

A ring that's lost; is there something better?

Patrick White's management of plot in *A Fringe of Leaves*

The central figure in *A Fringe of Leaves* is Ellen Roxburgh, a Cornish lass whose name before marriage was Gluyas. As a girl she never travelled very far from home, even though her mind echoed with snippets of a tale that Cornwall's given the world – that of Tristan and Isolde, or Tristram and Iseult, if that's the way it's come to you. The famous lovers haunt White's novel, though it's only a delicate colouring, not a framework of reference. Tristan was in charge of a ship, the ship was bringing Isolde to Cornwall where she would marry King Mark ... but a mysterious passion swept up the bride to be and the man in charge of her, because they drank a love potion. One wonders just what it is that causes a story to be adopted, and adapted, by the general populace. Something in the imagination wants to be fired up, and it seeks out the flames, the fuel, that it needs, it adapts stories in all sorts of ways to bring about the events which the world hasn't had the goodness to give it. Actuality restrains imagination, but that dreaming, speculative, story-making part of the mind is forever hammering anvils, blowing pipes, trying to make the world dance to a music that comes from nowhere but within.

Ellen Gluyas is chosen by Austin Roxburgh to be his bride, and this she becomes, though, from the deft and natural way she slips into her humbler way of talking, we know that the change is on the outside, mostly, and that the farm girl is still there, strong, wise,

giving her something she can fall back on when she needs a way out of situations which a higher level of civilisation has created but cannot resolve.

Civilisation, its limits, virtues, failings and alternatives, hovering close to it in almost every time and place, is, I think, the subject of this book, perhaps White's most attractive, most gently human work. We know that he built it on the story of Eliza Fraser, a white woman who was shipwrecked on the Queensland coast, got to shore, lived with the black people for a time, and managed to get herself back to ... civilisation (there it is again!); after which her story fades in the minds of those who create, and listen to, stories. White is a maker of stories too, and it isn't easy to surprise his intentions because he has a way of moving his narratives this way and that in order to accommodate his wishes as a novelist without putting the emphases in places where the public is used to finding them. This makes his novels novel, ingenious, difficult to pin down because of their refusal to assert some thesis that the reader can use by way of mounting a counter-argument. I sometimes think that the reader of a White novel is like an aboriginal tracker, studying broken twigs or marks on the ground before circumnavigating a rocky patch to discover the toe signs where the quarry has set off again on ground where s/he can be tracked a little further.

Even so, as I said in an earlier essay, Patrick White knows where he's going, and the broad outlines of his books are clear enough, so

let's break *A Fringe of Leaves* into sections that we can then explore a little more carefully.

There's Cornwall, England, in the time before Ellen Gluyas married Austin Roxburgh, and then the time they lived together until Austin decided he wanted to visit his brother, Garnet, who was sent, years before, to Van Diemen's Land.

There's Van Diemen's Land, brother Garnet, and his life in a settlement that's crude, cruel, uncouth, yet possessing also a genteel layer of only partially pretended refinement. In White's mind, I think, and if I read him aright, pretence is an important form of reality.

There's disgust in both Austin's and Ellen's mind with Van Diemen's Land, so they move to Sydney, and then, on a boat called *Bristol Maid*, they set sail for England. There's a voyage which gets them some way north of Brisbane, where their ship is wrecked on a reef, and the crew, with their two passengers, take to a pinnace and a longboat, and the two boats manage, separately and after considerable struggles, to reach land.

There's an encounter with black people, Austin and the other whites are killed, while Ellen survives, to start a new life as the lowliest of the tribe which has chosen to include her. Ellen is as lost as anyone can be.

There's a long and central stage of the book wherein Ellen realises that one of the natives is actually an escaped convict, and she throws in her lot with him. They slip away from the tribe and make their way south, together, one might say as man and wife except that Ellen's wearing a fringe of leaves, and her wedding ring,

Austin's ring, has a piece of vine threaded through it, so she's still 'married', somewhere in her being, to the husband and the world she's lost ...

There's a moment when Jack Chance, the convict, whom Ellen loves, by now, with a richer love than she's felt before, gets her to the patch of cultivated soil which she has to cross in order to rejoin the civilisation she belongs to. She starts to cross, calling on Jack to join her, but he darts back into the bush, scared of floggings and perhaps other aspects of civilisation ...

There's the period, beautifully managed by White in his descriptions and analyses, when Ellen's back with the family of the officer in charge of the Moreton Bay (Brisbane) settlement; she's regarded as a rarity, a precious object recovered, and a person made puzzling by the ordeal she's been through and seems unwilling to share. If contrast is a form of closeness, she's closest to a man called Pilcher, another survivor of the *Bristol Maid*, who's built a tiny and no doubt primitive chapel as his way of coming to terms with what he's been through. His return to civilisation helps us understand Ellen in a way that wouldn't otherwise be available.

There are two other add-ons to the tale, one at the beginning, a prelude, hardly more than some scraps of overheard conversation, but very Shakespearian in its way of getting things moving, and another at the very end. More of those anon.

So, in the eight preceding paragraphs, I've broken the book into sections; it would be tempting to say that I've given you the plot, but I don't think that's so. In the third essay in this series I said that plot is a form of social understanding, and in my essay about

The Eye of the Storm I tried to make clear how Patrick White insists on showing the world as he sees it. White's shall I say *noticeable* style – I think I mean notorious – ensures that the reader is too hard at work with what's going on and what's being said about it to have mental power left over to engage the writer in dialogue. The energy flow is all one way – from White to the reader. One outcome of this is that the very term 'plot' is a dubious proposition in considering White's works. One feels that it's there, but not in the form we associate with a two-sided agreement. I propose now, and therefore, to look at some of the sections of the book outlined above in order to see, or try and see, what White is doing with the various stages in order to make them meaningful to himself, before he shares these understandings with his readers.

The book begins in Sydney. The Merivales and a Miss Scrimshaw are returning home after visiting the *Bristol Maid* to farewell Austin and Ellen Roxburgh, on the eve of their return to England. Miss Scrimshaw is wearing brown, and she's fated to be clothed in the same colour when she reappears at the end of the book. Brown. Her name, the Oxford Dictionary tells us, is 'a general name for the handicrafts practised by sailors by way of pastime during long whaling and other voyages, and for the products of these, as carvings on bone, ivory, shells and the like.' Sailors are a world of their own, separated for long periods from what's happening in the lands they've left or are heading towards. Sailors are connected to civilisation but not entirely of it. Miss Scrimshaw is unmarried, though it's a woman's job to continue civilisation more or less as she finds it. She's still unmarried as the book ends, which means

that her life as a woman forms an obvious contrast with Ellen's, and the purpose of White's opening, I think, is to let us overhear the thoughts in the minds of the Merivales and Miss Scrimshaw as they reflect on the people they've farewelled. Miss Scrimshaw says that Mrs Roxburgh 'reminded me of a clean sheet of paper which might disclose an invisible writing – if breathed upon.' Under questioning from Mrs Merivale, she adds, 'Every woman has secret depths with which even she, perhaps, is unacquainted, and which sooner or later must be troubled.'

A little later, Mr Merivale, 'for the second time that afternoon, launched an unexpected remark. 'I wonder,' he said, 'how Mrs Roxburgh would react to suffering if faced with it?'

In raising these questions White is both pondering and stating his theme. Having done so, he can conclude his opening:

The occupants of the carriage were rolled on into the deepening afternoon, and finally, like minor actors who have spoken a prologue, took themselves into the wings.

The scrutiny, we discover when Chapter 2 opens, has been mutual.

Still at his book, Mr Roxburgh laughed through his nose and said, 'I don't believe those two women were in any way satisfied.'

'Mrs Merivale and Miss Scrimshaw would like to be thought ladies.'

Corrected, Mr Roxburgh began again, 'The two ladies would have preferred to find us unhappy, in ourselves and our ventures.'

'I expect, on leaving us, they discovered every reason why we should be feeling desperate,' Mrs Roxburgh answered, 'and will entertain each other this evening going over our wretched prospects. It's their profession, surely, to scent unhappiness in others.'

So Ellen and even to some extent Austin Roxburgh are fated to attract scrutiny. Yet Austin is an inactive man, lacking his wife's imaginative connection with those around her, and prone to withdraw to books, especially Virgil, when he might be attending to the world's opportunities. In an attraction of opposites, or is it complementarities, he's fond of his brother Garnet, who was sent, years earlier, to Van Diemen's Land. The reasons for his transportation, if we may use this term for a gentleman, are not entirely clear but there is a feeling that the family's 'name' would be safer if he were removed to the other side of the world. It is a case, I think, of civilisation protecting itself from someone who may stain it in some way. White has chosen his point of beginning well, the moment when the Roxburghs are sailing for home; it means that those parts of the narrative which deal with the coming together of Austin and Ellen, and their encounter with Garnet in Van Diemen's Land, are already in the past. In their ship, as it waits to leave Sydney, they are content with each other, and yet the questions raised by the Merivales and Miss Scrimshaw are fresh in our minds. Is Ellen Roxburgh fated to learn things as yet undiscovered? What will suffering do for her? The questions, note, are about Ellen, rather than her husband. Ellen is the unknown quantity and it's the experience of the shipwreck, of being a castaway, of losing her husband and being rescued, saved – or is she? – by another, that

will give her a richness of being which she could never have found within the confines of civilisation.

This raises the question of what we, or Ellen Roxburgh, or anyone, can do with experiences that lie outside the understandings, the social agreements, of our own civilisation. If an understanding, an apprehension, a realisation, comes to us from outside the experiences of the civilisation we belong to, what can we do with it beyond clinging to it stubbornly, sure that it's valuable even if we can't exchange it for any known currency? It may be enriching us internally, out of sight, but can we be entirely convinced by any thought we can't share with others? These are difficult questions and we can see Patrick White dealing with them as best he can in the final chapter when Ellen has crossed the paddock which causes Jack Chance to turn back, and re-entered the colonial world of Moreton Bay.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us return to Hobart and its surrounds, before we take that fateful voyage on the Bristol Maid.

White's writing is never simple. I have already likened the reader's task to that of the tracker following signs and symbols. (There are symbols all over the place in White's novels, the most obvious in this book being the ring that Ellen attaches to her person via a piece of vine, and carries, reassuringly, through the weeks when she is living with the blacks, and then escaping from them with Jack Chance; on the last day she discovers that the ring is gone. This *has* to mean that a certain way of thinking about Ellen is no longer valid, but White's narrative methods are so allusive, so

much a matter of hint and speculation, that one can never be certain where one is, which of course causes us to wonder whether White himself knows where he is or what's around the corner. The shape of his novels reassures us that he does, but the *detail* provides us with constant cause to doubt.)

The faintest signs and symbols ... The reader will be aware by now that I am not entirely comfortable at being controlled by Patrick White's release and withholding of information required by his readers. I find myself stepping back from the controlling detail to speculate on the way things are put together, close to each other or far apart. The most instructive investigation of this sort I can make in *A Fringe of Leaves* is the strange proximity of two sexual engagements, Ellen Roxburgh with Garnet Roxburgh, and, only a few hours later, Ellen with her husband, Garnet's brother Austin. As usual, White prescribes these encounters for us rather than allowing us to find a meaning in them for ourselves. The question that presses on me when I read this section is why the novelist manages his book so that the only time when the sexual intimacy of Ellen and Austin is shown to us follows closely on Ellen's decision to go riding on a black horse called Merle, an outing which ends with a fall, or a tumble, shall we say, at which point Garnet Roxburgh 'rescues' or 'assists' Ellen in an outburst of mutual lust. The two brothers are chalk and cheese but they are also close: similar in being dissimilar, close in being opposites. Yet Austin appears to have very little idea of what sort of man Garnet is. Very early in Ellen and Austin's stay with Garnet, Ellen hears sounds upstairs, for which there can be no other explanation than that Garnet is in sexual merry-making

with Holly, a young girl released from institutional life to be his household servant. That we are correct in thinking this comes clear a few days after Ellen's engagements with the two brothers. Austin and Ellen have been taking their meals separately, but Austin suggests that his wife should dine with his brother, and she does so, without any willingness to be close to the man with whom she has on one occasion been very close indeed.

Or has she? This is the question White is trying to prise open, so that he can answer it in the second half of his book.

So Ellen is at table with Garnet, and soup is served, followed by fish. The soup is brought in by Holly, about whom the book has two more things to tell us. First:

Holly too, was red about the eyes and had lost something of her original gloss. Under the shapeless grey gown, Mrs Roxburgh thought she could detect an ampler figure.

Mrs Roxburgh is right, and – second - Holly is returned to the institution from which she was borrowed, having completed her 'service'. Garnet would like continued use of Ellen as lover, however destructive of his fraternal situation that might be, but Ellen understands herself better than he does. Her brief excursion into the fields of lust has returned her to the husband she loves, within the bounds of restraint which are part of his character.

So why is Ellen shown in sexual intimacy with each of the brothers, only a few hours apart? We are clearly meant to bracket these intimacies, and consider them together. Why? I think there is an answer, strange as it may be. Ellen conceives a child on the day

in question; it's born, or rather still-born, in the longboat after the shipwreck, and it's committed to the ocean after a brief service read by Captain Purdew, almost the last time he's shown as somewhere near competent in *his* journey through *A Fringe of Leaves*. The child, I think we are meant to understand, is the child of *both* brothers, or, a little more accurately, it is a child conceived when the mother's plane, or continuum of business, is one that stretches from the limited, withdrawn, bookish, though tender Austin and his lustful, grasping, more hot-headed brother Garnet. The death and burial of the child is the ritualised termination of Ellen's existence on the plane that stretches from brother Austin to brother Garnet.

Austin, Garnet, and the child all have to be experienced, and then gotten rid of, before Ellen can be ready for what happens with Jack Chance. Ellen meets him when the black people of (I presume) Fraser Island take themselves, and Ellen with them, to the mainland in bark canoes. He is notable for having a hatchet in his woven belt. The blacks try to get hold of it, but this agile man leaps out of their way, chanting gibberish which makes them laugh.

Then Ellen, during one of his leaping turns, is close enough to see that the scars on his body are not tribal incisions on the chest, but a welter of healed wounds on his back. A little later, when she has gone into the scrub to piss (White says 'urinating') she sees him approach.

She saw that, in spite of his size and strength, his shanks, his dangling hands, were trembling.

To help him out of his difficulty she said to him in her native tongue, 'Where's tha from, eh?' then, on remembering

who she was supposed to be, she sternly asked, 'Are you a Christian?'

The man stood mouthing sounds, like an idiot, or one in whom time or shock had destroyed his connection with the past.

Her hopes shrank. Where she had glimpsed for an instant the possibility of rescue, it now seemed as though it was she who must become the saviour, not of a rational being, but a lost soul.

As the fifty superb pages that follow will show, each will be the saviour of the other, but at the last, when Ellen crosses the cultivated patch on the outskirts of the Moreton Bay settlement, she will cross it alone, and Jack, for that is the name he gets out eventually, will turn back to the bush. Ellen will plead – far more insistently than Captain Lovell expects – for a pardon to be granted Jack Chance, and Captain Lovell transmits her plea together with his own recommendation, but the reader, indeed the very book itself, knows that Jack's moment of salvation was lost when he hesitated. Ellen, covered in filth and crawling on her knees, is received by the white farmer and his wife, while Jack Chance returns ...

... to what? White's book gives us no more answer than the Eliza Fraser story. There is not even a line or two of speculation as to whether Jack will be able to rejoin the natives he's adopted – or was it the other way around? Will they have him back? Will they be happy that he's solved the problem of the white woman, or will they resent him for what he's done? Can he leave a tribe and come back? Will he feel, even if he's readmitted, that the love he's been

given by Ellen, the intimacy and the adoration, have finally purged him of the horror of betrayal by Mab, the harlot he killed in England, a crime which sent him to the bottom of the world to receive the flogging which gave him the welts by which Ellen realised that she was looking at someone who might get her out of her difficulty? Ellen's confusion in the presence of Emily Oakes, who receives her with warmth and patience at the edge of settlement, is considerable, and lasts so long that we must conclude that the experience she's been rescued from, if that's the word, has had permanent effects.

So what about Jack Chance? Hasn't he been through something quite as great? How will he understand it, he who will never be surrounded by kind, curious, sympathetic inquiries and offers of help? Was he fated to have, only ever, the one chance? Was he lost in the split second when Ellen started to cross the civilised field, and he held back? Answer, he was. He was too afraid to return, because his experience of civilisation was much nastier than Ellen's. He feared. It had little enough attraction for him.

This means that he must return to the black people, on whatever terms he can persuade them to make, for nobody can live alone. This means that White leaves him in his moment of turning back, because *A Fringe of Leaves* is about one civilisation, and the *absence* of civilisation surrounding it. White would, I'm sure, have been as aware as anyone that the aboriginal people had the world well sorted out in their minds, but he doesn't attempt to show what their world was like, its rules, its management, its systems, stories, practices and currents of feeling, above all its memories recreated in its daily practices. Civilisation, in his book, is our civilisation, and

the civilisation of the *other* people is a puzzling territory. It would take another book to explore that, and another writer, possibly one that's not been born.

I realise that I have pulled this essay to the brink of our country's biggest problem, that of understanding – first – and then reconciling the differences between the ancient, persisting cultures of the aboriginal people and those of the recent invaders. Since my essays only occupy a few pages and the problem will be with us for centuries, let us return to the point where my analysis diverged from the book, the moment when Ellen Roxburgh – with her wedding ring on one of those tendrils that form her fringe – and Jack Chance recognise that each, now, is in the hands of the other.

They are in a strange predicament. The black people they've left may or may not be in pursuit. They have a long way to go. They'll have food and water only if they find it for themselves. Each depends on the other, but this makes no allowance for letting go of their own responsibility for themselves. They are two individuals, each must perform at his/her peak, yet they are also one being. They can support each other, but neither can make any progress without the other. Are they both heading for the same place? Yes? No? Or they don't know?

The last. They only find out when Ellen starts to cross the field, and Jack turns away. It might have been otherwise, we must allow, yet one suspects that the test she was bringing him to face was one he was always going to fail. Was his journey with her, his travel, guidance and support, only self-sacrifice for her benefit? Possibly, yes. Did she burden him with responsibility for getting her back to

where she, at least, would be well-regarded? My answer is that she didn't intend it thus. The burdens were equal, Ellen would have said; each had the weight of the other to carry. And this was how it was that they came to love as they'd not loved before.

Love. Each is doing something for the other. Jack is guiding Ellen back through scrub she doesn't know, to the civilisation she thinks she wants to rejoin. She welcomes this. She supports him in every way she can. She too is leading him back. He's a good man, she knows, and she will have him pardoned. That will be his reward for what he's done for her. Those stripes on his back will be covered with a shirt. His qualities will be seen. All this, of course, depends on 'civilisation' doing what's required of it by two filthy creatures stumbling out of the bush, and this, of course, cannot be guaranteed. Ellen and Jack are safe with each other, then, while they are in the bush, pursuing their journey. Journeys derive their meanings from what happens along the way, but journeys also end, and the ending is the final meaning of the journey. What happens last is what counts most.

Or is it? There is a marvellous passage when Jack asks Ellen if she sings. She says she doesn't, but a moment later she recalls:

When first I met thee, warm and young,
There shone such truth about thee
And on thy lips such promise hung,
I did not dare to doubt thee.
I saw thee change, yet still relied,
Still clung with hope the fonder,
And thought, though false to all beside,
From me thou couldst not wander ...

Trudging along behind him, she remembers another song, 'from farther back', White tells us:

Wee Willie Winkie
Run through the town
Opstairs and downstairs
In 'is nightgown ...

Jack calls out to ask why she's stopped, and she says it's his turn. 'Songs was never much in my line,' he tells her, but he could imitate the bird calls. That's how he earned his living, by trapping and selling birds. 'Presently,' as White tells us, 'he began to demonstrate his talent.' Out of him pour the trills, the notes, the warbling of the birds he knew, back in England. If Miles Franklin had written the passage, he would have been likened to a lyrebird, but he isn't, he's a man as far from the world he belongs in as it's possible to be. Like Ellen, he's out of place, and this is brought home to them a little later.

In spite of her exhausted blood and torn feet, everything in fact which might have disposed her to melancholy, she was throbbing with a silent cheerfulness; until, from somewhere in the distant sunlight, an actual bird announced his presence in a dry, cynical crackle such as she associated with the country to which she and the convict were condemned.

They are together, then, Ellen and Jack Chance in a country to which neither belongs. It surrounds them, and they are finding their way, supporting each other. They are by now in love, certainly as White understands it. This is not the operatic love of Verdi or Puccini, a cascade, a torrent of powerful lyricism flooding from the

throat to the stars; this is a mutual dependence, a willingness to give, support, listen and accept, to allow the other to do whatever comes to mind, in the certainty that both are desperate to make the best of their situation. The journey itself is an act of love, the journey is defined by both the path it takes and the inevitability of its approaching end. When the journey ends, everything will change. Ellen will cross the cultivation, will fall on her knees to crawl the last few yards, and Jack will return to the bush.

Ellen will be taken in, and will begin the long process of working out what's happened to her, and where she is now.

Civilisation will look at her, and try to work out what it sees.

Jack will return to mystery, discarded by the story-teller who brought him into being.

Ellen will think of Jack, often, and will plead his case so strongly before Captain Lovell that he will recommend to his superiors that a pardon be granted to the man who helped the white woman ...

... but what will that do for Jack, who's taken himself away from the civilisation that Ellen's re-adapting to? Nothing. Ellen pleads because she must. Jack's goodness has returned her, filthy but safe and sound, to where she half-wanted to be. What she really wanted, perhaps, was for their journey to go on, but journeys end. It's their nature. New starts have to be made, and Ellen doesn't find hers easy.

She speaks to Pilcher, the other survivor, and looks at his chapel. It is, in its way, an embodiment of what's happened and one senses that he'll never be able to live far out of sight of it. He's a prisoner, then, of the journey he made, and he'll never get away from what

happened. Will Ellen make a fresh start? Will new people, beyond the chapters of the book, write new chapters in her life?

Let us turn to the concluding pages.

A boat arrives at Moreton Bay and it's going back to Sydney. Ellen is to travel on it. Captain Lovell decides that his wife and children should have a break from tropical heat, so they will go too, and with them Miss Scrimshaw, to assist. (Miss Scrimshaw is still wearing brown, which, I think, is White's encoded way of telling us where she stands in the marital stakes.) Also travelling on the boat will be Mr Jevons, a prosperous merchant from England, where he has three children, though he is now a widow. Marriage-makers, and those who see in the management of others' emotions a purpose for their own lives, must look on him with joy because ... do you need me to explain? Mr Jevons needs, and Ellen Roxburgh needs, at least in the minds of those who have no idea where her experiences, and her thinking about them, have placed her. The group, including Mrs Lovell's quarrelsome children, gather in the saloon to take tea. Mr Jevons leads Mrs Roxburgh there, offering his arm. The cliché forming in our minds as the likely ending is shattered when Mr Jevons trips on something – even Patrick White isn't sure what it is – and cup, cake and saucer go flying!

Mrs Roxburgh's garnet-coloured garment is stained by tea. Mr Jevons and later Miss Scrimshaw attempt to sponge the silk. Another cup of tea is brought to Ellen by Tom, the son of Mrs Lovell. What on earth is going on? One reads, one re-reads, one scours the cabin floor for signs and symbols. We're not having a happy ending on page 404, but most of 405 is blank, so we're not

going on much longer either. I take it that White's last word is Miss Scrimshaw's thought ...

... human nature cannot but grasp at any circumstantial straw which may indicate an ordered universe.

This is the paradox, then; Ellen's great experience took place outside the ordered universe, and she knows this very well, for after all, Jack, who must often be in her thoughts, has remained outside the ordered universe (of Moreton Bay!). Yet something is happening, at the very end; the appearance, the semblance of order, is being re-stated, even if it's too early to be any use for Mr Jevons, whom White characterises as a bull-frog when he's on his knees trying to get rid of the tea-stain he caused. I think the best way to read this final scene of a book that achieves greatness for long stretches is that Patrick White is slipping away from the action while it's in a state of confusion. He is, perhaps, in closest sympathy with Ellen Roxburgh as he does so.

But what about his readers? Sensing the sudden absence of the controlling author, we realise that we're being left to work things out for ourselves. The writer, having done so much, will do no more. He's leaving us on his terms, just as he's written for us.

I'm registering my complaint as I write this. It's a complaint that's been stored in my head for many pages. It's this. White holds information until he chooses to release it. Example one. The *Bristol Maid* hits a reef. Waves are lashing the sides of the ship. Before long they'll all be in the boats, and who knows what will happen. This is when White tells us, by a brief entry into Ellen's mind, that she is five months pregnant. Her husband Austin, not a particularly

observant fellow, admittedly, but confined with Ellen in a tiny cabin in a tiny boat, has not noticed? The question, already adverted to, as to whose child this is, has either not bothered Ellen (Rubbish!) or has been prevented from arising in the reader's mind by the author's decision to withhold knowledge of the pregnancy.

Example two. When Ellen is dining with Garnet Roxburgh, and their soup and fish have been brought to them by the pregnant Holly, Ellen inquires about two disturbing sounds she heard that morning. A shot, and a scream. She wonders if one of 'these wretches' – the convicts – has been put out of his misery. No, Garnet tells her, the mare, Merle, that threw her, leading to their sexual encounter, 'staked herself so badly it would not have been practical to keep her.' He goes on, 'We can't afford to carry cripples.' The horse is dead. This strikes me as very odd. Garnet is part of a society where the ownership of horses and carriages is a major distinction between those who count and those who don't. In such societies horses are carefully looked after. People, even to the highest levels, are judged by the way they treat their horses. This is one of the ways whereby the lowly can know the quality or otherwise of their betters. Do they know how to treat their horses? Do they care? White gets rid of Merle so swiftly and brutally that the reader must, I think, take it that Garnet is punishing the horse in his frustration at not being able to treat Ellen as he has Holly, the serving girl. Or that is what I think, but White's allusive style, controlling what the reader receives and when, puts me in the position of being unsure.

I realise that I am putting a bad-tempered ending onto an essay that has mostly been admiring, but I find that White is, for me, like the dictator who makes the trains run on time; we are grateful, no doubt, but what else did we lose in order to get this benefit?