



RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY IN "VOSS"

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Abstract:

In "Voss" deals the pilgrimage into the redemptive desert is presented most strikingly as it attempts find a new symbol for the soul. It is a spiritual exploration with a religious theme of suffering man finding salvation in the wilderness. The imagery is used here, as a framework comprising the land and the sky and Voss is placed at the centre of it. Towards the end of the novel a great comet appears which Voss finds beautiful and desirable always. Voss attains humility, simplicity, and accepts his natural human state.

Religious Symbolism and Imagery in "VOSS":

Patrick White is the best known among the modern writers of commonwealth literature. He has achieved universality through his major novels with their epic themes and their poetic treatment. White, who comes of a pioneering Australian family, is pre-occupied with the Great Australian Emptiness in his middle novels. *Voss* is considered as the Australian epics. White is fascinated by the notion of the pure being which is a feeling of oneness with the whole creation. White has a unifying vision of life and believes that Unity of Being could be achieved in a coherent cosmos. White can be seen both as a local writer, critically engaged with his society, and as a universal writer whose concerns can be described as unbounded by place and time. In his works, we can see an imaginative search for transcendent values in a secular age. Hence, there is the tension between the higher perceptions his characters seek and the mundane reality they inhabit.

White again lets the novel begin where it ends; *Voss* opens amidst the social set of Sydney who sends out the expedition and ends in the same circle on the day that a memorial is unveiled to the explorer. It can be studied as a story presented at two levels: the record of the expedition of *Voss*, the German explorer, and, symbolically, a soul's pilgrimage and penetration into an uncharted region of experience. The novel's basic image is that of the voyage of discovery as an exploration of the self, the nature of man and his relationship with the world.

Johann Ulrich Voss, a German set out on an expedition in 1845 to explore the uncharted territories of the Northwest of Australia. He was sponsored by many people and the chief among them was Mr. Bonner. Voss met Mr. Bonner's niece, Laura Trevelyan, four times and in that time, he had struck up a strange friendship with her. Though he did not have much spiritual faith, Laura offered to pray for him at all time. The significance of Voss's journey is in no way modified by its termination. His life is neither enhanced nor diminished by his death, the final mystery of which remains concealed.

Hillary Heltay connects *Voss's* journey into the heart of the desert with his journey to the knowledge of the self. The struggle against drought, flood, hunger, thirst, mutiny among his men and enmity from natives correspond the spiritual struggle to reconcile the pride and humility, the good and evil, the almost human and superhuman within his soul. *Voss* is accompanied in spirit by Laura in whom he recognises an inhabitant of the same spiritual landscape.

Voss was accompanied on the expedition by Palfrey man an ornithologist. Le

Mesurier a young man who was looking for the purpose of life, Harry Robarts a physically strong simple English boy and Turner a drunkard. The expedition left Sydney and sailed and then rode to Rhine Towers to stay with Mr. Sanderson for some time, gathering more things required for the expedition. Judd an ex-convict and Ralph Angus a young landowner joined the party at this point. They reached Jildra, where Mr. Boyle lived. More horses, mules, goats and cattle were selected and gathered for the journey. At about this time, Voss wrote to Laura, proposing marriage, and she replied with a letter of acceptance.

Laura insisted that the baby should be born in the Bonner's residence and nowhere else. Rose gave birth to a girl child. It was named Mercy. When Rose died, Laura adopted the child as a spiritual child of herself and Voss. As far as Laura's character is concern, she is skeptical by nature which is revealed vividly in this novel.

While leaving Jildra, Boyle told Voss to be guided by two aborigines, Dugald, the old man and Jackie, the younger one. After traveling for a few days and after the loss of more than half of the cattle, Dugald complained about his old age and said that he wanted to return to Jildra. Voss told Dugald to deliver a letter to Mr. Boyle. Dugald left but did not return to Jildra immediately. On the way back, he met a tribe of his own people and went off with them, tearing up and scattering the letters of Voss, saying that they contained the evil dreams of the white man.

Le Mesurier thought deeply about life and wrote poetry secretly in a notebook. He became seriously ill, unable to bear the strain of the journey. Turner became friendly with Angus and told him that he must ultimately depend on Judd and not on Voss. Palfreyman told Voss the story of his hunchback sister. Voss saw that Palfreyman's spiritual faith was not strong enough to save him. Voss punished himself for any human feeling. He killed his favourite dog because he felt great affection for it. He constantly saw Laura in his visions. Heavy rains compel them to camp in caves. Everyone was sick and weak but the compulsory rest during the rains returned some of their strength. They had lost more cattle and all the equipments while crossing a river to reach the protection of the caves.

In Sydney, the Pringles gave a ball for Belle, before she got married to Lieutenant Radclyffe. Belle and Laura looked very beautiful but Laura felt very sad without Voss. She met Dr. Badgery and knew that if she had not met Voss, she would have fallen in love with Dr. Badgery. Then Belle was married to Lt. Radclyffe.

After the rain, the party emerged from the cave, in spring. They encountered a group of aboriginals who might have stolen their equipment. As Palfreyman went across to them to ask about the equipment, they stab him. Judd shot one of the aborigines and the tribe ran away. After Palfreyman's funeral, Judd said he wanted to break away from the party and return. Turner and Angus join him. Voss moved ahead with Harry Robarts, Le Mesurier and Jackie. He had a vision of Laura with her hair shaved off. This novel moves between the two poles of Voss who dares the great emptiness and Laura who contains this daring in her love and between them they direct the gaze of the Australian too far horizons and charge his sensibility with the terror and pity of the tragic vision.

In Sydney, Laura fell ill. Her fever ran high and Dr. Kilwinning could not do much to help the delirious condition of Laura because Laura kept thinking about Voss constantly. She wanted to prove to Voss that man was not God, and she did it by sacrificing Mercy. Mrs. Bonner pretended that she had given away the child when

actually, she kept the child and became, close to it. Mrs. Bonner showed a cornet to Laura which she saw with her eyes shut.

The aborigines led Voss and his group. Jackie had disappeared. When Le Mesurier found that Voss could not do anything for him, he cut his own throat, though, Voss trusted in God. Harry died of exhaustion in the hut of twigs. Voss grew closer to Laura in his mind. The aborigines considered the cornet as their supreme God, the Great Snake. When the comet disappeared, they killed all the horses and mules of the expedition party. Compelled by the aborigines, Jackie beheaded Voss with the very knife Voss had given him. In Sydney, Laura's fever broke and simultaneously she cried that it was over because she knew that Voss was dead.

The Australian desert becomes an important image on a metaphysical level. The desert not only assumes rather unexpected and unusual nostalgic quality, but it also retains its archetypal aspects. Traditionally a place where deep truths are revealed, it is at the same time a place for suffering and hardships, and the desert of this country, conveniently shaped like the human heart, becomes the interior with all its interpretative possibilities. Here White ventures into the inner lives of his two major characters, Laura Trevelyan and John Ulrich Voss.

The death of Voss turns Laura as a teacher in Misses Linsely's Academy. The head mistress instructed her to accompany the pupil, Mary Hebden, to a garden party given by Mrs. De Courcy to celebrate Colonel Hebden's return. Colonel Hebden had gone into the bush looking for Voss and all the men of the original expedition. Laura met the Colonel who made her suffer by asking her about Voss. He told her about how some aborigines had enacted a massacre of horses at Jildra.

Colonel Hebden set off again to search for Voss. He narrowly missed meeting Jackie who seemed to be possessed by the spirits of the dead white men. When Hebden returned, he passed close to the dead bodies of Turner and Angus who had died of exhaustion in the desert. The day Hebden set off for Home, Jackie died in the swamps.

Twenty years later, Belle gave a party at Potts Point and invited everyone. Laura had, that very afternoon, attended a function when Voss' statue was unveiled. She met Judd the convict and the sole survivor, of the expedition. Judd told Laura that he had nothing of his own left in this world when he returned- all the members of his family had died and his property was all lost. He also told her that Voss was more than a man because he helped to reduce the sufferings of men. At the party, Laura told the group of people assembled around her that she believed that true knowledge comes of death by torture in the country of the mind. She said that Voss was not dead but would remain a living legend.

Conclusion:

This novel *Voss* can be studied from different angles. These angles are rendered possible because of the exquisite structure of the novel. Patrick White seems to be a master craftsman has made it possible to present an ordinary story and extraordinary messages at different levels. There are detailed descriptions of the terrain which remains without a name because it has not been charted so far. White's predominant technique is not suspense or the thrill of adventure. He goes one step further and presents a psychological journey of each individual participant of the expedition. There is no treasure at the end of the journey that motivates the travelers, as it had in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Thus, the plot is of secondary importance in *Voss*. There is no character of heroic proportions with a tragic flaw. There are only ordinary mortals who blunder on with the expedition. Though the expedition itself was

to go through the uncharted territories of Northern Australia, none of the characters goes with the aim of discovering the country called Australia. They have their own motives for travelling. None, except perhaps, Voss, is physically prepared for the hazards of the expedition. Voss's motive was to realize his own genius and attempt the infinite in his lifetime.

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