



Rooted Resilience: Nature's Consolation in Patrick White's novel 'The Tree of Man'

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Citation: Jane Theresa (2024, Rooted Resilience: Nature's Consolation in Patrick White's novel 'The Tree of Man' *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(3), 1026-1030

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i3.1500

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the consoling power of nature as experienced by the characters in Patrick White's novel, "The Tree of Man." "The Tree of Man" stands as the fourth published novel by the acclaimed Australian author and Nobel Prize laureate, Patrick White. Published in 1955, this seminal work showcases White's mastery of storytelling and his profound exploration of the human condition amidst the rugged landscapes of Australia. The novel unfolds the narrative of Stan Parker, his spouse Amy, and their offspring in rural Australia during the early 20th century. Through White's prose, the text intricately weaves a realistic yet poetic portrayal of life in the bush, capturing the essence of the region's evolution across the span of one ordinary man's lifetime. Through the epic tale of the Parker family, White invites readers into a world rich with emotion, beauty, and complexity, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of Australian literature. Through an eco-psychological lens, the study explores how the natural setting becomes an integral aspect of human life, reflecting the interconnectedness of all beings within the environment. Nature serves as a refuge for characters from all walks of life, offering solace and tranquillity that transcends social boundaries. Eco-psychology, as a modern movement, seeks to harmonize the relationship between humanity and the Earth, recognizing the profound impact of ecological interactions on physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being. By examining the text through an eco-psychological framework, this study elucidates the harmonious and balanced eco-human bonding portrayed in "The Tree of Man," shedding light on the enduring strength of nature's consoling power.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecopsychology, Idiosyncratic revelations, Biophilia, Australian Landscape

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I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
(69 William Wordsworth)

This paper studies the consoling power of nature as experienced by the characters in Patrick White's novel, "The Tree of Man." "The Tree of Man" stands as the fourth published novel by the acclaimed Australian author and Nobel Prize laureate, Patrick White. Published in 1955, this seminal work showcases White's mastery of storytelling and his profound exploration of the human condition amidst the rugged landscapes of Australia. Through the epic tale of the Parker family, White invites readers into a world rich with emotion, beauty, and complexity, leaving an indelible mark on the landscape of Australian literature. Through an eco-psychological lens, the study explores how the natural setting becomes an integral aspect of human life, reflecting the

interconnectedness of all beings within the environment. Nature serves as a refuge for characters from all walks of life, offering solace and tranquillity that transcends social boundaries. Eco-psychology, as a modern movement, seeks to harmonize the relationship between humanity and the Earth, recognizing the profound impact of ecological interactions on physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological well-being. By examining the text through an eco-psychological framework, this study elucidates the harmonious and balanced eco-human bonding portrayed in "The Tree of Man," shedding light on the enduring strength of nature's consoling power.

This study examines the profound influence of surroundings on character identities in Patrick White's novel, "The Tree of Man," emphasizing the transformative nature of ecological lifestyles. It explores how ecological living permeates every aspect of individual existence, leading characters towards a deeper appreciation and concern for the natural world. Through revelatory experiences in both wild and domesticated environments, characters undergo a journey of wisdom and modesty, finding solace amidst the beauty and challenges of nature. The novel serves as a literature of hope, wherein characters find consolation amidst life's sufferings through their connection with the environment. However, encounters with nature's destructive forces serve as poignant reminders of the complexities inherent in ecological relationships. Through a nuanced exploration of the characters' interactions with the natural world. The study examines how the Australian landscape becomes a source of solace, revelation, and transformation. By intertwining eco-psychological perspectives with literary analysis, this paper illuminates the depth of White's portrayal of nature's influence on human consciousness and identity in "The Tree of Man."

The opening chapters of the novel "The Tree of Man" depict Stan's journey into the untamed bush to cultivate the land bequeathed to him by his father. Through toil and determination, he erects a humble dwelling, laying the foundation for his future aspirations. It is amidst this rugged landscape that Stan encounters Amy Fibbens in the nearby town of Yuruga. Their courtship is swift, and they embark on a shared venture, journeying to Stan's property nestled in the bushland. As the years unfold, Stan and Amy dedicate themselves to the cultivation of their farmstead, tending to livestock and nurturing the land. Their life was woven with the rhythms of nature, as they adapt to the challenges and rewards of rural existence. Through tireless effort and mutual support, they forge a deep bond with their environment, finding fulfilment and contentment amidst the tranquil beauty of their surroundings. Together, they navigate the intricacies of rural life, weathering its hardships and celebrating its triumphs. Through shared labour and unwavering commitment, they transform their modest homestead into a sanctuary of warmth and abundance. As they cultivate the earth and nurture their dreams, Stan and Amy discover a profound sense of belonging in the embrace of the bushland, their lives intertwined with the timeless rhythms of nature.

In 1982, Japan incorporated *shinrin-yoku*, or "forest bathing," into its national health initiative with the goal of reconnecting individuals with nature in the simplest manner possible. This practice involves engaging in a mindful walk-in natural setting, essentially immersing oneself in the woods. To analyse the effects of forest bathing, researchers conducted field experiments involving a total of 280 participants across 24 forests in Japan. Participants were divided into two groups, with one half sent to the forests and the other to urban areas. The following day, the groups would switch environments. The results of the study revealed that individuals who spent time in the forests exhibited lower levels of cortisol, reduced pulse rates, and decreased blood pressure compared to those in urban settings. Being in nature alleviates stress, a realization underscored by ecocriticism which highlights the interconnectedness of all living organisms within natural environments. Nature offers solace amidst life's challenges, symbolized by the word 'tree' in the novel's title, reflecting Stan's quest for personal growth and vitality. Stan's affinity for nature is evident as the novel opens with the depiction of two significant trees. The cart drove between the two big stringybarks and stopped. There were dominant trees in that part of the bush, rising above the involved scrub with the simplicity of true grandeur.

"The Tree of Man" by Patrick White indeed offers readers a breathtaking and evocative portrayal of the natural world that envelops its protagonist, Stan Parker. Throughout the novel, White intricately weaves the landscape of rural Australia into the fabric of Stan's life, emphasizing the profound connection between the protagonist and his surroundings. White's attention to detail and lyrical prose brings the Australian landscape to life, painting vivid images of sweeping plains, dense forests, and rugged mountains. From the vast expanse of the bush to the tranquil flow of rivers, each element of nature serves as both a backdrop and a character in its own right, shaping Stan's experiences and influencing his journey.

The novel opens with a rich description of the land upon which Stan builds his home, highlighting the significance of the natural environment in shaping his identity and sense of belonging. As the story unfolds, readers are transported into Stan's world, where the changing seasons, the rhythm of the land, and the ebb and flow of life become central motifs.

White's portrayal of nature is not merely decorative; it serves as a powerful metaphor for the human condition. Through Stan's interactions with the land, readers witness themes of resilience, survival, and the cyclical nature of existence. Nature becomes a source of solace and wisdom for Stan, offering moments of reflection and connection amidst life's trials and tribulations. White's depiction of the Australian landscape reflects the complexities of human interaction with the environment. From the challenges of farming and agriculture to the impact of industrialization and urbanization, the novel explores the tension between progress and preservation, highlighting the delicate balance between human needs and the natural world.

"The Tree of Man" stands as a testament to Patrick White's profound appreciation for the beauty and majesty of the Australian landscape. Through his masterful storytelling, White invites readers to embark on a journey through the heart of nature, where the boundaries between the human and the natural blur, and the true essence of life is revealed in all its raw and untamed beauty. In the opening pages the author writes that Stan smelled the smell of green wood. This shows Stan's intimacy with natural surroundings.

"The Tree of Man" unfolds as a suburban drama chronicling the multi-generational saga of the Parker family. At its core lies Stan Parker, the son of a blacksmith and an educated mother who aspires for him to become a teacher or a preacher. However, after the passing of his parents, Stan is compelled to forge a new path for himself. Unwilling to be confined by the limitations of the Australian bush town of his upbringing, Stan embarks on a journey of self-discovery and reinvention, seeking to carve out a life that transcends the confines of his past.

"At Willow Creek, God bent the trees till they streamed in the wind like beards. In the streets of towns the open windows, on the dusty roads the rooted trees, filled him with the melancholy longing for permanence." (13 *The Tree of Man*)

Leaving behind his hometown, Stan ventures to an untamed area outside Sydney, where he inherits property. Amidst the wilderness, he endeavours to carve out a new existence, constructing a home nestled within the woods and cultivating the land through farming. For Stan, the woods offer more than mere shelter. They represent a sanctuary of peace and renewal, beckoning him to embark on a journey of introspection and self-discovery. In the quiet solitude of nature, Stan seeks solace and a fresh start, embracing the challenges and possibilities that lie ahead in his quest for a life of purpose and fulfilment.

"Stan Parker, began to tear the bush apart. His first tree fell through the white silence with a volley of leaves. Many days passed in this way, the man clearing his land. Seen through the trees, it was a plain but honest house that the man had built." (17 *The Tree of Man*)

In Patrick White's literary world, his protagonists often grapple with feelings of alienation when immersed in the complexities of human society. Stan, the central character in "The Tree of Man," epitomizes this theme as he finds solace and belonging amidst the tranquil embrace of nature. Unperturbed by the hustle and bustle of urban life, Stan is drawn to the serene beauty of the woods, yearning for a peaceful existence away from the chaos of the world. Silent and introspective, Stan's loneliness is palpable, yet it is through his communion with nature that he finds a sense of connection and purpose. In the quiet solitude of the woods, he finds refuge from the noise and distractions of society, devoting himself to the laborious task of clearing his land and building his home amidst the trees.

The narrative of "The Tree of Man" unfolds against the backdrop of both the mundane and the monumental events that shape the lives of the Parker family and their community. From the destructive floods in Wullunya to the birth of their children Ray and Thelma, the story captures the flow of life in rural Australia. As the town of Durilgai emerges and evolves, the Parkers find themselves enmeshed in a web of relationships with neighbours such as the O'Dowd's, Mrs. Gage, and the Quigley siblings. These interactions form the fabric of their daily existence, illuminating the complexities of human connection in a close-knit community. The region's struggles with severe droughts and devastating wildfires underscore the harsh realities of life in the Australian bush, while Stan's heroic act to save Madeleine during a fire highlights the indomitable spirit of human courage and sacrifice. Amidst the turmoil of wartime Europe, Stan's departure for war and Amy's dismissal of their German farmhand serves as poignant reminders of the far-reaching impact of international conflicts on even the most isolated corners of the world. Through these experiences, the novel explains themes of resilience, community, and the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity.

Each day brings Stan closer to his vision of a simple and harmonious life in harmony with nature. As he toils away, shaping his surroundings to reflect his innermost desires, he finds fulfilment in the rhythms of the natural world. For Stan, the woods represent more than just a physical space. They embody a sanctuary where he can exist in harmony with the land, embracing its quiet strength and enduring beauty. In the culmination of his efforts, Stan's house stands as a testament to his commitment to a life lived in communion with nature, a symbol of his unwavering determination to carve out his own path amidst the wilderness. In this tranquil haven, Stan finds solace and belonging, a testament to the enduring power of nature to heal and restore the human spirit.

"Seen through the trees, it was a plain but honest house that the man has built." (17 *The Tree of Man*)

One pivotal day, Stan introduces Amy Fibbens into his world. As they arrive at the site where Stan's house stands, they find themselves on the outskirts of town, enveloped by the scent of sheep and the earthy aroma of drying water in a mud hole. Despite the rustic surroundings, the landscape boasts incredible scenery and hosts delicate ecosystems. Their journey through the windy countryside aboard Stan's cart marks a significant moment in their shared narrative. As they traverse the rugged terrain, the land whispers stories of resilience and beauty, offering glimpses into the intricate balance of nature. For Stan and Amy, this journey symbolizes more than just physical movement, it signifies a new chapter in their lives, marked by unity and shared purpose. Together, they navigate the twists and turns of the countryside, their hearts stirred by the promise of a life intertwined with the natural world.

In this moment, as they journey through the windswept landscape, Stan and Amy's union becomes a testament to the transformative power of love and the profound connection between humanity and the land.

“The girl lazily smiled at the landscape, holding her hat.” (25 *The Tree of Man*)

It was a long ride through the bush road. The travel through the woods consoled her ill thoughts.

“The girl sat with her eyes on the road. She was not concerned, as at odd moments, her husband was afraid she might be. Because in her complete ignorance of life, as it is lived, and the complete poverty of the life she had lived, she was not sure but that might have to submit thus, interminably bolt upright in a cart. Life was perhaps a distance of stones and sun and wind, sand coloured and monotonous.” (26 *The Tree of Man*)

Nature's rejuvenating influence permeates the lives of the characters in the novel, invigorating their minds, bodies, and souls. Amy, in particular, finds solace and renewal in the embrace of the natural world, where she feels most alive and connected. Despite experiencing a sense of distance from Stan, her partner, Amy discovers comfort and fulfilment in the surrounding beauty of nature. For Amy, nature's consoling power becomes a refuge, a sanctuary where she can find peace and serenity amidst life's complexities. Her affinity for animals and enjoyment of planting trees reflects a deep-seated appreciation for the interconnectedness of all living things, fostering a sense of harmony and balance within her soul.

In the midst of nature's beauty, Amy discovers a sense of purpose and belonging, her spirit renewed by the gentle rhythms of the natural world. As she immerses herself in the wonders of the outdoors, Amy finds moments of joy and contentment, each experience serving as a testament to the enduring strength of nature's consoling embrace. “She should plant the white rose, where the slope of the land was still restless from the jagged stumps of felled trees.” (28 *The Tree of Man*). The nature which surrounded her spoke to her in its silence from her consoling depths.

“She walked slowly on, taking care of herself, and the harsh blue of her wooden jacket flickered through the evening colours of the garden, the colour of moss, almost of foreboding, and her skirt in passing stirred up an intolerable scent of rosemary and thyme, that lingered after she had gone.” (57 *The Tree of Man*)

As the Parkers continued their lives, Stan found solace and connection in the solitude of the woods, where the echoes of Amy's voice lingered even in his moments of isolation. For Stan, nature became a profound teacher, guiding him on a journey of self-discovery and enlightenment.

In his humble quest to unravel the mysteries of life, Stan turned to nature as his mentor and companion. Endowed with remarkable endurance, his resilient spirit enabled him to endure pain and adversity, propelling him ever closer to his aspirations. Over time, others settled in the area, and a white rose bush, a poignant symbol of Amy's memory and affection, flourished against the veranda. This delicate bloom served as a tangible reminder of their shared moments and aspirations, a testament to the enduring power of love and connection amidst the ever-changing landscape of life.

The major event that took place was a great flood, which fortunately did not destroy their farm. The still air became more charged the closer they got to the centre of the storm; the sky darker. The storm continued most of the days. “The whole earth was in motion and streaming trees, and was in danger of being carried with it.” (47 *The Tree of Man*). The constant rain that swells into the flood of Wullunya, causes trouble to people's lives, and Stan is brought to the point that he understands how weak man is. He joins other volunteers and helps rescue settlers stranded by the flood.

“The great trees had broken off, Two or three fell. He remembered the face of his mother before her burial, when the skull disclosed what the eyes had always hidden, some fear that the solidity of things around her was not assured. But on the dissolved world of flowing water, under the drifting trees, it was obvious that solidity is not”. (73 *The Tree of Man*)

Stan learns to humble himself from his surroundings and to embrace continuous change as the only solidity.

“*The Tree of Man*” unfolds as a poignant domestic drama, tracing the intricate tapestry of the Parker family's journey through the shifting tides of time and fortune over numerous decades. Set against the backdrop of the remote Australian bush, the novel delves deep into the rich tapestry of Australian folklore and cultural myth, weaving together the idiosyncratic way of life in the bush with broader cultural traditions and ideologies inherited from Western civilization.

Patrick White's masterful narrative explores the intersection of personal and collective histories, illuminating the complexities of Australian society through the lens of the Parker family's experiences. As the Parkers navigate the challenges and triumphs of rural life, they become emblematic of the broader struggles and aspirations of the Australian people. Through its richly layered storytelling and vivid depiction of the Australian landscape, “*The Tree of Man*” emerges as a profound exploration of identity, belonging, and the enduring power of human connection. White's evocative prose captures the essence of Australian life, celebrating the resilience and spirit of those who call the bush their home while also reflecting on the broader cultural currents that shape their world.

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