

## Questing for Identity in Patrick White's *The Aunt's Story*

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In *The Aunt's Story* (1948), Patrick White depicts the fervent desire of modern man to find his identity, and thus achieve a state of wholeness which eventually leads to inner serenity. To White wholeness is finding one's identity, that is, understanding the inherent duality of the animus/anima in the human psyche.<sup>1</sup> Once this is realized, man's innate imagination is inspired, and original creation ensues. The novel depicts the conflicts that arise, the confusion that is bred, and the desire to attain the state of wholeness through a painful but unique experience.

*The Aunt's Story* depicts Theodora Goodman, a fifty-year-old, single woman who decides to take a trip around the world after her mother dies. In the first part of the novel, White describes Theodora as a clever girl who always asks tough questions, and who experiences deep moments of insight. On her twelfth birthday, when she is struck by lightning, the Man who was Given his Dinner predicts that she will know truths no one else does. Theodora is seen in relation to her sister Fanny, her brother-in-law Frank, Violet Adams, the painter, Pearl, Gertie, and Tom. The most significant incident in her life is her meeting with Moraitis, the cellist, who tells her that man can be happy only if he acquires a vision in life. In the second and third parts of the novel, Theodora travels first to Europe and then America. In France, at the Hotel du Midi, she meets the Block sisters, Aloysha and Ludmilla Sokolnikov, Mrs. Rapallo, and the artists Whetherby and Leisolette. The interaction with each one helps Theodora develop and acquire knowledge of human nature. In America she withdraws from the world, lives in a shack, and attempts to form her vision, but Holstius appears to tell her that her life has been a failure because she has tried insistently to reconcile the irreconcilable. The novel concludes as Theodora is quietly taken to a mental hospital.

In *The Aunt's Story* White traces Theodora Goodman's footsteps from one hardship to the next in the hope that she will attain a vision of truth through knowledge of her psyche. He imposes a mythic pattern on his novel by subjecting his heroine, Theodora, to a series of trials and tribulations with the expectation that she will eventually gain the required knowledge to help herself, and maybe others. Unfortunately, Theodora does not return to Meroe, her home, but, instead, stops in California. Realizing her weakness, she retires from the

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Jung, *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Laszlo (New York: Doubleday, 1958) 9–12.

world and chooses an ascetic life. When at the end of the novel, Theodora is taken to a mental hospital, it is not clearly stated by the author whether she will remain in the hospital for the rest of her life. The reader, therefore, cannot avoid wondering if Theodora's quest for truth has failed or partly succeeded, or whether her decision to retire and stop her journey is temporary or final.

From the beginning White uses the symbol of the pearl to allude to the truth that Theodora seeks. By its very nature the pearl is safely sheltered in an oyster, so that over the years it has come to symbolize the mystic center of man's soul. Furthermore, the pearl was considered to be the product of fire and water, hence a perfect symbol for Plato's androgynous "spherical man" and Jung's *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, to assume that Theodora is Pearl's child is to imply her dual nature.

Theodora grows up sharing her father's knowledge of human nature. On her twelfth birthday the Man who was Given his Dinner appears to tell her that she has been chosen for a very special mission. On the same day she is struck by lightning. Lightning is associated with fire, which not only symbolizes purification and regeneration, but also spiritual energy. Before her journey begins the initiator tells her: "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."<sup>3</sup> Theodora begins her perilous journey unaware of the fact that perhaps she might not make it to the end.

Theodora senses that truth is completely different from what she can perceive or even imagine presently. The hawk symbolizes her indirectly. She aims at the hawk and shoots it down, but she fails to perceive that it foreshadows her own fall. White attributes to the hawk a particular act when he says it "stood on the sheep's carcass, and coldly tore and paused. Soon he would tear through the wool and the maggots and reach the offal in the belly of the sheep" (AS 33). The identification of Theodora with the hawk is clear since Theodora will tear at all appearances to get to the core of things.

Theodora gradually discovers that in order to find truth she has to know herself first. As Sri Ram says: "the real is every manifestation of the truth within ourselves, it is a truth which arises and makes its appearance as if from nowhere in a state of emptiness in which there is nothing preexisting to account for it."<sup>4</sup> She comes to some knowledge of herself in the *jardin exotique*. In the Hotel du Midi Theodora experiences both good and evil, femininity and masculinity, fatherhood and motherhood, and finally, discovers she is all in one. She realizes

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<sup>2</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971) 251.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (London: Penguin, 1982) 45. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation AS.

<sup>4</sup> N. Sri Ram, *An Approach to Reality* (Illinois: Theosophical Publishing House, 1968) 62.

that she is both divine and human. Actually, her name (in Greek, *theion doron*) implies the divine gift of God to man that translates into the innate divinity of the human soul. In congruence with the idea of duality, White says that "we walk split into myriad fragments . . . we walk with sensitive filaments that drink avidly of past and future, we walk against a united world, asserting our dividedness. All things, as we walk, splitting with us into a myriad iridescent fragments. The great fragmentation of maturity" (AS 133). Theodora experiences different lives in the Hotel du Midi. She lives the life of Ludmilla, who is good, perceptive, reasonable, and religious. She also lives the life of Varvara's, the general's first love, whom he did not marry because he was too poor. But most importantly, she experiences Mrs. Rapallo's guiles as she is drawn to the "nautilus." The fight for the possession of the nautilus between Mrs. Rapallo and Sokolnikov does not end except after it is shattered into smithereens. The conflict is actually taking place in the soul of Theodora. After the nautilus breaks, Theodora is "reduced considerably" and shrunken (AS 214). She realizes that fragmentation brings pain, sorrow, imbalance, and loss of identity. Presently, she feels lonely and confused, but she is determined to go on hoping that someday she might attain unity and wholeness and most of all maturity.

Theodora meets people from both East and West at the Hotel du Midi. The Hotel is described as a place of entrapment since it entices all who visit it. The visitors find it very difficult to leave, for as Mr. Durand says, they come and then stay for years. Theodora meets the Block sisters, who weave the web that captures all who enter the Hotel du Midi. Even though Theodora tries in vain to leave the Hotel du Midi, a number of obstacles impede her. For example, she gives in to Sokolnikov's Dionysian and epicurean power as well as to Rapallo's illusionary world. Theodora eventually succeeds in breaking free from the spider's web. She becomes aware that in order to survive she has to find and maintain a balance between Dionysian uninhibited recklessness and Apollonian poise and discipline. She gradually comes to a point of illumination as to who she really is, as well as to what are the most powerful forces in man's soul.

In the end of Book II, Theodora is seen searching frantically for her mother's garnet ring. She finally finds the ring, wears it, and walks miraculously out through the fire. The very act reflects her acceptance of whatever her mother stood for. From the beginning up to this point we have seen her accept only what her father stood for. Yet, there is more knowledge to be obtained, and so Theodora has to continue her journey. She leaves Europe for America with the hope that she will return to Meroe, bringing her trip full circle as symbolized by the roundness of the ring she has just placed on her finger.

Suddenly, Theodora shows an interest in a new way of life. She chooses her humble house, which Mrs. Johnson describes derogatorily as "this darned shack" (AS 281). She scrubs the floors with abundant water, and is seen undergoing a cleansing process. We are told that "she took the brown water, burying her face

and hands, till it ran down, and afterwards, in rivulets, in devious directions, under her dress, against her skin" (AS 218). For the time being Theodora lives like an ascetic, and is a recipient of alms bestowed upon her by the righteous. Thus the novel ends with a sense of partial fulfillment, for Theodora achieves momentarily a view of the elusive truth.

To grasp truth is to undergo a personal transformation. Theodora realizes that there is no specific formula which she can apply, adopt, or follow in order to find out who she is. She has to use her imagination, she has to be creative, but creativity is the result of self-knowledge. To be creative like Gertie means to work with one's hands. Gertie used to "punch at the dough," as she gave it form and made bread. Most of the time Gertie "talk[ed] rubbish, although she understood Life" (AS 26). White parallels the creative work of Gertie with that of Violet, Leisolette, and Whetherby, the sophisticated intellectuals who fail to create useful and lasting works of art, because they fail to discover their identity.

To understand and accept the opposites that tear man's soul apart is to succeed as an individual, as well as an artist, for artistic creation cannot take place before this stage is completed. It is no surprise then that Violet tries for a long time to paint the river. She finally does, but her painting is unsuccessful even though "friends congratulated [her] on the veracity of [her] rendering . . . [she is] not deceived." As for Theodora, she expresses a wish to write a poem someday "about rocks . . . and fire," a prophetic poem that will spring from fire (AS 61).

At the beginning of the novel Theodora sees the Old Man who was Given His Dinner, with his "beard like a prophet" (AS 40), beckoning her to explore the depths of her psyche. She finds the invitation irresistible and accepts the call because she is fascinated by the Old Man, who is committed to "making tracks" (AS 44). Theodora never asks easy questions, she enjoys her father's company, is familiar with matters that don't interest her sister Fanny, and burns with a desire to know everything. She enters an unknown zone of existence, which although it is a source of knowledge, it is simultaneously a region of unforeseen dangers. She finds herself inside a deep and dark place populated by "polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight."<sup>5</sup> The world into which she descends is hard and full of "crooked lanes of her own spiritual labyrinth" (HTF 60). The figures she meets are symbolic and need interpretation, and when they are unravelled, she needs courage to accept them. Moreover, Theodora undergoes a process of purification where her senses are "cleansed and humbled," and her "energies and interests concentrated upon transcendental things . . . this is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmitting the infantile images of our personal past" (HTF 101).

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) 58. All references are to this edition and will appear in the text following the abbreviation HTF.

Holstius appears in the last part of the novel to advise Theodora. He says: "you are torn in two, I expect you to accept the two irreconcilable halves" (AS 277). And later on Holstius exclaims: "you cannot reconcile joy and sorrow, or flesh and marble, or illusion and reality, or life and death. For this reason, Theodora Goodman, you must accept, and you have already found out that one constantly deludes the other into taking fresh shapes, so that there is sometimes little to choose between the reality of illusion and the illusion of reality. Each of your several lives is evidence of this" (AS 278). Theodora listens quietly, for "resistance had gone out of her" (AS 273). Yet it is certain that she will continue to ignore Holstius's advice and strive to reconcile the two "irreconcilable halves" (AS 277). With this in mind, White identifies his heroine once more with the bird which opens its wings and prepares to fly away. "Theodora made the additional effort and stood on her feet. The numbness of her whole body left her with intensely clear vision" (AS 278). Theodora "looked at the world with eyes blurred by water, but a world curiously pure, expectant, undistorted" (AS 278). Finally, Theodora confesses to Mrs. Johnson that she is "very happy in this house" (AS 280).

At the end of Part III Theodora smiles with content even though the doctor has come to take her away. She is confined to a mental institution because she is believed to be mad. In myth at the end of a quest, the hero is asked to return to guide his people by the wisdom he has acquired. In Theodora's case, the call to return goes unheeded, for Theodora doubts whether the wisdom she has gained will be accepted by others. Since Theodora is referred to as mad, Holstius could be only a figment of her imagination. Of course, White's use of Olive Schreiner's words at the opening of the third part should be considered. Schreiner says that "when your life is most real, to me you are mad" (AS 255). Evidently, Theodora's acquired knowledge is so deep and complex that no one can fathom it. She realizes that she does not fit in to society, and that returning to Meroe, the land of her dreams, would be futile, at least for now.

In conclusion, the ambiguity that Patrick White implied in connection with Theodora's decision to either retire and stop her journey temporarily or completely is finally resolved. It is clear that Theodora needs some time alone to fully absorb the significance of the knowledge she has gained. Earlier, Theodora spent some time at the Hotel du Midi where she prepared for the next stage of her quest. Similarly, her present confinement is intended to help her evaluate her progress before she sets off on the last leg of her journey that will take her back to Meroe. Obviously, Theodora is determined to complete her quest. In the meantime, she needs to be ensured that the truth she has discovered will be accepted by others as well. She also needs to cling for a while to the state of harmony and peace that her soul is presently enjoying. In addition, she needs to find out whether her vision of truth will inspire her to write a "poem of fire" (AS 61). If she succeeds in writing the poem, then she will be certain that her vision of

truth will be positively received by others, and this, in turn, will signal that the time is ripe for her to return home.