

THE THEME OF INTEGRATION IN THEA ASTLEY'S FICTION

by

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H. M. Doyle

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

'I work from life, as I know it, as I have known it'.<sup>1</sup> With these words Thea Astley presents herself as a disturbingly honest observer of human behaviour who is keenly aware of the triumphs and failures of ordinary people as they struggle to develop their human potential. She sees a world in which spiritual values are disintegrating, and no moral directives exist for a society beset by the fear of nuclear war and by political, economical, racial and sexist contention. Against this disordered backdrop she creates her own worlds with irony and compassion. Her personal dramas of small-town misfits gain deeper and more universal resonance as she expounds her central theme, which is that of the need for charity and fraternalism in the face of human cruelty.

Astley's *oeuvre* is substantial and significant. She consistently deals with complex issues, and although all but two of her works are based in Australian society and offer insights into Australian manners, her outlook is international. With her sensibility shaped by a Catholic upbringing and converted to a liberal Christianity, she is well aware of the deprivations of others. Astley is a responsible social satirist with relatively conservative attitudes who exposes the corruptions and contradictions of society with anger, corrosive wit and her own hilarious brand of absurdist comedy.

As her central theme unfolds and develops in each succeeding work other concerns emerge. These are the futility of self-delusion; the problems of perception; the inaccessability of the inner self to others; the power of the imagination; and the notion that time is the element in which we exist and through which we move. However, the main thrust of her enquiry into the causes of human woe lies in her challenge, as it emerges in her texts, to the male-dominated establishment which has manipulated civilization into its present position. She questions the efficacy of a closed, centralized power structure which maintains the control of an *élite* through civic

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1. R.L. Ross, 'An Interview with Thea Astley', *World Literature Written in English*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1986, pp. 264-69.

institutions, political parties, courts, education and the media. This centralized power permits the marginalization of minority groups such as coloured peoples, women and the poor. Astley stresses the irony of a system based on the need to control in a world in which, as her fiction discloses, human beings are patently not in control. Moreover she rejects as divisive any institution founded on hierarchy and distinction.

Astley's fiction as a whole reflects the human desire for an integrated, rather than a divided world. It suggests, also, that she is conscious of reality as a mysterious, fluid process whose indefinability must be accepted, whereas with its code of control the establishment's conception of existence favours an explainable, rigid composition which can be mastered and reduced to strict classification. To Astley such a vision is unrealistic.

In order to accomplish the change from a rigidly stratified society to one based on the idea of fluidity, Astley suggests a change in the human way of seeing and evaluating. Economic power must be devalued, but in a society where male values predominate this will not be easy. The male retains his superior status by making a sharp distinction between man and woman in which woman is seen not as 'different' but as the 'other', a divergence from the norm, and therefore by definition, inferior. Although not founded on any facts concerning innate abilities, certain qualities are traditionally attributed to each gender. The male is associated with power, public life, competition, thought and the creation of structures which uphold aggression and the capacity to kill, while the female is linked with dependence, private life, associativeness, feeling and procreation.

These are the ideas which emerge in the texts. With her vision of a possible alternative future Astley dismantles this closed system of opposition by presenting in her characters evidence that binaries frequently infiltrate each other, that most human beings possess most of the characteristics of these gender principles to a reasonable degree. Insisting on the value of the 'feminine' qualities traditionally repressed by males, she urges that men and women

acknowledge the interdependence of male and female sexual identity, and exercise those intuitive, imaginative, caring aspects of being which have been traditionally associated with the female, as well as those rational, intellectual aspects of being which have been traditionally associated with the male and which all too easily rigidify into power structures. In so doing they will integrate likenesses and differences into a fully functioning 'androgynous' consciousness<sup>2</sup> which may have the power to modify destructive social structures.

I do not mean, in this argument, to suggest that these attributes are, in any realistic way, exclusively those of the female or the male. Rather I am discussing the 'feminine' and the 'masculine' aspects of being as abstract categories in order to facilitate discussion; a kind of abbreviation to avoid the repetition of a series of binary oppositions: intuitive, imaginative, communal, giving as opposed to rational, intellectual, exclusive, conservative and so on. That is why 'feminine' and 'masculine' invariably appear, in this argument, in inverted commas. The term 'androgynous' also denotes an ideal category: that of the integrated, unified consciousness, relationship or structure. To indicate its abstract, ideal quality as opposed to a realistic, physical concept of androgyny, it too appears in inverted commas throughout.

Emerging from the texts, also, is Astley's notion that oppression is caused not only by economic and legal discrimination, but by a breakdown in personal relationships. Integration then, must begin within the self. Her work indicates that she recognises the human need to affirm and protect a particular existence, all the ideas, values and perceptions of the genetically-formed 'I'. Yet it shows, too, that she does not see this self as enclosed but, like existence itself, as a fluid process subject to continuing experience and involved in a web of relationships with other people, with communities and with the natural world. Psychic growth demands the harmonious integration of all the personality's facets, physical, emotional and intellectual, and the development of the individual's talents and

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2. See also M. Smith, 'Australian Woman Novelists of the 1970's: A Survey', in C. Ferrier (ed.), *Gender, Politics and Fiction*, St. Lucia, 1985, p. 213.

capacity for self-knowledge to the full. Becoming involved in this developmental process we acquire a system of values which reveals itself in our behaviour and in our choices, as well as in a sense of purpose and a kindness of spirit which promotes compassion, understanding and a sense of responsibility toward others. Implicit in Astley's work is the idea that without self-knowledge we become deluded. Her texts also infer that unless in each personality the sentient and instinctual levels are directed by spirituality, the self will be unintegrated, and will become a destructive force, contributing its individual discordance to a disintegrating, destructive society.

Thea Astley was born in Brisbane in 1925. There she received her primary and secondary education at All Hallows Convent, and in 1943 began part-time studies at the University of Queensland, gaining her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1947. Meanwhile as a student teacher she taught at primary schools in the suburbs and later in the country towns of Townsville, Imbil and Pomona. In 1948 she married Jack Gregson and left for Sydney where she joined the New South Wales Education Department, teaching English at Drummoyne Boys' High, Strathfield Girls' High and Cheltenham Ladies' College. Her only child, Edmund, was born in 1955. She became senior tutor in English at Macquarie University in 1968 and Creative Arts Fellow in 1978, the year in which she was appointed to the Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts. In 1980 she retired from University teaching and with her husband moved to Kuranda in North Queensland, writing full time except for some months in 1981 when she taught Australian Literature at a Danish University. Wanting to be closer to their son, who lives in Sydney, the Gregsons moved to the south coast of New South Wales in 1985.

Astley's grandfather, Canadian-born Con Lindsay, and her father, Cecil Astley, both journalists, fostered her love of language which showed itself early in life in verse published in *All Hallows Magazine*, while her writing talents were further encouraged when at eighteen, she became associated with a group of young writers who published a magazine called *Barjai*. A few years later she began writing prose and had some short stories accepted by the magazine of the University of Queensland. She completed the novel, *Girl With a Monkey*, in 1956 and when it received a commendation in a competition conducted by



*The Sydney Morning Herald*, Angus & Robertson decided to publish it, although not until 1958. She continued to write, with poems appearing in *Australian Poetry* and short stories in *Coast to Coast*, a series of anthologies of short stories. She edited a volume of *Coast to Coast* in 1969-70.

In 1960 the novel *A Descant for Gossips* appeared, a work which The Australian Broadcasting Commission adapted for television in 1983. A Commonwealth Literary Fund grant in 1961 allowed Astley time to write *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962) which was co-winner of the Miles Franklin Award, and another Commonwealth Literary Fund grant in 1964 assisted with the writing of *The Slow Natives* (1965). This book won both the Miles Franklin Award and the Moomba Award for literature. *A Boatload of Home Folk* (1968) was followed by *The Acolyte* (1972), and its successor, *A Kindness Cup* gained the Age Book of the Year Award. *Three Australian Writers*, a critical study of Bruce Dawe, Barbara Baynton and Patrick White, and *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* a collection of interrelated short stories, appeared in 1979 with the latter winning the James Cook Foundation of Australian Literature Studies Award. *An Item From the Late News* was published in 1982, *Beachmasters* followed in 1985, and in 1986 Astley was awarded the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal for her continuing contribution to Australian literature. *It's Raining in Mango* (1987), another set of linked short stories, is the latest addition to her impressive body of work.

Although she cannot be described as an aggressive feminist, from her first novel Astley has displayed anger at the lot of women. However, she is an independent writer whose protest against modern society is made not in the cause of feminist politics, but in the expression of 'feminine' values and beliefs. The oppression of women by the power structures which support male domination is only one element of her overall enquiry into human relationships. Moreover, implicit in the fact that she turns her ironic gaze on both men and women is the recognition that all men are not sexist and all women are not admirable.

With this reservation, however, she voices her resistance to the established powers through characters who denounce the male-dominated system, and she stresses her refusal to rest in the complacency of society's inherited certainties by inserting in the texts ironic reversals, contradictions, disruptions, paradoxes, unorthodox syntax, punctuation and word-forms, as well as that most potent form of subversion, comedy. She emphasizes also the perplexities of perception by concealing the text's point of view and by refusing to resolve ambivalences and ambiguities, so frustrating the reader's tendency to assign meaning and make final judgements. She defies the concept of reassuring closure with lacunae and open endings.

Her style is agitated and energetic, ranging from the elaborately figurative writing of the early books to the spare prose of *A Kindness Cup* and reaching a happy balance between the two in the wry and lively short stories of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* and *It's Raining in Mango*. Integrating her work are recurring places, musical and religious terms, imagery of disintegration and integration, and characters who develop as they re-appear. Astley delights in language, 'man's greatest invention',<sup>3</sup> which she values as more than a mere system of signs. Comparing it to modern technological inventions she claims:

These things are nothing beside the fact  
that 26 symbols in various combinations  
on paper can reduce the reader to laughter  
or tears. I'm sentimental about language -  
the structure, the art of it. I find words  
endlessly entertaining.<sup>4</sup>

Hers is a recognizable voice, self-conscious at first but increasingly assured with each work. As her technical facility improves her dialogue, always well-balanced with descriptive passages, becomes brilliantly realistic.

Astley has a strong sense of place and she creates backgrounds which reveal no trace of contrivance or artificiality. Although in *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* she points out that peace of mind is not dependent on any one place but must be attained within the self in

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3. T. Astley, 'The Higher Illiteracy', *The National Times*,  
September 29-October 4, 1975, p. 13.

4. *Loc. cit.*

*It's Raining in Mango* she acknowledges the individual's need for harmonious integration with one home place. She also depicts emotional states accurately, building her characters more often from observation and inference than from inner consciousness, and she is more interested in character interaction than in plot. Sensitive to the potential havoc lurking beneath the most ordinary situations, she has an exceptional ability to communicate simultaneously external and internal turmoil. She accomplishes this by building up a menacing atmosphere whose tensions must climax in either explosion or disintegration. She places her protagonists in circumstances which initiate frictions with other characters, and which confine and pressurize them to a point where they must make moral choices and either break out or succumb.

It is the purpose of this study to analyse the texts and to offer an interpretation of the vision which emerges. It argues that Astley sees a world in which human aggression is fostered by centralized power structures which divide cultures, races, sexes and classes; that she believes that any amelioration of human suffering must begin with the everyday actions of ordinary people as they replace the concept of divisiveness with one of fluid integration. This study suggests that the author views this process of integration in the following manner. It begins within the self; it entails integration of the self and society; and it demands the interaction of diverse cultures in global fellowship. Her texts reveal that she regards this process as a prime factor in the nourishment of the individual's latent spiritual qualities which express themselves most significantly in toleration of the self and of others. This study maintains that Astley's vision encompasses a world which must be directed by such spirituality if society is to have any chance of becoming a system of communication founded on common meaning and purpose, shared experience and values. Only then will human cruelty be replaced by forgiveness and charity.

Selection is necessary because of word length. I have chosen to omit *A Boatload of Home Folk* and *Beachmasters*, the two novels which deal more with Pacific experience, and to concentrate on those which are set in Australian society.