



A Critical Rereading of Patrick White's Novel Voss

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a study of the distinctive moments of self-revelation experienced by the characters amidst the natural landscapes depicted in Patrick White's novel, *Voss*. Through an eco-psychological lens, the study aims to offer a fresh interpretation of the text, highlighting how the environment becomes integral to the character's journeys and underscores the interconnectedness inherent in nature's creations. Eco-psychology, as a burgeoning field, seeks to understand and reconcile the intricate relationship between humanity and the Earth. It emphasizes the profound influence of the natural world on the human psyche, revealing how our consciousness is deeply intertwined with the elemental forces of the earth. This perspective resonates with Earth-centred faiths that seek to acknowledge and honour the profound solace and strength found in nature's embrace. Through this re-reading, readers are invited to witness the profound symbiosis between individuals and their environment, illuminating the transformative power of nature in shaping human understanding and experience. This eco-psychological study illuminates how the text of *Voss* exemplifies the characters' harmonious and balanced ecological-human connections, illustrating the profound influence of their surroundings on their identities. In recent years, scholars and activists have increasingly studied this inner realm, recognizing the transformative nature of ecological lifestyles that permeate every aspect of individual's lives. Through the character's encounters with the natural world, the novel portrays a journey towards a deeper appreciation and concern for the environment, offering a literature of hope. *Voss*'s own tribulations find solace in his communion with nature, particularly in the wild and cultivated landscapes where revelatory experiences awaken wisdom and humility. Patrick White's adept portrayal of the Australian landscape sets his work apart, with real encounters with nature leading to unique revelations for his characters. *Voss* encompasses a diverse array of landscapes, each woven intricately into the narrative fabric of the novel. Thus, this paper explores the concept of idiosyncratic revelation within the character's psychological realms as they engage with the ecology depicted in Patrick White's *Voss*.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, Eco psychology, Idiosyncratic revelation, Biophilia, Australian Landscape

A Critical Rereading of Patrick White's Novel Voss

Ecocriticism, emerging as an academic discipline in the 1990s with roots dating back to the late 1970s, explores the portrayal of nature in literary works, revealing the intricate relationship between literature and the environment. Coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," ecocriticism offers a lens through which readers can perceive the environment as an integral aspect of human life, reflecting the interconnectedness of nature's creations. Through Eco critical analysis, texts unveil the character's harmonious and balanced ecological-human relationships, showcasing how their identities are profoundly influenced by their surroundings. While many prioritize science and technology, ecological beliefs and ethical values shaping inner ecology are often overlooked. Embracing ecocriticism

necessitates a reevaluation of modern society's ideologies, emphasizing a return to Earth-centred perspectives. Environmental analysis of literature studies the scientific, philosophical, spiritual, and psychological dimensions within characters, shedding light on their environmental values and practices. Thus, ecocriticism serves as a vital framework for understanding the intricate interplay between literature, environment, and human perception. In recent years, scholars and activists have started analysing the inner realm of human connection to nature. The burgeoning field of Eco psychology elucidates how deeply intertwined our human minds are with the elemental forces of the Earth. As a modern social and intellectual movement, Eco psychology seeks to acknowledge and harmonize the relationship between individuals and the surroundings. Earth-centred faiths endeavour to honour the profound solace and strength found in nature's embrace. Eco psychologists scrutinize the psychological processes that both bind us to nature and alienate us from it, recognizing the intimate connection between the human mind and the natural world, which symbolize life and consciousness. The shift towards an ecological lifestyle encompasses a holistic transformation that permeates every facet of an individual's existence. Encounters with the natural environment often lead individuals towards a deeper appreciation and concern for the natural world. By embracing ecological commitments, individuals may relinquish certain scientific realities in favour of adopting new beliefs and practices. Therefore, ecological writing continues to offer a literature of hope, reflecting humanity's evolving relationship with the Earth and its ecosystems. The solace found in nature amid life's tribulations reflects a timeless truth recognized by many. While the precise origins of environmental psychology remain somewhat unclear, Willy Hellpach is often credited with discussing the concept first, notably in his book "Geopsyche," which explores how human activity is influenced by celestial bodies like the sun and moon. Throughout history, major scholars in environmental psychology such as Jakob von Uexkull, Kurt Lewin, Egon Brunswik, Gerhard Kaminski, and Carl Friedrich Graumann have contributed significantly to the field. Dr. Theodore Roszak's work, particularly in "The Voice of the Earth", studies the intricate relationships between psychology, ecology, and emerging scientific insights into natural systems. Contemporary academics like Dr. Paul Shepherd and Dr. David Abraham further our understanding of the human-nature relationship. Dr. Paul Shepherd posits that human nature is shaped by both evolution and environment, while Abraham explores our perception of the natural world, highlighting the inseparable bond between the human psyche and the environment. Through their contributions, these scholars shed light on the profound connections between humanity and the natural world, enriching our understanding of environmental psychology.

Australia, with its unique geographical location, rich history, and distinct culture, stands apart on the global stage. Initially defined by its convict beginnings and pastoral economy, Australia rapidly transformed through the influx of immigrants drawn by the gold rush. This period marked significant advancements in urban development and industrialization, as well as the emergence of Australians on the international scene.

Australian literature, distinguished by its diverse narratives both oral and written, reflects the nation's unique cultural identity and landscape. It is a literature deeply embedded in the collective values and experiences of its people, often prioritizing communal identity over individual heroics. Australian works frequently underscore endurance and resilience against adversities as emblematic of human spirit. This characteristic theme of perseverance in the face of hardship is a testament to the literature's emphasis on integration and collective endurance over personal triumph and disintegration.

The late 1970s witnessed a dramatic shift in the landscape of English Literature, fuelled by the exploration of new, previously overlooked areas within the literary canon. George Sampson, in his introduction to *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, expressed a sentiment shared by many esteemed critics at the time that the literature of Australia was seen as underdeveloped. However, as literature began to cross borders and embrace cultural diversity, the field of Australian Studies evolved, transcending its earlier perceived marginality. It has since challenged the conventional narratives that dominate traditional cultural forms, asserting its place and significance in the broader context of global literature.

This evolution reflects a broader trend towards recognizing and valuing the diverse voices and perspectives that contribute to the richness of the world's literary heritage. Australian literature, with its unique blend of historical depth, cultural diversity, and innovative storytelling, has emerged as a vibrant and essential component of this global tapestry. As scholars and readers continue to explore and appreciate the multifaceted contributions of Australian writers, the literature of Australia is celebrated not for its outset, but for its dynamic and influential presence in the world of letters.

Australian literature, historically perceived as less engaged with political themes compared to other national literary traditions, has often been characterized by a significant section of its literary community as bearing a deep skepticism towards activist literature. The portrayal of experiences in Australian literature, whether through the lens of an individual's journey or a collective history, is typically measured against what is deemed ordinary or representative of the wider community. There exists a nuanced balance between critiquing the flaws within societal norms such as a collective mindlessness and affirming the value of conformity and community. This delicate equilibrium underscores a broader critique of mindlessness rather than an outright rejection of communal conformity.

This thematic concern bridges the narratives of both Indigenous Australians and those of European descent, albeit with different understandings and expressions of community. For the Indigenous populations, traditional storytelling, songs, and legends are not just artistic expressions but vital practices for defining

relationships and allegiances to both their community and the land. These stories are fundamental to their cultural identity, offering a means to navigate and understand their place in the world.

On the other hand, the literature of white Australians often reflects a consciousness of their roots in foreign cultures, primarily England, and a strong identification with settler society values. This literature celebrates pioneer virtues and a profound connection to the Australian landscape, mirroring the community's journey from foreign settlers to a unified national identity.

Upon first contact with European explorers and settlers, Australian Aboriginal peoples were using a rich tapestry of oral traditions rather than written languages. Their sophisticated oral literature included songs, chants, legends, and stories, which served as vital means of communication, education, cultural preservation, and identity for over 65,000 years. The diversity of this oral literature was a direct reflection of the linguistic diversity among Aboriginal communities, with over 250 languages and 600 dialects estimated to have been in use at the time of European arrival.

These oral traditions were not merely stories or songs in the conventional sense but complex systems of knowledge and law. They encompassed the Dreaming, a complex worldview that explains the origins and culture of the land and its people, integrates practical survival skills, and guides social behaviour. The Dreaming stories are a testament to the Aboriginal people's deep spiritual and physical connection to the Australian landscape, articulating relationships between people, plants, animals, and the land itself.

The nuances and depths of these traditions were largely inaccessible or misunderstood by non-Aboriginal people for centuries, due in part to the absence of a written component that might have facilitated early documentation and translation by Europeans. It wasn't until well into the 20th century that concerted efforts were made to study, record, and understand Aboriginal languages and, with them, the oral literature they carried. This work has revealed the considerable subtlety and complexity of Aboriginal oral traditions, which embody rich layers of meaning, cultural knowledge, and ancestral wisdom.

The centrality of land in Aboriginal narratives reflects a profound relationship between Australian Indigenous people and their environment, one that is deeply spiritual, practical, and communal. As Aboriginal people move through the landscape, the act of naming places becomes a powerful form of storytelling, embedding knowledge, history, and law within the very geography they traverse. This tradition accomplishes several crucial functions, each intertwined with the others, reflecting the holistic Aboriginal worldview where the spiritual, social, and material realms are inseparable.

Firstly, these narratives serve an educational or knowledge-preserving purpose. Through stories, the locations of vital resources like food and water are passed down through generations. These stories also map out the terrain, marking safe passages and cautioning against dangerous areas, effectively serving as oral maps that ensure survival in the diverse landscapes of Australia. This geographical knowledge is not just practical, it is imbued with cultural significance, linking survival skills directly to ancestral wisdom and the continuing presence of the Ancestors in the landscape.

Secondly, the social function of these narratives cannot be understated. The telling of stories and the naming of places often occur during gatherings, which can bring together large clans. These gatherings are opportunities for reinforcing social bonds, for the transmission of culture from elders to younger members, and for the maintenance of linguistic and tribal identities. Through shared stories, a sense of belonging and community is fostered, strengthening the social fabric of each group.

Lastly, the religious or ritual function of these practices highlights the spiritual connection between Aboriginal peoples and the land. The stories are not merely tales of physical landmarks but are imbued with spiritual significance, describing the journeys and actions of ancestral beings who shaped the world. These narratives often form the basis of ceremonies and rituals, which are vital for the spiritual health of the community and the land itself. By recounting the stories and enacting the rituals, Aboriginal people maintain a connection to the Dreaming, the timeless time of ancestral beginnings.

This integrated approach to storytelling, where narratives serve to educate, unify, and sanctify, illustrates the inseparable connection between Aboriginal people and their land. The land is not just the setting for these narratives but a participant in them, imbued with agency and spirituality. Through their narratives, Aboriginal Australians continue to live in a relationship of care and responsibility with their country, a relationship that is as vital today as it has been for tens of thousands of years.

Patrick White's literary oeuvre, marked by its profound engagement with Australian landscapes and the nuanced positioning of individuals within these environments, offers a rich terrain for ecocritical analysis. Patrick Victor Martindale White, born in London in 1912 to Australian parents, received his education in New South Wales and later at Cheltenham, England. Continuing his academic pursuits, he enrolled at King's College, Cambridge in 1934. However, White's scholarly journey was not confined to the classroom; he embarked on a remarkable odyssey spanning approximately 14 years, during which he traversed Europe and America, immersing himself in diverse cultures and landscapes. His experiences were not limited to academic pursuits; White also served for five years within the intelligence section of the Royal Air Force during operations in Greece and the Middle East, gaining invaluable insights into the complexities of human nature and the world at large. This rich tapestry of personal experiences and academic training undoubtedly informed White's unique perspective and nuanced portrayal of Eco psychology in his seminal work, *Voss*.

White's narratives, characterized by their deep explorations of character psyche and environmental interconnections, illuminate the complex relationships between humans and their surroundings. His works not only foreground the physicality of the Australian landscape but also inspire it with symbolic and existential significance, reflecting broader concerns about identity, belonging, and alienation.

The significance of Patrick White in the context of Australian literature and ecocriticism cannot be overstated. As the only Australian recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, White's acknowledgment on this global stage underscores the universal appeal and importance of his themes, which include a critical examination of humanity's place within the natural world. This study reflects not only on the literary merit of his work but also on its capacity to engage with universal human experiences and concerns, making it important for studies at the intersection of literature and environmental awareness.

The growing field of ecocriticism, with its focus on the ecological implications of literary texts and the role of literature in reflecting and shaping attitudes toward the environment, finds a valuable subject in White's fiction. The increasing urgency of ecological crises has propelled literary studies toward a more pronounced engagement with environmental issues, recognizing literature's power to influence cultural and societal attitudes towards nature and sustainability. White's narratives, with their intricate depictions of the Australian environment and the human condition, provide a good platform for such analyses, allowing scholars to explore the intersections of ecological thought, literary expression, and environmental ethics.

White's work encourages a reevaluation of the historical and theoretical methodologies traditionally employed in ecocritical literature. Rather than focusing solely on specific types of environments, periods, or philosophical doctrines, White's fiction invites a holistic and integrated approach to understanding the ecological consciousness embedded within literary texts. His portrayal of the Australian landscape goes beyond mere backdrop or setting, engaging with the land as a dynamic and living entity that shapes and is shaped by human action and consciousness.

In this light, the study of Patrick White's fiction through an ecocritical lens not only enhances our appreciation of his literary craftsmanship but also contributes to a broader understanding of the role of literature in addressing the ecological challenges of our time. By examining the intricate weave of relationships between people and their environments in White's work, scholars and readers alike can gain insights into the complexities of the human-nature interface, fostering a deeper awareness of our collective responsibility toward the natural world.

The paper explores the concept of Eco psychology as depicted in Patrick White's novel, *Voss*. Through his intricate narrative, White invites readers to delve into the profound interplay between the human psyche and the natural environment, offering a thought-provoking exploration of our intrinsic connection to the world around us. "Voss" by Patrick White intricately weaves together the stories of Johann Ulrich Voss, a megalomaniac explorer, and Laura Trevelyan, the niece of Sydney merchant Edmund Bonner, a patron of Voss's expedition. Throughout the novel, Voss emerges as the central character, reminiscent of traditional heroes like Odysseus or Don Quixote, who glean wisdom from their encounters with the environment. Voss assembles a diverse crew of explorers, each finding personal significance in the journey. His character is marked by extraordinary struggles and a cyclical pattern of decline and rebirth. Enamoured by the unpredictable beauty of the wild, Voss seeks solace in nature, connecting the boundaries between self and surroundings. He believes in the transformative power of ecological immersion, viewing identity as mouldable through engagement with the natural world. However, as the expedition progresses deeper into the bush, Voss's superhuman appearance diminishes in the face of harsh weather, treacherous terrain, and hostile encounters with indigenous peoples. Despite not achieving its primary objectives, the expedition is not deemed a failure. Voss's journey becomes a testament to his resilience and humility, as he confronts his own pride amidst the challenges of the desert. Through suffering and struggle, Voss undergoes a profound personal transformation, transcending his initial ambitions to discover a deeper understanding of himself and the world around him. Voss's ecological journey is deeply rooted in his sensory immersion within the natural world, facilitating profound insights into spiritual realms. Through his harmonization with the environment, Voss uncovers the intricate complexities of psychology and the potential for transformative visions and intuitive understanding. The body becomes intimately entwined with nature, serving as a channel for experiencing both the suffering and splendour of the world. Patrick White's portrayal of Voss underscores the human quest for understanding, self-realization, and fulfilment, all of which are deeply intertwined with the natural world. Through encounters with nature, individuals learn invaluable lessons and wisdom, forging physical and spiritual connections that transcend mere existence. The solitary communion with nature fosters moments of revelation, allowing individuals to listen to their innermost selves and attune to the different voices of the Earth. Exploring the environment cultivates empathy and compassion for all living beings, fostering a profound sense of interconnectedness and reverence for the world around us. In this symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, the boundaries between soul, body, mind, and the spirit of the natural world converge, enriching the human experience and deepening our understanding of the interconnected web of life. Ecological interactions indeed possess the capacity to refine one's moral compass and console the wounds of the inner self through encounters with nature's humbling and consoling dimensions. In Patrick White's novel *Voss*, nature emerges as a potent catalyst for profound inner transformations within the characters. Their experiences in the natural world evoke a sense of mystical interconnectedness with their surroundings, eliciting revelations that mark significant milestones in their moral and spiritual evolution. These insights are flashes

of enlightenment, become enduring benchmarks against which individuals measure their growth and development. They serve as constant sources of inspiration, reaffirming faith in the enigmatic mysteries inherent within the natural world. During moments of adversity, individuals often draw solace from the memories and experiences forged in communion with nature, finding strength and resilience amidst life's challenges. Thus, the profound and enduring bond between humanity and the natural world serves as a guiding light, illuminating the path towards greater moral and spiritual enlightenment.

Experiences with the destructive aspects of nature serve as a profound reminder that embracing an ecological perspective is not synonymous with peace, safety, or limitless abundance. Despite the great stability offered by the environment's natural cycles and changing ecology, it is essential to recognize that this constancy is not entirely devoid of chaos. Those who spend significant time in nature quickly learn to respect its inherent spontaneity, realizing that humility is an indispensable quality for harmonious coexistence. Painful moments of relinquishment and withdrawal prompt individuals to reevaluate their life purpose and deepen their commitment to the Earth. Patrick White's portrayal of Voss reflects the internal struggle, as he seeks solace in introspection amidst the turmoil of his expedition. Physically, Voss is depicted as tall and sinewy, exuding an aura of strength likened to a rock or stone, symbolic of his inner power and resilience.

In the opening passages of the novel, Voss's journey from Sydney to meet Edmund Bonner unfolds as a nature walk, potentially offering respite from the burdens of life and nurturing his emotional and psychological well-being. Patrick White vividly captures Voss's state of mind as he crosses the natural landscape. In the embrace of nature, Voss's thoughts may have been momentarily lifted from the weight of his troubles, finding solace in the tranquil beauty surrounding him. White's descriptive prose likely portrays Voss's immersion in the sensory experiences of the natural world, perhaps evoking a sense of wonder, calm, and rejuvenation amidst the verdant scenery. As Voss wanders through the wilderness, his mind may have wandered freely, unburdened by the complexities of urban life, allowing for moments of introspection and reflection. Through White's narrative lens, readers may glimpse the transformative power of nature as it subtly shapes Voss's perceptions and emotions, offering a glimpse into the profound interplay between human consciousness and the natural environment.

How much less destructive than people, He remembered how, in a mountain gorge, a sandstone had crashed, aiming at him, grazing his hand, then bounding away, to the mutilation of trees and death of a young wallaby. Deadly rocks, through some perversity, inspired him with fresh life. (18 Voss)

Gritty winds tended to free him. A wind off the sea, even off becalmed bay water and sea lettuce, was stirring his beard as he descended the hill. So, the foreigner came into the town past the cathedral and the barracks and went and sat in the gardens beneath a dark tree, hoping soon to enter his own world of desert and dreams. He began to gaze his hands, upon twigs, and stubble of grass and the stones of his humiliation. (26 Voss)

For Voss, his journey into the natural environment served as an escape from the noise of the bustling town, a place from which he sought refuge in all weather conditions, navigating through landscapes where deformed trees threatened to snatch his clothes. Amidst this physical journey, memories of Voss's father loomed large, their contours distorted in his mind like swollen bubbles, depicting an old man who wielded authority over apprentices and clerks. Voss, yearning for a sense of freedom that he envisioned in the natural world, distanced himself from the protests of his parents, finding moments of contemplation where he pondered the true meaning and essence of that elusive freedom. In the solitude of nature, Voss grappled with existential questions, seeking clarity amidst the serenity of the wilderness and forging his own path away from the constraints of societal expectations and familial ties.

In the novel, Patrick White underscores the profound healing power inherent in gardens, highlighting nature's intrinsic call to the depths of human consciousness. The concept of biophilia, coined by Oliver Sacks in chapter titled *Why We Need Gardens?* in his book "Everything in Its Place," suggests that the love and affinity for nature and living beings are inherent aspects of the human condition. Oliver Sacks eloquently describes the universal experience of finding solace and rejuvenation in the midst of natural landscapes, whether it be wandering through lush gardens, timeless deserts, riversides, oceans, or climbing mountains. In these moments, individuals often find themselves simultaneously calmed and reinvigorated, their minds engaged, and their bodies and spirits refreshed. Numerous writers have expounded upon the significance of these physiological states in fostering individual and community health, acknowledging their fundamental and wide-ranging impact. In "Voss," White artfully portrays the gardens as catalysts for a powerful cascade of positive effects, illustrating how immersion in nature can serve as a transformative force, nurturing the soul and restoring harmony to the human experience.

'Palfrey man and Voss spent some time together, in fact walking in the Botanic gardens, talking, or in silence, accustoming themselves warily to each other, and considering some of those questions that would arise out of a partnership of many months.' (45 Voss)

'Such peace and goodness as were apparent in the earthly scene in the light and shadow, and the abundance of fragrant, wilting hay, might indeed have emanated from the soul of the old quietest.' (49 Voss)

Laura Trevelyan is depicted as someone who finds solace and introspection in the tranquil beauty of the garden. Her moments spent amidst the camellia bushes become a sanctuary where she can wander into her own thoughts, occasionally falling deep into self-absorption. For Laura, the garden serves as a canvas for reflection and contemplation, offering a respite from the complexities of daily life. The times when Voss and Laura walk

together in the garden are cherished moments, symbolizing their shared connection and mutual appreciation for the natural world. These walks become intimate interludes where they can share their thoughts, emotions, and experiences, deepening their bond amidst the serenity of nature's embrace.

'The man and woman were walking over grass that was still kindly beneath their feet. Smooth, almost cold leaves soothed their faces and the backs of their hands.' (87 Voss)

Throughout the narrative, the natural environment serves as the canvas upon which Voss embarks on his psychological exploration. Immersed in the wilderness, Voss encounters his multifaceted divinity, leading to profound revelations that redefine his understanding of the world. In the embrace of nature, Voss comes to appreciate the inherent wisdom woven into the fabric of the natural world, an inheritance that enriches his spiritual journey. Revelatory experiences, born from these encounters, possess the transformative power to dismantle the barriers of conscience erected by individual mind-sets, opening pathways to unimagined possibilities and destinies yet to be realized. Voss's encounters with nature's destructive forces underscore the stability, security, and profound connection that accompany a turn towards the earth. Within the expedition team, an intangible bond emerges, uniting all life forms in a shared experience of the natural world's splendour. Revelations, in their essence, enhance ecological events by unveiling the extraordinary within the mundane, reshaping one's perception of existence and challenging the confines of logic. Through moments of transformative insight, individuals confront the limits of their understanding and embrace newfound wisdom and humility. Whether amidst untamed wilderness or serene landscapes of natural beauty, revelatory experiences expand one's vision and unveil new dimensions of being, rendering the ordinary as extraordinary. In the midst of these revelations, the ordinary world takes on a luminous quality, inviting individuals to embrace the profound mysteries and wonders of the natural environment. Through these transcendent encounters, the human spirit finds solace, inspiration, and a deeper connection to the rhythms of the earth, forever transformed by the magnificence of the world around them.

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