SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP IN PATRICK WHITE’S THE AUNT’S STORY

Mustafa Faqe Muhamed
University of Polytechnics, Sulaymaniyah, Irak

Abstract: This article explores Theodora’s spiritual odyssey by highlighting her childhood recollections and her most important relationships with the other characters such as Frank, Clarkson, and Moraitis. It also focuses on Patrick White’s rationale behind emphasizing spirituality and ignoring the physical world. It underlines White’s philosophical dichotomy of spiritual development as well and physical nature under scrutiny in the light of Western Philosophy. The Aunt’s Story is perhaps Patrick White’s most famous and detailed work of the disintegration of identity. The whole plot deals with Theodora Goodman’s struggle for a free world in which she can attain truth. The Aunt’s Story is primarily concerned with Theodora’s attempt to attain some sort of epiphany, particularly when she yields to moments of close relationships with other characters and the landscape. However, this communion is thwarted on the grounds that it threat her spiritual world.

Keywords: physicality, spirituality, epiphany, socialized identity, external reality

1. Introduction

Theodora’s spiritual odyssey coincides with the disintegration of her socialized identity, her attempt to destroy “the great monster self”, her physical development (AS 128). It is important to point out that Theodora’s childhood environment paves the way for her natural desires towards spirituality to win over her physical development. As the external level, her home in Meroe is described as a deadly place where only images of “black volcanic hill, dark pines, and dead yellow grass” along with “the volcanic ash coating the windows” can be seen. On the internal level, at home, her “monstrous mother” who is a “small, neat, hateful woman, with small, neat, buckled shoes, and many rings” engenders some dangerous apprehensions about the physical world which gradually disappears. This does not mean that Theodora lacks tendency towards enjoying the physical world. Rather, she possesses a “volcanic fire” which seems to have resulted from her mother and the deadly Meroe. This volcanic fire gradually becomes a warrior which guards her spirituality and fights any external threat. As a result, it consciously and unconsciously thwarts every significant relationship one after the other. Her sterile communion with other characters such as Frank, Clarkson, and Moraitis is a good example of White’s tendency to undervalue the flesh and the body. White thwarts Theodora’s collaborative effort in a number of ways the most important of which is disqualifying her relationships from any significance other than private on the grounds that they are figments of her own imagination. This does not mean that Theodora lacks a potential for a creative and
fruitful collaboration. Rather, the problem is with her inability to enact it (Kiernan 462). Eventually, she becomes mad and schizophrenic and ends her odyssey in a remote place without friends, family, and home.

2. Significant Relationship in Patrick White’s *The Aunt’s Story*

*The Aunt’s Story* starts with Mrs. Goodman’s death, Theodora’s mother. This is the most important part of the novel because after her mother’s death, Theodora becomes free, starts her spiritual odyssey from Meroe to France and finally to America. Mrs. Goodman plays an important role in strengthening Theodora’s volcanic fire to thwart her significant relationships, and gradually banishing the physical world entirely by choosing a total emotional retreat into a schizophrenic world. Theodora’s childhood is very important particularly the deadly environment of Meroe and her mother. Despite that Theodora is presented as a rather passive character who often anticipates “superior fresh acts”, yet the cycle of some pivotal images throughout the novel paves the way for the reader to explore Theodora’s identity (AS 141).

A number of scholars criticize White for squeezing too many images into a small-size novel without offering a detailed explanation of them. Thelma Herring, for instance, argues that *The Aunt’s Story* fails to offer sufficient hints in order for the reader to decipher the strain of such a complex pattern of these polysemic symbols which are central in the novel (Herring 6). It is, to some extent, a legitimate criticism that the images seem to be bewildering. However, because they play an important role in connecting the fragmented parts of the novel together, it seems to be vital for the images to be polysemous.

It is true that *The Aunt’s Story* is a novel which makes the reader tired taking him to a journey from past to future and back to the present. It is not like other classic works in narration, peeling off the story and putting it before the reader to consume. Therefore, White’s *The Aunt’s Story*, like James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, demands an intelligent, indefatigable reader who can endure the protagonist’s odyssey. There are several images and symbols in *The Aunt’s Story* such as images of fire, volcano, bones, and hawks which offer great help in understanding the process by which White posits a dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual.

In *The Aunt’s Story*, White presents his heroine and other characters with a potential for collaboration; however, he thwarts this collaboration on the grounds that it is infertile (Riemer 26). In doing so, White separates physical nature from spiritual development which, according to Western Philosophy, they complete each other and the absence of either of them makes one uncertain of the existence of external reality (Levi 339).

We mentioned that the environment of Meroe is one of the significant elements of Theodora’s life which makes her ignore the physical world. From the very beginning of the novel, Theodora closely identifies herself with her home, Meroe. Images of a yellow house, the maze of the garden, the cactus trees, the dead yellow grass, the black hill and the volcanic ash are strongly attached to her life. These images create a futile environment for Theodora...
which gradually creates a tendency in her to evade the physical enjoyment. Theodora tells us about Meroe through her childhood recollections. Meroe, where “nothing remarkable had taken place” except for playing music, roses being decayed, and the human body disguising its actual mission of love and hate,” obliges her to depart from the ordinary word and create an imaginary universe instead (AS 60). This seems to be Patrick White’s tendency towards a radical disassociation of thought and feeling.

The use of different colors is significant. Colors such as yellow and black appear in the novel every now and then. The yellow house in Meroe can be associated with Theodora’s yellow skin, and the surrounding of Meroe, the black volcanic hill in particular to Theodora’s black dressings:

“She looked with caution at the yellow face of the house, at the white shells in its placid, pocked stone. Even in sunlight the hills surrounding Meroë were black. Her own shadow was rather a suspicious rag. So that from what she saw and sensed, the legendary landscape became a fact, and she could not break loose from an expanding terror.” (AS 23)

The above description teaches so much about Theodora. We learn later in the novel that she has a yellow face which reminds us of “the yellow house”. We also learn that Theodora often wears dark garments with a black hat. Similarly, “the skin of Meroë was black” and “was surrounded by a black volcanic hill” (AS 290). Thus, Meroë is very important to Theodora because her identity is strongly linked to it. Wherever she goes or imagines becomes another Meroë. When Mr. Goodman, for instance, tells her about a remote place in Abyssinia, Theodora immediately links it to Meroë:

“‘But at Meroë there is only a creek,’ Theodora said. ‘There is another Meroë,’ said Father, ‘a dead place, in the black country of Ethiopia.’ Her hands were cold on the old spotted paper of the complicated books, because she could not, she did not wish to, believe in the second Meroë.

‘I shall go outside now,’ Theodora said. Because she wanted to escape from this dead place with the suffocating cinder breath. She looked with caution at the yellow face of the house, at the white shells in its placid, pocked stone. Even in sunlight the hills surrounding Meroë were black. Her own shadow was rather a suspicious rag. So that from what she saw and sensed, the legendary landscape became a fact, and she could not break loose from an expanding terror.” (AS 15-16)

She is very afraid of this place because she imagines herself in that “dead place”, and that is what makes her rush out. However, she finds no alternative as when she goes out she only beholds “the yellow face of the house, the white shells in its placid, pocked stone” and the “black volcanic hill” (AS 17). This foreshadows that wherever Theodora goes would be the same. Indeed, Meroë repeats itself throughout the novel. For instance, there is much similarity between Meroë and the Jardin Exotique and Kilvert’s hut in the third part.

In the Jardin Exotique, the reader is introduced to the place through Theodora’s viewpoint. She sees “paths” of the garden in the Hotel du Midi as mazy as those of Meroë:

“Walking slowly, in her large and unfashionable hat, she began to be afraid she had
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returned to where she had begun, the paths of the garden were the same labyrinth, the cactus limbs the same aching stone. Only in the jardin exotique because silence had been intensified, and extraneous objects considerably reduced, thoughts would fall more loudly, and the soul, with little.” (AS 146).

The Jardin Exotique is a second Meroë for Theodora due to the qualities it has. Even the people in the Hotel du Midi resemble those of Meroë, the way they think and their behaviors as well. The first moment she meets Mrs. Rapallo, Theodora remembers her “monstrous mother” in Meroë. Through this flashback we understand Julia, Theodora’s mother who, like the dead Meroë, plays a dangerous role in engendering fear of the physical world in Theodora.

The first and most important flashback which tells almost everything about Mrs. Goodman occurs in the rose garden in Meroë where she is presented as a greedy, possessive, and destructive woman:

“The roses drowsed and drifted under her skin. ‘Theodora, I forbid you to touch the roses’, said Mrs. Goodman. ‘I’m not,’ cried Theodora. ‘Or only a little. Some of them are bad.’ And they were. There was a small pale grub curled in the heart of the rose. She could not look too long at the grub-thing stirring as she opened the petals to the light. ‘Horrid, beastly grub,’ said Fanny, who was as pretty and as pink as roses. Theodora had not yet learnt to dispute the apparently indisputable. But she could not condemn her pale and touching grub. She could not subtract it from the sum total of the garden. So, without arguing, she closed the rose.” (AS 14)

The above flashback reveals so much about Julia and Theodora. She is very aggressive with Theodora: she prevents her from “touching the roses” which is an indication of her tyrannical nature. As an innocent child Theodora is forced to “learn [not] to dispute the indisputable”. Moreover this destructive environment gradually engenders in her fear and hatred towards the external world. It obliges Theodora to create an imaginary world, as an alternative, and engross herself in her spiritual world. It teaches her that relationship with others will be problematic, and this is what makes her put an end to her relationship with Clarkson later in the novel.

Back to the Hotel Du Midi, Theodora sees her destructive mother in Mrs. Rapallo; they resemble each other because both of them are possessive and greedy. We are told in the beginning of the novel that Julia wants her daughters to marry affluent people. Apart from that, she is obsessed with dominance which can be seen early in the Chopin scene. When Theodora begins playing a nocturne by Chopin, Julia stops her and plays it herself. Angry, Theodora says, “She took possession of the piano, she possessed Chopin, they were hers while she wanted them, until she was ready to put them down.” (AS 21). The same situation repeats itself in the Jardin Exotique. When she takes a flight with Mrs. Rapallo to somewhere in Russia to see Gloria, her daughter’s ceremony, Mrs. Rapallo boastfully says, “Gloria is in audience with a most important personage, behind the Canova group, in the gallery on the right.” Furthermore, Mrs. Rapallo, like Julia, wants to possess everything. This possessiveness is portrayed by the nautilus which she carries and makes it her own “property”, as she says, “of course I bought it. It is mine” (AS 150). These scenes play a negative role in Theodora’s life because she needs a peaceful place as well as somebody who can understand her spiritual quest. However, what she
encounters is the same Meroe and people that she wanted to run away from in the first place. These destructive scenes make Theodora afraid of the external reality and that is why she thwarts her relationships with the other characters (Beatson 110).

Moreover, the reader learns that Theodora finishes her odyssey in a place in Nevada in the United States which is quite identical to Meroe. Kilvert’s hut, for instance, in which Theodora rests for a while, is surrounded by “sonorous islands”, which reminds Theodora of Meroe; she feels like “She is again among the black volcanic hills of Meroe” (AS 290). This remembrance of Meroe plays a very important role in the disintegration of Theodora’s identity because during this time she creates and terminates her fantasy in the Jardin Exotique which is represented by Katina Pavlou.

Theodora’s imaginary return from Jardin Exotique to Meroe starts from the first appearance of Katina who seems to be one of “[Theodora’s] several lives” (AS 278). The reader learns that from a conversation which occurs in the Jardin Exotique in which Katina expresses her boredom at everything: “I must go home before I have quite forgotten” (AS 149). Soon after that, Theodora leaves the school and goes home. This is significant particularly in that it provides grounds for many critics to believe that all the actions in The Aunt’s Story happen in Theodora’s mind due to her potential for imagination (Beston 34).

So far we discussed Theodora’s childhood recollections of Meroe, and how these memories created fear and hatred towards the physical world. We are now turning to highlight Theodora’s most important relationships and how “her volcanic fire” thwarts these communions.

As aforementioned, images of a “volcanic hill” appear frequently throughout the novel which are closely linked to Theodora’s “burning fire”. Theodora possesses some volcanic power which thwarts her potential for a creative engagement with the other characters (Steven 82). Her first communion starts with Frank, Fanny’s later husband. When Frank indirectly expresses his feelings to Theodora, she immediately fears her apartness with Meroe to the extent that the walls begin to crumble in her imagination. That is, we discussed earlier that Theodora’s identity is closely attached to Meroe. This is because she possesses the same qualities that Meroe has such as the black volcanic fire. When Frank exposes his feelings to her, she feels threatened as it reminds her of the childhood memory in the rose garden when her mother tells her not to touch “the grub”, which we explained earlier that it warns Theodora against the physical world. Therefore, her “black volcanic fire” is likely to erupt, as a means of protections:

“[Frank] spoke thoughtfully now, not with the criticism that other people’s voices had for Theodora Goodman. So that she wanted him to speak more. The blood in her stone hands ran a little quicker, perhaps from fear also, that stone will crumble. Not even Father could hold up the walls of Meroe when it was time. So now she waited for Frank to speak.” (AS 83)

It is clear that Frank initiates this interaction, but Theodora’s feelings are repressed because she cannot enact this potential to create a promising engagement and collaboration (Steven 85). The above scene invites us to a negative interpretation. White seems to repeat the same conservative belief that women’s energies should be allowed no viable outlet. A basic assumption of this
literature in *The Aunt’s Story* is that Theodora’s feelings are gathered in upon themselves and lay burning inwardly, and even if they erupt, they will be destructive as in the Jardin Exotic.

The first appearance of Theodora’s volcanic power occurs during the shooting scene with Frank. When Frank tries to shoot the hawk, Theodora’s “blood in her stone hands ran a little quicker,” and she immediately remembers the “black volcanic hill in Meroe” (AS 83):

“She remembered the red eye, and for a moment she quivered, and the whole hillside, in some other upheaval of mythical origin. She knew the white air, closer than a sheath, and the whole cold world was a red eye.” (AS 73).

The hawk’s eyes are red, and red is a basic colour of fire. Thus, Theodora’s volcanic fire is associated with the hawk. As a result of her inability to return Frank’s feelings, her volcanic fire erupts which ultimately makes her shoot the hawk down.

This reappears later during Huntly Clarkson’s acquaintance. When Clarkson invites her to the shooting gallery, Theodora outshoots him as she accurately targets the clay ducks.

When she returns home, Theodora’s volcanic power erupts briefly at her mother:

“ ‘I believe you were born with an axe in your hand.’ ‘I do not understand what you mean. Axes? I have sat here all the afternoon. I am suffering from heartburn.’ ‘Then it is I’, said Theodora, ‘I have a core of evil in me that is altogether hateful’” (AS 126).

At first, Theodora is angry at her mother because she believes that it is all due to her mother she cannot find a man of her own accusing her mother to have been “born with an axe in her hand”, which is a clear indication to her childhood memories. Her childhood environment which engendered apprehension in her now makes her potential for a creative engagement with Clarkson (Steven 65). However, soon after that her anger erupts at herself because of her inability to take a man of her own as she fails for the second time, after Frank, in her sexual encounters. This can be good evidence that White seems to have intentionally thwarted Theodora’s creative collaborative ability. If we tell the story through Clarkson’s lens, we will get to the conclusion that he is helpful to Theodora’s quest. This can be seen in a number of scenes.

Clarkson, for instance, is the best character in the novel to understand Mrs. Goodman whom Theodora struggles to run away from. This makes him closer to Theodora’s world. In the first acquaintance with Mrs. Goodman, Clarkson learns that she is despotic and a rather self-assertive woman:

“Mr. Clarkson agreed, amiably, above his desk, which was prosperous and broad, and at which he could already feel the tyranny of Mrs. Goodman aimed. He noticed that she was a small, neat, hateful woman, with small, neat, buckled shoes, and many rings. She sat in the light and kept her ankles crossed. But her daughter sat in shadow, and drew with her parasol on the floor characters that he could not read. (AS 93)

The above scene is a powerful example which highlights Clarkson’s understanding of Mrs. Goodman. He clearly shares Theodora’s belief that her mother is a “small, neat, hateful woman, with small, neat, buckled shoes, and many rings.” It does not mean that Clarkson is perfect, but he could be the one Theodora desires as she admits that, “It would be very easy, she felt, to
allow the kindness, the affluence, the smoky voice of M. Clarkson to engulf” (AS 93). This leads us to conclude that Theodora ends the relationship with Clarkson on no basis except for her natural fear of the physical world, her volcanic fire which is “altogether hateful”.

Volcano is associated with fire which is usually a dichotomous element in the literary works. On the one hand, it could be the bringer of destruction and/or the symbol of chaos and war; on the other hand, it might be the banisher of darkness and an eternal love as in the case of Prometheus who risked the wrath of the Titans to bring fire to man (Carl 66). In The Aunt’s Story, fire is destructive and the banisher of hope and love. It is this fire which prevents Theodora from a significant relationship. This destructive fire offers so much information about Theodora. We learn through this fire that Theodora’s problems are associated with hopeless sexual frustrations.

Fire has components of red colour, and the hawk, which is a frequent image in the novel, has “red eyes”. We explained earlier that Theodora closely identifies her feelings with the hawk which stands for her sexual feelings. The hawk and the fire are, therefore, closely interrelated. However, it seems weak to identify the hawk with Theodora herself; rather, it is a symbol of her feelings, sexuality in particular. If we identify the hawk with Theodora herself, she should commit suicide in the end because she shoots it down, while with Frank. Neither of these happens in the novel. Instead, we learn that Theodora “shoots” and “kills” her sexual feelings, as she stays a spinster forever.

Furthermore, the shooting gallery with Clarkson recalls the same hawk. As explained earlier, Clarkson seriously wants to engage with Theodora in a courtship. Theodora, nonetheless, stifles this opportunity by shooting the heads off the clay ducks. This scene is significant because Theodora’s volcanic sexual longings furiously erupt and cajole her into setting fire to the Jardin Exotique because she can no more endure “her volcanic fire”.

J. F. Burrows considers Theodora’s eruptive fire, particularly when setting fire to the garden, the bringer of hope and the banisher of darkness on the grounds that she finds final peace in the end by destroying the garden. However, it is important to point out that Theodora’s burning the Jardin Exotique is a by-product of her fruitless relationships. Therefore, it is the bringer of chaos and has destructive effects on Theodora’s overall life to the extent that it drives her mad and sends her to a mental institution. Beyond its destructive quality, fire, in The Aunt’s Story, can also be seen as an exquisite artistic element of romance which Theodora possesses. The eruptive volcanic fire burning inside her is, as mentioned earlier, a metaphor for Theodora’s sexual passion.

While in boarding school, Theodora and Katina become very close friends during which time a very important conversation occurs which reveals many things:

“Have you ever been inside the tower, Miss Goodman?” Katina Pavlou asked. And now Theodora felt inside her hand the hand coming alive. She felt the impervious lips of stone forming cold words. She dreaded, in anticipation, the scream of nettles. ‘No,’ said Theodora, ‘I have not been inside the tower. I imagine there is very little to see.’ “There is nothing, nothing,” Katina said. “There is a smell of rot and emptiness”. But no less painful in its emptiness, Theodora felt. “Still, I am glad,” said Katina Pavlou,
speaking through her white face. “You know, Miss Goodman, when one is glad for something that has happened, something nauseating and painful that one did not suspect. It is better finally to know.” (AS 253)

In this important conversation, White certainly plays on words through a very intelligent use of symbolism. The tower Katina mentions is obviously a phallic symbol which stands for sexual experience. Katina, who is Theodora’s mirror or “physical life”, downgrades “the tower” because “There is nothing, nothing,” but “a smell of rot and emptiness” and is “no less painful in its emptiness”. Katina disillusions Theodora by reducing sexual enjoyment to a “nauseating and painful” experience. Again, after this scene Theodora’s destructive volcanic power erupts as a result of her hopeless sexual frustrations. This time she cannot control the fire inside her. As a tempest, it is released and swept through the Hotel du Midi which eventually destroys the Jardin Exotique and the people around it. This puts an end to Theodora’s “created several lives” including Katina. It is perhaps the defining moment in Theodora’s odyssey as she comes to realize that she is living in an imaginary world which is why she destroys the Jardin Exotique.

As the great philosopher David Hume argues, reality is truth, and it is every manifestation of the truth which occurs within us, and sometimes appears as if from nowhere. Theodora accepts reality over illusion, “the created several lives”.

The destructive volcanic fire which “burns” both Jardin Exotique and Theodora’s courtship and sexuality has a lot to do with her childhood recollections in Meroe. A series of flashbacks in the novel, particularly those pertained to the fire and the volcanic hill, invite us to reconsider Theodora’s innocent childhood life in Meroe. One of Theodora’s most significant childhood events is the man, who is known in the novel as “The Man Who Was Given His Diner”. This man informs her that, “You’ll see a lot of funny things Theodora Goodman. You’ll see them because you’ve eyes to see. And they’ll break you. But perhaps you’ll survive” (AS 45). Indeed, after the man leaves Meroe, Theodora begins to see many unusual things which almost destroy her, but she miraculously survives.

It is obvious that one of the components of fire is light. J. E. Cirlot states that Jupiter’s lightning and thunderbolts in the ancient Roman mythology symbolize chance, destiny and providence (6). Lightning, in The Aunt’s Story, is associated with Theodora’s volcanic fire. It is closely linked to her early memories particularly the dream in which a lightning struck her. At night, early in the novel, Theodora dreams about a tree under which she is asleep which is struck by a lightning but miraculously survives. John Stasny has associated the tree with the phallus, the visual representation of the distant unfriendly lover “who both haunts and eludes” Mariana (214). Similarly, Theodora’s dream is obviously associated with her sexual experience:

“There was the night, for instance, somewhere early in the summer, when she woke in bed and found that she was not beneath the tree. She had put out her hand to touch the face before the lightning struck, but not the tree. She was holding the faceless body that she had not yet recognized, and the lightning struck deep. Breaking her dream, the house was full of the breathing of people asleep and the pressure of
furniture. She got up. It was hot in the passage.” (AS 80)

The lightning here is a reference to sexuality, as the tree is an obvious phallic symbol. It is also clear that Theodora cannot “touch the tree and the faceless body”. Hence, we learn that actually Theodora desires to experience sexuality but “her destructive fire” prevents her. On this occasion, Theodora’s spirituality is much stronger than her physical strength which eventually prevents her from enjoying her sexuality. The problem with White is that he does not allow Theodora’s sexual epiphany to be realized.

It is imperative to shed some light on White’s perspective on reality here. White believes that only one’s own existence and reality can be realized. This can be evidenced by Theodora’s uncertainty of the external world. White places emphasis on spirituality and ignores physicality. By doing that, White breaks the long established philosophy of dualism in which, as Rene Descartes argues, there is an interaction between spirituality and physicality; they cannot be separated because without one another the system is false.

In The Aunt’s Theory, White creates a dichotomy in which spirituality is an entirely different plane from the physical nature which, according to Western Philosophy, as Isaac Levi argues, is false because physical elements are a necessary complement of spiritual development. However, there is, some hope in White’s dichotomy which is important to be discussed. In the end of The Aunt’s Story, Theodora goes mad which is in itself a criticism of those who, like Theodora, ignore physical experience; they are mentally ill with deep emotional disturbance. However, this interpretation seems to be weak because we learn that Theodora is always rescued miraculously from physical world. Such physical world is represented by Frank, Huntly, and Moraitis whom Theodora ignores on the grounds that they threaten her spiritual quest. White rescues his heroine through a number of ways the most important of which is images of bones.

Bones in The Aunt’s Story may represent many things. However, the wisest interpretation might be the one which is related to Theodora’s defensiveness. Tamara Prosic associates bones with permanence and protectiveness from the outside world. Theodora’s volcanic fire which destroyed the Hotel du Midi is now spent which means she has no more weapons to protect herself from “the external reality”. Therefore, White has created extra weapons in order for Theodora to protect herself forever, as bones can last for a long time. From the very beginning of the novel, fragmented images of bones can be seen. We learned that Theodora often identifies herself with Meroe, and one of the noticeable images connected to Meroe is bones; that Meroe is surrounded by a skeleton of bones. So is Theodora. She has “cages of bones” (AS 173).

White’s intelligence lies in that he releases Theodora’s volcanic fire in the end of the Jardin Exotique because bones are subjected to melting when exposed to fire. Theodora’s volcanic fire is not only a destructive force to the outside world but to herself as well, as she almost destroys herself in the Hotel Du Midi. Therefore, Theodora releases her fire lest it destroys her. Bones stay with Theodora until the end of the novel because they offer her an internal protection. Interestingly, after the Jardin Exotique, White creates a more peaceful fantasy for Theodora which finds itself in Holstius because no more external threats are
expected. However, she is sent to a mental institution where she rests forever. She is safe, but lost without home, friends, and family. She chooses a total emotional retreat and becomes schizophrenic. Holstius’ final conversation might be the most important evidence for us to consider Theodora’s quest a failure:

“I expect you to accept the two irreconcilable halves. Come,’ he said, holding out his hand with the unperturbed veins. She huddled on the boards, beyond hope of protection by convention or personality, but the cloth on the legs of Holstius had the familiar texture of childhood, and smelled of horses, and leather, and guns.” (AS 277)

Holstius tells Theodora that her life has been a failure because she was incapable of reconciling physicality with spiritual world (although the “halves” may refer to joy and sorrow, flesh and spirit, illusion and reality, or life and death, which are not my focus). White seems to be rigid in his philosophical dichotomy of spiritual development and physical nature which he believes them to be “irreconcilable”. Despite Olive Schreiner’s philosophical claim that, “When your life is most real, to me you are mad,” Theodora’s final destination in the mental institution may prove White’s false dichotomy.

3. Conclusion

*The Aunt’s Story* is arguably Patrick White’s most successful and detailed study of the metaphysical world, particularly its portrayal of identity as open to a transcendental dissolution. It can be regarded as dismissive of the physical world. *The Aunt’s Story* is primarily concerned with the protagonist’s attempt to attain some sort of epiphany, particularly when she yields to moments of close relationships with other characters and the landscape. However, this communion is thwarted on the grounds that it is a threat to her spiritual world.

Theodora’s spiritual odyssey coincides with the disintegration of her socialized identity, her attempt to destroy “the great monster self”, her physical development (AS 128). Her sterile communion with other characters such as Frank, Clarkson, and Moraitis is a good example of White’s tendency to undervalue the flesh and the body. He thwarts Theodora’s significant collaboration in a number of ways the most important of which is disqualifying her relationships from any significance other than private on the grounds that they are figments of her own imagination. This does not mean that Theodora lacks a potential for a creative and fruitful collaboration. Rather, she fails to enact it due to her “black volcanic fire” which, according to White, protects her spirituality from the external, physical world. Eventually, she becomes mad and schizophrenic and ends her odyssey in a remote place without friends, family, and home.

*The Aunt’s Story* is open to a number of interpretations; therefore, it is unwise to give priority to the metaphysical reading and dismiss others. It has many doors through which the reader can enter into Theodora’s world. I have opened only one door of discussion which is a metaphysical one. There are, nevertheless, many other doors to be opened from a psychological and feminist reading through to an existential perspective.
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