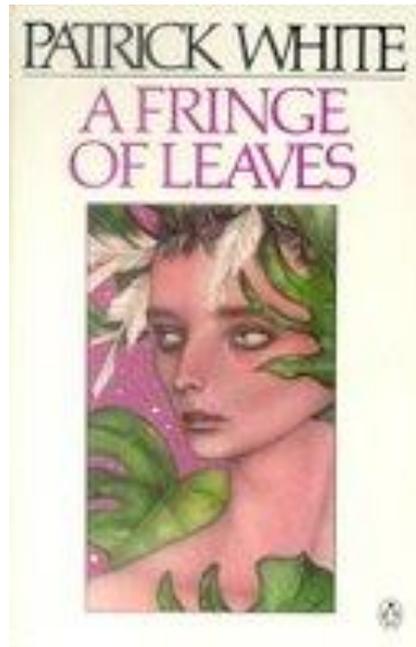


## The Theme of Self-Realisation in Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

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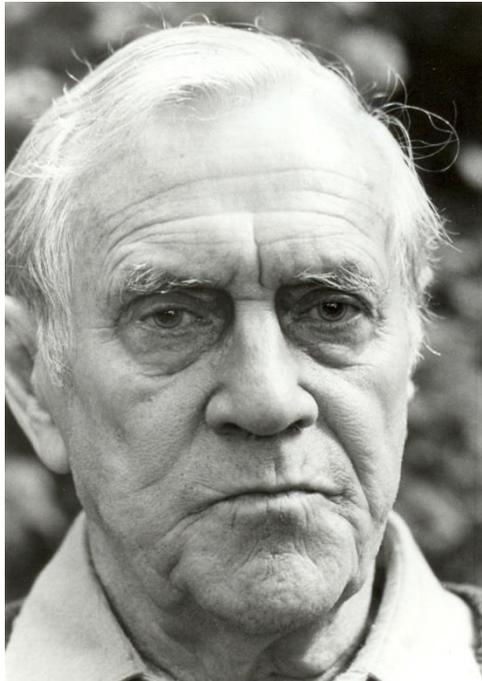


### Abstract

Patrick White is considered to be a major English-language writer of the second half of the twentieth century, and still the grand old master of Australian Literature. Being a prolific writer, he attempted almost all the genres of literature. He has written an extensive body of literature including prose, fiction, poetry, short fiction and drama. The basic theme in White is mankind's search for a meaning and for a value in existence. The characters in the novel *A Fringe of Leaves*, search for their identity by undergoing many crises and finally achieves it. *A Fringe of Leaves* depicts Ellen's journey through life and her self-realisation through suffering in endurance and understanding and compassion and love. She is basically human and modest and sensible. She is full of gratitude to her husband Austin and her convict-rescuer-lover, Jack. She never tries to look superior. Ellen leads a structured life until her experiences after the shipwreck of the *Bristol Maid*. At the end, she has become a person who is free from the structures of life and accepts the inevitability of disorder. She has experienced freedom, doing what she wants without worrying about the restraints of society. She chooses to return to civilisation and to the structures and orders of the English life. White

shows how Ellen develops from the country girl to the more structural life of the English lady. Through Ellen in *A Fringe of Leaves*, White teaches to suffer with dignity and to find strength in loneliness.

**Key words:** Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, self-realization, quest for true purpose of life.



Patrick White

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### **Quest for Knowing the True Purpose of Life**

Patrick Victor Martindale White (28 May 1912 – 30 September 1990) was an Australian writer who is widely regarded as one of the most important English-language novelists of the 20th century. Patrick White is well-known for his powerful dramatization of human isolation. He is apprehensive with the private life of the individual who, dissatisfied with society, runs away from the actual sphere of life to seek comfort in his self-conceived world of the imagination. He delineates characters, who are sensitive to the life's reality but anxious of its subtlety. The mind's eye has enabled them to mediate between the life within and the life without. White's characteristic strength is defined by the aggressive and imposing quality of these characters.

Nearly all human beings come to know the true purpose of their life sooner or later. Quest plays a very important role in knowing the true purpose of life. To seek is the start of

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any quest. Almost all the religions explain the quest as the yearning of a soul for God. The reward of the spiritual quest is gaining the deeper understanding of one's true self and the discovery of a new and different way of being. Quest can be satisfied only through prolonged suffering and by experience. White's central characters, male and female, naturally struggle through several layers of experience and finally achieve their identity. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, White animates Ellen, the heroine, who survives shipwreck of Australia. She is placed in the servitude by aborigines and she undergoes both physical and mental suffering. She finally achieves her identity by undergoing a total transformation of her self.

### **The Plot of *A Fringe of Leaves***

Andrew Elfenbein argue that the plot of *A Fringe of Leaves* manifests that “the contradiction of White between his desire to write about the physical landscape of Australia and the sense that the human spirit is ultimately unconditioned by any categories external to the self” (41-2). This contradiction manifests itself in the novel through two competing possibilities for describing the relation of its heroine, Ellen Roxburgh, to Australia. The first treats it as a metaphor: Ellen's divided personality is emblematic of the divisions within Australia itself. The historical conditions of Australia as a British penal colony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century find a mirror in Ellen's personal existence as a Victorian lady. The second uses Australia only as a setting that enables Ellen to develop a self-consciousness that transcends the categories of civilization, much like that of Mr. Hunter. In the novel, the second is achieved at the cost of the first: the insight that Ellen Roxburgh gains in Australia ultimately causes her to lose her metaphoric identification with it. Her experience comes to signify less Australia than the dislocated sensibility of White as a post-colonial novelist.

### **Setting: Australia of the 1840s, and the Story and Theme**

*A Fringe of Leaves* is set in the Australia of the 1840s. Vimala Rao says that in *Fringe of Leaves*, White excels himself as a “powerful narrative and moral visionary” (109). The action of the story in fact starts around 1835. Ellen and Austin Roxburgh are the married couple never separated except at the moment of the death. Austin is a rich man whose copy of ‘Virgil’ is a closer companion to him than his wife. Ellen is uneducated and is twenty years younger than her husband. Austin Roxburgh and Ellen have visited Garnet Roxburgh, the younger brother of Austin on his farm in Van Dieman's land. Dieman's land is a penal

colony and Garnet has retreated to that settlement under duress. The climax of the visit to Dulcet occurs on the day when Garnet seduces Ellen.

As a consequence of their shameful incident, Ellen pleads with her husband to leave Dulcet. After days of wait in Hobart Town, Ellen and Austin hear the good news that the Bristol Maid will shortly be sailing for London. The ship is stuck on a reef-bed. Mr and Mrs. Roxburgh are too shocked to understand the situation fully. They help each other in facing the crisis. The coral reef offers no shelter and the two boats are ready to launch out in search of land. They reach the land of aboriginal savages where Captain Purdew and Austin are put to death. Ellen sits without help and mourns helplessly for her dead husband: "Awwwh!" Ellen Gluyas cried out from what was again an ignorant and helpless girlhood" (FL 214).

Ellen is surrounded by a group of savage women who are in no way dignified. They prod her, jeer at her and soon strip her. She drapes her nakedness with the fringe of leaves. Her meeting with the escaped convict, Jack Chance puts her back on the road to civilization. She parts from Chance at the rim of the forest. She once again enters a civilized background as she steps onto the Oakes' farm. She comes back to life like a new born baby. Mr and Mrs. Oakes slowly persuade her into a normal kind of existence.

Captain Lovell meets Ellen and informs her that there is one more survivor of the ship-wreck Mr. Pilcher. One day Miss. Scrimshaw, the friend of Roxburghs talks to Ellen about Mr. George Jevons, a merchant from London who is also going to return to London. Ellen joins with him and goes to London. It is with Miss. Scrimshaw's vision that the novel ends. At the end, Miss. Scrimshaw has succeeded in bringing together Ellen and Mr. George Jevons, a merchant and widower, travelling in their boat to Sydney and then onward to their homeland. She visualizes a settled happy future for her disturbed and ravaged friend Mrs. Roxburgh.

### **Relation between Ellen Roxburgh and Australia**

In the first half of the novel, White underscores the relation between Ellen Roxburgh and Australia. Ellen writes in her diary: "I begin to feel closer to the country than I do to any human being" (FL 92). She is the product of a Pygmalion like transformation of the country girl Ellen Gluyas into the refined and distant Mrs. Roxburgh; her husband exclaims, "Who

would have thought that a crude Cornish girl could be made over to become a beautiful and accomplished woman!” (FL 107). Yet this transformation has not successfully suppressed the sensuality associated with her lower-class origins. Only once in her marriage does she respond to sex, “with a natural ardor, but discovered on her husband’s face an expression of having tasted something bitter, or of looking too deep. So she replaced the mask which evidently she was expected to wear” (FL 67-68).

Austin Roxburgh, who comes to the Zennor farm in order to recover, decides to marry Ellen. As a bride, her mother-in-law takes it as her duty to mould Ellen. She is asked to maintain a firm hand with the servants, to maintain a journal and the like. Ellen dutifully obeys them. She keeps up social norms and so keeps quiet in strange houses unless spoken to “for fear of what may jump out of (her) mouth” (FL 65). However, one journal entry shows that Ellen is the stronger one and her later experiences with the aborigines are but tests to prove this strength:

...I would like to see my husband as perfect. I will not have him hurt. I am better able to endure wounds, and would take them upon myself instead. Women on the whole are stronger because more knowing than men, for all the knowledge men lay claim to. We also learn to numb ourselves against suffering, whether of the body, or the mind. (FL 67)

However, she is unable to stop Austin’s death which is unexpected and full of action for a person who considers death as a ‘literary conceit’. In his effort to save Purdew, Austin gets speared and killed. Ellen’s grief over Austin’s death is heightened by her guilt about her seduction by Garnet.

### **Ellen’s State of Understanding and Human Compassion**

At the end of the novel, the reader encounters Ellen on the verge of accepting Mr. Jevon’s proposal. However, this does not imply Ellen’s failure to sustain her illumination. It points to Ellen’s state of understanding and human compassion. In the last scene, Jevons who tries to serve tea for Ellen tumbles and falls down and White describes him as a croaking “bull-frog” (FL 365). This description serves as an inversion of the popular myth of the Prince Charming in the guise of a frog. Here, Mr. Jevons is no fantasy prince but an ordinary

fallible human being. It also marks the distance travelled by Ellen from her original position of waiting for a dream prince from Tintagel.

Ellen, the quester, possesses the strength of character. In the very beginning Ellen Gluyas has a hard time in adjusting with her father. She is healthy and has much physical strength. So her father anticipates her to do a man's job on the farm. It is to her credit that she rises up to those expectations. She is stronger than her father and her father expects her to take care of him. He is too dependent on her and attached to her, after the death of her mother. He shows incestuous leanings when he is in the drunkard state. So Ellen herself is disgusted at her father's behavior. Her father clearly exploits her. Her wish to be a woman, loved and cherished, is confined only to her dreams.

Ellen's life long quest for her identity is closely related to her sexual relationship with people. Her feeling of love is stronger than her sexuality. It is suggested by the secret dream that she has nursed within herself from girlhood. The dream is that a lover will come out of the sea and that she will sail away with him to Tintagel. She expresses this wish to Austin before she marries him. "It is my ambition to see Tintagel" (FL 51). But neither her love nor sexuality has found a proper outlet during her life with her husband, Austin.

### **Strong in Character**

The reference is to the story of Tristan and Iseult and their romantic, tragic episode of love. It is the story of the adulterous love between the Cornish Knight, Tristan and the Irish princess, Iseult. But when Austin Roxburgh appears on the scene as her husband, he becomes equally dependent on her. He falls sick often. He fails in health and spirits. But Ellen Roxburgh is the strongest of the two in every way. Mr. Roxburgh himself has valued her strength of character: "I admire your strength of character" (FL 52). Ellen Roxburgh in turn replies: "Strength- yes! That's about all I've got to my name. And must depend on it" (FL 52).

As Ellen is a Cornish country girl, she is of different class to Austin and the older Mrs. Roxburgh. They teach her so that she will fit in with the others of their class. When Ellen Gluyas speaks, "they was there this mornin', Mr. Roxburgh" (FL 49). Austin corrects her by saying that "they were, were they?" (FL 49). Old Mrs. Roxburgh herself tells Ellen

“Whenever in doubt, ask, and I shall advise you, my dear, to the best of my ability” (FL 62). She also advises Ellen to keep a journal: “it will teach you to express yourself; a journal forms character besides by developing the habit of self-examination” (FL 42). Ellen feels that the identity she wears is always a “false impression” (FL 170). She feels distanced from both her married and maiden selves.

### **Character Reflecting the Divided Nature of Australia**

Ellen’s double character, both the “spurious lady” Mrs. Roxburgh, and the “farmer’s daughter” Ellen Gluyas, parallels the divided nature of Australia as a British colony. White uses Ellen’s sexuality to strengthen the symmetry. The sexual suppression demanded by the mask she is expected to wear mirrors the hypocritical steamianness of Australia’s anxious upper classes, always aware of their inferiority to those at “Home”. The natural vitality of the Ellen Gluyas side of her character relates her to all that is raw and savage in Australia, particularly to its prisoners.

These parallels become evident when Ellen commits adultery with her brother-in-law Garnet, whom she and Austin have come to visit in Van Diemen’s Land. Her act forces her to realize her similarities with Mrs. Aspinall, the alcoholic representative of Australian society, who also has carried on an affair with Garnet. After a tense conversation in which both women hint that they know the secrets of the other, Ellen notes, “However unpleasant it is to detect hypocrisy in another, how much more despicable to discover it in oneself- worse still, to be driven to it by Mrs. A. To be reflected in such a very trashy mirror!” (FL 118).

Austin’s lack of love for Ellen, directs her concentration towards Garnet Roxburgh. Although Ellen inwardly dislikes her brother-in-law, she is sexually involved towards him. When Ellen falls from the mare and sprains her ankle, Garnet offers a help to her. But she protests his help: “Don’t please! I’m obliged. It’s nothing- Garnet” (FL 102). He calls her “Oh Ellen- Ellen!” (FL 102). She too gives up her self-control and submits herself to him:

she was again this great green, only partially disabled, obscene bird, on whose breast he was feeding, gross hands parting the sweeping folds of her tormented and tormenting plumage; until in opening and closing, she might have been rather, the green, fathomless sea, tossing, threatening to swallow down the humanly manned ship which had ventured on her. (FL 102-103)

## **Feeling Guilty – Returning to Husband**

Ellen, even in her moment of undoing, is aware of the evil that she has committed. But she cannot end herself. Later she blames Garnet: “I was thrown from my horse, and while I wasn’t in my right mind you took advantage of it” (FL 103). Then feeling guilty of herself, Ellen returns to her husband Mr. Austin Roxburgh.

Austin Roxburgh begins to show his love to her. He comforts her by saying that she had to put up with “married to such a creaking fellow” (FL 109). After this talk, Ellen holds her husband. This kind of soothing and love, Ellen expects from her husband. Garnet later comes to Ellen and takes her hand. In refusing him, she utters: “I can’t make excuses for my own weakness- or ignorance. I still have not learnt enough to help myself, let alone others” (FL 112). A brief physical involvement with her unsavory brother-in-law starts her search for self. When Ellen leaves her brother-in-law, her adultery and Australia behind her, she climbs to the deck of her ship dizzy with a sense of freedom and joy.

After leaving Garnet Roxburgh, Ellen is closely attached to her husband. She experiences the true love showered by her husband. She finds a transformation in Austin Roxburgh. He protects his wife, “whose value had been increased by this child of theirs hidden inside her. He loved her, he felt, as he had never been capable of loving any other human being, excepting, perhaps the imagined brother of his childhood” (FL 177).

Both are emotionally involved to each other in “one flush” (FL 177). But her happiness is short-lived. In the ship, she gives birth to a premature baby which soon dies. When the ship is wrecked, the white people are encircled by the savages. Mr. Roxburgh feels ecstatic as well as frightened. A spear from an aborigine hits Austin. Austin at that moment asks Ellen to pray for him. Ellen out of pain at her heart cries: “Oh no Lord! Why are we born then” (FL 215). Ellen’s only hope is gone. The person who offers her, his love is no more. She feels that there is no one in this world to love her.

## **Isolation**

Ellen’s isolation develops after her shipwreck and the murder of Austin by the natives. White’s treatment of Ellen’s experience with the tribe is rather different from what the first half of the novel. Ellen finds freedom and joy among the natives that she lacked in

the stultifying social circles at Cheltenham with Austin. Yet much of Ellen's captivity reproduces, rather than differs from, her imprisonment at the hands of the Roxburghs. "They anointed her body regularly with grease and charcoal and plastered her cropped head with beeswax, and stuck it with tufts of down and feather" (FL 239). With the tribe, Ellen is subjected to a compulsory code of behavior that resembles with surprising closeness her transformation into Mrs. Roxburgh in England.

Yet her life in the jungle has another side, which does not reproduce her life as Mrs. Roxburgh or as Ellen Gluyas, but allows her to discover her own, unique sense of self. Earlier in the novel, when she sits alone in a clearing, she has a fleeting perception of an identity different from the ones given her by society: "She felt only remotely related to Ellen Roxburgh, or even Ellen Gluyas; she was probably closer to the being her glass could not reveal, nor her powers of perception grasp, but whom she suspected must exist none the less" (FL 82).

Walking alone in the forest, she regains this sense of a unique identity: "But she felt accepted, rejuvenated. She was the 'Ellen' of her youth, a name they had attached to her visible person at the font, but which had never rightfully belonged to her, any more than the greater part of what she had experienced in life" (FL 242).

### **Discovery**

This experience of possessing her own name is the prelude and symbolic cause of Ellen's discovery of the native cannibalism. White emphasizes Ellen's solitude at this moment; the natives run away from her "and soon forgot, or did not bother to look back" (FL 244). Ellen is the only survivor of an attack by the cannibals. During her days with the savages she suffers physically and mentally. At that time she sees, "the great pseudo-black approaching" (FL 251). It convinces her that the man must be some escaped prisoner. The man introduces himself as Jack Chance. She persists him: "We shall have to trust each, she persisted. 'Only bring me to Moreton Bay and I promise they'll give you your pardon'" (FL 252). Her companionship with the convict Jack Chance is well established. Ellen is freer to express some of her dormant feelings of love and sexuality. They make a deal with each other, physically as well as spiritually: "They must have reached that point where each is equally exalted and equally condemned" (FL 269).

### **“Can you love me, Ellen?”**

Unlike Garnet, the convict speaks to her of love and asks, “Can you love me, Ellen?” (FL 269). Ellen is elated in his company and experiences a full blossoming in her contact with him. She is reborn at this stage into her real self. She is neither the worker of her father nor the nursemaid of her sickly husband. But she lives on her own terms on a natural plane with her convict. She is the balanced middle between the two extremes of Austin and Garnet in this respect. Her company with Jack Chance, the convict lover leads her back to civilized life. This relationship is a far cry from romantic dreams of sailing off with her lover, Tristan to Tintagel.

Ellen loves Jack Chance so much: “... for however much crypto-eagles aspire to soar, and do in fact, through thoughtscape and dream, their human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe” (FL 366). It is at this point, having reached the moment of illumination that she is rescued by a native who reveals himself to be an escaped convict. The sacrament of the human thigh-bone has represented a passage to a different dimension of the holy for Ellen and with it a breakthrough to an understanding of what may be her “truer” self.

### **Personal and Cultural Dimensions**

The “chance” relationship with Jack Chance represents a fulfillment that has both personal and cultural dimensions. There are many “inner journeys” in White, but always the discovery made is that the self is not an object, but a subject in process, a subject who cannot be extracted from time and place, from culture and history. This is, in a very real sense, a *post-colonial* recognition and counters what many see as a modernist concern with fragmentation and wholeness. For one important demonstration of the processural nature of the subject is the importance of relationship, the importance of the other. Significantly, this other is never the Aboriginal Other, hard to imagine it otherwise, given the novel’s faithfulness to the official details of the Eliza Fraser story.

### **Limits of Human Existence**

The journey is one of limit. At the extreme limits of human existence perhaps not only may the self be found, but a final sacred oneness with the land. The fringe of leaves,

therefore, has been to Ellen like a fringe of civilization lightly protecting the body the entire human façade of the body from exposure. The fringe of leaves she has continued to make to hide her modesty is the sign of the fragility of the protection, both social and psychological, that humans grasp for the business of avoiding their true selves. On the journey back to Morton Bay, even the body itself becomes a ‘human façade’.

White has quoted Louis Aragon’s words as his final epigraph: “Love is your Last Chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there”. This serves very well to articulate the final meaning of the novel. Ellen’s one aim in life as seen throughout the novel is to be a woman, true and good. She herself is not conscious of the depth of goodness in her. She retains this excellence of loving others, even when the others are cruel to her. Right from her father and ending with her cultivating a feeling of love towards Mr. Jevons in the last part of the novel, Ellen has continued her own spirit on this spirit of love.

### **Self-discovery**

The key to the self-discovery and the achievement of some unexpected, indigenous and darker concept of the sacred is, of course the issue of cannibalism. Clearly, White is unconcerned by the consequences of racial politics in the depiction of the Aboriginal tribe. Peter Hulme’s superb description of the emergence of “Cannibal” into Western consciousness during Columbus’s journey to the Caribbean reveals that the idea of anthropophagi, or eating of human flesh, became the absolute miserable of civilized society only after the word “Cannibal” became attached to it. “Cannibal” and “native” became linked in the colonial project of demonization and exploitation. No people in the world engage in cannibalism as a form of nutrition, yet the ascription of “cannibal” to savages begun in Columbus’s journey became a central feature of the imperial adventures throughout the nineteenth century.

The Cornish farm girl finds sympathy with the Aborigines that for Mrs. Roxburgh might be more difficult. These two selves are indeed in constant conflict and it is Ellen Gluyas perhaps who is most agreeable to the spiritual possibilities that lie beyond the fringe of civilization. This expedition beyond the fringe is stuffed with risks. The wedding ring she attaches to her fringe of leaves is her association with wholeness and reality, a reality not perhaps as readily available to the Cornish farm girl. The dimensions of her journey beyond

the fringe are revealed in a dream in which it was not Austin, but Garnet, who had possessed her. The dream condenses the present experience of travelling beneath the surface of her self, finding the deeper layers even at the risk of her self-disgust. While Austin represents her official self, her civilized and respectable self, Garnet represents the coarser dimensions lying just below the surface.

The expedition takes her even beyond the certainty of her name. This name that “they had attached to her visible person at the font” (FL 242) is possibly her last connection to the official language of her identity and now “this label of a name was flapping and skirring ahead of her” (FL 242). It is important that at the moment of detachment from the language of self, she encounters something that cannot be easily fitted back into it.

### **Hungry Spirit**

Ellen’s “hungry spirit” has no parallel with Australian society; nothing peculiarly Australian marks her experience of her inner depths. Instead, her cannibalism shatters the separation between Ellen Gluyas and Mrs. Roxburgh by uncovering her essential, naked self. She expresses this new sense of identity by believing that, for the first time in her life, she can make a choice more positive than any she had hitherto made in a life mainly determined by other human beings or God: “she must resolve whether to set out on the arduous, and what could be fatal, journey to the settlement at Moreton Bay” (FL 247). After seeing an escaped convict, Jack Chance, dancing for the natives, she takes her most significant action in the book by promising him a pardon if he takes her back to civilization.

It would seem that the love develops between Ellen and Jack literalizes the symbolic parallel between Ellen and the prisoners developed in the novel’s first half. Both have experienced forms of imprisonment at the hands of the ruling classes, and both have found a kind of freedom in the wild; Ellen responds to Jack all the more because of what she has undergone as Mrs. Roxburgh. Critics have celebrated their relationship as a perfect union:

Need has created tenderness, affection, and trust between the unlikely pair...  
They have grown so close that they dream the same dream at the same time...  
Walking and dreaming have joined hands, erasing distinctions of both time  
and identity in a pure present. (FL 210)

## **Deceptive Mutuality**

Yet this mutuality is deceptive. White repeatedly reminds us that Ellen and Jack are not the same: Ellen's life with an actual prisoner makes the differences between her situation and that of Australia's prisoners most apparent. What distances her from Jack is precisely the sense of unique identity that she has discovered in the act of cannibalism:

With the passing of time she would not have known how to exculpate herself, or convey to the convict the sacramental aspect of what could only appear a repellent and inhuman act. He would not have understood, any more than he had recognized the semblance of a feather boa she had hung frivolously around her neck (FL 283).

Despite the confidences that Ellen and Jack share, they never overcome the unbridgeable gaps between them. Jack has secrets that Ellen cannot fully understand. After he describes to her his murder of his girlfriend Mab, he says, "I knew we'd understand each other" (FL 291), yet she wonders, "But did they?" Immediately after, when they, make love, Jack accuses her: "Your heart isn't in it, Ellen" (FL 299). Terrified at the prospect of being flogged, Jack runs back into the forest. Ellen must face civilization alone.

## **Simply Ellen!**

In the final section of the novel, Ellen is no longer Mrs. Roxburgh/ Ellen Gluyas, but the "Ellen" who nourished her hungry spirit in the depths of Australia. Her self-knowledge gives her a deep sense of responsibility behaviour, although she has committed no real crimes. It results in her strong sympathy for the prisoners: "I am responsible to someone- to all those who have been rejected" (FL 317); "Most of us are guilty of brutal acts, if not murder" (FL 330). In particular, she insists that she is bound by duty to ask for Jack's pardon. "Duty... will not allow me to keep silent," she maintains; when she turns to go into the boat taking her back to England, she says, "I have done my duty, I hope, by everybody" (FL 361).

When White identifies her with the Australian prisoners, it is not, as in the novel's first half, because of resemblances between her sexual suppression as a Victorian lady and their incarnation in the British penal colony. Rather, for Ellen, any survival in the society of other people is an imprisonment; she returns "voluntarily to the prison to which she had been sentenced, a lifer from birth" (FL 324). Only in solitude does she exist as her true self. When

she sits by herself in the chapel built by the Pilcher, the other survivor of the wreck, she hears: “Ellurnnn, she heard her name tolled, not by one, but several voices” (FL 353). She collapses into tears while she relieves the disloyalty of her earthly lovers, confronting her painful sense of alienation from those whom she has wished to love.

Ellen’s experience of the sacrament of eating human flesh was perhaps equally unsure but fitted into the mystical pattern of her experience at St. Hya’s well. In both cases, hers and Pilcher’s, there has been a sight of the sacred Other that both find impossible to fit back behind the fringe of civilisation. Looking back to the chapel, Ellen sees the disappearing form of Pilcher, and in reaching the settlement, “sensed at once that something out of the ordinary had happened” (FL 351). Ellen, it is clear, in meeting the merchant Jevons on the ship, will move back from the touch of transcendence she has encountered: “I don’t know what I any longer believe,” (FL 347) she tells the clergyman Mr. Cottle. But she has returned behind the fringe of civilisation and the novel obviously intends to be inconclusive about the effects of her discovery of the sacred. Yet it is clear that the experience of the heart of darkness, the dark heart of an uncivilised sacred, will have an effect on Ellen forever.

Ellen comes to know that her “self-knowledge might remain a source of embarrassment, even danger” (FL 307). As Ellen Gluyas/Roxburgh, she was able to form relationships with a wide range of characters, but as “Ellen,” her concern with “doing her duty by “everybody” causes her to be viewed as a peculiarity. She makes Captain Loveall, who must report her experiences, deeply uncomfortable; he describes her in his report as “a woman of some intelligence, but given to concealment, or confused I should rather say, by the ordeal she has recently undergone” (FL 358). Mr. Cottle, the chaplain, comes to offer her spiritual comfort; during his visit, she hears a prisoner being beaten and has a fit that “frightened him not only at his prayers, but also almost out of his wits” (FL 350).

Ellen is distanced not only from the upper classes, but also from the prisoners with whom she intensely sympathizes. When she meets a gang during a walk, “she was united in one terrible spasm with this rabble of men” (FL 334). Yet she senses the gaps that divided them because the “never-motionless chains conveyed a distrust which no passion or tenderness of hers could ever help exorcise” (FL 334). The men assault her with obscene comments; the corporal-in-charge tells her, “This is no place, ma’am, for a lady,” and a

prisoner spits at her as she turns to leave. Similarly, when she encounters a group of female prisoners, she hopes that “they might have understood each other,” (FL 336) but the prisoners march on, leaving her to return to her own prison, “the Commandant’s ‘residence’” (FL 336).

### **Two Significant Entries**

In the novel, Ellen makes two significant entries. One, into high society through her marriage to Austin. Another, into the aboriginal tribe after the shipwreck and after her husband and the other men are murdered by the aborigines. Both these entries set up various oppositions: natural and artificial; indigenous and metropolitan; civilised white culture and uncouth aboriginal culture. In her entry into society, Ellen is the docile and hard-working pupil who gives herself to be moulded by her mother-in-law to suit social norms. In the entry into the aboriginal tribe, the Gluyas self of Ellen asserts itself. Earlier, it is asserted once during her seduction by her brother-in-law, Garnet Roxburgh. This, in turn, goes back to “the presentiment of evil” which Ellen foresees during her visit to St. Hya’s well.

Ellen also qualifies as an Earth Mother. This is shown in her relationship both with black children and the children at the Commandant’s house. “The young children might have been hers. She was so extraordinarily content she wished it could have lasted for ever, the two black little bodies united in the sun with her own blackened skin and bones” (FL 230). The young Lovell children move intimately with Ellen on her return and insist on tales of the black children. “Innocence prevailed in the light from the garden, and for the most part in her recollections; black was interchangeable with white. Sure in the company of children she might expect to be healed?” (FL 342).

In Ellen’s life with the aborigines, one thing assumes importance and that is, hunger, and life revolves in pacifying this hunger. For instance, even death is followed by feasting as is seen in the fish-feast following the death of the child which Ellen nursed. The recurring importance on hunger is a way by which Patrick White prepares the ground for Ellen’s cannibalism. This incident enables Ellen to take part in a larger system of values and not the narrow ones posited by the society to which she belongs.

She was less disgusted in retrospect by what she had done, than awed by the fact that she had been moved to do it. The exquisite innocence of this forest morning, its quiet broken by a single flute-note endlessly repeated, tempted

her to believe that *she had partaken of a sacrament*... In the light of Christian morality she must never think of the incident again. (FL 244)

The eating of human flesh by the aborigines may seem savage in a civilised society's view. But it is the same society which barbarically punishes fellow humans with penal laws. This questioning is provided by Jack Chance, the escaped convict who helps Ellen to return to society. Jack tells her: "Man is unnatural and unjust" (FL 253). Further, Veronica Brady says that White has tried to point out in the novel as to how "aboriginal culture which acknowledges the debt to nature is closer to human truth than White colonial society which doesn't" (qtd. in Harishankar 114).

Ellen accepts her transgressions- adultery and cannibalism naturally. She never tells it openly either to the Commandant or anybody else. But her return to civilization suggests that she has learnt to combine and unite all aspects of life. Just as the cannibalism of Ellen is a crucial episode in the novel, so is her moment of illumination at the crude and primitive Chapel built by Pilcher. In Jill Ward's view, this moment

...represents a part of the cumulative growth in awareness which is at the heart of the mystical visions. Such moments are not intended to lend themselves to intellectual scrutiny... for Ellen it represents a cessation of the struggle against the warring aspects of her nature (FL 80-81).

With such an understanding, Ellen moves once again into society. Towards the end, she is also on the edge of accepting a marriage proposal from Mr. Jevons. Ellen's affirmative posture proves true her words early in the novel, "I discovered another world. Which will remain with me for life, I expect Every frond and shred of bark. My memories are more successful than my sketches" (FL 27).

White sums up Ellen's circumstances when he notes, "It saddened her to think she might never become acceptable to either of the two incompatible worlds even as they might never accept to merge" (FL 335). Only once she has shed her inauthentic identity as Ellen Gluyas/ Roxburgh is she open to the full power of Australia. Yet while she overcomes self-division, Australia does not; her insight causes her to lose the qualities that made her situation similar to that of the country. John Colmer has noted that Ellen, "finds a freedom and joy

among (the natives) that she lacked in the stultifying social circles at Cheltenham with Austin.” (77)

### **To Become the Ordinary**

Cut off from both the class into which she was born and that into which she was married, Ellen is poignantly aware that she has no choice but to capitulate to the ordinary, and retreats into a relationship with the well-meaning but banal Mr. Jevons. On the ship bringing her back to England, she once more becomes the divided woman, Ellen Gluyas/ Roxburgh. When Mr. Jevons spills tea on her dress, she at first responds in her Gluyas voice, “Dun’t! ‘Tis nothing,” but quickly resumes the cultivated voice of Mrs. Roxburgh: “It is nothing, I do assure you, Mr. Jevons” (FL 365). As “Ellen,” she has no place in society; she can survive only by accepting “once more the fate or chains that human beings were imposing on her” (FL 346).

Ellen’s isolation from the two “incompatible worlds” cuts her off from Australia, but it links her intimately to White’s own situation as a post-colonial novelist. He described himself as an anachronism, something left over from that period when people were no longer English and not yet indigenous. Like Ellen, he felt that his true self was caught between two worlds. The sense of historical dislocation may be what marked White most distinctively as an Australian. Yet for him, this sense of alienation from Australia became an artistic strength as the source of his original vision as a post-colonial writer.

White’s writing arises out of an attempt to know what relations can be sustained between society and an individual who has no proper place in that society. Because he felt that he did not owe an allegiance to any one feature of Australia, he had a more acute perspective on the competing worlds that make up the country. Yet his perspective was always tinged with the grief what Ellen feels when she realizes that her self-knowledge cannot be separated from the betrayal of her earthly lovers. Ellen returns “Home” (FL 52) with complete fulfilment and satisfaction, identifying her true self. She has learnt more from her life through her struggle suffering and experience. Finally she fits herself in the society that her husband desires.

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### **WORK CITED**

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The Theme of Self-Realisation in Patrick White’s *A Fringe of Leaves*

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