

## Chapter 2

## THE TREE OF MAN

*The Tree of Man* was published in 1956 when Patrick White and his partner Manoly Lascaris left Europe behind them, and came back to Australia and lived at Castle Hill, a suburb, then partly country, in north-west Sydney. At that time this area was semi-rural and sparsely populated, and White and Manoly had attempted to survive financially by growing cut-flowers and selling goats' milk, in short, pioneering in the Promised Land. According to White's biographer, David Marr, many of the characters as well as the setting of *The Tree of Man* are drawn from their first experiences in the district at that time.<sup>35</sup> The novel's main characters, Stan and his wife Amy, strongly reflect the lifestyle of the real-life friends at the time, although Stan is much more of a late Australian pioneer.

In 1951, during a storm, White experienced a conversion to a deep religious belief. This is important for the first novel published following this storm, namely *The Tree of Man*, has as the author's main male character, Stan, a man to be profoundly changed by a similar experience. For both Stan and White, the meaningful and life-shaping event takes place during a storm. During his adolescence and until this time, White had been an unbeliever, spurning religion,<sup>36</sup> but he now had come to formulate an evolving personal

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<sup>35</sup> David Marr, *Patrick White A Life*, Random House, Sydney, 1991, pp. 286-288.

<sup>36</sup> Commented on by White in T. Herring and G. A. Wilkes, 'A Conversation with Patrick White', *Southerly*, 33, 1973, 132-143. Also written about by David Marr, 1991, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

faith in a higher being.

By 1956 White had not published any work since *The Aunt's Story* of (1948), and, what with the physical labour involved on the farm, he felt that he had lost the ability to write. The profundity of his own traumatic revelation during the storm prompted him to recommence work on an old manuscript. The final result would be *The Tree of Man*.<sup>37</sup> Something of the illuminating insights experienced at the time that caused White to recommence writing is elaborated in the interview with Herring and Wilkes, already referred to, and also in White's famous self-probing piece, 'The Prodigal Son'.<sup>38</sup> In this early essay of 1958 White states: 'I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry...' (p. 157).

*The Tree of Man* is an account of two young people who marry and develop a pristine or hitherto unworked block of land. Their life's journey is paralleled by the fortunes of the (Steiner-like) Australian farm and the vicissitudes of the seasons. The couple interact, to some extent, with the local people, take part in defending the land from natural disasters in the area, and they have two children. By their middle-age, suburbia has reached out to them, and their farm is eventually subdivided and sold for housing development. The structure of the book takes the form of an exploration: the journey involving the lives of two people, who although married in body, lack any meaningful insight into each other's hopes, aspirations and deepest desires or needs.

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<sup>37</sup> *Patrick White Letters* ed., David Marr, Random House, Sydney, 1994, p. 86.

<sup>38</sup> Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', *Australian Letters*, 1, no.3, April 1958, 37-40; reproduced in *The Vital Decade, Ten Years of Australian Art and Letters*, eds. Geoffrey Dutton and Max Harris, Sun Books, South Melbourne, 1968, pp.156-158.

The major events in their lives are associated with the natural disasters experienced on the land: flood, fire and in the later years, drought. These events, as metaphors, correspond to the stages of their married lives; the fleshly and productive early years when first married; the testing of their marriage by flood and fire; and the later barren years of drought, as they drift apart both metaphorically and in reality. Importantly for a novel dealing with essential or universal spirituality, these natural events also have an unforced Biblical counterpart.

The text is divided into four parts, with each ending at a sequential phase of a day. Part one ends in the morning, part two in the afternoon and part three in the evening. Again, this periodicity is important, as it represents tropes of their evolving married life. Part four ends as the novel has begun, with Stan's grandson, also called Stan, wandering among the trees and dreaming of writing a poem of universal themes: life, death, love and a measure of clearer understanding by all people of the most complicated and the most simple matters affecting their existence. The novel is, therefore, cyclic in structure: it begins and ends with a young man, Stan, who in his imagination will feel and write poetry of some epic sort that will explain to all people the complexities of life and the mystery that underlies it. Throughout the novel verses from Shakespeare and A. E. Housman's *The Shropshire Lad*, are the actual and symbolic vehicle of communication chosen by White for Stan to muse on, or to better express or symbolise his slowly developing understanding and knowledge, but, for all of these purposes, the spoken language is inadequate.

The theme of life as a journey, with the associated metaphor of a river (of life), is universal in Western literature. It is no coincidence that at the time of

writing *The Tree of Man*, White was re-reading Homer's *Odyssey*, the timeless 'Western' epic story of self discovery over a life time. Although the novel cannot be said to be modelled on the *Odyssey* in the same way as James Joyce modelled his *Ulysses* on the classic earlier story, both these novels are concerned with themes of self discovery and self realisation. The desire to find the truth about oneself and thus to make sense and order of his own personal life within the surrounding universe becomes the overwhelming desire of Stan as he ages. In an important late passage Stan attempts to explain in a thought the motivating urge he feels and the importance which it has for him:

So she was still sitting, an old and heavy woman with her legs apart, when Stan came in, and from a distance she saw that he had suffered, and that she would not be able to help. 'What else are we intended to do if we have failed in this?' asked the old man, who had been creased by the journey. (p. 464)

In this passage in which the word 'journey' is deliberately included as a figure of speech, metonymy, denoting the journey of life, through which we learn much about Stan and his wife Amy. The above lines virtually summarize their characters towards the end of the novel. It is Stan who is searching; Amy has by this time, in old age, abandoned any hope of ever being granted any insights. Constantly anticipating a revelation, Amy has been granted some insights but she has not comprehended them, rather putting her faith in her children and in (talismanic) material objects. Stan, however, senses the necessity of the search, even though the reasons for it are dim and poorly defined in his own mind. The couple's early married life is one full of hope and expectation. As they leave Yurunga, their wedding place, for their new home, Amy (née Fibbens) notices the dead cow outside the 'old' home (p 20), a

symbol of what she is to leave behind, and yet is also to become, as we realise later. This final look at her old home with its intimation of her future is an important passage, as the scene described in idyllic terms and she is in that moment bathed in light and revelation:

Ah, she did feel now. It came swimming at her, that valley, from which the nap had been rubbed in parts, by winter, and by rabbits. Its patchiness had never coruscated more, not beneath the dews of childhood even. But what had been, and what was now a shining scene, with painted houses under the blowing trees, with the carts full of polished cans in which the farmers put the milk, with staring children and with dabbling ducks, with blue smoke from morning fires, and enamelled magpies, and the farmers' wives, spanking into town in sulkies, wheezing inside their stays and the red foxes at their necks, all would fade forever at the bend in the road. (p. 21)

This is a chance for Amy to glimpse the juxtaposed ideal and future, the Elysian fields of beauty and industry, but here also containing as caution the now bloated corpse of a cow. It is also a scene associated with childhood, a time of innocence and expectation of challenging things to come in the journey of life. For Amy the vision is marred by the appearance of the distressed cow. As if to reinforce this all too likely defective future, Amy is made to recall the simple pleasure of eating a 'bull's-eye' sweet under the bridge with swallows about, but 'the scythes of their wings mowing the light' is an unpleasant memory and a malevolent one, and, as Amy realises, 'she could not escape her childhood' (p. 21).

At this time Amy and Stan's knowledge of one another is still expressed in physical terms - they become 'knotted' (p. 24) in acts of sexual intercourse. These occur by moonlight; the whole experience a mystery only able to be expressed by poetry: 'the whole night had become a poem of moonlight' (p.

25). Their talk together is much about his planting a rose, a white rose smelling of tobacco, close by the house. Like many flowers or shrubs in White's fiction, this rose is to become an important symbol in the book, its growth, flowering and general vigour - or its lack thereof - closely paralleling the health of their marriage. In White's early novel, *Happy Valley*, the cyclamen plant is associated with Mrs. Moriarty, the sensual wife of the school teacher. Mrs. Moriarty is conducting an adulterous affair and notices:

The cyclamen plant in its lustre bowl sprawled in wide, voluptuous curves and brushed the nap of the tablecloth. She saw her face in the bowl, looking out of shape, and pink like the flower of a cyclamen. It was funny that yesterday the cyclamen had stuck up straight, always changing, sometimes as straight as a poker and tight in the mouth, almost spinsterly, and now it lolled, couldn't hold up its head, it looked sort of abandoned with its droopy leaves.<sup>39</sup>

The rose is a complex symbol,<sup>40</sup> representing both heavenly spiritual perfection and earthly sexual passion. As a symbol of the heart it is at the centre of the Christian cross, the point of all eschatological unity. The white rose is associated with innocence and purity and the chaste Virgin Mary. The rose growing means 'The Tree of Life' and implies regeneration and resurrection. White's linked use of the tobacco smell is interesting and ambiguous: sweet-scented roses are traditionally admired by the Chinese, in their hope for prosperity; and in the case of Amy's rose the sharp tobacco smell, one that rapidly becomes stale and repugnant, suggests something ominous about their marriage and its short period of felicity.

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<sup>39</sup> Patrick White, *Happy Valley: A Novel*, George Harrap, London, 1939, p. 109.

<sup>40</sup>J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1978, (1982), repr. 1990, pp. 141-142. It is also worth comparing this with White's use of the plants as symbols of sensuality in Mrs. Moriarty, the teacher's wife, in *Happy Valley*.

Amy and Stan work together over the years to develop their block of land, in full confidence in their own abilities and in one another. They are both self-assured: Stan 'did not need God' (p. 30), and Amy is 'happy' (p. 39), with the white rose showing the 'green, sappy wood' of immature vegetation. However, Stan, who by this time has enclosed the farm with wire, senses with 'longing' (p. 380), that something else exists beyond the narrow confines of their farm. This sense is heightened by the arrival of a traveller,<sup>41</sup> who disturbs their 'faces [of] golden waxiness of closed contentment' (p. 36), with tales of exotic places and discussions of religion and the Bible. White's brilliant imagery here suggests a husband and wife lying as in death, with medieval (alabaster) death masks, due to their inward-looking confined existence.

This state of intellectual 'death', due to lack of stimulation and knowledge outside the physical marriage is disturbed but slightly by the commercial traveller who brings to them images of an exotic life of travel and expense beyond their imagination. The traveller, like all on the human journey, brings a unique set of experiences and imaginings to share with Amy and Stan, in return for his lodging. In this sense he is bringing a form of 'life', of a further possibility to married people who as yet know very little. Amy's response to such stories is such that 'her eyes had a hungry glitter for something she did not possess' (p. 32), but Stan is not avaricious for goods, rather 'he had a subtler longing' (p. 35). When the traveller leaves and Amy notices her silver nutmeg grater, a wedding gift, to be missing, it is assumed by the couple that it

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<sup>41</sup> It is noteworthy that this traveller has no name as is the case of the traveller in *The Aunt's Story*. In both novels the visitor serves to introduce a sense of the exotic and the unfamiliar. Both men receive food as a 'reward' for introducing new knowledge, and both men are associated with 'gold', which acts as a metaphor for the knowledge they impart.

has been stolen and Amy is upset. The nutmeg grater, by association with Amy, thus becomes an object representing her materialism and (possessive) rationalism, much as the quart pot does for White's characters, Angus and Turner in his next novel, *Voss*.<sup>42</sup> In each text these material things also serve to remind the reader how limited and 'object-focussed' the characters Amy, Angus and Turner are, especially in their imaginations.

The portion of coloured church glass shown to Amy by the boy rescued from the flood fills her with a like pleasure, when she examines its colours:

She took the piece of glass and held it to her face, so that the whole room was drenched with crimson, and the coals of the fire were a disintegrating gold. (p. 94)

But she cannot discern any deeper significance than the colour, and the author then uses the object as a metaphor to comment on the closeness and inexperienced or unevolved nature of their marriage:

It was obvious that these lives had never shattered into coloured fragments. (p. 95)

The very next day the boy leaves without explanation and without even offering his name. Amy is then described as being 'shattered' emotionally, along with the piece of glass which then falls to the floor, unable to comprehend that the child did not want to stay. This is an early instance of Amy's limited insight into her own self. As the narrator states:

She could not explain that a moment comes when you yourself must produce some tangible evidence of the mystery of life. And now she was going round their kitchen, her daylight skin grey and drained by early rising, her hands performing blunt acts in no way related to the transcendent moments she

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<sup>42</sup> See P. White, *Voss*, p. 254.

had lived. (p. 97)

The first real spiritual challenge to Stan and Amy's self assurance comes in a storm late one afternoon, following on a disagreement about their apparent loneliness. Whilst they cling to one another for protection, Stan experiences a brief moment of epiphany with her as he recalls his childhood readings from the Old Testament (pp. 45-46). The effect of the glimpse is negligible as he continues to wonder but without comprehension: indeed his

vision was less positive than before, [it was] because there were so many bits of himself that he did not know how to unravel. (p. 51)

But although his attendance at church is not associated with any further glimpses, he still achieves moments of epiphany in the contemplation of the natural world:

At times, though, peace did descend, in a champing of horses' bits at a fence outside, in some word that suddenly lit, in birds bringing straws to build nests under the eaves, in words bearing promises, which could perhaps have been the grace of God. (p. 64)

By contrast, Amy becomes even more depressed at her inability to fully understand her husband, 'resenting some personal experience enclosed in him', (p. 64), and suddenly coming to realise:

I am ignorant of almost everything, I am ignorant of the sensations in my body, and of the meaning of almost everything; I cannot really believe in God. (p. 54)

Amy, as a sensual woman, believes she is confined to the physical world, and is 'powerless' (p. 60), to determine her future. She sublimates her frustration by assuming that the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth will solve many

of her problems, particularly since this experience would be unique to her as a woman and something inaccessible to Stan. Her understanding of her potency is associated with moon imagery in the text (p. 61). The symbolism is complex, for although it is associated with the feminine principle, the moon is also associated with pagan ritual.<sup>43</sup> Amy is attracted to the sensual, and especially to men: her experiences when driving in the gig with 'Mrs.' O'Dowd and meeting the flash young men (p. 77), leave her 'exulted'. On the same journey she learns the O'Dowds are not married, having 'chosen one way' (p. 80), and this leaves her unsure of the moral position of her new acquaintance, and in awe of someone prepared to stand outside of societal convention. Mrs. O'Dowd and Doll Quigley are two special and illuminating characters: both accept all people, regardless of circumstance, and are non-judgmental in their dealings with others.

Stan is to experience two challenges on his personal journey of discovery. The first is physical temptation felt when rescuing the strange visitor, Madeleine, from the fire at Glastonbury.<sup>44</sup> Until this time Stan has been receiving more experiences of epiphany, both in church and in his everyday activities. At the time of his son's christening with water:

...he was wandering quite frankly beyond the confines of the crude church, unashamed by a sudden nakedness that had

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<sup>43</sup> J. C. Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp.106-108.

<sup>44</sup>Glastonbury is an important symbol in the novel. The house of this name was built by a pretentious butcher, unaware of the name's ancient association. Glastonbury in Somerset, England, is associated with the Arthurian legend and the Holy Grail, and is said to be the site of the first Christian Church in England; so White creates the idea of Stan as a spiritual searcher being tested morally by fire in a house of this name. There is an additional association with the symbolism or gift, of trees since, in the legend, Joseph of Arimathea planted his staff in the earth at Glastonbury; the staff took root and became the Glastonbury thorn which flowers at Christmas. It is quite possible that White was familiar with J.C. Powys's novel, *A Glastonbury Romance*. This was published in 1932, during White's years at Cambridge University in the early 1930s; Powys was an earlier Cambridge graduate.

fallen upon him. Simultaneously with this pleasing nakedness, the flow of words, the flesh of relationships, were becoming secondary to a light of knowledge. He held up his face to receive he did not know what gift. (p. 124)

He has begun to understand the significance of the flashes of illumination he has been receiving and he has begun to anticipate more. When a second major storm hits the farm, Stan keenly awaits its coming, knowing 'events of immense importance would take place if only the moment of lightning could occur' (p. 150). And they do: Stan experiences a desire for universal love and humility, and for the first time he prays (p. 152).

Both this experience and that in the church are associated with water, but it is the fire at Glastonbury that challenges Stan's physical and moral integrity. His rescue attempt is described in Biblical terms as a 'mission of some mystery' (p. 180), the physical effort involved causing 'the breath of the saviour or sacrifice, it was not clear which, [to] come quicker' (p. 180). Madeleine functions in the novel as a saint and a whore, attractive to, but also consuming weaker men.<sup>45</sup> Stan is undoubtedly attracted to her physically; the description of him carrying her down the stairs is ambiguous in ultimate meaning - with overtones of a bridal setting or a rape - but not as to the element of sensual temptation:

It was not their flesh that touched but their final bones. They they were writhing through the fire. They were not living. They had entered a phase of contained consciousness. (p. 183)

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<sup>45</sup> White deliberately chooses the name Madeleine for this character. The name is derived from Magdalene and recalls her Biblical counterpart, Mary Magdalene, who by legend was a repentant prostitute, forgiven and loved above all by Jesus. See Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Schocken Books, New York, 1975, pp. 32-37.

But Stan resists her seductiveness, merely rescuing her from the house and coming through the trial by fire, thereby achieving a personal 'epiphany' despite his being burnt.

But these were the superficial wounds of the flesh. If he was trembling, it was because he had come out of the fire weak as a little child, and had seen his first faces by flashes of lightning.  
(p. 185)

Madeleine, a Christobel-like figure, is not then so fortunate; because she has attempted the seduction of and moral destruction of Stan, Madeleine has her hair burnt off, a state in the 1950s much reminiscent of the partisan-like treatment of women collaborators in World War II. For Amy, the sight of Madeleine after her rescue, wounded, and vomiting allows the simple woman the opportunity to escape from fear of her malign influence. Secretly Amy had observed Madeleine; she had become a source of fascination, envy and possible sexual allure, but now:

...Madeleine, since a burned thing, retching on all fours in the ash and grass, was exorcised. (p. 189)

Stan also has to exorcise the effect of Madeleine and the opportunity comes when he chases a stray duck in the ruins of the burnt-out house at Glastonbury. In his mind the capture of the duck and the chase becomes synonymous with the rescue of Madeleine from the fire and with his lust for her. To render the duck incapable of escape in the future, Stan cuts the feathers of one wing, described as 'satiny', a similar description to the dress material that Madeleine had worn during the fire. Despite the exorcism, Stan still feels guilt at the remembrance of his carnal feelings for Madeleine during the fire.

This fire, even more than the flood, tests the reactions of many of the people in the area at the time. As a representation of hell on earth for a period, each group responds in a characteristic manner: some, usually the men, are lured by 'the spell of the fire' (p. 176), while the women continue their normal activities. The children in their innocence are excited by the novelty of the event, whilst Doll Quigley, sensing the significance and grace in the moment, declares her intention to pray. Madeleine remains in the house, preparing for martyrdom, and Stan's goodness is to be tested when he responds to Amy's urging to rescue her.

Later Stan's feeling of universal love is put to the test when he is involved in the sale of a heifer to his neighbour, the mean Ossie Peabody. Knowing full well he has just been cheated by Ossie, Stan accepts the lower price because of the vision of goodness, a transfiguration, which he experienced at the time of the sale:

By now it [the stock yard] was ablaze. Stan Parker closed his eyes, accepting the foolishness of words, and disintegrating into little spasmodic waves of knowledge and contentment. His knowledge of goodness was impervious. (p. 156)

Paradoxically the war reinforces Stan's elemental belief when at home; visiting a church in a foreign country, he finds comfort in the familiarity of a priest offering the blessing. (This scene returns to an idea of White's from his earlier novel *Happy Valley*, with the boy soldier Oliver Halliday's experience of epiphany associated with music in France.) Stan is able to reveal something of his belief to Amy in a letter, which he has previously been unable to do face to face. In the letter Stan describes his epiphany 'on a bad night' (p. 204), which leads him to know that he would 'come through all this' (p. 204). The

knowledge of his survival comes to him through his experiences recalling the smell of wet grass after a storm at his home on the farm. This is immediately followed by sunlight, which conveys to the reader his illumination. His return home is associated with light and bees in a scene suggesting both Biblical and Virgilian warmth, sweetness and fruitfulness:

The house stood open. Great carpets of golden light were spread on the floors. Bees passed through the windows and out the other side of the peaceful house, in which the man and woman had sat and begun to look at each other. (p. 213)

At the same time Stan, we are told 'no longer believed anything can be effected by human intervention' (p. 214), implying that anything truly momentous was only through the involvement of God. Sometime later this belief is challenged following the confirmation of Amy's adultery with the traveller, Leo. Stan's immediate response is to go to town and get drunk and in this state 'spits' at the God who appears to have deserted him (p. 333). The only redeeming feature of this episode is Stan's Odysseus and Nausicaa-like experience, the contact with the innocence and purity of Con the Greek's daughter, Panayota. Her enthusiasm and optimism, 'I want to do everything' (p. 337), makes Stan recall the scent of the white tobacco-smelling rose he and Amy had planted when first married. He is charmed by the girl's honesty and love of poetry and music, even though he does not share her imaginative capacity to appreciate it, and he returns to Amy in a relationship now described as one of 'habit' rather than of love (p. 342).

Stan is now middle-aged and, during an illness associated with fever, he recalls the night of the first great storm in which he 'had never seen more clearly' (p. 405). During the illness he realizes that at some time the same

clarity would be granted again and he slowly begins to re-establish the faith he had lost at the time of Amy's adultery. During a production of the Shakespeare play *Hamlet*, Stan comes to realise more clearly that he will one day die. On returning home, he almost shoots himself with a rifle. As he rests in recovery Stan begins to pray. His action in this instance is precipitated by his observing the wonder of the natural world, in this case, the industry of ants. Stan seeks an answer to the eternal question, 'What is intended of me and for me?' (p. 423). Although he is not answered, he is not deterred, continuing to pray, and attending his local church hoping for an answer and a 'glimpse', (p. 432). This is to be Stan's penultimate epiphany, and the one in which he realised that, ultimately, all would be revealed:

He knew it. He closed his eyes now, either to hide an emptiness, or to resist a light that was too strong. (p. 432)

At the same time, he is so confident that:

It is not possible, he considered, that I shall not eventually receive a glimpse. Which made him smile luminously. (p. 432)

Finally, just before death, when seated in the centre of a circle in his garden, Stan receives his final illumination, and the answer he has sought throughout his life:

As he stood waiting for the flesh to be loosened on him, he prayed for greater clarity, and it became obvious as a hand. It was clear that One, and no other figure is the answer to all sums. (p. 497)

Thus Stan and Amy, who commenced life together 'knotted', as husband and wife, diverged spiritually in their individual quests during their marriage. Stan achieved what appears to be total comprehension and intuitive

understanding of the mysteries that both have contemplated. For Amy the result has been bleaker; she sought her answer in objects such as the piece of window glass or the silver nutmeg grater - possessions invested with a mystical significance, but in themselves incapable of revelation. She is also attracted to a passing series of men, and finally seeks solace with a commercial traveller at a time when her life is seemingly empty of meaning. But this behaviour is unfulfilling and she comes to appreciate the meaninglessness of the act, when, 'Looking at her own face stranded [in the river of life] in the glass' (p. 315).

These extramarital encounters have had a reckless sensual effect, exemplified by Amy's contact with Mr. O'Dowd, when she actively encourages him to physically examine her:

As he leaned right over and looked inside Mrs. Parker's blouse.  
Then he came up and stood quite straight.  
Then Amy Parker knew that all her life she had been expecting O'Dowd to do something of this nature, or not O'Dowd particularly. So she did not instantly resume her correct body. Big sticky lilies are too heavy to hold their heads up after rain, or with the dew even, but bask in their fresh flesh. (p. 299)

White uses the image of the lily, the Christian symbol of chastity, now bent provocatively, to suggest that Amy is compromising her own purity.<sup>46</sup> This sensual experience, like that of the contact with the flash lads (pp. 77-78), leaves Amy 'rejuvenated', and after the visit to the O'Dowd's she goes home in a state, akin to a rather surreal description of travel: 'She flowed, easily and smoothly as light and the streaming trees' (p. 300).

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<sup>46</sup> See the description of the 'lily' in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 14th edn., ed. Ivor

Early in her marriage Amy was content to substitute her husband Stan for God; her education is poor (p. 33), but she had 'a private yearning for intricate relationships and immeasurable events' (p. 49), something emphasized by human contact especially with her neighbours, the Quigleys. The Quigleys are her closest neighbours, but Amy finds it very difficult to communicate with them. She is physically repelled by the appearance and behaviour of the simple Bub, and Amy has no understanding of the depth of Doll Quigley's compassion and understanding and of the potential benefit to herself there if she should seek it. Yet contact with the saint-like Doll, does bring with it a moment of illumination or even epiphany:

'I just felt a little queer. It is nothing, Doll,' said Amy Parker. She sat on an upright chair in a beam of sunlight that was too hot. Till now she had never sensed sharply and personally the division between life and death. (p. 49)

However, it does not bring any deeper understanding, and Amy becomes increasingly despondent about conception, experiencing a false pregnancy. When, ultimately, she does have children, a son Ray,<sup>47</sup> and later a daughter, Thelma, neither bring permanent happiness to her. Whilst she communicates intuitively with the children by touch, a deep love for them is unattainable, and quite early in Thelma's life Amy realizes her relationship with her daughter will always be on a superficial and physical level, precluding any deeper understanding. Despite her being almost besotted with Ray, when he calls to the farm unexpectedly one day with his illegitimate son, his immoral behaviour

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H. Evans, Cassell, London, rep. 1991, p. 663.

<sup>47</sup> Possibly ironically named, as a 'ray of light and hope', he proves a deep disappointment to both Stan and Amy.

finally causes Amy to reject him (p. 436). Indeed, Amy's relationship with her children is so devoid of deeper understanding that she speculates that they might well 'take over' (p. 251) materially, a circumstance she is convinced occurs when the bossy Thelma leaves home to find her future in the city.

Increasingly resentful of what she perceives as Stan's secret religious belief, Amy still continues to receive moments of (relative) epiphany and understanding. One day in town, she comes across Mr. Gage, the husband of the postmistress, busy studying ants (p. 103). Amy is not surprised by his unusual behaviour, and understands Mr. Gage's paintings immediately when shown to her by Mrs. Gage after his death. Many have a religious subject and these Amy somehow 'knew about' (p. 289), undergoing an epiphany when examining one of them closely:

Then Amy Parker, who had been standing inside the uproar, noticed in the corner, at the feet of the women, what appeared to be the skeleton of an ant that the husband of the postmistress had scratched in the paint with a sharp instrument, and out of the cage of the ant's body a flame flickered, of luminous paint, rivalling in intensity that sun which the woman was struggling after. (p. 290)

But Amy is incapable of probing this revelation any further, or of exploring its deeper meaning for herself.

The anger at what Amy perceives is Stan's secret knowledge, and the frustration at her inability to share it, is heightened by her lapsed personal behaviour and she breaks off the relationship with the traveller, Leo, realizing:

...with blinding clarity that she had never been worthy of him [Stan]. This illumination of her soul left her weary but indifferent. After all she had done her material duty in many ways. (p. 326)

Amy's feelings are replaced by an acceptance of sorts - 'in time the knowledge that some mystery was withheld from her ceased to make her angry' (p. 326) - but 'she longed for some event of importance to fill the house's emptiness' (p. 327), and so, finally, she comes to the conclusion that 'whatever is to happen now will happen in spite of me' (p. 330). Unlike Stan who returned from the war content to trust his God with his future, Amy's later life is nihilistic. Thus in her later years, as she ruminates after the evening meal, Amy fears 'I have nothing, I know nothing' (p. 366), and sits on her verandah, 'watching for something to happen, though mostly it did not' (p. 379).

Her negative thoughts in response to these deeper self-realizations are Amy's lowest point, before she achieves some limited pleasure from the visits of her daughter-in-law, Elsie Tarbutt and of her grandson, Ray. But even this contentment is disturbed when, with Stan, she views a production of the Shakespeare play, *Hamlet*. The play deals in part with jealousy and adultery, and forces Amy to reconsider her life's experiences in the light of her affair with Leo and of her envy of Madeleine:

Well you got over it. You did not want it. There is a time when you do not want anything. She thought. Or in a panic, it was coming over her in a draught of light and noise from the lit stage, a time when you want everything and do not know what this is. I want Stan, I want Ray, said the queen, and I am not sure that I have had anything, that I know enough to have. (p. 419)

Amy's musings in response to the play reflect the struggle Amy has with her husband Stan whom she knows (this knowledge is the 'draught of light and noise'), while she also receives revelations and epiphanies, experiences she does not try to share or to understand. She remains, therefore a member of the

viewing public watching a play, not as an actor or participant, desiring something she knows is unattainable. Indeed, all of Amy's life has been spent observing other people and events, yearning for involvement but never knowing where to enter or how to become committed.

Amy is a sinner, committing adultery, deeply envious of Madeleine and greedy for affection from other men. She desires material objects, yet knows that within all people and in all places there is a capacity for both good and evil. (p. 316) This duality is only briefly mentioned in the novel, when Amy questions Stan about the behaviour of their son, Ray, speculating as to whether such 'badness' is the result of his 'upbringing' (p. 319), or is hereditary. Stan answers in an oblique manner, claiming not to understand such 'mysteries' and, therefore, accepting the blame for his son's faults.

Amy never ceases to be resentful of her husband and his apparent 'success' with belief. Towards the end of the novel Amy suspects, too, that Stan has 'received the grace of God' and blames him for her own unbelief, as she felt he 'would not let her' embrace or find her own religion. At Mrs. O'Dowd's death, and even at Stan's, she is unable to weep or demonstrate much grief, a reflection of how little insight she had achieved. As Stan dies, he is described as 'escaping from her', (p. 497) and her notion of possession/dispossession is central to an understanding of the whole. For a greater possession of knowledge, of truth, of understanding are the virtues and attributes for which Stan subconsciously yearns and strives. Once he has obtained his 'glimpse', some revelation can occur and Stan is said to die happily in 'peace and understanding'. (p. 496)

Possession is also associated with Amy's question of which of them has got what, and although she feels in her case the answer is nothing, Amy is still able to comment to her daughter, Thelma:

Because he loved him [the Greek], Ray could not hurt him enough. 'No', she said, 'I do not *understand*. But I *know*.' (p. 355)

This is true because Amy, as a mature woman, has some knowledge or common sense, learnt through her experiences as mother, sinner, wife and farm worker. By contrast, her daughter Thelma and son-in-law Dudley Forsdyke are effete and ineffective, neither possessing much awareness of life outside a confined circle of the law and money and deliberately shunning any opportunity to progress further, apart from one occasion, when visiting the Parker farm, Dudley senses something worthwhile to exchange for his successful legal practice. Such thoughts, however, are quickly dismissed by the self-centred and materialistic Thelma.

Whilst Amy may understand something of her son Ray, it is Stan who 'knows' his wife Amy intimately. From the time of their first meeting, Stan 'knew' Amy Fibbens, and 'knew' he was to marry her. (pp. 17,19). And whilst Amy is 'ignorant' from poor parenting, Stan early in their marriage realizes: 'Even the mystery of possession is a mystery that it is not always possible to share'. (p. 53)

But, as is to be the pattern of their married life, Amy has to be content with a superficial appreciation of Stan, one confined to knowing him physically, and, over time, in greater depth. The onion skin metaphor, a favourite of White's, symbolising an increasing complexity, completes the paragraph:

She had not succeeded in eating her husband, though she had often promised herself in moments of indulgence that she would achieve this at some future date. But she had not. He retreated from her once again. She knew him down to the pores of his skin...

As she gathered the rustling onion skins. (p. 126)

In the novel - much as later, in the case of the artist's stepmother in *The Vivisector* - the possession of objects serves the function of reassuring their owners and acts as a substitute for metaphysical seeking. Early in their life the Parker couple are 'contented' (p. 29), with their furniture, suggesting a certain strength can be derived from solid objects of value or beauty; and Amy remains throughout life fascinated by potentially talismanic or numinous objects, like the nutmeg grater and shard of glass found by the orphan in the flooded church.

Her subsequent substitution of her maternal instinct for the materialistic is the reason Amy attempts to possess the orphan boy found during the flood. As possessor of the shard of glass, he is marked in Amy's eyes as somehow very special, but neither she nor Stan are able to communicate any form of warmth or love to the child and he abandons them without expressing any thanks early the next morning.

Why are the characters Stan and Amy so different? Stan has an intuitive knowledge denied to Amy. Already at their first meeting, even in the silences, Stan was knowing Amy and thus in a sense possessing her: 'the thin girl became familiar to him in the ages of silence in which they sat' (p. 16). Stan also has a background of religious instruction inherited from his mother, by whom he was named after the English explorer of Africa, another questing mystic. Amy, by contrast, is orphaned young, unloved and limited in her

imagination and expectation of life. But as she leaves her adopted home after marriage, Amy realizes the past can never be ignored, this appreciation coming in a description of light and understanding:

...there in the hollow afternoon swallows flew, the scythes of their wings mowing the light. She could not escape her childhood. Out of her handkerchief its slow, sad scent of peppermint. (p. 21)

Amy is somebody who has 'not yet been loved' and for whom significant events in life occur without human catalysing (p. 16), a suggestion by the author that her imagination and creativity are limited. Stan, on the other hand, at the time he first arrives at his future home, as a young unmarried man, is already in possession of intuitive knowledge, especially of the future:

But he knew also there was nothing to be done. He knew that where his cart stopped, he would stop. There was nothing to be done. He would make the best of this cell in which he had been locked. How much of will, how much of fate, entered into this it was difficult to say. Or perhaps fate is will. Anyway, Stan Parker was pretty stubborn. (p. 7)

Although the dichotomy between the opposing forces of fate and will are introduced early in the narrative by White, the theme is not pursued to any great extent until later, when Amy speculates about similar events in the life of her children, especially Ray. In response to the evidence of his criminal behaviour, Amy wonders about the effect of hereditary factors in such circumstances (p. 319). Again, White chooses not to investigate this,<sup>48</sup> which is a pity, since a significant sub-theme in the novel is the clash between the

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<sup>48</sup> Following his destruction of the Greek's belongings which he has stolen, White comments: 'it seemed that his daemon would never be exhausted...' This suggests an innate Cain-like urge Ray is unable to control, akin to original sin, p. 240.

country and the city, the sites of good and evil, and their effect on human nature and character. White even begins the novel with a description of an original pristine Australian wilderness imbued with a spirituality, the trees forming a natural temple or cathedral-like space. (p. 3)

Despite, or perhaps because of the differences in their upbringing, Amy and Stan Parker are unable throughout their lives to communicate effectively. Neither is ever able to reveal to the other their innermost desires or needs, and their possession of each other is restricted to the physical need for warmth and sex. Notably, as the marriage ages, the terms used about the relationship change from 'love' to 'affection' and later 'friendship' and 'tolerance', coinciding with their gradual drift apart. As mentioned above, only once, in a letter written when Stan was at the war front, does he reveal anything of significance to Amy. Writing during brutal trench warfare, he reveals how he knew he would survive and ultimately return home (p. 204). Importantly, as with other epiphanies of Stan's, the knowledge communicated is associated with storms and light, and a heightened awareness of the natural surroundings, on this occasion, the smell of cut grass.

Otherwise, communication between Stan and his wife and many of the characters in the novel is by the senses and especially by hesitant touch. Hands, the instrument of touch, are used by White in this and other novels to define character,<sup>49</sup> and are associated with character traits, especially Stan with the honest work roughened skin on his hands and Bub Quigley, with his

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<sup>49</sup> The hands of the lawyer, Arnold Wyburd, in *The Eye of the Storm* offer a typical example (p. 38). Dudley Forsdyke, the solicitor who marries the Parker's daughter, Thelma, also has the 'dry' lawyers' hands, p. 347.

'innocent' hands (p. 49). Hands in war-time are grotesque in colour and shape, reflecting not only the brutality, but also the poignant blessing of peace and love, as offered by the arthritic deformed hand of the priest (p. 203). Hands are stressed in the offering of food, for example Doll Quigley's rock cakes to Stan on his return from war, (p. 218), and for the purpose of offering prayer to God; but hands are also used to clutch at possessions (p. 240). While the death-like skin colour of the hands in war mirrors the brutality of the conflict and the intention to carry out destructive acts, such as Ray's mutilation of the Greek's belongings (p. 240). Other mentions of skin colour in the novel are to alert the reader to aspects of the character's nature. Ray, when young, is described as having gold skin, as does his companion, the Greek, whilst his sister Thelma, who is secretive and sly, has green skin - reminiscent of Coleridge's 'Christobel' - a colour shared with the other women who are later to share a nefarious life with Ray (p. 280).

Thus White enables both Stan and Amy to receive epiphanies. The difference between the two characters is that Stan actively seeks and desires further revelations in order to increase his knowledge and to attempt to answer the universal question, why are we here? Most of the illuminations Stan experiences are during battle or physical storms and associated with heaven-sent blazing light. It is the last and greatest one, immediately before his death, that permits understanding and comprehension. Stan's experiences are marked by a personal humility, absent from the expectations of his daughter, Thelma. Her religious observance is of a demonstrative and ostentatious form, an attempt to purchase something worthwhile through ritual and giving, rather than by personal supplication. But Thelma does achieve one profound insight,

that 'knowing oneself is the saddest luxury' (p. 424), a small morsel in adequately sustaining her through the material world which she inhabits.

The function of the understanding of the truth and knowledge Stan has achieved is not an abstract virtue; repeatedly in the novel Stan is described as a 'good' man in practical, caring and societal ways. He is an excellent neighbour, unselfishly helping a younger friend to the point of exhaustion. He risks his life in the floods and the fire in the area. His war service is exemplary and his return home is associated with bees: those industrious, diligent and nourishing creatures (p. 213). He is respected by the other farmers (p. 302), and his advice is regularly sought. Even in his commercial dealings, for example, with Ossie Peabody (p. 156), Stan is scrupulously fair. Stan is therefore an exemplar of Christian virtue but does not proselytize, so his role in the novel cannot be construed as like that of a saint or religious disciple.

Nonetheless, he has a few friends and his most intimate acquaintance is the saint-like Doll Quigley. Almost immediately after returning from the war Doll greets Stan 'in the light of exchange and enquiry' (p. 217), offering a gift of rock cakes, and her unspoken love. Stan senses this and when Doll admits she had prayed for him he ponders:

What was the secret which, he sensed, he might share with this woman? Their souls almost mingled, as well as their lives.  
(p. 218)

Doll Quigley is one of those figures whom White has imbued with intuitive spiritual knowledge and moral goodness, akin to his character, Waldo, in *The Solid Mandala*. Such people do not necessarily seek but have an instinctive goodness, something which Stan continues to think about long after their

meeting:

But Stan Parker continued to think of Doll Quigley, her still, limpid presence that ignored the stronger, muddier currents of time. It was through ignorance perhaps. Or else the purposes of God are made clear to some old women, and nuns, and idiots. At times Stan Parker was quite wooden in his thick bewilderment. Then for a moment he would be laid open, as he was by Doll Quigley's glance. (pp. 218-219)

These memories for Stan become the trigger for moments of epiphany as he senses the profundity and importance of seemingly minor events:

He would begin then, watching his own hands as they did things, or he would remember the face of an old woman in a shattered church, or a tree that had been blasted, putting on its first, piercing leaves. (p. 219)

Stan is described in his momentary understanding as being 'laid open' (pp. 218-219). In this condition he is able to appreciate and interpret the moments of illumination. His mind is prepared or conditioned by his seeking, so that apparently insignificant events become momentous in their significance for him. This state of being 'laid open' is characteristic of White's characters who are humble and not self-serving. Rose Portion in *Voss* is a good example of someone who selflessly serves and discharges her duties responsibly.<sup>50</sup> However, many of these characters endure physical deformity (Rose Portion has a hare lip), mental anguish or instability, and are often on the margins of society. Their burden of suffering appears to heighten their awareness of their place on the earth and their sensitivity to the needs and suffering of others. These elemental souls are destined to share the burdens

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<sup>50</sup> Laura Trevelyan on learning of Rose's pregnancy is solicitous for her physical well-being; Rose replies in a manner suggesting both a physical and mental state are involved: 'I have been laid

of others but their motives and actions and comments are frequently misunderstood. In other words, they espouse the ideal of White's selfless Christian love. It is this love for her brother Bub that drives Doll Quigley to take his life and she is subsequently incarcerated in 'the nut house at Bangalay'. For Doll Quigley so loved Bub and all humanity, that she who was 'the essence of goodness', was the only person capable of taking such an extreme action for His sake. The narrator declaims this goodness as 'given to give' (p. 480), and it marks her uniqueness.

In White's fiction such peculiarly good people are often practising artists,<sup>51</sup> indeed the author himself felt he had suffered for his homosexuality and his asthma.<sup>52</sup> White sees the artist - or person with a holistic life philosophy - as having a unique integrity and uncompromising vision, whose expression of love is through his/her music, poetry or painting. This integrity is the quality in the music and playing that so disturbs Thelma Forsdyke when she visits the concert theatre. Fearful of exposing her emotional self, Thelma is unable to accompany the Jewish violinist<sup>53</sup> as he progressively moves into the depths of passion with his playing (pp. 488-489). Instead she maintains a rational and almost superficial approach to listening to the concerto, and hurries to leave at the end.

Her spiritually impoverished soul must be nourished by a superficial association with those organisations and activities deemed proper by the level

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right open in my time.' (*Voss*, p. 76).

<sup>51</sup> A theme explored by White in his novel *The Vivisector* through the main character, the artist Hurtle Duffield.

<sup>52</sup> See D. Marr, *Patrick White A Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>53</sup> This musical challenge to Thelma here is comparable to that of the pianist, Alice, to Oliver Halliday in *Happy Valley*, or Theodora's response to Moriatis in *The Aunt's Story*, pp. 115-116.

of society to which she aspires. This yearning even extends to Thelma altering her given name to Christine (p. 445), in the expectation of greater acceptance by her peer group, particularly from her 'dishonest' friend Mrs. Fisher (p. 439), the former Madeleine. By doing so, Thelma has engaged in a duplicity with others - an identity shift in society - but not so with her own conscience, so that White, who is particularly hard on such characters in his fiction,<sup>54</sup> writes of Thelma: 'The naked self can be most loathsome.' (p. 445)

White's characterisation of Thelma suggests that there is no doubt that she will never achieve any form of enlightenment, despite her diligence in seeking financial and social advancement:

She was tough too, in spite of an air of delicate health, that rattly cough with which she could frighten people. She would have to be tough to get what she wanted, almost. What she did want, that is, the ultimate in desire, eluded her... (p. 387).

Thelma reads *A Shropshire Lad*, XXXI, the Housman poem, which gives the book a motto, when alone one afternoon after a brief meeting with her wayward brother Ray.<sup>55</sup> The two stanzas quoted in the novel depress her, reminding her and the reader of the transient nature of human life, and of its apparently feeble accomplishments when viewed over a period of time. The novel's title is taken from a line of the poem in which the human race, as manifested in a particular society, metaphorically described as a wood, flourishes in growth then inevitably deteriorates and ends as ashes. The metaphor works on two levels as it is the invading Romans - in this case in

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<sup>54</sup> A similar character is Shirley Rosetree in *Riders in the Chariot*. After the death of her husband Shirley remarries in a fashionable Anglican church, St. Mark's, and renames herself, becoming Sheila Wolfson. (pp 482-483) Her actions are those of expediency and a desire to associate with the fashionable.

Britain - whose empire eventually falls, the certain fate of all materialistic civilisations, the brash 'new' Australia thereby included. Sensing her own insignificance Thelma resorts to blaming others for her spiritual isolation:

Half-sensing the meaning of the poem, she blamed her parents bitterly for the situation to which she had been exposed. She also blamed God for deceiving her. (p. 390)

But Thelma is, if nothing else, pragmatic about what she wants and the methods to obtain it; she is aware of her own nature: kneeling with her parents in church, shortly before her father's death, she finally acknowledges the terrible potency of material things in her life and how irreversible for her the situation is. Thelma, like Ray her brother and other city dwellers in the novel, represents the evil side of man's nature in the traditional dichotomy of good and evil. Her parents, by comparison, are good, simple people, these qualities being emphasized in the following paragraph by Stan and Amy's association with light:

She [Thelma] was comforted by their presence, kneeling beside her, more than she was by the sacrament. Their lives were transparent and lovely in that early light. Thelma Forsdyke knelt, worshipping a state of first innocence, which was the only redemption from sin, and because she could not recover this, any more than resume the body of Thelma Parker, sin would have to stay. (p. 431)

As White has used music in the novel to help define Thelma's character, so (the appreciation of) poetry is a device used in this and other novels to emphasise the intensity of an image or idea.<sup>55</sup> For echoed poetry is a method

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<sup>55</sup> The lines are from A. E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad*, Harrap, London, 1974 (1896), p. 49.

<sup>56</sup> An extraordinary effect is created by White with the death of Le Mesurier in *Voss*, the author writes:

Bracing himself against a tree, Frank Le Mesurier began to open his throat with a knife he

of crystallising an image so that its thought shines with a greater intensity and luminosity that is akin to the epiphanies received by some of the novel's seeking or blundering characters. In this sense not all characters will have the sensibility or imagination to respond to such potential enlightenment, for both intellect and emotion are involved in comprehension of these illuminating moments.

Poetry is mentioned at the beginning and the end of *The Tree of Man* and is particularly associated with the imagination of Stan Parker and his grandson, Stan. Their characters are similar: neither are able to express their love except through the medium of poetry. The edifying message at the conclusion of this novel, and one White often emphasizes throughout his writing, is the potential for all to find universal expression and love through the arts. By writing poetry of his own, the young Stan feels he will be able to explain the large issues of life, death and existence, to others, even to the unbeliever:

So he would write a poem of life, of all life, of what he did not know, but knew. Of all people, even the closed ones, who do open on asphalt and in trains. (p. 499)

In this way, the novel is concerned to explore the meaning and existence of humanity and its purpose on earth. And Amy speaks for all when she expresses to Doll Quigley the universal rhetorical question and answer embodied in, 'We suffer for some purpose' (p. 484).

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had. Such blood as he still possessed forgot itself so far as to gush in the beginning. It was his last attempt at poetry. Then, with his remaining strength, he was opening the hole wider, until he was able to climb out into the immense fields of silence. Voss, p. 381.

In answer, White suggests that for some of those who seek there will be revelation and understanding. In *The Tree of Man*, he chooses a simple, good man who accumulates incrementally a belief that one day he will be granted ultimate understanding. Stan's quest is one that exists not just within the realm or confines of formal established religious observances or reflective English poetry but takes a truly spiritual form, incorporating both dogma and his own quiet observations and interpretations of the natural world. His interactions with others, particularly with his wife and also Ossie Peabody, both of whom he has 'known', have allowed him to rebuke confidently the simplistic evangelist who urges him to repent in theological terms and to read religious tracts as aids. Stan is able to imagine a God everywhere; not just a theological god, but a deity of universal love, manifest even in the most unlikely place such as in a 'gob of spittle' (p. 495). And White declares that Stan saw this truth 'through perversity perhaps, but with his own eyes. He was illuminated'. (p. 495)

Stan's journey may be equated with the process by which the fourteenth century religious mystic Meister Eckhardt<sup>57</sup> envisaged the entry of an individual into communion with God. This is the crux of Stan's journey, his salvation, the ultimate knowledge of his 'soteriological' teleon, and it takes place in four stages. In his fallen state, man is initially preoccupied by wordly things and his relationship to them is distorted so that possessions come, paradoxically, to 'possess' their owner, the stage of entrapment termed

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<sup>57</sup> A quotation from a sermon by Eckhardt is used by White as an epigram in his novel *The Solid Mandala*; 'It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within', *The Solid Mandala*, p. 7. White's own exposure to German literature would seem to be an influence here.

*eigenschaft*, by Eckhardt. In part one of the novel, Stan declares he does not need God: he is satisfied with his existence and relying on his physical strength to achieve his narrow objective of developing the farm. He has occasional doubts but neither he nor Amy question the purpose of their lives. When caught in the storm, neither in their nakedness are able to comprehend the experience (p. 45). Stan's life at this time is interpreted through his physical experiences, and transcending communication is very limited.

In Eckhardt's second stage, *lazen*, there is a release from the previous attachments, with a progressive 'freeing up' and release. *Lazen* means 'to let be', a form of self-abandonment, but not withdrawal from the routines of life. Stan gradually comes to sense that his searching will be rewarded, although he does not understand how. His behaviour during the sale of the heifer to his neighbour Ossie Peabody, previously referred to, is a typical example: Stan is aware he has been cheated on the sale but for the sake of friendship, a powerful form of love, Stan does not object. For in this act, his knowledge of goodness deepens and he is illuminated (p. 156). This quality is perhaps the ancient equivalent of the modern concept of 'personhood': a quality in which the individual has come to terms with their own contingency and has the courage 'to be'.<sup>58</sup>

As a result of the *lazen* process, one comes more and more to a quality of life Meister Eckhardt calls *abegescheidenheit*, 'detachment'. In this state, the individual is pure and empty, free from worldly possessions and values. Stan's

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<sup>58</sup> Introduction, 'A Psychological View of Religion in the 1970s' by H. Newton Malony, in *Religion in Psychodynamic Perspective*, eds. H. Newton Malony and Bernard Spika, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. 23-43.

detachment in the novel is but ill-understood by Amy who suspects his 'depth' and is unable to comprehend it. Amy seeks fulfilment of her sensual nature in adultery with another, whilst Stan prepares to receive further revelations.

This progressive schema is not continuous. Following his discovery of Amy's adultery, Stan spits at the absent God, visits the evil city and gets drunk. He is rescued from his morose attitude by seeing Con the Greek again and especially by his response to the innocence of the youthful Panayota, Con's daughter. This episode functions in the novel in the same way as the fire at Glastonbury; it is a test for Stan, a choice between good and evil. It is a trial that he succeeds in overcoming, but to the detriment of his relationship with Amy: they 'enter a fresh phase of life' (p. 342), cohabiting rather than truly loving.

According to Eckhardt, the culmination of the spiritual progression is the 'breakthrough' or *durchbruch*, the final unification of man and Godhead. For Stan the breakthrough is the revelation which he receives immediately before his death. At this point, full knowledge is then imparted to him. There is also a sense of penetrating and being penetrated by the divine being, so that Stan achieves some form of total comprehension.<sup>59</sup>

Throughout his journey Stan is associated with trees, indeed the novel begins and ends with his standing among trees or in a sacred grove. The novel had opened with Stan the invader (equivalent to the 'Roman' of the Housman poem), within a cathedral-like space formed by the trees. Stan becomes a new tree personified, 'putting down roots' as he establishes his

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<sup>59</sup> See the explanation of this idea in Robert K. C. Forman, *Meister Eckhardt: The Mystic as*

farm, and putting out branches as his family increases. The tree shape also functions as a metaphor for Stan's upward yearnings, a solid reliable structure, striving toward God and the light, but with roots deep in the world of the earth. Additionally, the broad canopy of leaves symbolically represents the protective capacity of the tree and Stan's shelter of his family and workmen.

Any close reading of the novel suggests that Amy can be viewed as a secondary character while Stan is dominant and the most important, a view reinforced by Stan's association with a massive structure such as a tree and Amy with the tobacco smelling rose. However, Amy does question her status and yet she understands that 'we suffer for some purpose' (p. 484). The tragedy for Amy is that she never receives any insights and succumbs to the Biblical sins of envy and adultery, always blaming others for her own lack of vocation. She is destined to end her life miserably, estranged from the metaphysical knowledge of her husband and sustained only by a prospect of salvation and eternity through her grandson, 'Elsie's boy, in whose eyes her own obscure, mysterious life would grow transparent at last' (p. 497). In the end, as the Housman poem reveals and the tree exemplifies, the temporal life is an opportunity to seek knowledge and wisdom externally to the self. But in Patrick White's novels not all will do this. As *The Tree of Man* ends, it appears that the grandson, Ray will be one who does attain a deeper self-understanding:

So revelations are never conveyed with brilliance as revealed.  
The boy knew, however. (p. 404)

*The Tree of Man* is White's earliest exploration of ideas of epiphany and revelation, ideas that he develops in later novels with greater subtlety. Of those of the two major characters, Stan's journey is by far the most complete. He is granted some form of answer to his life's quest. Amy, by contrast, remains on the margin of Stan's experiences after Europe and a long war, sensing their importance and relevance but never participating. The novel itself is informed at a deeper level by White's own revelatory experiences and written out now from his own observations of the stereotypical Australian urban-fringe stolid district in which he lived at the time of writing.

It is not clear, however, in this novel what exactly is the role which epiphanies play; certainly knowledge is achieved, but White does not make it clear of what use the knowledge is, or how it may be utilised for further growth. These questions he explores more fully in the later novels *Riders in the Chariot* and *A Fringe of Leaves*.

In his next novel, *Voss*, the open, vast and confronting Australian landscape again becomes White's background for his exploration of the literal and metaphorical quest for meaning in life.