



A Critical Study on *The Tree of Man* by Patrick White

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Abstract

The Tree of Man by Patrick White is a profound exploration of ordinary life set against the backdrop of the Australian bush. The novel follows Stan Parker and his wife Amy as they build a life from scratch in rural Australia, chronicling their struggles, triumphs, and the quiet evolution of their inner lives. Through floods, fires, war, and personal loss, the Parkers' story becomes a meditation on endurance, identity, and the human condition. Patrick White uses a poetic, modernist style to elevate the mundane into the mythic, blending biblical motifs with the harsh realities of settler life. The novel's structure mirrors a spiritual journey from Edenic beginnings through trials and disillusionment to a kind of quiet redemption. It's not just a tale of pioneering but a philosophical reflection on existence, time, and the search for meaning in the everyday.

Key Words: Australian Bush, spiritual journey, isolation, settler life and endurance.

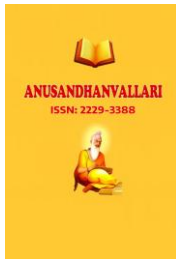
Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* chronicles the lives of Stan and Amy Parker. The novel creates a memorable portrait of human resilience by tracing their lives from youth to old age. The novel is a domestic narrative, following the fortune of the Parker family in rural Australia over multiple decades highlighting their routine existence over significant historical occurrences. Patrick White depicts the Australian environment as a dynamic presence within the novel. The terrain affects the protagonists' labor, feelings and perspectives. White shows how nature becomes intimately linked with human experience. Because existence in the bush is frequently severe and isolating, and this setting molds both the characters' resilience and their limitations.

Stan Parker, with only a horse and a dog for company journeys to a remote patch of land he has inherited in the Australian hills. When the land is cleared enough for a rudimentary house to be built, Stan brings his new wife Amy, to the wilderness. Together they struggle to establish a home for themselves and their growing family. The novel is in four parts exhibiting three generation of Parker's family.

Young Stan Parker's parents are dead. His father was a blacksmith, Stan was not interested in following his father's footsteps or remaining in the confining atmosphere of the Australian bush town where he grew up. Wanting to start a new life, he leaves his home town and travels to an unsettled area outside Sydney, where he has inherited some property. He plans to develop the land into a farm. He clears the land, plants crop, and builds himself a shack.

Lonely in the wilderness, he visits some relatives in a town, and at a dance there he meets a simple girl named Amy. After a brief courtship, the two are married; then they drive all day in a wagon across the countryside and settle that evening on the primitive farm. They both work hard and make improvements to their property as the early years of their marriage pass.

The author depicts interpersonal connections between Stan and Amy. He shows numerous instances of miscommunication and silence between them. Their interactions mirror the solitude: inherent in the human conditions. The novel is steeped in Australian folklore and cultural myth, and is recognized as the author's attempt to infuse the idiosyncratic way of life in the remote Australian bush with some sense of the cultural traditions and ideologies that the epic history of western civilization has bequeathed to Australian society in general the Anglo-Australian cultural



inheritance. The novel has a quality of fable, linking the quite lives of Stan and Amy Parker, and their children, to the life blood of the continent on which they eke out their existence.

The Tree of Man is less a plot driven narrative than an exploration character development, with the Australian bush itself constituting one such character. The trials and tribulations of the Parker family, and their neighbors, are played out against the backdrops of fires, floods, drought-the burden of living in an inhospitable land. And together, but essentially apart, they face everything from the domestic upheavals of birth and death to natural disasters. In this chronicle of simple lives in joy and sorrow, Patrick White creates an evocative monument to human endurance.

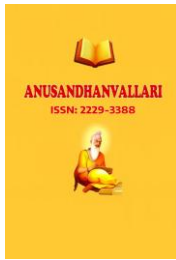
Stan Parker and Amy make a farm together and watch other people move into the land around them, they survive floods and fire and Stan comes back from the war. They have a boy and a girl: who both in their way reject their parents honest simple life, but Amy and Stan endure through their love for each other and the natural world around them, which cannot be expressed in words and remains a mystery to them. The events move slowly across the stage, against flood and fire and drought, against poverty, relative security and disintegration. The outside world intrudes with war, but the center of the community is underscored by the strength of nature.

The major event to take place outside their immediate lives is a great flood, which fortunately does not destroy their farm. Stan joins with other volunteers and assists in rescuing settlers who have been stranded by the flooding. Later, Amy and Mrs. O' Dowd, a neighbor, go to town to meet their husbands after the flood waters have receded. During this period, Stan and Amy have experiences that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Stan sees an aged man suspended from a tree above the flooded land, even though the man is dead and Stan can do nothing to help him, the image continues to haunt him. Amy picks up a lost child and takes him home the night after the flood. He disappears the next morning, leaving only a bit of colored glass behind which she saves. The Parkers continue to labor, adding to their house, gathering a herd of milk cows, planting and harvesting crops. Only families' settle nearby a village gradually appears, and a wealthy Sydney family constructs a grand country house on adjoining land, naming the estate Glastonbury.

Stan Parker is a simple man who finds connections with his fellow human to be more difficult than his connection with the land he lives on. A variety of neighbors, both weird and endearing, weave through their lives as they struggle through floods, fires and their own doubts and shortcomings. These interactions are what really moves the story along because the character development is much more important than any pretense of a plot. The Parker children grow to become flawed adults, each in their own way, but it doesn't appear to be anyone's 'fault' watching them develop those flaws is part of the appeal of the book, and recognizing that their development is more than simply the cause and effect of incidents and vignettes is necessary to fully appreciate the narrative.

This novel, the first of his works to bring him anything much by way of fame in Australia, comes from the time, beginning in 1948, when White and his partner Manoly Lascaris were working a tiny farmlet at Castle Hill, north-west of Sydney. The Tree of Man is although a long book, centered on the lives and circumstances of a man and a woman who are deliberately shown as every-people, while their children, a boy and a girl, are almost anybody's kids, that is, the family is chosen for representation, not because they are singular in some way, but because they are not. It is the ordinariness of Stan and Amy Parker that causes White to choose them. His subject matter is the daily experience of humble people, sure enough of themselves that they are not any representative, or models of certain historical type. They are simply themselves, living quietly in the place that's only bush when they take it up, and thinly developed outer suburbia by the end of their lives.

Patrick White doesn't tell us the activities and energies of the city of Sydney, which is not far away. Nor does he 'locate' Stan Parker socially; instead he reverts to a time before Stan was born and his mother had thought to call him by another name, but her husband laughed, so Stanley became a respectable sort of name.



Love is the central theme of the novel. Amy and Stan have an undying love that Stan accepts as given, but this is not enough for Amy. She craves to get closer to her husband and finds it difficult to accept that in many respects each of them are inviolable. This is in contrast to the odds to the Parker's. O'Dowd is an alcoholic, their farm is a ramshackle affair they appear on the edge of chaos and yet they love each other unconditionally and demonstratively.

White was looking towards religion as a possible salvation from the human condition and some of this is explored in the novel. Stan experiences an epiphany at the end of his life, but it is his simplicity and his wisdom that leads him to it. Stan and Amy raise children go to war survive fire, flood and drought. They also content with jealousy, deceit, adultery, and smoldering anguish of disappointed hopes and unrealized dreams. In short, the novel is an intense inspection of the mind and heart of the man and the woman.

Stan Parker is stubborn and a bit of a fatalist, like White himself. He is practical, strong of body, taciturn, with a great, uncharted continent of poetry lost somewhere inside of him. White refers to the bushfire that follows the floods in the area in the traditional Australian way, something White, not so long before an expatriate of many years standing, accommodates easily. He describes how men fight the fire with words

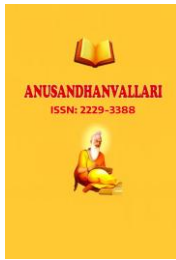
"Change!" said somebody. "We shall be changed all right, with the fire lickin at our arses. We shall be changed into jumpin monkeys. Up the hill and over. With the smoke comin out."

It would appear that normality will resume, but this fire has only been a prelude to another to follow, threatening Glastonbury, the large home of the ex-butcher Armstrong, who, with his wife, have important, meaning wealthy, connections in Sydney. The Armstrongs have a son who will die in World War I, when the book gets that far into the century, but the son, Tom, is currently the fiancé of the beautiful but inexplicable Madeleine, whom we have encountered once or twice, riding through the district, something about her, high on a horse's back, indicating her view of herself in relation to lesser beings, including Amy Parker who is in some way besotted with her, or perhaps with something Madeleine represents which Amy knows is beyond her.

By the time Stan Parker gets to Glastonbury, spectators have gathered to watch the efforts to save the grand home. One feels, as the flames approach, that the battle to save this place which only the Armstrongs care about is something of a set piece, and so it turns out, but in an unexpected way. The beautiful, haughty-or is she? Madeleine is still in the house as it starts to burn. Why she's in the house, why she's been allowed to remain there, is not house because Stan Parker, brave and cool-headed, is going to find her, to try to lead her out, to be blocked by flames in the back stairs, and then further flames on the grand front stairs, Madeleine is going to reveal something that lesser writers would call a death-wish, and she is going to be saved when Stan takes her in his arms and carries her out of the flames to a welcoming set of onlookers.

This subterranean spiritual thirst sends out signal flares us fragile moments, as when he takes Ray, with whom he has spent the years leading up to the boy's puppy-killing adolescence inadvertently constructing a great edifice of relational failure, into the bush, in hopes that the vast, open distances will do for his son what it always does for him.

The novel ends without an ending, but, rather an affirmation, not only of continuity, but also of the ephemerality of human life. The books claim may be huge but it has been modestly made, and this is consistent with its central characters, whose lives we have followed over many years. White's modest approach to the lives of rather scatty early settlers is not far from the writers unlikely comparison. For instant, Amy Parker visits the O'Dowds in response to a note from Mrs O'Dowd, who isn't married to O'Dowd, but uses the name for convenience, because she isn't going to leave him, despite the querulous and sometimes dangerous nature of her situation. O'Dowd's place is surrounded by the mess-O'Dowd has exchanged the shotgun for a cleaver. This continues until it occurs to the drunken man that if he turns in the opposite direction, those who are fleeing will be brought face to face with him.



And so it happens, and O'Dowd comes to something like his senses, and peace of a sort is restored. Amy tells Mrs O'Dowd that she wouldn't stand for such nonsense from any man, even her husband, but Mrs O'Dowd, who is apparently used to scenes of the sort, says that she likes her husband and that they are suited to each other. It's a funny scene, White clearly reveals in it, and in some sense it lies more easily within his range than another of the novel's major scenes, one which would apparently suit him better.

This is when Tom Armstrong, who is to die in France a few years later, will rush up to claim his fiancé, only to find that something in her experience- something never really explained- has turned her life in another direction. She doesn't want Tom Armstrong. She staggers into the darkness, White tells us that her hair has been turned off.

Many writers are at the mercy of the subject matter they've gathered from here and there in their experience or imagination. In White's case, his writing being as subjective as it is, the world he creates is something that's been willed. One feels that the burning of the Glastonbury homestead is in some way a brief mortality play enacted by White for insertion into the long stretches of narrative that lie between the trees that open the book and the trees that close it.

The mansion at Glastonbury has a further function in the book, something that White handles with extraordinary skill. Before the fire, it is the centre of social activity, not for people of the distinct, senior, his face disfigured by a stroke, visits only occasionally with his wife to collect a few roses and go away. Stan pays a brief visit to have a look, and finds a half built staircase leading to an open sky, vines growing inside the walls, sexual yearning scribbled near the ashes of a swaggy's fire, and excrement smeared on a wall. The Armstrongs have left a ruin, perhaps even the ruin of a folly, to be swallowed and regurgitated in Durilgai's folklore. White has ended a period and left room for the beginning of another, all this done with simplicity and ease, because he leaves it to the reader to see the implications inherent in his description.

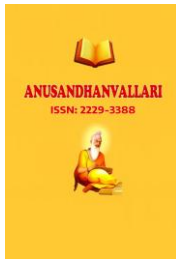
The oil painting scene draws out something almost malevolently satirical in White's presentation of his people that the paintings lie between being pretentious and mysteriously significant. Similarly, the narrator appears not to take up any position on whether or not Stan and Amy are in any sense responsible for the lives of their children, Ray and Thelma. White's skill in showing the contrasting developments of Ray and Thelma each of them contrasting with and occasionally continuing the characteristics of the parents, Stan and Amy. They fail to deal with these matters of continuity and responsibility in relation to their children.

With the next generation growing up, the focus is on the Parker Children who emerge as Individuals. Thelma, who marries above her station, and returns at intervals, to hover over her parents, but never really to share. Stan and Amy were not present at their daughter's wedding.

"If they had not been to the wedding, it was because, obviously, it might have been embarrassing. But on an afternoon visit, alone, they were appreciative and hushed."

Ray marries Elsie Tarbutt, a devout Methodist. Stan and Amy, who have seen little of Ray over the years, attend this ceremony. Elsie has a child, also called Ray, who is, a necessary creation because he will be needed for the very end of the book. Critics comment on the nature of human life, going on and vulgar enough, in White's judgment, to allow him to deal with them in a prose where satire, savagery, contempt and an extra layer of human feeling can all come into play. Amy Parker makes a last visit to the O'Dowd's, and holds her once-friend's hand as she lies dying. White puts it as

Great gusts of wind rocked her in the little trap. Her cheeks were soon plumped out. Down the funnel of her throat poured the wing, till she was big with her mission. Late in the lives of Stan and Amy, they go to Sydney at the suggestion of Thelma, their daughter, and they attend a performance of Hamlet, which Stan read as a boy. Seated high



in the theatre, they watch the events of the famous play rather like the king and the queen watching the play within a play performed by the visiting troupe. The *Tree of Man* is a novel, but the novelists' methods, in the later parts of the book, are more dramatic than novelistic.

Stan intuites God, without ever naming God, in the elements. On a hot night, after Amy, has gone to bed, he remains outside, waiting for a storm to break. Yet, for all the intimations, God remains elusive. Only at the end, minutes before his death, does Stan receive his revelation. He is sitting in a chair, old and failing, amidst the trees in the yard outside his home, where he is accosted by an earnest young man aflame with the Gospel. God, the young man believes, has saved him from a life of women and alcohol. White is a "difficult" writer. Because he uses a richly allusive, subtly symbolic language to coax his readers into a parallel awareness. White invites the reader to consider at least two layers of meaning beyond the physical. First, there is the life of this couple, more like the garden described than the garden itself.

The fundamental theme is the intimate bond between humanity and the natural world. The Australian environment functions - not merely as a setting but as a potent influence that molds human fate. The author implies that although nature is immense and indifferent the human struggle to exist within it bestows purpose and dignity upon life.

Stan is portrayed not as a hero but as a farmer. Stan and Amy despite living together struggle to understand each other. While Stan is composed Amy is emotional and in search of beauty. Both face profound loneliness. The life cycle continues as children mature and leave home and parents grow older and death becomes inevitable reality. The author suggests that human existence is fleeting but is part of a broader, ongoing cycle. The novel portrays how the characters struggle with the quest for purpose in their lives.

Throughout the book, Stan and Amy are called "the man" "the woman", rendering them at once mythic and fragile. We met them before in "The Book of Genesis". We watch these two ordinary, unformed, people, grope their way toward each other, generally missing each other by a mile. We watch as they try, and fail, to be the parents their children need. We watch their erotic lives travel along incompatible areas of meaning. The flood they survive and the fire they survive, leave scars on their souls far more lasting than those left on the land on which they survive. And that land, on which they were the first to settle, will not long bear up under the ugly banality of urban encroachment. Along the way they learn that death is always a violence, regardless of its means, and that death can mean something quite other than the demise of the body. As they approach the end of their great meander, not far in miles, but metaphysically epic, they find they have arrived at a life. Throughout the novel, White draws our attention to a process, the mystery of creation itself. It is as if at the end of the novel we are witnessing its birth.

The novel is beyond the passage of time, change, and life. Though individual lives conclude, the existence of life continues. White implies that meaning of life is not in achievement - but in acceptance, perseverance and the experience of human existence.

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