1995

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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss2/13
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Abstract
Most of the critical attention to Patrick White's The Aunt's Story 1 has concentrated on Theodora Goodman's escapades in the Jardin Exotique and most critics agree that the other characters and events in the Jardin are figments of her imagination. Few, if any, attempt a plausible explanation for her flights of fancy and merely conclude that Theodora, the protagonist, is schizophrenic or mad.
INTRODUCTION
Most of the critical attention to Patrick White’s *The Aunt’s Story* has concentrated on Theodora Goodman’s escapades in the *jardin Exotique* and most critics agree that the other characters and events in the *Jardin* are figments of her imagination. Few, if any, attempt a plausible explanation for her flights of fancy and merely conclude that Theodora, the protagonist, is schizophrenic or mad.

Drawing on Object Relations theories of Margaret Mahler, Melanie Klein and others, this essay will offer some psychological explanations for Theodora’s mental confusion. This is not an attempt to reduce the novel to particular psychological concepts, but to explicate it in a way which may complement other critical work. It will hypothesize that what appear to be the adult protagonist’s Oedipal conflicts and ambiguous gender and identity are displacements of earlier, fundamentally non-erotic, non-incestuous desires and needs of the developing child for the (m)other, which originate in infancy, and which form the prototype of all subsequent relationships.

Object Relations psychology differs from Freudian psychology in that it shifts the focus of attention from notions of pansexuality, the Oedipus complex and castration anxieties to issues of nurturing and relationships, concentrating on a mother-child dyad instead of a father-child dyad. According to its basic tenets the developing ego must accomplish two essential tasks: separate the self from symbiotic union with the (m)other and reintegrate aspects of self and (m)other which are split during the process of separation of the self from the (m)other. Melanie Klein, Margaret Mahler and others generally write of the child’s relationship with the ‘mother’. However, in this essay, because of the assumption that the mother-child relationship is the prototype of all other relationships, ‘(m)other’ is used to denote broader implications in interactions of Self with Other.

Margaret Mahler calls the process of separation and individuation ‘hatching’. She writes that the human infant progresses from the earliest symbiotic union with the mother, to differentiation of the self from the mother, continues through practising at being independent of
her, on to *rapprochement* with her and ultimately to consolidation of identity. According to Mahler, 'optimal human symbiosis is essential for the vicissitudes of individuation and for the establishment of a cathectically stable sense of identity'.\(^2\) Failure in this regard results in an impaired sense of self and activates, metonymically, an endless search to recapture this elusive union with the (m)other.

Splitting occurs *pari passu* with a sense of differentiation from the (m)other, and is a means of enabling the child to cope with separation from the (m)other. Melanie Klein writes that the child, in phantasy, initially splits the (m)other, and particularly the breast, into 'good' as it offers libidinal gratification, and 'bad' as it frustrates. Concomitantly, the child, in phantasy, also splits his or herself into 'good' and 'bad'. The 'good' child loves the 'good' (m)other, and the 'bad' child hates and attacks the 'bad' (m)other.\(^3\) The infant generally attempts to project 'bad' aspects outwards and to 'introject' 'good' objects. Such defensive splitting can result in feelings of paranoia and persecution from the split-off 'bad' object, and excessive idealization of self and object images as a protection against persecution by the 'bad' object. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodges succinctly put it, because of simultaneous introjection and projection, 'objects both construct the subject and are constructed by it.'\(^5\)

As the ego matures, the infant is able to integrate previously split perceptions of itself and the (m)other and to perceive that 'good' and 'bad' experiences proceed from the same (m)other who is the source of 'good' and 'bad' alike. Simultaneously, conflicts between the 'good' and 'bad' part of its own self, or the loving and hating parts of the self, are no longer split, and the developing child recognizes that it is the same person, herself or himself, who loves and hates the (m)other, who is both good and bad. Because these processes occur before the acquisition of linguistic ability, the child conceptualises its world and relationships by means of imagos and phantasy.

Since Patrick White often writes in a non-realist or symbolic mode, and because it is generally accepted that divisions and dichotomies inhere in the themes and structures of his work, object relations concepts of phantasy, splitting and reintegration are particularly useful in exploring the nuances of his fiction. As Ilan Buchman explains, phantasy does not replace adult experience, but, instead, 'brings the intensities of childhood experience to bear on current adult life. It adds depth by evoking the unconscious remnants of infantile experience, without substituting that experience for an adult one'.\(^6\)

**SEPARATION**

In *The Aunt’s Story* Patrick White sensitively and imaginatively chronicles Theodora Goodman's journey through life and illustrates the conflicts she experiences in the process of realising her selfhood.
Writing in the *bildungsroman* tradition, White depicts the vicissitudes of the protagonist's individuation, from the confines of an oppressive childhood, to freedom in phantasy in middle age, and ultimate incarceration by society for what is considered to be her 'madness'.

The opening line of the novel provides many clues to the psychodynamics of the Goodman family relationships: 'But old Mrs. Goodman did die at last' (p.11). This suggests that someone, perhaps Theodora, through whom the narrative is focused, has been longing and waiting for her mother's death. A desire for the death of a parent of the same sex may suggest Oedipal conflicts. However, in light of object relations theories, Theodora's desire for her mother's death may more fruitfully be seen as an aggressive, retaliatory phantasy against a 'bad' and unloving mother. As such, it is an intra-psychic drama of a child who has been narcissistically wounded.7 Significantly, this wound is due not to loss of the mother by death or absence, but because the mother is emotionally absent even while she is physically present, and therefore incapable of meeting the needs of the developing child.

Mrs. Goodman appears to alienate, rather than bond with Theodora. Consequently, for Theodora, the parental object is split between the 'good' father whom she loves and the 'bad' mother for whom 'her love was sometimes smudged by hate' (p.12). Simultaneously, the image of the female child is split, in Theodora's mind as well as her (m)other's, into the conventionally pretty Fanny, who is loved by the (m)other and who has prospects of a bourgeois marriage, and the plain Theodora, doomed to 'spinsters', who is constantly criticized:

'Oh', she cried, 'Fanny, my roses, my roses, you are very pretty'... 'And Theo,' she said, 'all dressed up. Well, well. But I don't think we'll let you wear yellow again, because it doesn't suit, even in a sash. It turns you sallow,' Mother said. (p.27)

'Turn your toes out, Theodora. And run and do your hair. You look a fright.' (p.40)

The Goodman mother-daughter relationship is an admixture of mutual love and hate. Their interchange when Theodora wins a kewpie doll for outshooting her suitor, Huntly Clarkson, is evocative of the Kleinian child's phantasies of persecution by the 'bad' parental object:

In her hate she would have hewn down this great wooden idol with the grotesque doll in its arms...
'Mother, must you destroy?'
'Destroy?' asked Mrs. Goodman.
'Yes,' said Theodora. 'I believe you were born with an axe in your hand.'(p.121)

Successful individuation, object relations theorists argue, is dependent upon a predominance of good experiences over the bad in the
parent-child relationship. For Theodora, bad experiences appear to exceed the good. Her struggle for a sense of identity is dramatized in her gothic nightmares of someone being struck by lightning, 'a faceless body that she had not yet recognized.... A stale cry came out of the mirror in the passage, choked as if it just could not scream, even in its agony' (p.77).

Not only does Mrs. Goodman alienate Theodora, but she also prohibits bonding with her father: 'Your father is not to be disturbed, said Mother, which gave to his door a certain degree of awfulness' (p.22). Theodora's frustrations at this enforced separation are revealed metaphorically. As she walks outside the forbidden door, 'the pines, when the wind blew, flung themselves at the windows in throaty spasms' (p.23).

Her father's death scene, with its undercurrents of forbidden desire, has Lawrentian overtones. In D. H. Lawrence's short story, 'The Odour of Chrysanthemums', the dead miner's wife and mother compete with each other in fondling the dead man, the beloved husband and child. Surrounded by dead chrysanthemums, symbols of repressed or frustrated desire, they vie with each other to fondle him and perform the last ablution for him. In The Aunt's Story, with the odour of chrysanthemums hanging heavily in the air, Theodora takes the place of her (m)other at her dying father's side. The filial and the erotic converge, as in her flowing nightgown and streaming hair she kisses him and buries her head in his knees:

She would throw her strength against this stone that he kept rolling on her mouth.

'And we are close,' he said. 'It is not possible for us to come any closer.'

But it was for this that she buried her face in his knees (p.85)

Again, despite the Oedipal reverberations, Theodora's relationship with her father may more appropriately be seen as a compensatory measure for rejection by a cold and disapproving mother. As Eileen Starzecpyzel observes: 'mother bond damage, father bond substitution'.

With her father's death, Theodora loses her only refuge against her (m)other's relentless cruelty. Nevertheless, she attempts to salvage a tenuous sense of identity in the role of caretaker to her ailing, but cantankerous mother. James Masterson describes similar patterns of behaviour as 'borderlining' relationships. In this condition, self images and object images 'are not fused but separate and split into rewarding and withdrawing part-units....They call for passive-regressive behaviour which requires the forgoing of the true self and self-assertion'. Mrs. Goodman's thoughts best reveal her sadistic hold on her daughter and Theodora's masochistic state of indenture:
If we could take the hearts of those who do not quite love us and lock them in a little box... Then I would say: Theodora, now that you are hollow, my words will beat on your soul for ever so that it answers regularly as an African drum, in words dictated by myself, of duty and affection. (p.92)

In her social forays with Frank Parrott and Huntly Clarkson Theodora ‘practices’ at being independent. However, her refusal of Huntly’s marriage proposal suggests that she is not yet independent of her mother. She continues to live in the parental home, gratifying her mother’s whims, and generally behaving in a helpless, dependent, unassertive, and asexual manner. However, while she remains docile and compliant on the surface, Theodora’s phantasies reveal her destructive rage towards her ‘bad’ mother: ‘I am guilty of a murder that has not been done, she said, it is the same thing, blood is only an accompaniment’ (p.123).

Theodora’s matricidal phantasies merge with her mother’s ‘actual’ death. Nevertheless, since her prime role in life was that of daughter, with her mother’s death, she loses even this precarious sense of self: ‘she could not say with conviction: I am I’ (p.13). As Phyllis Edelson observes, ‘Mrs. Goodman’s death sets her both free and adrift’, and she embarks on a journey, not with a destination in mind, but with the goal of ‘reconstruction of self’.11

PHANTASY

In the Jardin Exotique the splitting of characters accelerates into an explosion of various doubles of Theodora and members of her family. Characters merge, change and exchange roles with dizzying rapidity, and perspectives become kaleidoscopic. As John and Rose Marie Beston observe, they ‘all have multiple identities, sometimes simultaneously’.12

The appearance on the scene of the young girl, Katina, triggers the onset of Theodora’s metamorphoses into several selves. She ‘had become a mirror held to the girl’s experience. Their eyes were interchangeable, like two distant unrelated lives mingling for a moment in sleep’ (p.142). As Theodora’s desired Other, Katina is a displacement of the desired (m)other. But instead of recognising Katina as the Other, Theodora assimilates her image, thereby blurring the boundaries between self and (m)other in narcissistic merging. Their ‘interchangeable eyes’ and mingling of selves suggest Theodora’s recurring desire to merge with the (m)other.

Katina is a multivalent symbol, an overdetermined or condensed image of many of Theodora’s repressed desires. She serves as a double for the absent Lou, a niece with whom Theodora shares an intimate love; and her licentiousness with General Alyosha Sokolnikov, a father figure, may be read as a projection of Theodora’s desire for intimacy with her own father, even though that desire is prompted by maternal
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rejection. Her terms of endearment for the ageing roué carry sexual innuendoes:

‘Then you do not love me? A little?’...
‘Of course, I adore you. If I did not, I would not kiss you. There!’
‘It is usual also, I believe, to call one’s lover by endearing names’…
‘I shall call you,’ she laughed...
‘I shall call you my Monstera deliciosa.’ (p.219)

Theodora projects her wishes on to Katina, and Katina makes the overtures, both to Alyosha and also to Theodora: ‘We would sit without our dresses, and eat pistaches….And I would kiss you, like this, in the particular way I have for aunts’. Theodora herself remains primly correct, and protests: ‘Go, Katina! It is far too hot’ (p.143).

Theodora’s repressed desires are realised in and through Katina, who becomes both the object and the vehicle of her desire:

In the sun, Katina herself was a small round white flint. That I could pick up and fling, wrapped in my love, Theodora felt, into the deathless, breathless sea… In her arms the child’s body, still limp with sleep, was like her own nakedness. Their hearts beat openly and together… (pp.143-144)

White’s stream of consciousness technique often reflects, mimetically, the blurring and transcending of boundaries between ‘illusion’ and ‘reality’, ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, self and (m)other. The reader is never certain whether Katina actually spends the night with Theodora, lying down in nakedness, or whether the incident represents a projection of Theodora’s own desires.

A psychological chameleon, Theodora also assumes or introjects the personalities of General Sokolnikov’s ex-wife, his sister and his lover. This is not without its compensations. In conventional society Theodora, a female with masculine attributes, who has a moustache and is skilled at shooting, is derided as ‘the bloke in skirts’ (p.67). But in the Jardin, in Theodora’s phantasy, this is redressed by merging with the persona of Ludmilla, the General’s androgynous sister who ‘took snuff, and spat in the corners, and wore boots like a Cossack under her long skirts’ (p.149). She is rewarded with the (however fleeting) love of the General: ‘But when you are your two selves among the saints, then Ludmilla, I love you best’ (p.152).

As a dual self, Theodora/Ludmilla also feels she is ‘on equal terms with the saints’ (p.151). By means of phantasy, Theodora assumes a position of power and omnipotence. She sits ‘with her legs apart, like a man,….the world was a little crystal ball that she could hold in her hand, and stroke and stroke’ (p.151). But she experiences a return of the repressed when the General evanesces into her mother as s/he belittles her:

‘You would not know,’ said the General… She walked with her hat in her
hands, the big straw with the unfortunate sallow ribbons, she walked to where her mother sat, saying in her small, horn, interminable voice: Here is Theodora, we were discussing whether, but of course Theodora would not know... (p.153)

Theodora not only projects undesirable aspects of herself on to others, but she also introjects what the bourgeois society she lives in considers to be desirable or 'good' aspects of others, in order to win approbation. She identifies with Mrs. Rapallo's daughter, Gloria, who marries well, becomes a Principessa, and remains generous and enchanting. This also compensates for Theodora's guilt at disappointing her mother by not contracting a bourgeois marriage with Huntly Clarkson. But Mrs. Rapallo finally confesses that the Principessa is a figment of her imagination (p.242). Consequently, Theodora's sense of atonement is short lived, and her ontological insecurities persist:

I am yellow and thin, with a slight moustache. I am single, for the same reason, because I am ugly, and because I have never been in a position to buy a husband. (p.207)

Her severely damaged self-esteem is filtered through the prism of her patriarchal society in which female beauty and money are essential commodities for procuring marriage partners.

The beautiful Lieselotte is another of Theodora's avatars or projections. When the precocious and promiscuous Katina, whom Theodora loves, makes overtures to Wetherby, who is Lieselotte's lover, both Theodora and Lieselotte feel spurned and threatened. For Theodora it brings back memories of rejection and emotional persecution by her (m)other. As a projection of the 'bad' part of Theodora, Lieselotte enacts the violence which Theodora feels. Like Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, in a fury sparked by jealousy and hate, Lieselotte hurls a lighted lamp at Wetherby, thus vindicating both Theodora and herself.

Theodora's escape into many forms and her inability to consolidate a sense of self or to form a stable relationship even in her phantasies, are suggestive of Sade, who 'urges transgression of the limits separating self from other, man from woman, human from animal, organic from inorganic objects'.¹⁴ She appears to be loved by a monkey (p.211), claims to be Epaphroditos, the lover of Aphrodite (p.198); declares she is a nun (p.188); an ointment (p.163); is suspected of being a Communist (p.165); becomes a nautilus thief (p.212); a Pale Horse (p.203); a man (p.165); and the General even thinks she is an illusion (p.204); and/or that she is dead (p.204).

As Edelson observes, Theodora appears to be shopping around for a self.¹⁵ Her frenetic appropriations of various forms and personae suggest anxieties over separating self from (m)other. Her blurring of boundaries between self and (m)other, inner and outer worlds, reflects
a persistent longing for regressive union with the (m)other.

MADNESS OR INDIVIDUATION?
In the final section, Holstius appears as the 'good' or idealised parent, who calms Theodora's fears, as her father did. He is prophet and healer, phantasric, ephemeral, other-worldly. He is symbol of the benevolent father-figures in Theodora's life, such as The Man who was Given his Dinner, who appears on her twelfth birthday, whom she 'loved' for it 'made her warm' (p.45), and also of her own father, who taught her to ride and shoot. His clothes have the familiar texture of childhood and smelled of horses, and leather and guns' (p.278). He serves as a literary device to link past and present, to tie up loose ends, and to see that the promise to return, made by the Man who was Given his Dinner, to the little girl Theodora, is kept, in fairy-tale fashion.

The narrative suggests that, through the agency of Holstius, Theodora accepts or integrates various conflicting aspects of her life. Holstius appears as the Great Physician, who heals Theodora, ratifying her acceptance of dualities and reintegrating various elements of her past life and experiences. Doing so also brings the narrative to an end. 16

They entered into each other, so that the impulse for music in Katina Pavlou's hands, and the steamy exasperation of Sokolnikov, and Mrs. Rapallo's baroque and narcotized despair were the same and understandable. And in the same way that the created lives of Theodora Goodman were interchangeable, the lives into which she had entered, making them momentarily dependent for love or hate, owing her this portion of their fluctuating personalities, whether George or Julia Goodman, only apparently deceased, or Huntly Clarkson, or Moraitis, or Lou, or Zack, these were the lives of Theodora Goodman, these too. (p.284)

The crucial point, however, is that while Theodora appears to integrate previously split aspects of self and (m)other, she ultimately fails to recognise and accept the boundaries which separate the self from the (m)other. In her phantasies she merges with and becomes one with a host of (m)others. Otto Kernberg writes that in acute personality disorders,

there is a severe defect of the differentiation between self and object images, and regressive refusion of self and object images occurs in the form of primitive merging fantasies, with the concomitant blurring of the ego boundaries in the area of differentiation between self and nonself. 17

Thus, despite the affirmative images, the novel's conclusion remains ambiguous because ultimately, Theodora is overcome by society and relegated to an insane asylum.
In its oxymoronic conclusion the novel implies that Theodora
emerges as an integrated personality, because of her absorption, via phantasy, of ambivalent characteristics. However, her psychological integration appears to be more a matter of narratorial assertion rather than of demonstration, and demands an act of faith on the part of the reader. What the novel demonstrates is that in the final analysis, Theodora’s phantasies of merger with the (m)other are regressive. The lunatic asylum itself becomes a metaphor for confinement within a (threatening) maternal womb. Thus separation and individuation for Theodora remain illusive and elusive.

The Aunt’s Story offers insights into much of White’s later work, in which the quest for an integrated self or a stable sense of identity continues to be a major theme. In later novels psychological integration often occurs in the protagonist’s death-bed phantasies, suggesting that the process of separation and individuation, is never complete. It remains a potentiality rather than a reality. The Whitean protagonist is engaged in a life-long struggle for individuation, which is seen in object relations terms as ‘constituting a more or less successful process of distancing from and introjection of the lost symbiotic mother, an eternal longing for a symbiotic fusion with the ‘all good’ symbiotic mother, who was at one time part of the self in a blissful state of well being’.18

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Eighth Annual Conference of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas, in April 1993. This essay is also an excerpt of a chapter from my Doctoral dissertation.

1. Patrick White, The Aunt’s Story (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). All page references are to this edition and are included in the text.
3. See Hanna Segal, Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1988), pp.3-5, 11-23. Melanie Klein spelled ‘phantasy’ with a ‘ph’ to emphasize the uniqueness of her view of the infant’s complex unconscious life. Most other theorists use the word ‘fantasy’. Throughout this paper ‘phantasy’ will be used except in verbatim quotations from other theorists.
4. This term refers to a process by which the functions of an external object are taken by its mental representation.
7. Narcissistic wounds are the result of the failure of maternal love.
13. Theodora/Ludmilla is among the first of many androgynous characters in Patrick White’s fiction. Some others are the twins Arthur and Waldo Brown in The Solid Mandala (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), and Laura and Voss in Voss (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), who are presented as the masculine and feminine aspects of each other, and Eudoxia, Eddie, and Eadith in The Twyborn Affair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), who are one and the same person.
16. Despite the ambiguity surrounding Theodora’s individuation, the implied integration of split aspects of self and (m)other at the end of the novel produces a surface gestalt of artistic unity, similar to a process which Anton Ehrenzweig calls ‘sycrreism’, which is a global view which involves the concept of undifferentiation. It also lacks self-criticism and disposes of mundane sortings of experience which fail to satisfy the id. Anton Ehrenzweig, The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1993), pp.6-12, 16-20, 34.