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# The Prison and the Font: An Essay on Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

## **Abstract**

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White presents a vision of a woman's struggle for self-knowledge and freedom as she experiences life from almost every stratum of society in the early Australian penal colony. Prompted by instinct and necessity, Ellen Roxburgh gradually explores the depths of her 'heart of darkness' when a shipwreck forces her to leave the company of the 'moral classes' and mix with Aborigines and convicts before returning to white civilization. Her journey is punctuated by images of baptism reflecting ritual initiations into new life; however, these images are often accompanied by reminders of the individual and societal forces which imprison humankind and restrict our freedom and understanding. By combining variations of metaphorical baptism with prison imagery, White suggests that our ability to experience symbolic rebirth is limited while our quest for the freedom it brings is difficult and ongoing.

# The Prison and the Font: An Essay on Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves*

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White presents a vision of a woman's struggle for self-knowledge and freedom as she experiences life from almost every stratum of society in the early Australian penal colony. Prompted by instinct and necessity, Ellen Roxburgh gradually explores the depths of her 'heart of darkness' when a shipwreck forces her to leave the company of the 'moral classes' and mix with Aborigines and convicts before returning to white civilization. Her journey is punctuated by images of baptism reflecting ritual initiations into new life; however, these images are often accompanied by reminders of the individual and societal forces which imprison *humankind* and restrict *our* freedom and understanding. By combining variations of metaphorical baptism with prison imagery, White suggests that *our* ability to experience symbolic rebirth is limited while *our* quest for the freedom it brings is difficult and ongoing.

Even before the shipwreck, Ellen undergoes an important initiation when the harsh realities of the penal society gradually stir her to confront her own potential for evil, an essential step towards self-knowledge. She does this by identifying with the convicts, a gradual process which enables her to view society from a different perspective, asserting that evil is relative as well as socially defined. On first seeing prisoners while she is on the way to Dulcet, Ellen experiences a 'pang of commiseration' for them (p. 75), and she is uncomfortably conscious of some common bond of depravity which links her to these 'wretches'. As suggested by the refreshing shower of rain which follows, this incident marks her induction into a new, albeit improperly developed, level of self-awareness. Thereafter, she ponders over the convicts and begins to empathize with them even though she has 'lost the art of common speech' and is conscious of the social barriers which separate the two groups (p. 91). The prisoners' suffering, along with the hypocritical attitudes she perceives among members of the upper classes, leads her to question society's definition of right and wrong and to suspect that her

token Christian faith no longer insulates her from wrong-doings or offers a panacea to all ills. Having acknowledged her vulnerability and imperfections, Ellen is prepared to undergo a symbolic rebirth. Prompted by visions of penal brutality, the 'whip crack' and 'pistol shot' (p. 98), she plunges into the hidden depths of her own nature to clarify the strong sense of foreboding which the prisoners' predicament elicits in her. She links the feeling with the odd presentiment of personal evil which led her, as a young woman, to travel to St Hya's Well and immerse herself in the black water. Ellen's recollections of this mythical font of her youth evoke images of a ritual baptism; her past action of diving into the well forms an analogue for her present attempts to confront the darker side of her nature and exorcize the evil she senses lurking there. However, as she herself realizes, the 'sacrament' is limited. Unable to re-experience the cleansing powers of St Hya's Well, she is left foundering in the depths, 'faced with her own vulnerable image, swimming at her from the mirrors' of a dark house (p. 98). This is the first of a series of ambiguous baptisms that accompany Ellen's probings into the darker side of her nature.

Ellen's confrontation with personal evil brings her a small measure of freedom, allowing her repressed sexual urges to emerge in a brief sordid moment. As she explores a 'green fathomless sea' of sensuality with Garnet (p. 103), the 'instrument' she uses for 'measuring [her] depths' (p. 104), she undergoes another metaphorical baptism and an instant of ecstasy; but, ironically, the freedom she obtains is quickly outweighed by remorse and self-loathing, and she feels trapped in a conflict between her own sexual longings and the morality that she is expected to conform to. She longs to flee from Van Dieman's Land and the penal colony which prompts painful reminders of her unguarded lust. Moreover, she imagines herself to be an escaped convict who may not 'survive to enjoy [her] freedom' (p. 111). Later, the prison imagery surrounding her initiation into sensuality intensifies when she dreams of being lashed with her braids which are 'turned into knotted cords' (p. 140), resembling the 'cat' that punishes errant convicts. These images suggest that Ellen is struggling to come to terms with a prison of her own making where her conscience is her jailer. Her subconscious need for atonement restricts her ability to view her affair with Garnet as a small but necessary step toward ultimate freedom.

Ellen's next and most important ritual baptism takes her another step closer to freedom even though it occurs during her stay on the island where her metaphorical imprisonment is emphasized by a literal one. Paradoxically, she is both captured and freed ('unhooked') by a tribe of Aborigines and the hunger and suffering she experiences at their hands allow her to fulfill the convict role that she has already taken on im-

aginatively. Through this role, she is able to expiate her sins and begin seeking a new identity. Stripped of the vestiges of *civilized* life, she discards the mask of upper class morality, rejects the God imposed upon her by the Roxburghs and searches for the natural divinity she embraced with only limited understanding in her youth when 'rocks had been her altars and spring water her sacrament' (p. 222). At first, faced with a hostile environment where 'the spirits of place [are] not hers to conjure up' (p. 222), Ellen fears that this mystical religion may only be available to the natives. However, after a series of ritual anointings suggesting the initial stages of baptism, she experiences a transcendental union with the Aborigines and the 'spirits of place' when she eats the flesh of a young tribal girl. This incident is described in terms which stress religious rebirth: the glen where the feast occurs resembles a cathedral with its 'pinnacles' and 'arches' (p. 242), the Aborigines have an air akin to 'communicants' (p. 243), and Ellen herself 'believe[s] that she had partaken of a sacrament' (p. 244). Furthermore, she recalls St Hya's Well once more and draws a direct parallel between the two incidents, suggesting that her recent reception of the 'eucharist' completes the symbolic baptism begun with the anointings:

Just as she would never have admitted to others how she had immersed herself in the saint's pool, or that its black waters had cleansed her of morbid thoughts and sensual longings, so she could not have explained how tasting flesh from the human thigh-bone in the stillness of a forest morning had nourished not only her animal body but some darker need of the hungry spirit. (p. 245)

Ellen's anthropophagy prompts her to redefine evil and come to terms with her 'heart of darkness' - a major step in her quest for self-knowledge and a new identity. It is the climax of her confrontation with the hidden depths of her character, and it leads her to a deeper level of self-awareness than that which she has thus far achieved; yet, we must ultimately question the extent of the freedom it brings when she remains a prisoner, an artifact and object of trade to her captors. In such a role, her 'sacrament' is limited and she can only achieve a temporary escape from the 'female passivity' which has immured her from birth (p. 237).

Ellen's relationship with Jack Chance, the convict, is similarly ambiguous. As her rescuer and lover, Jack frees her from the Aborigines and liberates the sensual passion locked deep inside her; however, White's prison imagery leads us to suspect that Ellen is exchanging one kind of captivity for another. Aptly, bird-catching is Jack's profession, and she becomes his latest 'cage-bird', dependent on him for food, safety and human contact. Although she embraces the love and protection he offers, she perceives, through a 'grille' of broken teeth, a man who re-

These words contain none of the spiritual awe which Ellen previously associated with the well. They indicate that religious enlightenment seems remote from her present situation, while suggesting that she is prepared to repress the knowledge she gained through past confrontations with evil.

Thereafter, Ellen's gradual movement back into society is punctuated by yet another series of metaphorical baptisms. Given the framework of the penal system in which they take place, these baptisms must ultimately be seen as part of an ironic movement back to the restrictions which Ellen sought to escape from; yet they still assert a measure of growth on the part of the protagonist. The first of these ritual initiations occurs when Ellen, who is as 'naked as a new-born' child (p. 297), stumbles out of the wilderness to Oakes' farm where she undergoes a bath, marking her return to civilization. At the hands of Mrs Oakes, she is treated with kindness and nursed back to health even though she experiences recurrent bouts of guilt and self-loathing, locking her up in a dark world from which the journey to Tintagel and ultimate freedom seems impossible. At these times, she again takes on the convict role, an identity which is underlined by Sergeant Oakes's assertion that looking after her is 'worse than mutiny at the prisoners' barracks' (p. 310). Later, Ellen's feelings of imprisonment intensify when she travels southward to stay at Captain Lovell's house in the penal settlement. Here, 'bars of sunlight' and 'gilt grilles' evoke images of a cell (p. 325); yet, even in this stultifying atmosphere, she is baptised twice, suggesting that 'religious' rebirth is still possible although severely limited. In the first instance, she is cleansed by the spittle of a convict when she 'submit[s] herself to humiliation as punishment for her omissions and shortcomings' (p. 335); then, in Pilcher's chapel, Ellen's own tears bathe her in peace as she re-lives the past and accepts her 'chains' as part of the human condition. In doing so, she demonstrates that her quest for self-knowledge has not been futile. Aware of her personal limitations in the face of an existential universe, she is now ready to drop the convict role and venture forward. This step is marked by a final image of ambiguous initiation - the spilt tea which stains Ellen's dress, suggesting that she is entering back into English society with all its positive and negative connotations.

Overall, White's combination of baptism and prison imagery in *A Fringe of Leaves* provides an effective lense through which we may view the protagonist's struggle for freedom and a new identity. Ellen's struggle is not unique; it represents that undertaken by *humankind* in general, particularly those who must forge new and separate nations out of the chaos of penal oppression and colonisation. White exposes the strength of the literal and figurative forces which imprison *us*; yet,

minds her of penal oppression: 'the settlement at Moreton Bay had begun to exist for her in brick and stone, in dust and glare, in iron and torment, as though she too, had escaped from it only yesterday' (p. 275). Even in their lovemaking, Ellen wonders if they are not 'hardened criminals' desperately attempting to escape from the restrictions of *civilized* society so that they may build an ideal world based on love (p. 276). As reflected by their dreams, this attempt is doomed to fail: Ellen dreams of discovering a redeeming passion in a land of 'thorns, whips, murderers, thieves, shipwreck, and adultresses' (p. 280), only to lose her lover to an Irish female convict, while Jack's nightmare suggests that he cannot forget the past nor prevent himself from wanting to make Ellen a surrogate for his murdered Mab. When the two awake after their disturbing dreams, the light takes on 'iron grey' tones (p. 280), emphasizing the metaphorical prison which encloses them.

The limitations of Jack and Ellen's love are further stressed by ironic images of baptism, suggesting that the measure of new life and happiness they gain from their relationship is brief and tenuous. The most significant of these baptisms follows the night of dreams when the two lovers seek to be cleansed and re-united as they splash about in the lily pond:

It was sad they should destroy such a sheet of lilies, but so it must be if they were to become re-united, and this after all was the purpose of the lake: that they might grasp or reject each other at last, bumping, laughing, falling and rising, swallowing mouthfuls of the muddy water. ...they kissed, and clung, and released each other, and stumbled out. (p. 285)

In contrast to the well of her youth or the glen in which the cannibal feast took place, this lily pond contains no depths of mystery or blackness. It offers only a shallow font and a baptism which necessarily destroys the natural beauty of the pool and leaves the participants with 'mouthfuls of muddy water'. Although Ellen experiences a momentary union with her 'saviour-lover' during their immersion, her love for Jack gives way to ambivalence, if not open hostility, when she sees the Oakes' farm and realizes that her re-entry into society is only a day away. From this point onward, she begins to resume the role of Mrs Roxburgh, creating an emotional and social distance between herself and the convict. Moreover, she rejects the possibility of symbolic rebirth with Jack when she de-emphasizes the importance of St Hya's Well:

Did I ever tell you, Jack, how I walked all the way to St Hya's and let meself down into the pool? In they days people went to the saint for all kind of sickness. What I went there for I dun't remember not at this distance. Or if I were cured. I dun't believe a person is ever really cured of what they was born with.' (pp. 298-9)

his novel asserts a qualified optimism because it gives *us* glimpses of the symbolic rebirth towards which *we* may aspire even though *we* remain in a continual state of flux, grasping 'at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe' (p. 366).

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