



The Theme of Depiction of Society in Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*

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Abstract

The Living and the Dead is a sombre family novel with the Civil War in most of its misery as the central political conflict. It revolves around its complicated figures, brother and Sister Elyot and Eden Standish, and their mother, Catherine, who ultimately are driven apart. Her husband fails at his marriage, leaving Catherine to raise the two children. Elyot, a writer and critic, gains experience in Germany yet finds himself apart. Eden, a free spirit, is in search of meaning turns to politics only to suffer from her choices. Joe Barnett is involved with Eden just to meet his fate. As a novel of paralysis, senseless sacrifice, love, death and politics of the thirties, it is an interesting document of the contemporary milieu.

Key words: politics, meaninglessness, sufferings, senseless, sacrifice.

The novel, *The Living and the Dead*, is creation of White's extraordinary physical and mental adroitness. It powerfully forwards the leading idea of the distinction between the living and the dead. D. H. Lawrence had realistically dramatized human life and existence: "*A thing is not life just because somebody does it... It is just existence... By life we mean something that gleams that has fourth dimensional quality.*"¹

The title of the novel itself reveals the preoccupation of the main character, Elyot, from his earlier poetry to those who feared the springs of spiritual nourishment, and were morally dead even while they lived. The confusion between symbolic and worldly ambition is strongly pronounced.

Geoffrey Duttan has also commented on its thematic and social relevance: "*The structure of the book..., from the irony of the title to the picture of the Australian mountain town, enclosed by nature, burst open by human beings, to the deaths and*

destroyed loves which are too honestly unelevating to be called tragedy."²

After her marriage Kitty became a different personality and changed her name to Catherine Standish, a mother of two children, a slightly desperate, pleasure loving, and vaguely dissatisfied woman. The real problem of Elyot's psychic situation is that he is strongly impelled towards his maternal matrix and at the same time has a cherished fascination for the personal mother. "*White is not writing about incest with psychological sophistication, but is simply writing, about his own interest which happens to be preoccupied with incestuous fantasies. The fantasies are never brought before conscious scrutiny, nor are they intellectualized or formulated as such, but remain part of the unconscious structure of the narrative.*"³

The two main contrasting characters in the novel, Elyot Standish and his sister Eden have been sensitively portrayed as "*a certain literary romanticizing of the workingman, as well as the*

poetic and spiritual symbolism attributed to the Spanish Civil War.... The novel has the silky, slightly, pedagogic and culturally superior tone of that particular milieu."⁴ Eden represents the living, erratic unpredictable and easily hurt type demeanour while her brother is consciously intelligent, sensitive and never really touches the world. Eden, in an era of socialist and egalitarian ideals, falls in love with a poor man Joe Barnett, the cabinetmaker, who dies in the Spanish Civil War. It portrays the less confident quality of Elyot's character which White called "living-dead". The scene of Kitty's engagement to Willie Standish in which she meets his parents convincingly portrays the "dry-odours" of the contemporary English class. Walsh beautifully opines that, "Patrick White catches it's ineffable whiff perfectly."⁵

Elyot's conscious personality forced him to follow his goal while his unconscious matrix interrupts his activity due to his archetypal mother's negative attitude, sign of stagnation and inertia ultimately affecting Elyot's life adversely. Eliot's binding attraction towards his complicated mother proved to be destructive due to her negative behaviour. On the one hand, she attracted the youth binding them with her love, on the other she turned away becoming scathing and brutal as David J. Tacey points out, "It is difficult to determine whether Mrs. Standish actually behaves in this manner, or whether the boy's fantasies convert her into a destructive figure."⁶ Since Elyot played the role of son-lover, his father's thin presence didn't play the dominant role in developing the ego of the child; there is no internal direction into adulthood and maturity. This is the strong proof that his connection with his mother was passionately intense. "Out of his bewilderment he had taken refuge behind what people told he was a scholarly mind... Adopted as a defense, this becomes a habit. Like the intellectual puzzle as a substitute for living, which you chose deliberately" (168,170).

The marriage of Catherine and Willie Standish completely failed. Mrs. Standish's entry into the life of pseudo-intellectualism and unsystematic sensuality definitely ended in her humiliation at the hands of a worthless saxophonist, Wally Collins. White had distributed the constituents

of "existence", "life", "the dead" and "the living" among different characters to differentiate their position. But it is a difficult task to locate the actual position of Mrs. Standish in this living-dead scale. When she was young, she had promise of living life but her adulthood was fatally tragic, either in the form of death or an "apprenticeship to it." White communicates the condition of the childhood and the terrors of the children exactly as Henry James had realistically written to Louis Waldstein in a letter, "But eh the exposure indeed, the helpless plasticity of childhood that isn't dear or sacred to somebody."⁸ Every child has intuitively got a separate identical individuality and his wonderfully exciting experiences or excruciating sufferings of solitariness have been described with an extremely fine sense of reality. Connie painfully leaves Elyot and Eden to join her mother in London where she is palpably in reduced condition. "Goodbye, Connie", Eden screamed, "send me some postcards as well as the letters...Because parting changes everything. At parting there is sometimes a conscience, there is sometimes none. Eden even felt a sense of loss,...Yes, it was dull when Connie left. Something had been rubbed out of the familiar pattern. A new pattern had to be made" (103, 104).

Kensington Connie Tiarks was in love with Elyot, who has a melancholic relationship with a mentally disabled girl, Hildegard Fiesel who made him feel inconsequential. Elyot felt an unbridgeable falseness in Hildegard. His physical encounter with her in the forest gainfully appeared false. "All that late afternoon, wondering, sitting, in the forest Hildegard made with her voice,... he knew that he was not himself. He was a strange person,... But he watched, he listened to her, he was observed himself, with the form of Hildegard. He was becoming what she wanted him to become" (119). The negative aspect of women is emphasized upon Elyot as this so depicted lover Goddess is now becoming the devourer of the personality. This love making of Elyot in the forest creates bitter feelings towards Hildegard; her presence "suffocates" (121) her smile seems "bitter" (124). Hildegard's all communication with Elyot is in vain, he cuts away brutally: "he resented even her appearance now. The golden sealed surface of her face that would blur in

a gust of hysteria" (p. 124). The image of the destroying matrix can be seen in her now. She perceptibly appears as a "Destroying Goddess" only leaving Elyot more regimented in his behavior. Elyot is characteristically enclosed in "solipsistic self-solitude" while Julia, the maid and the clumsy Connie Tiarks nourish hopeless passion for Elyot. Mrs. Standish is comparatively tough and selfish and is disdainfully supposed to be suffocated by time. Only character of Eden waits for further revelation. Mrs. Standish is over prepared to play her role and Eliot to be underprepared as an example of immaturity.

Eden's life was spent in the crisis of two different love affairs, the first with a married architect from Putney, "bland, unseeing, expression....Obsession by his own emotion" (145). Witnessing the intensity of Eden's love for Joe Barnett, Elyot wishes for a similar passion in him also. He becomes assiduously self-critical, dissatisfied with his isolation and break free from his emotional prison: "he wanted to press with his hands, rouse an element of fear or surprise, some sign of the spontaneous" (276).

Upon his return from Cambridge, Elyot found his mother as a repulsive figure. She had descended to the level of a prostitute although a sophisticated one, a whore of Ebury Street. He feels himself to be devastated, isolated, sad and abandoned because his mother repulsively satisfying her sexual needs with the help of different people.

"Elyot was a shadow that fell across the substance of her friends, the men who brought her presents, who filled her drawing-room with conversation and cigar smoke. Elyot standing sideways. His manner was perpetually sideways. Smoothing his hair, she could sense withdrawal. Or they set untidy silences. She could feel his disapproval of mentioned names" (132).

Her desperate affair with Wally Collins, the nightclub saxophonist, marks the beginning of her absolute disintegration further known as Wally's moll, his "Old Girl" (295).

The death of Mrs. Standish finds Elyot in a considerable relief. Now he allows modification to happen with him:

"...beyond the rotting and the death there was some suggestion of growth. He waited for this in a state of expectation. He waited for something that would happen to him that would happen in time, there was no going to meet it. In the evening there would be the funeral" (322).

In a psychic movement after the funeral, Elyot sees the image of his mother in his sister Eden, a kind of prototypal attraction towards her but this drama doesn't last long as Eden accidentally sets off to Europe to take part in war with the medical corps. Bidding farewell to her at the railway station, Elyot finds himself completely free and at last, there arises a desire in him to return to maternal source. Once more he is connected to the matrix just to see the lost world of his childhood. Ultimately, with the dissolution of human element, becomes the eternal man, "he lay, on the shore, and the sound of water lapped across his chest, a blaze of sun shone between the bones" (p. 108). There is a sense of regeneration and rebirth in the end with a tone of completion of the story "the end of a journey" (p. 335) and the choir of unknown voices sings, "then we are here, we have slept, but we have really got here at last" (p. 335). There is still more; "He yawned" (p. 335). He abruptly felt like someone who had been asleep, and had only just woken. It suggests the end of a mere egoistical existence with a fresh realization of an ultimate desire. David J. Tacey pertinently points out "As White becomes more convinced that the dissolved state is ideal, the mothers become more devouring until we meet the most terrible of all, the thin headed succulent of Mrs. Fack and Mrs. Jolly. Mrs. Standish has conveniently put to rest. Mrs. Macarthy and Hildegard dispensed with through time and circumstances yet the procession of negative mother cannot be stopped."⁷ The snobbery of the Standish, the context of Joe Barnett, his work in the old Crick's worship, his home, neighbours and the presence of Julia all find sufficient comical description. Eliot's proposal to Julia asking her to marry him is hugely entertaining.

"Julia,... will you marry me"? She sat in her stockings, on her flat feet. "It'll be a bit of wait", said Julia. "I'm five, he said and two months" (p. 73). Joe is the only non-neurotic figure who is here to bring unity among the other characters and their goodness in a very intellectual and symbolic way giving a gorgeous shape to this novel. The novelist had taken the help of interior monologue, imagery, irony, metaphors and symbols to produce the desired effect. The use of irony in his narrative style is very much developed: "The soup was good and nourishing ... She always said when the soup got thin."⁸ White's use of metaphor to help his reader understand the love of a mother for her son Eddie. "As a mother she would cheerfully have given him anything he had asked, the whole Church if he had wanted it, holding it out on the palm of her hand" (p. 31).

White has used symbols in *The Living and the Dead* in many places. Solidity of Elyot's mother has well been depicted with "yellow wedge" (p. 16). The softness of Julia's hands and words suggest yellow cheese as "her words, her hands were as stolid as yellow cheese" (p. 16). Happenings play a very significant role in the life of Julia who can be easily elated or depressed with, and in this regard Mrs. Standish once astonishingly remarked. "Julia is a thermometer I wish I didn't feel" (p. 16) Water colours of the school days kept in the drawers were used as symbols to denote the past things. "The school room water colours that she still kept in drawer in her writing-desk were, well, the quaint relics of a precocity that had pleased her at the time" (p.32).

Having an unconscious respect for the substance of things, Julia's whole existence, past and present, was very real and fragile. "Wiping the dribble from the baby's mouth was a gesture of humility, and deep respect" (p. 59). The less communicative nature of Eden, a calm and quiet girl, has been compared with the furniture, which is inanimate. "She was less communicative than furniture" (113).

The image of the earth mother is worth recognition. "It was an almost enclosed, almost a circular bay...the gentle, enclosed basin of water, the

sturdy trees that sprouted from the sides, his own legs planted in the moist sand" (98).

The "gentle, enclosed basin of water" symbolizes the source, in which the youth feels "secure and solid" as an embryo delicately placed within the womb along with a Christian symbol for christening ceremonies. The dipping of a baby in holy water is considered to be a new life in Christ. The circular bay, rounded stones, earth, trees, water are ancient symbols of the Great Mother. Water represents the origin of life and earth the foundation. Trees pictorially represent the creative aspect of Nature. Elyot's dissolution of his identity imparts him an exciting feeling. The rounded shape represents a state of fullness as well as The Great Round of Nature which is womb of his Great Mother into which he wanted to retreat. According to Elyot's discovery of a cave at Ard's Bay shows his acute longing for the maternal depth.

"Later he found the cave, going inward through wall of rock... He gathered the coloured stones,... It gave him great pleasure to feel he was doing this, secretly, unknown to the Macarthy, or Julia, or Eden. He very much needed this secret life" (98). Here the cave symbolizes the Earth Mother. The Aborigines painted on bark and rock to produce elaborate designs of human and animal pictures. The painters catch the ever changing effects of nature in an impressionistic style to capture the colourful atmosphere of Australian life. Elyot is desperate to return to the maternal world. It inspired him to sing and draw like a primitive artist in "matriarchal time." "When Elyot is unconscious, mother plays a positive role and Elyot wants to dissolve into that figure. It can also be considered as a symbol of life in totality. Elyot's life with Oedipus complex is just a fantasy, whereas his day world with the devouring associates is the reality of human life. There lies a huge gulf between these two realms. On Mrs. Macarthy enquiry about his whereabouts, Elyot refused to answer and didn't expose his secret life: "Nowhere, he said. No-where much. Because Mrs. Macarthy and Ard's Bay were quite separate. They had to stay like that" (p. 102).

Thus we see that *The Living and the Dead* is a work of mature, creative and impressive fiction.

The author is successful in presenting the contemporary social milieu with gorgeous shape and maximum detail. He has taken the help of interior monologue, irony, imagery, metaphor and symbols in this novel in a much developed narrative style.

Works Cited

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