyse different patterns of human relationship in *Voss*. In *Voss*, we find that there are different degrees of relationships, as many as four different levels of relationship governing the fictional pattern:

- 1) Voss and Laura
- 2) Voss and the fellow-travellers

- 3) Explorers and the Aborigines
- 4) Voss and the settlers of New South Wales

As We First Read:
Voss

These facets of relationship interrogate the basic thematic structure of the novel. We have already formed some ideas regarding these relationships in course of our discussion on different aspects of the novel. We should therefore emphasise two particular forms of relationships that have not been extensively dealt with in our earlier discussion. These two levels are:

- 1) Voss and the Bonner family
- 2) Voss and his fellow-travellers

2.6.1 Voss and the Bonner Family

What is the nature of the relationship that really exists between Voss and the Bonner family? It may be said that this relationship should be studied at two levels. Voss is related to the Bonner family at the most concrete level as far as his plans for the expedition is concerned. But Laura, even though belonging to the same family, seems to be related to Voss at an abstract level.

Mr. Bonner has shouldered the task of organising Voss's expedition. He has planned the entire programme for Voss's journey. In the picnic party (Chapter 3), he clearly spells out the essential plan of Voss's expedition. But a close analysis shows that Mr. Bonner stands out as an icon of the entire group of settlers assembled at New South Wales. He represents the enthused psychosis of the settlers who are gradually building up a nation. Thus Voss's relation with the Bonner family symbolically exhibits an interrelation of the explorer's sense of quest and the coloniser's intention to get beyond the land's strangeness. At the microcosmic level, Mr. Bonner symbolises a miniature representation of the country of settlers and Voss symbolises the perennial, unending quest of an explorer. But in the Bonner family, Laura is the only character who appropriately establishes an emotive relation with Voss. She correctly measures out the depth and intensity of Voss's vision. Voss also discovers in Laura a perfect co-sharer of his strange, mystical feelings.

2.6.2 Voss And His Fellow Travellers

In this strange expedition, Voss emerges as the perfect leader. He has stayed in this country for two years and four months only. But he has gradually identified himself with the spirit of this country. In order to carry on the expedition, he gathers together a number of fellow travellers. The fellow travellers of Voss belong to different backgrounds. Initially his expedition party comprises four men with distinctive backgrounds. Robarts is an English lad whom Voss has met on board a ship. Le Mesurier is a man with great qualities. Palfreyman is an exceptional ornithologist. Finally Turner is a labourer who intends to be included; and they will join Voss as they reach Mr. Sanderson's place at Rhine Towers. In the group is Angus as well, a spirited young fellow. Finally Judd, a man of physical strength and moral integrity, will join the party. The fellow travellers work together in a perfect state of amity till they reach Jildra. But with the beginning of the wilderness, there starts a gradual transformation in their attitudes and responses. Initially they come to be disturbed by the intermittent attacks of the Aborigines. Patrick White here begins to develop a sense of contrast between the White Australian world represented by the settlers and the indigenous Aboriginal world of the Australian wilderness. This is further precipitated by the growing sense of traumas that finally leads to distrust and disintegration. The expedition comes to be divided. In chapter 12, the two parties move in opposite directions. In the following chapters, White narrates the death of Voss and his fellow travellers. But do these deaths show the defeat of the explorers? Does the insurmountable wilderness of Australia prove ultimately triumphant?

Perhaps the answer to these questions remains in an unsuspected quarter. We should not try to magnify the death of these travellers. It is their attempt to identify the nature of Australia's strangeness that becomes important. It is through death that they endeavour to explore the inner being of Australia. They move beyond the concrete, microcosmic reality and discover the mystical, macrocosmic reality of Australia. It is true that all of them die in the end, but they die with a complete knowledge of the strangeness of Australia. Perhaps it is through their death that they concretise a vision of the Australian dream.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

Patrick White in *Voss* takes the role of a presenter who upholds the patterns and perspectives of the inner being of Australia. In his analysis, Voss emerges as a distinctive symbol trying to go beyond the limited vision of the settlers. His journey through Australia is therefore a symbolic journey. Moreover White has presented a pattern of intense emotive experience. This is largely evident in the Voss-Laura relationship.

2.8 GLOSSARY

Aborigines:	The original primitive race living in a country
Historicise:	Interpretation of event patterns in terms of a rationalistic framework of history
Nuclei:	in the art of narration, the essential story is considered to be the Nuclei or the primary level or the story pattern
Indicial:	in the art of narration, the level of suggestive meanings is regarded as the indicial level.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. How would you account for the relationship of Voss and Laura? Does this relationship substantiate the theme of exploration in the context of Australia?
2. How many multiple patterns of relationship can be found in *Voss*?
3. Would it be right to call *Voss* "an emotionally complex novel"? Discuss.

UNIT 3 ROMANTIC ELEMENTS IN *VOSS*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 What is Romanticism?
- 3.3 Aspects of Romanticism in *Voss*
 - 3.3.1 Theme of Journey
 - 3.3.2 Element of Love
 - 3.2.2 Romantic Landscape
- 3.4 The Romantic World
 - 3.4.1 World of Voss
 - 3.4.2 Laura's World
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to acquaint you with the romantic elements that may be located in the thematic pattern of the novel. So far we have looked at the elements of exploration in the novel. But the theme of exploration, as we will see, explains only the exterior pattern of the novel. In order to appreciate the emotive intensity of the novel, it is essential that we isolate the romantic segments of the novel. And that is what we shall try to do in this unit. Let us begin with a brief introduction.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Exploration as such is regarded to be the task of an adventurer. When a new land begins to be inhabited, scientists, geographers and anthropologists begin thorough research on the land. But this research is limited to the level of apparent reality. In other words, it becomes an exploration of the conditions of the land, its people and customs, its forests and rivers. But as we concentrate on the literary text (*Voss*), we find that the theme of exploration grows to acquire a new dimension. Exploration itself becomes a significant component stabilising a distinctive sense of romanticism. Patrick White's *Voss* may in this sense be regarded as a specific romantic text. *Voss* may be considered a paradigmatic text executing a process of exploration and journey. White meticulously portrays a complicated linear movement and creates an interweaving pattern of progression and suffering. It is this idea of exploration that therefore amounts to an accumulation of emotional intensity. In this Unit we will therefore try to locate the sense of romanticism at two distinctive levels. In the first place, we shall make an attempt at considering the presentation of the journey as a significant romantic component. Secondly, we shall also try to discover the emotional movement in terms of the relationship between the central characters. Let us look at what is understood by the term "romanticism"

3.2 WHAT IS ROMANTICISM?

Romanticism was an ideological and artistic movement that replaced Classicism in the nineteenth century. It stressed the freedom of individual self-expression and turned towards emotion, "inspiration, spontaneity and originality as against the

Augustan principles of mechanical, impersonal, artificial rationality" (MEG 05, Block 3). As an artistic method it expresses the artist's attitude to the depicted phenomena, which in a way elevates his/ her work and gives it some emotional colouring. Frederick Schegel is often considered to be the first person to use the term *Romantisch* in literary contexts. His brother August W Schegel, implied that romantic literature was in contrast to classical literature. Many people believe that this movement originated in England but the seeds of this movement were sown in Germany as far back as in the eighteenth century. However in eighteenth century England, a discernible shift had already begun to take place in sensibility and feeling, particularly in relation to the natural order and Nature. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats and Byron were the chief exponents of the Romantic Movement in England.

Aspects of Romanticism in the 18th century:

- an increasing interest in Nature and in the Natural, primitive and uncivilised way of life
- a growing interest in scenery, specially its more untamed and disorderly manifestations
- an association of human moods with the 'moods' of nature- and thus a subjective feeling for and interpretation of it
- a considerable emphasis on Natural religion
- emphasis on the need for spontaneity in thought, action and in the expression of thought
- increasing importance attached to natural genius and the power of the imagination
- a tendency to exalt the individual and his / her needs and emphasise on the need for a freer and more personal expression
- the cult of the Noble Savage.

Most romantic poets considered themselves to be free spirits expressing their own imaginative truth. But what we need to remember is that Romanticism attaches great importance to the individual and the subjective dimension of the human experience. Rene Welleck has defined Romanticism as "a compound of a particular view of imagination, a particular attitude to nature and a particular writing style," (MEG 05, Block 3, p.6). The other characteristics of Romanticism include a reaction against tradition, the importance of nature and country life, escape to the middle ages, liberation of the ego, spontaneity, love of the supernatural and a revival of lyricism. We shall not go into too many details as you have already studied Romanticism thoroughly in Block 3 of your Literary Theory and Criticism Course (MEG 05). Instead we shall look at the various aspects of Romanticism to be found in our novel of study.

3.3 ASPECTS OF ROMANTICISM IN VOSS

Before we approach the aspects of romanticism in *Voss*, it is essential to address the basic principle of romanticism. Romanticism as a distinct form of ideology essentialises strangeness and enchantment. Again these two qualities at its most intense level embrace an exotic mysticism. Romanticism is in fact a quality of mind; and this is largely prompted either by the advent of a new philosophical mode or by an epoch-making event. British Romanticism was fortunate to be aided by both of these critical components: **German Transcendentalism** and the **French Revolution**. Australian literature was not fortunate enough to be nurtured by any of these critical factors. Moreover by the time Patrick White began writing his novels, Europe was groping under the shadow of the World Wars (White's first novel *The Happy Valley* was written in 1939). Again when *Voss* was written in 1957, Europe was experimenting with different forms dealing with such ideological proliferations as the

Angry Young Man Movement, Dadaism, Existentialism, and so on. Naturally Europe outgrew the ecstasy of romanticism. What is then the source of Patrick White's romanticism? Perhaps White's romanticism lies embedded in the growing consciousness of Australian individualism. While Europe was busy with intellectualizing its inward despair, Australia was gradually trying to substantiate its own identity apart from other places. In the domain of literature, the Jindiworobak Movement is a distinct sign of Australia's search for individualism and identity. The history of Australia is a history of the repeated attempts at coming to terms with the land. But in doing so, they began to discover a quality of strangeness and enchantment in the land. This sense of romanticism was earlier echoed in A.D. Hope's sustained statement of deep romanticism:

They call her a young country, but they lie,
She is the last of lands ...

Again Rex Ingamells, the founder of the Jindiworobaks, commented in Conditional Culture:

"The real test of a people's culture is the way in which they can express themselves in relation to their environment, and the loftiness and universality of their artistic conceptions raised on that basis." This specific statement largely points at the Australian quest for self-assertion and romantic individualism. In the following part of this Unit, we shall try to identify this sense of romantic quest with reference to Patrick White's *Voss*. Let us begin with the journey motif/theme.

3.3.1 Theme of Journey

The idea of the journey has always been a distinctive romantic component. If we delve into literary history, we will come across a large number of literary antecedents. The romantic predisposition with the idea of journey has also generated a sense of symbolic quest. This romantic and symbolic quest may be traced back to Homer's *Odyssey* that exhibits a sense of symbolic suffering. In the course of ten years' long journey Odysseus travels through many unknown lands and passes through many strange experiences. But there is also a hidden sense of romanticism because the entire journey is a progress towards his reunion with his wife and son in Ithaca. Again in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, there is a symbolic spiritual journey. British literature is also packed to the full with such journey motifs. *Pilgrims Progress*, *Tom Jones*, *A Sentimental Journey*, *Heart of Darkness* are some significant and pertinent examples. In all these creative works, the romantic and the symbolic traditions are vigorously at work.

Patrick White's *Voss* also projects an exploratory journey in which the spirit of romanticism is largely associated with the discovery of sublime strangeness. If it had been merely an exploration of the physical topography of the land, it would be nothing short of a travelogue. It is true that *Voss* presents a long journey through the arid topography of Australia. But Patrick White never intends to generate a geographical awareness of the land. He instead tries to make the readers intensely aware of the ecstatic romanticism growing out of the multiple emotions created by the mysticity of the land. The idea of journey projected in the novel is essentially experiential in character. In fact the progress through the land is a journey into one's own self. It is a kind of self-discovery. In New South Wales Voss comes to know the settlers - the small world of Mr. Bonner and other settlers forming an Australian microcosm. Voss encounters a mimetic version of the motherland the settlers have left behind. There is also a curious interweaving of the convict past projected in terms of some of the settlers.

"The first stage of Voss's journey takes the party by sea to Newcastle and overland through the gentle, healing landscape of the Hunter to Rhine Towers" ... Rhine Towers in the care of the Sandersons - is a place of

simplicity and perfection, an Eden in the bush ... Voss leads the party from that sublime valley across New England to the flat coolabahs country... Jildra is the last outpost before the wilderness. West of Jildra lies the desert. Once the expedition left Jildra, Voss was on an expedition to the outer limits of his imagination," (David Marr, pp.315-316).

It is a linear progressive journey that gradually leads us to the strange romantic interior of the land. The more they progress into the land, the more they unlearn the normative customs and designs of life. As they go beyond the traditional frontiers of human existence, they are confronted with an arid, cruel nature. Exposed to the primal intensity of nature, they begin to perceive the perennial instincts of the land. Moreover there is a curious sub-text of the conflict between the whites and the Aborigines. The aborigines appear as the human agents of the primal simplicity of nature itself. The explorers are considered to be aliens disturbing the mystic innocence of the land. The loss of the compass seems to be extremely symbolic of a subversion of the civilised artifice of the settlers. Let us now examine the elements of love in the novel.

3.3.2 Element of Love

The element of love is also another significant component of the theme of romanticism. This specific emotional aspect of the novel may be located in the relation between Laura and Voss. White wrote,

"I wanted to write a story of a grand passion – don't jump. So this is at the same time the story of a girl called Laura Trevelyan, the niece of a Sydney merchant, one of the patrons of Voss's expedition. It is different from other grand passions in that it grows in the minds of the two people concerned more through the stimulus of their surroundings and through almost irrelevant incidents. Voss and Laura only meet three or four times before the expedition sets out. They even find each other partly antipathetic. Yet, Voss writes proposing to the girl on one of the early stages of the journey, partly out of vanity, and partly because herealises he is already lost; she accepts, partly out of a desire to save him from his delusions of divinity; partly out of a longing for religious faith, to which she feels she can only return to through love..."

But the idea of love is not realised in the context of any direct involvement. Love is considered essentially as a spiritual experience. In the primary chapters of the novel, their relationship may be regarded as a kind of deep attachment. Laura seems to try to understand the intensity and the depth of Voss's emotional involvement in the exploration. Voss also seems to be touched by her sympathy and kindness. But it is not really possible to locate the element of love during this phase. In fact it is through their absence that they begin to discover the intense workings of the emotions of love. In other words, the idea of love is more a psychic experience than a concrete mode of physical realisation. Patrick White has tried to create a tension between the levels of abstraction and concretisation in the context of love. In the beginning of the novel, we come across an emphasis on the concrete level of love. But as the novel progresses and Voss leaves on his mission of exploration, both of them begin to experience an emotional attachment at the level of abstraction. This psychic intensity of love gradually conduces to deep feelings of love. They begin to undergo strange visionary experiences.

"Or she closed her eyes, and they rode northward together between the small hills, some green and soft, with the feathers of young corn ruffled on their sides, others hard and blue as sapphires. As the two visionaries rode, their teeth were shivering, flashing, for their faces anonymous with love, was turned naturally towards each other, and they did, from time to time, catch such irrelevantly personal glimpses. What they were saying had not yet been

translated out of the air, the rustling of the corn, and the resilient cries of the birds. As they rode on, all metal was twining together, of stirrup-irons, for instance, and the bits in the mouths of their horses."

Romantic Elements in *Voss*

These abstract experiences create hallucinatory reactions.

"So he rode through hell, until he felt her touch him.

'I shall not fail you' said Laura Trevelyan.

'Even if there are times when you wish me to, I shall not fail you.'

He would not look at her, however, for he was not yet ready...

'You are not in possession of your faculties,' he said to her at last.

'What are my faculties?' she asked.

Then they were drifting together. They were sharing the same hell, in their common flesh, which he had attempted so often to repudiate. She was fitting him with a sheath of tender white."

But Voss does not come back in the end.

"As the two characters are separated by events and distances, their stories have to be developed alternatively, but they also fuse, in dreams, in memories and in delirium – most closely, for instance, when Voss is lying half-dead of thirst and starvation, and Laura is suffering from delusions as a result of a psychic disturbance diagnosed as the inevitable "brain fever". Voss is finally dragged through the dust, and accepts the principles Laura would have liked him to accept before he is murdered by the blacks. Laura recovers. She becomes a headmistress and a figure of some respect in the community, if also one that nobody really understands, because of some mysterious past," (David Marr, p. 314)

Despite the tragic end of Voss, Laura does not behave like a suffering woman. In fact the idea of love has been sublimated in terms of the role Voss plays as a maker of history. The personal history of their love comes to be subsumed by the assertion of public history. Patrick White has used all the traditional components of a love story—feelings of attachment, absence, suffering, love's unhappiness and so on. But White has never lost sight of the essential theme of the novel. He has therefore created an interweaving of the theme of love and that of exploration. These two themes have been splendidly assimilated to form a unified design. Thus the projection of love in this novel has finally substantiated a greater theme—the Australian history that Voss cannot die because he has become part of history through his exploration of this strange land. Having talked about the elements of love in *Voss*, we shall now analyse the romantic landscape as well.

3.3.3 Romantic Landscape

In the beginning of the novel, we are placed in the urban settlement of New South Wales. It is a world that still clings to the memories of the original homeland. But gradually they are building up the settlement. It is a world that is slowly growing up. Mr. Bonner proudly proclaims how they are establishing the country. But in this way they are also destroying the native purity of the country. Their association with nature is limited to their occasional going out for a picnic. When the explorers cross Jildra, we begin to experience a distinctive change in the topography. The urban world of New South Wales comes to be replaced by a primitive, un-trodden landscape. Here human beings seem to be unprivileged, helpless creatures exposed to the sublime passivity of nature. It is a landscape where we notice an absence of man-made artifice. The explorers aided by their horses and the compass, seem to be paltry and sordid. The macrocosmic nature projected through its vast stretches of sand, stones and rivers creates a feeling of awe. There are also two different kinds of landscape associated with two contrasted sets of people. New South Wales is the

world of the civilised whites, while the unexplored interior of the Australian landscape fits in well with the native Aborigines. In other words, New South Wales represents artificiality and restraint, whereas the primitive topography symbolises, simplicity and sublimity.

This landscape generates multiple reactions among the explorers. As long as they are limited to the civilised landscape, they adhere to the urban code of discipline, order and restraint. But as they enter the macrocosmic world of Australian landscape, confusion and division gradually set in. Old Dugald is the first to underline this sense of division. He goes back to his own people (the Aborigines), thereby suggesting an antithesis between the Whites and the Aborigines. Voss' leadership is also questioned and a visible rift takes place in the party of the explorers. Perhaps the sublime vastness of the landscape creates an unbearable pressure on all of them. The uninhibited spontaneity of the landscape gives them a release from the long-cherished notions of discipline and restraint. Confusion finally leads to the death of all the explorers. They do not return to the urban world of New South Wales. It is through their death that they are consumed into the sublime landscape of the interior of Australia. Like the Greek philosopher Empedocles, they finally die, but they die with cognition and knowledge. Let us now look at the romantic world to be found in our novel.

3.4 THE ROMANTIC WORLD

We have tried to define the term 'Romanticism' very briefly as you have already studied it in block 3 of your MEG 05. We have also looked at the Romantic aspects in *Voss* we will, now take a look at the Romantic World of *Voss*.

3.4.1 World of Voss

The world of Voss is a world of strange discovery. He is a German explorer who has come away from his homeland in order to discover the strange primitiveness of the interior of Australia. Thus sitting at the house of Mr. Bonner (Chapter 1), he remembers how he wavered between different ambitions. His father was a timber merchant and his mother was a sentimental woman. At first it was decided that he would become a great surgeon, but he "was revolted by the palpitating bodies of men". Then it was thought that he would become a botanist. But finally he leaves Germany to become an explorer. But what does really bring him to Australia? Australia perhaps became a strange icon for him - an icon representing romantic obsession. Thus the stereotyped careers of a surgeon or a botanist do not really satisfy him. He wants to work out a new kind of future. He says to Laura: "Your future is what you will make of it. Future is will" (Chapter 3). It is because of this emphasis on his personal will that he stands apart from the others. This naturally conduces to misunderstanding and miscomprehension: "Some pitied him. Some despised him for his funny appearance of a foreigner. None, he realized with a tremor of anger, was conscious of his strength. Mediocre, animal men never do guess at the power of rock or fire, until the last moment before those elements reduce them to ...nothing" (Chapter 3).

This demarcation may be explained only in terms of the specific mindset of Voss. Even though Voss seems to have planned the exploration of the Australian continent, yet he is actually interested in discovering the essential soul of Australia. Voss's quest is in fact a metaphysical quest emphasising the mystical infiniteness of the land. Through continuous settlement, the world of gods is gradually becoming the world of men. But Voss intends to move beyond the limited frontiers of concrete experientiality. He remains absorbed in a world of his own. Even though he travels with his other team members, he is emotionally distant from them. He begins to be identified with this strange world of vast natural perspective. When some of his group members leave him, he does not really consider himself alone. Loneliness is

actually a state of mind. But Voss seems to have annihilated this sense of loneliness through his metaphysical consciousness of probing deep into the eternal infinity of the Australian world. When the Aborigines through the treachery of Jackie finally capture Voss, he does not lose his faith in the powers of the innate goodness of man. Voss again and again tries to annihilate the barrier between the whites and the Aborigines. The Aborigines consider themselves as truly belonging to the land and as such they find themselves separated from the settlers. But Voss says to Jackie: "Where do I belong, if not here? Tell your people we are necessary to one another." When Voss finally awaits death at the hand of the Aborigines, he seems to undergo a strange mystic experience. He suddenly begins to visualise his release from the prospective violence and despair. He remains confined among the black fellows and this creates strange feelings in Voss. Before his death, he has a dream that seems to offer a sudden possibility of emancipation. He visualises himself riding away from his past: "Once he had ridden away, he did not look back at the past, so great was his confidence in the future" (Chapter 13). But even in his death, he is merged into the land. His blood goes deep into the mystic land and he becomes, through his death, a part of the mystic land: "His dreams fled into the air, his blood ran out upon the dry earth, which drank it up immediately. Whether dreams breed, or the earth responds to a pint of blood, the instant of death does not tell" (Chapter 13). Voss's death may be considered as an icon of the Australian dream. Voss's journey is therefore a distinctive paradigm of the mystic discovery of the interior of Australia. "Voss's expedition was not a failure, though he found no new pastoral Eden, made no maps, lost all the specimens his party collected, and failed to reach the sea on the far side of the continent. Through his suffering in the desert, Voss conquered his pride". (David Marr, p.312) Let us now examine Laura's world.

3.4.2 Laura's World

Laura belongs to a world of abstractions. She is essentially absorbed in her own world of mysticism. From the very beginning we find her distant from the world of sordid realism. As we see her for the first time, she appears a proud, snobbish woman who still clings to her British past. When she meets Voss for the first time she begins to remember how after the death of her parents she came to live in Australia with the Bonner family. Yet she does not consider Australia to be her own country. She also does not seem to have any interest in the Australian interior. She remains comfortable within the four walls of the house. She says to Voss: "We drive out sometimes, for picnics, you know, or we ride out on horseback. We will spend a few days with friends, on a property ... but I am always happy to return to this house" (Chapter 1). It is only through her contact with Voss that she gradually begins to recognise the mystic quality of Australia. But this creates of the concrete world of Australia. On the other hand, she participates in a strangely mystical world. Laura is basically a complex character. Her complexity lies in the fact that she fails to adjust herself with the level of concrete reality. Though she participates in the mundane affairs, she finds herself mentally distanced from all this. Thus she goes to the picnic, but she cannot take part properly in the usual forms of enjoyment. Again she attends the party organised by Mr. Bonner. But she escapes into the garden and begins a kind of metaphysical conversation with Voss. It is in this conversation that we get inkling into the mystical quality of her character. She develops a psychic intimacy with Voss and comes to be identified with Voss's journey. Voss becomes a distinctive icon of an unending, mystical quest. Even though she does not participate concretely in the journey, she becomes indissolubly related to it at the level of mystical abstraction.

We should also consider another mysterious aspect of her character. This is particularly noticeable when the Aborigines capture Voss. After Voss's capture by the Aborigines, she comes to be attacked by a mysterious fever. When Voss dies, she is cured. The fever works very much like a spell. An impression of this kind is noticed in Mr. Bonner's statement: "The fever is broken". However it seems that there is mysterious link between Laura's fever and Voss's death in the hands of the

Aborigines. Laura suffers from the spell as long as Voss (through his death) does not become a part of this land's mysterious enchantment. After his death, Voss becomes a part of the Australian history; and it is only now that Laura's spell is broken. Laura seems to find a fulfilment in the sacrifice of Voss. She now realises that Voss has become a part of history and indirectly she becomes a part of this historical consciousness.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen a curious interweaving of the themes of exploration and romantic sensibility. This seems to generate a distinctive romantic awareness. The journey itself implies a significant romantic mysticality. If we analyse the character of Voss appropriately we find that he is a specific romantic icon. His journey is therefore a romantic quest. In other words, it becomes a progress towards the unknowable. Moreover Laura becomes romantically inclined to the spirit of enchantment generated by this element of strange quest. Again the frequent alternation between New South Wales and the mystical interior of Australia creates a constant shift of focus. Thus throughout the novel, we notice a significant opposition between the level of reality and that of romanticism.

3.6 GLOSSARY

Angry Young Man Movement:

A group of British novelists and playwrights of the 1950s who expressed hostility to traditional standards and manners of "the establishment". They depicted the oppressiveness, hypocrisy and demoralising values of the social world. John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* is an example.

Cartography:

The art of drawing maps that decides and validates a distinctive territory. The study of cartography has become a major component in the analysis of New Literatures.

Dadaism:

A nihilistic movement in art started by Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball and Richard Huelsenbeck in Zurich during World War I. The term was meant to signify everything and nothing, or total freedom, anti-rules, ideals and tradition. In art and literature manifestations of Dadaism were mostly in the form of collage effects: arrangement of unrelated objects and words in a random manner. This movement influenced the poetry of Ezra Pound and T S Eliot.

Existentialism:

Meaning 'pertaining to existence'. It is derived from Kierkegaard (1813- 55), who stressed that in God are the infinite and the finite. Heidegger and Jaspers both German Philosophers expanded upon this belief. The importance of this aesthetic tradition lies in their belief that human beings fashion their own existence and only exist by doing so, and by doing what they do or do not, gives essence to that existence. Jean-Paul Sartre is

the chief modern exponent of this tradition. In his view human beings are born into a void, a mud. But they are at liberty to remain in this stale passive, supine semi-conscious state in which they are scarcely aware of themselves or they may come out of this subjective passive state, become aware of themselves and then experience *cogito* (a species of metaphysical and mental anguish). They would then drag themselves out of this situation and begin to exist, whereby they give meaning to both existence and the universe. In other words human beings are obliged to make themselves what they are. Some of the other exponents of existentialism are Albert Camus, Simon de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty and Jean Wahl.

French Revolution:

The French public rose against their monarch Louis XVI in a bloody revolution in 1789. They had been suppressed and overburdened with taxes for a very long time as a result of which they rebelled against their king and the nobility. The cry of the revolution was, "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity"

German Transcendentalism:

Transcendentalism was a New England movement that flourished from c. 1835 to 1860. It had its roots in romanticism and in post-Kantian ideology by which Coleridge was influenced. It had a considerable influence on American art and literature. Basically religious it emphasised the role and importance of the individual conscience, and the value of intuition in matters of moral guidance and inspiration. They were also social reformers. Ralph Emerson, Waldo, Bronson Alcott, H D Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne were some of the propagators of Transcendentalism.

Jindiworobak Movement:

This Movement started in Australia in the 1930s. Its founder was Rex Ingamells. This movement tried to emphasise an extreme craving for Australianness in the presentation of the land's perspective as well as its idiom.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine the interweaving themes of love and journey in Patrick White's *Voss*.
2. Do you think the world's of Voss and Laura contribute to each other?

UNIT 4 MULTIPLE THEMES IN *VOSS*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Perspectives on the Land
 - 4.2.1 Early Settlement
 - 4.2.2 Nature and Men
 - 4.2.3 Nature in Jildra
- 4.3 Problem of Identity
 - 4.3.1 Settlers of New South Wales and their Reactions
 - 4.3.2 Voss and his Sense of Identity
 - 4.3.3 Laura's Sense of Identity
 - 4.3.4 Theme of Suffering in *Voss*
 - 4.3.5 Religion in *Voss*
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.5 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall acquaint you with certain problems of land and identity. When a group of people settle down in a country/ place, the question of their identification with the land naturally arises. If we analyse the basic thematic texture of the novel carefully, we will find that *Voss*'s essential emphasis is on the curious interrelation between the question of land and identity. In this Unit, we shall therefore concentrate on different aspects of this problem.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Units, we have seen how Patrick White has analysed a distinctive notion of exploration in the context of the discovery of the interior of Australia. This theme of exploration naturally evokes a sense of romanticism. This idea of romanticism is intricately related to an awareness of the strange, mysterious aspect of the land. If we consider the vast, primitive aspect of Australia, we may easily locate the components of romanticism working on this land. But the strange perspective on this land may be perceived only when we consider it in connection with the problem of identity.

4.2 PERSPECTIVES ON THE LAND

So far we have looked at the multiple aspect of the land in a sporadic manner. We have nevertheless been able to gather a certain amount of information regarding some distinctive traits of the land. Land comes to be connotative only when its identity is ascertained. It is therefore important to consider the perspective of nature, its relation to the world of man; moreover the ways in which different characters contribute towards creating, endorsing and stabilising its identity.

4.2.1 Early Settlement

The history of Australian literature is marked by a continuous struggle to resolve the tension between the individual identity of the settlers and the land they have come to

inhabit. This naturally presupposes a strategic adaptation to a strange land, which since time immemorial has been man's persistent effort at stabilising himself in varying situations. In prehistoric times, when the Achaean tribes invaded Greece around 2200 B.C. they encountered a similar problem in adjusting to the indigenous Pelasgian culture. If we suggest that many early poets and novelists of Australia were mostly convicts transported from England and as such their vision of Australia was that of foreigners artificially transplanted in a strange country, we would be holding the stick by the wrong end. In fact the early settlers gradually acclimated themselves and discovered a new allegiance. One may be reminded of Mary Gilmore's famous tribute to the pioneers in her poem *Old Botany Bay*:

"I was the conscript
Sent to hell
To make in the desert
The living well."

After the initial phase of strangeness and the consequent mode of identifying oneself with the new land, there is a gradual and growing spirit of enchantment. Thus Mary Gilmore recounts the pristine purity of the early phase of settlement:

"There were no bad smells about the bush when the kingdom of the wild was its own kingdom. ... It was not till the settlement came the earth sank, and sewers burst. Once Australia smelt like spice-islands.... Ships knew before they came to her, "we are near Australia", said the seamen, "can't you smell the flowers".

This spirit of enchantment is equally noticeable in Walter Murdoch who discovers a sublime ecstasy even in a spectacle of fire:

"No language could convey an idea of the wonder and terror and beauty of the spectacle by night, when the valley below you and the hillsides around you are all one red roaring hell of furious destruction".

In short these facets are related to the problem of land, insofar as the settlers discover new roots in a strange country. But the problem of identity is complex and raises multiple themes and issues. When the British arrived in Australia, it was not an empty country. Even before the British arrived, the Australian Aborigines were roaming about in this country for 40,000 years. When the first fleet of settlers reached the shore of Australia, there were at least 300,000 aborigines in Australia belonging to many different tribal groups like the Koories, the Nimbans, the Noongas, the Lora and so on. They survived with their hunting skills, indigenous customs and pagan totemism. This problem of land and identity naturally took the shape of a warlike confrontation between the natural citizens and the destined citizens, between the state of primal innocence and the strategic intention of settlement. These multiple layers of tension between the intruders and the natural inhabitants conduce to a complex structure of racist relationship. This is partly recorded in the sad history of such aborigines as *Bennelong* or *Permulwoy*. At this stage, we would like to tell you a little about these two men. When Arthur Phillip was the Governor, he was ordered to live "in amity and kindness" with the Aborigines. He however, wanted to develop a kind of relationship with them in order to be able to procure food etc., and to be able to take them English and "turn it to the advantage of the colony". With this intention in mind he tried befriending several Aborigines, when that did not work, he decided to kidnap a few of them, force them to learn English, and act as intermediaries between the two races. *Arabadoo* was the first to be captured and was quite successfully converted into an 'English Man' but he died during the epidemic of small pox that wiped out half of the Gamaraigal tribe in mid-1789.

Bennelong was then captured for the same purpose in 1790. **Bennelong** was however smart and clever enough to escape from the clutches of the English after six months and he made good with "a smattering of English, a love of wine and fund of stories"; (Aboriginal Australia, R Broome, p, 27). **Permulywoy** on the other hand played a different role in the history of Aboriginal culture. As European settlement spread through the island continent, so did the violence. We have to remember that Australia was not a "terra nullis" when Governor Phillips landed in 1788, (it was inhabited by the indigenous population later termed Aborigines). By the late 1790s, the Hawksbury River area, eighty kilometers north west of Sydney, supported over four hundred Europeans who were mainly farmers and agriculturalists. These Europeans "farmed on both sides of the rich river flats for a distance of about 50 kilometres". As a result of this several conflicts broke out in the region. "The Aborigines explained to Governor King in 1804 that the settlers' farms blocked their access to the river and thus much of their food supply. When they crossed the farms to get to the river they were fired upon by the settlers who claimed the Aborigines damaged and burned their crops". The Aborigines retaliated against this display of European injustice by forming raiding parties and attacking the Europeans. Of these (so called) marauders was an Aborigine, the Europeans called 'Mosquito', who was captured and transported to Van Diemens's Land (Tasmania). He became a stock worker and then a tracker several years later. He then led the Oyster Bay tribe on one such raid, was captured and finally hanged in 1823. At Toongabbie, west of Sydney, in 1897, **Permulywoy** did the same thing. He led Aboriginal fighters against the soldiers and settlers until he too was eventually shot down. "In ghastly fashion, his severed and pickled head was sent to Sir Joseph Banks in England," (R Broome, p, 29).

We have mentioned these two Aborigines to you to give you an idea of the kind of society that prevailed then, the power struggle and the complexities of politics between the two races. We shall now look at 'Nature and Men' in the next section.

4.2.2 Nature and Men

In New South Wales, the natural background seems to be obliterated by the intrusion of a civilised pattern of life. Nature is here articulated into the artifice of a garden. Laura therefore asks Voss to see the garden of her uncle: "You must see the garden. Uncle has made it his hobby". When Voss asks if they go much into the country, Laura again refers to it in terms of pleasure-trips or picnics: "Not really. Not often. We drive out sometimes for picnics, you know". Here we come across a kind of drawing-room society, gossiping, chatting and absorbed in their world of small interests. But we discover different patterns of nature. In New South Wales, Voss is particularly struck by the growing pleasantness of nature: "It was a gentle, healing landscape in those parts".

Again Sanderson who leads Voss to Rhine Towers is a man of culture. Though he is secluded from the artificial pageantry of civilised life, he remains absorbed in his own world of contemplation: "They [Sanderson and his wife] had whole row of books, bound in leather, and were for ever developing them". Let us now take a brief look at 'Nature at Jildra'.

4.2.3 Nature in Jildra

At Jildra, nature becomes a dry and perched. "By now the tall grass was almost dry, so that there issued from it a sharper sighing when the wind blew". But nature here expands into something vast, mysterious and secretive. It appears to be a "flat country of secret colours": their figures look small and the horses become almost children's ponies, when they are fore grounded against the background of vast nature. Here light explodes and breaks "into flashes of clattering, shrieking, white and sulphur light"; and trees, too, were but illusory substance, for they would quickly turn to shadow, which is another shape of ever-protean light". The seasonal cycle in the novel develops a pattern of linear extremity. It starts with the spring. Thus Patrick

White describes: "One evening that spring when the street was already dissolving, and amiable pedestrians were calling to one another in friendship." But there is a distinctive change in the seasonal impression, as the explorers leave Jildra: "They had entered, as it happened, a valley sculptured in red rock and quart." As they proceed further, they begin to be swept by intermittent showers of rain. In this context, we may also consider a significant topographical design. The story begins at New South Wales, which represents an apparently semi-urban civilised society with the Bonner family at the centre of the fictive design. We depart with Voss and his party to proceed towards New Castle and then to Jildra. Finally we are led into the arid topography of the continent. Moreover the journey by the ship *Osprey* is also briefly padded into the design. There are, therefore, three different topographical perspectives: land, water, and the desert. These three topographical variables create a triune perspective that creates a sense of integrated totality.

In the next section, we shall look at the 'Problem of Identity' and examine the various problems emerging from this crucial notion of 'identity'.

4.3 PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

What do we really mean by identity? Identity means an assertion of the individual self. But this sense of identity comes to assume a greater significance only when it is studied in relation to its immediate context. In Australia this sense of identity should be examined with reference to the settlers. But their sense of identity becomes meaningful when their relation with the land is appropriately substantiated. Keeping this in mind we shall now look at the settlers of New South Wales and their problems with identity.

4.3.1 Settlers of New South Wales and their Reactions

The problem with the settlers of New South Wales is that they do not comprehend the nature of their identity. As the novel begins, the settlers show an inexplicable aversion to this country. Laura says to Radclyffe: "It is not my country, although I have lived in it". Le Measurier considers it to be a "damned country" and seeks to discover the real purpose of Voss. It seems to be a country where certain people come to make a fortune. Laura points out: "He does not intend to make a fortune out of this country, like other men". But still for Belle it seems rather outrageous to go far into the country for an exploration which is uncertain and disastrous: "I would not like to ride very far into it, and meet a lot of blacks, and deserts, and rocks, and skeletons, they say, of men that have died". Mr. Bonner is all the more forthright: "Everyone is still afraid, or most of us, of this country, and will not say it. We are not yet possessed of understanding". The basic inadequacy of their argument is that they examine this land absolutely in physical terms. Even when Mr. Bonner feels enthusiastic about this country in relation to their identity, he looks at it purely from the standpoint of administrative machinery which is for him imperative of progress and identity: "We have only to consider the progress we have made. Look at our homes and public edifices. Look at the devotion of our administrators, and the solid achievement of those men who are settling the land". In contrast to the problems faced by the settlers of New South Wales, is our protagonist, Voss. Let us now examine Voss and his sense identity.

4.3.2 Voss and his Sense of Identity

Voss's journey is not merely an explorer's adventurism. It is perhaps a quest for determining the nature of individual identity in a strange land. In endeavouring to explore this country, Voss and his team - mates begin to determine their identity within a particular framework of contextuality. The entire process of the journey

becomes in effect a linear progression into the psyche – a journey towards the self. But the question of identity may be properly ascertained with reference to the sense of totality. While the settlers themselves feel distanced from the spirit of the country, Voss even though an explorer may be identified with this land. While Radclyffe says that the country does not belong to Voss, Laura affirms: "It is his by right of vision". It is only this right of vision that generates identification with the land. Thus the unknown strange land that Voss undertakes to explore becomes incarnate in the personality of Voss. Laura therefore ecstatically says: "I am fascinated by you. You are my desert". This right of vision accelerates a greater perception of the country and its inhabitants. Though the whites living in New South Wales are firmly established in this country, they are culturally as well as psychologically distanced from it. They have come here either as free settlers or as convicts; hence, proper assimilation into its culture is yet to be achieved. Though settled in Australia, the country they have left still lurks in the background. Their basic inadequacies lie in their attempt to discover in Australia those value-systems they have left in England. They forget that England is their past and it is part of their memory but Australia is their present and it forms the total perception of their immediate reality. Therefore Laura's proud claim "I was born in England" seems to be self-defeating. But Australia is the governing symbol that exists as a form of strange timelessness. The final phase of Voss's journey is only apparently racist; but there is an inner layer of ritualism. The surface pattern of the journey projects a confrontation between the whites and the blacks. The blacks again and again interrupt and disturb the explorers. They steal their compass, their cattle and finally they take away Judd and Voss; and they kill Voss. The killing of the horse, the reference to the snake-king – all seem to be part of a ritualistic performance through which Voss ultimately comes to be amalgamated into the original native perspective of the land. Perhaps there is a suggestion of total self-extinction through which one can be absorbed into the land's native purity. Thus even before his death, he can perceive the archetypal pattern of native life: "The men had painted their bodies with the warm colours of the earth they knew totem by totem, and which had prevailed at last over the cold, nebulous country of the stars". Having looked at Voss's sense of identity let us now take a quick look at Laura's dilemma.

4.3.3 Laura's Sense of Identity

Laura initially strikes us as a quiet, silent and reserved woman largely absorbed in her own world of mystical meditation. But gradually she is drawn to this search for identity. Laura seems to be a paradigm of waiting, but this particular aspect of her character is distinctively related to the central theme of identity. Living within the closed framework of civilised pattern, she almost runs co-extensive with Voss's journey. Thus even in the course of Voss's journey where she is not physically present, she appears and disappears in terms of Voss's mystic vision. She spiritually accompanies Voss and continues to be an inevitable part of the journey. Though she in fact remains confined to the concrete world of New South Wales, she undergoes a metaphysical experience of being transported to the world of Voss. It is through such experiences that she begins to be identified with the Australian world. She also becomes gradually entangled with Rose's psychic struggle in relation to her pregnancy. The entire household develops a sense of hatred against Rose. Mrs. Bonner particularly finds it extremely disturbing. But Laura becomes sympathetically associated with Rose. The birth of Rose's child and Laura's determination to protect the child after Rose's sudden death may be read as a distinctive symbol. The child is an Australian in its true sense of the term. All the characters presented here are mostly foreigners settled in Australia. Naturally they are implanted in this country and they have no indigenous claim on this country. But this child is born in Australia and it really symbolises the making of a country and foreshadows the Australian dream.

For Laura, it is perhaps the future – the determined future of a generation that properly belongs to this country, born and brought up in a country that they would

love. Thus Laura indirectly contributes to the specific theme of identity. It is therefore no more a strange land. She also indirectly partakes of Voss's crisis during the journey. The mysterious fever running alongside Voss's crisis in the journey may naturally be read as a symbolic correlation. How can we interpret this mysterious fever that grips Laura? Should it be merely taken as a physical illness? Maybe not! The co-extension of Voss's crisis leading to his death and Laura's illness may be considered as a telepathic relationship. It is this characteristic relationship that helps them to discover their own identity in the context of this mysterious land. In this way Laura progresses towards self-knowledge. In the beginning of the novel, she appears a woman absolutely dispassionate about Australia. But gradually she unlearns her earlier preconceived ideas and learns to perceive the true essence of the land. This permeates through her being and she considers Voss not as a concrete being but as a part of Australian history. Perhaps she recognises herself as a significant witness to this great event.

4.3.4 Theme of Suffering in *Voss*

In the epigraph to his first novel, *The Happy Valley*, Patrick White used a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi: "It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering, which is the one indispensable condition of our being. Progress is to be measured by the amount of suffering undergone... the purer the suffering, the greater the suffering." (David Marr, p. 311). This quotation implies his assertion of suffering as a distinctive element in his novels. *Voss* particularly substantiates the nature of intense suffering. Though it fictionalises the story of a megalomaniac explorer, yet the major concern of the novel seems to be the complex virtue of suffering. David Marr in his biography of Patrick White has tried to relate this question of suffering with the novelist's personal life. He therefore comments: "White saw himself as a sufferer: as an asthmatic, homosexual, foreigner and artist." But he was at the same time aware of the fact that he had never been exposed to the worst misery: poverty. Moreover his intense friendship with Lascaris saved him from absolute loneliness. But Patrick White considered suffering as a constructive and positive principle of life. David Marr comments once again: "Yet he saw suffering as a force in his life, making him what he was, making us as we are. For White, pain is a force of history, shaping men and events". White once said: "I have always found in my own case that something positive, either creative or moral, has come out of anything I have experienced in the way of affliction". As Marr points out, "behind the suffering of Johann Ulrich Voss, in the Australian desert lay the pain White experienced writing *The Tree of Man*. Both men were explorers: Voss on horseback, crossing the continent and White at his desk trying to fill the immense void of Australia."

Voss's journey across the desert is also a progress through suffering. He tries to explore the nature of the void present in Australia. In other words, he investigates the true spirit of the infinite. But this quest involves a series of suffering experienced in his inner self. As a result of his journey, he seems to be submerged in a sea of futility. He suffers from the pain of unrequited love. Voss suffers from unrequited love in the sense that he proposes to Laura through a letter wherein he writes, "I have ever been aware of your friendliness, and since interest in our welfare, as well as the great value I myself place upon our connexion, however, slight this may present itself at first, and subordinate in the plan of life that fate has prepared for each of us." He also goes on to say, "... In the mean time, also, I would ask your allowance that I may write to your Uncle, Mr. Bonner, with necessary formality, for your hand," (Chapter 6). But he is able to confess his feelings for her and to write to her about this only when he is already at Rhine Towers. Laura responds by saying that she is "temporarily confused: and wonders whether "two such faulty beings (can) endure to face each other, almost as in a looking-glass? Have you foreseen the possible outcome? And have you not, perhaps, mistaken a critical monster for a complaint mouse?" She concludes by saying that they "may pray together for salvation" and that she "shall intercede as ever" for his "safety and your (his) happiness," (Chapter 8). It is only after this exchange of letters that they begin to feel each other's presence and are united in

spirit though miles apart. But we know (after having read the novel) that they will never really meet each other again and that Voss will die eventually in the great Australian deserts. In his letters to Laura he mentions their love for each other saying, "That we should love each other, Laura, does at last appear inevitable and fitting, as I sit here alone in this immense country." He also refers to her as his wife, "Do I take too much for granted my dearest wife?" he thinks that distance has in fact brought them closer. He writes again, "you see that separation has brought us far, far closer. Could we perhaps converse with each other at last, expressing inexpressible ideas with simple words?" He concludes by saying, "I send you my wishes, and venture by now also to include my love, since distance has united us thus closely. This is the true marriage, I know. We have wrestled with the gristle and the bones before daring to assume the flesh," (chapter 8). But Laura does not receive this letter. We will not go into details on why this unfortunate incident takes place. Instead we shall move on to discuss the dissension within the party that Voss suffers from. The dissension within Voss's group occurs soon after the strong currents in the river wash the raft with their supplies away. We do know that Voss is aware of the fragmentation that is about to occur when he asks Palfrey,

"I want you to be candid with me. Are you of Judd's party?"

"Of Judd's party?"

"Yes. Judd is forming a party, which will start off from me sooner or later."

"I will not split off," said Palfreyman, sadly. "I am not of any party."

The discontentment and anger finally leads to a confrontation between Voss and Judd with Judd saying that he is no longer under the leadership of Voss and that he wishes to go home leading, "anybody that is of like mind". Except for Jackie, the "black fellow", Le Mesurier, Harry Robarts and Voss, the rest of the party turn around and try to go back home, Palfreyman has however died during the course of the dissension and is spared the decision of continuing with Voss or turning back. We are aware of the fate that befalls the dissenters and Voss's party too. Voss also suffers as a result of the lack of faith between the whites and the indigenous aborigines of Australia as Jackie betrays them. The Aborigines capture Voss and his party, Le Mesurier cannot take the tension of impending doom and rather than die in the hands of the Aborigines, he slits his throat and kills himself. Jackie has turned traitor and the only people now left are Harry and Voss. Harry dies while a captive and his putrefying body is thrown into a canal while the Aborigines sing a weird song, and Voss has to await death. Jackie is chosen to kill Voss and the boy, "was stabbing, and sawing, and cutting, and breaking with all his increasing, but confused manhood, above all breaking... When Jackie had got the head off, he ran outside followed by the witnesses, and flung the thing at the feet of the elders..." The other members of the party that had deflected too suffer in the midst of the vast desert and die eventually. Both Jackie and old Dugald epitomise the lack of faith between Voss and the Aborigines that Voss suffers from. But, as David Marr points out, "through his suffering in the desert, Voss conquered his pride." With the extinction of self-pride, he comes to achieve self-knowledge through suffering. This idea of suffering brings us closer to the Christian principle of self-knowledge. Thus Laura says: "perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind."

4.3.5 Religion in Voss

Patrick White's works are generally accepted as "marking a new departure in its concentration on the inner spiritual crisis and in individual religious experience", (Dorothy Green). His works are pervaded by Christian imagery and explore the various dimensions of the (Christian) doctrines of **Grace** and **Salvation**. Moreover as Amos Wilder and Charles Glicksbury comment, he realised the fact "that to be meaningful and relevant in the context of the contemporary world, the religious stance must necessitate an involvement with, not a withdrawal from the realities of ordinary human existence". So what Patrick White did was preach not any coherent set of orthodox doctrines but belief in the existence of a transcendental order that

more or less impinges directly on the life and destiny of the individual human being who must therefore work out a satisfactory relationship with and adjustment to that order. That is evident in our very own novel *Voss* as well. The religious spirit that exists in *Voss* (in keeping with that in his other novels) is also very responsive to nature, - the birds, beasts and flowers as also to the world of other fellow human beings. White has the unique capacity to draw imagery from the natural world and then to use that to dramatise his transcendental vision that once again reinstates the sense of its significance to the religious spirit. So what we have here is a professed religious order that is extremely responsive to nature and that which creates a religious order / vision with its imagery, while at the same time, creating the magic of the religious vision. We shall not go into too many details here. Just as in the previous section we did not go into details on the *theme of suffering*, we shall not try and analyse the minute details on religion in *Voss* too. What we shall do at this stage is to give you a line of thought that will make you question what you have read in the novel and try and analyse it, so that a clearer picture emerges before your eyes and the words on a page are not just words but have a story to tell. We also know that at this stage of our discussion on *Voss*, you are equipped to do some thinking for yourselves. Having said this we shall continue with our next and last unit of this Block.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we looked at two significant aspects of the novel. It must be remembered that this novel is history as well as fiction. At the fictional level, we may locate a distinct pattern of story telling, making use of all kinds of usual characteristic components. But it also conceals a pattern of history. Patrick White has carefully historicised Australian nature and shows man's heroic struggle with this unfavourable topography. Again in the process of this struggle, he comes to rediscover himself. The distinctiveness of this land helps him to identify himself. In this way, a true perspective of history has been created in *Voss*.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Indigenous: It refers to the native, aboriginal people and their culture

Topography: Detailed description, representation of natural features of a land.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. How does nature and men confront and coalesce in Patrick White *Voss*?
2. Do you think that the problem of identity in Patrick White's *Voss* foregrounds a more important question of self-discovery?

UNIT 5 MODERN READINGS: SOME IMPORTANT AREAS

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Modern and Postmodern Readings
 - 5.2.1 Characteristics of an Epic
 - 5.2.2 Epic Components
 - 5.2.3 Text and Meaning
- 5.3 Inner Movements
 - 5.3.1 Idea of Time
 - 5.3.2 Dream and Visions
 - 5.3.3 Biography and Fiction: Some Comments
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In the earlier Units, we have covered most of the important components with reference to Patrick White's *Voss*. In this Unit, we would like to introduce to you some modernist and postmodernist methods to arrive at a larger understanding of this novel. As we belong to the postmodernist era, it is necessary for us to judge this novel from a postmodernist critical point of view. You are already familiar with terms like 'modernism', 'postmodernism', 'deconstruction' etc., having studied these critical theories in your Literary Theory and Criticism course (MEG 05). In this unit, we shall firstly, define 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' and then analyse the text using one of these critical approaches. Let us begin with the introduction.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the essential methods of postmodern critical analysis is to deconstruct the codified levels of meaning. In this unit, we shall therefore consider some of the ways and means by which to examine the novel from many different angles. With the arrival of Derrida and Paul de Man on the philosophical as well as literary scene, many revolutionary changes in the methodology of literary analysis took place. This led to the subversion of the fixed code of meanings and encouraged a multiplicity of interpretation. This widening vista of interpretation will be evident in the following analysis. Let us look at the terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' before we go any further.

5.2 MODERN AND POSTMODERN READINGS

Before we begin one important question should be clear to us: what is modern and what is postmodern? Modernism is a refusal to accept the traditional patterns of thought. This element of critical denial of traditionality and the opting for experimentation comes to be strengthened especially after the two World Wars. This

naturally gave way to multiple forms of experiments in the fields of literature, philosophy and science. But in the 70s, we once again confront a critical shift in both the literary and philosophical circles. The critical thinkers are no longer content with modernist explorations. Postmodern critics attempt to subvert the rigid canons and formulate open-ended discussions on literature, philosophy, politics, sociology and so on. These critical approaches may also be applied to Patrick White's *Voss*. We may for instance, deconstruct *Voss* by analysing the novel in the manner given below. Many critics have called *Voss* a book of epic stature. Let us look at *Voss* from this point of view and discern whether or not it is fit to be called an Epic.

5.2.1 Characteristics of an Epic.

Before we begin with the epic components of *Voss*, we shall try to formulate the distinguishing features of an epic. M H Abrams (in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*) has given us a relatively good idea of what an epic is. In the **first place**, an epic presents a great hero and his heroic deeds. Thus Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* is the mainstay of the Greek camp in the great battle against the Trojans. Thus Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Beowulf in *Beowulf* or Rama in the *Ramayan* are some of the splendid prototypes of heroic figures. **Secondly**, the setting of an epic should be vast. Abrams in this context gives some examples: "Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin", again Virgil's hero Aeneas (Aeneid) descends into the underworld. Milton's *Paradise Lost* covers a wide range of Heaven, Earth and Hell. **Thirdly**, the epic poet presents the superhuman deeds of the hero. Thus in Homer's *Iliad*, we come across the great deeds of Achilles in the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey* we come across the adventurous wanderings of Odysseus. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes the rebel angels against God and Satan's final attempt to corrupt mankind. **Fourthly**, an epic always concentrates on supernatural beings for instance we, find the Olympian Gods in Homer's epic, God, Christ the and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. In this way, the epic poet makes use of the divine machinery (*deus ex machina*), meaning thereby that gods come down to take part in human action. **Finally**, the epic poet makes use of a grand writing style. In other words, elevated or high style is used to bring grandeur to the subject of the epic. Having said this, let us try and compare Patrick White's *Voss* with Homer's *Iliad*.

5.2.2 Epic Components

Voss is supposed to be based on the true record of Ludwig Leichhardt who died in the Australian desert in 1848. In this novel, White has presented a mysterious German figure who, attempts to overreach the untoward circumstances of life by trying to cross the Australian continent for the first time. It has been sometimes interpreted as a novel with a significant epical dimension. In fact, traditional epic properties put forward in the context of a modern design may be found in many different forms of creative activity. It is possible to locate certain proximate patterns of parallelism between the traditional epics of Homer and Patrick White's *Voss*. It may be pertinent, therefore, to chart out the points of parallelism:

Iliad

Voss

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Assembly of the Achaean Soldiers | 1. Voss's collection of certain adventures. |
| 2. Vastness of the epic battle | 2. Vastness of the journey |
| 3. Difference between Achilles and Agamemnon | 3. Difference between Voss and Turner. |
| 4. Achilles' withdrawal with the Myrmidons | 4. Withdrawal of Turner and others with Judd as the leader |

- | | |
|---|---|
| 5. Laocoon and the snake signifying a decisive finality | 5. The great snake and Voss |
| 6. Final pessimism in death and destruction. | 6. Finality reached through a series of deaths. |

5.2.3 Text and Meaning

Based on these six points of parallelism, we may analyse *Voss* as a modern day epic and discern the probability or lack in it. Let us look at textuality in the next section. The idea of meaning is almost coterminous with knowledge. For the science of meaning itself signifies a system of knowledge. The modern quest for knowledge begins to take shape in a different direction with **Edmund Husserl's** phenomenological philosophy that considers the world as a reflection of consciousness; and speech has an expression of absolute meanings that exist separately from language. **Husserl's phenomenology** holds further that pure meaning exists first as a pre-verbal transcendental signified and then finds expression through the human voice.

But this critical position is challenged by **Jacques Derrida's** notion of **deconstruction** that stands firmly against Husserl's critical principle in so far as Derrida questions the latter's belief in the pre-linguistic absolute meaning. Derrida finds a difference or division within the sign between its two aspects. In other words, he discovers an infinite range of variables in the interrelation of the signifier and the signified. He believes that the signifier could suggest a large number of possible signifieds. Thus Derrida's post-structuralist notion of deconstruction finds fault with the absolute notion that confines meaning to a limited boundary. Derrida visualises an open-ended, infinite possibility of meaning that opens up an appropriate perspective of modern explication

Patrick White's *Voss* may conform to a deconstructive pattern through a large number of explications intended in the text. He has, therefore, marked a sharp break from the traditional story arrangement and contrasted a terrible expedition with the normative design of life. Again frequent intrusion of visions and telepathic correlation presents a collapse of traditional realism. If we prepare a gist of the story pattern, it will appear surprisingly slight. We come across Voss, the German explorer, at the house of Mr. Bonner who is there with the explicit purpose of crossing the Australian continent. Here he collects fellow-adventurers, develops a mutual feeling of love with Laura and makes for the disastrous journey. Then follows an alternate pattern of Voss's progress and the reactions in the house of Mr. Bonner, with a distinct emphasis on Laura's lovelorn waiting. It ends with the creation of a chasm within the party and the consequent death of Voss and the others in the desert. Things are rounded off with the discovery of the mysterious conditions of Voss's death and Laura's prospective hopefulness. Voss has been presented as a figure that stands opposed to steadfast, fixed meanings. He in fact considers the deconstructive method of destroying limitations of meaning. When Mr. Bonner seems doubtful of the results of the expedition and asks: "You are aware, I should say, what it could mean?" Voss replies: "If we could compare meanings, we would arrive perhaps at different conclusions". Even the figure of Voss himself is deconstructed by means of the interactions of the other characters. When he refuses to dine with the Bonners, different perspectives of the man come to the surface:

"A rude man", saw Mr. Bonner. "A foreigner", saw the P.s. and "someone to whom I am completely indifferent," saw Laura Trevelyan.

Even in matters of primary discussions on the mapping of the journey, there is an emphasis on open-ended indeterminacy. When Voss's team-mates try to present a slapdash dependence on a fixed purpose, Le Mesurier ironically says: "Purpose? So far, no purpose." But Voss perfectly realises the nature of variability. He therefore

says: "I would be purposeless in this same sea". Again Le Mesurier asks about the time to be covered by this expedition. But Voss rejects any formulaic codification: "One month. Two months. It is not yet decided". The moment of their journey in a ship has also been conceived in terms of multiple reactions from the standpoint of involved spectators. Voss and the party set sail in a ship called *Osprey* that has become almost a symbol of a microcosmic world proceeding towards a strange, infinite, macrocosm. The entire picture, once again comes to be deconstructed through the varying attitudes of three women. For Laura, it is an escape out into a broad prospective world: "Yes, they have got away". Rose Portion feels inclined to pray for the explorers: "Oh, I will pray for them". Belle suddenly waxes eloquent on Palfreyman's nicety, quietitude and kindness. But such scattered, disjointed opinions are merged into a deep sense of melancholia. Thus the essential impact finally yields a larger dimension of inexplicable sadness: "Their bodies shivered in their thin gowns: their minds were exposed to the keenest barbs of thought; and the whole scene that their vision embraced became distinct and dancing beautiful but sad".

The cave experience of the explorers (Chapter 10) points to the range of flexible variables present in the novel. The cave with its rock drawings not only indicates a sense of shelter but a sense of mysterious interior that creates a design out of an apparent formlessness. But the experiential mode of all this has been deconstructed by the interpretive variety of the reactions: "The simplicity and truthfulness of the symbol was at times terribly apparent, to the extent that each man interpreted them according to his own needs and level". But the deconstructive variants finally lead up to a foreshadowing of Voss's death at the end. The picture in the cave, therefore, seems to point at a linear, teleological movement: "See, this man is going to die. They have gone in at the back through the shoulder-blades".

5.3 INNER MOVEMENTS

Yet another way of deconstructing the novel would be by analysing the two unities of time and place/space. Let us see how time and place/space are measured in the novel.

5.3.1 Idea of Time

The idea of time and space relationship is a significant contributing factor to the complexity of the novel. In *Voss* we are often led to look backward and forward—backward to the past and forward to the future. This movement of time naturally coalesces with the progress in space. It can be said to approximate a linear design that implicates the idea of the present through a demonstration of the past and the future. Consider, for instance, the first meeting of Voss and Laura. After initial formalities, both of them refer themselves to the past. Laura finds herself "threatening to disintegrate into the voices of the past". The stray, half-forgotten, silhouetted moments of past establish a new meaning of their essential existence. Finally Laura's invitation to see the garden (Chapter 1) foreshadows the garden incident when they come to be co-sharers in the participation of mutual love (Chapter 4). The garden episode in its turn transcends the limited unit of time to move forward to a vision of the future. Laura and Voss are "faced with a great gap to fill, of space, and time". They come to discover that "future is will". The consciousness of future again and again torments them because of its uncertainty and mystery. Laura comes to be saddled with the pressure of an internal indecision: "The future? Laura Trevelyan could not bear to think of it, even though the present, through which the riding party moved, was still to some extent on unpleasant dream." The entire novel seeks to grasp the phases of past and future that finally conduce to an epistemological understanding of life and existence. This explains the pithy conversation between Mr. Ludlow and Laura. When Ludlow asks: "When does the future become present?" Laura curtly responds: "Now". Ludlow is extremely puzzled and Laura

explains: "Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer and die". Ludlow tries to concretise it with reference to Voss's death. But Laura goes beyond the limited frontier and strongly affirms a linear prospective ideal of life: "Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be".

5.3.2 Dreams and Visions

The recurrence of dreams and visions shall be analysed in this section. There is also a co-extensive pattern of dreams, visions, hallucination and even primitive cults that unravel a complex design of thought. In fact the pattern of realism is interrupted by moments of extra-realistic visualisation. Palfreyman's precise reaction to the sailor's inexplicable story of guilt and romance perhaps sums up the entire idea: "You wished to live what you dreamed" (Chapter 5). But dreams often take the shape of visions and hallucination. When Osprey sets sail, Laura is absorbed in a persistent pattern of dream and sees the vision of the "whole rows of sailors' blackened teeth gaping from a gunnel" (Chapter 5). Again during the mystical experience in the cave, the image of the snake ritual comes to the forefront. The black fellow therefore refers to the King Snake that is the symbol of the father figure: "Father, my Father, all black feller" (Chapter 10). It is the Snake King that visits Le Mesurier in his dream. He finds himself wrestling with the "great snake, his king, the divine powers of which were not disguised by the earth colours of its scales" (Chapter 10). The ominous vision of the snake is concretised towards the end of the novel when Voss stoically waits for the final moment of death. Jackie enacts the story of the Great Snake and Voss anticipates the gradual progress towards death (Chapter 13).

This has been again curiously mixed up, through an inexplicable suggestion, with Laura's mysterious fever. There is a sporadic assemblage of cult-tokens like dew-gathering, the snake symbols, the appearance of a comet and the "odious pears" which foreshadow a seminal crisis. However, the crisis of Voss through a division in the party and his approaching death in the hands of Jackie is paralleled by Laura's crisis explicit through her undiagnosed mysterious fever. This finally reaches a level of mystical experience when Laura in a sort of delirious dream promises to Voss: "I shall not fail you" (Chapter 13). This comes to be alternately repeated in Voss's vision of Laura and it is further mystified when he visualises Laura's sickness, her strangeness and beauty: "Then he looked at her, and saw that they had cut off her hair, and below the surprising stubble that remained, they had pared the flesh from her face. She was now quite naked and beautiful" (Chapter 13).

5.3.3 Biography And Fiction: Some Comments

Often, there is a merging of lines where fact and fiction are concerned. Some critics have tried to discern traces of Patrick White's life in *Voss*. On the surface of it, it appears that Voss is the explorer trying to discover the mysterious interiors of the heart of Australia. But it could just as easily be looked at as a philosophical search for the infinite. To that extent, *Voss* seems to represent Patrick White's frame of mind. In Voss (the person/ character) we may also locate his maker who has always attempted to explore the mysterious zones of human existence. David Marr (White's biographer) has tried to establish biographical interconnections between Voss (the character) and Patrick White (the writer). Thus he suggests that Laura Trevelyan and her cousin Belle Bonner are modeled largely on White's "memories of the Ebbsworth children". The Ebbsworth family were linked with the White family through marital relations. Of the three Ebbsworth daughters: Mary, Elaine and Isabelle – Mary and Isabelle have been merged to create the character of Belle Bonner. Patrick White was deeply impressed by the deep and sensitive mind of Isabelle that he based Laura Trevelyan's character on her. David Marr writes: "From their older sister Isabelle, the boy sensed a measure of intuitive sympathy. This became the core of Laura Trevelyan's character. Isabelle was years older than the twins (Mary and Elaine), intense, and with a face of great interest," (David Marr, pp. 314-315).



White's childhood home at Lulworth, the source of all his Harbour houses
with buffalo lawns, palms and wild gardens

Moreover, Mr Bonner's homestead is largely reminiscent of White's childhood home at Lulworth. Marr comments: "As he was writing *Voss*, White drew deeply for the first time from the history of his own family. Mr Bonner, patron of the expedition, lives in a house with Lulworth's dark gardens overlooking a rushy marsh on the edge of a Harbour. There is a bunya bunya on the drive. The house is a wilderness of mahogany and Bonner's study (was) like Dick's room at the end of the verandah..." (David Marr, p.315). Again the landscape of Voss's journey from the Hunter to Rhine Towers largely resembles Belltrees in its placid, innocent days.



Memories of Belltrees are strong in *Voss*

In the early days of settlement of the Whites in Australia, James White (the brother of Patrick White's grandfather Frank, at the age of twenty), got the land of Belltrees on lease from an ex-democrat called William Charles Wentworth in 1848. Thus the backdrop of Belltrees is detectable throughout the novel. Moreover in the novel, we find that when Voss reaches Jildra, the description of the topography seems to be based on Patrick White's memories of Brenda. It was, as David Marr points out, "the station over the Queensland border to which he had driven with his uncle, where they woke at dawn to the sound of the birds and black servants padding about in bare feet." It has been further suggested that Patrick White was immensely impressed and influenced by the exhibition of the outback paintings of Sidney Nolan in March 1949

and March 1950. These paintings became useful in creating an imaginative experience for the author, especially in his projection of the landscape of the desert. David Marr writes, "years after these exhibitions, he told the painter how he felt they had both been exploring the same territory, and expressed what they found in the same way. So he asked Nolan to do the jacket for *Voss*," (David Marr, p. 316).



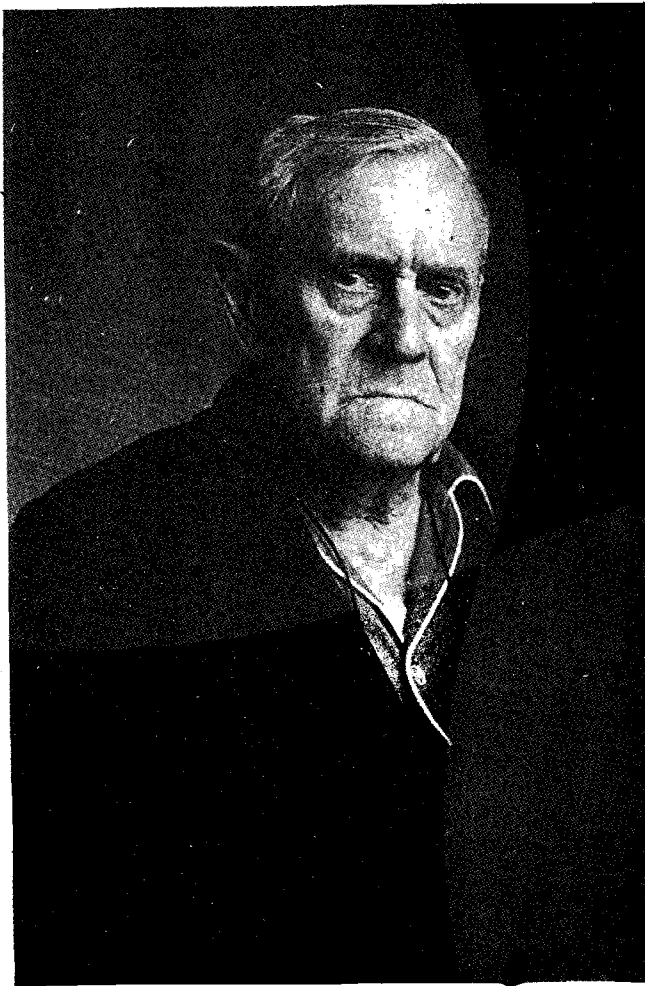
The valley at Belltrees looking east past the chapel to Mount Woolsoma

5.4 LET US SUM UP

White's novel, thus deconstructed, should however lead up to a significant conclusion. Deconstruction expands, through a presentation of a large number of un-coded variables, the perception of knowledge. This central force is also at work through the hermeneutics of signifieds. Thus Voss is sometimes an ordinary man, sometimes a foreigner, sometimes a leader, and sometimes a god. Laura is also a woman, an intellectualised idea, even a dream. These variables are posited in terms of a number of relationships. The journey that Voss undertakes and the inner development of Laura finally yield a process of gradual transition from being to becoming. In the garden episode (Chapter 4), Laura simply looks upon herself and Voss as floundering "into each other's private beings". But this shades off into an acceptance of life as a continuum that grows, develops and finally embraces the finality of life. Thus during the cave experience, Voss states: "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (Chapter 10). It is this process of becoming that turns Voss's journey into a quest, into a myth, and makes him a part of legends and history. Thus Colonel Hebden says: "Mr Voss is already history" (Chapter 14). This makes Voss an idea, enwrapped in an inscrutable mystery. The people are all curious and keen to find out the concrete reality about Voss's end. Thus Dugald and Boyle question the black fellow in an effort to know the truth. The Colonel also continues his search for the truth. Finally Judd presents the bare truth of his death.

But it does not remain confined merely to an area of information; rather it becomes a part of the cognitive pattern of knowledge. Earlier in the novel, Voss had already underlined this principle of knowledge in his own mystical way: "Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind". Laura comes to visualise the ultimate meaning of an abstraction, of a man turning into an idea. She therefore says: "Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually by those who have been troubled by it" (Chapter 16). This rightly affirms the development from being to becoming.

We have come to the end of our block. We hope we have been successful in our attempt to trace the development of the modern Australian novel, analyse the novel and place Patrick White within the socio-cultural milieu of his times.



White, back in hospital in 1985 facing an uncertain future

5.5 GLOSSARY

- Canon:** General standard or principle by which a work of art is judged.
- Deconstruction:** It is the most popular critical term in the postmodernist school of thought. It rejects the fixed code of meaning and accepts flexibility of interpretations. Derrida is the chief exponent of this school of criticism.
- Derrida:** Jacques Derrida is a French philosopher who read a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in 1966 at an international colloquium at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. He attacked the pretensions of the structuralists and set in motion the deconstruction movement.
- Paul de Man:** Paul de Mann was a Belgian who migrated to the United States of America and studied

at Harvard University. He became Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale University in 1971. He was instrumental in propagating the philosophy of Derrida.

Subversion:

It is a process of destroying the established beliefs and opinions. This critical principle is largely used in the postmodernist analysis of literature.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. How would you consider the different levels of meaning in Patrick White's *Voss*?
2. How does Patrick White project the movements of time in *Voss*?
3. How does Patrick White present the interweaving of dream and visions in his *Voss*? Discuss.

5.7 SUGGESTED READING

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