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Extreme Place and Metaphysical Experience: the Australian Desert in Patrick White's Voss

Abstract

**Keywords:** Australian Desert; Exploration; Country of the Mind; Voss; Patrick White.

This article investigates the meaning and function of the extreme place of the desert in Patrick White's Voss (1957), whose eponymous protagonist, a German explorer possessed by a god-like delirium, attempts to cross the Australian continent from East to West. By using the narrative frame of the exploration journey, White reworks and reassesses the colonial figure of the conqueror of an alleged "terra nullius" showing how the exploration of the inner Australian continent is actually an exploration of the protagonist's mind. As the prototype of untouched nature, antagonistic to human progress in its vastness and immutability, the desert and its extreme conditions create a perfect setting for Voss's self-testing, and for his proud and mad longing for elevation to a superior state of existence. The desert is perceived by Voss as a blank page on which he can write his obsession, but in the end Voss is stripped bare of his heroic stature and reduced, by means of suffering and hard-won humility, to a human being who is finally possessed by the land he had strived to dominate. At the end of his journey Voss loses his supposedly godlike stature and is faced with the limits and weaknesses of a human being. His death by decapitation represents the loss of his leadership and the conquering of his pride, and allows the reader to rethink the meaning of failure and the implications of knowledge, which is not a matter of geography, but of suffering in the country of the mind.
Extreme Place and Metaphysical Experience: the Australian Desert in Patrick White’s Voss

Anna Lisa Pers

Introduction

White writes beautifully, precisely, and Voss is a heroic, brilliant novel. At its core is a haunting love story between the messianic Voss and Laura Trevelyan, the awkward young orphan he meets in Sydney before his journey. - Richard Rayner, The Los Angeles Times. “The pace of the book, the strength and power of the prose, the tension and dramatic force, were all there, but when the book strikes off into the deserts of mysticism, I am one of those people who would sooner sink home.” - Kylie Tennant, Sydney Morning Herald. “In a sense, the book shows the face of a Patrick White who had doubts about whether to continue writing after his books were largely dismissed in Australia (three of them having been called ‘un-Australian’ by critics).” - Mr. Bonnier.

Plot summary: The novel centres on two characters: Voss and Laura. Despite Voss’s absence and the story intersperses developments in each of their lives. This site

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