

***Contrivance, Artifice, and Art: Satire and
Parody in the Novels of Patrick White***

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ABSTRACT

This study arose out of what I saw as a gap in the criticism of Patrick White's fiction in which satire and its related subversive forms are largely overlooked. It consequently reads five of White's post-1948 novels from the standpoint of satire. It discusses the history and various theories of satire to develop an analytic framework appropriate to his satire and it conducts a comprehensive review of the critical literature to account for the development of the dominant orthodox religious approach to his fiction. It compares aspects of White's satire to aspects of the satire produced by some of the notable exemplars of the English and American traditions and it takes issue with a number of the readings produced by the religious and other established approaches to White's fiction.

I initially establish White as a satirist by elaborating the social satire that emerges incidentally in *The Tree of Man* and rather more episodically in *Voss*. I investigate White's sources for *Voss* to shed light on the extent of his engagement with history, on his commitment to historical accuracy, and on the extent to which this is a serious high-minded historical work in which he seeks to teach us more about our selves, particularly about our history and identity. The way White expands his satire in *Voss* given that it is an eminently historical novel is instructive in terms of his purposes. I illustrate White's burgeoning use of satire by elaborating the extended and sometimes extravagant satire that he develops in *Riders in the Chariot*, by investigating the turn inwards upon his own creative activity that occurs when he experiments with a variant subversive form, satire by parody, in *The Eye of the Storm*, and by examining his use of the devices, tropes, and strategies of post-modern grotesque satire in *The Twyborn Affair*.

My reading of White's novels from the standpoint of satire enables me to identify an important development within his *oeuvre* that involves a shift away from the symbolic realism of *The Aunt's Story* (1948) and the two novels that precede it to a mode of writing that is initially historical in *The Tree of Man* and *Voss* but which becomes increasingly satirical as White expands his satire and experiments with such related forms as burlesque, parody, parodic satire, and grotesque satire in his subsequent novels. I thus chart a change in the nature of his satire that reflects a dramatic movement away from the ontological concerns of modernism to the epistemological concerns of post-modernism. Consequent upon this, I pinpoint the changes in the philosophy that his satire bears as its ultimate meaning.

I examine the links between the five novels and White's own period to establish the socio-historical referentiality of his satire. I argue that because his engagement with Australian history, society, and culture, is ongoing and thorough, then these five novels together comprise a subjective history of the period, serving to complement our knowledge in these areas. This study demonstrates that White's writing, because of the ongoing development of his satire, is never static but ever-changing. He is not simply or exclusively a religious or otherwise metaphysical novelist, or a symbolist-allegorist, or a psychological realist, or any other kind of generic writer. Finally, I demonstrate that White exceeds the categories that his critics have tried to impose upon him.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 1
Chapter One	
History and Satire in <i>The Tree of Man and Voss</i>	p. 47
Chapter Two	
Satire and Religion in <i>Riders in the Chariot</i>	p. 83
Chapter Three	
Parody and Satire, Art and Artifice in <i>The Eye of the Storm</i>	p. 139
Chapter Four	
Going Back to Go Forward: Degenerative, Grotesque Satire in <i>The Twyborn Affair</i>	p. 184
Conclusion	p. 226
Bibliography	p. 235