

# Poetic Symbolism In Novel By Patrick White



PATRICK WHITE

**NEW BOOKS**

If you can imagine the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a Victorian romance, you will have an approximate idea of the effect of "Voss," the Book of the Month in America, the Book of the Month in England, which appears at last in Australia, the praises of the literary world dripping off its long serpentine form.

BOOKS about Colonial Sydney, worthy in their way, there have been enough to surfeit us; but "Voss" has an El Greco thunderstorm light about it. The book is weird, macabre, cruel and of a nightmare strength. It fixes you with its glittering eye.

In "The Tree of Man," Patrick White gave us a broad, sunlit landscape with one simple heroic figure standing, a mountain around which rolled great clouds of poetry. "Voss" is the hellish undershadow cast by "The Tree of Man."

Voss, a shabby, irritable German adventurer, with frayed cuffs and an obsession, with his demoniac vanity, his fussy meticulousness and vitality, his pale eyes, his uncanny perceptiveness and callousness, is a complex and civilised man who plunges into the desert that is partly the interior of Australia crossed by the explorer Leichhardt, but on another level is the hell of the human mind.

Voss is the sacrificial god-man; and with him go into the desert the adoring simple boy, the poet, the devout scientist, the ex-con-vict rapt in survival, the aristocratic young landowner, the scoundrel and two aborigines. They are discovering a new country and they are discovering themselves.

"Human behaviour," the author comments, "is a series of lunges, of which, it is sometimes

**VOSS, by Patrick White.**  
—Eyre and Spottiswoode,  
London. 20s.

sensed, the direction is inevitable."

The formal setting is Colonial Sydney from which Voss leads his expedition.

The book begins with a series of domestic scenes: the young girl, Laura, receiving the alien adventurer awkward in the parlour, while her family are at church; the picnic, with the businessmen sitting on the wavelapped rocks with their wives and children; the evening party at which Laura offers to pray for Voss, and he rejects her prayers.

In Sydney, Voss collects his followers, his supplies. Through tense, discordant scenes, the wind, known as the "brick-felder," blows like the personality of the man who has disturbed the cosy parties.

ONE of the finest passages of descriptive writing in the book is the scene when the expedition sets out from Circular Quay.

"What kind of man is he? wondered the public who would never know. If he was already more than a man they really did not care . . . They did, moreover, prefer to cast him in bronze than to investigate his soul because all dark things made them uneasy, and even on a morning of his toric adventure, in bright primary colours, the shadow was

sewn to the ends of his trousers where the heels of his boots had frayed them."

There is only one link with life that Voss cannot snap, the thread of understanding that binds him to Laura, the niece of the merchant, Bonner, who finances his venture.

However far Voss goes, the girl, on the dark occult level of his imagination, goes with him. She is the feminine alter-ego whom he cannot reject or deny. He plunges into the unknown, and Brendan Boyle, the corrupt aristocrat living in squalor with his tribe of blacks and his rum, sees him go, farewells him.

"To peel down to the last layer," Boyle yawned. "There is always another and another of yet more exquisite subtlety. Of course, every man has his own obsession. Yours would seem to be to overcome distance, but in much the same way of deeper layers of irretrievable disasters. I can guarantee that you will be given every opportunity of indulging yourself to the west of here. In stones and thorns. Why anyone so disposed can celebrate a high old Mass, I do promise with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood in Central Australia."

WHETHER you read "Voss" as a narrative of adventure, or as a psychic love story, or as a re-creation of a period of history, the tension rising to a horrifying and gruesome climax will hold you.

But Patrick White is essentially interested in personality, in character and the spiritual struggle of these men, as much as their torments of thirst and hunger. Voss indicates, has a greater breakthrough than any of his companions, and because of his enormous endurance, he undergoes, in some mystical sense, an apotheosis.

This, from some Philistine quality in myself, I found the most unbelievable part of the book. Voss was such a dislike-

able individual; Patrick White had been at such pains to make him an insufferable egotist, and the breakdown of his demoniac vanity was nothing I cared to contemplate.

The potentiality to endure torture, the author infers, is a virtue. Courage, apart from the character of the man who possesses it, is a good thing in itself.

Voss was transmuted by suffering. This should be exalted, but I found it rather depressing.

The pace of the book, the strength and power of the prose, the tension and dramatic force, were all there, but when the book strikes off into the deserts of mysticism, I am one of those people who would sooner slink off home.

PATRICK WHITE obtains his most striking effects by contrasting the formal surface of Sydney's constricted society with the reality of emotional suffering, the "torment of the spirit."

There is, for example, the dependable Dr Badgery, the ship's surgeon, who loves Laura and knows that on the night of the dance she is suffering for the lost explorer: "So the surgeon re-obsession. Yours would seem turned presently to his ship, and to be to overcome distance, but had soon restored the shape of his in much the same way of deeper layers of irretrievable disasters. I can guarantee that you will be given every opportunity of indulging yourself to the west of here. In stones and thorns. Why anyone so disposed can celebrate a high old Mass, I do promise with the skull of a blackfeller and his own blood in Central Australia."

The dance provides another example: "I could hint," Mrs Bonner says, "to one or two of the more responsible girls that it is almost morning." O reason, Mrs Bonner, speak to the roses and the mignonette. They will be trampled, rather, or float up and down in the silver seas of morning, together with the programs and the used napkins.

And in the desert: "A skeleton of a gelding, of which the eyes had gone milky with blight, and the crimson sores were the only sign of life, stumbled and fell with a thin scream into the gully, where he lay, and lunged, and continued to scream."

One of Voss's followers recognises him in this book as "the ugly rock on which truth must batter itself to survive." It is certainly a jolt to the humdrum of our surface literature.

—KYLIE TENNANT.