The Reign of the Mother Goddess:

a Jungian study of the

novels of Patrick White

by

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Summary

This thesis offers a new approach to the study of White's novels. It does not assume that the author is identical with his work, that he "produced" it and therefore "knows" what it is about. Rather it adopts the view that the work, being a truly visionary kind of literature, leads a life of its own which is independent of the author's mind. The work must, however, relate to White at a depth-psychological level. The stories can be seen as spontaneous creations of the author's inner world, or representations of his imaginal life. The teller/tale relationship is therefore analogous to that between ego and unconscious in psychoanalytic work. The teller stands amazed at what he "creates", frequently misunderstands what the tale is saying, and often forces the symbolic material into an incongruous intellectual frame. The dynamics of this situation, or White's "quarrel with himself", is what forms the central focus of the ensuing discussion.

Each White novel is a variation upon a single myth relating to the image of the Great Mother and Her Son. The presence of this archetypal pattern makes the novels unusually accessible to a Jungian or mythic approach. The point is not that White read Jung and "applied" his work in the fiction, but that the creative imagination, structured a priori along mythic lines, is comprehensible and accountable within the context of Jungian archetypal thought. The thesis is in some way a contribution toward a science of the imagination, which Freud and Jung pioneered earlier this century, and which has been carried forward in the work of Kerényi, Neumann, James Hillman, and Marie Louise von Franz. It is founded on the idea that imagination is not chaotic and limitless, wandering hither and thither in an arbitrary way, but that it follows highly structured patterns, is ordered by internal psychic forces, and works in accordance with mythic principles. The task of the myth critic is to experience the work from the inside, to penetrate its deep structure, and to relate this to an appropriate
psycho-mythological paradigm. The critic must proceed with utmost caution, allowing the work to suggest its own interpretative frame by "amplifying" the mythic content which is already inherent in the material. In White studies the critic must be especially careful not to allow him/herself to be sidetracked by the author's interpretation of events, but to remain absolutely faithful to the narrative structure and acutely receptive to its symbolic imagery.

In approaching White we have to unlearn much of what we have been taught about the novel. We do not, for instance, find that the characters "develop" in the expected sense, nor do we find that the subject of the fiction is the "world" as we know it. White's world is one of myth and dream. We have to view everything as if we were moving in a psychic landscape, inhabited not by people and things, but by imaginal figures and numinous objects. White is not writing about life: he is simply writing, or rather, he is dreaming a universe. And although that universe coincides at times with certain aspects of "Australian life" it is not to be located within a realistic context. Sarsaparilla is not Sydney or Melbourne, but it is a place, a mythic place in a mythic reality.