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UTTAR PRADESH RAJARSHI TANDON OPEN UNIVERSITY
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Indira Gandhi National Open University



UP Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-08
AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

**SIXTH BLOCK : Contemporary Australian Poetry
(1970 Onwards)**

SEVENTH (a) BLOCK : David Malouf : Remembering Babylon

SEVENTH (b) BLOCK : Jessica Anderson : Tirra Lirra by the River

EIGHTH BLOCK : The Removalists

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MAENI-08 AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Block

6.

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY (1970 ONWARDS)

Block Introduction

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION :

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY (1970 ONWARDS)

When is art contemporary? One answer to that is 'when the moment of production is identical or close to the moment of reception.' In other words contemporary Australian poetry is that which is being composed by poets even while you and I are reading it. The sub-title of this block "Contemporary Australian Poetry (1970 onwards)" reminds us that in this case it is specifically poetry that is written from 1970 to the present day. In other words it is poetry with which you and I more or less share a generation.

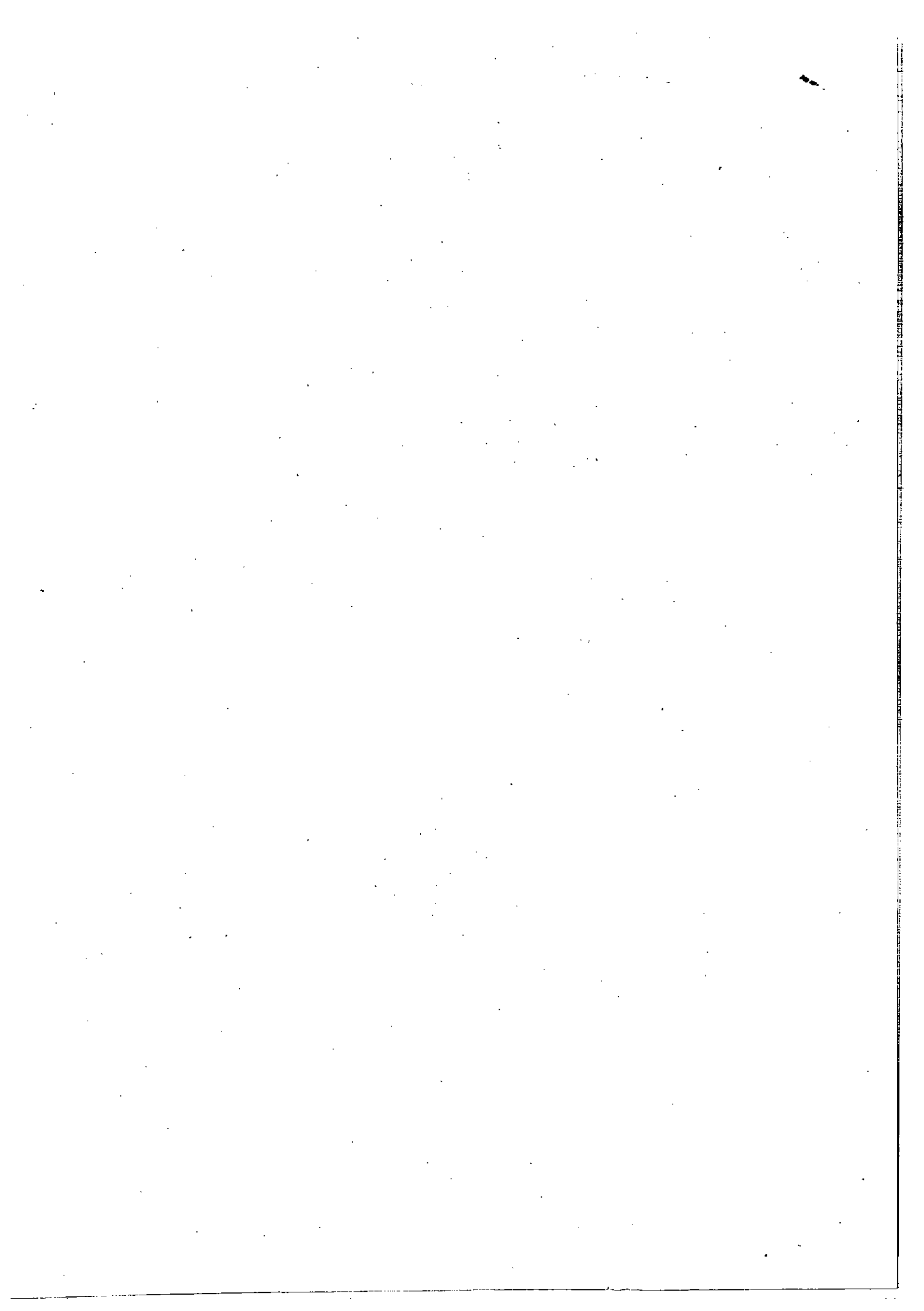
Yet the term 'contemporary' denotes not just a factor of time but a certain quality of mind as well, that has to do with continuing evolution and change. It suggests that geography and history—or organised space and organised time—are in fact being reconstituted before our very eyes. When Kenneth Slessor—whom you study in Block 4 as a modern poet—maps Australia in a certain way we are conscious that something new is being done. To cite his most famous elegy 'Five Bells' he uses this image:

'Night and water / Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats / In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.' Traditionally the Southern Cross to which he refers here is a common cultural marker to denote Australia, the island in the Southern Hemisphere which seems upside-down to eurocentric readers in the Northern Hemisphere. Slessor's modernity is seen in the way he uses this image to evoke a world 'Down Under.' He dissolves a stable image of Australia rather than constructs such a stable image as a traditionalist would have done, since Slessor evokes not the constellation but its upside-down reflection in water. But a contemporary poet such as Les Murray disturbs this image even further:

'The Cross hangs head-downward ... [its] light sprinkles down on Taree of the Lebanese shops, it mingles with the streetlights and their glare.'

For the Australia of today is far more complicated than the Australia of the past. For instance, the Southern Cross of Murray shines on a world that is pluralistic in every sense. As the title of this poem—'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle'—suggests, Australia today evokes the experience of her indigenous peoples. She also includes the experiences of immigrants (the Lebanese shops of the quotation), of suburbia or small town ('the streetlights and their glare') and of many other worlds which I hope to evoke in this Block.

Contemporary is thus more puzzling at times than *modern* because it is—by definition—a 'happening' time. In Unit 1, I will introduce the Australia of today through the political and cultural experiences that have shaped her in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In Units 2 through 5, I discuss the work of specific poets: Bruce Dawe, Les Murray, Chris Wallace-Crabb, Gwen Harwood, Ee Tiang Hong, Kevin Gilbert, Murdooroo Narogin and Gig Ryan. I place each poet in terms of two contexts: the sociocultural context and the literary context of their writing. Please read the prescribed poems between the first and second sections of each unit so as to map the Australia of today as clearly and sensitively as possible. This Block will not only introduce you to eight contemporary poets but will also help you to trace the development and trends in contemporary Australian poetry.



UNIT 1 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

Structure

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- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Political Issues
 - 1.2.1 Republicanism
 - 1.2.2 Vietnam
- 1.3 Social Issues
 - 1.3.1 Immigration
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- 1.4 Cultural Issues
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 - 1.4.2 The World of Women
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Glossary
- 1.7 Questions
- 1.8 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The **primary** objective of this unit is to examine **specific political, social and cultural issues that have shaped Australia from 1970 to the present day**. The **secondary** objective is to use these issues to lead in to an examination of the themes and content of contemporary Australian poetry. **Please try to understand the issues discussed here as ongoing cultural experiences rather than as specific historical events or movements**. Evidence to illustrate and explain these issues will be taken from poems that are outside your course as this is the introductory unit but I will try to make these illustrations as self-explanatory as I can. **Please use the poems only to the extent that they clarify the issues that are being discussed and do not get bogged down with textual detail.**

1.1 INTRODUCTION

On what kinds of history does contemporary poetry in general rely for its issues and themes? And how does it work these different histories into its structure and shape them into poetry? I always think that the short poem by the British poet Philip Larkin (d. 1998) suggests some good answers to these questions.

Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)
Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban
And the Beatles' first L.P.

Up till then there'd only been
A sort of bargaining
A wrangle for a ring
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything.

Then all at once the quarrel sank:
Everyone felt the same,
And every life became
A brilliant breaking of the bank
A quite unlosable game.

The points come thick and fast. First, look at the way in which the subject of the poem — the sexual revolution — is discussed, not just as the sociological phenomenon that it is but more importantly as a cultural landmark. Contemporary poetry thus uses apparently 'objective' or 'historical' data as indications of 'subjective' or psychological change. Next, notice the markers of cultural change that are used. In 1963 the legal ban on D.H. Lawrence's interwar novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was at last lifted in Britain. The result was a sense of artistic freedom from censorship in the world of high culture. In the world of popular culture, the release of the first long-playing record by the Beatles suggested that British pop music had come of age. Then look at the way in which a contemporary poet like Larkin constructs personal space within an apparently public enclosure. The period of growing up, or puberty is the 'shame that started at sixteen/And spread to everything.' But it is evoked immediately after the picture of Victorian prudery where personal feelings are smothered in the interests of public propriety: 'Up till then there'd only been/A sort of bargaining/A wrangle for a ring ...' In this verse, as in the first, the personal enters in parenthesis as it were, after the public world has been mocked. Finally consider the wry appraisal the poem gives its age, as it tries to evaluate the very dubious balance of profit and-loss that characterizes the new liberation. 'Then all at once the quarrel sank;/Everyone felt the same,/And every life became/A brilliant breaking of the bank,/A quite unlosable game.' Perspective isn't always easy to maintain when a poem analyses a movement that is developing simultaneously with the poem itself. Some degree of open-endedness seems necessary since both poem and movement are in a state of ongoing development.

How does contemporary Australian poetry handle the challenge of evoking the Australia of today? Before I engage with specific issues [from 1.2 to 1.4] I will put just one example of such poetry before you so that you can form a sense of some of the issues involved and also of some of the strategies used to deal with them. Here is the first half of a Les Murray poem.

The Broad Bean Sermon

Beanstalks, in any breeze, are a slack church parade
Without belief, saying *trespass against us* in unison,
Recruits in mint Air Force dacron, with unbuttoned leaves.

Upright with water like men, square in stem-section
they grow to great lengths, drink rain, keel over all ways
kink down and grow up afresh, with proffered new greenstuff.

Above the cat-and-mouse floor of a thin bean forest
Snails hang rapt in their food, ants hurry through several dimensions:
Spiders tense and sag like little black flags in their cordage.

Going out to pick beans with the sun as high as fence-tops,
you find
plenty, and fetch them. An hour or a cloud later
you find shirtfulls more. At every hour of daylight

appear more that you missed: ripe, knobby ones, fleshy-
sided
thin-straight, thin-crescent, frown-shaped, bird-shouldered,
boat-keeled ones,
beans knuckled and single-bulged, minute green dolphins at suck ...

Beginning with the title 'The Broad Bean Sermon' the poem evokes sensitively but clearly a specific time and place. First, it is clearly set in a time when belief in orthodox Christianity is at something of a low ebb. The 'preacher' of the sermon (elsewhere thought of as a lecturer) is a patch of beans. The first line stresses that commitment is slack and all are 'without belief.' Note also the selective parody of the Lord's Prayer. The complete line in the Bible is 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' Here however, in the italicised phrase, the beans are represented as saying '*trespass against us*'. In other words they ask to be picked which is a comic inversion of the original prayer. Next the poem is equally clearly set in a time of protest against militarisation. The beans are compared to unenthusiastic raw recruits in the first verse, who are yet to learn to be alert as they turn up in uniform ('mint Air Force dacron') which is slovenly. 1.2.2 will deal with this response to the Cold War crisis in Vietnam, more specifically but for the moment just make a mental note of this point. Then look at the way in which the physicality of the human presence is established. The beans are 'upright with water like men,' they are fleshy and 'keel over all ways.' Feminist poetry in Australia as I hope to show briefly in 1.4.2 and comprehensively in 5.3 is deeply involved with an analysis of what constitutes the male presence. Also, look at how the poem evokes the spirit of place. This is no longer the Australia of Outback and Ocean or even the Australia of city and bush. Although the beans are described in the third verse as if they constitute a forest they could as easily be the product of a vegetable patch in suburbia., The new and complicated tensions of such a landscape will be examined in 1.3.2, in 2.2 and 2.3 but again, just file this possibility away in your mind. What, for instance, do you think could be the consequences of internalising the seascape in this way, as the beans are described as 'minute green dolphins' ? Finally ask yourselves about the quality of life evoked by such a poem. What are the consequences of suburban pastoral, and what kind of a human presence does 'The Broad Bean Sermon' conjure up ? Most of all, what are the issues which challenge contemporary Australia in poems such as this one ?

1.2 POLITICAL ISSUES

1.2.1 Republicanism

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw a growth in popular sentiment in Australia that favoured complete independence from Britain. The South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) lasted from 1954 to 1975 and comprised the following countries: Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines, the United States of America and Britain. It came to an end largely because its member states were unable to agree on a common policy in Vietnam [see 1.2.2]. Britain insisted that Vietnam was not an issue that concerned her directly while Australia supported American intervention in Vietnam. Even before this, Britain's membership of the then European Economic Community (EEC) had been the subject of differences with Australia. The increase in pro-republican sentiment was a feature of Paul Keating's government. Finally, in 1986 the Australia Acts ensured Australia's total independence of Britain. These Acts comprised a Statute of the Westminster Parliament and a Statute of the Canberra Parliament. Until then Britain had retained residual powers of intervention in Australian federal and state matters. With the passing of the Australia Acts the Privy Council in Britain lost the right to hear appeals from Australian courts. The status of Queen Elizabeth II as sovereign of Australia however remained unchanged. She signed the Australia Acts while on a visit to the country in 1986.

In what way—if at all—does this distancing from Britain (once affectionately called 'the Old Country') enter contemporary Australian poetry ? As with all political shifts the translation into cultural influences comes gradually. With a modern poet such as

Judith Wright [whom you will have studied in Block 4] the loosening of ties is anticipated. Look at this extract:

For a Pastoral Family

In England we called on relatives,
assuming welcome for the sake of a shared bloodline,
but kept our independence.
We would entertain them equally, if they came
and with equal hospitality—
blood being thicker than thousands of miles of waters—
for the sake of Great-aunt Charlotte and old letters.

Already the relationship with England is in the process, so to speak, of being put away in lavender or being slipped into a photograph album that is, it is in the process of being relegated to the past. England is there as a point of cultural reference in the memory, not to be dismissed, but also not to be used as a rule. Notice the ring of pride in the phrase 'we ... kept our independence.' It is I think critical to a phase of national and emotional self-sufficiency which deepens even more in contemporary Australian poetry. Here is Gig Ryan's 'Ode to My Car' where the use of England as an available point of reference is quite different.

At least the mechanics are honest.
My poor car, baby, you should be in England,
Not here, withering. Though in the sun you can still,
Not shine, quite, but glow from within like a higher state.
Thin wheel of mine, last forever

Here the dominant sense about England is derived from popular culture. According to popular stereotyping England is more genteel, more refined, than Australia which is earthy and raw. At the same time it seems neither necessary nor desirable to contemporary writers that England be expunged from the national consciousness. As Peter Porter, a poet who is Australian by birth but who lives as an expatriate in England writes, 'You cannot leave England, it turns/ A planet majestically in the mind.' Chris Wallace-Crabbe refers to this emotional bonding shown by Australian poetry to England as representing 'the psychological hegemony of most natal or long-adopted nations.' I'd like however to offer an alternative suggestion. Might it not be possible that the Australian imagination constructs England so as to locate itself more accurately? What do you think?

1.2.2 Vietnam

From 1965 to 1973 there was a prolonged civil war between the Communist state of North Vietnam which was tacitly supported by the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the non-Communist state of South Vietnam supported by the United States of America. On one level, this was a phase of the Cold War—the ongoing struggle for world domination being fought out between the two superpowers and their blocs. On another level though, the Vietnam crisis was a testing time for Australia. The Australian government under Robert Menzies enthusiastically backed American involvement in Vietnam, despite Britain's refusal to intervene [see 1.2.1]. Australia intervened militarily in Vietnam, sending its first batch of combat troops in 1965. In 1968 the Australian military presence in Vietnam was at its strongest. Nonetheless Vietnam was not a cause popular with the Australian public and there was widespread condemnation of the government's policy of military intervention. Protest was exacerbated when Menzies introduced a system of conscription by ballot. In 1972 Australian forces withdrew. But the human cost of Vietnam was crippling.

Over 47000 members of Australia's armed forces had served in Vietnam and more than one-third of them were conscripts. Australia sustained 2900 casualties (people injured or killed in the war). There was also a sense of futility about the entire campaign. With the withdrawal of American support a Communist unification of the country took place in May 1975 with the entry of North Vietnamese troops into Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. Most of all there was a sense of moral bankruptcy. What was the justification behind the intervention of the First World in the affairs of a peasant-based, poverty-stricken region, vastly inferior in terms of money power and fire power?

Much contemporary Australian poetry written in response to the Vietnam crisis is protest poetry. At times specific aspects of the war are condemned and at others the policy as a whole is castigated. Here is an extended quotation from Bruce Beaver. Listen to the specific issues he raises and also to the role he assigns poetry.

Letters to Live Poets

God knows what was done to you.
 I may never find out fully.
 The truth reaches us slowly here,
 is delayed in the mail continually
 or censored in the tabloids. The war
 now into its third year
 remains undeclared.
 The number of infants, among others, blistered
 And skinned alive by napalm
 has been exaggerated
 by both sides we are told,
 and the gas does not seriously harm;
 does not kill but is merely
 unbearably nauseating.
 Apparently none of this is happening to us

I have to live near this, if not quite with it
 Writing to you...
 Writes Vietnam like a huge four-letter
 word in blood and faeces on the walls
 Of government, reminds me when
 The intricate machine stalls
 there's a poet still living at this address,

I'll begin with the specifics. First there is criticism of the twin evils of censorship and propaganda which are both enemies of the public and of the truth. Censorship tries hard to smother the fact of war and to delay the publication of all its attendant brutalities. Propaganda institutionalises deceit. Casualties are disguised and discussion is hampered. Next there is condemnation of what is called 'collateral damage' today, which involves the death of unarmed civilians in military attacks. The horror is heightened by the poet's pointing out that babies are being killed in unspeakable ways. Then there is a castigation of the hideousness of the military measures used. Chemical warfare which is inhuman and barbarous is being used. Finally there is the poet's examination of the role of poetry and the relationship between the poet and the state during a time of unconscionable war. The business of the poet is seen to be that of the keeper of the public conscience. It is his business to keep alive the sense of outrage over the moral filth of such a war, particularly when the state tries to smother such a sense. The poet then is seen to be a humane and moral opponent of the inhuman governmental machine that is the state. Other poets

focus on related aspects of war. Bruce Dawe draws attention to the facelessness and futility of militarism.

Homecoming

All day, day after day, they're bringing them home,
they're picking them up, those they can find, and bringing them home...
they're zipping them up in green plastic bags
they're tagging them now in Saigon, in the mortuary coolness
they're giving them names, they're rolling them out of
the deep-freeze lockers ...

For the military personnel killed in the war, the homecoming in body bags is ironic. They return voiceless, nameless and faceless. Their only identity is derived from their dog tags. But while both Republicanism and Vietnam challenge the contemporary Australian imagination in terms of foreign affairs, it must be said that domestic affairs also bring their challenges and it is these at which you and I now need to look.

1.3 SOCIAL ISSUES

1.3.1 Immigration

In the twentieth century, immigration became a vexed issue in Australia. On the one hand, one concern of government has been that expressed in the phrase 'the white Australia policy.' The 1902 Act supported this policy by requiring a dictation test in a European language to be administered to any potential settler. In 1905 the Act was modified so that the test now covered 'a prescribed European language.' The dictation test continued in use till 1958. The 1925 Act empowered the Governor-General to refuse entry to a group of aliens he might consider undesirable on the economic or the racial score. This Act was hardly used. The Ben Chifley administration (1945 to 1949) continued the White Australia policy.

Simultaneously however another concern of government policy has been to allow immigration when it has seemed enabling. As a member of the Commonwealth, like every other corporate settlement, Australia has been largely the product of generations of immigrants comprising both pioneers and settlers. After World War II the Australian government agreed to the request of the Allies to allow immigration largely from Southern Europe and also to help with the resettlement of ex-servicemen. The challenge of immigration in statistical terms can be gauged from the fact that against the 750,000 immigrants who arrived between 1860 and 1900, 3.5 million arrived between 1945 and 1985.

How has this challenge translated into cultural terms? Look at the following stretch of writing by Ania Walwicz and try to analyse its multi-layered anxieties.

Wogs

They're not us they're them they're them they are else what you don't know
what you don't know what they think they got their own ways they stick
together you don't know what they're up to you never know with them you
just don't know with them no we didn't ask them to come here they come
and they come and they come there is enough people here already now they
crowd us wogs they give me winter colds they take my jobs they take us they
use us they come here to make their money then they go away they take us
they rip us off landlords they rise rent they take us they work too hard they
take us they use us bosses we work in their factory rich wogs in wog cars rich

jews in rich cars they take us they work so hard we are relaxed they get too much they own us they take my jobs away from me wogs they don't look like you or me they look strange they are strange they don't belong here they are different different skin colour hair they just don't look right they take us they land on us there isn't enough space for us now they come they work for less they can work in worse they take anything they work too hard they want from us we have to look after our own here not let them let them go back where they come from to their own they're everywhere they get everywhere you can't speak to them why don't you learn to speak english properly they are not like you or me they're not the same as everybody they change us is your child educated by an australian ?

To me it seems that the speaker is shown to articulate a mindset that is filled with hostility towards immigrants. First immigrants seem to embody the social unease of mainstream culture. Their insistence on group solidarity and on being unlike the dominant cultures angers those who consider themselves the only true Australians. Next immigrants are said to create economic insecurity. They are ready to work longer hours for lower wages and thus push white Australians out of the job market. Then immigrants—once they become rich—reverse roles by employing white Australians and (allegedly) living off their work. Immigrants disturb patterns of land ownership and alter the accepted work ethic. Finally the speaker's xenophobia reaches a crescendo with the overriding anxiety: are 'Australian' children safe from cultural contamination by the wogs? The organising principle of irony in the passage of course is that anxieties—social, economic and cultural—are identical on both sides of the ethnic barrier. To deliberately reduce the significance of ethnic origin the author decapitalises all terms of ethnicity.

1.3.2 Suburbanisation

As a result in part of changing patterns of immigration, the population in Australian cities grew. More than 2 million 'New Australians' entered the country between 1946 and 1966, many from parts of Southern Europe that had high birth rates. The expansion rate of the coastal cities went up. The result was that the demographic face of Australia changed radically. The early poets (1788 to 1901) had explored the outback and ocean in their work and more modern poets examined the dichotomy between the city and the bush. Contemporary poets are confronted by the challenge of suburbia with cities expanding rapidly and spreading outwards through new towns and sub-cities. By 1986 only 16.4 % of the total population of 15.8 million lived outside towns. More than 50 % of the population was concentrated in Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. So the traditional theme of Australian literature, the desire to overcome the overpowering land now alters, in contemporary terms to become a desire to deal with the spread of suburbia, that dismal hinterland which is neither metropolis nor outback but a territory being rapidly overrun by new townships. But how does suburbia alter the quality of life? Bruce Dawe offers an insight into this question in the following sonnet.

Drifters

One day soon he'll tell her its time to start packing.
 And the kids will yell 'Truly?' and get wildly excited for no reason,
 And the brown kelpie pup will start dashing about tripping everyone up.
 And she'll go out to the vegetable-patch and pick all the green tomatoes
 from the vines,
 And notice how the oldest girl is close to tears because she was happy here,
 And how the youngest girl is beaming because she wasn't.

And the first thing she'll put on the trailer will be the bottling-set she never
unpacked from Grovedale,
And when the loaded ute bumps down the drive past the blackberry-canecan
with their last shrivelled fruit,
She won't even ask why they're leaving this time, or where they're heading
for
—she'll only remember how, when they came here,
she held out her hands bright with berries,
the first of the season, and said:
'Make a wish, Tom, make a wish.'

What are the qualities of suburbia that are featured here? First there is its curiously shifting and rootless character. It's true that this particular family is without a permanent home but the suburban landscape itself seems to be descended from no particular source. Next there is the uneasy coexistence of town and country. The caravan and the bottling-set suggest perpetual driving between towns but the fruit-vines and vegetable-patch (for which it's hardly ever quite the season) suggest the country over which the town has sprawled. Then there is the shabby-genteel existence that the family drags out. They only just escape poverty, are vaguely mindful that appearances have to be kept up, and yet never have enough money to put their roots down anywhere. Finally there is the emotional dislocation, the toll exacted by suburbia. The fluctuating feelings of the wife and children are the direct result of this kind of existence.

A more detailed examination of the emotional deprivation that goes with suburban life is offered in the poem 'Hostel' by Evan Jones (b.1931). The scene is a boarding-house (or paying-guest accommodation) where people experience a strangely paradoxical sense of community. Each lodger is alone in his cubicle and yet each, by knowing the isolation of the other, feels he is not the only one to suffer loneliness. This comes through especially in the last verse.

At night I hear the light switch off next door,
The bed creak and the cough and the nose blown,
Feet up and down the corridor, the drone
Of distant voices: and I settle down.
That's why we like it, that's what we're here for:
Nobody feels at night that he's alone.

1.4 CULTURAL ISSUES

1.4.1 Indigenous Culture

The critical point to notice about contemporary Australian poetry is, I think, that it does not so much *represent* the experience of indigenous peoples but *present* it so that it speaks for itself. One strand of writing is clearly nostalgic. It yearns for a Golden Age which it believes to have been more gentle and kind than the present, when the land was as yet in the possession of its original inhabitants. That is very much the tone of Wallace-Crabbe's 'Panoptics' which attempts an intensely romanticized reconstruction of the past.

It was another race
with a slender hold indeed
on the lintel of prehistory:
a grammivorous people,
gentle, bandy, greeneyed,
who left so little mark

on the tofts and crofts of time,
 their adzes unremarkable,
 shards pitifully few
 and their passions blown away
 like the long lavender wind.

Notice the way in which indigenous culture is presented. It is shown to be gentle and delicate. Elsewhere in the poem we are told of the wonder and the magic conjured up by the indigenous people. They are said to mythologise the very heavens giving the stars wonderfully evocative names. At the same time—as seen in the verse above—this very gentleness proves their undoing. Other, more violent cultures erase the presence of the quiet indigenous peoples. Even their hold on material goods is slight and the harsh processes of history erode the fragile remnants and artifacts of their material culture.

At the same time, isn't there something culturally unacceptable in such a perspective? Doesn't there seem to be something condescending in this comparison which occurs elsewhere in the poem: 'It was another race / gentle as rosewater, / libidinous like kittens / who coined such poetry ...?' The lines—for all their plangent nostalgia—seem shot through with cultural superiority. Why should indigenous cultures be seen as similar to the animal world in the unthinking wish to mate? Do indigenous cultures have to be seen as irrational at all? A poem such as the following by Mudrooroo Narogin (the aboriginal name which is preferred by Colin Johnson) provides a harsh but much-needed corrective. The speaker is a member of the indigenous race.

from The Song-Circle of Jacky (1986)

If you want me, walk along a street
 Holding in each dark doorway,
 Nothing, but your middle-class do-gooder fear;
 Then stop, look down, right down—
 An empty bottle, a sprawled black body,
 Pink streaming urine stinking of your wine.
 If you want me, follow the screaming siren
 Rushing pigs to crush our anger—
 Brother against brother till they come
 And hustle away the debris of our hope.
 If you want me, try your grassless parks,
 In solitude, old men drinking life away.

This is a completely different picture of the life of indigenous peoples as it is in the Australia of today. Look at the way in which race-based and class-based oppression work against indigenous peoples. The 'screaming siren' which sounds like squealing pigs is that of a police van to put down discontent among marginalised peoples. The condemnation of the dominant culture is clear in such a poem because it is seen as responsible for the victimisation of indigenous folk. At the same time such writing cannot be described solely as the chant of the victim. Social abuses—alcoholism, street violence, police brutality—are catalogued. These include the cant of middle-class morality, the alienation of city-life and the general despair that is seen as part of contemporary life.

1.4.2 The World of Women

The themes of women's needs and empowerment are not in themselves new. An early evocation of the constraints placed on women can already be found in the work

of Judith Wright whose poem 'Smalltown Dance' is very clear on the subject. 'But women know the scale of possibility, / the limit of opportunity, / the fence, / how little chance/ there is of getting out.' What is radical in contemporary Australian poetry is the refusal to set parameters for that which is acceptable in women's experience. There is a complete setting-aside of boundaries, even physical boundaries. A good example of this radicalism is Fay Zwicky's 'To a Sea-Horse'. The sea-horse—a species in which the male rather than the female helps to hatch and rear the young—is used to explore the possibility of the reversal of gender-determined roles. Owing to a biological quirk the eggs of the sea-horse are hatched in a pouch beneath the tail of the male of the species. This quirk allows the poet to question stereotypical expectations about the roles of the male and female at the very outset. 'Snouter' refers to the sea-horse because of its markedly projecting nose. 'Wall-eyed,' 'sweet,' 'feeble,' 'corseted,' and 'pouting,' are usually terms associated with the description of the female face and figure. What do you think is the effect of these terms being applied here to the male of the species? Here is the opening of the poem.

Wall-eyed snouter, sweet feeble translucent
Tiny eunuch, teetering on your rocker,
Pouting, corseted in
Rings of bone, flesh flaps
Fanning the tides as you totter and roll
Forward, but never so forward as
She.

The general effect is to mock the impact biological pressures put on cultural stereotypes. As a rule—much to the anger of feminists—the identity of women is determined by biological necessity (the fact of reproduction). Zwicky demonstrates the sheer idiocy of such cultural stereotyping by endowing a male entity (the sea-horse) with a reproductive role and also with so-called female attributes—the pout, the feebleness, the corseted appearance—that go along with this stereotype. By the end of the poem, gender-stereotyping has been demolished. Once the eggs are hatched, as the poet wryly remarks to the sea-horse, 'Hatched in your warmth, / Flexed in your strength, They'd be mad/to trust women/After this.' Zwicky's poem is representative, I think, of the way in which the age reinvents the worlds which women inhabit by setting aside inherited biological and psychological identities.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

Contemporary Australian poetry speaks for a time and space shaped by continuing change. Politically Australia is moving away from Britain as the Republican movement—an expression of an age that has seen the collapse of SEATO (South East Atlantic Treaty Organisation) and the Vietnam war—gathers momentum. Socially, demographic patterns alter under pressures of immigration and suburbanisation. With radical experiments in presentation of the experiences of indigenous peoples and the experiences of women, Australia's cultural image continually reinvents itself.

1.6 GLOSSARY

adzes
cant

axe-like tools
special words used by a particular group of people especially with the intention of keeping the meaning secret from others not in their group, code words

corseted

crofts

gramnivorous

libidinous

propaganda

ute

wog

xenophobia

given support by tightly laced
innerwear

small farms

grass-eating

lustful

news disseminated to create a

specific (one-sided) impact

utility vehicle such as a van

Western Oriented Gentlemen

(pejorative term for non-Caucasian

who imitates Caucasian cultural

practices)

unreasonable fear and dislike of

foreigners or strangers.

Contemporary Australia

1.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Outline any two sets of challenges faced by contemporary Australian poetry.
- Q.2 Use the sonnet 'Drifters' to illustrate how two worlds of experience—suburbia and the world of women—generate their own pressures.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Buckley, Vincent (ed.) *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse*. London, 1991.

Palmer, Alan (ed.) *The Dictionary of the British Empire and Commonwealth*. London, 1996.

UNIT 2 BRUCE DAWE & LES MURRAY

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 'At Shagger's Funeral'
 - 2.2.1 The Social Context
 - 2.2.2 The Literary Context
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- 2.3 'The Quality of Sprawl' & 'Blood'
 - 2.3.1 The Social Context
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- 2.4 Common Concerns
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Questions
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to examine the prescribed poems of Bruce Dawe and Les Murray. The secondary objective is to explore what constitutes the distinctively Australian quality of their response to the social and literary issues with which they deal.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Bruce Dawe (b. 1930) worked initially as a manual labourer after dropping out of high school at the age of sixteen. While working on a construction site at a university he recalls having thought as he looked at the students, 'What lucky bastards, I wish I was one of them.' He went to night-school, matriculated, and in 1954 registered for a part-time arts degree at Melbourne university. Its faculty at this time included such practicing poets as Chris Wallace-Crabbe (whose work we will examine in Unit 3) and Vincent Buckley. Dawe joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1959 and served for nine years which included a stint in Malaysia. By the time he left the Air Force he had married and also published two volumes of poetry. He taught at Queensland and then held a lecturership at the Darling Downs Institute of Higher Education. He has since obtained a doctorate. A frequently-anthologised poet, he limits the number of his poems in any one anthology to six. Why, you might ask? Because he wishes other poets to be also represented in these collections

Les A. Murray (b. 1938) dominated the 1970's. His rise to fame in Australia has been said to follow his growing popularity as an Australian poet in cultural centres such as New York, London and Edinburgh. He has been described as 'natural food for the seminar' (Buckley, xxxv) because of his discursive style and has often been the subject of study at seminars despite his being (as I hope to show) 'so assertive a spokesman of anti-academic values' (ibid.)

2.2 'AT SHAGGER'S FUNERAL'

First of all, let us read the text of Bruce Dawe's poem. Read it two or three times till you understand the general theme and situation.

AT SHAGGER'S FUNERAL

Bruce Dawe and
Les Murray

At Shagger's funeral there wasn't much to say
That could be said
In front of his old mum—she frightened us, the way
She shook when the Reverend read
About the resurrection and the life, as if
The words meant something to her, shook, recoiled,
And sat there, stony, stiff
As Shagger, while the rest of us, well-oiled,
Tried hard to knuckle down to solemn facts,
Like the polished box in the chapel aisle
And the clasped professional sorrow, but the acts
Were locked inside us like a guilty smile
That caught up with us later, especially when
We went round to pick up his reclaimed Ford,
The old shag-wagon, and beat out the dust
From tetron cushions, poured
Oil in the hungry sump, flicked the forsaken
Kewpie doll on the dash-board,
Kicked hub-caps tubercular with rust.

The service closed with a prayer, and silence beat
Like a tongue in a closed mouth.
Of all the girls he'd loved or knocked or both,
Only Bev Whiteside showed—out in the street
She gripped her hand-bag, said, 'This is as far
As I'm going, boys, or any girl will go,
From now on.'

Later, standing about
The windy grave, hearing the currawongs shout
In the camphor-laurels, and his old lady cry
As if he'd really been a son and a half,
What could any of us say that wasn't a lie
Or that didn't end up in a laugh
At his expense—caught with his britches down
By death, whom he'd imagined out of town?

2.2.1 The Social Context

Dawe has been described as 'Homo Suburbensis' (Wallace-Crabbe 233) and that should in itself suggest the social context of his work. The pressures of suburbia and indeed an example of Dawe's own writing on this theme have been set out already in 1.3.2. Here I will focus on the social markers in the prescribed poem 'At Shagger's Funeral' so please keep going back to the text. First look at the nickname 'Shagger.' The phrase 'lonely as a shag' (or cormorant, a sea-bird) is a colloquial expression used to denote a compulsive loner or an odd person. Here however the sense would appear to be the more general slangy term used to denote a person who has casual sex indiscriminately with a large number of women. So the sense established is that of a lower-middle-class drifter, with no particular job and with no particular emotional attachments. Next look at the social circle which has come to mourn Shagger. His friends are 'well-oiled', a colloquialism indicating that they are drunk. The only one of his women-friends to turn up is the casually-named Bev Whiteside who has clearly been one of the women he has picked up in his time. Then look at the way in which his second-hand car is described. Called the 'shag wagon' it has probably been the site of most of his one-night stands. It is run-down, a regular old boneshaker, and has

cheap nylon upholstery. Finally as if to establish a 'suburbia of the heart'—a sense that socioeconomic rootlessness extends into emotional rootlessness—even the moment of Shagger's death is given a ring of commonness. The phrase 'caught with his britches down' by death suggests how he was taken completely by surprise or caught off-guard by death, as if he were surprised in the midst of one of his casual liaisons.

2.2.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of this poem is again indicated by the title. The fact that it centres around a funeral suggests first that it is an elegy. Conventionally an elegy is a work of art which mourns the passing away (usually) of an individual or an age and also mourns the passing away of a set of values associated with the individual or age. Yet this is not so much a conventional as it is an ironic elegy. If Shagger's friends are more or less tongue-tied during the funeral it is because they feel that nothing of what they know of his life is appropriate to recall at a solemn ceremony. Besides look at another kind of ironic framing which the poem offers. One line of argument is the ironic anti-heroic line I have just mentioned. In sharp contrast to this is the wholly sombre religious line of commentary that runs through the poem. Even if the 'professional' attitude of the clergyman conducting the service is discounted there is still a sombre list of abstractions to be considered. The phrase 'the resurrection and the life' is used by Jesus to explain to his disciples that that is precisely what he is—the promise of eternal life to those who follow him. So the phrase has a dignity that is otherwise lacking in the shifless world of Shagger and his friends. Moreover consider the various kinds of loss with which the poem is concerned. On the wholly personal level—whatever significance the event may or may not have for his friends—the death of Shagger means that his mother loses a son (no mention is made of any other family members). In terms of cultural deprivation the elegy mourns the passing away of love. The battered car, the awkward friends, Bev Whiteside who will go thus far and no further, testify to a way of life from which love is absent. On what I call (somewhat reluctantly) the religious level, the elegy testifies not just to a world in which orthodox belief is at a low ebb but also raises a theological question. If death has caught Shagger unawares (see 2.2.1) has he been snatched away before he could prepare himself for death? In other words, does this elegy reveal the loss of grace or divine goodness as seen in the snatching away, so to speak, of Shagger?

2.2.3 The Text

I'll try to make Dawe's characters my point of entry into the text since his closeness to his characters has been analysed in this way: '[his characters show Dawe to be] sharp but not censorious, ironic rather than cynical, frank but not outspoken' (Wallace-Crabbe 233). The first point made is that there is a yawning gap between Shagger's friends and his mother. The funeral service means a great deal to her in the sense that abstract concepts such as the 'resurrection and the life' are real to her in a way they are not real to Shagger's friends. On their side they are unable to tell Shagger's mother what they really think of him. This makes the speaker—whose monologue is the poem—feel somehow inadequate. A consciousness of their own inappropriate appearance and behaviour is responsible for the 'guilty smile' which is evoked by their presence and their memories. The run-down car and the world of run-down relationships suggest two kinds of emotion. The obvious sense is that of sterility, in a world where both objects and people are rusting and decaying. However despite the ironic detachment with which the world is opened up there is also a certain amount of reluctant affection. The feeling his friends have for Shagger—which they cannot communicate—is shown when they try to crank his car into life. Again, while Bev Whiteside draws the line at going down to the graveside she has at least turned up, although reluctantly. These residual signs of affection

suggest to me that Dawe's tone in the poem is ironic but not condemnatory. He is open about the limitations of his characters but does not (as for instance with Bev) nail down blame or even responsibility. All are fellow-sufferers in the suburbia of the heart which he evokes, and I think therefore that the *tone* is one of compassion rather than judgement. Even at the end Shagger's friends prefer—as the speaker says—to remain silent rather than to have a laugh at his expense.

Of Dawe's *language* the following analysis has been made: '... [he is] in some ways the quintessential Australian poet. From the first he formalized in verse an accent and intonation which existed everywhere in Australia—a demotic accent and a sardonic intonation, in which he reported ironically on one injustice after another....' (Buckley xxxi). The fact that this poem is a monologue—an extended conversation with just one speaker—suggests that it may be a confession of sorts. The speaker ventilates the doubts and anxieties of the group as if he is their representative and spokesperson. For instance he speaks of their awkwardness in church, especially when they see Shagger's mother, their inability to speak the truth about Shagger, their aimlessness and their loveless lives. The poem might in this sense be called an opening-up of the suburban heart and conscience. At the same time there is humour (sometimes self-directed) rather than gloom. Their rueful handling of the car, the description of Shagger as 'a son and a half' and even their eventual recognition that the only way to recall Shagger is through a laugh or a lie show that this is a poem that works through understated humour. The language is deliberately that of the masses rather than that of the classes. But are these specifically Australian qualities? Perhaps an examination of other poets might suggest an answer.

2.3 'THE QUALITY OF SPRAWL' & 'BLOOD'

In this section, we will study two poems by Les Murray— 'The Quality of Sprawl' and 'Blood'. Do read the texts carefully.

The Quality of Sprawl

Sprawl is the quality
of the man who cut down his Rolls-Royce
into a farm utility truck, and sprawl
is what the company lacked when it made repeated efforts
to buy the vehicle back and repair its image.

Sprawl is doing your farming by aeroplane, roughly,
or driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home.
It is the rococo of being your own still centre.
It is never lighting cigars with ten-dollar notes:
that's idiot ostentation and murder of starving people.
Nor can it be bought with the ash of million-dollar deeds.

Sprawl lengthens the legs; it trains greyhounds on liver and beer.
Sprawl almost never says Why not? With palms comically raised
nor can it be dressed for, not even in running shoes worn
with mink and a nose ring. That is Society. That's Style.
Sprawl is more like the thirteenth banana in a dozen
or anyway the fourteenth.

Sprawl is Hank Stamper in Never Give an Inch
bisecting an obstructive official's desk with a chain saw.
Not harming the official. Sprawl is never brutal

though it's often intransigent. Sprawl is never Simon de Montfort
at a town-storming: Kill them all! God will know his own.
Knowing the man's name this was said to might be sprawl.

Sprawl occurs in art. The fifteenth to twenty-first
lines in a sonnet, for example. And in certain paintings;
I have sprawl enough to have forgotten which paintings.
Turner's glorious Burning of the Houses of Parliament
comes to mind, a doubling bannered triumph of sprawl--
except, he didn't fire them.

Sprawl gets up the nose of many kinds of people
(every kind that comes in kinds) whose futures don't include it.
Some decry it as criminal presumption, silken-robbed Pope Alexander
dividing the new world between Spain and Portugal.
If he smiled *in petto* afterwards, perhaps the thing did have sprawl.

Sprawl is really classless, though It's John Christopher Frederick
Murray
asleep in his neighbours' best bed in spurs and oilskins
but not having thrown up:
sprawl is never Calum who, in the loud hallway of our house,
reinvented the Festoon. Rather
it's Beatrice Miles going twelve hundred ditto in a taxi,
No Lewd Advances, No Hitting Animals, No Speeding,
on the proceeds of her two-bob-a-sonnet Shakespeare readings.
An image of my country. And would that it were more so.

No, sprawl is full-gloss murals on a council-house wall.
Sprawl leans on things. It is loose-limbed in it s mind.
Reprimanded and dismissed
it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail
of possibility. It may have have to leave the Earth.
Being roughly Christian, it scratches the other cheek
and thinks it unlikely. Though people have been shot for sprawl.

(1983)

Blood

Pig-crowds in successive, screaming pens
We still to greedy drinking, trough by trough,
Tusk-heavy boars, fat mud-beslabbered sows:
Gahn, let him drink, you slut, you've had enough!

Laughing and grave by turns, in milky boots,
We stand and yarn, and whet our butcher's knife,
Sling cobs of corn—hey, careful of his nuts!
It's made you cruel, all that smart city life.

In paper spills, we roll coarse, sweet tobacco.
That's him down there, the one we'll have to catch,
That little Berkshire with the pointy ears.
I call him Georgie. Here, you got a match?

The shadow of a cloud moves down the ridge,

On summer hills, a patch of autumn light.
My cousin sheathes in dirt his priestly knife.
They say pigs see the wind. You think that's right?

I couldn't say. It sounds like a good motto.
There are some poets who—He's finished now.
Melon-sized and muscular, with shrieks
The pig is seized and bundled anyhow

His twisting strength permits, then sternly held.
My cousin tests his knife, sights for the heart
And sinks the blade with one long, even push.
A wild scream bursts as knife and victim part

And hits the showering heavens as our beast
Flees straight downfield, choking in his pumping gush
That feeds the earth, and drags him to his knees—
Bleed, Georgie, pump! And with a long-legged rush

My cousin is beside the thing he killed
And pommels it, and lifts it to the sun.
I should have knocked him out, poor little bloke.
It gets the blood out if you let them run.

We hold the dangling meat. Wet on its chest
The narrow cut, the tulip of slow blood.
We better go. We've got to scald him next.
Looking at me, my cousin shakes his head:

What's up, old son? You butchered things before....
It's made you squeamish, all that city life.
Sly gentleness regards me, and I smile:
You're wrong, you know. I'll go and fetch the knife.

I walk back up the trail of crowding flies,
Back to the knife which pours deep blood, and frees
Sun, fence and hill, each to its holy place.
Strong in my valleys, I may walk at ease.

A world I thought sky-lost by leaning ships
In the depth of our life—I'm in that world once more.
Looking down, we praise for its firm flesh
The creature killed according to the Law.

2.3.1 The Social Context

The social context of these poems by Les Murray is both like and unlike that of Dawe's poem 'At Shagger's Funeral.' On the one hand, they are both city poems. 'The Quality of Sprawl' defines a certain attitude to life almost entirely in terms of urban history and anecdote. 'Blood' sets up a particular contrast between urban life and rural life. The difference is that neither of these poems by Murray is exclusively suburban. Both look at life in small towns but neither uses small-town life as its main subject. What worlds do these poems actually evoke?

First, 'The Quality of Sprawl.' I read it as constructed so as to juxtapose two opposite worlds. The *first* verse—through its anecdote of the farmer—sets the world of rural

Australia against the world of urban technology which it adapts to suit its purposes. The world of rural Australia—which uses the aeroplane to farm—is evoked again in the *second* verse but contrasted this time with the world of cosmopolitan crassness that stupidly and callously lights its cigars with ten-dollar currency notes or wears expensive mink coats with common canvas shoes. Then there is the world of popular culture—captured in the reference to the Hollywood action film *Never give an inch*. Against this is placed the world of high culture conjured up by the reference to the nineteenth-century painter W. J. M. Turner. The world of mediaeval European history—conjured up by the references to Simon de Montfort and Pope Alexander III—is set against the world of contemporary Australia as seen in the different anecdotes in verse 7. Finally there is the context of Christian thought in verses 2 & 8 that Murray uses to explain his central theme.

I'll explore the ramifications of these different worlds in 2.3.3 but just now I'd like to make one point. Murray takes a great deal of time and trouble to set up pluralistic contexts because he wants to demonstrate that the chief virtue of 'sprawl'—the attitude he describes and glorifies in this poem—is that it is an attitude that stands above all contexts. In itself it is superior to any or to all the worlds—social, artistic or historical—evoked in the poem. This may seem to be a paradoxical statement but I think Murray sets the challenge of understanding it before his readers. To open this I think I need to say a little about the literary context of the poem which I will do in 2.3.2.

'Blood' is at first glance a more clear-cut poem. It too is constructed on the basis of contrasted contexts. Only in this case there is just one pair of contrasted worlds throughout the poem. There is the world of the city from which the speaker comes and there is the world of the farm from which his cousin comes. While killing a pig for the table the cousin realises that the speaker's stay in the city has made him squeamish or unnecessarily fastidious. Curiously, as the cousin points out, this squeamishness has made the city-bred speaker cruel. For the speaker now thinks only of his comfort and not of the animal. He hurls the corn-cob at the pig without much concern as to whether the pig will be unnecessarily injured. Hence the line in verse 2 'It's made you cruel, all that smart city-life.' The cousin tries to kill the pig with one plunge of the knife, to minimize its pain. In that sense, despite his slaughter of the pig he might be said to be kind. The city-bred speaker may not at first be comfortable with slaughter but that is because he is mindful of his own comfort rather than that of the animal's. Again though, as with 'The Quality of Sprawl' any further explication must take place within a specifically literary context.

2.3.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of 'The Quality of Sprawl' is made clear from its title and opening line. The poem is an exercise in definition. Like all definitions it works in two ways. It establishes what its subject is and also what its subject is not by setting up a line of similitudes or comparisons and dissimilitudes or contrasts. As the subject of the definition is a certain state of mind or a certain attitude to life, it seems to me that it is a definition that works by making the abstract concrete. Hence its reliance—already noted in 2.3.1—on anecdote and example. At the same time, it is a definition that falls into the category of humorous verse and indeed at times seems to be an example specifically of nonsense verse. Nonsense verse is that which deliberately suspends the principle of reason in order to make a statement. A good example of this occurs in verse 5. Look at these lines: 'Sprawl occurs in art. The fifteenth to twenty-first lines in a sonnet for example.' On the level of fact this is ludicrous. As a sonnet contains only fourteen lines, it stands to reason that a poem which exceeds this limit—whether by having fifteen lines or twenty one—is not a sonnet. At the same time Murray has suspended reason for a particular purpose. He

wants to show that his poem lives out its own theme, namely that an attitude which sets aside boundaries to fulfil itself, is admirable.

Bruce Dawe and
Les Murray

The literary context of 'Blood' is a little more difficult to establish since it is a response to various kinds of writing. The first point I wish to make is that it is an account not just of the slaughter of a pig but also that it is an account of an abomination—a violation of a rule given by Jehovah to the Jews under the leadership of Moses as recorded in the Old Testament around 1405 B.C. (Significantly the title of another poem by Murray is 'The Abomination.') Jehovah had required the Jews to eat only those animals and birds classified as clean and not to eat those classified as unclean. According to this ruling the pig is unclean. "And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud: he is unclean to you. Of their flesh shall ye not eat, and their carcase ye shall not touch, they are unclean to you" (Leviticus 11.7—8). There is, in a later book of the Bible, a specific injunction concerning the blood of slaughtered animals. 'Only be sure that thou eat not the blood for the blood is the life and thou mayest not eat the life with the flesh' (Deuteronomy 12.3). In the New Testament, however, God makes a far more liberal statement. In Acts, a book that has accounts of a more dynamic and open community that is international, these old restrictions are put aside and the statement made is simply this. When Peter, an orthodox Jew, refuses to eat the meat set before him in a dream because it is unclean he hears a voice from heaven saying '... what God hath cleansed that call not thou common' (Acts 10. 13 - 15). I will make the specific connections between 'Blood' and these texts in the following section (2.3.3) but I'd like to make just one point now. 'Blood' is a response to a complicated sets of texts on the theme of what constitutes right human conduct. 'Leviticus' is concerned with the need for holiness on the part of the Jews in the dealings with Jehovah and 'Deuteronomy' is concerned with the need for obedience on the part of this same race. 'Acts' includes a redefinition of morality to meet the challenge of an expanding community which is no longer wholly Jewish. 'Blood' concerns itself with a reassessment of individual and community conduct in the contemporary secular world as it redefines that which is holy and that which is sinful.

2.3.3 The Texts

I will try to stay as close to the sequence of verses as possible so *please* keep referring to your texts. 'The Quality of Sprawl' proceeds I think by incremental pressure, or the piling up of one anecdote upon another to support an argument so where necessary I will try to explain the anecdote.

Verse 1 speaks of the contest between the Rolls Royce company and a farmer. Rolls Royce—when this poem was written in 1983—was the premier British car company associated with all that is exclusive in terms of style and comfort in British car design. All its cars evoke a world of grandeur and luxury. Any farm vehicle is by design and purpose a utility model. So when the Australian farmer customises a Rolls to meet his need for a utility vehicle he does two things. He indicates that his personal needs must be met even if an inherited idea—the equation of a Rolls with luxury—has to be dismantled. So the farmer shows he has confidence in himself unlike the company which is so worried about the fragility of its image that it tries desperately to buy back the vehicle.

Verse 2 continues the definition with a Biblical allusion. Jesus had urged his disciples to demonstrate their difference from others by their readiness to go the extra mile or to offer more help than they had been asked to give. 'And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away' (Matthew 5.41—2). So—given the Australian reality of great distances across the country—the suggestion is that

'sprawl' is a matter of generous excess for the sake of others. It is an attitude that can concern itself with others because it proceeds from a sense of quiet self-assurance. The Rococo school of art is associated with eighteenth century Europe and its distinguishing feature is decoration based on delicacy and grace. Similarly 'sprawl' can be allowed its excesses because it proceeds from an inner poise, or personal stillness at the centre of activity. 'Sprawl' is not vulgarly ostentatious nor does it flout itself to show up another's poverty.

A similar point is made in *verse 3*. 'Sprawl lengthens the legs' in that it extends possibilities. To improve their performance at the races, dogs may be given a diet of beer and liver. At the same time as has just been shown sprawl is not about display for its own sake.

'Sprawl is never brutal / though its often intransigent.' In other words, according to *verse 4* it is unyielding on principle—and therefore may lead to loss of life—but it is never savagely cruel for the sake of cruelty alone. In the example of the action film, the hero devastates the office of a mindless petty official as a gesture of principled protest while leaving the official himself unharmed. In contrast, although Simon de Montfort's uprising in the England of 1265 is seen today as an early attempt to establish parliamentary democracy it was—in its time—responsible for the Battles of Kenilworth and Evesham at which many lives were lost. The remark attributed to him here is meant to show his utter disregard for the lives of others. The brutality of this attitude according to Murray prevents it from being an example of sprawl which is usually an exaggerated attitude that is harmless. For example, having a sufficiently detailed knowledge of this incident as to know the person to whom this was said would be an example of sprawl. It would be excessive but not injurious.

J.M.W. Turner (1775—1871) was an English landscape painter whose work was intensely Romantic in the sense that the physical setting was shaped entirely by its emotional content and atmosphere. The painting of the Houses of Parliament to which *verse 5* refers is specifically an example of his light-drenched landscapes in which light, colour and feeling are used deliberately to blur outline. More generally however, he is cited as one whose work embodies sprawl or the magnificence of excess. The following description of Turner's achievement will, I think, suggest something to you of the components of the attitude to life which Murray calls 'sprawl'.

Turner ... had visions of a fantastic world bathed in light and resplendent with beauty, but it was a world not of calm but of movement, not of simple harmonies but of dazzling pageantries. He crowded into his pictures every effect which could make them more striking, and more dramatic, and had he been a lesser artist than he was, this desire to impress the public might well have had a disastrous result ... Yet he was such a superb stage-manager ... that he carried it off (Gombrich, 391-2).

The vision of a more glorious world is attributed to Turner in this extract and this quality itself has something of sprawl in it.

Verse 6 offers a somewhat complex illustration. It begins by explaining that sprawl is not criminal presumption or an arrogant display and parade of power for its own sake. An example of such arrogance it is said was that of Pope Alexander III in 1193 who used his papal office to secure a sea-based or maritime empire for Spain and Portugal. This is an account of his action. 'The Pope had risen to the occasion. He had drawn a line down the globe from pole to pole, a 100 leagues west of the Azores, giving all lands discoverable to the west of it to Spain, and on the east to Portugal' (Trevelyan, 295). The arrogance of the Pope's act lies first in his assumption of the

role of arbiter of the world's destiny and next in his parceling out the world between the Iberian monarchies (Spain and Portugal) as if no other country existed. This action triggered off much maritime exploration that led to the discovery of America and the race for trade and empire. Yet, Murray goes on, if Alexander had some sense of self-knowledge, if he recognised his own action in private with a smile at its enormity, perhaps he too could be said to have sprawl.

Contemporary Australia re-enters the poem in *verse 7*. Two people in this verse extend and colour life in contemporary Australia in different ways: John Murray who pushes excess thus far and no further, and Beatrice Miles who travels '1200 ditto' (i.e., 1200 miles) in a taxi to popularise her readings from Shakespeare. Sprawl is not however seen in the poet's friend Calum who cannot distinguish between enough and too much. Notice the poet's sense that any manifestation of sprawl is somehow linked to Australia, as he says it is 'an image of my country.' He only wishes it were seen more often.

Verse 8 explains this yearning. Lavish to a fault—like beautiful wall-paintings in cheap, government-built flats—sprawl is a psychological attitude that is casual, relaxed, and is personified as one who is cheerful and ready to take a rebuke. Even then it does not respond aggressively but (as in *verse 2*) it 'turns the other cheek' or forgives its attacker when attacked, as Jesus had taught his disciples: '... whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also' (Matthew 6.39). We are not told specifically of those who have been put to death for living out this attitude but since sprawl is an other-worldly, other-centred attitude it is likely to be met with stiff opposition.

In sharp contrast to 'The Quality of Sprawl' which is an extended definition, 'Blood' seems to me to be a contracted dramatisation in a single act. I find it helpful to think of it as three scenes around one action — the action or ritual of the sacrificial slaughter of the pig. The *first* scene is the prelude to the slaughter in which it is contemplated by two people. There is a line of coarse comedy that runs through, with the other pigs and sows being warned off the dinner of the pig that is to be slaughtered. "Garn, let him drink, you slut, you've had enough!" and again "Yah! Get back, you sods. / Let him drink it all: its his last feed." There is also a line of solemnity that accompanies the ritualising of this act and cuts across the comedy. The cousin's knife is described as 'priestly' because it is to be used for a near-ritual. There is a reference to the old country superstition that pigs can see the wind.

The *second* scene is the act of slaughter itself. It begins and ends with a reflection on the speaker's state of mind. So it starts with this wry comment— 'I'm sentimental—not like these damn flies'—and ends with an analysis of precisely this sentimentality. Asked whether he is squeamish, the speaker is quick to deny it and ratifies this by offering to go and fetch the knife. This central scene describes the butchering of the pig. On the one hand this seems brutal. The last reflex action of the pig—to rush downhill after it has been stabbed to the heart—seems particularly gruesome. On the other hand—as the concluding section points out—if the pig is to be killed and eaten cleanly, all the blood must run out. And as the cousin explains, only this method can ensure such a result.

The *last* scene returns in a sense to the point at which the poem started, namely the attitude of the speaker. Again his meditations are double-edged. He muses with some satisfaction on the holiness that has been established with the slaughter of the pig according to Jewish sanctions, '... the creature killed according to the Law.' Simultaneously though there is the sense that this newly-recovered sense of sanctity has been bought at a price, indeed at a blood-price. The sense of evenly-balanced

choices and emotions which has characterised the entire poem is present even at the end.

The *final* question posed by the poem 'Blood' is, I think, ironic. What constitutes holiness or conversely, what constitutes sacrilege? The pig has been killed in accordance with the Judaic Law yet isn't there such a thing as blood-guilt? The poem is consistently open-ended in the way it deals with this central contrast and does not compel the reader to choose one option over the other. The city-bred speaker's fastidiousness may cover unthinking cruelty, and the country-cousin—who actually kills the pig—may be more sensitive. At the same time the sense of speculation is provided by the speaker.

2.4 COMMON CONCERNS

Can the prescribed poems of Dawe and Murray be said to share concern and anxieties? I think they can. Both poets are concerned to explore a particular phase of the *national consciousness* --- its development of a recognisably contemporary Australian voice. 'At Shagger's Funeral' and 'The Quality of Sprawl' depend on the long, relaxed line although for different reasons. The first poem uses it to intensify the sense of elegy and the second to set out a working definition. In both cases though, it is made deliberately colloquial to evoke the rhythms of daily speech. Australia emerges as the common cultural denominator, not just because 'currawong' is substituted for 'maggie' but also because—as in 'The Quality of Sprawl'—all cultural referents, whether historical, geographical or legendary are measured against contemporary Australia.

Another concern shared by these poems is their analysis of *states of mind* under contemporary pressures. The stresses of urban and suburban life are examined although in different ways. Rootlessness, meaningless relationships and alcohol abuse colour the life of Shagger. Rootlessness recurs in 'The Quality of Sprawl' although here I think it fuels the impulse of cultural redefinition (see 2.3.3) in various contexts. 'Blood' plays off not just an urban as against a rural dweller but two different ways of life shaped by different needs and influences.

Ultimately I think both poets construct encounters between *temporal and eternal values*. I hesitate to call either Dawe or Murray a religious poet partly because I do not read these poems as concerned with one faith to the exclusion of another and partly because I do not wish to limit the open-endedness of their inquiry. Nonetheless, I want to draw attention to the fact that all three poems place the events of the here and now against the possibilities of the hereafter. Shagger's friends may be drifters as he was but—if only for the brief span of his funeral—his friends come up against the reality of the life to come and feel ill at ease. 'Sprawl' as an attitude is explicitly shown to be generous, compassionate and other-worldly, as has been seen. 'Blood' continually speaks of the imperatives of Judaic Law but can hardly do so (2.3.2) without implicitly privileging its greater partner, that is, grace. It is grace which opens up or redefines the issue of holiness in a world that is larger than the world bounded by the Law. And although all three poems use explicitly or implicitly a Christian frame of reference they are not at all exclusively Christian. For the world in which these values are examined is a world that is contemporary and secular, in other words, very like our own.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Bruce Dawe (b. 1930) analyses—as in his poem 'At Shagger's Funeral'—the implications of suburban life for the individual and for the community at a moment of

loss. The social and economic dislocations of suburbia are seen to create an emotional rootlessness as well. Les Murray (b. 1938) explores psychological attitudes—both national and personal—in 'The Quality of Sprawl' and 'Blood'. Both poems work out different kinds of cultural redefinition. The prescribed poems of Dawe and Murray share the following concerns: i) an exploration of national consciousness through the prism of suburbia, ii) an analysis of various states of mind and iii) a contrast between temporal and eternal values.

2.6 GLOSSARY

currawong	Australian name for bird known otherwise as magpie
intransigent	stubborn
<i>in pectus</i>	Latin phrase meaning within one's own heart, in secret
oilskins	waterproof clothes
ostentation	display of wealth to attract attention
presumption	arrogance

2.7 QUESTIONS

- Q. 1 Examine the pressures of contemporary life explored in the poem 'At Shagger's Funeral' and suggest their consequences.
- Q. 2 Analyse the pluralistic cultural contexts set out in 'The Quality of Sprawl' and 'Blood' and evaluate their impact.

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

- Bennett, Bruce & Jennifer Strauss (ed.) *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Melbourne, 1998.
- Gombrich, E. H. *The Story of Art*. 1917, repr. Oxford, 1989.
- Trevelyan, G. M. *History of England*. 1926, repr. London, 1952.

UNIT 3 CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE & GWEN HARWOOD

Structure

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 'Melbourne'
 - 3.2.1 The Social Context
 - 3.2.2 The Literary Context
 - 3.2.3 The Text
- 3.3 'In the Park'
 - 3.3.1 The Social Context
 - 3.3.2 The Literary Context
 - 3.3.3 The Text
- 3.4 Common Concerns
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to analyse 'Melbourne' by Chris Wallace-Crabbe and 'In the Park' by Gwen Harwood. The secondary objective is to explore—through these poems—the way the topography of contemporary Australia changes and redefines itself.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chris Wallace-Crabbe (b. 1934) taught at the University of Melbourne. One of his students here was Bruce Dawe (see 2.1) and indeed a section of one of Wallace-Crabbe's major poetic sequences entitled 'Losses and Recoveries' is dedicated to Dawe. I find the role of remembrancer or 'memory keeper' to the public, is one that Wallace-Crabbe plays in some of his poems. For instance, this is how he recalls Dawe in the poem to which I just referred.

Film has no tenses, the latest pundit says,
poems have tenses and nostalgias though
like anything, and when I get to think
of the mid-fifties, flashing through my slides,
I see you slope past Chemistry, blue-chinned
in military shirt and a maroon
figured art-silk tie...

The idea that poetry has its own 'tensions and nostalgias' is, I think, central to an understanding of Wallace-Crabbe. Here his concern is not simply to evoke the presence of Bruce Dawe—a fellow-poet and an old student—but (as importantly) to evoke a specific time (the 1950's) and a specific place (Melbourne). As 3.2.1 will suggest, Melbourne in the 'fifties was a place of critical change: a notion that is developed in the prescribed poem as well. Memory, cityscape and political commitment—note the reference to the 'military shirt' of Dawe who had done a stint in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) (see 2.1) as against the printed silk tie associated with the typical poet—come together in the poetry of Wallace-Crabbe. They also come together in his critical writing. As Assistant Editor of *The Oxford*

Literary History of Australia (Melbourne 1998, see 2.8) and as university teacher he has been concerned with the formation of critical opinion and public taste in the area of Australian literature which until recently has been relatively unexplored. So when he recalls—as he does both in ‘Losses and Recoveries’—the topography of various cities and of his mindscape, it must be remembered that he intends to form public opinion as a poet and as a critic or indeed (as he might describe himself) as a ‘pundit.’ This puts him in the forefront of analysing the way in which land and sea or city and university act upon each other.

Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) taught music at school in Brisbane before moving to Tasmania following her marriage in 1945. A homemaker and the mother of four children, many of her poems deal with the complicated legacies of wifehood and motherhood as these alter the options open to women. For example, her poem ‘Person to Person’ explores a meeting between the speaker and her former lover in a dream and the interruption of their meeting by the child of the speaker.

... I reach to take
your hand, and a thorn from the rosevine
rakes blood from my wrist.
... I cannot hear
what you say as a child comes to wake me
by scraping his nails on my arm.

Who grows old in a dream, who can taste
the ripe wholeness of absence ? and who can summon
by light the incredible likeness of sleep ?
From this fading dream as useless now
As a torn-off wing I wake to embrace
The stubborn presence of life.

If I had to isolate the feminist component of Harwood’s poetry I would say it is the way in which she explores the opportunities available—or denied—to women as a result of the gender-stereotyping which insists on their being imprisoned within their roles as wives and mothers. Her poems have been described as ‘chilling testaments to the annihilation of women’s creative energies under the grind of domestic cares ...’ (Blain, 497-8). In the lines quoted above for instance, notice how the possibility of sensual passion is withheld from the speaker by the intrusion of her child. ‘The ripe wholeness’ which the speaker can conjure up only in her dream is destroyed by the world of grim family responsibilities, the ‘stubborn presence of life.’ All the ideas are to be found in the prescribed poem ‘In the Park.’

One other point you might take into account is Harwood’s creation of personae whose degree of identification with her own known views is quite close. In ‘Person to Person’ the speaker is denoted by ‘I’—the first person singular—while the speaker of ‘In the Park’ is carefully anonymous and described only in the third person. This combined desire to conceal her personal identity while revealing her views is seen in Harwood’s adoption—largely during the 1950’s and 60’s—of various pseudonyms such as Walter Lehmann, Francis Geyer, T. F. Kline and Miriam Stone. Notice how most of the pseudonyms deliberately blur the question of gender, perhaps to resist stereotyping. Anonymity was also facilitated in her case by the relative remoteness of Tasmania at that time from the pressures of international publishing.

3.2 ‘MELBOURNE’

Let us begin this section by a thorough reading of Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s poem ‘Melbourne’.

Melbourne

Not on the ocean, on a muted bay
Where the broad rays drift slowly over mud
And flathead loll on sand, a city bloats
Between the plains of water and of loam.
If surf beats, it is faint and far away;
If slogans blow around, we stay at home.

And, like the bay, our blood flows easily,
Not warm, not cold (in all things moderate),
Following our familiar tides. Elsewhere
Victims are bleeding, sun is beating down
On patriot, guerrilla, refugee.
We see the newsreels when we dine in town.

Ideas are grown in other gardens while
This chocolate soil throws up its harvest of
Imported and deciduous platitudes,
None of them flowering boldly or for long;
And we, the gardeners, securely smile
Humming a bar or two of rusty song.

Old tunes are good enough if sing we must;
Old images, re-vamped *ad nauseam*,
Will sate the burgher's eye and keep him quiet
As the great wheels run on. And should he seek
Variety, there's wind, there's heat, there's frost
To feed his conversation all the week.

Highway be highway, the remorseless cars
Strangle the city, put it out of pain,
Its limbs still kicking feebly on the hills.
Nobody cares. The artists sail at dawn
For brisker ports, or rot in public bars.
Though much has died here, nothing has been born.

3.2.1 The Social Context

I will try to place the poem against the historical background to the founding of the city of Melbourne so as to suggest the social and cultural elements that colour it. In 1851, Victoria gained its separate identity as a colony within Australia with its capital named Melbourne after Queen Victoria's first Prime Minister. Its origins however were treated with some reservations. A poem written by Rudyard Kipling a couple of generations after the founding of the city has Melbourne offer this description of herself: 'Greeting! Nor fear nor favour won us place / Got between greed of gold and dread of drought/ Loud-voiced and reckless as the wild-tide-race/ That whips our harbour-mouth.'

The origins of the city of Melbourne 'got between greed of gold and dread of drought' are presented unattractively but accurately in the above lines. The 'hungry forties' (the 1840's) were a period of starvation and unemployment in Britain that drove people to seek their fortunes elsewhere, frequently in the new territories of Australia such as Victoria. 1851—the year when it acquired a separate political identity—was also the year when gold was discovered in Victoria. With the onset of the gold rush, people flocked to Victoria and prosperity ensued. There is a story that

only two policemen were left in the city of Melbourne as the rest had left to go prospecting for gold. So—between the twin compulsions of need and greed—the city of Melbourne developed.

After World War-II, Melbourne took on another kind of significance. It became an important centre of thought in terms of political and cultural history. In 1940 a journal entitled 'Meanjin' had been founded by Clem Christesen, a Brisbane journalist and in 1945 it moved to the University of Melbourne. Its counterpart was 'Southerly' published by the University of Sydney. Melbourne however began to be associated with progressive, reformist publishing and thinking. Wallace-Crabbe himself has written of the way in which the intellectual tradition represented by Melbourne was 'reformist, socially critical, pro-union and historically nationalist' (Bennet, 224) during this period. It is against this that I would like to place his later sentiments expressed in 'Melbourne.' 'Meanjin' was also able at this time to publish overseas writers, some of whom were left-of-centre thinkers. In 1954 another journal entitled 'Overland' was founded in Melbourne by Stephen Murray-Smith. This journal represented various shades of political response from the Left to various issues such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. It also set out a consciously nationalist agenda.

Melbourne then—during the 1950's—had an exciting and complicated intellectual life. The presence of the university helped the formation of a group of writers concerned not only with poetry but with publishing and with the formation of an intellectual tradition. Unlike the relative silence of their contemporaries on political crises such as the Korean War (1950-51) the commitment of the Melbourne writers has been lauded in this way. 'More important than their irony or their connection with universities (where either of these existed) was their awareness of the common human reality as full of threat and tension. The Cold War was ever present in the cultural discussions of Melbourne...' (Buckley, xxvii-xxviii).

Nonetheless Wallace-Crabbe's poem registers a strong sense of disappointment with the city. It seems that—perhaps unlike its university—the city of Melbourne engenders disenchantment and frustration. It is also possible that Vietnam and its aftermath [see 1.2.2] did not generate as strong a condemnation among the ordinary people of the city as they did among the intelligentsia. I will address the specifics of the prescribed poem in 3.3.3 but just now I wish to clarify the socio-cultural context by using an extract from 'Losses and Recoveries.'

Melbourne holds us: hands, lips, bodies, all
That we are it feeds—and feeds upon;
many would go, but drag the city with them
world-wide, wherever they push and flee.
Here, look now, all this is ourselves and
Up over the dull blue skyline dangles
A bright eastering T-jet the colour of hope.

The relationship between the city and its people is complex. The people are of the city and carry it within themselves, as part of their inmost being, wherever they go and however hard they try to escape it. At the same time the city feeds or preys upon its people. Ultimately the city and its people are indistinguishable. The only hope they have of redemption and a new life is ironically the T-jet—a fight aircraft that symbolises death—recalling the Vietnam war. The social and cultural context shared by the city of Melbourne and its people is—against this complicated heritage—fraught and sometimes unhappy. Its people may be of the city even when they are not in it but this intense bonding itself may prove destructive.

3.2.2 The Literary Context

The idea of a poet addressing a city on its quality of life is one that is at least as old as classical Latin poetry written during the reign of Augustus Caesar. This kind of city poetry was revived during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and John Dryden's 'MacFlecknoe' (1682) is a good example of this kind of writing. I will use the following extract from 'MacFlecknoe' to illustrate certain characteristics of city poetry since I believe that Wallace-Crabbe's 'Melbourne' can be usefully examined in this context. The 'Augusta' to which Dryden refers here is London and the Barbican is the old wall built by the Romans to protect London during their conquest.

Close to the walls which fair *Augusta* bind
(The fair *Augusta* much to fears inclin'd)
An ancient fabric raised t'inform the sight,
There stood of yore, and *Barbican* it hight:[i.e., was named]
A watch tower once, but now, so Fate ordains,
Of all the pile an empty name remains.

What are the features of city poetry that can be isolated from this extract? First I should think, its use of satire. 'Fair' *Augusta* is the most obvious example of mockery since—as Dryden goes on to show—London is not beautiful but ugly, a place of pointless ruins. Next and related to this is the way in which this kind of poetry draws a clear parallel between the life of a city and the mind of its people. If the people are caught in the grip of political uncertainty—as they are in 'MacFlecknoe'—the city in turn will seem paralysed with fear. Then—following from the notion of satire—comes the corollary that the poet establishes a contrast between the real and the ideal. In this case, the past of the city of London is shown to have a meaning and a purpose which it lacks in time present. Finally and I think most importantly, is the role of the poet in city-poetry. The poet sees himself as the custodian of the cultural values of a city at a time when all other people have deserted the city and she is no longer true to herself. In these lines for instance Dryden implies that even though the ancient watch-tower is now a crumbling ruin, the poet can and will stand forth as a watchman to police and protect the walls of his city. If the poet did not care for his city, he would not get so disappointed in her. In city poetry the poet's anger against his city is in direct proportion to his feeling for her.

3.2.3 The Text

The text of 'Melbourne' begins with a disclaimer. The city, we are told is not located on the ocean but overlooks a 'muted' bay. The bay in question is of course Botany Bay, a convict settlement in the eighteenth century. Now however it is stilled to the point of stagnation. Fish are easily had and the city fattens on the fertile soil around the bay. Then comes the turnaround. 'If surf beats it is faint and far away / If slogans blow around, we stay at home.' In other words just as the waters of the bay are peaceful because they are recessed away from storm-tossed ocean waves, the mind of the city is similarly shut away from all meaningful thought and controversy whether specifically political (over Vietnam perhaps) or more general social issues.

The citizens of Melbourne—and this is the criticism made in *Verse 2*—are as sluggish of action and thought as are the mild waters of the bay. The action always happens elsewhere. All shades of political commitment: nationalist (the patriot) terrorist (the guerilla) or victim (the refugee) can be seen in Melbourne only on the newsreels and documentaries in town. Commitment does not move or touch these people at all. It is for other, more torrid zones on which the sun of oppression beats down.

Verse 3 sticks the knife in further. Original thought does not happen in Melbourne. The city borrows its clichés from other cultures and—as in a garden—allows them to flourish briefly for a season before they wilt and die. Other second-rate commonplaces are then substituted. The city of Melbourne is thus compared to a garden which provides fertile soil—hence the irony—for ideas borrowed from elsewhere. Its custodians—the gardeners—also mouth plagiarised sentiments brought from elsewhere. All intellectual development is imported from other cultures, probably those of the United States and Britain. There is nothing valuable in thought that is indigenous to Melbourne.

The arts—laments *Verse 4*—are similarly recycled. The mind of the average person in Melbourne is said to be vegetative. It asks to be quietened or sedated with commonplaces, not disturbed by thought.

Finally *Verse 5* envisages the death of the city. Like a wounded animal, Melbourne is to be killed or put out of its misery. Public apathy is marked. Artists who are supposed to be custodians of culture—see 3.2.2—either emigrate or simply drink themselves silly. Since both artists and citizens have dodged their responsibilities the city has no chance of being born again. There has been birth and death but no cultural rebirth for Melbourne.

3.3 'IN THE PARK'

In the Park

She sits in the park. Her clothes are out of date.
Two children whine and bicker, tug her skirt.
A third draws aimless patterns in the dirt.
Someone she loved once passes by – too late

to feign indifference to that casual nod.
'How nice,' et cetera. 'Time holds great surprises.'
From his neat head unquestionably rises
A small balloon.... 'but for the grace of God....'

They stand a while in flickering light, rehearsing
the children's names and birthdays. 'It's so sweet
to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,'
she says to his departing smile. Then, nursing
the youngest child, sits staring at her feet.
To the wind she says, 'They have eaten me alive.'

3.3.1 The Social Context

Asked to enumerate the themes she frequently used in her poetry, Gwen Harwood once offered the following catalogue 'love, friendship, art, memory' (Sage, 308). The surprising omission of landscape from this list has itself been thought to suggest something of the social context of her poetry, which derives from 'her resistance to identification with recognisably nationalist preoccupations' (ibid). I believe though that 'In the Park' does in fact, evoke a landscape, the landscape of suburbia. The general outlines of this context have been indicated in 1.3.2 and 2.3.2. Here I wish to focus on one particular aspect, the sense of suburbia that is generated in one of its victims, in this case, a woman. The first point established by the poem is that a woman in suburbia is marginalised by both place and gender. While it is true that both the woman and the man remain unnamed she is shown to be distinctly shabby

while he is neat. We are not told how many children the woman has but she is accompanied by four, the two who 'whine and bicker,' a third who grubs around in the dirt, and a fourth who is not yet weaned. The next point made is that the forces of sex *and* gender (respectively, biological necessity and cultural conditioning) have imprisoned the woman. She feels strongly that her children have fed off her. The concluding line—which she has courage to entrust only to the wind—makes this point clearly: 'They have eaten me alive.' She has been destroyed in other words by the biological demands of child-bearing and child-rearing. Simultaneously she also feels she is pressured by the sacrifices and statements contemporary patriarchal society expects a wife and a mother to mouth—sentiments that are culturally acceptable. Hence her dependence on platitudes: 'Its so sweet/ to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,' when in reality her situation is the reverse of sweet. Then there is the point that contemporary socio-cultural pressures dehumanise all people, both men and women. Look for instance at Harwood's portrayal of the man. Is he a person or a puppet? His social reflexes condition him to make a 'casual nod' to an old acquaintance of whose love in the past he had not been aware. I think the greatest casualty in this situation is that of human personality. The man has been reduced to the level of a neat little caricature in a comic strip. All his responses are programmed rather than real. Hence his very thoughts seem to come out in bubble-form, just as characters in cartoon-strips have their thoughts and speech printed in a roughly oval space that is outlined by the artist. Finally (and this point follows from those made earlier) the sonnet explores the relationship between language and feeling. As a rule it seems that within the social context of contemporary suburbia, language is used to escape from emotion. Look at the list of clichés that make up this brief moment of social intercourse: 'how nice', 'etcetera', 'Time holds great surprises,' 'but for the grace of God,' and of course, the remark already discussed, 'Its so sweet/ to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive.'" Only right at the end does speech convey emotion when the woman says bleakly, 'They have eaten me alive.'" This comment is heard only by the wind and is an expression of pent-up feeling that will not be held in check any longer. The near-total rift between language and feeling is a measure of the rift or alienation between one person and another and also of the rift within a single individual herself. These gaps are caused by the pressures of contemporary society.

3.3.2 The Literary Context

The poem 'In the Park' is a sonnet. The word 'sonnet' means 'a little song' in Italian. The sonnet is a form of poetry that originated in Italy in the thirteenth century. Petrarch, an Italian poet (1304-1343) popularised this verse-form, and Harwood's sonnet is based on the Petrarchan model. That is, the fourteen lines are divided into an octave comprising eight lines and a sestet comprising six. The rhyme-scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet is *abba, abba, cde, cde*. This structure is used to communicate a single wave of emotion which rises to a high point at the end of the octave and then ebbs away through the sestet which either complements or responds to the emotion of the octave in its own way.

How does Harwood's poem fit into the sonnet tradition? The emotion is single: a strong passionate sympathy for the woman who is trapped by culture-conditioning. The octave sets out the situation: the mother worn out by child-bearing and rearing suddenly meets an old acquaintance. Her sense of entrapment intensifies with his response. The sestet opens out the situation in the sense that the woman's response to the situation is laid bare. I think that the octave sets the scene which is analysed by the sestet.

Apart from traditions concerning form, there are also traditions concerning content against which I'd like to place the poem. There is the tradition of poetry written by

and about women in Australia. Within this there is the line of specifically feminist response which is concerned with the way in which women are offered or denied access to opportunities for empowerment. Earlier poetry such as that of Judith Wright (b. 1915) had exposed the way in which the societal roles of wifehood and motherhood had closed possibilities of development for women as individuals. The following verse from Wright's 'To Another Housewife' depicts a situation in which two women share with each other how their girlish resolution—never to touch meat—has been blown to bits by the responsibilities of adulthood.

How many cuts of choice and prime
our housewife hands have dressed since then—
our hands with love and blood imbued—
for daughters, sons and hungry men !
How many creatures bred for food
we've raised and fattened for the time
they met at last the steaming knife
that serves the feast of death-in-life ! (Buckley, 81)

Wright's poem talks about the housewife's carving of meat as a parable for the way in which women are prevented from making and living out personal choices by the chores and responsibilities of domestic routine. It is as if a housewife has no life of her own as it is her lot in life to perpetually serve the children and the men of the household who make demands on her. The poem recognises the way in which women are denied freedom of choice and action by the roles imposed on them by patriarchy. Yet Wright's poem does not (I think) have the vulnerability and the anger of Harwood's poem. This makes 'In the Park' a statement that complicates Australian feminist poetry.

3.3.3 The Text

The sonnet begins by embodying precisely the condition of the deprivation and marginalisation of women which it castigates. A woman who is nameless and (initially) faceless is defined only by externals: her clothes and her children. The *first quatrain* (four lines) adds an edge of poignancy to her situation by suggesting that even in time past her love has perhaps not been known.

The pathos of the opening is complicated by the tinge of irony that appears in the *second quatrain*. Both characters are shown to make clichéd and formulaic responses so that the phrase—'but for the grace of God'—which closes this section is shown to have no genuine resonance in this place and time.

The *sestet* seems to me to contrast the formulaic response with which it opens ("Its so sweet ...") with the quiet and heartfelt horror of the closing remark ("They have eaten me alive"). The gap between these responses is I think the gap between the outer and inner self of the woman under pressure.

To me it seems that the sonnet is an excellent example of Harwood's control of the memoir or personal record: 'the poem ... that restores a lost past to the light of the present ...' (Sage 308). The woman realises—on meeting a once-loved acquaintance—that motherhood and wifehood have meant for her an extinction of self-realisation. The past and what it could have brought her strike the woman painfully because the past revisits her in a peculiarly personal way. Other kinds of memories are discussed in the sonnet: name-lists and birthdays for example. The act of memory is painful but recognition of this fact gives the woman (who has so far been either silent or trite) the dignity of a voice in the last line of the poem. The memoir has always seemed an art-form particularly open to women as the writing of

a memoir demands experience that can be personal not public, an education that has not necessarily been formal. Here Harwood uses the sonnet-form to record a single, strong emotion—the pain of loss—focused through a single moment at which past and present interact with each other.

3.4 COMMON CONCERNS

What—if any—are the concerns common to the prescribed poems of Wallace-Crabbe and Harwood? First I would suggest that both alter the inherited paradigm of the Australian landscape that they use. The stereotype—with which your earlier blocks must have familiarised you—is the dichotomy between the city and bush. With these poems it seems that this traditional opposition no longer obtains. The opposition is no longer between culture and nature. Instead, rifts and fissures open up within the world of civilisation itself. Wallace-Crabbe's poem protests the stagnant complacency of the mind of Melbourne which is reflected in the city and the bay that laps its shores. Harwood's sonnet protests the dehumanisation imposed on women by suburbia.

Also, the voice of protest in both poems is that of a single individual. It is a voice crying in the wilderness as the speakers (the poet in 'Melbourne', the woman in 'In the Park') express the death-in-life that characterises the environments in which they are placed. The voice of protest in both cases is marked by its vulnerability and frustration on account of the insensitivity of its surroundings.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

Chris Wallace-Crabbe (b.1934) castigates the self-enclosed and self-preserving quality of the city of Melbourne in his poem of the same name. In the tradition of the city poet he adjures Melbourne to rouse itself politically and culturally as it is—he believes—in a torpor of emotion and intellectual apathy. *Gwen Harwood* (1920-1995) analyses the ways in which contemporary suburbia constructs stereotypes of wifehood and motherhood that destroy women. Her sonnet 'In the Park' is a searing indictment of the way contemporary society feeds on women and denies them access to opportunities of self-development.

3.6 GLOSSARY

complacency
disclaimer
indictment
adjure
searing
torpor

self-satisfaction
refusal to acknowledge
accusation
solemnly request
hot, scorching
condition of lazy inactivity

3.7 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Analyse the various components in the dissatisfaction of the speaker in 'Melbourne' and show how these allow the poem to be placed in the tradition of city-poetry.
- Q.2 Explore the pressures exerted by gender-stereotyping in Harwood's sonnet 'In the Park' and show how the sonnet-form is ideal for the intensification of pressure.

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements & Isobel Grundy (ed.) *The Feminist Companion to Literatures in English: From the Middle Ages to the present*. London: B. T. Batsford, 1990.

Warner, and Marten. *A History of England*. London, 1930.

UNIT 4 EE TIANG HONG & KEVIN GILBERT

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 'Coming to'
 - 4.2.1 The Social Context
 - 4.2.2 The Literary Context
 - 4.2.3 The Text
- 4.3 'Mister Man'
 - 4.3.1 The Social Context
 - 4.3.2 The Literary Context
 - 4.3.3 The Text
- 4.4 Common Concerns
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to open up the experience of two subcultures—those of immigrant and indigenous peoples—as these are evoked in Ee Tiang Hong's 'Coming To' and Kevin Gilbert's 'Mister Man.' I will also try—as a secondary objective—to open up a debate on multiculturalism as it exists in contemporary Australia.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism is perhaps the single distinguishing feature of Australia today that sets it apart from the country as it was, say, during the aftermath of World War-II. Look for instance at the following account of this change. The writer recalls his upbringing during World War-II and contrasts it with the reality of life in contemporary Australia.

... you might say that my upbringing was monocultural, in fact classically colonial, in the sense that it concentrated on the history, literature and values of Western Europe and, in particular, of England, and not much else. It had very little relationship to the themes of education in Australia today, which place a heavy stress on local history, the culture of minorities, and a compensatory non-Anglocentric approach to all social questions. 'Multiculturalism' ... reflects a reality ... that the person on the bus next to you in Sydney is just as likely to be the descendant of a relatively recent arrival, a small trader from Skopelos, a mechanic from Palermo, a cook from Saigon, a lawyer from Hong Kong or a cobbler from some *stetl* in Lithuania as the great-great grandchild of an Englishman or Irishman, transported or free. The length of one's roots, as distinct from their tenacity, is no longer a big deal ... whatever passing pangs of regret this may induce in the minority of Australians whose families have been there for most of its (white) history. By the 1970's Australia had ceased to be a 'basically British' country anyway. And there was no feasible way of persuading the daughter of a Croatian migrant of the mystic bond she was supposed to feel with Prince Charles or his mother (Hughes, 76-7)

What are the consequences of the shift from monoculturalism to multiculturalism likely to be for poetry? As already suggested in the Block Introduction, the map of contemporary Australia is very much more a collage of ethnicities. The extended quotation that you have just read suggests the unbelievable cultural pluralism that can result when a cross-section of ethnic groups—Mediterranean and Central European races are mentioned above—live together. Poetry then is likely to present a far wider range of voice and experience than before. The mood of optimism that colours the extract may not always be present, though, and the extent to which poetry reflects a shift away from anglocentric models may possibly vary as well.

4.2 'COMING TO'

Let us now read Ed Tiang Hong's 'Coming To'.

COMING TO

It was a blind corner,
I remember, I couldn't think
to brake somehow, still less in time,
That moment round the bend--
a shock of water, overwhelming sea
where should have been a road,
a bridge over the river,
I mean even in flood.

A sensation of floating,
car engine dumb as cork,
I must have passed out
as under ether, I guess,
my head just above water,
body vague as sponge, and
below the knees, adrift
as slush, at one with.

On terra firma, Australis
don't ask me how I got out, Eddy,
and, Bruce, this isn't a suicide note,
Heaven forbid! No sailing
to Byzantium, either. Indeed,
thankful just to have survived then
around an edge of consciousness,
new faces, fellow Australian.

And a country woman asking;
'Where y' from?'
Her husband stands up tall
by their four-wheel drive,
looks me up and down:
(Jesus! What on earth!)
And so, uncertain, 'Perth',
I said, from down under.

4.2.1 The Social Context

The social context of Hong's poem is one that I have already established from a more or less impersonal socio-historical point of view in 1.3.1 which deals with the

complexities of immigration. Here however I will examine substantially the same ground from a more personal and biographical point of view. The writer is an Australian of Caucasian origin.

My father, who was born in 1895, was like every other Australian of his generation when he spoke of Asia. He saw it as a threat—not surprisingly, since Australia had been at war with Japan from 1941 to 1945, and lost many young men in the Pacific islands, in New Guinea, on the Burma Road and in hellish concentration camps like Changi. Only by a hair's breadth and the force of American arms did we escape being forcibly co-opted into what Tojo called the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Such national experiences, mixed with a long tradition of Sinophobia—for the racially exclusive White Australian Policy was a left-wing law, originally designed to keep cheap coolie labour out of Australia—did not predispose even intelligent Australians, like my father, towards an appreciation of ... [China or Japan].... He rarely mentioned Asia to me. He called it the Far East, meaning the Near North, and would not have considered going there. Far East of where? East of Eden: that is, east of England, a country in which ... he had spent less than three of his fifty-six years. (Hughes, 75-6)

What are the points relevant to the immigrant experience (particularly of Asians) that emerge from this extract? First there is the reminder that as a result of the Japanese aggression towards Australia in World War II, Australians of Caucasian origin regard Japan with fear, as they have always done the Chinese. Unsurprisingly fear generates hostility. Next there is the reiteration of another kind of fear—apart from xenophobia—that immigration raises unemployment. As in the Walwicz extract in 1.3.1 cheap immigrant labour, it is feared, will lower wages and reduce jobs for the established workforce. Then there is the ignorance that accompanies fear. There is no knowledge of even such close neighbours as China or Japan, or of these or other cultures from which migrants come. Finally there is the sense that Australia continued until well into the twentieth century to see the world from the point of view of Britain, geographically and culturally. Indochina and Japan are Australia's neighbours to the north. They are to the Far East of Britain however and to all those Australians for whom Britain was Eden or 'paradise', Indochina and Japan were located—farical though it seems—in the Far East as well. In other words immigration challenges anglocentrism.

4.2.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of 'Coming To' is a little more complicated to set out. It seems to mark a rite of passage or a phase of development, in a way that draws attention to its literary ancestry. When Hong reminds his readers of the lyric 'Sailing to Byzantium' written by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats in the early part of the twentieth century. Yeats's poem concerns a passionate journey of the imagination to a city of the mind. Byzantium (present-day Istanbul, capital of Turkey) is chosen by Yeats because in the ancient world it represented the artistic achievement born out of a confluence of cultures: Greek, Roman and Christian. Although Hong's disclaimer comes quickly to remind his readers that 'Coming To' is no 'Sailing to Byzantium' any more than it is a suicide-note, it is clear that Hong's is also a poem about a journey made toward some kind of cultural experience that is composite or pluralistic. As with 'Sailing to Byzantium' this journey of the mind presupposes *and* increases self-knowledge and self-recognition.

4.2.3 The Text

Ec Tiang Hong &
Kevin Gilbert

The text of 'Coming To' is constructed on a pun which is the title of the poem. On *one* level it is a poem about the speaker's regaining consciousness after a car accident in which the car is practically submerged by a river in spate and the poet manages to escape after having briefly fainted. On *another* level the poet comes to an understanding of his situation as an immigrant. When he recovers his senses the husband and wife who have stopped to help him ask from where he has come. So far he has regarded himself as an Australian, one who has at last (like Captain Cook) reached the firm ground of Australia after undergoing perilous waters. He has thought of the Australian couple (presumably of Caucasian origin) as fellow citizens. Now with a shock he looks at himself through their eyes and realises what they see as his foreignness. 'Jesus, what on earth!' is the unspoken, parenthetical response of such people to the presumably Asian origins of the speaker. Nonetheless the speaker scores an ironic triumph at the end. His response to the woman's question, 'Where y'from?' is 'Perth.' In other words he gives his country of citizenship (that is, Australia) to which he now belongs rather than his country of birth from where he has emigrated. To Caucasian-Australians he is an immigrant, but he sees himself as an Australian. 'Down under' is another phrase shot through with irony. The phrase was originally used by the English to describe Australia derisively as being the country right at the base of the known world. For an Australian to use this term to describe himself would be a comic turnaround, like turning the tables. For one who seems to be 'merely' an immigrant to those who look at him, the hijacking or appropriation of the phrase is I think an act of courage. He is resolute to claim equal status as an Australian in a multicultural society in good standing. In short, he comes to an understanding of the complexities of his position.

4.3 'MISTER MAN'

Let us now turn to Kevin Gilbert's poem 'Mister Man'.

MISTER MAN

Written after watching a tribal Aboriginal berate Judge Furnell for his facile cleverness and his incomprehension of the affinity of the Aboriginal and his tribal land - (Monday Conference, ABC television, 7 April 1975)

Mister man
Have you stood on this rock
Have you come close to this ghost-gum tree
Have you stood on green fingers of grass
And felt deep their life surge like me?
Mister man
Have you entered the caves
And greeted your own totems there
Have they given directions to go
God-like through life's pathway like me?
Mister man
have you stood on the shore
Of this land your own soul now rent bare
And discovered the hatred you wrought
The suffering the death you ploughed there.
Mister man
Have you looked at your face
Like mine that is mirrored in land
Yours reflects only on pools

My image goes deep in the sand
The soil and the rocks and the trees
The souls of my people are here
The birds and the clouds and the breeze
The sun and the moon and the stars
Talk to me are of me they dwell
Inside me they each are a part
Of me they live in my heart
All things all created by God
Are in me this whole universe
Are of me—we speak and we cry
We talk and we dance and we sing
And I bring them gifts of my soul
Of my love God has bidden me bring
Mister man
If perchance you do find
The essence the life force in land
All giving expression to self
To soul-force then you'll understand
The God-soul in all things around
This essence of life then you live
Then indeed, Mister man, you do live.

4.3.1 The Social Context

The social context of Gilbert's poem is that of the indigenous experience which has been set out in some detail in 1.4.1. Here however I will try to open out the imaginative aspect of this context. Look at the following account of life in Australia in the middle of the twentieth century.

In those days we had a small, 95 per cent white, Anglo-Irish society Of the world's great religions other than Christianity—Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam—we were as perfectly ignorant as a row of cats looking at a TV set: or would have been if Australia had had television in 1955 which luckily it did not Not until my late teens did I have a conversation with an Australian Aborigine, and it was short. There were no Aboriginal students, let alone teachers, at Sydney University. The original colonists of Australia—whose ancestors had walked and paddled there, across the string of islands that lay between "our" continent and Asia, around 30,000 B.C.—were completely unknown to us city whites, and their history and culture fell into a box called "anthropology," meaning the study of exotics with whom one had nothing in common and whose culture had nothing of value to contribute to ours. Thinking so was our subliminal way of warding off the suspicion that ours had contributed nothing but misery and death to theirs. (Hughes, 75)

First look at the unrealistic cultural homogeneity which was challenged in a subsequent generation by such poems about the experience of indigenous people as 'Mister Man.' The myth of monoculturalism—that society is white, Britain is the sole national referent and Christianity is the sole religious referent—is evoked here so that it can be understood as something that shaped mainstream culture before the articulation of the experience of subcultures. Next look at the silent apartheid which appears to have prevailed at this time. White and indigenous peoples have—literally and metaphorically—not had anything to say to each other. Then look at the even sharper alienation between urban whites and the indigenous peoples. The latter, it is stressed, are the original inhabitants of Australia. Such people have been

marginalised both by the way in which the general public ignores them *and* by the way in which the academy studies them. Finally notice that cultural apartheid in this case is based on the sneaking fear of white Australians that perhaps their predecessors had devastated the indigenous people and therefore it was perhaps best to avoid the latter entirely. 'Mister Man' chastises these assumptions written into contemporary society.

4.3.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of Gilbert's poem is indicated by its epigraph which reads 'Written after watching a tribal aboriginal berate Judge Furnell for his facile cleverness and his incomprehension of the affinity of the Aboriginal and his tribal land - (Monday Conference, ABC television, 7 April 1975).' It is an occasional poem—or one written to mark a specific event, place or time, in this poem, a particular court-case. It is also one that uses black humour to open up painful issues for castigation and correction. The chief source of this comedy is the use of pidgin to articulate indigenous experience and subvert the experience of the white interlocutor. The other source of black comedy is the inversion of the situation. Now it is the judge who is on trial and it is the ordering of experience from the point of Caucasian Australians that is placed in the dock. The indigenous speaker is the accuser and the verdict is given implicitly from the point of view of the experience of his people.

4.3.3 The Text

The text returns insistently and repeatedly to its title. 'Mister Man' is the term used by the speaker as he berates the Caucasian judge and makes a series of rhetorical demands of him and of the culture he represents. Note how the poem depends for its ordering on the rhythms of pidgin since these may be seen to order indigenous experience. Formal punctuation is therefore minimal. Also notice it is not just a single individual who is on trial but an entire system of values. At the outset the right of the judge—and of the culture he represents—to hand down the law is questioned. It is shown to be a right that has no basis in felt experience. Its central premise is that the experience of the indigenous people unites them with the cosmos. 'The birds and the clouds and the trees / The sun and the moon and the breeze/Talk to me are of me they dwell/Inside me ...' This premise lends a sacredness and an authenticity to the relationship between these people and the land: "'Have you entered the caves / and greeted your own totems there ...?'" The point is that the spirit of the indigenous people is stamped indelibly on the land. The features of the land throw back or reflect their features. People of Caucasian origin have to understand that it is only limpid water in which they can see themselves.

4.4 COMMON CONCERNS

I read 'Coming To' and 'Mister Man' as sharing a *theme* namely, what constitutes contemporary Australian identity. 'Coming To' is a forcible evocation of the cultural tensions that develop when there is a difference between a person's country of birth and country of citizenship. 'Mister Man' is a powerful reiteration that the land is the birthright of indigenous people and an integral part of their claim to entitlement. The poems also seem to share a *mode*, specifically that of protest. 'Coming To' draws attention to the pain and confusion inherent in the immigrant experience while 'Mister Man' protests the marginalisation of indigenous people who can claim to be at the centre when it comes to owning the land since that is their birthright. Both poems *challenge mainstream culture* by offering radically destabilising points of view as alternatives. Finally, both run I think a similar *risk*: that of constructing a cultural ghetto and thus marginalising the very people they wish to empower. Does it elevate or diminish the dignity and purpose of these poems to read them as

representative of the experiences of immigrant and indigenous peoples respectively? Does such a reading facilitate the reader to see across (or through) boundaries? Or is this only an exercise in cultural tokenism? I don't know that there are hard and fast answers but I'd still like, I think, to put question-marks over these issues. What do you think?

4.5 LET US SUM UP

Ee Tiang Hong in 'Coming To' and Kevin Gilbert in 'Mister Man' seek to challenge mainstream culture by opening up the worlds of immigrant and indigenous experience respectively. 'Coming To' is an exercise in self-recognition as an immigrant who suffers a road accident comes to understand that acceptance of the fact of his Australian identity is hard to come by. 'Mister Man' overturns the attempt of Caucasian society to claim cultural supremacy by pointing out that the primal claim of ownership of the land belongs to the indigenous people. Both poems seek to redefine Australian identity by articulating protests from the margins. Both I think ultimately share a problem: does the representation of a cultural group in its separateness empower or enfeeble it?

4.6 GLOSSARY

Sinophobia
apartheid

the fear of and distrust towards the Chinese race originally, separation on the basis of ethnic origin which lasted until 1992 in South Africa, used here more colloquially to indicate cultural apartness.

arraigns
subliminal
pidgin
limpid

accuses
of which one is not consciously aware
language that is a mixture of two or more languages
clear.

4.7 QUESTIONS

- Q 1. Analyse *either* 'Coming To' or 'Mister Man' to show how the poem of your choice redefines Australian identity.
- Q 2. Examine the possible strengths *and* weaknesses of 'Coming To' *and* 'Mister Man' in terms of the protests they make.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

Hughes, Robert. 'Multi-Culti and its Discontents' in *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, 1993, repr. London: The Harvill Press, 1999, pp. 73-129.

UNIT 5 MUDROOROO NAROGIN & GIG RYAN

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 'Harijan'
 - 5.2.1 The Social Context
 - 5.2.2 The Literary Context
 - 5.2.3 The Text
- 5.3 If I had A Gun
 - 5.3.1 The Social Context
 - 5.3.2 The Literary Context
 - 5.3.3 The Text
- 5.4 Common Concerns
- 5.5 Contemporary Australian Poetry : An Overview
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Glossary
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to complete this study of contemporary Australian poetry by studying Mudrooroo Narogin's 'Harijan' and Gig Ryan's 'If I had a gun'. The secondary objective is to show how such radical representations of those marginalised in terms of race, class or gender rewrites the history of Australia.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Mudrooroo Narogin and Gig Ryan are two contemporary poets whose preferred names—which I will use throughout this unit—draw attention to the theoretical positions from which they write. The former is the preferred usage of Colin Johnson. By using it, Narogin deliberately focuses on the fact that he wants to privilege indigenous experience and identity over a conventionally more suitable anglicised identity. 'Harijan' I will try to show, also asserts a solidarity with the untouchables of India. Both the indigenous people in Australia and the Harijans in India are peoples against whom social and cultural discrimination is practiced in the land of their birth on account of their origin. Narogin implies that it is possible for oppressed classes of the world to unite—setting aside national boundaries—in response to the common discrimination they face.

A 'gig' is a single-event performance of popular music and Elizabeth or Gig Ryan is a singer and song-writer as well as a poet. She has (from 1975-8) also worked on a Melbourne women writers' magazine *Luna*. Ryan articulates the voice of radical feminist protest.

5.2 'HARIJAN'

HARIJAN

Naming us the children of God.
Refusing us paradise.
Exiling us from the kingdom.
Oppressed by those who fear our touch.

Afraid to touch the children of God.
Murdering us—our blood and guts fertilise this land:
Raping our women—their tears and saliva are our sacrifice:
God will give us our promised land.
Earned by our sweat and the labours of our hands.
Our paradise created by our own efforts

No more will our touch pollute—no more, no more
No longer will they fear our touch—our touch no longer:
No more in fear of our lives—less than dust in fear of our
lives:
Free and equal, free and equal : our land our land our land
our land.

Our exile is over,
United we stand
With wrath, with humanity
Having earned our love.
We, the children of God.
That great man named us.
Going out to free a nation
In which we remain slaves,
Now, no more, no more,
Mahatmaji, no more!

5.2.1 The Social Context

The social context of 'Harijan' is established by the title itself which makes it clear that the poem has to do with the plight of outcastes in India. Until the start of the twentieth century they were branded unclean and their very touch was thought to be polluting. They were confined to a set of menial jobs and suffered various social prohibitions in silence. They were—for instance—not allowed to draw water from common wells or worship in temples since even their shadows were thought to mean certain defilement. When Gandhiji assumed leadership of the Indian freedom struggle he realised that freedom needed to include the emancipation of these untouchables. He therefore said that henceforth they would be called God's people, literally, Harijan. He insisted that all public places of worship be thrown open to them and undertook scavenging—the job usually reserved for them—to try to restore their dignity and give them a fresh identity to go with their new name. The Constitution of post-independence India guarantees equality of opportunity to all its citizens and makes discrimination punishable by law. Nonetheless it continues. Despite legislation, backward castes continue to be particularly vulnerable to oppressions that take the form of land-grabbing, dacoities, religious persecution and crimes against women. The liberation then that their re-naming seemed to offer has turned out to be a delusion.

5.2.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of Narogin's poem is that of the declared sequence. The poet makes it the last of a set of three pieces on India which he calls 'Three poems from India.' His publishing of this sequence in a collection entitled 'Long Water: Aboriginal Art and Literature' (1986) suggests the parallel he wishes to draw between forms of discrimination written into the Indian and Australian experience. The purpose of the declared sequence as a format for poetry is to draw attention to the development of a particular theme against a particular background. The first two poems in this sequence are entitled respectively 'Calcutta in the evening' and 'Carla,

do not forget Calcutta.' 'Harijan' is the third and concluding poem in this sequence. 'Calcutta in the evening' evokes the magic of the city along with that of the poet's love. 'To my right a baby cries, to my left the mother sighs, / Before me the husband shouts and Grandfather mutters / While I stand thinking of my love / In the evening raga uniting in a sudden quietness / The palm sways as supple as her body.'

Mudrooroo Narogin
and Glg Ryan

This combination of the enchantment of the city and of the beloved continues into the next poem. Although the poet is clear that the city has been ravaged by the passage of time or 'has had many lovers' he still feels its charm. 'Do not forget Calcutta / Her dreams colour the poetry of the morning / A golden sun struggles to shimmer through the mists / And her children fling off their nightmares / Suddenly glimpsing her as she was and will be.' Together these poems lead up to 'Harijan.'

5.2.3 The Text

The text of 'Harijan' is constructed around a central paradox. On the one hand, the term suggests that, owing to the intervention of Gandhi—the outcastes have at last been set up as a chosen people. On the other hand, this sense itself becomes self-defeating. They have no blessed inheritance, no paradise into which to step. No promise of a bright future awaits them. And in time present there are only the certainties of various forms of social and moral oppression. This paradox is expressed through a set of concepts borrowed from the Jews of the Old Testament. At one time they were ruled by the Egyptians and believed that, as God's chosen people, they would be led by him out of slavery into the promised land of deliverance. One of the ironies of the poem is that if the Harijans obtain liberation it will be on the basis of their own effort. Another continuing and tragic irony is that just as Gandhi's identification of them as the 'people of God' is a mixed blessing—freedom for India has not necessarily meant their liberation. They believe they have won their own freedom and secured their own dignity.

5.3 'IF I HAD A GUN'

IF I HAD A GUN

I'd shoot the man who pulled up slowly in his hot car this morning
I'd shoot the man who whistled from his balcony
I'd shoot the man with things dangling over his creepy chest
in the park when I was contemplating the universe
I'd shoot the man who can't look me in the eye
who stares at my boobs when we're talking
who rips me off in the milk-bar and smiles his wet purple smile
who comments on my clothes. I'm not a fucking painting
that needs to be told what it looks like
who tells me where to put my hands, who wrenches me into position
like a meccano-set, who drags you round like a war
I'd shoot the man who couldn't live without me
I'd shoot the man who thinks it's his turn to be pretty
Flashing his skin passively like something I've got
to step into, the man who says *John's a chemistry PhD*
and an ace cricketer, Jane's got rotten legs
who thinks I'm wearing perfume for him
who says *Baby you can really drive* like it's so complicated
male, his fucking highway, who says *ah but you're like that*
and pats you on the head, who kisses you at the party because
everybody does it, who shoves it up like a nail
I'd shoot the man who can't look after himself

who comes to me for wisdom
who's witty with his mates about heavy things
that wouldn't interest you, who keeps a little time
to be human and tells me, female, his ridiculous
private thoughts. Who sits up in his moderate bed
and says *Was that good* like a menu
who hangs onto you sloppy and thick as a carpet
I'd shoot the man last night who said *Smile honey*
don't look so glum with money swearing from his jacket
and a 3-course meal he prods lazily
who tells me his problems : his girlfriend, his mother,
his wife, his daughter, his sister, his lover
because women will listen to that sort of rubbish
Women are full of compassion and have soft soggy hearts
you can throw up in and no one'll notice
and they won't complain. I'd shoot the man
who thinks he can look like an excavation-site
but you can't, who thinks what you look like's for him
to appraise, to sit back, to talk his intelligent way.
I've got eyes in my fucking head, who thinks if he's smart
he'll get it in. I'd shoot the man who said
Andrew's dedicated and works hard, Julia's ruthlessly ambitious
who says *I'll introduce you to the ones who know*
with their inert alcoholic eyes
that'll get by, sad, savage and civilised
who say *you can* like there's a law against it
I'd shoot the man who goes stupid
in his puny abstract *how-could-I-refuse-she-needed-me*
taking her tatty head in his neutral arms like a pope
I'd shoot the man who pulled up at the lights
who rolled his face articulate as an asylum
and revved the engine, who says *you're paranoid*
with his educated born-to-it calm
who's standing there wasted as a rifle
and explains the world to me. I'd shoot the man who says
Relax honey come and kiss my valium-mouth blue.

5.3.1 The Social Context

The social context of Gig Ryan's poem is that of radical feminist protest against a gender-conditioned world. The poem protests the arrogant assumption that women's roles—of lover, sex-object, or counsellor—are determined by biology while men's roles are determined by mental ability. In other words, the poem demolishes cultural stereotypes that are constructed according to double standards by which men are discussed in terms of their skills while women are dismissed on the basis of their physical attributes alone. It is specifically a protest against a phallogocentric society in which everything: social codes, culture-conditioning and all people are created to provide men with instant gratification, sexual, emotional, or psychological. The poem constitutes an attempt to move to a gynocentric context which focuses on the needs of women. Its social and cultural concerns have been described as a response to the following problem.

The concept and practice of 'mateship' in the Australia of the late nineteenth century spelt the prevalence of masculine authority in the new continent. The history of the arrival of the Whites, and the establishment and strengthening of their colonial outpost in the naturally adverse landmass of the new continent, throughout never

mentions a single woman in its steady chronicle of the conquest of nature and the building-up of a new nation. (Saha, 45)

One way of looking at Ryan's poem then is to see it as an attempt to rewrite contemporary cultural history by writing women into it.

5.3.2 The Literary Context

The literary context of the poem may be deduced from the following analysis.

Ryan's poetry is ... distinguished by its use of contemporary urban settings and a concentration on the difficulties of sustaining personal and sexual relationships in this milieu. Tonally, it ranges from anger to a resigned fatalism, from wry humour to an unexpected pure lyricism [A subtitle] 'Arguments and Monologues' [is] a further indication of the style of much of her work. (Sage, 549)

What trends can be seen in this study? First there is a recurrence of a theme with which I dealt in 1.3.2 and 3.3.2 namely, the pressures of suburbia on relationships. The difference in Ryan's poem comes I think from a specific sense of the psycho-sexual frustration of the woman in a relationship, as it is the woman who feels she is being reduced to the level of a sex object. There is also the indication that Ryan's poetry is obedient to the rhythms of the individual speaking voice which argues things out or holds forth on one theme.

5.3.3 The Text

Hyperbole—or exaggeration for the sake of effect—is I think the governing mode of the poem. It is constructed on a set of premises that are deliberately non-realistic on the level of observable fact. All the premises to which the poem responds are in turn based on the double standards on which a gendered society operates. For example, the cultural stereotyping which believes that men's thoughts are profound because they deal with the public world while women's thoughts are trivial because they deal with the private world is shown up in its ugliness. The poem deliberately uses grotesque images centering around sex and violence to evoke the horror of lovelessness in a contemporary world. The tone of the poem remains colloquial throughout but the spoken voice is one of great anger particularly when it describes the sexual union in terms of ugliness alone. I'd call it a rant rather than a monologue because it seems to work through a relentless incremental effect. Words and images on just one theme seem to pile up and give the poem the force it has. A monologue would, I think, have worked through the logic of argument rather than the accumulation of examples and illustrations.

5.4 COMMON CONCERNS

'Harijan' and 'If I had a gun' give those who are marginalised a voice of angry protest. Narogin depicts the alienation of people from their own land only on account of their supposedly inferior birth. Ryan describes the alienation of women on account of gender exploitation from the worlds of reason and love. Both poems gain an immediacy and validity by being cast as first-person testimony to the wretchedness of the conditions described. A similar effect is achieved by the closeness with which both poems obey the rhythms of the speaking voice. Neither flinches from describing the sordidness of sexual violence to drive home their arguments. Social exploitation then, is the common denominator of the indigenous experience and of women's experience in both subcultures.

5.5 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY : AN OVERVIEW

Before I conclude this study of contemporary Australian poetry I think I would like to put two questions on the table. First, how does it alter the poetic traditions it has inherited? Second, what lines of development are you and I likely to see in this field in the near future?

To take the first question: I think contemporary Australian poetry complicates many of the themes and thought-structures it inherits. It is unlikely to offer its readers a description of the Australian landscape either for its sake alone or even largely for its own sake. Look for instance at some of the prescribed poems in your course on modern Australian poetry for the sake of contrast. I am thinking particularly of Kenneth Slessor's 'South Country' and will recall here a verse from this poem. 'And over the flat earth of empty farms/ the monstrous continent of air floats back/Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black,/Bruised flesh of thunderstorms...'. The poem is – among other things – a powerful evocation of the land of Australia and of the sky that overarches it. There is still a sense that Australia is unknown territory or *terra incognita* to most readers, and I think that is one possible reason why the poet needs to evoke the place before evoking the spirit of place. In contrast, contemporary Australian poetry does not feel the need – understandably I think – to introduce to its readers a region that has had poetry written about it since 1788. It focuses instead – and Wallace-Crabbe's 'Melbourne' is a good example, I think – on evoking the soul of the people in the first place, and allowing the seascape to be a secondary consideration alone. This is perhaps a more sophisticated way of writing about a culture. Yet I must confess to registering a certain sense of loss. I miss the lyricism that is strong in the earlier poetry, as in Neilson's 'Orange Tree' for instance. 'Is it, I said, a waste of love/ Imperishably old in pain,/ Moving as an affrighted dove/ Under the sunlight or the rain?' Perhaps the contemporary world has fewer options – in the wake of militarism and racism – about which poets can be lyrical, But I at any rate find a certain sense of loss in this area. It is possible that contemporary Australian writers have to take on board a far more fractured world in which different kinds of experience – white, indigenous, and migrant – have to be presented and so the option of romanticism is no longer an open one.

The second question is somewhat more open-ended. It is possible that Australian poetry may in the foreseeable future relate directly to Indian poetry in English. Mudrooroo Narogin's sequence for instance foreshadows one kind of bridge-building; and other attempts may be forthcoming in the future. Satendra Nandan – an Australian poet of Indian origin – has a collection entitled *Lines Across Black Waters* (1997) which suggests how exploration in this direction may be undertaken. It is also possible that – just as contemporary Canadian writers deal with experiences of a Sri Lankan, Indian or Pakistan past and relate in that way to the Indian subcontinent – Australian writers may also open up similar areas of experience. I think that in the final analysis much will depend on how contemporary Australian poets relate to multiculturalism and decide whether boundaries of experience marked by race and gender difference are to be looked over or to be looked through.

5.6 LET US SUM UP

Contemporary Australia responds to sociocultural challenges arising from Republicanism, the aftermath of Vietnam, immigration, suburbanisation, and the experiences of indigenous peoples and of women. Bruce Dawe analyses the pressures of suburbia while Les Murray anatomises national and psychological attitudes. Chris

Wallace-Crabbe castigates the emotional and intellectual torpor he sees as characteristic of city-life while Gwen Harwood examines the psychological and emotional trauma suburbia can induce in women. Ee Tiang Hong exposes the ignorance and arrogance with which white Australians can confront immigrants and Kevin Gilbert opens up the alienation written into the indigenous experience. Mudrooroo Narogin sees a parallel in the discrimination encountered by Harijans in India while Gig Ryan radicalises feminist protest.

5.7 GLOSSARY

rant	tirade or sustained scolding
incremental	the adding of particulars to construct a climax

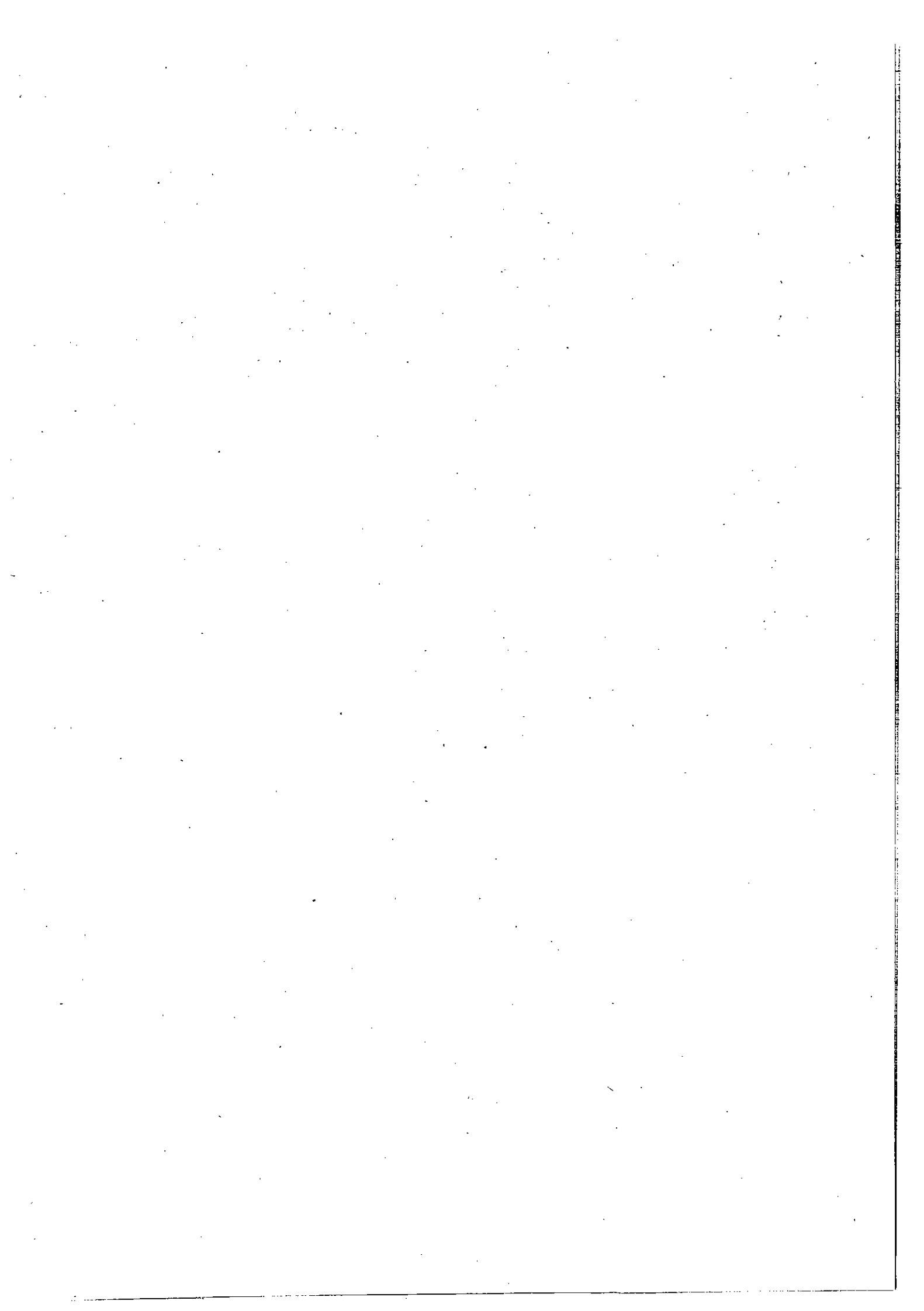
5.8 QUESTIONS

- Q 1 Critically examine Narogin's social commentary in 'Harijan' and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of his comparative model.
- Q 2 To what extent is the voice of 'If I had a Gun' effective as social protest.

5.9 SUGGESTED READING

Sage, Lorna. *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Cambridge, 1999.

Saha, Subhash Chandra. 'Feminist poetry in post-modern Australia: A Case Study', in *The Critical Endeavour*, Vol 11, July 1996, pp. 45-52.





Block

7a

DAVID MALOUF : *REMEMBERING BABYLON*

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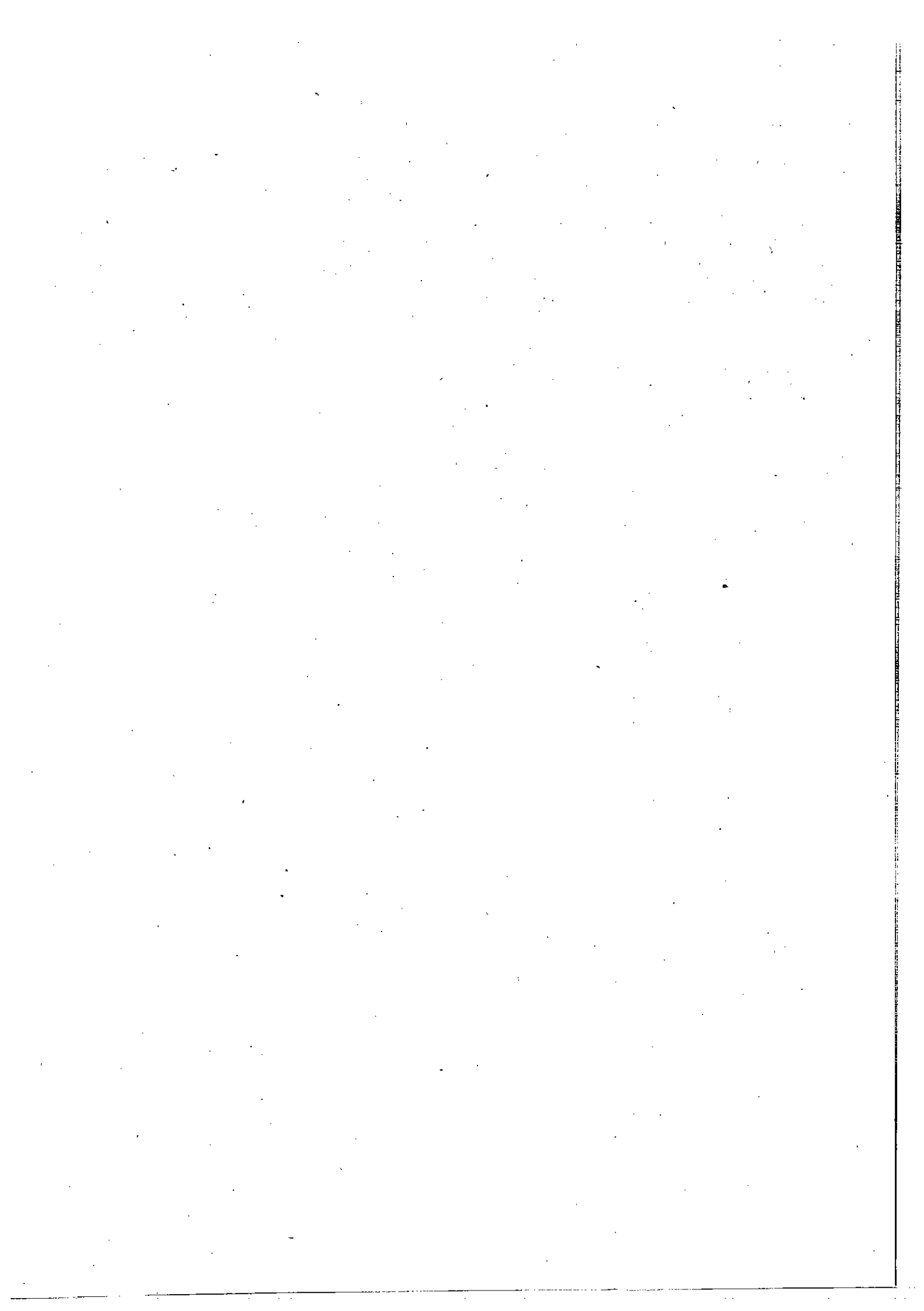
BLOCK INTRODUCTION

David Malouf was a prize-winning poet before he published his first novel, *Johnno*. In an interview published in "The Hindu" on 17th November 1996, Malouf said that he always wanted to be a writer and had written stories while at school and university. Speaking of his multicultural background he said! "My grandparents came from Lebanon. It seems in the Arabic world, the Malouf family is a great writing family; so may be it is in the genes. My mother was from London. She reproduced her Edwardian England in Australia."

David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon* was published in 1993. Writing in the moral and political wake of the first stirrings of organised aboriginal protest, Malouf reflects in his novel on the social and psychological reflexes that determined the white man's policy towards the Australian continent and its native inhabitants.

Remembering Babylon (1993) is one of the masterpieces of Australian Literature. We are sure you will read and enjoy the novel as well as the discussion on it.

Best of Luck to You!



UNIT 1 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN FICTION: AN OVERVIEW

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Many Trends
 - 1.2.1 The Realistic Novels
 - 1.2.2 The Traditionalists
 - 1.2.3 Repositioning
- 1.3 Women's Fiction
- 1.4 The Aboriginal Fiction
- 1.5 Migrant Writing
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will give you an overview of contemporary Australian Fiction.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Australian fiction is no longer compelled to concentrate on the 'matter of Australia' to proclaim its identity as a National Literature. It has also challenged the idea that one representative literature speaks to all Australians. Contemporary Australian fiction does this when it attempts to re-write or re-present dominant narratives about Australia—its history, its migration patterns, its Anglo-Celtic identity and its relationship to the aboriginal owners of the land. Though the facts of the first century of white settlement have not changed, the stories Australians tell about them today are very different from the ones told fifty years ago, especially with regard to relationships between the white invaders and the original inhabitants of the country, the aborigines.

The fiction scene in Australia today covers Anglo-writing, Migrant writing and Indigenous writing. It has moved from its initial concerns with romance and realism to a rich diversity that puts it on par with the best contemporary fiction anywhere in the world. Their fiction today is characterized by formal inventiveness, experimental design and structure. It is richly diverse in its expression and investigation of Australian culture. Key elements in that process have included the examination of the post-colonial condition (the remaining and revaluation of the past in the present), the emergence of challenges by women writers and the assertion of new directions in Aboriginal culture.

1.2 MANY TRENDS

Australian fiction from the sixties to the nineties began with a rejection of the Australian Legend (i.e. the pioneer legend that celebrates rural values of the settler such as egalitarianism and fairness) and moved towards a post-modern fabrication or refusal of significance (meaning-making systems). If it is necessary to set a date for contemporary fiction in Australia it would be from the 1970's onwards for, this

period has been the most productive in terms of value and volume. Helen Daniel in her book about the new fiction writers of the 1970 generation referred to them as 'Lear's' because of their various moves away from conventional realism. This helped her to group together different writers under a common tendency to undermine the authority of fiction. These writers were post-modern in their deliberate fabrications, their use of unreliable narrators (i.e. the narrator that the reader distrusts—a phrase from Wayne C. Booth.) Also, David Lodge has suggested that there is no such thing as an objective, reliable narrator since any presentation of an event will always imply an attitude towards it. Nick Caraway is an unreliable narrator in Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* and anti-authoritarian central figures Michael Wilding too has suggested that recent Australian fiction starts from rejecting the Australian legend and ends up with 'American lies'. There is a shared preoccupation with the very fictionality of fiction together with language and the failure of language to fully encompass experience. Writers today are concerned with the distance between language and perception. Janette Turner-Hospital in *The Last magician* (1992). The image of the vortex or spiral is used to demonstrate the accumulation of meaning. David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is also concerned with the problem of language and its failure to communicate. Contemporary Australian fiction has many strands. There are the traditionalists—followers of the realist tradition of Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy—who continue to take up themes of social realism. Some of this new fiction can be seen as a development of the old realist and nationalist tradition as it moved from nationistic identity to a confrontation with communist politics and then on to a re-examination of cultural identity.

1.2.1 The Realistic Novels

Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy and Barbara Baynton were realists who preferred to deal with ordinary men and women. Like D.H. Lawrence, they believed in the novel as a reflection of life, the fundamentals of which are simple: countryside, the great Australian Outback (the Bush), though they have also written city novels. Other writers linked to this tradition are Henry Kingsley, Rolf Boldrewood (Thomas E. Ethel Anderson), Katherine Thompson While the Lawson-Furphy tradition has been valorized as a nationalistic one, it is also a gender-biased one that favours the Australian male. Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* is the celebration of a bush hero but it is, also a satire on a national type. The traditionalists were also responsible for the formation of a nationalist stance—and a national identity. The 1890's saw Australia on its way to federation. This nationalism has since come under attack as it is believed that this concept of nation was realised retrospectively and therefore never existed in the 1890's. It was a myth. It has become impossible for a largely urban society to identify completely with 'national' types like 'the bushman' or the 'larrikin' (a rough, rowdy, boisterous young man). Contemporary fiction mirrors this disenchantment with Russell Ward's 'true Australian' but continues to find 'the Australian Legend' a 'spirituous Mundi' (a storehouse) of images for their fictions. Images of these national types merge with postmodern preoccupations and a writer like Peter Carey ridicules one such type, the 'yarn spinner' in his novel *The Illywhacker* (1985). Contemporary feminists have questioned the masculinity of this national identity forged by these traditionalists. They have challenged the male national mythology of mateship (the ideal of brotherhood—Australian ideas of mateship were a product of their isolated way of life where 'a mate was a bulwark against loneliness, a help in time of sickness and accident'. (John Docker. In a *Critical Condition* 1984, p 116) Miriam Dixon in *The Real Matilda* (1976) speaks of mateship as 'deeply antipathetic to women after re-defining the term as "an informal male-bonding institution involving sublimated homosexuality" Australian society has shown at times an unbrotherly, crude xenophobia... a blind racial prejudice" (T. Inglis Moore, *Social patterns in Australian Literature*, 1971, p 235)

1.2.2 The Traditionalists

The traditionalists set up a discourse that saw an oppositional relationship between Australia and Britain. The landscape and people took on a distinct Australian identity. The closing words of Lawson's story, 'The Bush Undertaker', mirrors this stance: "And the sun sank over the grand 'Australian bush-the nurse and tutor of eccentric minds, the home of the weird and of much that is different from things in other lands'. Contemporary writers have contested this notion that a post-colonial nation can only represent itself in reference to a European model. Traditionalists have conceptualised Australian space either as a hostile prison house or as a Utopian paradise. This dichotomy or 'double aspect' as Judith Wright calls it continues in contemporary fiction. The specificity of place continues to play an important role in fiction. The place is so big that it can never be written out.

Opposed to the realists there was the other stream of traditionalists, the writers of popular romance such as Tasma (Jessie Louvreur) and Ada Cambridge. This parallel tradition continues in contemporary fiction. Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) brought these two traditions of realism and romance together providing at the same time a position for a female subject in a patriarchal male oriented society.

Patrick White's famous dismissal of the traditionalists as 'the dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism' saw the beginnings of a shift in literary values in Australia. Realism made way for innovative ideology (i.e. the system of beliefs and practices and stories which underpin and justify a way of life). Patrick White was the first to lead Australian fiction into a new era of experiment and innovation. White began as a traditionalist in *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957) but soon began to write in a modernist mode, like Randolph Stow. Stow's *To the Islands* (1958) and *Tourmaline* (1963) are surrealistic in their settings in remote landscape of Australia. A realist to begin with Stow moved on to write abstract fictions' of symbolic and mythic content. White's influence can be seen in the posthumously published novel of Christina Stead, *I'm Dying Laughing* (1986) where she expressed a sense of disillusionment with the modern world. These writers paved the way for contemporary writers such as Thomas Keneally, Peter Carey, Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley and Kate Grenville.

1.2.3 Repositioning

Basically Australian writing is a New World Literature reflecting the concerns of displaced peoples and cultures such as the Anglo Celts and European Whites (displaced from England and Europe) the Aborigines (displaced from their own land), the migrant writes who adopt their language and culture to life in a new land and the internationalists (the transcultural writers) who try to recolonise the old world. There are differences in this New World Literatures: such as the distinction between the settler literatures of Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa; the literature of the displaced and subject peoples in the West Indies and the literature of indigenous peoples in Africa, India and the Pacific Islands. It is perhaps possible to read the cultural history of Australia as a continuing 'identity crisis', a constant re-positioning of cultural markers and cultural boundaries. Australia has defined itself by similarity and contrast, in relation to British culture, in relation to the land itself and its indigenous people, in relation to the so-called 'Western' world and in relation to its geographical neighbours in Asia and the Pacific. Contemporary fiction in Australia reflects the conflicts between power and ownership, high and popular cultures, male and female, between generations, between metaphor and metonymy and formalism and realism. Contemporary narratives provide a cognitive map of Australian society, indicating the nation's preoccupations and commenting on Australian life. Urban landscaper dominate as Australians now live mostly in metropolitan centres, but a sense of awe for Australia's geographical isolation remains a feature of contemporary writing; writers now speak of the politicisation of

space in terms of 'margins' and 'periphery'. Malouf's discourse reflects this subliminality (an in-between space, a threshold area)

There is also a move away from nationalistic concerns. Writers investigate or depict the nature and influence of political (or personal) power. They are engaged in constructing a new Australian tradition. Locality and place have become important vehicles for the exploration of a sense of identity and the colonial past. Recent Australian fiction reflects not just an Anglo-Saxon or Celtic heritage but a multicultural, multi-vocal society with difference in the way Australians see themselves. All these concerns will be illustrated later in the works of individual writers that make up the new diversity' of Australian fiction.

Many Australian novelists have been drawn to a re-writing of their country's historical past in an effort to understand it. Peter Carey makes a pertinent remark in his *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) when he says, "I learned long ago to distrust local history". David Malouf in *Remembering Babylon* (1993) takes up this stance when he re-writes the myth of settlement. In a way the novel is a re-working of the 'battlers' as the early settlers were known as several novels have been written about these 'Battlers'. In fact the 'Battler' attitude is still popular in contemporary Australian society. Aboriginal writers like Mudrooroo (formerly Colin Johnson) and Sally Morgan contest this white mythmaking and attempt to reclaim aboriginal history. Contemporary writers focus on the fictionality of history and this contradicts the notion that history is 'constructed'. Paul Radley, the narrator stressed the fictionality of history because it is narrative. History is just a fiction which a majority has agreed upon."

Thomas Keneally's *Bring Larks and Heroes* (1967) deals with life in the convict settlements as does *The Playmaker* (1987) another convict novel which explores the theme of convictism and its historical representations. Jessica Anderson's *The Commandment* (1975) and Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) follow the trend. These two novels are set in part in the penal colony of Moretown Bay in Queensland. A darker revisionist novel is Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) which is based on attacks on white farmers by a much provoked aborigine at the time of the Boar War and the Australian Federation.

Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows* (1976) like Mudrooroo's *Dr. Wooreddy* deals with the near extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines. It is interesting to compare and contrast these two re-constructions; one from the perspectives of a white man, the other from that of an Aborigine (though Mudrooroo is now displaced as American Creole rather than indigenous Australian). Rodney Hall re-imagines the Gatton murders of the early years in *Captivity Captive* (1988). The most ambitious comic presentation of Australian colonial history is Peter Carey's debunking of the picaresque mode in *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *Illywhacker* (1985). David Forester's *Moonlite* (1981) and Peter Mather's *Trap* (1966) are also narratives of the 'failed vision'. History is used as a 'vast visual image bank' for effects and for settings, for even comic eccentricity.

The World Wars have also been a recurrent theme for present day writers. The Gallipoli landing in 1915 was a moment of national crisis that has grown into the *Anzac myth of popular culture*. Roger McDonald's *1915* (1979) and Jack Bennett's *Gallipoli* (1981) are fictional responses to this event. Australians in wars abroad are the subject of David Malouf's early fiction such as *Johnno* (1975), *Fly Away Peter* (1981) and *The Great World* (1990). Martin Boyd's *When Blackbirds Sing* (1962) is perhaps the best Australian novel about World War I. Boyd states his case for pacifism and shares a preoccupation with settlement history that underlies the best Australian novels.

Nicholas Hasluck's *Truant State* (1987) and Nigel Kranth's *Matilda My Darling* (1983) turn back to specific moments in Australian history. Kranth's novel reconstructs the context which inspired AB Patterson's famous ballad, 'Walt,

Matilda'. *Truant State* examines the conflicts in Australian society after World War I. Hasluck analyses the role of the individual in history and examines the conflicts in Australian society after World War I. The message is that one cannot play truant from history. The settlers cannot leave the history of their mother land behind. History becomes a kind of 'inquest' of the past. Hasluck's earlier novel *The Bellarmine Jung* (1984) brings together events from 1629, 1948 and 1978 linking a mutiny on board a Dutch ship off the coast of a student studying in Amsterdam. This metafiction also speculates on the fictionality of history as it turns to an undocumented discovery of Australia by Dutch Sailors. An earlier novel by Christopher Koch, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978) set in Indonesia in the 1960's reflects on the politics of Western intervention in Asia. His more recent prize winning novel *Highways to a War* (1995) explores a similar theme. Through this novel Koch recreates the Vietnam War. In the above novels Australian writers have moved away from Australian history but continue to reflect on Australian politics and society. Rodeny Hall's *The Islands in the Mind* (1996) is a historical re-construction of seventeenth century European imaginings of an unknown land in the South (Australia). Like Hasluck's novel it offers a missionary myth of origins for European Australians. Women novelists have also undertaken to reimagine Australian history but we will look at their attempts in the following account of contemporary fiction by women.

1.3 WOMEN'S FICTION

The last forty years have seen a great upsurge in women's fiction in Australia. Debra Adelaide's 1998 bibliography lists 450 women writers. Australian publishers were accused of a feminist bias. The distinctive features of women's writing in Australia are its "energy, its resilience and its determination to tell the truth, even when this contradicts the comfortable complacencies of Australian belief" (Shirley Walker, *Guide to Women's Literariness*, p.171) Dale Spender, the Australian feminist critic, maintains that women writers wrote about different issues in different ways from the men. "What women writers saw and made of the continent and its inhabitants was a long way from the world of 'mateship' and make a decidedly different body of literature with distinctly different traditions." The women's literary tradition has provided the voice of the 'other' which challenges the optimistic centralist vision of Australian life. Women writers like their counterparts in Britain, America and India wrote different kinds of fiction. Some were interested in re-historicising the past, some in family sagas, others in social realism while some others examined the writing process. Nearly all were attempts to capture certain areas of female experience.

Ever since Caroline Leakey wrote the first convict novel, *The Broad Arrow* (1859) about fifteen years ahead of Marcus Clarke's more famous *His Natural Life* (1874), women writers have been in the forefront of writing in Australia. Established writers such as Thea Astley, Jessica Anderson, Elizabeth Jolley and Shirley Hazard are signposts in fiction today.

Thea Astley who began her career in the 1950's is a social satirist whose fiction is based on themes of persecution of the individual and the prevalence of colonialism and racism in Australia. Influenced by Patrick White, her novel *The Slow Natives* (1965) concentrates on spiritual crisis in individual lives. Just like White's *Riders in the Chariot*, Astley's move away from the realist mode was significant. It set the trend for contemporary fiction to be innovative and experimental. Her novel *The Kindness Cup* (1974) is a study of fear and guilt and is another "contact narrative:" where white Australians and indigenous people meet. It concerns an Aboriginal girl who leapt to her death after being pushed by a group of whites. It marks the author's concern with racist attitudes in Australia. *Its Raining in Mango* (1987) is a witty episodic narration of the Laffrey family. *Reaching Tin River* (1990) explores women's marginal position in society. Her latest work, *The Multiple Effects of*

Rainshadow (1996) re-examines a violent incident in history and once again explores the topical theme of race relations. The incident is examined from several angles.

Jessica Anderson, another internationally acclaimed writer has attempted an understanding of social dynamics. Although she came to writing relatively late in life she has since achieved real success. She too uses the realist tradition to explore female experience, though her early novels have male protagonists. Her first novel *An Ordinary Lunacy* (1963) explores man-woman relationships. It is a study of obsessive passion combined with a keen observation of sophisticated Sydneyites. *The Commandant* (1975) is an historical novel based on the life of Captain Logan the sadistic commander of a convict settlement. *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1978) is Anderson's best novel. This novel has an interesting generic history; it started as a short story, was then written as a radio play, and finally published as a novel. The experimental nature of the novel stems from the use of intertextual references to Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott' together with Elizabeth Bishop's poem, 'The Gentleman of Shalott' which remind the reader that it is a literary text, an artifact and not a 'slice of life'. Nora can be seen as the failed artist in her fictional recreations of her memories. The narration takes place in two time frames, the virtual present and the narrative of her past life. Nora's various voices and perspectives are dramatic. Memory is a major subject of Nora's story which is told as a journey through Nora's different 'selves'. Being a feminine Odyssey, the novel belongs to the 'second wave of feminism in Australia', the wave that saw German Green's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). As in Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* (1982) the point of view is consistently that of a female. Jessica Anderson's recent novel *One of the Wattle Birds* (1994) presents an interesting parallel and contrast to *Tirra Lirra*. Its young narrator Cecily Ambruss is also portrayed as a potential artist caught in a complex web of family conflict. Social mores have changed from the time of Nora's youth. Cecily is an illegitimate child living in a de facto relationship. But she is haunted by the restrictive codes of the previous generation. This novel too has an intertext evoking Arthurian legend, *Morte D'Arthur*.

Elizabeth Jolley is another outstanding Australian writer, who achieved both local and international success. Her novels are complex reflective fictions within fictions which seem to question the basis of reality. She too is concerned with sexual freedom for the individual. Her work illuminates many post-structuralist feminist concerns by a process of creation play. Her early novels, *Palomino* (1980) and *Milk and Honey* (1984), developed contemporary Gothic narratives by which she explored dark secrets. The relationships of writing to life become elements of cyclical plots in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983), *Foxybaby* (1985) and *the Well* (1986). Yet Jolley always explores the darker side, the secret elements in women's lives, and perhaps the deriving force behind her work, too, has been autobiographical, in that her masterly trilogy *My Father's Noon* (1989), *Cabin Fever* (1990) and *the George Wife* (1993) seem to be exercising elements from the writer's own past. "Jolley, like Campbell, transform any autobiographical impulse into a sophisticated, conscious art – nevertheless, her novels speak of women's experiences and their fears. When reading, *The Well*, *Miss Peabody* or *Foxybaby*, one may enjoy the post-modern layering of narrative, and laugh at Jolley's whimsical or absurdist humour. But the core of such novels always contain a horror – death, incest, loneliness, the use of sex for power – which figures not as an external oppression but as a potentiality within her mildest women characters." (Bruce Bennett, p. 318-319) Moreover her experiment with form reaches a peak in *Foxy Baby* (1985) which is basically writing about writing. *The Well* (1986) uses the gothic mode to describe another disturbing relationship. In *The Sugar Mother* (1988) Leila Bott and her mother insinuate themselves into the ordered life of the academic Edwin Page. Each of these novels provides a new perspective on one of Jolley's constant themes: women and the creative process. Jolley is a constant experimenter whose novels are textually complex. Her most recent novel *Lovesong* (1997) is about music, where the act of performing and listening to music represent moments of transcendent sensuality, similar in some ways to Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999).

Though women writers continued to record women's experience in conventional ways, many were innovative and experimental. Helen Garner's work traces the fortunes of the women of her generation who had witnessed the first wave of the liberation movement in the 1960's. Her fiction continues two key elements in contemporary women's writing: the attempt to capture female experience and the attempt to find a suitable narrative structure. *Monkey Grip* (1977) set in Carlton (Melbourne) is the story of a young woman's infatuation with a heroine addict. Her other novels, *The Children's Beach* (1984), *Cosmo Cosmolino* and *The First Stone* (1995) are also concerned with the 'Angst' of the urban scene.

Finola Moorhead's *Remember the Tarantella* (1987) uses five women characters in a patterned narrative that uses dance as its motif. *Barbara Hanrahan's Sea Green* (1974) reads like a condemnation of her earlier autobiography. *Dove* (1982) and *Kanpee Doll* (1984) focus on restoring the female voice. Marion Campbell's *Lines of Flight* (1985), *Not being Mirriam* (1988) and *The Golden Dress* (1988) are concerned with the artist's self and explore the problem of language as well as the writing process. Janette Turner Hospital challenges the genre in *Charades* (1988) which uses the paradigm of schizoid in her examination of the woman's voice. Interestingly enough Murray Bail in his *Eucalyptus* (1988) also stresses the power of the story letter's art but through a male voice. Turner Hospital's other novels are *The Ivory Swing* (1982) which is set in Southern India, *The Last Magician* (1992) and *Oyster* (1996). This last novel explores the gothic potential of an isolated cult. Turner-Hospital like Shiley Hazard of the 1980's could also be seen as a transcultural novelist as her fictional world includes a number of countries such as India, Canada, America and England.

A re-imagining of Australia's historical past has also been attempted by women writers such as Kate Grenville, Jean Bedford and Sara Dowse. In *Joan Makes History* (1988). Grenville's female consciousness, Joan, now to 'make' Australian history. She is present at several key moments in Australian history from Captain Cook's landing in 1770 to the opening of Parliament in 1901. In this revisionist novel, Australian history becomes her story. Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* retells the story of the famous bushranger Ned Kelly from a female perspective, that of his sister Kate. Robert Drewe's *Our Sunshine* (1991) brings in the male perspective with Ned Kelly himself as the narrator. Sara Dowse's *West Block* (1983) is a political novel on the Fraser administration and it has a political context-the dismissal of the Whitlam Government (Gough Whitlam-a former Prime minister of Australia). Amanda Lohrey is another political writer who uses her novels to explore issues of public and private morality. These are *The morality Gentleman* (1989), *The Reading Group* (1988) and *Camille's Bread* (1996). Other significant novels are Drusilla Modyeska's *Poppy* (1990) Kate Grenville's *Lillian Story* (1986) Janine Burke's *Speaking* (1984), Carmel Bird's *The Bluebird's Cage* (1990) and *The White Garden* (1995) and Sue Wolf's *Leaning towards Infinity* (1996). Some writing by men could also be read as feminist such as David Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* (1979) and *City of Woman* (1981) together with David Forster's *Mates of Mars* (1991) which also explores the gender divide.

1.4 THE ABORIGINAL FICTION

Another important skin in contemporary fiction is that of the Aboriginal writing. Aboriginal novelists, like Mudrooroo Narogin (formerly Colin Johnson) find the issue of where home is rather problematic. His first novel *Wild Cat Falling* (1965) is densely plotted and follows four days in the drifting life of an angry nineteen years old Aboriginal petty criminal after his release from prison. The sense of time in this novel is elastic as the past blends into the present. His best known novels weave character and incident with ironic dexterity. *Long Line Sandawara* (1979) is about a

group of aboriginal guerilla fighters "beginning the project of restoring the place of aborigines in Australian history" (The Oxford Literary History of Australia, p.322) Dr. Wooreddy's *Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) re-historicises the annihilation of the Tasmanian Aborigines through the eyes of Wooreddy, a wiseman of the tribe. *Wild Cat Screaming* (1992) is a sequel to *Wild Cat Falling*. Archie Weller's social realist novel *The Day of the Dog* (1981) reflects the anger and frustration experienced by young urban Aborigines in Perth. Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Song* (1910) is a gruesome account of Aboriginal revenge in Brisbane while Kim Scott's *True Country* explores contact with Whites in a sensitive account of life in the Kimberley. The female aboriginal voices find expression in poetry and autobiography rather than in fiction, except for Faith Bandler's *Wachovia* (1977).

1.5 MIGRANT WRITING

Migrant writing is one more significant area in contemporary fiction. Here too there are both male and female voices. A vital theme in Australian fiction is the question of where home is and consequently the fate of the homecomer to Australia, the nation of migrants ("Everyone after Cook is migrant") which has adopted multiculturalism as apart of its national policy continues to produce writing that critiques the conflict between cultural and physical belonging. While Murray Baul's *Homesickness* (1980) is a satire on this theme as he describes an ignorant group of Australian tourists abroad, Time Winton's *The Readers* (1994) exploits this theme of 'Australian abroad'. Novelists like Blanche D'Alpuget, Robert Drewe and Christopher Koch try to situate Australia within the Asia-Pacific region rather than in relation to Europe. But the writers who reveal the development of a new hybridity in the Australian consciousness are the first generation migrants of contemporary society. Some of these, writers of Asian background such as Meena Abdullah, Yasmine Gooneratne, Christopher Cyrill and Brian Castro have marginalised the white Australian in their work. Migrant writers have added to the vitality and diversity of the literary scene in Australia. The voice of the migrant now speak's through new forms of fiction.

Reviewing the literature produced in Australia by multicultural writers since the time of the Second World War, Sneja Gunew (1994) and Annette Corkhill (1994) Both discern a number of characteristic stages or modes of writing. The writing produced by migrants who have recently arrived in Australia tends to be 'contrapuntal': it juxtaposes the old culture with the new - it is cross cultural - it is frequently nostalgic and is more often conventional. The most typical of such writing is the prose description of the migrant experience itself: the feeling of uprootedness, or of cultural dislocation is strong and the struggle of the migrant to find his/her place in the new country is a major theme. Judah Waten's *Alien Son* (1952) is a good example making a living which is at the forefront of the migrant's mind. In the midst of the struggle to learn a new language and to adjust to a new environment, many migrants considered the very act of writing a luxury. Nevertheless remains a marginalised discourse. Another mode of this writing is that of translation or mediation. The writing functions as a mediation between cultures. The scope widens as writers began to experiment with form. Antigone Kefala, Ania Walwicz's *Rosa Capiello's* and Anna Conani's distinct voices reflect their multicultural origins. There is a strong sense of an implied author speaking through the narrator. Silence has been the destiny of many migrants from non-English speaking cultures. These texts consciously break that silence. The power to narrate bestows a kind of political power (the power to hold a speaking position).

I include here some of the more strident migrant voices in contemporary fiction in Australia. This brief survey should help you to locate these texts within the framework provided in the preceding paragraph. /

Maria Lewett's autobiographical novel *No Snow in December* (1985) is an account of a Polish immigrant family. The theme of alienation through language is repeated in Antigone Kefala's *Alexia* (1984). Benery Farmer's and Angelo Loukakis' short stories also deal with the Greek migrant community. Rosa Cappiello in *Oh Lucky Country* (1984) (a translation from the original in Italian) searches for a language to express things beyond the bounds of Australian English. Cappiello's novel speaks to the reader from a double distance; from the position as a migrant and from the position as a woman.

Brian Castro has been variously described as Asian, Asian-Australian and Chinese-Australian. He is multicultural in the real sense and is a good illustration of the difficulty Australians have in dealing with people who do not fit into convenient cultural categories. *Birds of Passage* (1982), his first novel belongs to the category of 'contrapuntal' multicultural writing: it juxtaposes the old culture with the new; it traces the various stages of the migrant experience and the displaced person's search for a new identity. The story has two protagonists, Seamus O'young and Shaw. Only Shaw is actually a migrant: he comes from China during the Gold rush in the late 1850's and later returns to his home country. The Present day Seamus is an Asian-looking, Australian-born orphan of unknown origin and thus the subject of much speculation and fantasising. The novel is a search for a history, for a story that can provide Seamus with an identity. Both strands of the novel are firmly anchored in the history of Australia and explores racist attitudes. Twentieth century Australia, while becoming multicultural has not cast off its racist heritage. The novel employs complex narrative techniques. Both characters are engaged in story telling and it is perhaps possible to read Seamus as a character written into Shaw's story. It is a typical postmodern text as it resists any reading that tries to make sense of all the elements in its intricate plot. The reader is forced to be an active partner in the creative process. There is a preoccupation with narrative theory especially when Seamus meets a middle-aged Frenchman on a train to London who identifies himself as Roland Barthes, a well known theorist of narrative. Barthes' famous essay 'The death of the author' (1977) argues that the real authority over meaning fictional narratives is not the author but the reader who is free to interpret the text as s/he wishes. The 'double' is a recurrent feature in Castro's fiction. His other novels *Double Wolf* (1991), *After China* (1992) and *Drift* (1994) also include strange parallels and coincidences between characters and stories. His most recent novel *Stepper* (1997) revisits the life of Soviet agent Richard Sorge and links it with his protagonist Victor Stepper.

Beth Yahp' fiction *The Crocodile Fury* (1992) adapts Malaysian modes of narration to her novel of family history and fairy tale. To line Epanomitis' novel *The Mule's Foal* (1993) focuses on events in a small Greek village and uses magic realism to successfully marginalise the majority. (Magic realism: first used to characterise the work of South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It is used to refer to the inclusion of any mythic or legendary material from a specific culture in fiction) Adib Khan's *Seasman Adjustments* (1994) is about a Bangladeshi migrant while Yasmine Goonaratne's *A Change of Skies* looks at the Sri Lankan experience in Australia.

The Hand that signed the Paper (1995) sparked off a controversy when it was found that Helen Demidenko, its author, was no Ukranian refugee but Helen Darwin from a British background. Peter Kirkpatrick *The Cry of the Goldfinch* (1997) with its complex characterisation draws the reader into a complicity with the crimes of the paedophile (child molester) pivotal character Bujak. Richard Haes *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1997) is the disturbing story of a Slovenian refugee in Tasmania.

The late 1990's have seen an eruption of young writing talent in Australia together with exciting new texts from the 'old masters'. Peter Carey's *Jack maggs* (1997) is a metafictional text which interacts with Dicken's *Great Expectations*, Maggs being the convict who helped Pip. David Foster's *The Ballad of Erinungarah* (1997) is both a

poem and a novel. Its intertextuality includes material from myths, medieval poetry and the myths of the Aboriginal Dreaming (the timeless time of ancestral beings). Murray Baul's *Eucalyptus* (1998) is a contemporary fairy tale about a father/daughter relationship as the father plans to marry his daughter to the man who can accurately name each one of the thousands of eucalyptus trees on his estate. The daughter, however, falls in love with a man who can weave together magical narrative threads.

Several first novels showcased new talent such as Giorgia Blain's *Closed for Winter* (1998) described as 'beachside gothic'

Tom Gillings *The Sooterkin* (1998) explores an earlier Australian society of Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania) in 1820. Thomas Shapcott's *Theatre of Darkness* (1998) moves between the poetic and functional genres. Carmel Bird's *Red Shoes* (1998) has a CD-ROM with visual and musical contributions which can be read together with the text or instead of it.

The recent trend of 'dirty realism' or 'grunge' writing was initiated by some young writers who prefer to write about the material realities of contemporary life. One such 'grunge' novelist is Andrew McGahan, but his novel *1998* (1995) is also a reevaluation of Australian history. Perhaps Graeme Turner, a leading Australian critic of fiction has the best last words on the subject: 'the picture which emerges... is that of a mature literary culture... negotiating new and hybridized versions of the national through a diversity of textual forms and critical receptions' (The Oxford Literary History of Australia, p. 363).

It can be concluded that 'Australia' is itself a narrative formation and the texts listed in this unit all present different (sometimes compatible, sometimes conflicting) stories about its history, its peoples and its cultures.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have classified the Contemporary Fiction and have given an overview of the fiction written by the contemporary writers.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. 'Australianness, like mateship, is a myth which serves specific interests and ideologies.' Explain this statement and relate it to some of the texts you have read about in this Unit.
2. How is contemporary Australian Fiction classified? Name some of the categories.
3. How is the idea of place and landscape central to the way Australians define themselves? Examine how the idea of place is presented in contemporary fiction.
4. Who are the traditionalists? How have they influenced contemporary writers in Australia?
5. How is history re-imagined and re-worked in contemporary Australian fiction?
6. "History is just a fiction which a majority has agreed now". Discuss this idea in relation to texts which deal with actual "historical" events in Australia. Do they resist or celebrate conventional accounts?
7. How do some Australian novels challenge the idea that there is one representative literature which speaks for all Australians?
8. Discuss some of the experimental fiction you have read about in this unit. Look at experiments in both content and form.

9. Name some of the writers who mix a variety of genres in their fiction. Identify these genres and explain the purpose of bringing these forms together.
10. List some of the international or transitional novels you have read about in this unit. What are their concerns?
11. Show how 'rational masculine codes' are out of fashion in contemporary Australian fiction.
12. What are the concerns of contemporary women writers in Australia?
13. Write a brief account of novelists who reconstruct images of Australian society.
14. How do contemporary novelists map Australian society? What do these novels suggest about Australian life?
15. What is Australia's double aspect? How is it projected in contemporary fiction?
16. Give a brief account of indigenous writing. How do Aboriginal writers reclaim their history.
17. What is a migrant novel? Is it un-Australian? Discuss some of the novels that have been placed into his category.
18. Compare and contrast how migrant writers and Aboriginal writers express their relationship to Australian society.
19. Would you use the word postcolonial in relation to contemporary Australian fiction? What texts would you choose as illustrations?
20. Urban landscapes dominate but a sense of awe of Australia's geographic isolation remains a feature of contemporary writing-discuss.

UNIT 2 THE AUTHOR, HIS CREATIVITY, AND REMEMBERING BABYLON

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Author and His Creativity
- 2.3 Chronology
- 2.4 Select Bibliography
- 2.5 Summary of the Novel
 - 2.5.1 Chapter 1
 - 2.5.2 Chapter 2
 - 2.5.3 Chapter 3
 - 2.5.4 Chapter 4
 - 2.5.5 Chapter 5
- 2.6 The Remaining Chapters
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will introduce you to the author, David Malouf and his creative output.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You may have heard about a group of writers from Australia who visited India in 1996 under the New Horizons' Festival sponsored by the Australian Government. One of them was George Joseph David Malouf (Ma-louf), a transcultural contemporary Australian novelist, poet, writer of short fiction, playwright and librettist. In this unit and the subsequent ones, we will discuss Malouf once his novel, *Remembering Babylon*.

The inspiration for David Malouf's seventh novel, *Remembering Babylon* (1993) comes from an account by E. Reynolds, a nineteenth century historian, of an English sailor, James Morrill, who lived for seventeen years among the Queensland aborigines before returning to white society. His words when revealing himself to a group of shepherds, were 'Do not shoot! I am a British object, a shipwrecked sailor'. Malouf's novel, however, not an historical novel, though it re-imagines the key moments in Australian history. Despite its time span which stretches from the middle of the nineteenth century to the first world war, the concerns of the characters and the ideas of the novel are very much alive in the last decade of the twentieth century.

Gemmy Fairley, the central character of *Remembering Babylon* has not been shipwrecked. He is cast overboard by his shipmates while suffering from fever. On being washed ashore, he is tended by the Aborigines with whom he lives for sixteen years. His arrival in the small farming settlement twelve miles from Bowen has a profound effect on all members of the small colony. Their lives will never be the same.

The two quotations at the beginning of the novel suggest the theme. The first extract, from William Blake's long prophetic poem, 'The Four Zoas,' expresses a state of

confusion. The protagonists can no longer distinguish their homeland, Jerusalem from Babylon where they are exiled and in slavery. The second quotation from John Clare gives the poet's vision of the Apocalypse. "In the time of the breaking of nations," of chaos and disaster, what memories remain in the mind?

The central question seems to be one concerning Australian identity. Australians are still asking themselves, Who are we? What forces shape us and what is our relationship to the land in which we live? How does it change us? Malouf's novel attempts to answer these questions. It is the same concern we have noticed in his earlier fiction as well.

The novel begins in the middle of the last century, during the colonial period of Australian history. It gives a realistic picture of the harshness of life of selectors or small farmers, those who came from the British Isles as free settlers but without capital and who were given small areas to farm by the government. Small farming in Australia, as in India, has nearly always meant poverty because of the relative aridity of the land compared to Europe and the uncertainty of the climate. We in India are all too aware of how dependent we are on the monsoons. The classic portrait of the selectors' lives is given from a humorous point of view by Steele Rudd in the famous book *On Our Selection* (1899)

Malouf's novel gives an accurate picture of the settler's attitude to the land and their efforts to destroy the ecology of the land by clearing and ring-barking in an attempt to make it more like home. Of all the lands settled in by Europeans in the last three hundred years (viz. America, Canada, New Zealand), Australia has suffered most due to the destruction of the natural habitat and of animal species. Malouf reflects the fear and suspicion of most of the settlers towards the aborigines and of the unofficial policy of genocide i.e. (the killing of a whole race) which prevailed throughout Australia and particularly in Tasmania and Queensland.

The portrait of aboriginal life given in the novel though not detailed nor idyllic, suggests that the tribes achieved a close bonding to each other and to their land and that the natural balance they had with nature went back tens of thousands of years into the early history of humankind on this planet.

Despite its historical setting, the attraction of *Remembering Babylon* lies mostly in the characters that Malouf creates and the ideas and themes that give it a contemporary relevance.

2.2 THE AUTHOR AND HIS CREATIVITY

Born in 1934 in Brisbane, Queensland, Malouf had his schooling at the Brisbane Grammar School and later completed his B.A. (with honours) at the University of Queensland. He has been in and out of Australia, being for sometime in Europe and writing for an international readership hence the term "transcultural" writer, is used as an epithet for him.

Malouf was a prize-winning poet before he published his first novel. Like Thomas Hardy his poetic sensibility pervades his fiction. In an interview published in "The Hindu" on November 17th 1996, Malouf said that he always had wanted to be a writer and had written stories while at school and University. Speaking of his multicultural background he said, "My grandparents came from Lebanon. That did not influence me in any way. In fact the first time I visited Lebanon was last year (1995). It seems in the Arabic world, the Malouf family is a great writing family so may be it is in the genes. My mother was from London. She reproduced her Edwardian England in Australia. She read a lot. Till I was 14, my sister and I had a nurse to take care of us. My mother and she used to read aloud to each other. As a

boy I heard a lot of Dickens, Mrs. Henry Wood and other novelists-very English stuff.

Malouf first gained attention as a poet. His early poems were personal as he wrote about his grandfather, his sister, his home in 12 Edmondson Street in Brisbane and about the process of growing up. Later he wrote on love and on places in Europe that he visited. These later cultural and historical poems are dense, philosophical and meditative. His first book, *Bicycle and other Poems* (1970) was published when he was twenty-eight. His 1980 poetry collection *First Things Last* is a celebration of the natural world. *Neighbours in Thicket* is an award winning collection.

Malouf's first novel, *Johnno* was written in 1972 and published in 1975 when he was forty. It portrays the spiritual growth and coming of age of two young men who were childhood friends, Johnno and Dante. The story follows the shaky friendship of the narrator Dante and Johnno, an intriguing, disturbed, fatherless youth. Dante's suspicions of Johnno's suicidal tendencies are confirmed when he receives the news of Johnno's death by drowning.

Dante receives an angst-ridden suicide note from Johnno in which he cites Dante's indifference and restraint as reasons for his suicide. But the novel's real concern is novel's Brisbane, the background against which people move and things happen. Nostalgia, a feature of Malouf's art, pervades the novel. The overgrown country town that is now a state capital comes alive with its pubs, alleys, their actual situation, projected on to this land their sense of 'weird melancholy'. Associated with the threatening strangeness of the land, the aborigines became figures of evil, almost diabolical. The Mabo decision was the Australian High Court's rather belated rejection of notion of 'terra nullus', as it gave aboriginal people right over the land which was traditionally theirs. The opponents of Mabo felt that the land rights and native titles to aborigines would hold up economic development. The settlers regarded the aborigines as different from and inferior to them and this attitude continues even today as the Mabo decision is still debated in contemporary Australia. In fact this novel was published in 1973, the year of the indigenous people and is Malouf's attempt at reconciliation. He attempts to write the aborigines back into history in this novel. Preoccupied as he is with the issues of space and change, the relations between the self and the other, language and silence, Malouf looks at these issues in terms of relations between non-aboriginal and aboriginal Australians. He explores this racial difference in colonial Australia and renews the national symbols of exclusion and imperial power and prosperity by re-imagining them in this novel. The whites and the aborigines are seen in metaphysical terms, as a choice between good and evil, between Jerusalem and Babylon of the title. In the process the novel offers an opportunity to learn a new language of reconciliation, a language of the earth, of nature, a language known to the first Australians, the aborigines.

The novel highlights the Queensland frontier of the 1850's and the settlers' reliance on an imperial power which "held them all, a whole continent in its grip" (p.5)-a power derived from a distant monarch. But the novel also explores the anxiety felt by the settlers as aborigines refuse to acknowledge that imperial authority: "And all around, before and behind, worse than weather and the deepest night, natives, tribes of wandering myalls who, in their trespassing this way and that all over the map, were forever encroaching on boundaries that could be insisted on by daylight." It may seem at first rather odd to associate this colonial outpost with Babylon, but as the first of the books two epigraphs suggests, one of the title's allusions is to Blake's Babylon, a city formed by the dismemberment of Albion (England). The allusion suggests that colonial Australia is a dismembered Albion, formed by successive waves of transportation of convicts and migration of European settlers. If the scattered pieces of Albion's body could be put back together again (re-membered), then according to Blake, Babylon would become a New Jerusalem and Albion would be resurrected. Malouf attempts a similar task in this novel and this involves reconciliation with the first Australians. This project is doubly difficult especially after the Mabo ruling and the controversies over land rights that continue to rage in

present day Australia. Remembering the past and reconciling it with the present can be fraught with problems. Malouf's opening sentence evokes two very different kinds of recollection. The first is a locale of white settlers from which a 'proper' Australian identity springs. But this locale is also the site of violent dispossession. How is Malouf to re-member the different histories and cultures that collide at this point?

Malouf does so when he sets out to re-member the point from which Australian identity springs. The political act of dispossession (of aboriginal land) is translated into psychological fear of the unknown. This fear becomes a threat when Gemmy arrives at the settlement. Gemmy crosses the boundary which divides the white and the black and thus defies imperial colonial authority. What is more terrifying to these the river, gardens, backyards and even the wooden walls and iron roofs. Memory is used to hold together diverse life experiences. Malouf attributes to Johnno an element of mystery. This recurs in many of his novels. If Johnno's death remains a mystery, so does Gemmy Fairley's disappearance in *Remembering Babylon*.

In 1979 Malouf was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Prize for fiction for his second novel, *An Imaginary Life*, a fictionalized account of the ancient Roman poet Ovid's life in exile in Tomis, in 8 AD. The theme of exile is reworked in *Remembering Babylon*. In *An Imaginary Life*, the story works on emotional and philosophical planes. It is a novel of great beauty and power, richly imaginative and poetic. It has been called a 'post colonial meditation' and considered a criticism of civilisation. The exiled poet, Ovid, learns to identify with nature and empathise with an alien culture through a boy reared by wolves-the child-and through the people with whom he lives, lead lives which are simple, elemental but completely in tune with their surroundings. Malouf admits that while writing this novel he was very much influenced as an Australian by the presence of by the aborigines. "From outside, aboriginal culture may look strange but it is rich and multi-layered". (The Hindu) Ovid finally comes to believe in the wholeness of creation. Apart from playful parallels such as a shared birthday (Malouf's and Ovid's- March 20th), Malouf admits that he was influenced by Rudyard Kipling and by J.M.G Staid's detailed observations of 'Victor and the wild boy of Aveyron in the eighteenth century. Speaking on this novel at the university of Madras, Malouf observed "silence is a form of communication. Speech divides us". In fact language and communication are tricky issues in his novels. Ovid's metamorphosis is complete when he regains the communion with nature that he had lost in his youth. As Malouf says in his afterward, "My purpose was to make this glib fabulist of "the changes" live out in reality display".

Malouf's 1982 novella, *Fly Away Peter* which won the *The Age*, Book of the year award, also begins in Australia. Ashley Crowther the protagonist returns to his plantation in Queensland after twelve years in England. Jim Saddler who also lives there is content with observing the numerous species of birds that migrate to the swamps. Ashley turns the estate into a wild life sanctuary and hires Jim to manage it. A nature photographer, Imogen Harcourt, decides to settle down with them till World War I disrupts the calm. Ashley and Jim enlist and encounter the horrors of war. Jim dies abroad and Ashley comes home to his property. The two migratory patterns-bird and human-are held up for inspection. The south coast of Queensland, now known as the Gold Coast is presented in its pre-world war days as a Paradise before the Fall where man and nature lived in perfect harmony. The characters function more as centres of consciousness except for Imogen Harcourt who made a choice when she migrated from England and knows that she will never return.

Malouf made Italy the setting for his other 1982 novella *Child's Play*, a first person narrative told by a young terrorist preparing to assassinate an internationally acclaimed author. Please note that an interesting analogy can be drawn in connection with Salman Rushdie. Malouf explores the relationship between the ageing writer and his assassin in a way that reveals his abiding fascination with the

nature and possibilities of the imagination, especially the creative imagination. Malouf employs the concept of a simultaneous past, present and future. The terrorist in his preparation envisions the near and distant future and his own place in history. What Malouf said of this work holds good for all his novels. "I write out of a strong sense of time and place, a past that is continuously present and of continuities within change."

Harland's Half Acre, Malouf's author novel published in 1984 opens with Frank Harland, the protagonist being with his brothers and father at Killarney, the remnants of a once prosperous farm in the Australian outback. Once again Queensland and Queenslanders are at the heart of the matter. These Harland acres are squandered through drink, gambling, debt and neglect. Frank dreams of restoring the farm to its former glory as described by his father. Working on his talent for drawing, Frank sends his meagre earnings back to the farm. When he eventually becomes famous and prospers he slowly buys back the land that was once part of Killarney. His paintings immortalize the farm. The novel deals with possession-legal and imaginary. When Frank finally gets back the farm there is nobody to leave it to. Finally, half an acre of paintings is all that's left.

The Great World (1990) is a war novel, but it is also a novel of self-knowledge. This novel won the Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Prize for fiction. It covers Australia's experience of the Second World War and its after effects down to 1987. Malouf explains: "The novel is a sort of an epic, rather an anti-epic for it is not about big events but small. (It) is about the use of memory holding together life. A realistic novel with a great many characters, it is about Australian prisoners of war and of the Japanese who go to Asia to work as coolies. It is about a man who had no education but an extraordinary memory and was the prisoner's memory bank." Thomas Shapcott, a contemporary Australian poet refers to this novel as Malouf's *Tree of Man* (a seminal novel by Patrick White) because like White, Malouf is concerned with the world of the common man. The prisoner of war experience becomes a central metaphor of deprivation. In fact *Fly Away Peter*, *Harland's Half Acre* and *The Great World* are exercises in mapping and naming the salient feature of Australian history from the first decade to the late 1980's. Through Malouf cannot be called a historical novelist, this re-imagining of the past is central to his fictional art. Myth of Australian national life are articulated as the novel covers a period of over seventy years, moving from Sydney's crowded King's Cross to the peaceful backwaters of the Hawkesbury River. The novel renegotiates the ways in which colonial space can be conceived.

Malouf's latest novel *Conversations at Curlow Creek* is set in 1827 in New South Wales. Another re-imagining of Australia's past, the novel is about an escaped convict who is a bushranger (a highwayman). This man is to be hanged in the morning. The man who supervises the hanging spends the night in the hut with him. They discover that they are both Irish. Death, nature, law, justice and injustice are some of its concerns.

2.3. CHRONOLOGY

1934	David Malouf born on 20 March in Brisbane of Lebanese and English parents.
1954	Graduates from University of Queensland
1955	Junior Lecturer in English at University of Queensland
1962	Is published in <i>Four Poets</i> , along with Judith Green, Rodney Hall, and Don Maynard
1963-68	English Master at St. Anselm's College Birkenhead (UK)
1968-78	Senior Tutor, then Lecturer, in English Department at University of Sydney, New South Wales

- 1970 Publishers first Volume of Poetry, *Bicycle and other Poems*, in Australia (appears as the year of the Foxes and other Poems in the U.S. in 1979) Publishes first novel, *Johnno* (released in the U.S. in 1979)
- 1974
1975 Published first novel *Johnno* (released in the U.S. in 1979)
1978 Second Novel, *An Imaginary life* published in both the U.S. (Braziller) and the U.K. (Chatto & Windus)
- 1979 *An Imaginary life* garners the New South Wales Premier's Prize.
1981 Poetry Volumes *First things last* and *selected Poems*.
1982 Publishes novella *Child's Play*, along with *Eustace and the Prowler*.
Novella *Fly Away Peter* (issued in U.S. as the *Board of Time to come*), set in Queensland before World War I, wins the Age Book of the year Award and, with *Child's Play*, the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal.
- 1984 Releases novel *Harland's Half Age*.
1985 Short-story collection *Antipodes* receives the Victoria Premier's Prize.
- 1986 Publishes *12 Edmond Stone Street* and completes Libretto for Richard Meale's Opera *Voss*, based on the novel by Australian Nobel Laureate Patrick White. *Voss* premieres at the Australian Opera.
- 1987 Play *Blood Relations* is named winner of the New South Wales Premier's Prize.
- 1990 Publishes novel *The Great World* (awarded the Commonwealth Writer's prize, the Miles Franklin Award, and the Prize Femina Etranger) and writes Libretto for Meale's *Mer de Glace*, which premieres at the Australian Opera.
- 1993 Novel *Remembering Babylon* is named by Time as one of the best books of the year, is shortlisted for England's Booker Prize, wins the Los Angeles Times Prize for Fiction, and becomes the first recipient of the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Publisher Opera Libretto Baa Baa Black Sheep.
- 1994 Issues *selected Poems, 1959-8*
- 1995 Novel *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*
- 1998 Publishes *A Spirit of Play: The Making of Australian Consciousness*
- 1999 Short-Story Collection *Untold Tales*
- 2000 Selected as Sixteenth Neustadt Prize Laureate (March). Publishes Short-Story Collection *Dream Stuff*. Awarded Neustadt International Prize for Literature at the University of Oklahoma (October). Autumn issues of world literature today dedicated to Malouf and his work (December) wins Lannan Literary Award for fiction. Publishes Opera Libretto *Jane Eyre*.

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2.5 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

A novel is not just a story. You, the reader, make sense out of the novel by exploring the way that the setting of the book, the plot or story, the characters and the style of the author combine to reveal something of the writer's views about life.

The first chapter of *Remembering Babylon* is central to the subsequent events and ideas of the novel. The narrative sequence in the novel is as follows:

The Author,
His Creativity

- Gemmy's first appearance and its immediate consequences on the white settlement.
- A flashback to sixteen years before Gemmy was washed ashore. He was cared for by the aborigines but is drawn back to white settlement.
- The growing relationship between Gemmy and the white community.
- The exploration of the past life of George Abbot – another flashback.
- Another flashback – an account of the McIvor family in Scotland and in Australia.
- The settlers' different perspectives about how aborigines should be treated and these attitudes effect their approach towards Gemmy.
- Gemmy has lived for five months with the settlers and he represents a treat of their fragile sense of security. This is a flash forward.
George Abbot's sentimental education begins when he meets Mrs Hutchence and is later introduced to Leona.
- The Aborigines visit Gemmy.
- The rising panic among the whites.
- Some members of the white settlement organise a series of acts of violence against the McIvors for sheltering Gemmy.
- The results of the short meeting between Gemmy and the Aborigines.
- Another flashback to the time when the McIvors first hear of Gemmy's abduction.
- Mr. Frazer's botanizing and his sensitivity to Aboriginal culture.
- Bee keeping at Mrs. Hutchence's place and Janet McIvor's initiation rite into woman hood.
- The horror of Gemmy's early childhood experiences in London – another flashback.
- Lachlan's reclaim to Gemmy and to the attack that follows
- Mr. Frazer's visit to the Governor of Queensland.
- Bushfires and Gemmy's disappearance.
- Fast forward to the first World War and to a meeting between Janet, now a nun and Lachlan, a minister in the Queensland State Government.

2.5.1 Chapter 1

In keeping with the mystical nature of this novel (connect this with the last three paragraphs in chapter 20) Gemmy's first appearance to the children is like a supernatural revelation. He seems to spring out of 'the no-man's land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome... of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dar'"(p3). He seems not quite human, half-way between a bird and a human being Lachlan (Jock McIvor's nephew) first thinks he is aboriginal, but his fair hair and the shreds of clothing on him proclaim his nationality. Gemmy balances briefly on the top rail of the fence, his arms spread out and shouts the amazing words: 'Do not shoot, I am a B-b British object!' revealing his origins and the fact that he has not spoken his language for a long time. This first appearance of Gemmy suggests the dichotomy of margins and periphery in the politivisations of space in the novel. It also indicates the novel's liminal nature – the suggestion that boundaries are man-made and tend to both exclude and include.

Lachlan immediately assumes authority and prods Gemmy in the back with his stick, which Gemmy has mistaken for a gun, and marches him off like a prisoner to his uncle Jock.

The settlers see Gemmy's arrival as a heaven sent distraction to the monotony of their lives. They are mostly ignorant, fearful people, trying to make a living out of the Queensland bush, refuges from the wretched poverty of the working class of the

British Isles: They are afraid of the strange land with its unpredictable climate of floods and cyclones and searing heat. Even greater is their dread of the aborigines. The settlers' reaction is to use a shotgun to keep them at bay. Their reaction to the land is to strip it, to make it more like home.

Gemmy faces the assembled settlers and their children. With gestures and scraps of language which he can recall, Gemmy helps them to discover some of his past. Common words start to erupt from the recesses of his memory. He utters them with delight, angering Hee Gosper as he seizes Hee's hammer to show that he knows its name. The next afternoon, the two educated members of the colony, the minister, Mr. Frazer, a sensitive and compassionate man, and the pretentious schoolmaster, young George Abbot, try to make a written account of Gemmy's life which finally runs to seven closely written pages, Gemmy cannot read the account but when he handles the pages, he feels that some magic has drained from him and captured his life. He wonders how he can contrive to steal the papers back from Mr. Frazer. The memory of the life he has lost begins to return to him.

2.5.2 Chapter 2

This chapter begins with a lyrical description of Gemmy's discovery by a group of Aboriginal women and children when he is washed ashore. Malouf's poetic sensibility is at work here. After emerging from the delirium of fever, Gemmy is saddened not to see Willett, the London rat-catcher, with whom he lived, scroched from the fire which Gemmy had lit before he had run away and been forced to join the crew of the ship.

With the street child's determination to survive and his quick wit, Gemmy makes a place for himself in the tribe, quickly learning their language and customs and forgetting his own. He becomes one of their legends and hears them tell his story.

"How, when they found him he had been still half-child, half sea-calf, his hair swarming with spirits in the shape of tiny phosphorescent crabs, his mouth stopped with coral; how ashpale and ghostly in his little white shirt, that long ago had rotted like a caul, he had resin up in the firelight and danced, and changed before their eyes from a sea-creature into a skinny human child" (p.27)

At the same time, Gemmy is aware that there is another part of his life, a secret story which must be told in the language he has temporarily lost. The tribe believe that when Gemmy becomes a man he will give up his other world which still troubles his dreams. Gemmy is convinced that he will return to his old life with Willett but it doesn't happen that way. He is recalled to life among the white settlers and then has sudden flashes of memory: the sight of houses, clothes on a line, a man chopping wood with an axe. These moments help him to recover some words of the language he has lost. The most powerful of all these memories returns when Gemmy watches Ellen McIvor (Jack's wife) throw out scraps of food to her geese and Gemmy tastes these scraps. He is reduced to tears. At night, the speech of the McIvor's draws him like a magnet:

"If he could get the words inside him, as he had the soaked mush, the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come upto the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognise get hold of. He did not want to be taken back. What he wanted was to be recognised." (p.32)

The next day when Gemmy runs towards the children, he is drawn, almost despite himself, by his desire to recapture his hidden self and the language in which it must be expressed.

2.5.3 Chapter 3

This chapter describes the developing relationship between Gemmy and the white community. He brings out the best or worst that each person is capable of. He lives with the McIvor family, not because of any decision by Jock McIvor's but because of his wife Ellen's compassion. Their children, Janet and Meg and their nephew Lachlan, become Gemmy's friends. He plays with them and teaches them some of the skills he has learnt from the aborigines. Although there is affection between Lachlan and Gemmy, Lachlan, still a child, establishes his dominance, Gemmy is his man. Janet loves Gemmy and accepts him even though she may never know certain aspects of his life. Gemmy returns Ellen's tenderness with little acts of kindness. Jock is awkward with Gemmy. He fears that the others will turn against him for sheltering Gemmy. He feels that his mateship with the other settlers is threatened.

Ned Corcoran, a man who forces his children to steal from his neighbours, leads the campaign of hatred and suspicion against Gemmy. He suggests that Gemmy could be in league with the blacks. Gemmy represents for Ned "all the abominations" of the aborigines. One of the most sinister aspects of Gemmy is that he has apparently lost most of the language he spoke as a child. Even his physical appearance and his smell have been changed by due to his long stay with his time with the aborigines. The horror which the white settlers associate with the blacks seems to have rubbed off on Gemmy and they fear him too:

"It brought you slap up against a terror you thought you had learned, years back, to treat as childish: the Bogey, the Coal man, Absolute Night, and now here it is, not two yards away, solid and breathing..."(p.42)

This is a powerful expression of fear that these limited people feel towards the unknown, in the dark history of the world and in their own minds. Gemmy becomes the symbol of this fear.

2.5.4 Chapter 4

This chapter contains an exploration of the past life of George Abbot, the unpopular nineteen year old school master. George has become a teacher in the Australian outback almost by chance and when the story begins, he is drowning in a sea of hatred and self loathing. He is an unsympathetic bully to his pupils, who is only interested in maintaining his authority.

George is the only boy in a poor Scottish family. On the death of his father, an eccentric cousin, Alisdair Robertson, his wealthy, godfather, takes over the responsibility for George's education and his upkeep. But as he grows cousin Alisdair loses interest in him.

After acquiring a degree George visits his cousin to thank him and reveals that he would like to be a missionary and explorer in Africa. Cousin Alisdair does not listen. Instead he talks of the golden opportunities in Australia, 'that other and rival graveyard' (p50) to Africa. The implication is that if George agrees, his godfather will provide for the family and see that his sisters have sufficient dowry to marry well. The greyness of George's despair extends over the country of his exile and over its inhabitants, both black and white. To Abbot, Gemmy is part of the degeneracy of the aborigines. He antagonises his most favourite pupil Lachlan by scorning his attachment to Gemmy.

2.5.5 Chapter 5

Here we have an account of the McIvor family in Scotland and in Australia. Ellen Beathie came from the Scottish mining town of Airdrie, near Glasgow. Her father and four brothers were miners and it is well known that working in mines can be

back-breaking as well as dangerous. Ellen feels that her brothers are brutalised by their harsh life in a bleak mining town. They are coarse, drunken and given to fights. It is one of her brothers who brings Jock home after a game of football. Jock, in contrast to her brothers, is tall and fair. He works as a gardener on a big estate. Ellen is attracted to him and they marry and emigrate to Australia. When Ellen's brother Rob, Lachlan's father, is killed in a mining accident, Ellen and Jock agree to take in Lachlan.

Their daughters, Janet and Meg are delighted to hear of their cousin's imminent arrival. Janet idealises her father's life in Scotland. She considers it a kind of dream time, having more richness and meaning than the rural life in Australia. 'This cousin who was coming would bring some of that with him. He would still have its light upon him, alive and actual. He would still have its speech in his mouth' (pp. 54-5).

But Lachlan is arrogant and touchy. As a protection against his feeling of dislocation, he appears to scorn their life in the bush. Janet makes fun of his accent and his life back in Scotland, even though this life in the old land is a part of her dreams. Lachlan retaliates by talking to Ellen in Scottish dialect, which the girls cannot understand. Lachlan's sense of self-preservation soon helps him to come to terms with the life in the harsh outback. He becomes a useful member of the community and a skilful hunter and tracker. He thrives and matures, developing a vision of his own role in the new land.

Janet realises the difference between her future and Lachlan's. She is discouraged by its limitations. She sees the monotony and hardship of her mother's life and longs for a world that is 'larger, more passionate, crueller - even that would be a comfort - than the one she (was) bound to' (p. 58). In a significant passage in the text she discovers under the lemon tree scab on her knee:

'another skin, lustrous as pearl. A delicate pink, it might have belonged to some other creature altogether, and the thought came to her that if all the rough skin of her present self crusted and came off, what would be revealed, shining in sunlight, was this finer being that has somehow been covered up in her'. (p. 59).

Janet keeps these moments of introspection to herself. Lachlan, on the other hand, shares his visions. With Gemmy's assistance and knowledge of survival in the bush he boasts that he will make famous explorations, even discovering the bones of Luderich Leichhardt - the explorer who also inspired Patrick White's novel *Voss*. Gemmy is moved by these visions and assumes a protective attitude towards Lachlan. It is one of the few occasions when Gemmy realises himself to be a young man.

2.6 THE REMAINING CHAPTERS

Having taken you through the first five chapters of the novel, I would like you to read the remaining chapters and look for the following points. Note down any of the phrases or sentences you might like to refer to later.

In Chapter 6 you will encounter the different views on the aborigines. These attitudes of the White settlers will affect their behaviour towards Gemmy. Make a list of these attitudes. For e.g. Ned Corcoran believes that genocide is the only solution. A second group want to know the details of Gemmy's life with the aborigines. On page 65 you will find an interesting paragraph on how the settlers react to Gemmy's explanations. They find them obscure! 'There were no words for it in their tongue.'

Look for the part which stresses the genuine trust that develops between Gemmy and the minister, Mr. Frazer. This points to another attitude towards the aborigines or the

first Australians. On page 68 there is an interesting passage which tells you how the aborigines reacted to the presence of Mr. Frazer. Later in Chapter 14 you will read of Mr. Frazer's reaction to this new land.

As time passes note how the settlers' fragile sense of security is undermined by what Gemmy represents. Even Jock views Gemmy with fear and suspicion. Read the passage on page 74 which tells you about Ellen's initial attraction towards Jock. She had associated the young Jock with 'sunlight and space' and is appalled at the effect this harsh landscape has had on him. Note the yearning for home that relates to the theme of exile. Ellen too represents the community's fear of the unknown in her attempt to establish "the precarious order" to keep away this fear (page 80).

Consider how Malouf builds up a picture of the young schoolmaster George Abbott. Mrs. Hutchence succeeds in taking him down a peg or two by ignoring his intellectual status. George, who is attracted to Mrs. Hutchence's young companion, Leona Gonzales is made to feel that the whole world has been changed (page 93). Notice Gemmy's suspicion and fear of the schoolmaster. It was George who captured his past life in the magic writing of the school room.

One of the most significant events in the novel is that of the two aborigines who visit Gemmy one afternoon as he is planking a shed for Jock. This is observed by Andy McKillop, an untrustworthy farmhand, one of life's losers. Andy invents the existence of a magic stove which the aborigines have given to Gemmy. On page 100 Andy's motives are clearly stated. Yet Andy had used the aborigines to suit his own purposes. Andy's story and the hysteria it arouses spread like a bushfire.

Make a note of all the events that reveal the rising panic in the community starting with Barney Mason's visit to Jock McIvor. Why do the settlers suddenly rely on the testimony of a worthless man like Andy? Notice how Jock is gradually being isolated for his association with Gemmy. Page 110 to 111 are significant in assessing how Jock comes to terms with this situation. They reveal a new sense of intimacy with Ellen as they share feelings of loneliness in Australia. In this new land there is an 'absence of ghosts' (p. 110).

Violence in this small settler community escalates. Make a list of the acts of violence organised by Ned Corcoran and Andy McKillop. Can the McIvors or Gemmy hope for justice? Remember this is the outback, the frontier and the forces of justice are miles away in Bowen which in turn depends on the advice from a little Island in another hemisphere - Britain.

Notice the shifts in points of view as the narrative returns to the conversation between Gemmy and the aborigines and its consequences. On page 118 Gemmy explains his sense of loss. His vitality has been spent. He no longer feels a oneness with the land and creatures. Why is this so? What triggers off this introspection in Gemmy? What other memories are also triggered? Keep in mind the first word of the novel's title. It is now Gemmy's turn to remember.

Read chapter 13 in detail and see how flashback is used as an effective technique for the process of 'remembering', to reveal how it can be both a nightmare as well as a consolation. A violent incident brings the McIvors closer and renews their bond of affection, teaching them to reach out to Gemmy in spite of impending social disgrace.

Gemmy's stay with Mrs. Hutchence is arranged for his protection. He helps her by building hives for her bee-keeping. There is a significance in Janet's interest in bee-keeping. On page 142 Janet has an unusual experience which determines her vocation in life. What is it? Why does Janet feel that she has been "drawn into the process and mystery of things"? (p. 143). Would you consider this episode as a renewal of Janet's self? Remember that such episodes or moments of revelation have

been referred to as moments of epiphany. Do you think that this experience of Janet is one such moment?

Gemmy's act of remembering or recalling his past continues in Chapter 16. The terror of the attack at the McIvor's house and his displacement to Mrs. Hutchence's have bring back memories of past agonies to Gemmy. These memories are important in order to reconstruct Gemmy's miserable, exploited life in industrial London of the nineteenth century. Why does Gemmy want to get hold of the magic sheets from the school house where details of his life were recorded?

On Pages 164-165 Lachlan too has a moment of epiphany when he looks back to see Gemmy watching him as they part, never to meet again. It is the memory of the end of a friendship which recurs as a poignant moment of loss throughout Lachlan's life.

The other character who tries his best to reconcile himself to the land and its environment is Mr. Frazer. He makes an important move in Chapter 18 to acquaint the Governor of Queensland, Sir, George Bowen and the Premier, Sir, (Robert) Herbert with his belief that White settlers should use the natural resources of the land, not destroy them. He is also concerned about the fate of Gemmy. As I have said earlier David Malouf is interested in re-imagining the history of Australia. Here is a reference to two real people, the Governor and the Premier, both highly qualified from British Universities, but both shown to be more interested in their own careers rather than in reconciliation measures. Sir George shows little interest in what Mr. Frazer has to say. His meeting with the Premier is equally unproductive. The ironical outcome is a letter from the Premier offering poor illiterate Gemmy the post of Customs Officer for the port of Bower.

There is another point that you must make a note of as you read and respond to this novel and that is the references to bushfires. Fire is an important image, frequently used in the novel and reaches, frequently used in the novel reaches symbolic proportions. You can make a note of the various references to fire, flames and so on to understand the significance and Malouf's repeated use of it. Chapter 19 begins with a description of a bushfire. What do you think this signifies? Note the attitudes of some of the other characters towards Gemmy. Why is Gemmy disappointed? Why does he take away those composition exercises sheets? Where is the original account of Gemmy's life? Do you notice a change in the schoolmaster, George Abbot? Is he still arrogant and uncaring? What does Gemmy remember as he heads towards the swamp? Why is Gemmy heading towards the swamp? *Look for answers on pages 180-181.*

Now that you've progressed to the last chapter of the novel, Chapter 20, reading and interpreting what you have read you will notice that there is a sudden time leap. The story fast forwards to the First World War. From the mid-nineteenth century we are catapulted into the early twentieth. You will be familiar with this kind of telescoping of history as you would have encountered this technique in Shakespeare's historical plays.

Janet is now a nun whose name is sister Monica in the convent of St. Iona's, Wynnum and Lachlan is a Minister in the Queensland Government. Why did Janet get in touch with Lachlan? What effect did Lachlan's effort to help Janet have on his career? Do you see a parallel with the earlier events in the novel? The act of remembering continues when Janet and Lachlan recall their recent past. Tragedy haunts Lachlan as he remembers the death of his grandson Willie killed on the war front. They remember the coming of Gemmy as "someone we loved" (p.194). There is a sense of release at this final acknowledgement of love. Though the word reconciliation is not mentioned, it is a keyword for this Cathartic final chapter. After all, this novel was published in 1993, the year of reconciliation between whites and blacks. They accept the fact of Gemmy's violent death.

When Janet is alone, watching the sea come in over the mud flats, her memories of the past blend into a vision of the future in Australia. The moon illuminates this final moment of epiphany. The tide which rises seems like a symbol of hope and love.

**The Author,
His Creativity**

“Out beyond the flatlands, the line of light pulses and swells. The sea, in sight now, ruffles, accelerates. Quickly now it is rising towards us, it approaches.

As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another. It glows in fullness till the tide is high and the light almost, but not quite, unbearable, as the moon plucks at our world and all the waters of the earth ache towards it, and the light, running in fast now, reaches the edges of the shore, just so far in its order, and all the muddy margin of the bay is alive, and in a line of running fire all the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life.” (P.200)

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have talked about the creativity of David Malouf. Also, we have given you the summary of the novel.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the opening of the novel.
2. Critically analyse the last four chapters of the novel.
3. Discuss the main writings of David Malouf.
4. Write a note on the bibliography of Malouf
5. Analyse the biographical details of Malouf.

UNIT 3 STRUCTURE, CHARACTERS AND METAPHORS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Structure and Characters
- 1.3 Metonyms, Metaphors, and Epiphanies
- 1.4 The Concluding chapter
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will mainly discuss the structure of the novel, the characters, the metonyms, the epiphanies and the metaphors.

3.2 STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERS

In *Remembering Babylon*, Malouf moves farther back in Australian history than before – to the mid-nineteenth century. His story of a pioneering settlement near Bowen in North Queensland provides a rich context for him to continue his rewriting of Australia's national mythologies, again addressing the accompanying question of cultural identity. *Remembering Babylon* offers a reprise of the myth of exile, first explored fifteen years earlier in *An Imaginary Life*; but also deals with the colonial myths of pioneering and frontier settlement, myths that in their original versions were silent about the violent dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants, and marked by a failure to realise that the 'Old Country' could not be remade in this new place.

In this Unit will discuss Malouf's exploration of post-colonial concerns as a central focus of the novel. This exploration is conducted principally through developing the symbolic force of the chief protagonist, as well as through the familiar themes of the enabling hybrid (more developed here than previously), of the primacy of language as both a constructive and restrictive agent, and of the necessity to reconnect the cultural with the natural. The primacy of language is in this novel reinforced throughout by a cluster of metonyms related to the mouth.

In his analysis of *An Imaginary Life*, Gareth Griffiths concludes that "concerns such as linguistic displacement, physical exile, cross-culturality and authenticity or inauthenticity of experience are among the features which one might identify as characteristically post-colonial."¹ *Remembering Babylon* is more overtly engaged with post-colonial concerns than *An Imaginary Life*, and it addresses and reflects these concerns in three main ways: by remaking the pioneer myth of frontier settlement so as to reveal the myth's flaws; by evoking again the themes of accident, fragmentation, ambiguity and open-endedness; and by deploying again the ideas and metaphors of post-romantic aesthetic, sometimes in an attempt to achieve a resolution.

The three elements do not always coexist easily. Even as Malouf attempts to distance himself from colonial ways of interpreting the world, for example, he cannot avoid reinscribing them to some extent; and his reminders of the provisionality and randomness of existence can be seen as conflicting with his essentialist recourse to the fundamentals of an enduring and universal Nature. One of the most interesting

aspects of *Remembering Babylon* is that it reveals so clearly the tension between a familiar yearning for a state of completeness and connection – for a transcendence beyond space, time and language – and an awareness that politics and history frame and define us inescapably through language

Structure, Characters and Metaphors

The central figure in the novel (this is the first Malouf novel not to have dual chief characters) is Gemmy Fairley. At the age of thirteen he is thrown overboard while ill off the coast of Queensland, then rescued by Aborigines, with whom he lives for sixteen years. Hearing that there are white settlers living in the south, he seeks them out, sensing that the key to some troubled part of him lies with the different language. He approaches three children – Lachlan Beattie and his cousins Janet and Meg McIvor. Lachlan, who seems best able to communicate with Gemmy, “captures” him, and the McIvors take him in. Most of the settlers, however, find Gemmy’s presence strongly unsettling, and become antagonistic to the McIvors, especially when some “blacks” appear on Jock McIvor’s land and Gemmy is seen speaking familiarly to them. That Jock resists this peer pressure as long as he does in such an isolated place is a testament to the heroism exhibited by “ordinary” people, and is contrasted later in the novel with the pompous ambitions of the governing class. There is no climax to this escalating tension: Gemmy disappears; and his fate is never really known. The novel ends with the reunion approximately sixty years later of Lachlan and Janet, who is now a nun. The plot is unpredictable and the characters elusive – Gemmy is not the only character to disappear from the story. The structure is also fragmented, combining lyrical sections with portions of historical saga and even a chapter of sustained comic satire. Such inconclusiveness and fragmentation support the post-colonial theme in the novel by failing to provide neat and reassuring verities about colonial settlement and the growth of the nation.

Gemmy’s mythical significance is an amalgam of the wild child, the *enfant sauvage* from *An Imaginary Life*, and the Lost Child of Australian art and literature. The Lost Child typically wanders innocently away into the hostile bush, never to be seen again, thereby underlining the settlers’ sense of vulnerability in an alien and unforgiving land. But in *Remembering Babylon*, a revisionist fable, the myth is reversed; the child is found, demonstrating the possibility of survival in the new environment. Gemmy returns to white culture; not out of rejection of the Aboriginal culture he is now more familiar with, but to solve a puzzle, to reclaim a partially remembered, partially lost past, and in order to complete himself.

Watching a man in a clearing about to chop wood, Gemmy recovers the word “axe”² and this fragment from his first language propels him to discover more. The next day he approaches a group of children, seeking to prove that “all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered” (33). In the context of the narrative as a whole, these words carry wide metaphorical reverberations, though in view of Gemmy’s ultimate rejection by the bulk of the settlers it seems that the space between the two cultures, inscribed with conflicting values, cannot yet easily be “covered”. Mr Frazer, the settlers’ minister, comes to perceive that it is only someone like Gemmy who is capable of “covering” this space, who could yet be the key to a possible future resolution of the conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures. Gemmy’s symbolic force is as a subversive, post-colonial figure, a hybrid who combines both indigenous and European perspectives and knowledge, and who is for some a catalyst of change.

Gemmy has emerged from the dark Other of the bush surrounding the embryonic settlement – an Other the settlers do not see except through their understandably still Eurocentric eyes (what Mr Frazer calls “their English eyes”) (130). He has come from:

the no-man’s-land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience, not just their own but their parents’ too, of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark (3).

The phrase "savage and fearsome" refers principally to the indigenous inhabitants, demonised, dehumanised, and conflated with the natural environment, like bush-fires or snakes. There are many allusions to the violent suppression of the Aborigines in the novel, including Lachlan's first reaction to Gemmy's arrival:

A black! That was the boy's first thought...

Very sturdy and purposeful, two paces in front of his cousins... and with a belief in the power of the weapon he held that he knew was impossible and might not endure, he pushed the stick into his shoulder and took his stance...

'Do not shoot,' it shouted (2-3)

Here Malouf combines an evocation of the invaders' murderous violence with a near-parody of seductive and popular tales about the brave boy of the Empire, which extended well into the twentieth century.³ It is equally telling that before Gemmy's appearance, Lachlan has been playing a game in the dusty paddock in which he imagines himself hunting in the snow for wolves. The girls, especially Janet, reject the game since "they had no experience of snow, and wolves did not interest them" (1). But Lachlan insists, because in his mind the fictional European landscape is more real than the baked earth around him. The scene also suggests the power of the imagination – a power the settlers will eventually have to use if they are to remap this new geography and make it their own.

For while Malouf is critical, even satirical, of the settlers' failures, he is also sympathetic to those who faced what seemed an "impenetrable dark" (8):

It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front... what you were left with when the last sleeper settled was the illimitable night, where it lay close over the land. You lay listening to the crash of animals through its underbrush, the crack, like a snapped bone, of a ringbarked tree out in a paddock, then its muffled fall; or some other, unidentifiable sound, louder, further off, that was an event in the land's history; no part of yours. The sense then of being submerged, of being hidden away in the Depths of the country, but also lost, was very strong (9).

They are all lost children, and another lost child has come to show them they cannot only survive, but belong. For most of them, however, Gemmy only articulates their fears and threatens their fragile sense of identity. The townsfolk's negative reaction recalls that of the people to Tomis, who are also living at the edge of an empire, to the Child in *An Imaginary Life*, as characterised by Gareth Griffiths:

For those at the colonising edge it is imperative that they define themselves by creating the wild as savage, and other, as something which must be resisted and destroyed since, once allowed in, it will possess and transform their already fragile identification with a centre to which they constantly aspire without ever quite possessing.⁴

Malouf stresses the sense of exile from the "centre" that oppresses several of his main characters. Abbott had aspired to make his way in exotic Africa, where he would embrace "hardship" without "illusions" (49); instead he has been sent to Australia, which he despises. Ironically, it is largely the tropical climate, not dissimilar to the "Dark Continent", that so oppresses him: "in all its forms clammy and insidiously sweet – lushness and quick bloom followed by a dark putrescence" (51). But the real disappointment lies in Australia's failure to measure up to the romantic notions he has formed of Africa and empire from his "Sunday school stories" and readings of the explorers like Dr. Livingstone. Janet McIvor is also oppressed by the idealised

image of a place she has never been – Scotland: “There were times when she felt helpless against a place which, as her parents evoked it in every word they uttered, belonged so much more strongly to all the highest emotions in her than the place she was in” (55). Authenticity cannot possibly belong to the place she knows; her parents’ accent, their phrasing prevent it. She too is trapped by language.

As the bizarre figure of Gemmy teeters on the “boundary fence” (2) between the bush and the children, the symbolism is clear; he stands on the boundary that for the settlers means ownership and the limit of the domesticated, and the exclusion of the unknown beyond. But it is potentially an enabling boundary as well. As Bill Ashcroft has commented, the fence “represents the margin of language and culture but also a way of defining the world. And it is the possible liberation from the way of defining the world which Gemmy represents.”⁵ Such a possibility of transformation and liberation is not grasped by most of the settlers. Gemmy’s presence threatens to break down the comfortable absolutes of what it means to be non-Aboriginal, or authentic, or even human rather than animal. He upsets the reassuring binary division of white and black, civilised and savage, constituting an anomalous category in between. He has an ease with the natural environment, but also, it becomes increasingly clear, a facility with the English language. His first words, “Do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object!”, are allowing for the comic irony, accurate. By using and so re-entering the language of the colonisers, he has been deprived of his agency as a subject, and become a passive object, defined by the gaze of Empire.

But once inside white discourse again. Gemmy is able to represent an ambiguous and destabilising position in the settlement: “It was the mixture of monstrous strangeness and unwelcome likeness that made Gemmy Fairley so disturbing to them, since at any moment he could show one face or the other” (43). For himself, Gemmy is both empowered by his recovered original language, and painfully limited, as when his life story is with comic absurdity extracted and transcribed by Mr Frazer and the school teacher, George Abbot. The power of non-Aboriginal Australians to write the history of the country, including its indigenous people, is parodied here in “the minister’s Colonial fairytale” (19), with all its “gaps of memory”, “dislocation” and distortion due to preconceptions (16). With another touch of the irony that pervades the novel, Gem has learned to speak five languages while living with the tribe (40) – we know his linguistic facility far surpasses that of the rough settlers who mock him – and it is only in English that he stammers.

Gemmy is taken in by the McIvors; and this act of kindness causes a schism between the family and its neighbours. The shambling, eager-to-please interloper undermines the comfort of a racial binary:

He had started out white. No question. When he fell in with the at thirteen, was it? – he had been like any other child, one of their own... But had he remained white?

...you had to put to yourself the harder question. Could you lose it? Not just language, but it. It (40).

Jock’s mateship with his neighbours is seriously shaken by his loyalty to Gemmy, whom he defends out of a sense of fairness. Gemmy has been the catalyst in making Jock question his unexamined sharing of values with his mates: “He had begun lately to be critical, even of Jim Sweetman” (73). Later when some Aborigines visit Gemmy, and he is clearly at ease with them, the neighbours put even greater pressure on Jock to shelter Gemmy no longer, causing Jock to reflect that “he too had been shaken in these last months: not by what Gemmy threatened but by what he had begun to see in others” (103). The theme of Gemmy as agent of change is not a subtle one, but it is effective in the detailed nuances Malouf pursues of social conformity and cohesion at odds with a more complex and difficult sense of justice or

balance, of the "sociable self, communal warmth" at odds with an existentially "alone" authentic self (106-107).

Jock's awareness of his self-transformation and heightened individuality is most accurate in a moment of epiphany, in which he experiences an intense openness to nature, similar to the Heideggerian *Being-in-the-world*:

It was as if he had seen the world till now, not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company, even when he was alone...

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of.

When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects
Iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought
To the scene, was a lightness in him ... like a form of knowledge he
Had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him,
But was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy (106-107)

In the Maloufian "special moment", Romantic resolution of the conflict between individual and collective, between subject and object, is temporarily achieved; and again, as in *An Imaginary Life*, the moment is linked with an intimation of progressive change. Jock's transformation, through Gemmy's agency, suggests a post-colonial inflection on Ovid's words that are just as apposite to the later novel: "It is our self we are making out there, and when the landscape is complete we shall have become the gods who are intended to fill it."⁶

Jock's self-transformation, through Gemmy's agency, occurs in a timeless realm outside language, and raises the related themes of language and communication, especially the Maloufian paradox that language can be both powerful and limiting "he could have found no form to communicate [his new awareness], outside words" (108). The contradiction is that though these epiphanies occur without/beyond language, or more accurately, in the higher form of language that is silence, as described by Ovid: "the true language, I know now, is that speech in silence in which we first communicated, the Child and I, in the forest, when I was asleep,"⁷ all other meaning depends on the social imbeddedness of language. This imbeddedness is exemplified when Gemmy is interrogated by the settlers about the whereabouts of his tribe, and realises that he can tell them very little of the tribe's reality because the settlers do not inhabit the same language (and therefore inhabit a different landscape): "... a good deal of what [the settlers] were after he could not have told, even if he had wanted to, for the simple reason that there were no words for it in their tongue"(65).

And yet it is the "true language" of silence which is free of cultural discourse – a discourse hegemonically controlled in the colonies by the empire's governing class – and which therefore might empower the post-colonial "voice":

Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical
Structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which
Conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established. Such
Power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice."

Gemmy's voice is either silenced or misunderstood or misinterpreted. Even the benevolent Mr Frazer, Gemmy's advocate, has only a limited success in "hearing" Gemmy during their outings in the bush to name flora and fauna. Mr. Frazer's relationship to the bush is mediated by a nineteenth-century scientific drive to "botanise" (66); he uses language to categorise and separate, whereas Gemmy uses it to connect: "he was sensitive to this dealing between name and spirit" (67). Gemmy

is also subject to this categorising of plants and places in the sense that his Aboriginal enculturation makes distinctions between "men's business" and "women's business"; but this is represented by Malouf as "reverence", as more desirable than scientific detachment. Moreover, such a spiritual interpretation of the land enables Gemmy to have a closer communication with it, a closer connection through his senses:

Structure, Characters and Metaphors

So when he and the minister ... trudged up a rocky, sun-scorched slope to where they could see, north and west, all the country he was at home in, he was moving through a world that was alive for him and dazzling; some of it even in the deepest shade throwing off luminous flares, so that he had to squint and cover his eyes, and all of it crackling and creaking and swelling and bursting with growth; but he cast the light only in patches for Mr Frazer, leaving the rest undisclosed (67-68).

Gemmy, the hybrid and harbinger of a possible future connection with the land, can only indicate the right direction for Mr. Frazer who, like the explorers, is blind to much that he is "mapping" or "writing" on these small expeditions. As in the epiphanies of Jock and Janet, there is in these scenes a stress on light and brightness (contrasting with the "Absolute dark"), and on the importance of being open, via one's senses and body. Malouf has commented on this latter Motif:

I think of myself and almost all the writing – as beginning somehow with the body, in a sensual way; with a strong sense of where the body is, its compactness, and where it impinges on the world around it. I suppose that's why I get led so often into notion of mapping, of space, and boundaries."

It is implied that, like other white liberals – to use contemporary terminology – Mr Frazer benignly and indiscriminately regards the indigenous people as part of the flora and fauna: "Even when they were meant to be seen, he did not distinguish them from the surrounding vegetation or the play of light and shadow between the leaves" (68). More clearly, both the Aborigines and the land accept Gemmy but resist his companion:

As for what the blacks would be seeing, Gemmy knew [he] would have a clear light around him... It came from the energy set off where his spirit touched the spirits he was moving through.

All they would see of Mr Frazer was what the land itself saw: a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow as gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been.

Mr Frazer's and Abbott's "writing" of Gemmy is more serious in its well-meaning failure; its attempt to pin Gemmy down is as clumsy as a butterfly collection. Their attempt to record his life history has the "facts... all out of their proper order, and with so many gaps of memory and with so much dislocation" caused by the limitations of language and the interpolation of the recorders' own values and assumptions (16). This incident reflects on the failure of conventional white history, with its attempts at grand connections and unifying generalisations. Malouf, thus, emphasises that his project is not to provide another Australian literary saga, and he places in context the later disappearance from his narrative of Gemmy and the McIvors, the fragmentation of the novel's plot, timeline and genre. Localised moments can be more reliably recorded. But Fraser's and Abbott's inaccurate history of Gemmy also incorporates him into a white colonial discourse that threatens to make him regress to the time when he was a miserable slave as "Willet's Boy" (150) in the industrial European city, or the two years he spent bullied and abused at sea:

These visions that dragged him back and racked his body with the reliving of what he had already endured a first time, left him weak and shaken... He began to sicken, and saw at last that what he was suffering here had to do with the sheets of paper where, months ago, Mr Frazer and the school master had set down his life (154).

Gemmy is reduced to a kind of shadow by the seven pages of writing, until he has almost lost his connection with the "earth" (176) – "lost all weight in the world". He sets out to retrieve the sheets from the schoolteacher before they "draw him to his death", and having retrieved them, the process of his disintegration halts. As he walks through a part of the bush blackened by fire, it begins to rain, and the word "water" comes to him, allowing him to re-enter the landscape, much as the word "poppy" had rescued Ovid: "he was walking now in a known landscape; all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him" (181). In the presence of fire and earth ("charred earth") and water, the fundamentals of Nature, he is metaphorically freed from the slavery of the sheets of paper, the false history, and is in harmony with the land again. He is also literally freed, as the rain washes away the writing and dissolves the paper. But it is not one of his five Aboriginal languages that allows him to "know" the "landscape" here once more: it is the English word "water". Gemmy is empowered by his hybrid concept in previous novels – the hybrid not only defies boundaries but, like the image of metamorphosis, it signifies change, and therefore empowerment.

3.5 METONYMS, METAPHORS, AND EPIPHANIES

The way the word comes to him, "a drop of moisture sizzled on his tongue", is one example of the frequent use of metonyms for language in the novel; the references to "tongue", "mouth", "lips" and especially "breath" are so numerous that they far exceed the use of any motif in earlier novels. Gemmy's reconnection with the landscape is prefigured, for example in the first third of the novel by his thought that "there was no way of existing in this land... unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the various parts of it and made them one" (65). In the way Malouf creates a metaphorical sub-text which indirectly reinforces the theme that land and language and self are parts of the same process. The scenes of Jock's and Janet's epiphanies are written without using these terms, which is appropriate given that the scenes attempt to describe an experience beyond language.

That human language is not always adequate is brought home to Mr. Frazer when, after this unsatisfactory dinner with the Governor and Premier, he releases he has not understood the nuances of cultured and bureaucratic social discourse: "He was astonished. Had he made himself so unclear?" (175) He fails to communicate with the administrators partly because of an ideological gulf. The two rulers of this "colonial democracy" (172) do not share Mr Frazer's recognition of the need to accept this new land in its own terms. Governor Brisbane sees Queensland as a blank page, "mere rocks and air" (168), and his mission is "creating spaces where history may now occur". He has to "call into existence a new self-governing state", but his idea of making a new place is to mimic classical forms, constructing a culture on the ancient and already outdated European model, "all classical allusion and analogy." "Analogy is his drug", Malouf repeats on the next page, commenting on the Governor's letter "home" to England in which he writes: "How refreshing among my daily cares are these classical analogies" (169). Only through this cultural filter, comically grandiose, can the Governor manage intermittently to mask his disappointment at the "dispiriting bushland of the opposing shore" (171), "opposing" in more ways than one. Malouf succeeds in presenting this concise picture of myopic colonial bureaucracy through a satirical mode but ridicules ambitious, complacent,

Eurocentric colonialism. Mr Frazer's eminently sensible scheme of accommodation to this tropical place, by growing native produce rather than exotics, is ignored by his hosts. The Premier bathes in the praise of Lady Bowen for the temperate fruit like peaches and grapes that he grows at his property, and the "peacocks and pheasants" (174), as well as in the sexual double entendre of his and Lady Bowen's talk of strawberries and asparagus (173). The motif of the machine, familiar from other Malouf novels, returns as she gushes over Mr. Herbert's "machine for making ice." The machine motif is ambivalent in Malouf, and can negate nature, or operate in the service of it; the latter meaning is evident in this case. Mr. Frazer is defeated by all this "speaking in code", but Nature is still triumphant; though Lady Bowen induces a "cosy torpor" with her piano playing and exotic singing "in a sweet Italian voice" (174), Nature invades the sitting room with mock violence reminiscent of the neo-classical Alexander Pope:

Suddenly there is an explosion in the room. Lady Bowen has slapped her forearm, a smudge of crimson appears there, the rich blood of the Candianos, which she stares at a moment – they all do – as if she had not expected it to be quite so scarlet or so abundant. She rises and leaves the room.

Clouds of mosquitoes have drifted in from the mangroves downriver ... and go sailing by with their fine legs hanging.¹⁰

The guests, who have that evening acted out the rituals of social refinement (within which constructed values such as "civilisation" or "primitive" have been naturalised as common sense), are forced to resort to lighting coils of "dried cow-manure". The satirical absurdity is capped when the Premier offers Gemmy a post as a Customs Officer (175); the subversive agent is incorporated into the bureaucracy.

The novel leaves us in no doubt of the correctness of Mr Frazer's contrasting perspective, which is presented as an entry in his "writing-up book" (129):

We have been wrong to see this continent as hostile and infelicitous, so that only... by felling, clearing, sowing with the seeds we have brought with us, and by importing, sheep, cattle, rabbits, even the very birds of the air, can it be shaped and made habitable. It is habitable already. I think of our early settlers, starving on these shores in the midst of plenty they did not recognise, in a blessed nature ... which they could not, with their English eyes, perceive... We must rub our eyes and look again, clear our minds of what we are looking for to see what is there. Is it not strange, this history of ours, in which explorers ... fall dry-mouthed and exhausted in country where natives ... are living, as they have done for centuries, off the land? (129-130)

It is revealed that, like Jock McIvor, Mr Frazer too has experienced a sensual (as well as, in his case, an intellectual) openness to the land: "Slipping out in the dark he would track night-scented flowers in the summer woods, or *with breathing suspended* and his whole body alert, observe from a hide, in the soft night air and a liquid *light* with its own colours, the life of creatures that were abroad ... while the eyes of others were closed" (131). My italics stress the key elements of such moments – full awareness of body, of predominant light, of suspension of language, signified by the motif of breath. What Mr Frazer's eyes are open to, most importantly, is the insight offered by Gemmy the hybrid:

Our poor friend Gemmy is a forerunner. He is no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth, but a true child of the place as it will one day be, a crude one certainly, unaware of what he has achieved ... the exemplum ... deeply moving to those who are willing to look, and to see, without prejudice, that in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature (132).

Some readers may find this a little too spelled out – almost a gloss on the novel's principal theme. Peter Pierce finds the portrayal of both Abbott and Frazer "schematic", and adds that "Malouf makes Frazer the vehicle for some sentimentally didactic appreciation of the Aborigines as the true inhabitants of an antipodean Jerusalem... [and enlists Gemmy] as a prototype of "the coming race" in Australia."¹¹ Though one may concede the schematic quality of sections of the novel, the novel has a more contemporary agenda than merely to describe the colonial stereotype of the "coming man" of the turn of this century. The "coming man" was a mechanism by which the imperial race could be seen to be revitalised through tough, practical, colonial stock.

Mr Frazer and Jock McIvor are not the only characters to sympathise with the outcast Gemmy, or to experience epiphanies. Janet McIvor, though looking back to an idealised Scotland, and frightened by the vastness of this new country, has special moments in which she experiences an authentic connection with it. Her epiphany comes earlier in the novel than Jock's, and is composed of similar elements – the grass, shining colour, bright light, the merging of body and Nature, and transformation. Seeing the pink skin under a scab on her knee, she becomes aware of a "finer being that had somehow been covered up in her"

When she got up and walked out into the paddock, and all the velvety grass heads blazed up, haloed with god, she felt, under the influence of her secret skin, suddenly floaty, as if she had been relieved of the weight of her own life, and the brighter being in her was very gently stirring and shifting its wings.

In a particular vibrancy of light that on another occasion might have given her a headache, all the world shimmered and was changed (59).

Her ability to connect with nature seems equal to her father's; though, like many of Malouf's female characters, she has a core of pragmatism as well that makes her "sceptical of mere feelings" (60).¹² The scepticism is brought to bear on her brother Lachlan's fantasies of being an explorer who searches for Leichhardt. Lachlan imagines being "wounded by blacks", but Gemmy, the faithful black, will "nurse him back to health with herbs only the natives knew of." It is the kind of scenario one would expect to find in colonial boys' adventure tales, and is capped off by his intention to name rivers and mountains after his friends and family or parts of Scotland. Janet secretly disapproves, because "when real life caught up with you, it would not be in a form you had already imagined and got the better of" (61). Perhaps she is proved correct, as Lachlan becomes a politician.

Jock's epiphanous vision included "hundreds of wee bright insects ... metallic, iridescent" (107), while Janet's included "grasshoppers...made of finest glass" (59). Apart from Nature's apparent ability to mimic or surpass the qualities of the made objects, metal and glass, the insect motif is worth nothing of its prevalence in the novel. Mrs Hutchence is most memorable for her heavily symbolic bee – keeping on the edge of the settlement. It is a place that both Gemmy and Janet are drawn to: Janet "loves" the "business with the bees" (138), and the bees are "a necessity to her, as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts." The bees are thus set up as representing not just Nature, but more specifically, communication. Working without Mrs Hutchence and the bees Janet learns the Ovidian trick: "to see things, to let them enter her" (138-139). Like Jock's and Janet's insects, the bees are "dazzling sparks". To Janet, the bee has the property of an "angel" (141), perhaps in that they bear messages from "*their side of things*" (angels rebisically both guardians and messengers) (140). More than that, they are Christlike: when a swarm unexpectedly set... her, Janet does not panic (she is a practical girl still – her oral mind told her this"), and holds her breath and "surrenders", that is, surrenders herself to the realm beyond language. You are our bride, her new and separate mind told her as it drummed and swayed above the earth" (142). The bees, she thinks, have been attracted by her new sexual maturation (The sticky blood flow"); thus she is

marriageable – to Nature to Christ. This becomes literal when at the end of the novel we find she has become a nun. It is at once a communication with nature and a religious experience, and again Gemmy is partly the agent: she is “convinced” of her metamorphosis when she looks back at the swarm “through Gemmy’s eyes” (144).

3.6 THE CONCLUDING CHAPTER

The concluding chapter of the novel is set much later, during the first world war. Janet is in a convent at Wynnum, a bayside area on the outskirts of Brisbane, where she tides her own bee hives. Janet has created a political crisis for her cousin in Lachlan, now a state cabinet minister, by writing him a letter requesting that she be able to keep up her scientific correspondence (on the subject of bees) with a German priest: “It seemed absurd, she wrote, that the business of nations should get in the way of work that had only to do with nature; which knew nothing, either nothing either, for the little laws of man.

But the letter is also an example of the Capality of language to challenge “laws” and conventions, to redefine and transform a world-view. Further, as a result of the conventions to redefine and transfer us a world—views, Further, as a result of the letter Lachlan visits Janet and she, ambassador of Nature, gives him an apple. the knowledge she has to offer him is embodied with bee-hive:

It was like peering through into the City of God that is how she thought of it...into the life of little furry-headed angles with a flair for geometry, and some power (this was the great problem she had set herself) of *communicating* (191-192)

Though she cannot “grasp” the problem not we knows that she did back at Mrs. Hutchence’s. There she remembers, she thought of the swarm, “as an angel,” but she thinks of it “these days as a machine, which was a change but not a difference”: she hopes Lachlan can understand. Here, as elsewhere in Malouf’s fiction, the machine is not unnatural but a bridging device. This is one of several references to a metaphorical resolution of nature and culture in the chapter, most involving machines: there is the swarm that is also like a machine (192); Lachlan’s cutting of the apple with a knife; Lachlan’s memory of making-believe a “dry stick” was a gun (195); and the children making “miniature tables and chairs... of white beeswax” (198). The boundaries are blurred. Even Lachlan’s “breathing” is paralleled with the “humming” of the hive, suggesting the body as a kind of machine, and the blurring of natural and human (193-194). Above all, the image of Gemmy standing on the fence returns to them, like an angel before it falls, and like the bees, an emissary from the future:

the creature, unrecognised and unnamed as yet, that had launched itself out of the unknown world towards them, that the landscape itself had hurled into their midst; a ragged fragment of itself, or of its history or of their own, some part of it that was still to come, had hung there against the pulsing sky (194).

Since Janet is a nun, the Christ-like allusion is also explicably present: “When he was up there’ (she saw the hooked toes again, dusty and misshapen).” But Gemmy as emissary of a new hybrid consciousness is the dominant image. We are told that, nine years after Gemmy’s disappearance, Lachlan learned from a clan that might be the same as Gemmy’s, of a murderous “dispersal” six years before “by a group of cattlemen and two native troopers” (196), but Lachlan cannot establish for certain if Gemmy has been one of the victims.

He comforts himself with the image of Gemmy on the fence, revealed to them “outlined there against a streaming sky. Still balanced” (197). Janet does the same,

musings on the "moment[s] of illumination" – she has been led to by Mrs Hutchence and Gemmy," once and for all, up there on the stripped and shiny rail, never to fall" (199). They saw him most clearly on the boundary, the edge, and the novel ends with a sustained image of the edge of the coast where Janet lives, the shoreline experiencing its own epiphany of "light" and "running fire", the "vast continent" ... in touch now with its other life" (200).

It is a lyrically compelling closure, drawing on the preceding romantic discourse as an intimation of hope. This final image stands outside history and language; the shoreline is indifferent to contested human history, perhaps waiting for a time when the human inhabitants have become the gods eagerly anticipated by Ovid.¹³ But directly before the final images Malouf has placed a realistically described reminder of our dark historical formation,¹⁴ a massacre of Aboriginals, one of whom may well have been the novel's sympathetic central figure. We are told this massacre has been considered too unremarkable by the newspapers to report, thereby escaping official history.

Despite the modern Australian setting, it is possible to make a similar argument for distancing in *Remembering Babylon*, and certainly Gemmy the hybrid is represented as a first, flawed bearer of possibility, rather than a "'super' human ideal"; It could also be argued that Gemmy signifies the limitations of any single "essentialist" view, whether European or Aboriginal; and therefore promotes a "pluralist view of culture."

And yet Malouf's impulse to resist closure, to maintain open-endedness and provisionality, is undermined by the novel's endnote, which explains that the idea for Gemmy Fairley came partly from the actual case of Gemmy Morril, who spoke the words "'I am a British Object'" We are left with the all-pervasive reach of history, and the paradox that mythologies must refer back to that which they disassemble: that time and space and language resist the urge to transcendence.

Malouf said in an interview two years before the publication of *Remembering Babylon*

People used to write about Australia as a hostile place. Our alienation from it was something that existed before, and even quite late – if you think of a poet like A.D. Hope, he's still writing about Australia as a kind of alien place. I don't think Australians in my generation and later really think of that any longer....

I grew up in a world in Brisbane, a sub-tropical place. where we acted all the time as if we were really living in England ... People just pretended they were somewhere else.

That all changed, and I think literature has reflected that change in a very strong way.¹⁷

Perhaps it would not be presuming too much for literature to suggest that David Malouf's "mythologies" have made a contribution to that change.

The relatively short space of eighteen years separates Malouf's first novel from his seventh. Despite his considerable literary output, this may well represent the achievement of mid-career, and any generalizations or predictions have limited value. What is clear is that his work is remarkably homogeneous, as evidenced by the degree of continuity between *Johnno* and *Remembering Babylon*: in each we find a questioning of the difference between "history" and the story that we make of our lives; a yearning for self transformation and for wholeness; a sensitivity to the way we create reality through the language we share a post-Romantic deference to Nature and the imagination; and an exploration of the problem of coming to terms with Australia as a place that we are still in the process of constructing culturally. As an Australian writer of the late twentieth century, Malouf's work has demonstrated how

the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world.

**Structure,
Characters and
Metaphors**

3.5 LET US SUM UP

We have, in this unit, mainly discussed the structure of the novel, the characters the metaphors and the epiphanies.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the structure of the novel.
2. Discuss the main characters
3. Critically analyse the metonyms, the epiphanies and the metaphors.

UNIT 4 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND COMMUNICATION

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Narrative Technique
- 4.3 Language and Communication in *Remembering Babylon*
- 4.4 Some more aspects of Language
- 4.5 Representing the Aboriginal
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will mainly discuss the narrative technique and the problem of language and communication in the novel.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A novelist can tell a story in many ways. The narrative of *Remembering Babylon* has been examined and commented on by several Australian literary critics and theorists. Narrative in modern fiction is complex because it is experimental and innovative. As you have probably learnt from your study of the British novel, there are various narrative techniques. This unit will focus on Malouf's way of telling us the story of Gemmy Fairley and the early years of Colonial Australia.

4.2 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Remembering Babylon is unique for the genre shifts in its narrative technique as it moves from straightforward narrative to flashbacks, diary entries, records of journals and a mystical and poetic evocation of the landscape. It has been called a mixed narrative with dual perspectives. The novel re-imagines a key moment in Australian history – the contact between the settlers and the aborigines and between the settlers and the land. The novel is one of the many revisionist novels of early Australian settlement. Other Australian authors such as Eleanor Dark, Kylie Tennant, Rodney Hall, Thomas Keneally and Robert Drewe have all attempted to re-image this phase of Australian history. The narrative technique evolves from the act of remembering and is part of the 'Memoir' tradition in Australian fiction. The title resonates throughout the work. What are the problems that one is likely to encounter in analysing Malouf's narrative technique?

The first is that of incompleteness or rather the suggestion of incompleteness. The novel introduces the reader to the lives and circumstances which are not fully realised. The narrative withdraws in space and time from the core of the story. The promise of a saga is cut short by the truncated story. The novel shifts constantly from saga to historical fiction, the satire of colonialism. There is no sustained narrative mode. There seem to be many books in *Remembering Babylon*. In keeping with his

fictional technique this novel is also short (only 200 pages), almost like a novella, but it also resembles the epic in its scope and ambition. If Malouf's *The Great World* dealt with the Anzac experience in the Second World War, *Remembering Babylon* deals with the history of outback pioneering in the 1850's.

The narrative is fraught with the anxiety of "remembering" to maintain links between generations. It is also a narrative of the extraordinary about the ordinary. One is reminded here of R.K. Narayan's ordinary characters and their extraordinary heroics. The novel begins with the observing consciousness of a child; Lachlan of Malouf's technique seems to be expository rather than dramatic – more showing than telling. There is a story within a story as Gemmy's story later because a part of the aborigines is the communal store of narrative. "In time his coming among them became another tale they told and he would listen to it with a kind of wonder" (p.29). This is the Australian version of the American "captivity narrative", stories of people abducted by Indians. Gemmy's story is also a version of the lost child story in Australian fiction and painting, such as Marcus Clarke's "Pretty Dick" (1869) or Joseph Turphy's *Such is Life* (1903). The lost child story is a kind of commentary on the harshness of the Australian bush or outback. Gemmy, thus, becomes a prototype of the lost child and the captive. The landscape description in Barbara Baynton's stories are echoed in the description of Gemmy when he is first spotted by the children.

"In the intense heat that made everything you looked at warp and glare, a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of the land over there that was forbidden to them, had detached itself from the band of grey that made up the far side of the swamp, and in a shape more like watery, heat struck mirage than a thing of substance, elongated and airily indistinct, was bowling, leaping, flying towards them"(p.4)

Problems of form arise when Malouf starts numerous stories in such a brief novel. There is a digressiveness in the technique with the introduction of smaller stories such as the sketch of Mrs. Hutchence from Malacca which Malouf leaves unresolved. The story of the local school teacher, George Abbot is another vignette. Juxtaposed with this is the more sympathetic response of Mr. Frazer. Malouf makes Frazer the vehicle for some sentimental appreciation of the aborigines, as the true inhabitants of this Promised Land though it seems like Babylon to the settlers.

Through Frazer, Malouf takes the reader to another story away from the outback, and to the residence of Governor Bowen. Malouf's mild satire ridicules this attempt to recreate the home country in an alien environment.

Malouf is also aware of the Australian saga novels of the inter-war years. In these fictions, the settlers bravely combated natural forces of fire, flood and drought. All this is implied subtly and with the greatest ceremony in *Remembering Babylon*. The saga material is narrated through the consciousness of Ellen McIvor as she remembers arriving in Brisbane and her past in Scotland.

The narrative contains what is known as Malouf's 'disappearing acts' where characters conveniently disappear such as the McIvors and Gemmy Fairley. The narrative takes the form of a revisionist text as it reimagines Australia's colonial history. There is nostalgia for imagined historical moments, in this case the early years of colonial settlement.

The narrative technique is also intimately connected with the mystery of language. It is through the mystery that people and land meet in a moment of epiphany that transcends space and time.

Malouf has never been a writer of voluminous novels. In fact all the novels are rather short. *Remembering Babylon* is only 200 pages long and the twenty chapters include several flashbacks and one fast forward. "Malouf is one of the strict economists – of imagination – a major talent who feels compelled to express himself in miniature"

(Peter Craven). His canvases are usually small, he is no Tolstoy or D.H. Lawrence nor is he a Patrick White or Christina Stead. The cinematic technique is enhanced to great visual effects as the novel draws to a close. The narrative has a symmetry in that it begins and ends with the same characters.

4.3 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IN REMEMBERING BABYLON

In his more recent novel *Remembering Babylon* Malouf returns to similar themes as those in *An Imaginary Life*, but moves from the fringes of the Roman empire to nine tenth-century Queensland, Australia. The struggles of characters to achieve wholeness in this novel are taken up not through silence as they were in *An Imaginary Life* but rather through an emphasis on sensory and gestural communication.

The sensory group receives the most attention in this novel, highlighting examples which seem to emphasize the transformative nature of these non-verbal communicative experiences; many important scenes explore the experiences of three major characters, Jock McIvor, his daughter, Janet, and Gemmy Fairley, the young man who after living among the Aborigines for sixteen years, joins a pioneer community. Before working more closely at Janet and Gemmy, we note a significant scene with Janet's father, Jock. He is walking alone in a field, reflecting on how he has changed since Gemmy arrived, when he experiences a kind of epiphany:

Wading through waist-high grass, he was surprised to see all the tips beaded with green, as if some new growth had come into the world that till now he had never seen or heard of. When he looked closer it was hundreds of wee bright insects, each the size of his little fingernail, metallic, iridescent, and the discovery of them, the new light they brought to the scene, was a lightness in him – that was what surprised him like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy. (P107)

This sensory experience is typical of many in the novel. Jock McIvor uses his bodily senses (sight, hearing, touch) to see the reality of the Australian landscape anew. He responds to his new vision with feelings of surprise disturbance, and joy. And notably, the knowledge that he gains is unnameable; that is he cannot express it in rational, discursive language, experiencing it instead through his senses.

Later in the novel, Janet McIvor, the eldest daughter of the family that has taken in Gemmy Fairly, has a similar experience. **The experience is non-verbal too based entirely in her body and senses.** It also allows her to understand Gemmy fully for the first time. In this short but pivotal episode, Janet goes to visit Mrs Hutchence to help with the beekeeping Janet has already found that beekeeping is deeply satisfying to her; she loves the bees now and finds them a necessity... as if without them she could never enter into her own thoughts" (138). Her sense that without the bees she could not enter her own thoughts – her language is important. **She realizes that both the discursive and non-discursive are essential to fully experiencing life, that both are essential for full cognitive life. And it is significant that her understanding come through bees, animals which have a sophisticated system of communication themselves.** In this scene, it is as if Malouf has joined the human sensory capabilities with an animal communication system to symbolize Janet's transformation. Although Janet is about to have a life altering experience, she initially denies the significance of the scene, thinking that there is no mystery in the tableau of bees, clouds of billowing smoke, and the sun as dazzling sparks. Eventually, however, she realizes that it is communicative, as Malouf writes that for her the scene "– just the same, touched on something, just at the edge of thought, that

she could not catch hold of" (139). In its emphasis on the power of the non-discursive, the parallels with her father's experience described above is striking.

Then, as Janet goes to work with Mrs. Hutchence, a swarm of bees alights on her, covering her body quickly and in a single cloud. "She just had time to see her hands covered with plushy, alive fur gloves before her whole body crusted over and she was blazingly gathered into the single sound they made, the single mind" (142). At this point Janet's rational mind tells her to stand still that the bees will not sting as they are already full. She then distinguishes between she calls her old mind (the one that uses verbal language and tells her what to do) and her "new and separate mind" her new mind - one that is linked to the sensory and the bee - tells her "you are our bride" and it is outside her body, drumming and swaying above the earth (142). Janet links this new mind and the mind of the bees to her body and its new phase signaled by menstruation. As she stands still, and realizes that it matters not whether she is girl, woman, or tree. Mrs. Hutchence and Gemmy appear with the smoke that attracts the bees. The bees peel off her body. "Like a crust, till she stood in her own skin again which was fresh where the air touched it" (142-43). Her skin seems new to her now and she remains 'a little out of herself'. Gemmy and Mrs. Hutchence fret over her. Later after she is grown up and has become an expert on bees, she remembers the experience as both a physical "bodily excitement" and a time "when her mind had for a moment been their unbodied one and she had been drawn into the process and mystery of things" (143). Here Malouf clearly suggests that the verbal and the sensory are needed to come to an understanding of the mystery of life, or to put it another way, to understand fully one's mental life. Janet experiences a kind of "wholeness" that Malouf himself in a video interview, has said is one of his primary concerns in his novels. ("An Imaginary life" 1987).

Malouf writes that Janet is surprised that she does not appear changed to Mrs. Hutchence, because to her, her old body has been born a new. Furthermore, after the experience Janet has a vision of herself not as a gawky girl, but as a ch-----stump black and bubbling. Since she sees this image "through Gemmy's eyes". She is convinced of its truth. This ability to see through Gemmy's eyes for the first time is representative of her deepened understanding of him; she cannot understand who he is solely through discursive language and her intellect - she needs a sensory experience such as the one with the bees to come to such as understanding. Knowing that she sees for the first time from his perspective enables her to experience unity between body and mind. The experience is transformative and could not be accomplished without Gemmy and the sensory knowledge provided by the bees.

Indeed, Gemmy is linked with James from early on in the novel. Throughout the novel, Gemmy is presented as a character with two important characteristics. First, he is the catalyst for the other characters growth and transformative experiences. Second, he is the one character who has integrated the various non-verbal forms of communication. As a fully sensory human, Gemmy literally sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures, and silently listens his way through the novel. One early episode that will serve as an example of the importance of gesture for Gemmy occurs after he has just entered the white settler's homestead and tries to communicate with them. A few English words begin to come back to him, but it is gesture that he relies upon to tell the story of his sixteen years with the Aborigines:

All of which he made them understand partly with signs, partly with words that he dragged up at need, but in such a distorted form as he hummed and hooted and shot spittle out of his mouth, and tried to get his tongue around them that it was the signs their understanding leapt at. (10)

The settlers try to read his gestures and Gemmy, also learns to read their non-verbal gestures. At first Gemmy has difficulty reading their "wooden expressions and gestures" and it is only later, after much watching and study, that he is able to understand and distinguish the small signs that made them trackable:

....the ball of gristle in the corner of a man's cheek, which you could actually hear the soft click of if you listened for it: the swelling of the worm like vein in a man's temple just below the hairline, the tightening of the crow's feet round his eyes. The almost imperceptible flicker of pinkish naked lids.... He saw these things now, and what astonished him was how much they gave away. Perhaps their faces were more expressive because he could catch these days more of the words they used even the ones they left unspoken. So long as he was deaf to the one he had been blind to the other. No more.

Here Gemmy shows his understanding of the necessity of both verbal and non-verbal communication systems; it is significant, too, that he arrives at his insight long before any of the white settlers reach a similar understanding. Tragically for Gemmy, however, he too undergoes a transformation, but it is a reversal of Janet's. Gemmy begins to rely more heavily on verbal discursive language, the English of the settlers, having preciously used his knowledge of gestures, signs, and his senses to be his guide in understanding and reading them. Gemmy dies as a result of his attempts to master verbal language. First he dies symbolically when the rain washes the written words (i.e. the so-called story of his life). Off a piece of paper, the language that he thinks has captured his strength but is nothing more than the scribbling of school boys. Then he dies again when he disappears from the novel and the world of Janet and Lachlan. In one sense then, discursive language, especially the written, is responsible for his demise. Gemmy gives it tremendous power which undoes him, and the settlers use the difficulties with verbal language as their sources of distrust and suspicion of Gemmy.

Thus, these experiences of Janet and Gemmy, demonstrate beautifully the paradox of verbal language; it has both creative and destructive elements, containing the potential to bring about psychic wholeness or disintegration and death.

To sum up: *Remembering Babylon* is preoccupied with the role of non-verbal communication experiences in the quest for wholeness and unity. The novel emphasises other aspects of non-verbal communication, notably the sensory. Powerful episodes centred in bodily sensation are shown to lend to life-altering experiences for Janet McIvor, Gemmy Fairley, and others. Further the revelatory ending of *Remembering Babylon*, with its echoes of incantation and epiphany, highlights Malouf's exploration of how one knows and experiences the world and whether unity and transformation are possible. Janet McIvor's final memories of Gemmy Fairley as she watches the day's light dying away suggest that a fully connected life – one in which communion with other humans, animals, or nature – lies within our grasp Malouf writes that the light and the sea approach each other. "As we approach prayer. As we approach knowledge. As we approach one another."(200) The syntactic linking of 'prayer', 'knowledge', and 'one another', as well as their denotations and connotations, intimate the larger existential and epistemological question that drive Malouf's fiction.

As an avid reader, you must have observed that as a writer Malouf combines a deep understanding of linguistic behaviour with a singular aesthetic vision.

4.4 SOME MORE ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

In the earlier section we discussed the language and communication in the novel: in this section we will discuss some more aspects of the language and we may repeat some of the points discussed earlier. The repetition, I may remind you, is meant for reinforcement in distance education.

Remembering Babylon is an extraordinary parable of exile, identity and language loss. Malouf is preoccupied with communication and explores the relationship between verbal and nonverbal communication or the lack of it in his poetry and fiction: for example: in the poem entitled "To be Written in another Tongue" and in the short story, "The only speaker of his Tongue". Language for Malouf plays a vital role in the construction of identity. Language is also connected with the theme of exile, and is thus a strong theme in much of his writing.

The novel's complex shifts in chronology and focus yield a dramatically simple story. The marginalisation of Gemmy's story results from the fact that it is merely one more element in the parable of alienation and assimilation. And this is developed through a meditation on language and identity. The novel is a study of colonization through the prison of language. Language mutation and language loss underlines the narrative. Gemmy loses his language being away with the aborigines and acquires a new one. He tries to get back to the White settlement to "put the words back in his mouth". The novel becomes a microcosm of all-linguistic adaptation and change.

Ironically the McIvor family who adopt him are from Scotland and so do not speak English. They too experience language loss. George Abbot tries to teach his rugged pupils English words that they would never be able to relate to the visionary Mr. Frazer's data on local flora in the native tongue. Gemmy knows that there are no words in English for the natural life of Australia. Gemmy has this mystical view of the oneness of language and environment that he got from the aborigines and which he passes on to Frazer.

The inability to adapt linguistically is matched by a failure to adjust culturally. The Australian landscape is named with a European sensibility. Distant England becomes a point of reference for the things relating to Australia.

Malouf employs nonverbal communication such as gestures, silence, sensory communication; and animal communication systems. Human language for Malouf is only one of the sign systems in the dense network of signs in the world. Gemmy experiences a wordless unity during his meeting with the aborigines. Silence becomes a positive experience for Gemmy as it did for Ovid in Tomis. The characters struggle to achieve a unity of being through sensory communication. Jock McIvor, Janet and Gemmy rave this sensory experience. Jock experiences a oneness with the land as he walks alone in a field. He uses his bodily senses to see the reality of the Australian landscape since he has thought he cannot express his knowledge in rational terms. Janet too has a similar experience in bee-keeping which allows her to understand Gemmy for the first time. Her understanding comes through the bees - insects with their own sophisticated system of communication in the animal world. Janet cannot understand Gemmy through her rational intellect. She needs a sensory experience. This use of sense perception links Gemmy with Janet. Like Ovid, Gemmy has a transforming effect on the other characters. His senses were shaped by his life with the Aborigines. Gemmy sniffs, tastes, looks, gestures and silently listens his way through the novel. He relies chiefly on gesture to tell his story of his 16 years with the aborigines. Gemmy begins to rely on the verbal language and this leads to death. First he dies symbolically when the rain-washes off the written words on the paper, which he thinks, is a record of his life. He dies again when he disappears. Gemmy gives language a great power and this kills him. What Malouf demonstrates in this novel, in the experiences of Janet and Gemmy is the paradox of the verbal language. It can be both creative and destructive. The themes of language and exile are used to explore transformation. The revelatory ending of the novel with its incantatory effects is almost like an epiphany. Some critics see Malouf as a kind of structuralist. He tends to set up binary opposites such as mind and body, home and exile, nature and culture, dream and reality. Verbal and non-verbal language is another. Malouf aims for a reconciliation of these binary conflicts and is conscious that each is part of a pair and are required for creating a wholeness in life, for a complete experience of the world.

4.5 REPRESENTING THE ABORIGINAL

White perceptions of the aboriginal form part of the tradition of Australian fiction. Three early Australian novels that deal significantly with the Aborigines are *Ralph Rashleigh* (1840's) by James Tucker, *The Emigrant Family* (1849) by Alexander Harris and *Fifty Years Ago: an Australian Tale* (1864) by Charles de Boos. Others followed such as Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardo* 1929, Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1939) and Poor Fellow My Country (1975) and Eleanor Dark's *The Timeless Land* (1941). This literary tradition continued into the 1950's, 60's and 70's with such works as Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1958), Peter Mathers' *Trap* (1966) and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* (1972) and Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961).

Current fiction in this area has undergone a transformation. Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) is a reassessment of early perception of the Aborigines. Then there is Robert Drewe's *The Savage Crows*, which explores white violence on the Aborigines. *Remembering Babylon* represents a current trend by the White Australian authors while writing about aborigines to look backwards. To try and reinvent them as the peaceable inhabitants of a pre colonial Eden is perhaps safer than dealing with the present situation. In the *Remembering Babylon*, another novel about a white man who has lived with the Aborigines in the mid 19th Century, we see the Aborigines at one remove from the author. Malouf's entry point into the alien (to the Europeans) world of the aboriginal culture is teenager Gemmy Fairley who has spent his formative years among them and becomes an object of curiosity, suspicion and bigotry when he returns to white settlement. Germain Green's attack titled "Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash" may have consolidated the novel's position as a literary landmark but it focussed attention on Malouf's representation of the aborigines. Malouf keeps the reader on the periphery of the aboriginal life. We only glimpse them by proxy, through the agency of Gemmy. In fact Malouf has been accused of stereotyping the borigines' spirituality in his description of Gemmy's meeting with them on the farm. Green felt that Malouf relegates the Aborigines to mere symbolization of the white mans Id and for not including the fact that European settlement introduced disease, displaced the the Aborigines from their land and filled it with unsuitable livestock. The Whites called the Aborigines savages and did not refer to themselves as invaders. But Malouf is conceived with the fears of white society that the Aborigines might try to drive the whites out. This is still evident in the objections to the Maho decision. Suzanne Falkiner confronts Green's attack with the view that Malouf's book is a work of the imagination, a metaphor and poetic novel. Malouf has stated that the inherent fear of aboriginality implicit in many Europeans including himself is one of the subjects he is trying to address in the novel.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed the peculiarities of the narrative technique used by David Malouf and also analysed the problem of language and communication in the novel.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Given an account of David Malouf, the writer and his work.
2. What links do you perceive in the fictional worlds created by David Malouf?
3. Comment on the major themes and preoccupations in the fiction of David Malouf.

4. "Remembering Babylon reflects the major concerns of a trans-cultural writer"
– Discuss.
5. How does Malouf re-imagine Australian colonial history in *Remembering Babylon*.
6. *Remembering Babylon* exhibits a tension between remembering and forgetting. Discuss.
7. Comment on the importance of place or setting and its use in *Remembering Babylon*
8. Consider Gemmy's function as a 'between-world's character.
9. In *Remembering Babylon* does Malouf compare Indigenous and European worlds or does indigeneity merely feature as the backdrop for colonial performance?
10. Contemporary writers often speak of the politicisation of space in terms of "margins and periphery". Can you perceive this dictionary in *Remembering Babylon*?
11. Malouf is not concerned with language but the failure of language to fully encompass experience. How does this manifest in *Remembering Babylon*?
12. Comment on *Remembering Babylon* as a mixed narrative of contact.

4.7 SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 5 THEMES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 From Colonial Identity to National Identity
- 5.3 Exile and Alienation
- 5.4 Faultlines in White Australian Identity
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will critically analyse the themes like from Colonial Identity to National Identity Exile and Alienation and Faultlines in White Australian Identity

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Several important issues present themselves in an analysis of David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*. One such important issue is the delineation of the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity using the construct of change. Malouf attempts to forget or re-imagine colonialism as he attempts to remember (and re-member) it in the nineteenth century.

5.2 FROM COLONIAL IDENTITY TO A NATIONAL IDENTITY

Remembering Babylon begins with the sentence: "One day in the middle of the nineteenth century, when settlement in Queensland had advanced little more than halfway up the coast....." This is an imaginary line drawn by the author that divides colonial settlement from the unknown. A novel that concerns itself with margins and periphery, the boundary lines are drawn for the minimal level of contact. One of the myths of Australia was that it was an unknown empty space, a terra nullus, with the Europeans as the Chosen People, encountering this Wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Australia was a blank space to be filled in by the 'civilising' power of Europe. The indigenous people being breeds, without law – European or English Law – had to give way before European settlement.

The land was threatening because it did not fit in the categories that the colonisers wished to impose on it. All that they saw were 'the strange scribbling of nature learning how to write.' But the aborigines belonged here and could read the Book of Nature closed to the white settlers. So they too were subsumed into this vast unknown and the dread it provoked. White settlers have failed to come to terms with the fact is that Gemmy shared the life of the black fellows and learned their language and yet comes back to claim his birthright as a 'British object.'

"And the horror it carries to you is not just the smell, in your own sweat, of a half forgotten swamp-world going back deep in both of you, but that for him, as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all of you stand for have not yet appeared over

the horizon of the world...and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips the last rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back."(p.43)

A contemporary parallel can be found in the panic occasioned by the Mabo decision. The notion that the aboriginal people have rights as the white Australians is like Gemmy's crossing of the line of demarcation which threatens the settler's sense of superiority and identity. Looking at Gemmy out of the settlers feel that civilisation and its effects can be cancelled. They respond by drawing Gemmy out of the settlement and back to the aborigines where he is later killed by a group of whites. "...ridden down and brought to earth by blows from a stirrup iron...an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls." (p.196). This is true to the brutality of the times but Malouf is also concerned with transformation and reconstruction.

Among the settlers, Janet McIvor and her cousin Lachlan Beattie are changed forever after this meeting with Gemmy. They are the only two characters who open out to the possibilities that Gemmy represents. Janet moves from the colonial space of nineteenth century Queensland to the sacred space of the traditional aboriginal society. She experiences a moment of epiphany, a moment also of great danger when she is covered by a swarm of bees. Instead of shrinking from this danger which would have proved fatal, she rises above colonial fears sees into 'the life of things.'

When Malouf re-imagines the colonial past, he is conscious that white Australians rejected aboriginal culture and everything it stood for. They tried to impose their one-dimensional notion of reality. They had closed their minds to the aboriginal way of life which is largely symbolic and in which the psychic and the physical are the two aspects of one reality. The Mabo decision allows for this difference, especially their difference in their relationship with the land. But this difference will not be accepted until the white Australians learn to accept the aboriginal other. This is where the figure of Lachlan becomes important. Lachlan, the typical idealistic is a settler of legend and he is full of heroic visions. His confidence is shaken as Gemmy's arrival confuses things. All those neatly drawn lines that distinguish black from white, civilised from savage, good from evil are challenged. Though Lachlan goes on to become a member of Parliament, the memory of Gemmy continues to haunt him. The ragged figure of this white-black fellow remains with him balanced between the colonial settlement and the unknown country beyond. When he discovers the bones of Gemmy, he tells his uncle about it and acknowledges his own complicity in the killings and dispossession of a people. Lachlan's sense of guilt is Malouf's way of setting right these historic wrongs.

Janet too moves out of the narrow, ideological enclosures of the white Australian culture to recognition of the other aboriginal Australia. This act of recognition is itself a move in the right direction. This is what she recognises in the light of the moon, towards the mystical end of the novel where "the outline of the vast continent appears, in touch now with its other life." (p.200).

The process of transformation extends to some of the other characters as well. Mr. Frazer the minister - botanist, is the only adult who learns something from Gemmy. Just as Mr. Frazer helps Gemmy to translate his life into English, Gemmy in turn helps him to translate the landscape of Australia, its flora and fauna into something comprehensible. He learns, by defining the particular, to redefine the whole and in doing finds himself transformed as well. Thus through the mystery of the imagination, the political is transformed into the aesthetic and psychological and is accompanied by the metamorphosis of the colonial into the national. Then only it will be possible to build an authentic Australian identity. This identity is androgynous. It holds together both primitive and civilized, masculine and feminine, the empowered and the powerless. Janet speaks for the primitive voice of the land and Lachlan represents the Australian political and social life. But this aboriginal

other. The focal point for this re-membering is Gemmy who plays a complex role. He serves as a catalyst for the disorientation of the colonial experience. As a whiteman who arrives in settler society from the aboriginal Australia he seems to have 'lost it' – the elusive quality that defines white colonial culture. That threat to white civilisation unsettles the colony. Gemmy also embodies the feared unknown. As a white-black-feller he evokes fears of deracination. He also implies a future Australian race that is not simply black or white, aboriginal or European, but an identity that stands between these poles. It is through Lachlan's and Janet's memory that Gemmy survives as the 'fountain-light' of their adult day.

A passage of fifty years separates the novel's final chapter from its mid-nineteenth century beginning. This is about ten years after federation (the formation of the States) and just before the First World War. These political markers which bring the colonies together as a single nation help to forge a collective identity. The imagination creates a national identity built on the re-membering of different peoples and states into the nation of Australia. This makes for the reading of the novel as a redemptive narrative as it transforms a moment of violent dispossession into an anticipation of national unity.

5.3 EXILE AND ALIENATIONS

In a way *Remembering Babylon* is an investigation of the age of old human problem of exile. The most famous of these voluntary exiles were the ancient Israelites in their migration from Ur of the Chaldees through the desert to the Promised Land of Canaan. Like them, most of Malouf's characters in this novel have turned their back on their homeland in an attempt to find a new home at the antipodes. The ancient Israelites had the voice of their God and a pillar of cloud or fire to Guide them to their new home. But what about migrants like the McIvors? Ellen McIvor is inspired by a desire for sunlight and space, two elements she could not find in the Scottish mining town she had grown up in.

The concept of exile is important in the present day Australia when so many of its residents come from different parts of the world. Very often school children are asked to consider the question of what Australia means to them, home or exile? For Ellen and Jock, Scotland remain home with its familiar voices, song and the old patterns of life. The transplanted McIvors, Corcorans and Sweetmans have abandoned mine-pits and blackmities to stake their claim in the new world are unsure whether it will lead to their salvation or their downfall. There is no name as yet for the dusty track runs by the General Store, road connecting their settlement to the others on the coast. The newcomers have barely made a scratch on the vastness that surrounds them.

Linked to exile is the theme of alienation – the terrible human divides wrought by race, class and culture. Malouf effectively explores this theme through the role of Gemmy Fairley. He had dramatised this difficult communion between civilised and primitive in an earlier novel, *An Imaginary Life* (1978) where Ovid befriending a wolf boy learns to communicate in silence. Human societies have always had their outsiders, those who are different because of appearance, religion or race. Gemmy's difference makes him an object of fear, especially as he had lived for sixteen years with the aborigines.

The land is another issue at stake in the novel. The setting of outback Queensland influences the main characters. Their attitude to the land is one of the indications that their place of exile has become part of the life of the imagination.

George Abbot, the school teacher finds the land symbolic of the defeat of his ambition and of his own degradation. He finds the climate and lush plant life

repellant. The aborigines seem to him to represent life in its lowest human form. George fears his degeneration the most. When his life is transformed by meeting Leona, his new life is symbolised by his perception of the beauty of sunset in the bush. Janet McIvor chooses to work with bees partly because they seem to her to represent the national richness of the land. The uniqueness of the land is a source of delight to Mr. Frazer. Jock McIvor's attitude changes from shock to joy. He is at first appalled by the harshness of land, of the intemperate climate but; later has a vision which is poetic in intensity and delight.

5.4 FAULTLINES IN WHITE AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

There can be few sentient visitors to Australia unaffected by their contact, however peripheral, with that country's indigenous inhabitants. The sight of drunk, dulled aborigines, enveloped in the almost palpable shroud of their misery, shock and profoundly disturbs. While slumped at the bar of a segregated pub in some desolate, red-neck town in the continent's endless interior, or wandering aimlessly in the precincts of a city shopping-mall, their blank gaze an opaque, protective membrane against the visual aggression of their urban surroundings, theirs is an intensely powerful presence; it exudes despair. In common with North America's Indians, those other tragic victims of colonial rapacity, their closed-down, sealed-off look tells of 'pain beyond any possible telling, depopulation, the loss of homeland, the loss of any fore-seeable future.....'. For these wretched people are the broken shards of a more than 40,000 year old civilization. Wantonly destroyed by a mere two centuries of colonization they are the psychically mutilated survivors of the policy of genocide that British settlers pursued from their earliest days in the colony.

And yet it was not until the bi-centennial celebrations of 1988 that the aboriginal population of Australia, demonstrating for the first time en masse, actually succeeded in focusing generalized public attention on the intolerable conditions of their existence. It took two hundred years and the virtual extermination of one of the earth's most ancient peoples before even a minority of whites began finally to concede that an irreparable injustice had been committed against Australia's autochthones.

There is a terrible inexorability in the pattern that colonization follows. Why that should be so, what reasons may be adduced for the malignant ethnocentrism of colonizers – these are the questions that form the main axis of David Malouf's novel, *Remembering Babylon*, published in 1993. Writing in the moral and political wake of the first stirrings of organized aboriginal protest, Malouf reflects in his novel on the social and psychological reflexes that determined the white man's policy towards the Australian continent and its native inhabitants. He also outlines the opportunities that the pioneer settlers failed to take and which had they been taken, would almost certainly have allowed their descendants firstly, to develop a more equitable relationship with the aboriginal population; secondly, to avoid many of the ecological disasters which Australia has suffered as a direct result of colonization, and finally, to forge a less incongruous, more authentically Australian identity than that which is theirs today.

Yet Malouf does not choose to address the aborigine issue directly. Opting for an oblique approach, he examines, with the endlessly probing eye of the pathologist, the reactions of a group of British settlers to the arrival in their midst of Gemmy Fairley, an English castaway 'gone native'. In his, late twenties when the narrative begins, Gemmy was, we discover from the narrator's subsequent recourse to flashbacks, tossed overboard in his early teens from a British ship, sailing for the shores of Northern Queensland. The last sixteen years of his life have been spent with the aboriginal tribe who discovered him on the beach where he lay stranded, like some helpless marine creature the sea had washed up.

The effectiveness of Malouf's strategy lies in the fact that the gap he incites readers to fill obliges the latter to imagine for themselves the grim answer to the ominous rhetorical question that, without ever being explicitly formulated, rumbles like distant thunder in the sub-text of the novel. Namely if Gemmy Fairley, a white adult Anglo Saxon male, is capable of eliciting such intense hostility on the part of his compatriots merely because of his lengthy association with aborigines, what must be the response of those same men and women when confronted with the aboriginal, people itself?

Making the novel's main protagonist a British subject whose prolonged exposure to, and radical transformation by, aboriginal culture has made of him a kind of human palimpsest, has the further advantage of providing an unusually revealing angle from which to view the settler's relationship with their native culture. For it is through the depiction of the white community's pathological response to Gemmy's absence of recognizable Anglo-Saxon characteristics that Malouf both painstakingly exposes the extent of the colonizing society's sense of insecurity vis-à-vis its own socio-cultural identity and, at the same highlights the overweening importance that a common language, shared cultural references and a joint set of codes inevitably assume for the members of such a profoundly dislocated society.

Though Gemmy is presented in successive chapters of the novel from the varying perspectives of a multiplicity of focalizers, what remains constant in all of the disparate evocations of him is the arresting image of a white black man, an aboriginalized white. His original Anglo-Saxon self has, you must assume, been completely overlaid – if not enterly effaced – by more than a decade and a half of shared existence with the indigenous tribal people who rescued him. Significantly the effects of this accidental superimposure of one identity over another are not confined to Gemmy himself. They are also evident in the dangerous tensions that are seen to surface among the white settlers when, having grudgingly admitted Gemmy into their midst, they discover that they can neither 'read' his appearance, nor decode his behaviour.

As we shall have repeated occasions to note in this Unit, Malouf's characterization of the settlers very faithfully reproduces many of the attitudes that prevailed in Victorian Britain as a result of nineteenth century 'Scientific' investigations into questions of race and post Darwinian thought on the theory of human evolution. In his study of colonialist fiction entitled *The Savage In Literature*, Brian V. Street explains; for instance, that 'a distrust of anomalies, caused partly by the continual attempt to define precisely the different groups of mankind was reinforced by specific scientific pronouncements about the native of 'hybrids,' so that the Englishman was wary of anyone who seemed to be crossing racial boundaries'. It was, Street demonstrates, a feeling that found abundant, expression in the literature of the period, Kipling being one notable example of the many Victorian authors who '(added)' the scientific distrust of the biological hybrid the cultural xenophobia of the nineteenth century Englishman towards, the character who chooses to be a 'racial anomaly'.

From the earliest pages of Malouf's novel, Gemmy, as he is seen by the various members of the community to which he has been drawn (as if by some instinctive animal urge to sniff out the barely remembered scent of his former existence) is consistently identified with the territory from which he suddenly appears, as opposed to the country from which like the settlers, he originates. Twelve-year old Lachlan Beattie's (and thus the readers) crucial first impression of Gemmy is for instance, that he is a fragment of ti-tree swamp, some bit of land over there that was forbidden to (the children)'. On realizing, however, that what he has taken to be an integral feature of the surrounding topography is, in reality, an autonomous living being, Lachlan's immediate conclusion is that, given the terrain from which the apparition is emerging, the latter can only be a black and that therefore the settlement is being raided by blacks. In the boy's mind, the link between the land beyond the settler's boundaries and the threat of hostile natives is automatic and absolute.

More importantly, the place from which Gemmy launches himself to hop and flap his way towards the mesmerised Lachlan and his cousins is perceived by them as being 'the abode of everything savage and fearsome. Of nightmare rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark. Nor, is it just Gemmy's over-imaginative, childish captors who view their environment in this way since the white adults' perception of the area around the settlement can scarcely be said to differ. 'The country he had broken out of was all unknown to them. Even in full sunlight it was impenetrable dark. 'From the moment Gemmy enters the narrative, then, the reader, cannot fail to register that, in the settlers' eyes, this pathetic interloper brings with him a powerful aura of the untamed and therefore inherently inimical space surrounding their land. The resemblance between Malouf's colonizers and their nineteenth century fictional counterparts, is unmistakable. Referring to Buchan's novel, *Preseter John*, Brian V-Street makes the point that 'the incomprehensibility of the 'natives' and their lack of enlightenment are seen in turn of night time and darkness. That is, as contrasted with the certain light of dawn and the familiar landscape of one's own homeland, Africa represented for many Englishmen a 'dark immorality' (24)

Once 'captured' by Lachlan and taken in by the boy's aunt and uncle, Elen and Jock McIvor, Gemmy's remaining in the British families can only be described as being on sufferance. In direct contrast with the aborigines who, it will be revealed analeptically, had accepted the extraordinary white channelling on the beach with minimal resistance and admirable good grace, Gemmy's compatriots respond to his presence with 'open hostility' (37). They consider him with the utmost distrust and constantly subject him to 'silent scrutiny' (37). It is not that they dispute his British origins – on the contrary, the story they are able to piece together from his queer, deformed snatches of English offers them a convincing enough explanation for his bizarre appearance and outlandish manner. Paradoxically, it is removing the tattered remnants of his naval uniform to present as a kind of metonymic token of his Anglo-Saxon heritage, that Gemmy draws their attention not only to his nakedness, but even more alarmingly, to the savages' innocent unawareness of his naked state.

Please note that the contrast between Gemmy's unselfconscious nakedness and the embarrassed indignation that nakedness provokes in the settlers is a fairly straight forward reference to the Eden myth. What Malouf seems to be suggesting here is that it is the settlers, with their 'superior' knowledge, their more advanced technology and their evolutionarily more mature status, who are responsible for introducing sin and corruption into the paradisial innocence of Australia that existed prior to their arrival on the continent.

As a result, the dominant sensation that they retain of their first encounter with Gemmy is not the surprise of discovering that the latter is, despite all indications to the contrary, 'one of them'. What fills their thoughts and haunts their collective consciousness is the deeply troubling fact that the hermetic barriers within which their embattled community lives have been breached by a stranger who has spent more than a decade and a half in the company of a primitive people. Even a humane and sympathetically drawn character like Ellen McIvor is shown to harbour anxieties, wondering nervously when Gemmy calls out in the night – 'what dream out of the dark world he had lived in had come back to claim or he had gone to meet.' (79) But for the majority of the settlers, mistrust of Gemmy centres on the far more specific suspicion that he may, in his waking hours, continue to maintain contact with his adoptive tribe and be passing on information to them. From their point of view, knowing that Gemmy has been with blacks for over half his life learning their 'lingo' and 'all their secrets, all the abomination they went in for.' (39), can only mean, at the very least, that his racial and cultural loyalties are in doubt. 'Was he in league with the blacks? As infiltrator, as spy? (38) is the question that endlessly exercises the settlers' minds.... Worse still is the appalling possibility that he may be out of

touch with his racial origins'. 'He had started out white', they readily concede, but the crucial point is 'had he remained' white?'(40)

Compared with even the youngest child in the settlement, his ability to communicate in English is pathetically inadequate and that flagrant linguistic incompetence naturally raises in their minds the possibility of a much greater and far less acceptable deficiency – the loss of his original cultural identity.

The expression 'he isn't all there' normally used to signify simple-mindedness in an individual is shown, for example, to have, for some of the settlers, a more sinister connotation when it is applied to Gemmy, since they are convinced that, even when he is talking with them in the flesh, in full sunlight, his spirit is 'halfway gone, across a line, like the horizon, that was not to be fixed in real space' (38) He does not, in other words, exist in the same socio-cultural dimension as they do.

Their willingness to entertain the idea that Gemmy's identity as a white Anglo-Saxon might not only have been significantly modified but completely erased by his subsequent experience of living among Australian's indigenous population has a resounding significance in the novel. For what it throws very prominently into relief is both the settlers' belief in the strength of aboriginal culture and, at the same time, their corresponding absence of faith in the power of their own racial and cultural heritage to resist, by and of itself, the insidiously eroding influences of the country they are striving to refashion after the image of their native land.

If we examine, for example, their reaction to Gemmy's so called 'native look,' we see that their initial responses to come up with a plausible theory for it. Adopting Mr. Frazer's line of reasoning, they explain it variously as resulting from the aboriginal diet, by the facial adjustments he has been required to make in speaking the different languages of the native tribes or by a conscious attempt on his part to gain acceptance from the tribe through the mimetic assumption of their facial expressions. But what lies exposed ultimately once this tide of rational explanation recedes, are the jutting contours of the colonizers' neurosis; the perpetually undermining sensation of living – 'in a place that had not yet revealed all its influences upon them.' (41) and which might ultimately therefore lead to their undergoing the same degrading metamorphosis that has transformed Gemmy from a civilized human being into a savage. After all, as one of them nervously reminds the rest 'wasn't it true(...) that white men who stayed too long in China, were inclined to develop, after a time, the slanty eyes and flat faces of your yellow man, your Chinese?' (41) When he is looked at from that perspective, it is easy to understand why Gemmy is the incarnation of their secret fears, the living proof of what prolonged exposure to the native elements of Australia will do to a civilized white. Victorian society was, as Brian V. Street reveals in his study, haunted by the idea that environmental influences might, in certain circumstances, be strong enough to subvert or even overcome the sacrosanct power of racial heredity. Even men of science were capable of asserting in such learned journals as 'Anthropology Review' that European settlers in America were degenerating to a point where they were likely to become as low as the Red Man. It was, as Street observes: '... a constant fear of sojourners in savage lands, including missionaries, that they would succumb to their savage environment.'(116)

Unable to offer his fellow countrymen any clear, unequivocal signs that would help them to see him as a white man, Gemmy 'become(s) in their eyes black'(41) For, while the imprint of his racial origins is no longer immediately discernible, the stamp of the aboriginal tribe upon him is, by contrast, both blatant and apparently ineradicable. The lingering taint and odour of what, to the settlers, is his debasing association with blacks cannot be removed no matter how hard Ellen McIvor scrubs away at his clothes: 'he had kept the smell he came with, which was the smell of my all half-meat, half-mud, a reminder, a depressing one, of what there might be in him that could not be reclaimed'(41)

As to why, when the influence of British civilization has proved so demonstrably phemeral, the colonizers should ascribe such strength and indelibility to the mark left by aboriginal culture, the answer is to be found in the comprehensive representation David Malouf offers in his novel of the colonialist's vision of the world.

What is made clear as the narrative develops is that, even if the settlers are prepared to consider Gemmy himself as harmless, they cannot overlook the primordial fact that he constitutes a direct link to that dimension of the country they inhabit that terrifies them. He is, first and foremost, a constant reminder of realities (like the massacre of nineteen whites at Comet River), they would rather forget. As such, the mere sign of him in their midst has the power to disquiet, disorientate and thoroughly destabilize them.

In common with all colonialists, the British who colonized Australia were possessed of a manichean vision of the world in which they strove to implant themselves. Colonized territory, as they saw it, and as it is evoked for us through successive focalizers in Malouf's novel, is composed of two antithetical and grossly disproportionate parts. On the one hand, there is the spatially limited, fenced-in area they have claimed for themselves by ridding, stripping, denuding it of all its original features.

Please note that this is the purpose of colonization for its agents – the ruthless excision of the indigenous so that the transplanted foreign body, of the colonizer's culture make take root and flourish. On the other, is the infinitely vaster, unconfined and ever-threatening-to engulf space occupied wholly by native and therefore alien elements. In passages that may be said to express the settler's point of view, this latter space is, as we have already had occasion to note, consistently referred to in language that underlines its dark, dreadful and primeval nature.

In the eyes of the white community, other remote centres of colonisation that are dotted along the coast line of north-east Australia, clinging like so many tiny barnacles to the outer, seaward rim of the continent's massive land mass, are separated by 'tracts of country that no white man had ever entered. It was disturbing that to have unknown country behind you as well as in front' (8) The deliberate emotional restraint which permits that statement alerts us to the undertow of fear and insecurity that it is its ostensible purpose to conceal.

Having uprooted themselves from their homeland where evidence of their civilization, the matrix of their socio-cultural identity had been omnipresent (in all their lives till they came here, they had never ventured, most of them, out of sight or earshot of a village strple that, as they stooped to carry stooks and lean them one against the other; was always there when they looked up...') (9) the British settlers in Queensland are psychologically adrift in a context which offers no recognizable cultural landmarks, a topography they have no means of decoding or of relating to their own experience. 'out here the very ground under their feet was strange. It had never been ploughed' (9)

The insight we are given into Ellen McLor's occasionally devastating feelings of alienation constitutes the most sympathetic depiction of the settlers' situation that Malouf offers in his novel. The anguish that fills her at such times, derives, the narrator indicates from 'the absence of ghosts', 'the fearful loneliness of the place' (10) what she misses most are the tactile and visible signs of a cultural heritage that has always provided her in the past with her sense of the world.

... a threshold worn with the coming and going of feet, hedges between fields that went back a thousand years and the names even further, most of all, the names on headstones, which were their names, under which lay the bones that had made their

bones and given them breath. They would be the first dead here. It made death that, much lonelier, and life lonelier too.' (110-111)

In direct contrast to the sensitivity and legitimate angst ascribed to Ellen McIov is the rest of the community's response to the unassimilable strangeness of their environment. True to the colonial paradigm, their collective gut reaction is fundamentally aggressive. They set about the systematic elimination of all that is alien with the aim of creating in its place some replica of the world they have left behind their mania for 'Stripping (the land) as soon as [they] could manage, of every vestige of the native; for ring barking and clearing and reducing it to what would make it, at last, just a wee bit like home. (10) naturally involves them the outset in an extraordinarily destructive relationship with the land they are colonizing. And yet, the text affirms, their strategy is a singularly futile one, since it fails to prevent them from falling prey to the 'unnerving knowledge' that the land they have cleared was, until a very short time ago 'on the other side of things, part of the unknown.' (9, *Emphasis mine*), and might still, notwithstanding all their relentless efforts to tame it by neutralizing its latent menace 'have the last of mystery upon it, in jungle brakes between paddocks and ferny places out of the Sun.' (10) Like all colonialist ventures, the scale of the enterprise they have embarked upon is too vast, too ambitious to be realizable. How can these deracinated and insecure people entertain any realistic hope of ever authentically possessing a land which, in their own vision of it, is already occupied by a preternaturally ubiquitous indigenous population 'traipsing this way and that all over the map [...] forever encroaching on boundaries ... (9)?

Malouf's answer to that rhetorical question is that, whatever their official discourse might suggest, the colonizing community is only too well aware of the fact that, in diametric opposition to their own situation (in which they cannot guarantee), the native peoples of Australia move around unimpeded by barriers in a boundless universe where they are manifestly at home. Even the restricted living space on which the British families have laboured to engrave the unequivocal signs of possession is penetrated by aborigines if it happens to include part of the latter's ancestral hunting - grounds. Like the North American Indians who believed that land was gift from the creator and could not be pressed by individual humans, the nomadic blacks do not possess the code with which to decipher the message of ownership that the white man's fences are intended to convey! Consequently they continue to cross through them 'in the shadowy way of those whose minds you cannot touch' (100-101) Similarly, in the dark hours', when there are neither shotguns nor 'the glow of the white man's authority' (9) to keep them out, the aborigines wander wherever they please, failing to acknowledge the existence of any barrier whose purpose is to exclude them. Thus, outside the daylight hours, the land so arduously cleared by the settlers is felt by them to revert to its alien, hostile state. For the 'humanizing' influence brought to bear on the landscape by the sound of the white man's voice is extinguished at night and in its place noises of an altogether different, 'unidentifiable' and, by implication, inhuman nature can be heard asserting the separate, autonomous existence of a land and a people beyond the colonizer's control that fills them, the narrator observes, with the very strong sense of 'being submerged, of being hidden away in the depth of the country, but also lost' (9)

As had been plainly indicated at the very beginning of narrative through Lachlan's reaction to the idea that the settlement is being raided by blacks ('After, so many false alarms it had come,' (2, *Emphasis mine*), the settlers live in the constant fear that ... at any moment [...] they might be over whelmed' (42) But the following graphic image gives us a much more vivid sense of the feelings of insecurity that eorde the mental equilibrium of the white community: 'the stoutest of them stepping under the stars to take a piss before bed, all unbuttoned and exposed to the night would feel his balls shrink at the crack of a twig, and tuck himself away without even troubling to shake the last drops off (42) And in Barney Mason we are able to see the damage suffered by a man perpetually thrown off balance by 'his own unhappy sense that the world was preparing at any moment to tear away from him the last vestige of security (103)

Here, then is the cause of the paranoia that gnaws away of Malouf's settlers. It is the overwhelming, sensation of being outside one's own element in the face of an enemy who is consummately at home and at ease in his. The very authority of the colonial administration itself (as symbolized by the legal documents in the Lands office in Brisbane, which bear the names of individual land owners) is, the narrator suggests, no match in the settler's mind for the obscure poems he himself confers upon the aborigine in tacit recognition of the latter's symbiotic relationship with the territory over which he ceaselessly roams.

This is also the point at which the trajectory of Malouf's settlers may be seen to diverge radically from that followed by the conventional heroes of nineteenth century fiction. For though, as we have seen, the settlers in *Remembering Babylon* exhibit many of the key responses towards the colonial experience that prevailed both in Victorian society and is much of the literature of the period after is absent from Malouf's post colonial evocation of Australia's colonizers is the mythologization of the imperial culture. This is why his characters who are essentially working-class refugees fleeing the grinding oppression of Britain's Industrial Revolution, are not endowed with the reserves of innate superiority on which the upper-class heroes of Buchan's or Ballantyne's or Haggard's or Henry's novels draw in order to triumph over hostile populations and insalubrious environments. The tension emanating from the opposition between the psychological insecurity and precarious circumstances in which Malouf's settlers struggle to survive and the strength of the supernatural forces with which those same settlers believe aboriginal society to be empowered constitutes, moreover, the main source of the energy that drives the narrative forward.

Though none of them has any empirical evidence of male-violence on the part of the blacks, the whites are nonetheless incapable of dissociating the latter from the profoundly intimidating characteristics that they ascribe to the mostly devilish country they are in the process of colonising. Any chance encounter with an aborigine thus triggers off feelings of sheer terror: Even in broad daylight, to come face to face with one of them, stepping out of nowhere, out of the earth it might be, or a darkness they move in always like a cloud was a test of a man's capacity to stay firm on his own two feet when his heart was raising'. (42) One of the fundamental propositions underpinning the narrative is in fact, that in the fragile and beleaguered psyche of Australia's white colonisers, the aborigine is not simply like all indigenous people in the eyes of their colonisers, the personification of alterity, the distilled essence of the unknown and unknowable other. With his 'sooty blackness beyond black' (43) and his indecipherable, unconscionably alien way of life, he is perceived. Malouf shows, as the ultimate, most terrifying of bogeymen. So while they may be consumed by night terrors and traumatized by the unpredictable, havoc wreaking violence of rainstorms and cyclones, the settlers nonetheless consider the natives as constituting the greatest threat to their survival for they are: 'worse, than weather and deepest night.' (9)

Lacking the exalted heroic stature (and the unassailable self confidence) conferred by imperialist discourse on the colonizers who tamed the dark continents of Victorian fiction, the whites in *Remembering Babylon* are handicapped by a fatal weakness. At the first sight of the aborigine's timeless and challenging gaze, their faith in their own racial superiority, in the power of western civilisation itself, is seen to wither impotently away. Brought face to face with what he was chosen to consider as a mere savage, Malouf's settler finds himself unable not to recognize their shared origins. And compared with the colossus of their common humanity, the civilisation, perceived by him hitherto as constituting both the source and bastion of his own superior ideality, suddenly appears as flimsy and superficial as the proverbial fig leaf. This dawning realization that his culture might after all be nothing more than a decorative veneer beneath which he continues to exist in the same fundamentally primitive state as the natives whom he views with such repulsion and contempt rocks the settler to his very ontological foundations. To use the school master George

Abbot's words the life led by the aborigines, 'inspired nothing but a kind of horror at what human nature might in its beginnings spring from, and in such a place so easily sink back to' (51). It is the profoundly destabilizing possibility of such appalling degeneration that Gemmy's presence constantly evokes for the already insecure British community and which drives them, ultimately to the acts of physical and psychological aggression that will hound him from the settlement.

And yet, despite the state of collective paranoia that the narrator describes, the whites' hostility towards Gemmy is neither entirely uniform nor completely unanimous. Dissonant voices do exist and, occasionally make themselves heard. Even in the discourse of the vociferous majority we may detect the existence of a contrapuntal theme. At variance with the prevailing, genocidal impulse to go out and get rid of 'em, once and for all" (62) that seems to be the inevitable concomitant of all major acts of colonization, there are these of the milder' colonialist tradition whose sole aim is endeavouring to extract information from Gemmy is to facilitate their exploitation of the natives by incorporating the latter more efficiently into their predestined positions in the colonial world as labourers and servants. But the only genuine dissension from the hard core colonialist point of view is expressed by Gemmy's reluctant host, Jock Melvor, and by the minister, Mr. Frazer, who may be said to represent, respectively, the decency of the common man and the humanitarian Christian tradition.'

Though Jock cannot himself bear either the touch or even the proximity of Gemmy, an inherent moral rectitude prevents him from allowing himself to be swept away by the burgeoning paranoia that inflames the imagination of the rest of the community. The irony is that it is in scornfully reminding his compatriots of the superior power of their shotguns compared with the derisory nature of any conceivable threat posed by the aborigines that Jock becomes suddenly aware of the meaninglessness of such an argument. For the point is, he realizes, neither he nor they, have faith in that power: 'all their education, their know-how, yes, and the shotguns they carried-might not be enough against what? Some vulnerability to the world that could only be measured, was measured still; by the dread it evoked in them?' (105) Unlike the heroes of nineteenth-century colonialist fiction, who are not only convinced of the supermacy of firearms over any kind of native weapon but are eager to prove it to superstitious 'savages' at the drop of a hat, Jock and his fellow countryman are seen here to doubt the power of their civilisation's technology to subdue the supernatural forces they attribute to the indigeneous peoples of Australia. Thus at the very moment he tries to persuade his friend, Barney, that what differentiates white from aborigines is the former's rational thinking, Jock is himself invaded by the irrational fear that he might have set forces in action, out there, just by breathing into the air the mere possibility' (105).

This, I believe, is the reason why, despite their manifest contempt for the indigeneous inhabitants of Australia, the British Settlers are portrayed, through their visceral rejection of Gemmy, as evincing a willingness to entertain the hypothesis that aboriginal culture might leave a stronger, more lasting trace upon the human personality than their own what it comes down to in the end is the horrified recoil of the ordered, disciplined, rational Victorian mind at what it perceives as the invasive, uncontrollable meanderings of the unconscious.

The white settlement, enclosed within boundaries, compartmentalized stripped of all natural, spontaneous growth, represents the austere virtues of reason so valued by nineteenth century Anglo—Saxon culture. The vast, uncharted wilderness over which the aborigines wander uninhibitedly, violating the settler's space with impunity clearly corresponds, on the other hand, to the obscure, anarchic power of the idea that so terrorised the late Victorians. It is precisely that fear of the unbridled unconscious that is expressed by nineteenth century colonialists, both real and fictional. When they speak of heir dread of what Molly M. Mahood refers to as '.... continual downward pull of savagery.'

But though Jock is, in some respects, dismayed by his estrangement from his former friends, his alienation is not depicted in entirely negative terms. He is shown for example to discover himself a stronger, more sharply defined identity, a singular self over shadowed hitherto by his desire for acceptance by the group to which he felt the belonged. And Jock and Ellen's emotional response to the panorama they see from the top of the ridge overlooking the settlement ('the boundaries of their own land...') had grown clearer to them in their recent difficulties (109) seems to be a fairly transparent metaphorical allusion to the couple's heightened perception of themselves as individuals.

Interestingly, this new sense of identity is also shown to kindle in Jock a greater responsiveness to his surroundings, opening him up at last to the pleasure to derived from what was previously a source of deep anxiety, the very strangeness of the Australian continent. As long, as he had remained 'wrapped' in his 'sociable self' he had been impervious to the appeal of the country in which he is struggling merely to carve out a living. But once the cocoon of group identity has been peeled away, laying bare his individual sensibility, he is seen to develop an infinitely more sensitive relationship with his adopted habitat. His discovery of hundreds of tiny iridescent insects is 'experienced by him as a lightness... like a form of knowledge he had broken through to. It was unnameable, which disturbed him, but was also exhilarating; for a moment he was entirely happy' (107). There is in him a new found ecstasy in natural phenomena exemplified in the lines that follow which helps to soothe his nagging ache for the familiar topography of 'home; and reconcile him at last to the loss of his native land;

It was just on sunset; All the western sky was drenched in flame and the daylight moon, the wrong way round, hung colourless, almost transparent, in a blaze of such resplendence that you felt small, almost dwarfed before it. He turned his face to her and was transparent himself (109).

But the therapeutic virtues of such rapture are, as Jock's very singularity attests, unknown to the vast majority of Australia's early settlers for whom the uniqueness of that continent's flora and fauna merely fostered the disconcerting conviction that they had landed in a freakish part of the globe, inferior in all respects, to the world they had left behind.' Seeing their environment exclusively in terms of how they could exploit, it was naturally a further bar to their benefiting from the kind of healing delight in the country's natural phenomena that Jock experiences.

In taking with them to the new world all the cultural, social and geographical references of the old, the British who colonized Australia created around themselves a kind of opaque, impermeable bubble which effectively cut them off from all direct contact with their new homeland. Clearly, it is a point which has a far wider application than the specific context in which it is used in *Remembering Babylon*. To quote Brian V. Street:

Physical separation could be overcome far more easily than the moral and psychological separation between Europeans and the native inhabitants of those distant lands.

This separation from the local inhabitants is sustained by memories of loved ones at home, enabling the traveller to cut out his mind the land he is actually in. The emotional link is only with his own culture which he thus brings with him to the alien environment. (27)

The radical geographical and cultural dislocation that colonization demanded invariably produced a pathological defensiveness on the part of its proponents. Banding together the better to ward off the multiple assaults on their vulnerable sense of identity, they immured themselves behind the impenetrable ramparts of an expatriate society that was not only irrelevant to but fundamentally at war with the

country they were colonizing. The kind of cultural autism that this engendered was, as Malouf's novel demonstrates, one of the main reasons for the inevitable failure of colonial ventures.

'Sociable in temperament', 'it went against his nature to be at odds with his friends.' (108), Jock is nevertheless expelled from the bubble as a result of his choosing to dissociate himself from actions and attitudes that he finds morally unpalatable. Mr. Frazer, the other main dissenting voice in the narrative, is, by contrast a natural outsider. A benign if slightly eccentric cleric with a passion for botany, he is automatically set apart from his fellow countrymen by the enthusiasm of his response to the exoticism of the north Queensland landscape. The knowledge of the natural world that Gemmy has absorbed during his time with the aborigines is considered by the minister as being of inestimable value and he applies himself to the recording of it with a quasi—missionary zeal. It is, in fact, through the medium of Mr. Frazer that the main ideological thrust of the novel is developed; firstly by means of the speculation he indulges in when writing in his journal and secondly via the episode in which he goes to Brisbane to talk to the Governor about Gemmy.

To take the first of those two points, Mr. Frazer argues cogently in his 'Writing—up book' in order to dispel, the myth of the 'hostile and infelicitous' (129) image of Australia that is propagated through colonialist discourse. It is his fervent belief that the widespread practise of stripping the land of its natural features is a grievous mistake. If the settler's impression of his new environment is an inimical one, it is, the minister reasons, because of the former's distorted vision which, in turn, is caused by his having imported with him into the colony codes and references which have no 'relevance there. If moreover, the first colonizers starved in the midst of plenty, it was previously because they could not with their English eyes perceive, [what was all around them], since the very habit and faculty that makes apprehensible to us what is known and expected dulls our sensitivity to other forms, even the most obvious' (129—130) But Mr. Frazer is realist enough to recognize that the defectiveness of the settlers' perception of the world is by no means accidental. He detects a kind of refractory pride in it; an insistence that if the land will not present itself to us in terms that we know, we would rather die than take it as it is (130). Emphasizing the futility of such intransigence while at the same time stressing the necessity of accepting 'what is there' of learning and assimilating the invaluable knowledge of their environment that the indigenous inhabitants have to offer, the minister proposes Gemmy as a potential source of inspiration to his countrymen since he explains, in allowing himself to be at home here, he has crossed the boundaries of his given nature.' (132) The radical message embedded in the reverend's Christian discourse is that, for the British colonists in Australia, the price of successful integration is no less than the relinquishment of their socio—cultural identity. It is only, his argument implies, by severing the residual analytical cord that attaches them to the homeland that they will ever be in a position to come to terms with the intimidatingly different conditions of life that obtain in the colony. Gemmy, the example he offers, is on Mr. Frazer's own words, 'no longer a white man, or a European, whatever his birth.' (132)

It is, of course, a doomed message that Mr. Frazer endeavours to impart, as is eloquently demonstrated in the episode describing his failure to enlist government backing for his heavily symbolic project of cultivating native Australian species of fruit. Though the two men he seeks support from to help him implement his vision represent a vastly more elevated social and educational stratum than that of the proletarian settlers they have, the narrative contrives unequivocally to show the same fundamentally negative impact on the country as the ignorant, narrow—minded human flotsam they are there to govern. Sir George Bowen, Governor of Queensland is a middle—class parvenu, a 'monstrously ambitious' civil-servant who has no interest in the country other than as a vehicle for furthering his career. His flamboyant, militaristic dashing about the unpaved streets of Brisbane epitomise the vacuous ostentatiousness of imperialism. The epithets ('peevish' 'overbearing', 'grandiloquent') used by the narrator to characterize Sir George's behaviour may also be seen, by association, to apply to the 'distant almost unapproachable power' (166)

he is, said to embody. In the eyes of this pompous, paranoid, incurably ethnocentric representative of government, aborigines are 'creatures, only recently redeemed from nakedness, whose minds are still sunk in unfathomable night' (169) Seeing himself in the same heroic terms as those attributed to the colours of Algeria in the mythologizing discourse of that arch—imperialist Louis Bertrand' he believes that he is 'a kind of imperial demurrage, out of mere rocks and air creating spaces where history may now occur' (168)

The thesis that Malouf invites us to consider finally is this: however disparate their cultural or socio—economic provenance might be, colonized country as it exists in reality, its own distinctive geographical identity, its own physiologically and culturally adopted indigenous peoples. What men like Sir George choose to see is a vacuum which they are going to fill, a blank page on which they will inscribe their glorious history, an empty, uninhabited landscape which they will populate, cultivate and build on when Sir George himself looks at the immense territory his government has chosen to name 'Queensland' his blinked eyes are hungry for signs that will lend themselves to his obsessive allusions to another, vastly different cultural tradition: "Your town, 'he writes to his patron, Lord Cardwell, of the little mosquito - infested port in the north on which he has settled the great man's name, lies in a position analogous to that of Thermo pylae; that is, at the north end of the Australian Epirus." (169) 'Analogy', the narrator drily asserts, is his drug. He finds it everywhere.' (169).

The Premier, Mr Herbert, an English aristocrat who is more discreet, less volatile in his demeanour than Sir George, is shown to be no less pernicious an influence on the territory he administrates. The only character in the novel who can, truly be said to represent the social class to which the heroes of nineteenth century colonialist literature belong, Mr. Herbert is, in the portrait Malouf offers of him, singularly devoid of the traditional heroic qualities. Languid, effete and irredeemably self—centred, he has none of the moral fibre ideological zeal and downright spunk that are seen to motivate his fictional predecessors. He considers his term in Queensland merely as an 'adventure of the youth' (172) of which is weary. The home which he shares with a fellow Oxonian is 'a Horatian retreat (...) from the rough and tumble of colonial democracy, which he does not believe in'. (172)

His fifty acres of Cambridgeshire' has been used to grow English produce and, the narrator confidently predicts, 'once he leaves it, he will not revisit.' (173) Australia has provided him with the raw material for an interesting experiment, a suitably uplifting hobby for a noble Englishman. He has transformed a sub—tropical wilderness into a lush cultivated country estate, but beyond that self—gratifying project he has no more interest in the land or its people than the common settler has.

Having gone to the state capital in the hope of persuading those in and with power to embark on the visionary project of encouraging the colonists themselves to adapt to their new environment rather than disfigure it to conform to their own inappropriate expectations. Mr. Frazer returns home dazed and defeated: "The orchards he had foreseen receded into a future that appeared increasingly remote" (175). In the version Malouf presents in his novel, colonial society is, from its lowest ranks to its highest echelons, psychologically and ideologically committed to destroying the identity of the country on which it imposes itself.

Alone of all the white protagonists, Gemmy is shown to have succeeded in blending into and becoming an integrated part of the geographical and cultural environment into which his hitherto picaresque existence has ineluctably propelled him. Not that there is any morally edifying purpose ascribed to Gemmy's achievement. The point of view from which he is seen to operate is essentially a pragmatic one.

There was no way of existing in this land, of walking your way through it, unless you took into yourself, discovered on your breath, the sounds that linked up all the

various parts of it and made them one. Without that you were blind, you were deaf, as he had been, at first, in their world.(65)

What motivates him in his initial contact with the aboriginal tribe that discovers him is presented as being nothing more exalted than the survival instinct itself.

The keys to Gemmy's rapid integration are firstly his age ('He was a child with a child's quick capacity to take things in and the street child's gift for mimicry.' (25—26) and, secondly, the flexibility with which youth is endowed: '[he] he let himself be gathered into a world which, though he was alarmed at first by its wildness, proved no different in essence from his previous one,'(26) Conversely, precisely because Gemmy is young and malleable he is 'young enough also to forget'(26). This is why, in acquiring the languages of his hosts, he loses what derisory knowledge of the English language he formerly possessed.

Significantly, the loss of his native tongue is equated, in the narrator's reconstruction of events, with the disintegration of his original cultural identity, for the point Malouf seems intent on making here is that the cultural framework or *de'cor* to which language inevitably and abundantly refers cannot remain intact without the words that construct and support it. Once Gemmy has lost his grip on the signifier, the signified also eludes him: 'He would see it clearly enough[...] but no word was connected to [it] and when his mind reached for it, the object too went thin on him.(27) Deprived of the nourishing lifeblood of language, the original 'text' of the palimpsest that Malouf's tragi-comic protagonist represents fades as the new 'text' inscribes itself.

But if Gemmy's memory of his former identity is seen to slip from his consciousness, there is no evidence in the narrative to suggest that the acquisition of a second culture has effaced that identity completely. Retreating to an inner recess of his unconscious mind, his British self is seen merely to lie dormant, leaving Gemmy with the disorientating sensation that there is within him 'a different story [...] which had another shape and might need, for its telling, the words he had had in his mouth when they had first found him, and had lost, though not, he thought, for ever.' (27-28). The fact that rumours of the presence of whites near the area he is living in disturbs Gemmy to the point where he cannot rest until he has sought them out provides tacit confirmation of the idea that some sense of his racial identity remains alive in him.

There is one further point worth noting concerning this episode. What is shown to reactivate Gemmy's memory as he skulks around the settlement searching for signs that will restore his socio-cultural origins to him is a succession of the most banal and concrete phenomena. There is, it seems, a deliberate intention on the author's part to develop the idea that the cultural identity of a people, the essence of what it feels itself to be, bears little relation to the lofty abstractions of Art and Civilisation that featured notably in the self-legitimizing discourse of colonialists and continue to flourish today in conventional conceptions of what 'culture' is about. What he shows us through Gemmy's experience is that it is the smell of horse-dung on a path, the sound of an axe striking wood, the sight of a woman pegging out washing on a clothesline – in short the unexceptional, everyday features of an individual's existence – that constitute the fabric of what may be called his native culture. The point is given a retrospective piquancy by the preposterously, exalted images of the colonizer's civilisation that its grandiloquent apologist, Sir George, is seen to be obsessively engaged in fabricating.

In a parodic reformulation of Provost's experience with the tea soaked Madeleine, Gemmy's imprisoned memory of the earlier 'text' of his childhood self is finally released by the taste of soaked mush that someone has thrown out to feed the hens:

The creature whose dreams he stared came right up to the surface of him. It fed on the saltiness of the stuff, and for a moment entirely took possession of him. He saw things through its eyes in bewildering flashes; and found himself shaken with sobs.

but where the tears came from so suddenly, and why he could not tell. A stranger, a child it might be, who had never wept, was weeping in him.'(31)

The es

But though Gemmy is seen here to make contact with his past, the images used to be the experience are of such a manifestly schizoid nature that we can only conclude that there has been no merger or continuity between his original identity and that which, as a result of his long immersion in aboriginal culture, has been superimposed upon it. The two 'texts' are presented as separate, serial, mutually impermeable strata of a fractured psyche.

It is, I think, of considerable significance that, as Gemmy struggles to close the gap between himself and his elusive native culture, it is language or, more precisely, the almost literal absorption of words as physical objects that is intuitively felt, by him as being able to provide the vital link. Pressing himself up against the hut of a family of settlers, listening to the incomprehensible sounds of their conversation, he is convinced that, if only he can get near enough to swallow the words as they leave the speakers' mouths, he will be able to capture and possess their meaning: 'If he could get the words inside him, as he had the soaked mush, the creature, or spirit or whatever it was, would come up to the surface of him and take them. It was the words he had to get hold of. It was the words that would recognize him.'(32) The gloss we are invited to put on that somewhat enigmatic declaration is, as I understand it, that Gemmy's movement towards white society is prompted solely by an attempt to retrieve the largely effaced text of his original identity and not by any desire to be re-absorbed by or reintegrated into that society.

There is nothing in the narrator's account to suggest any impulsion on Gemmy's part to abandon the aboriginal way of life he has shared since being jettisoned by his fellow countrymen some sixteen years earlier. For Gemmy, it is simply a matter of 'recovering the connection that would put the words back in his mouth, and catch the creature, the spirit or whatever it was, that lived in the dark of him' (32-33). In leaving the cover of the ti-tree swamped to run to the boundary fence of the settlement his only objective is to gain recognition for the Anglo-Saxon part of himself. He wants to prove that all that separated him from them was ground that could be covered.'(33)

When, therefore, some alien voice from deep inside him stutters 'do not shoot. I am a B-b-british object (33, his reaction is one of astonishment and betrayal. The 'creature' has revealed, suddenly, an independent and treacherous will of its own, and it is that, the reader is led to understand, which has enticed him to where he is, balanced symbolically on the fence between the two cultures that have successively and in their hugely different ways inscribed themselves upon him. For, from that unstable vantage point, what Gemmy sees are the metaphorical representations of his dual identity, 'all swamp and forest one way, raw clearings, the other' (33). The substitution of 'object' for 'subject' is clearly no innocent slip of the tongue on the part of the linguistically deficient enunciator. It is the author's voice intervening here to indicate that his protagonist, poor damaged goods that he is, (the narrator refers to him as 'a man who had suffered a good deal of damage' (7) is very much a socially manufactured article, the product of his bleak, de-humanized, Dickensian childhood in 'civilized' Britain. The problem that the 'Made in England' label that would normally confirm his country of origin must have faded during his long years under the Australian sun, or perhaps it has been concealed by the unfamiliar characters of the script that overlays it for it is manifestly no longer visible to his British compatriots.

It is for that reason that Gemmy's yearning to obtain acceptance for his identity as a white Anglo-Saxon is destined never to be satisfied. In the eyes of the British families, he is no more than 'a parody of a white man' (39), and, white they feel. It is their duty 'to bring him back. If it was feasible, to being a white man' (39), they are deeply pessimistic about the outcome of such an endeavour. More pertinently, if, after

several months spent in the settlement, Gemmy himself is at all uncertain as to which of the two 'texts' that comprise him constitutes the stronger, more legible manuscript. That uncertainty is definitively dispelled by the visit, he is paid by two members of his adoptive tribe.

During the silent communion that succeeds the exchange of formalities between Gemmy and the aborigines come to reclaim him from the 'ghostly white creatures' he is currently living among Gemmy's spirit is transported to the sites of his former wanderings. And in the long, lyrical passage that describes his psychic return to the tribe's home territory is made clear that this is the real locus of his identity since it is, the narrator insists, through the recognition of that landscape's vibrant and cherished features that Gemmy feels 'the energy flow back into him' (11). His sudden recovery of the good health that has gradually drained away from him during his stay among the white families forces Gemmy to acknowledge explicitly that 'the air he breathed here did him no good the food too. The ground he walked on jarred at every step. The land up there was his mother, the only one he had ever known,' (118) In common with the aboriginal people who saved his life, Gemmy believes, at last, that the earth beneath his feet is his sole progenitor, the true matrix of his being. Counteracting the healing, revivifying power that the aborigines bring Gemmy, is the toxic discharge emitted by Andy McKillop, the only member of the white community to witness the blacks' visit to the settlement? As Gemmy sees it, Mc Killop represents a source of contamination.

The air around (Gemmy) was immediately infected, sucked into the emptiness (Andy) made just by stepping into it.' (118). Shattered by the force of the virulent - racial antagonism that informs all the thoughts and reflexes of Mc Killop and his ilk. Gemmy is obliged to concede the impossibility of ever reconstituting his identity as a white man. His counter with the deranged settler leaves him with the impression of having 'looked into a pool (...) and seen an image of himself that was all unfocused pieces that would not fit.' (49)

The violent assault to which Gemmy is suspected as a result of Mc Killop's malicious scare mongering among the settlers marks the end of his hopes for recognition from his fellow countrymen. Later, as he sickens in the remembrance of his physically and emotionally abused childhood self, the conviction grows in him that, since his suffering derives from his having allowed his life to be set down on paper by the school master, the only way to put an end to his torment must therefore be to get the sheets of papers back and so retrieve the 'text' of his former existence. And it is through the attitude Gemmy displays towards the manuscript that records his early life history that we are enabled to understand fully the primary of the aboriginal way of seeing in the whiteman - blackman dyad that Gemmy represents. In the episode dealing with his return to the settlement to get back the transcript of the disjointed, autobiographical babble that was extracted from him on his arrival there - an episode which narrated from his point of view, Gemmy is said to be

"going back to claim his life, to find the sheets of paper where all that had happened to him had been set down in the black blood that had so much power over his own, the events, things, people too that sprang to life in them (...). Mugicked into squiggles like the guests of insects under bark, they had drawn the last of his spirit from him. They were drowning him to his death. (176)."

Since Gemmy cannot read, it is obviously of no consequence that the sheets of paper George Abbot hands over to him contain only the ill-written exercises of British school children. All he craves is the symbolic restitution of the 'text' of his tortured Anglo-Saxon self so that he can destroy it and thereby embrace whole heartedly the aboriginal culture with which alone now he can identify. In what is a highly symbolic scene, the part of Gemmy that had been resurrected by the 'magic' of the written record and had disintegrated on contact with the pathological violence of Andy Mc Killop's animosity is shown to be discarded for good. Walking away from the settlement in the rain, Gemmy takes the sodden 'manuscript' from his pocket and

drops it 'like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected...' (181) His experience of life in the colonizers' world has resulted in the irreparable dismemberment of his original identity.'

Recounted analeptically in the closing chapter (i.e. Chapter 20) from the distant stand point of Lachlan's and his cousin Janet's old age, Gemmy's death or rather the manner of his dying, reinforces the idea that ultimately, Gemmy's only identity is that provided by the aboriginal tribe into which he succeeded in integrating himself. Searching for news of his erstwhile companion nine years after his disappearance from the settlement. Lachlan hears of a 'dispersal' carried out by settlers some six years previously. Like the 'commando raids' referred to by the sanguinary narrator of J.M. Coetzee's novella, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* that sanitised term is, in colonialist discourse, the code word for the extermination of indigenous people. The narrator's account of the incident does not make use of such cynical euphemisms. It is, on the contrary, provocatively explicit: 'The blacks had been ridden down and brought to death by blows from a stirrup iron at the end of stirrup leather – an effective weapon, when used at a gallop, for smashing skulls.' (196) Since Gemmy is believed to be one of the victims, it is clear that, to the whites who perpetrated the massacre, he was indistinguishable from the blacks whose existence he shared to the end, as indistinguishable as are his presumed remains among the eight identical parcels of bark to which Lachlan is eventually led by surviving members of the decimated clan.

The main function of the heterodiegetic narrator of *Remembering Babylon*, is, then, to excavate the foundation – social, psychological, and cultural – on which white Australia is built. If this proves an unedifying task, it is because those foundations were eroded from the very beginning by the same moral faultlines that may be seen to traverse all colonial societies. And though the failures of colonisation are seen to be multiple, they can, the novel attests, always be traced to a single unvarying cause, the blinding, and paralysing ethnocentrism of colonisers.

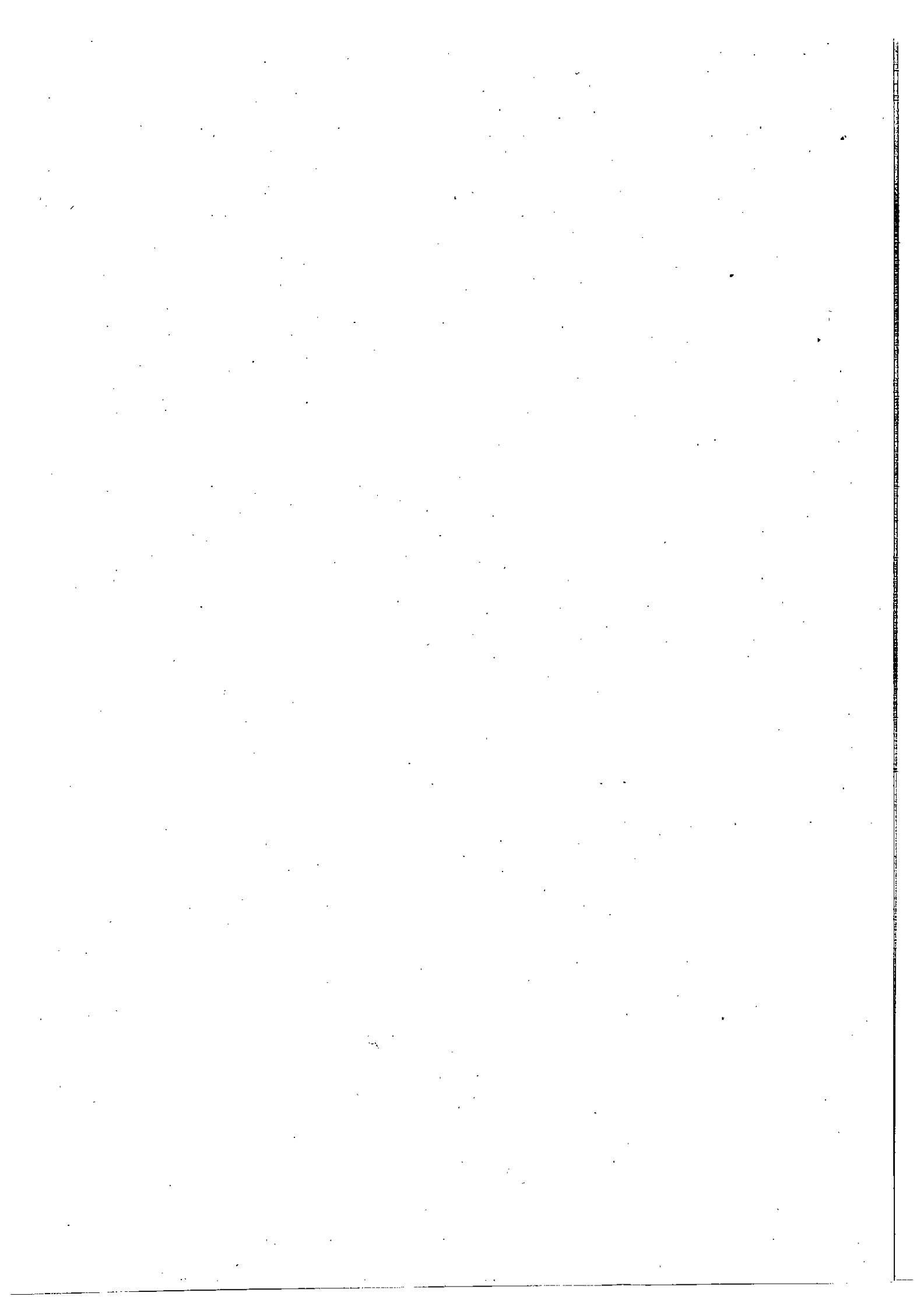
The settlers Malouf portrays are imprisoned both physically and mentally within the unyielding confines of what is known and familiar to them, unable to come to terms with what is there, incapable of reconciling the reality of Australia with the myth of colonisation propagated by the discourse of their culture.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity, the themes of exile and alienation and the Faultlines in the white Australian identity.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the evolution of Australia's colonial identity into a national identity.
2. Discuss the theme of exile and alienation as reflected in *Remembering Babylon*.
3. Discuss the various aspects of the faultlines in the white Australian Identity.





Uttar Pradesh
Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-08 AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Block

7b

JESSICA ANDERSON : *TIRRA LIRRA BY THE RIVER*

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Jessica Anderson is the author of six works of fiction. All these works illustrate Anderson's fascination with a particular kind of character — one who stands outside her society. Anderson's chief concern is with female protagonists.

Anderson's characteristic interest in the inner life of people, which critics have compared to that of Henry James, her delicate but effective style, the intricate patterns and allusions of her work, the seriousness of her psychological and moral concerns, and her particular interest in the problems of women, have made her a very important Australian writer.

Tirra Lirra by the River (1978) won the Miles Franklin Award, the most prestigious of all Australian awards, and the Australian Natives' Association Literary Award. The Novel has become quite famous. Its moving and involving account of a woman's life, reflecting as it does the social confinement and frustrations of the time, is not only a remarkable piece of fictional psychology but also an important social document.

Tirra Lirra by the River — Jessica Anderson's best known work—remains a book of understated power and considerable beauty, and well worth studying.

I hope you will read and enjoy this feminist novel as well as the discussion on it.

Good Luck to you!

UNIT 1 THE AUTHOR AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

The Author and
The Title

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Author and Her Works: Introduction
- 1.2 The Title of the Novel
- 1.3 Literary Allusions: Intertextuality
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Questions
- 1.6 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this unit are to examine the intertextuality involved in the use of the title, *Tirra Lirra by the River*; to provide information about the writer's life; and to help you in analysing the poem of Tennyson vis-à-vis the prescribed novel.

1.1 THE AUTHOR AND HER WORKS: INTRODUCTION

One of the ways of entering a literary text is through seeing the text as a product of an individual mind. Though such an approach has limited application especially in the case of the novel under study, it is still considered one of the traditional ways of entering a text. To familiarize ourselves with the concerns and themes of Jessica Anderson's texts we will look at the shaping of the author's life.

Jessica Anderson was born in 1916 in Gayndah, Queensland but grew up in Brisbane, in a suburb where children could roam freely in the nearby bushland. Her parents were freethinkers, members of the Labor movement and Republicans. Anderson retains some of this early indoctrination. She is a Republican and joined the Citizens for Democracy in 1975. She is a freethinker in the sense that she believes there may be some sort of spiritual element to be tapped into but is not clear how this can be done. She calls herself a pantheist.

She has been married and divorced twice and has lived mainly in Australia, with the exception of a couple of years in England as a young woman. This brief exile seems to have had a marked effect on her. She has used more than once the theme of a woman returning to Australia after a long absence. Although she came to creative writing relatively late in life, Jessica Anderson has since achieved real success. She wrote short fiction and radio scripts for a number of years, before turning - at the age of forty - to writing novels. *An Ordinary Lunacy* (1963) was the study of an obsessive passion, combined with astute observation of the sophisticates in Sydney society. *The Last Man's Head* (1970) is ostensibly a crime novel, though with considerable psychological and moral subtlety. *The Commandant* (1975) is an historical novel based on the life of Captain Logan, Commander of the Moreton Bay Penal settlement during the early 19th Century. It centres on Logan's young sister-in-law, and sees Anderson beginning to explore a feminist perspective, in this case regarding the restrictions in women on colonial life.

Tirra Lirra by the River (1978) won the Miles Franklin Award, the most prestigious of all Australian literary awards, and the Australian Natives'

Association Literary Award. The Novel has become quite famous. Its moving and involving account of a woman's life, reflecting as it does the social confinement and frustration of the time, is not only a remarkable piece of fictional psychology but also an important social document.

The Impersonators (1980), which also won the Miles Franklin Award, as well as the NSW Premiers award, is set in Sydney during the 1970s, centering on the experience of a woman who has lived overseas and come back home. *Stories from the Warm Zones* (1978), won the Age book of the year award. It consists of a semi-autobiographical stories of childhood in Brisbane during the 1920s, as well as contemporary stories set in Sydney during the 1980s. A subtle feminist theme runs through many of the stories. *Taking Shelter* (1989), a study of a diverse group of people living in Sydney in 1986, allows Anderson to explore her familiar themes of commitment, self-determination, frustration and identity. An unusual thing about Anderson's writing is that she has reversed what is often the usual order of mirroring the writer's own age. Anderson wrote *Tirra Lirra* about a woman in her eighties when she (i.e. the author) was in her fifties. In her seventies she wrote two novels, *Taking Shelter* and *One of the Wattle Birds* about young people.

Observation, imagination and memories of life in Sydney — when she went to a great many lively parties— aid her in the weaving of her stories. She regards her private life as private and remains aloof from the Sydney literary scene, refusing to involve herself in controversies, feuds, struggles and campaigning. She also stands apart from the mainstream because she is an intensely urban novelist. The broadness of Australia's vast interior landscape to which many writers pay lip-service is notably absent from her work. She lived for a long time at Potts Point where opportunities to observe the vagaries of street life abound.

One of the recurrent themes in her works is that of a being who in varying degrees does not quite belong. Themes of love, death and money find unusual treatment in this elegant stylist's works. Though her novels frequently deal with Australian themes like the problems of departure and return, she believes that she writes in the English tradition. Having received many awards for her contribution to Australian literature, Anderson has attempted to depict many different nuances of urban Australian life. She is now highly regarded as a fiction writer. Her characteristic interest in the inner life of people, which critics have compared to that of Henry James, her delicate but effective style, the intricate patterns and allusions of her work, the seriousness of her psychological and moral concerns, and her particular interest in the problems of women, have made her a very important Australian writer.

Tirra Lirra by the River - her best known work - remains a book of understated power and considerably beauty, and well worth studying. We will now discuss the title of this feminist novel.

1.2 THE TITLE OF THE NOVEL

In literary circles the use of the same plot/story by different writers belonging to different periods of time has never been unusual. In fact, in the eighteenth century copying the 'classical' texts was considered an essential characteristic of 'high' literature. The source did not matter and the presentation of the story was the only important consideration. Some of the greatest writers have been what we would now call plagiarists! The origin of the story bothered neither the writers nor the critics.

However, when a twentieth century text derives its title from another well-known text, the reader is expected to be familiar with the older text and understand the recent text in the light of its relationship with the older one. *Tirra Lirra* belongs to this

category and is in dialogue with Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" across barriers created by time, place, culture and genre. While the former is a twentieth century Australian novel, the latter is a nineteenth century English poem. The fact that *Tirra Tirra* owes its title to Tennyson's poem indicates the participation of the novel in a literary tradition interested in two important issues transcending the barriers of time. One of them is the relationship between imagination and reality, and the other is the position of women in different societies at different points of time.

It is important at this point to remind ourselves that all literary texts are products of unique social and historical conditions. Therefore, reading and interpreting a literary text necessarily involves understanding the processes of production of the text. Trying to read a literary text in terms of universality of appeal or themes is dangerous and will be playing into the hands of those who believe that literary texts do not participate in the formation of societies. The implication of this for all of you is that you must familiarize yourselves with the social conditions prevalent in twentieth century Australia especially with the changes that were taking place in the position of women.

The expansion of the boundaries of the British Empire in the nineteenth century had two very important consequences worthy of being noted prior to the study of this novel. Since expansion of the Empire necessarily entailed voyages by the sea, women were not participants in this process. Thus, women were kept out of political activity and were confined to domesticity. However, women were not the only marginalized. The residents of the countries subjugated in the process of this expansion lost their political rights and very often their cultural institutions as well. One of the significant results of the expansion of the boundaries of the Empire was the marginalization of the non-whites and the women. Issues of race and gender became the hot topics of debate. Though these are very complex issues, it is important, at least, to be aware of their existence.

The gender issue assumes greater significance in the context of Australian literature where mateship or a male-male relationship is one of the recurrent themes. As Susan Lever points out, "In Australian writing, women have borne the symbolic burden of respectability and suburban life". While some were viewed as conspiring with the oppressive forces of industry, others were seen as the objects and sometimes instigators of sexual adventure. Germaine Greer's literary critical polemic, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977) challenged the stereotyping of women in the above-mentioned ways. *Monkey Grip* is not merely a document of the political place of the Australian women in the mid-1970s, but also a part of the feminist tradition that examined the sexuality of women. By trying to find new formal structures to do so, Garner helped in breaking traditional approaches to and modes of representation of women in Australian fiction.

Anderson's *Tirra Tirra* is a participant in this attempt to portray women differently. It resists the cultural stereotyping of women and provides new approaches to representation of women. By using a female protagonist, Anderson questions the acceptance of dominant forces in any culture as *the only* existent ones. Such resistance to authoritarian structures makes the text an interesting one for all those who have an interest in the politics of the creation and propagation of monolithic structures.

1.3 LITERARY ALLUSIONS : INTERTEXTUALITY

As has been mentioned earlier, the title of the text is a quotation from Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott". To understand the significance of the title of the text one must first read and understand Tennyson's poem. The poem tackles a major aesthetic theory of the Victorian Age, that is, the autonomy of art. As M.H. Abrams states in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, "a poem is an object in itself, a self-contained universe of

discourse, of which we cannot demand that it be true to nature, but only, that it be true to itself". The poem explores the conflict between "art" and "life" that is symbolized by the two conflicting worlds of Shalott and Camelot. One of the approaches to the poem is to interpret the poem as showing that life is hostile to artistic production. According to this reading of the poem the artist must be detached from the real world and observe the real world only in the "mirror of the imagination". However, since the poem itself is a work of art actively engaged with its own historical moment, it ironically refutes the necessity for aesthetic withdrawal from "life" or history, the very point it internally appears to affirm. What Tennyson's poem demonstrates is that art and life, the aesthetic and the political, are inextricably entwined.

Not only has Jessica Anderson chosen a line from Tennyson's immortal poem for the title of the novel, but she makes it strikingly clear that 'The Lady of the Shalott' influences *Tirra Lirra by the River* in a major way. So, you must know the significant biographical details of the great poet of 'The Lady of Shalott'.

Lord Tennyson was the most celebrated of all Victorian poets. He was educated at Cambridge University, and even as a student he began to make his mark as a fine writer. His second published book of verse, *Poems* (1832) - which appeared when he was just twenty three - contain 'The Lady of Shalott' which influenced the writing of the prescribed novel, *Tirra Lirra by the River*. The poem, 'The Lady of Shalott' was inspired by England's most cherished mythic cycle, concerning King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Tennyson favoured emotionally charged subjects, including (as in 'The Lady of Shalott') tragic love, exotic settings, and rich, highly-crafted verse. His work suited the taste of the time perfectly, and he was enormously successfully.

Tennyson was appointed Poet Laureate - the official poet of the United Kingdom - in the same year. He went on to write the other famous poems, including 'In Memoriam' (1850) and 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1854). His masterpiece is without any doubt - 'Idylls of the King' (1859-85), a massive epic poem recounting the full story of King Arthur. It is an extraordinary work, not only in scale, but in the vast detail of its narration. Tastes may have changed in these 'post-modern' times, leaving Tennyson and the Romantics behind, but everyone with a literary bent of mind even today would love to read *The Lady of Shalott* and 'Idylls of the King'.

'The Lady of Shalott' is the story of a woman bound by a magical curse. The reason is never explained. It doesn't matter, of course. As in so many fairy stories or fantasies, she is trapped, can survive only as long as she doesn't break a taboo. That taboo is: looking out, and by extension becoming involved in, the real world. When she inevitably falls in love, with the handsome Knight Lancelot - the one who rides by singing 'Tirra Lirra' - and abandons her lovely tower, she pays the penalty and dies. Jessica Anderson has seen in this poem the tragic story of a woman trapped, whose attempts at finding satisfaction and love are doomed. It is a brilliant piece of technique to use the celebrated Tennyson poem as a metaphor for a life. Nora is, in some ways, a 'Lady of Shalott' - lonely, unfulfilled, occupying her days with embroidery and her thoughts with dreams of somewhere where she can find love and hope (i.e. her Camelot). This allusion is carried over into the novel as Nora weaves references to Lancelot and Camelot into her story, identifying her lovers and even her father with the romantic Knight of the poem, of Arthurian legend. As the poem is the source for much of the imaginary and prefigures many of the themes in *Tirra Lirra*, a careful reading of it is essential for a full appreciation of the novel.

Dear student! Read it now, considering in particular:

- parallels in story, character or theme between the poem and the novel, and the extent to which Anderson deviates from her 'source';

- the added significance that is gained in the novel by allusions to certain motifs (the tapestries, for example, or the mirror, or the horses) carried over from the poem; and
- the reasons why the meaning of the novel should be enlarged by reference to an earlier text, and to the tradition, literary as well as cultural to which it belongs.

Here is the original poem in full.

The Author and
The Title

THE LADY OF SHALOTT

Alfred Lord Tennyson

Part I

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
 To many-tower'd Camelot;
And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
 The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot
Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
 The Lady of Shalott,

By the margin, willow-veil'd,
Slide the heavy barges trail'd
By slow horses; and unhail'd
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
 Skimming down to Camelot:
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land?
 The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
 Down to tower'd Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers 'Tis the fairy
 Lady of Shalott.'

Part II

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.

She had heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
 To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
 The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hands before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
 Winding down to Camelot
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
 Goes by a tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true.
 The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And Music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
'I am half sick of shadows.' Said
 The Lady of Shalott.

Part III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
 Of bold Sir Lancelot.
A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
 Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy.
The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazon'd baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
 Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,

As he rode down to Camelot.
As often thro' the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flow'd
His coal-black curls as on he rode,
As he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river
He flash'd into the crystal mirror,
'Tirra lirra,' by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.

Part IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
Over tower'd Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay:
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along

The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darken'd wholly,
Turn'd to tower'd Camelot.
For ere she reach'd upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? And what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer,
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, 'She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott.'

We presume that you have read the poem and have tried to understand it. Now, we will reinforce a part of what we said earlier:

The Lady of Shalott lives in a tower and weaves night and day. She could look at the world only through a mirror. She is cursed with a sensibility that commits her to a vicarious life. Confined to her island and her high tower, she must perceive actuality always "at two removes; at a sanctifying distance and then only in the mirror that catches the pictures framed by her narrow casement". Living in isolation one day she sees the image of bold Sir Lancelot who represents all the vitality that she has been denied. No longer able to bear the isolation, she leaves the "web" and the "loom". This brings the curse on her and when she attempts to enter the public domain, she gets destroyed.

Tennyson uses a common Victorian theatrical device, that autonomous art is "feminine" by nature. In Victorian culture a parallel is often drawn between the privacy of the artist and the privacy of the middle class woman. An artist occupies a world separate from the public sphere (the factory and the marketplace) just as a woman is enclosed in a private and domestic space. This creates a demarcation between the "feminine" and the "masculine" areas of experience. Tennyson exploited this stereotype in his poem. Through this he could communicate the anxiety he experienced about being relegated to the margins as a poet. More importantly, by creating the figure of the Lady of Shalott as his alter ego, he distanced himself from her and showed how he could discard the "feminine" quality of an artist to regain his masculine identity. This is why he allows his "male" hero, Sir Lancelot to take over the poet's voice at the end of the poem. The end of the

poem is noteworthy in the inadequacy of Sir Lancelot's response to the Lady's life and death. Another reading of the poem relevant to our understanding of the text involves the issue of construction of an identity. According to this reading, the Lady of Shalott cannot locate a coherent sense of her self in the world. When she finally decides that she is "half sick of shadows", she writes "The Lady of Shalott" around the prow of a boat and attempts to enter social life thereby. However, the project to establish a specific identity is doomed. Such a notion of the self was possible only in self-referential isolation and thus her proclamation "This is I" is met with puzzlement and she ceases to be a "self" at all (i.e. she dies).

Having looked at Tennyson's poem and the sites of its production, it is time for us to turn our attention to the novel that derives its title from the poem. Nora Porteous, like the Lady of Shalott, was a weaver of tapestries. Her sensibility and her desire to experience the extraordinary led to her isolation from the others. Her sister and mother, Olive and Dorothy, Colin and Una, the Custs - all have one thing in common, that is their inability to understand and inhabit the world of Nora. Unable to accept the ordinariness of life, she begins to rejuvenate her life through images that she stores in her mind - distortions of the real. It is through these images that she reconstructs her life. Like the Lady of Shalott, Nora views reality at multiple removes. Since the images she recounts are memories, some have been distorted over a period of time and some through repeated reconstruction. Recollections where she constructed the past keeping in mind the audience resulted in the original image being lost or unrecognisable. Her caricature of Colin for the benefit of those at number six had made her forget the original incidents involving him.

Again, like the Lady, she hopes to escape the trap of ordinary existence through her Sir Lancelot, John Porteous or his nephew, Colin. She is expected to conform to a stereotype, a social self, once she follows her Sir Lancelot. However, as in the case of the Lady, Nora is unable to fit into a social role and fails in it. All her efforts to transform the world that she lives in finally end in frustration. It is only her creative mind that helps her to come to terms with the pains of and the ordinariness of existence.

The phrase "tirra lirra" is taken from a song in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* where Autolycus thinks of "tumbling in the hay" with his "aunts" (whores). Tennyson's making Sir Lancelot hum these lines is indicative of the lady's sexual frustration. Anderson's choice of these particular words underline her use of the sexuality metaphor to challenge the dominant structures that exist in a society.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

The title of the novel places it in the tradition of English literature, which Anderson admits she writes in. Taking off from Tennyson's poem, the novel examines and questions the roles assigned to women in the society. Being the story of an old woman, it also underlines the double marginalisation of old women. The text resists not just social and political roles assigned to women, but also the representation of women in various forms of cultural production. Rejecting roles of nature and nurture and rebelling against being confined to domestic space, the text posits alternative approaches to and modes of representation of women. Also, the analysis of the novel vis-à-vis the Tennyson poem, throws a lot of light on the novel.

1.5 QUESTIONS

- Q.1. Write a note on Jessica Anderson's biographical details.
- Q.2. Briefly discuss Tennyson and his works.

Q.3. Discuss the significance of the title of the novel.

Q.4. Discuss the issue of intertextuality.

1.6 SUGGESTED READING

Friedman, Susan Stanford. 'Creativity and the childbirth metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse'. *Speaking of Gender* (ed) Elaine Showalter. New York: Routledge, 1989.

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UNIT 2 THE SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Section-1
- 2.2 Section-2
- 2.3 Section-3
- 2.4 Section-4
- 2.5 Section-5
- 2.6 Section-6
- 2.7 Section-7
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will give you the summary of each section of the Novel.

2.1 SECTION-1

Nora Porteous (nee Roche), now an old woman has returned to her childhood home in Brisbane. She is still wearing the uncomfortably warm suit she put on before leaving London and is suffering exhaustion after the six hundred-mile journey from Sydney. She tries to reconcile her memories of the old house with the present reality.

Accompanied by a kindly local, Mr. Cust, who has driven her from the station, Nora wanders through the house, which rekindles many of her early girlhood memories. She sees herself having left the house many years before, waving goodbye to her mother and sister on the front steps. Nora's mind also returns to her former home in London, No. 6, which she shared with friends Hilda, Liza and Fred. She imagines a conversation with these friends and strains to present her current situation to them in a way that they would find amusing.

Looking through the window, Nora sees again the imaginary world that engaged her as a girl. Distortion in the glass used to transform the flat dull suburban landscape into one of winding rivers and mountains. As a girl she read her father's book of poetry-the tales of Lancelot and The Lady of Shalott.

One night, walking restlessly by the river, Nora lay on the ground, unbuttoned her blouse and bodice, and lay partly undressed in the moonlight. She heard a horse coming by, leapt to her feet, did up her clothes and walked on. She was sixteen.

In adolescence, she felt estranged from many of her peers, finding the rough boys with their crude sexual overtones threatening and boring. Her love of beauty and interest in artistic things led to a sense of exclusion. She shared her love of reading with her friend Olive Patridge, but felt that her own mother did not understand or like her particularly. There were frequent bouts of antagonism between Nora and her Sister Grace. Only Dorothy Irey, exotic and dramatic, seemed something of a kindred spirit for Nora. They would pass while walking restlessly, and acknowledge each other's presence.

Nora dreamt frequently of leaving, and took refuge in reading and writing poetry. Due to her father's early death, Nora was forced to work in the Cust News Agency

and later selling art materials. We learn of the death of her brother Peter and, the other boys during World War I in France.

Nora bathes, then eats, continuing her internal conversations with the former housemaids from London. She determines to create a place for herself in this new environment that will be not too ugly.

2.2 SECTION-2

Mrs. Cust arrives the next morning, offering to take Nora shopping. As she returns the gloves which Nora had left in the car, Nora's thoughts again return to No.6, particularly to the cat there and to feelings of grief - as yet unexplained. Betty Cust now owns one of the embroideries that Nora had made while still a young woman in Brisbane, and offers to show her, Nora suspects that this piece, which she once thought so wonderful, will turn out to be quite ordinary.

Mrs. Partridge, now ninety-five, still lives by the river, but Olive, her daughter and Nora's old friend, returns only infrequently from London where she is now a well-known novelist. Nora remembers being with Olive in an abortionist's waiting room, and acknowledges that she has not kept in contact with her old friend.

Struck down by illness, exhaustion or flu, Nora is forced to take to her bed. She loses track of the time, as days pass and people come and go the doctor, the nurses and Lyn Wilmot, the next door neighbour whom Betty has engaged to care for Nora.

During this time, Nora wonders about death, and feels a sense of anger toward Colin Proteous, her former husband. She realises that her doctor is the son of Dorothy Rainbow - formerly Dorothy Irej. When told that Dorothy died many years before, Nora struggles to remember the details. Snippets of letters from her mother and Grace come back into her mind. Betty Cust tells Nora that she must have known, and Nora remembers unopened letters from Grace, that she merely crumpled and burnt. It would seem that Dorothy had committed suicide.

Nora imagines her mind is a sort of globe, on which are inscribed millions of images of her past which she does not wish to revisit are kept in the shadow or darkest area. Her memories of Colin are kept firmly in this latter region. Nora is reminded of her former mother-in-law by Lyn Wilmot; the somewhat disconcerting carer in Nora's sickroom.

Nora determinedly rotates the globe in her mind, to bring the image of her former husband into the light. Nora first met Colin at a party for Olive's farewell, when she was only twenty-five. She was struck by the sight of an older man, a dark mysterious stranger who sent her fleeing in panic. Frightened and excited, she returned hoping to find this man again, only to find him gone, replaced by a younger, fairer man the latter was Colin Proteous, who Uncle John the dark stranger - had just left - the party to sail for India. Colin stroked Nora's arm, likening her to Lillian Gish, the film star, and their courtship began. Nora's mother and sister were impressed by Colin, a lawyer working for the Government. The photo of Nora's father was brought out for Colin to see, though Nora herself was unable to recollect any details of her father's appearance. Her confidence was restored by Colin's admiration of her, and they were married quickly.

Her glamorous visions of Sydney did not however go well with the boring red brick house in which Colin's mother lived. Instead of boarding, Nora had her way and the newly married couple found rooms to rent in an old house at Potts Point close to the harbour. The area was frequented by artists, and Nora found it far more aesthetically pleasing than the suburbs from which Colin came. Although determined to be in

love with Colin, Nora found his sexual overtones unexciting. But she found consolation in the friendships afforded by the residents of the adjoining house, 'Bomera'. The artists at 'Bomera' accepted Nora, lending her books, and Ida the dress-maker, recognising Nora's artistic talents, offered to teach her to cut fabric. Her failure to produce a baby worried Nora, and she had to contend with the continual sniping of Una, her mother-in-law. A distance was growing between Colin and Nora. She wished to work but he would not permit it. As the Depression made its presence Colin decided that they would move back to board with his mother in the suburbs. Nora unhappily took leave of her friends, promising to maintain contact with them despite the distance.

2.3 SECTION-3

This section begins with Nora's memories of the Depression, which she discusses with Betty Cust. Lyn Wilnot arrives and begins to dust, complaining to Nora about the Custs being well off, about Nora not getting up and about Dr. Rainbow. Nora is reminded by Lyn of her mother-in-law Una Porteous. Nora's memories of the piano scales being played in the Cust home bring with them a strange sense of danger, which she can't understand. Nora uses her flattery to manipulate Lyn Wilnot and is pleased to see the response, although this also brings Una into a clearer focus for her.

Forced to live with her mother-in-law, Nora was determined to at least decorate their bedroom in a way that pleased her and reflected something of her artistic flair. Travelling into Sydney to purchase curtain material, she deliberately met with Lewie and lent him over one pound of the change — a sizeable amount in those days. She did not attempt to lie to Colin, who was furious that she had given the money to Lewie. Nora was pleased with the decorative effect she had created in their bedroom and developed more of an enthusiasm for lovemaking. This did not however meet with Colin's approval; he preferred her to be completely inactive. Feelings of rebellion continued to grow in Nora. She had no money of her own, as Colin gave his mother all the money for the household expenses, and effectively refused her an allowance, despite her entreaties. In a letter to her own mother, Nora finally poured out her despair, but was given in return a lecture from Grace about duty and not 'crying for the moon'.

She tried getting work for herself, but found that she was rejected everywhere. Writing to Lewie, she received the returned letters and learned that he had disappeared. Having been lent *the Forsythesaga*, Nora found the distasteful husband Soames, a particularly repellent character. In her later life at No.6, she was reminded of this unhappy period of her life whenever the book was mentioned.

Having no access to money of her own, Nora became increasingly 'sly' and stole small change from Una's purse and her husband's pocket. Although she was disgusted at herself on one level, there was a secret pleasure in this act of rebellion, which enabled her to make secret visits to Ida and 'Bomera'. Totally starved of stimulation, Nora began to make dresses for Una and her friends and to read Colin's school books on Geometry and French, in the face of Una's 'But what good will it do you?' Panicking as the years went by — as she was by now thirty-two — she took up the restless walking again. She bought lottery tickets and fantasized about getting away. Her walks reminded her of Dorothy (Irey). Rainbow Grace's letters told of Dorothy's success in having married Bruce Rainbow, but Nora imagined herself in that situation, mad with restlessness. Her letters of reply concealed the truth of her emotional state in a banal listing of events.

Colin joined the tennis club and insisted on Nora participating, despite her discomfort in the heat. But even her enthusiasm for this was disapproved of by her husband. She became increasingly reluctant about any physical contact between them since

their coupling seemed to have no love at all in it. Colin bought a car which he washed lovingly. Nora continued to be part of his social life, with its 'soporific women', still yearning secretly for escape. By now, Colin had started regarding her 'with hatred'. Her sense of self had all between lost and she was in despair. She continued to make dresses for women, being aware now that they pitied her.

The final degradation was when Colin brought his girl friend, Pearl, to the house and told Nora that he wanted a divorce. Pearl had the audacity to criticise Nora for taking Colin's money and giving it to queenie boys.

2.4 SECTION 4

Nora awakes to what she thinks is the sound of tennis balls, and is visited by Dr. Rainbow. He brings to mind Dorothy, and Nora wonders to herself whether Dorothy committed suicide and was perhaps found by her son (Dr. Rainbow). She learns from Betty that Grace was deeply affected by Dorothy's death.

Betty brings the tapestry that Nora created while still a young woman. Nervously Nora looks at it, expecting to find faults, but is amazed and thrilled to discover its beauty. She describes it as belonging to her first long period of waiting, a time when she could still play and create because there was no panic. This was unlike the second period, in the iron-grey suburbs, where she felt that her talent was being limited by panic and despair.

Colin's own lawyer advised Nora against accepting his earlier offer in the divorce settlement, emphasising that the 300 pounds offered was not adequate. He persuaded Nora to ask for 1000 pounds, and finally she settled for 800.

Having left the Porteous home, Nora took rooms in a hotel and indulged herself with novels and a fine lace handkerchief. She visited Bomera, but found it changed too. While Ida and the water colourist were still in residence, the artists had been replaced by a group of new and much younger people. The Depression had blighted Ida's dreams of a dress making shop. Nora decided to go to London almost by accident, simply as a realisation that no one could stop her.

During a last visit to Brisbane, Grace and her mother made their disapproval plain. There was a bickering between Nora and Grace, the latter calling her sister as 'frivolous'. Nora took comfort in spending time with her young nephew Peter. She thought of visiting Dorothy Irey, but was advised against it by Grace. Seeing her from a distance, Nora was aware of the physical changes in Dorothy. She was much thinner and the flowing hair had been cropped short. After two weeks, Nora thankfully took leave of her, saying goodbye to her mother and sister and leaving in a yellow taxi (of which we are reminded in the opening of the novel).

Colin sent a bouquet of roses to the shop, which Nora cast overboard in disgust. During the six week voyage to south Hampton, Nora became involved in a shipboard affair with an American Engineer. Convinced that she was barren, Nora engaged in a physical relationship, her first taste of 'Loving freedom'. She determined that there would be no further contact between this man and herself when they reached England. Completely unaware that she was pregnant Nora watched the man being greeted by his wife, as he and Nora pretended not to know each other.

Renewing her friendship with Olive Patridge, Nora discovered that procuring an abortion in London was more difficult, expensive and dangerous than it would have been in Sydney. While being unwilling to become involved, Olive eventually provided Nora with the address of a doctor willing to perform the abortion. Olive was not at all the person whom Nora had imagined when reading her novels. While

Olive disapproved of Nora's decision, Nora in return chided Olive for the lack of realistic contraceptive details in the world of her novels. The abortion was a humiliating and degrading experience for Nora. The doctor, while taking her 300 pounds, accused Nora of irresponsibility. Nora concealed the unpleasant reality from Olive. Nora enrolled herself in a dress making school in order to become a real professional. Olive, who had joined the communist party (which was fashionable with many intellectuals in the 1930's) chided Nora for her frivolous interest in clothes. Nora likened her to Grace. The thudding of tennis balls in the square outside disturbed Nora's recuperation. She was still hemorrhaging badly after the abortion, but did not disclose this to Olive. Returning to her own lodgings, but still far from well, Nora endured terrible bleeding, determined she'd die rather than go to a hospital. From this point began a period of celibacy that would last the rest of her life.

Nora and Olive drifted apart. According to Olive, both had disguised their true selves from too early an age. London for Nora was dark and unfriendly, but she did make friends with a series of 'lesser Lewies'. Through sheer determination, she mastered cutting and found work with several important dress makers, eventually setting up her own business.

She was intent on returning to Australia, though her friend David Snow told her that like him, she would be homeless wherever she was. Having booked her passage in March 1939, Nora was prevented from sailing in November by a severe bout of bronchitis. Then followed six years of war. During those years came the deaths of her mother Ida, Grace's husband, David Snow, who was killed at Dunkirk, and several work companions killed in the raids on London.

Betty Cust brings news that the water-colourist from Bōmera has achieved fame posthumously.

2.5 SECTION 5

Betty Cust brings the news that at last the mail strike is over. Nora begins to think of writing to Hilda and Liza, who are her old friends in England. The Custs talk of their reasons for never travelling to Europe - too many things at home keep them anchored. Nora enjoys an omelette cooked by Jack, and reflects warmly on the excellent quality of food available in Australia.

Determined to bring back the memories associated with the playing of music scales in the Cust house, Nora talks to Jack, who tells her that it would have been his older brother Arch, then thirteen, who had played the piano. Suddenly Nora's globe of memories spins and she remembers Arch with clarity.

While she was left alone tending the shop at lunch time, Arch made a habit of stopping his playing and suddenly coming downstairs, attacking Nora with tickling and chasing. The whole experience was suffused with a frightening but titillating eroticism. While furious with Arch, but nevertheless aroused to a fever pitch of excited anticipation, Nora found it difficult to deal with this over whelming flood of emotion. She slapped him 'like a mother' on one occasion, while another time she felt a tenderness and laid her neck against his head - thus spurring him on to greater sexual - liberties and indignities Nora complained to the Custs and wept endlessly, but admitted that the crying was for relief and shame, and that the shame was not to do with morality. But, it was there because of the extreme youthfulness of her 'arcadian lover'.

Savouring these memories now, which had lain for so long completely buried, Nora learns that Arch at thirty-nine married a young girl of eighteen who bore a striking

resemblance to herself. She is not surprised at this news, as she realises now that her shipboard lover was in fact a reincarnation of the adult from that Arch might have taken. Nora idly imagines what might have eventuated if she had met up with Arch before travelling to England.

2.6 SECTION-6

in a rebellious mood, Nora gets up from her sick bed, and opens up her old bedroom. She is amazed to see her bed still made up, as though Grace had long expected her to return. She finds a photograph of her father, but it stirs no memories of which she is conscious. Dr. Rainbow brings a parcel, another embroidery which had belonged to his mother. This one — of a magpie emerging from among jacaranda leaves, — Nora recognises as not as good as the first.

Jack lets slip a reference to Dorothy's death. She committed suicide by putting her head in the gas oven. It was Gordon (now doctor) Rainbow who found his mother. Nora shows the photograph of her father and Betty comments on the excessive grief that Nora was said to have experienced. Nora does not remember any grief on that occasion.

We now learn about Nora's own attempt at suicide. It was prompted by some 'spark' having been put out, in the context of revelations about wartime atrocities, and Nora's own realisation that she was losing her looks.

Planning to return to Australia now that the war had ended, Nora decided to have plastic surgery to her face first. While in the hospital she became friendly with a fellow patient Hilda. She admitted to Hilda before the bandages were removed that she feared the operation had been a mistake. Nora was right. When the bandages came off, a face mask-like in its immobility was revealed. Again time to form, she didn't complain but decided that this was the final straw: — she would commit suicide. Returning to her flat, Nora found a bundle of letters, one of them Grace's with the news of Dorothy's death, but unable to face them, she burnt them and took sleeping pills. She was saved by the council workers, who had come to turn her water off.

While recuperating in the hospital, she was visited by Hilda who suggested a meal together when Nora had recovered. Still intent on dying Nora agreed to meet but determined to get herself more sleeping pills. However at their meeting, Hilda brought the news of a job at theatrical costumiers, and persuaded Nora to try it. Somewhat grudgingly, Nora took on the job having decided to hang on 'provisionally', keeping the pills at hand.

She took to this new work with enthusiasm, finding it giving rein to her skills and her latent artistic abilities. Some movement and mobility came back into her face eventually and she worked for twelve years in these happy surroundings.

Nora wonders why, Dorothy Rainbow wasn't able to hang on 'provisionally' and thinks of how the web of both their tracks back in the suburbs had merged together. Nora sees a little girl and an old man behaving in courtly fashion from her window and stares longingly.

Letters arrive from Hilda and Liza. Nora seeks signs of their mental state concerning their new homes, and is unable to deduce anything negative.

They all came together to share Fred's house many years before: three thin old women, and he, another Lewie. After twelve years of happy communal living, Fred became paranoid and difficult and eventually his sister brought the news that he had

been committed to a mental institution. Unable to pay the higher rent demanded by Fred's sister, the women had to leave the house. London was no longer the same and became very expensive. Nora decided to return to Australia. The other two women found a home in the country with Liza's sister. Only Belle the cat had nowhere to go. They agreed that she must be left to Nora alone. She still has the scratch on her arm caused by putting Belle in the cage for the vet.

2.7 SECTION-7

Nora rebelliously enjoys a hot bath, and the pawpaw sent down by Arch Cust from Cairns she eats with secret pleasure. Lyn Wilnot bustles in bossily speaking of her dislike of Dr. Rainbow and connects it to the 'many murders'. Nora wants no details from Lyn, and deliberately waits until the Cust's visit for further enlightenment. Betty tells of Dorothy killing all of her family with an axe before taking her own life. Only Gordon, then a child of eight, escaped by hiding under the house and later seeking refuge down by the river, where he was found the next day. Nora wonders about the suppressed 'angry self' in Dorothy, and is momentarily angry with the community, who could not permit Dorothy to be herself. The pills and good works for the Red Cross were meant to snap Dorothy out of her 'suburban neurosis', but they didn't reach her needs. Nora is horrified by the ugliness of the murders; then feels disgusted at her 'over fastidious' self.

While Dr. Rainbow examines her, Nora ponders over his feelings by the river, a small boy of eight in such a state of shock. Although given permission to get up, Nora, feeling weighed down, decides to sleep.

Betty arrives with Mrs. Partridge's embroidery. Nora is amazed by its excellence and beauty. A swirling pattern of celestial bodies, Nora knows that this is her best work. Confronting it disturbs her. She wonders, what she might have achieved if she hadn't met her husband, and what else she may have drawn out of her 'compressed secret life.'

Nora talks of Grace and senses a deeper understanding in Betty than she had previously assumed. Nora's thoughts move from Dorothy and the axe to Belle. She wonders whether the disgust she attributed to Grace was really her own self-disgust. She sleeps and dreams of the cat, bucking and twisting, fighting with the cage, scratching Nora's wrist with her claws. She wakes suddenly, feeling blood everywhere. She can smell it. But the light reveals only sweat.

Nora moves to the kitchen to find Betty's soup and determines that she had enough health to fight the sickness of her mind and body. In the early morning sounds, she imagines she hears her mother's voice. Dr. Rainbow visits again and tells Nora that she is willful like her sister. Nora wonders to the back of the house, through her brother's old bedroom, which has been converted into a sitting room by Grace. Nora is 'insultingly amazed', by the pleasing effect Grace has created.

Nora descends into the back yard, which is green and lush. The large mango tree casts shadows over a white garden seat. Hillocky areas have been created by Grace's work. Her enthusiasm for composting has created a special secret garden, which Nora intends to enjoy. Betty joins Nora. They discuss Grace. She was not happy we learn, having told Betty that she had tried to have faith but only had opinions. Nora is touched by this admission. She decides to live in the back rooms of the house, as Grace had done, sleeping in the glassed-in-room, where at night the visions of the moonlit yard comforted her. She notices the bats at night and birds during the day.

On the advice of Dr. Rainbow, Nora decides to walk to the river, to call upon old Mrs. Partridge and return the embroidery. However, she is disoriented and finds the

neighbourhood all changed, with houses everywhere. Recognising the Custs's big old house, Nora learns that the river is now only accessible in a couple of places. She finds her way slowly back to what she now calls her domain' and decides that there will be no more walking for her. This new period of waiting reminds Nora of her first, in that it too has no panic attached.

She receives the news that Olive Partridge will call on her. Letters come regularly from Hilda and Liza. Nora recognises that they are all storytellers, busily weaving the truthful fictions of their lives from relationships events, and memories, to prepare them for public consumption. Despite pressures from Lyn Wilnot, Nora doesn't intend to saw again. She has made things all her life, and is now intent on wanting to find them; in a show of solidarity with Grace Nora picks up the fight against the neighbour Gary Wilnot, who would have her chop down the mango tree. She declares that this will not happen in her life time.

Sitting in the shadow of the mango tree, Nora is at last conscious that the 'globe of memory' is now spinning freely. She has found the real river, the depths within herself. From the back steps, Nora has a vision of a man in a boater hat approaching. Her young self squeals 'hold me tight', as the arms of the man reach out for her. The face however remains static, as in the photographs of her father, then there flashes in her memory the image of a horse with a nodding plume and her own choking feelings of pain.

Another time, after sitting under the mango tree, Nora remembers from her childhood a black dress being pulled onto her, over her swollen eyes and hears again the step of a horse. The nodding plumes on the horse at her father's funeral flash upon her memory. She hears the voice of the undertaker declaring it a fine ceremony.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

We have given you the summary of the story of Nora Porteous as depicted in the prescribed novel. Now you must analyse it critically.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the turning points in the life of Nora Porteous.
2. Write a note on the character of Nora Porteous.
3. Write the summary of Sections—4.

UNIT 3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Critical Analysis of Section-1
- 3.2 Critical Analysis of Section-2
- 3.3 Critical Analysis of Section-3
- 3.4 Critical Analysis of Section-4
- 3.5 Critical Analysis of Section-5
- 3.6 Critical Analysis of Section-6
- 3.7 Critical Analysis of Section-7
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will critically analyse all the seven sections of the novel.

3.1 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 1

The opening of the novel presents us with what is clearly a 'home coming'. Nora has returned, after a long absence, to her childhood home in suburban Brisbane. We soon realise however that this is no sweet reunion with the beloved place of her childhood. It becomes obvious that Nora's feelings about her childhood home are anything but warm and nostalgic. They are more than slightly ambiguous. Certainly fond memories stir as she looks through the old house, but there is also reluctance, coolness, and a detachment. Nora is, we quickly realise, something of 'an outsider'. She never feels entirely comfortable and 'at home', in her girlhood home. The enthusiasm of Mr. Cust is strangely at odds with Nora's more ironical and detached interior tone - There is an obvious fondness for the nephew Peter in Sydney, but apart from this - Nora seems to be without family. We assume that both her mother and sister Grace have since died and that the house has now become hers - Mr. Cust's continual reference to Nora as Mrs. Roche (which is her maiden name) shows us that the locals still see her as the young woman who left many years ago. For them, Nora's subsequent life is unknown and the woman that she has become no longer fits conveniently into this setting. There is an antagonism, a mild irritation in her feelings towards Jack Cust as he bustles helpfully about her. It is as if his presence is a reminder of the oppressive nature of Nora's girlhood, as yet largely unrevealed to us.

At this point we are introduced to what will be one of the novel's principal themes Nora's search for fulfillment. What triggers her recollection of that buried past of her life is a peep through the glass of the window. The distortions in the glass convert the ordinary Queensland back garden into a magic landscape, one which, as a girl, was the centre of Nora's fantasy life and yearning. We are told that she knew the poetry of Tennyson - the 'Idylls of the King' and 'The Lady of Shalott' - thanks to a book that had belonged to her father. A sensitive, intelligent, imaginative child, Nora found in the Romantic poetry of Tennyson a vision of a world of excitement, love and richness. The 'Lady of Shalott,' which she quotes, recollecting this part of her childhood, has become identified in her mind with these yearnings. The mythic figure of Sir Lancelot, riding past the lonely tower of spell bound Lady seemed a parallel to the lonely girl, 'trapped in her suburban, Antipodean home. The humdrum

existence of Nora's childhood was never good enough for her. She always wanted something better, what she calls a 'Landscape of the mind'. She wanted creativity, intellectual interaction, and excitement. The poem refers to the fabled Camelot, City of King Arthur, Nora, like the Lady of Shalott, wanted to escape from the lonely, arid exile in which she found herself, and make her way to her own 'Camelot'. We may see, as we chart the movements of her life story, that she was always, like the Lady of Shalott, looking for Camelot. First she sought it in the bright lights of Sydney. Later she was to look for it in London. She had as a child glimpsed a magic world beyond the boring existence of her home, and wanted to find it.

What are we to make of the curious scene recollected from the time she was sixteen, when she lay partly undressed on the ground in the moonlight? Certainly we see the emerging eroticism of a young girl. She was, as she admits, yearning for a 'knight in shining armour' - someone to fulfil her dreams of happiness. But there is more than this. It is important to go beyond the obvious sensuality of the scene. She says, and we should note, that she was looking for 'Not only for a lover. I believe I was also trying to match that region of my mind, Camelot'. Later in the same passage she tells us that she was 'in love with beauty'. Nora, like countless others before and after her, wanted more than what her boring environment provides. Her life story is to be dominated by this 'quest' for beauty, magic and romance which she always believed could be found. Was it real? Did she find it? These are the questions which the novel will explore. Note, by the way, that she is not the only character with this sort of yearning. Dorothy Irey seemed to share the same artistic longings and sense of alienation from her native surroundings, and even Olive's mother had an understanding of some of Nora's needs. The group she would later take up with in Sydney, and her friends in London, would also be fellow seekers of beauty and romance.

Nora feels it like an outsider, a type of alien among her friends. The peer group in this pre-war Brisbane eventually rejected Nora, who was ill at ease with the clumsy advances of the boys, and restless and bored with the pursuits of the girls. The irritation that Grace felt for Nora was similar to that of the other girls, who found Nora to be so unlike themselves. The sadness that Nora showed while crying at work one day could easily be explained with the loss of her brother and the other young men at war, but there is also a feeling that it was part of her nature, a form of hysteria of the sort sometimes associated with more artistic temperaments. When the elderly Nora again finds her magical view through the distorted glass in the window, we are reminded of the mind's ability to transform the exterior world in accordance with one's interior landscape. Clearly the needs of this young, artistic girl were not met in her tedious and father - deprived upbringing.

3.2 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 2

Still feeling alienated and despairing, Nora goes into a physical decline, an illness which is obviously real but is caused by psychosomatic factors. In the semi-delirious state in which she finds herself, she begins what is to be a re-examination of her whole life. Pushed by the unconscious forces in her mind, she begins to re-examine things long repressed - what she calls the dark side of the globe of her life.

The party at which Nora met Colin, her husband, is clearly a key scene. The most striking thing however is that it was the older man - Colin's uncle John Porteous - with whom she was suddenly entranced - not Colin - who seemed the man of her dreams. Dark-haired like the mythic Lancelot of 'The Lady of Shalott', he appeared fleetingly in her life, exciting her with dreams. As Colin said, she had 'eyes... only for him.' A retrospective glance tells us that the older man was perhaps the person she should have married. Instead, on the rebound, she got Colin. He pushed himself

forward, courted her, made himself what Nora's mother called 'Prince Charming' although for us the epithet is ironic – he was no such thing. She describes her relationship with Colin as being characterised by 'my determination to be in love with him'. She was very much acting out a pretence of love. The metaphor of entrapment (ref. the Lady of Shalott) is played upon subtly. Colin's mother's house is described by Nora as a place where she would die. Colin hearing Nora's despair, says, 'Dye? ... combing her hair in the mirror' – an obvious echo of the Lady of Shalott. Nora was, in short, the traditional wife, trapped into the habit of a loveless marriage, a modern day equivalent of Tennyson's 'lonely and dispirited heroine'. Colin turned out to be no Knight in shining armour. He was mean, petty, boring, and after wooing Nora and getting her to be his wife, seemed to largely lose interest in her, treating her as a possession and someone to be ordered around at his convenience.

The life in Sydney, however, offered her another chance at 'Camelot'. Her friendship with Ida and Lewie gave her access to the world of art, beauty, far off places – though trapped in an unsatisfying marriage, at least she was able to escape temporarily from her loneliness and boredom into the rich pleasures of friendship with these unconventional, creative and intelligent people. That her husband Colin disapproved of the bohemian lifestyle he associated with Ida and Lewie, and of course specifically with Lewie's homo-sexuality, is predictable. We are not as readers however invited to side with Colin. On the contrary, we can easily see how these entertaining honest and sympathetic people were part of Nora's urge to express herself.

The pressures on women, particularly in those times (i.e. the early 1930's) to play the traditional wife and mother role, and the 'necessity' of having children, are made abundantly clear. Her inability to have a child was a major problem. In a society and time when women were seen in their biological function, the inability to bear children was something of a disaster. In this too she was trapped – trapped within the expectations of the time which she was unable to fulfil.

The move to live with Colin's mother as the Great Depression took hold, was the last straw. Here, in the suburbs, isolated now from her artistic friends, trapped into inactivity, she was truly miserable. Ironically, she seemed to have got over uneasiness with the sexual nature of marriage, only to find her new passion and comfort with her body up against Colin's boorish indifference. There is something pathetic about Nora's attempts to love Colin, only to be greeted by his indifference. By the time we have gone through this section of her recollection, we see that she was indeed trapped in her tower, still yearning for the person and the experiences which will offer what the Knight in the poem offers – a haunting possibility that some day she would find 'Tirra Lirra by the River'

3.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 3

The Great Depression sets the back ground for the 'Chapter' of Nora's recollections. However, although a sense of its devastating effect on other people (including the unfortunate Lewie) is sketched in, we understand that it did not personally affect Colin and Nora very much. Colin remained in employment through out the years of hardship. It did however create the excuse for them to return to live with his mother, the appalling Una, of whom old Nora has been reminded by the tiresome Lyn.

The principal subject of this section is Nora's marriage. To modern readers, it perhaps seems amazing. The idea of an adult woman having no money of her own and being forced to depend utterly on the whims of her husband; of being treated like a child, of being forced into submissiveness if she wanted to get anything (That's the essence of Una's criticism: 'If only you'd learned how to handle him) is shocking. Yet it was a common situation during the period. Society simply expected men to

work and women to be homemakers – with no house of her own, and no children, Nora was without occupation, without value, without meaning. The stultifying effects of this 'patriarchal' system are made painfully clear—Nora's pathetic attempts to get away (as in the lottery fantasy) and her reduction to the role of sneak-thief (because she had no choice) are truly sad.

While Nora is the centre of our attention, we also get the glimpses of other women caught in a similar predicament. Grace's lecture in the letter about 'doing her duty' remind us that acceptance of one's lot in life—however unfulfilling—was the conventional wisdom of the day. The soporific (half-asleep) wives of Colin's social circle are another reminder. And the veiled references to Dorothy's unhappiness are a foretaste of something more sinister to come.

On the sexual front, we may be surprised to see Colin's reaction, Nora had got over her early reluctance about making love (which was a natural reaction to insensitive moves on Colin's part), and had begun to enjoy it. Colin then found her enjoyment disturbing. The old view of women as 'virgin or whore' confronts us. Even sex as a pleasure was taboo. She couldn't win. The antagonism in their marriage inevitably grew. How could a partnership of master and slave be other than torture? Nora resented Colin's control over her, and his insensitivity to her needs. Colin resented Nora's independence and resentment of him. First distance, then hatred. The marriage became a sham. It is almost a relief to us to hear that Colin ended it, though the humiliation of him bringing home another woman, who actually has the audacity to criticise Nora, is yet another insult to her sense of dignity and right to happiness.

3.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 4

Nora's renewed recollections of her past are promoted by Mrs. Cust bringing the sample of her embroidery. Although this might seem just a useful narrative link, in fact, it is very significant. Nora, looking at the embroidery, knows that she was talented, and we should note it too. She had a considerable artistic gift, however, little encouragement she received from her family and others around her. The hostile experiences she has suffered has left her with her a sense of severe self-doubt: yet this essential fact remains, she was an artist, no matter what people thought. Like so many unknown, artists, she was unrecognised and unpraised. It is a difficult and lonely path.

We must also dwell for a moment on the remarkable affair of the divorce settlement. It is made very clear indeed that Nora would have accepted what she was offered by way of a settlement i.e. 300 pounds if she had not been urged, nay, bullied, by the lawyer to take more. We are reminded again of the low self-esteem and lack of expectations which are characteristic of women of her time. Having been pushed into agreeing that more was appropriate in return for her years of servitude - not to mention the psychological abuse - to a man who after all made quite a lot of money. Nora dug her heels in at least for a time. In a show of what she has been so far lacking, she allowed her pride its due: more was appropriate. Yet note how quickly her resolve crumbled when she was subject to the inevitable criticism of those around her (i.e. other women, ironically). These women's voices suggested that, women should not make demands. Women must be content with what they are given. It goes without saying that the author positions us to have an opinion on the fairness (or lack of it) of such assumptions.

Her confrontation with the brutality of a patriarchal society, however, motivated her to make a break. Fearfully but determinedly, Nora embraced freedom, committing herself to her new life, on her own. Later, she was to admit to a 'surge of excitement and strength'. She was belatedly realising she could be independent. The role society dictated for women was not necessarily the only one she need choose to play.

Yet we are reminded again of the appalling restrictions on women in that era when *Ida* replied to Nora's denial that she would ever marry again, 'you will. What else can you do?' We are also reminded of the pathetic and vulnerable situation of a woman who had no independent means of earning a living, having not been brought up to it, nor educated for it.

Her mother and Grace predictably (but incorrectly) saw her act of self assertion and defensive (not to say desperate) gaiety as symptoms of her being depraved. 'Reckless, Cynical Frivolous those were the words they used about me.' The oppression of women in former times did not come from men alone. Quite clearly other women, with passive expectations and traditional thinking were a part of the social apparatus which kept women -like Nora - down.

Failure to meet up with Dorothy, now married to Rainbow, was another of the small losses in Nora's life. It was partly Grace's diapproval not to tell about the way marriage and the conventional domestic life sealed or locked women into a type of isolation - another type of Shalott tower. Perhaps it was Nora's basic insecurity and reluctance to act. Whatever the reason, in hindsight, we suspect that a lack of ability to express her frustration to like-minded people (such as Nora) may have been behind Dorothy's eventual catastrophic breakdown. This brief mention of Dorothy, thin, nervous, obviously ill at ease in her new domestic role, is a fleeting reference to another life which will end up ruined too.

The love affair on the boat going to England might come as a surprise to readers, who by now have got the impression that Nora was, if not 'frigid' as Colin once declared, at least confused and uneasy with her sexual identity. The diagonally opposite is reflected by the ship board romance. She met the unnamed American, got to know him, became his lover, and all with an exhilarating sense of freedom and pleasure. We should not interpret this affair as a careless or immoral indulgence, for there is every indication that Nora was deeply attached to him, and on his part, if he were free, that he would have married her. There was no guilt, no reckless and self-destructive energy about the affair. 'I feel it was precisely the absence of a future together that enabled us to love without cruel possessiveness'. It is almost as if Nora's relations with men had been so soured and become so complicated, that an affair with no strings attached was all she would now allow herself. Shortly after, as we see, she became a lifelong celibate anyway.

The discovery after reaching England that she was pregnant ushered in a new period of pain for Nora. It tells us incidentally that her failure to get pregnant while married to Colin was not, as Colin implied, her fault. Colin in a typically chauvinistic assumption about women, had declared that their inability to have children was Nora's fault. Presumably no man could ever be at fault when it came to conception. The truth is now revealed to be otherwise. It was Colin who was infertile. Perhaps it reflects symbolically too in some way on the loveless nature of the Colin-Nora marriage. No fruit, of that union was produced, perhaps, because there was no genuine love between them.

The issue of abortion bears specific comment. It goes without saying that abortion was illegal in times gone by. It has only in very recent years in Australia (not necessarily elsewhere) become a legally permissible procedure. The time in which this novel was set (i.e. the 1930s) was a time set about with sexual repression of all kinds. Abortion was quite simply beyond the law. That didn't stop abortions happening. It simply meant that they were performed by backyard practitioners or doctors down on their luck, prepared to do the procedure for exorbitant black market fees. Nora, forced to go to one of these people, had to hand over almost all of her divorce settlement. Three hundred pound was a fortune in an era when the weekly wage would have been perhaps six or seven pounds. Worse than that, she was confronted with the moralising attack of the doctor who performed the abortion. In his words we see the all too familiar signs of what has been a well marked strain in

western culture - a fear of women and a dismay at their sexuality. 'You women. You make me sick, the whole rotten lot of you. There is only one sure way to avoid pregnancy, but oh no, you haven't the decency for that'. There were of course few female doctors in the time we are speaking of. It goes without saying that male doctors varied enormously in their attitudes and sympathies. At the very least however it is an ironic and chilling reminder of the patriarchal view of women that this abortionist should take such a high moral stand, equating Nora's extramarital pregnancy with a sinful nature. The irony is that we see Nora as innocent, if somewhat naive, and the abortionist as the truly repulsive individual. Without underlying the point, the author guides us to judgements quite contrary to these reported in the narrative.

In the light of the horrific abortion, which obviously traumatised Nora although she 'toughed it out' and tried to make light of her real feelings, her reluctance about sexuality pushed her into a lifelong vow of abstinence. Can we blame her? She had had a brutal husband, and her only experience of real passion had led to a dreadful abortion. The only man of her own age she seems comfortably able to relate to seem to have been - homosexual (namely Lewie back in Sydney, and it is hinted, David Snow in London). Truly celibacy was the valid option for a women of her time,

Her relationships with other women continued to be somewhat troubled, trying to avoid giving vent to the full force of her despair, she resorted to "flippancy", putting it seems a type of barrier between herself and her potential friends. This has been alluded to in passing with reference to Dorothy. Rainbow, and it seems to be borne out again with Olive. Why the role playing and the defensiveness? There is a remarkably striking quote in the passage involving Olive which sums it up. Olive had been talking about wanting to become simple. Nora replied, "No chance, you'll never be simple, and neither shall I. We both had to start disguising ourselves too early". This goes beyond a simple feminist argument about women in pre-feminist times. It relates also to the predicament in which many sensitive, artistic, individualistic people find themselves - both men and women. Highly intelligent, exotic individuals caught in a conventional milieu (viz., a suburban childhood, a gender stereotyped marriage) are forced into a type of role play. The role play is a defensive reaction. They cannot be themselves, so they must disguise their real nature, seeking solace and fulfilment in secretive ways. This is, Nora's tragedy.

Nora gave up men, spent all her money, learnt to be a dress maker, and finally set up in business on her own. We must remind ourselves that the path ways to higher education and the professions were virtually closed in the period this novel deals with. Nora had therefore found the only 'feminine' profession for which she had aptitude - dressmaking. It is important to note her reaction when the brass sign went up. Although she makes no great show of her relation, it is clear not only in David suggesting opening champagne but in Nora's cryptic comment, 'I have come a long round about way - to find out who I am.' Her profession was more than just a way of making money to live. It was an affirmation of her identity, her personal skill and her right to be taken seriously.

Nonetheless, reading between the lines, we can see that London had turned out to be other than the 'Camelot' which Nora hoped it would be. She now yearned for home - and Sydney in particular. Having in a sense found out who she was and achieved a painful type of peace with herself, she wanted to be where she belonged. Only the intervention of her illness and then world war two prevented her from achieving this modest goal.

3.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 5

The central episode of this section - the long repressed memory of her youthful episodes with Arch Cust - provide new insights into the complex nature of Nora's

personality. We might reasonably summarise the episodes that Nora recollects as her first experience of eroticism. Despite the difference in age, and Nora's complex mixture of feelings (anger and excitement together), it is clear that she found the games played by Arch very stimulating. Though we must be careful in over playing this allusion, there is a clear hint that Arch was another variant on the Lancelot archetype. His dark curls, the intensity of his passion, the sheer excitement of his presence to Nora suggest something very powerful. Nora has suppressed these memories. Why? Presumably because her attitude towards sex and men has become so complex. Adopting a defensive coolness towards every one, in the face of her many disappointments and the harshness of her life, she has also suppressed the sweet moments, the potential that her relationships with men had at various times for fulfilment.

It is no coincidence that her shipboard lover was a man resembling Arch. She always yearned, we may presume, for a man of passion who would get beyond her defenses, as Arch did, and come close to arousing the sensual Nora hidden inside the fearful and awkward Nora. It is also no coincidence that we learn, somewhat – poignantly, that Arch too harboured a passion for Nora. Later in life, he married a girl who almost exactly resembled the Nora of his youth, and then his passion was fulfilled in a happy marriage. We cannot help contrasting Arch's eventual happiness with Nora's continuing isolation from men and others.

3.6 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION 6

Nora's discovery of her father's photograph is the beginning of what will be another quite important element in the buried labyrinth of her personality. We learn that he died when she was six years old, and that her grief was 'excessive'. That she has no memory at all of her father or indeed of the grief is in itself an indication that the pain involved was so profound that she had buried the whole experience. We are given another clue to Nora's whole life long stratagem of repression and 'soldiering on'. It also perhaps works to explain her troubled relationships with men. Not having a father during her formative years could only have distorted her understanding of the opposite sex.

The news of Dorothy's suicide confirms that we had probably begun to suspect. The signs had been there already of a profound unhappiness in Dorothy, an isolation and a bitter acceptance of the lot that fate has cast her. Now we know that she ended her own life in despair.

In this incident of Dorothy's suicide, there is a parallel between Dorothy and Nora. We simultaneously learn that Nora herself tried to end her life, with sleeping tablets. Why? In Nora's case a sense of horror – the knowledge that she was losing all that made her life meaningful – her looks, her ability to attract men, her youth, and her child bearing potential. Since, particularly in the time referred to, such things were the core of a woman's identity, the gradual loss of them could plunge such a person into deep despair, what else had she to hope for in the traditional scheme of a woman's life? Her despair was exacerbated by her isolation and her long habit of repressing her emotions. This is exemplified most obviously in the scene where she realised that the face lift had failed. (Please note that the face lift by the way is really another form of 'disguise'). She knew that the doctor was faking enthusiasm and optimism. Yet she said nothing except to politely thank him. She had kept her emotions under control for so long that her only recourse in her loneliness and despair was to attempt suicide.

This is the low point of the whole novel, and it is thematically very important. While Anderson does not tediously underline the point, she had made it very clear deal to do with her entrapment within traditional female expectations. Like her actress friend

Hilda, Nora depended upon her appearance. When, to the disappointment of a failed marriage, lack of children and a career which was enough to keep her alive but little more, she added the dread of losing her appearance, her 'femininity' – she had nowhere else to go. We cannot help but feel but strongly for her predicament, which is in many ways an emblematic or typical one for women.

The fortuitous meeting with Hilda, and the opportunity that arose to become a theatrical dressmaker and designer, saw Nora move into a new phase of contentment and happiness. Her personal life, paralleling her professional life, moved into a phase of friendship. The solace offered her by Hilda, Liza and Fred was important: we understand this to be a period of stability and relative fulfilment in her otherwise somewhat bleak life. But even this period of relative contentment was cut short when Fred declined into mental illness. It is probably not appropriate to look too far into Fred's mental breakdown for sides of an underlying feminist message. Certainly he was a homosexual (please remember: we are told he is another Lewie) and there was a misogynist (i.e. women hating) streak in Fred but he is not presented as a caricature of male grossness. He is yet another of the sad people with whom Nora's life seems to be filled. The real trauma for her was not what Fred said in his madness but the splitting up of the support group, the all important friendship that Nora had enjoyed with her London friends for many years. The heartbreaking situation involving the cat was just the last straw. We now know why Nora has a scratch on her arm. It is real enough, but also somehow symbolic of another loss in her life. Homeless again, Nora returned to Australia. By now however she was not seeking Camelot, she was vaguely, unhopefully perhaps, looking for somewhere to call home.

3.7 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SECTION-7

Now an old woman, Nora is making her peace bit by bit with the formerly repressed parts of her life. She is facing truths, and accepting reality, both in her own life and that of others she has known.

Some of the things she confronts are deeply painful. The news that Dorothy Rainbow murdered all her family except the obviously traumatised Gordon, is a bitter discovery. It is worth noting Nora's remark about Dorothy possibly would not have done it if the others in her community had understood her better. 'If one of you had [understood her], she may not have done it'. This links quite obviously to the broader theme of people, particularly women, being repressed into roles that do not suit their individual nature. The dreaming recollections of Dorothy's terrible and merge with Nora's guilt over the cat belle, and her remembered horror at the abortion. Walking from her nightmare sweating, she imagines she is bathed in blood. This old guilt of the baby she lost, is another of the things she is trying to reconcile herself to.

Reconciliation also takes the form of accepting, finally, the other members of her family. Wandering through the old house, sleeping in Grace's glassed-in-room, and sitting reflecting in Grace's garden, she is in effect integrating those who are close to her – her mother, her dead brother, and Grace, Grace, whom Nora had despised as a girl, is now accepted back into her heart. 'Forgiveness' has its part in healing too.

The final integration is the most painful of all. Having set out on a course of recognising the dark side of her life, the fears and repressions, she finally comes to the childhood terror which perhaps must have initiated her life of defensiveness and isolation. What she remembers is her father picking her up and loving her, but we understand that it was the loss of that love which crippled her at an early age. Though now an old woman, her sudden recollection of the image of her father and the cry 'Hold me tight!', we recognise as the cry of a child wanting to be loved and protected. That she was forced when so young and vulnerable to endure the trauma of the death of her beloved father goes a long way to explain the person she became

in the end, after a life time of wandering of searching for 'Camelot' of being homeless and alone., Nora now has returned to her real home and found a kind of peace. It is the peace of final acceptance. She knows now that she was artistic, her life was worthwhile, did experience love— however difficult it might be— and that she has a place to call her own. As she waits for death (the final wait to which she alludes) it is with a sense of new calm. The book ends with the traumatic reference to her father's death, but it is almost as if she is fully alive for the first time. Accepting the pain of that experience together with the pain of her life and of others around her, she is finally coming to terms with the things as they really are. Now the metaphoric ball of memory spins freely. Nothing is hidden. Nothing is suppressed. All of her life, pleasures and pain, is integrated and she is at peace.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

We have critically analysed all the sections of the novel for your benefit. Please try to analyse the critical analysis done in this unit and sharpen your analytical skills.

3.9 QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the structure of the novel.
2. Discuss the climax and the denouement of the prescribed novel.
3. Discuss the opening section of the novel.

UNIT 4 CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Structures

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Main Characters
 - 4.1.1 Nora Roche Porteous
 - 4.1.2 Colin Porteous
 - 4.1.3 Grace Roche
 - 4.1.4 Dorothy Irey Rainbow
- 4.2 Minor Characters
 - 4.2.1 Olive Partridge
 - 4.2.2 Arch Cust
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- 4.3 Major Themes
 - 4.3.1 The Opression of Women
 - 4.3.2 The Search for Camelot
 - 4.3.3 Trauma, Grief, and Breakdown
 - 4.3.4 Role Playing and the Pressure to Confirm
 - 4.3.5 A Portrait of the Artist
 - 4.3.6 The Search for 'Home'
- 4.4 What do the Critics Say
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will analyse the major characters as well as the minor characters. Also, we will discuss the important themes in the novel.

4.1 MAIN CHARACTERS

4.1.1 Nora Roche Porteous

The Lady of Shalott is Jassica Anderson's key metaphor for Nora. If we examine the portrait of the lady we discover the following aspects of her nature: she is an artist, a weaver, a maker of beautiful tapestries; she is a beautiful woman capable of love, but cursed never to find it; and she is locked in a tower from which she cannot escape except into a type of death.

All these qualities apply quite plainly to the character of Nora. She is indeed an artist, who looks at life, and means what she sees into the art which is one of her main reasons for living. She is 'cursed', forced to search in vain for love. The loss of her father at an early age goes a long way to explain what is wrong with Nora. The men in her life are in a sense reflections of her dead father. Because of this loss she has taken refuge in detachment and stoicism. In consequence all her relationships are difficult ones. She is fated never to find true passion and fulfilment of love despite the fact that searching for love and acceptance is one of her primary needs. And she is locked in a tower. What's the tower? It is conformity, it is marriage, it is marriage, it is grief; it is the restriction of self.

There is one aspect however in which Nora is not like the Lady of Shalott. The lady leaves the tower in search of love and dies. Nora does not die. She survives. She learns to endure, she learns to detach herself from pain and she learns that life, like the river, goes on. Unlike the fated Lady of Tennyson's poem, Nora is not finally a tragic victim. Her life is sad, there is no question. But she is a survivor. Like many

other people, she endures and acquires wisdom. A bitter wisdom perhaps, although tinged with forgiveness and the fondness of memory.

Character

4.1.2 Colin Porteous

Colin is not an attractive character. Mean, self-centred, he treated Nora as a possession, even a prisoner (Is he the owner of the tower?) He expected her to dote on him like her mother. There is nothing deeply evil or out of the ordinary about Colin. He simply represents the forces of smug conformity, the dead hand of patriarchal chauvinism and the crushing nature of mindless, insensitive conformity.

4.1.3 Grace Roche

On the surface Grace was the absolute conformist - a good christian, a good daughter, a good wife and mother. She seems to have had the conventional happy life that Nora never found.

Yet there are hints that deep down Grace was not happy. We know that the young man she loved died in the war, and that she married (Note that it is hinted) as a matter of convention. She was deeply disturbed by the tragic end of Dorothy, but there are hints that her doubt went beyond that. May be playing the role that she had assigned herself as the older daughter, the role that so irritated Nora, was not without its restrictions and irritations for Grace. There is a bit of a clue in the garden which Grace cultivated so passionately in the backyard. In a sense Grace had a 'secret life' to, though a less dramatic one than Nora. The garden was an expression of her creativity, her attempt to find beauty and peace in a less than completely fulfilling life. Like Nora, we should not judge Grace harshly. She suffered in her own way.

4.1.4 Dorothy Irey Rainbow

Dorothy was exotic in appearance, probably artistic and creative. She was 'different' This is expressed most clearly in the symbolically restless walking she did (Like Nora) like other characters referred to in the novel, she was locked into a conformist suburban lifestyle, 1930s style. The tension between her restless inner nature and the deprivations of her life, which found expression first in a nervous breakdown, and finally in the homicidal explosion that led to her own death, argue much about the problem of oppression.

4.2 MINOR CHARACTORS

4.2.1 Olive Partridge

Olive is parallel with Nora, though more successful and seemingly more contented. Of course, she inherited money at the age of 25, allowing her to experience greater 'freedom.' Perhaps Olive had more drive than Nora, or was simply luckier. In both her writing and her marriage, Olive found, we assume, her own version of Camelot, a relative satisfaction which made Nora's frustration all the harder to bear.

4.2.2 Arch Cust

Arch is a curious character, apparently peripheral but in fact close to the centre of what is wrong with Nora. He is wild, passionate, full of joie de vivre, he has satyr-like qualities and earthly eroticism. Yet, with Arch, sex is not predatory so much as game like. Though Nora was forced to reject Arch's advances, he is the closest she ever came to tender passion (except for the unnamed American on the ship). The moment when he put his head on her breast and she stroked his curls is as near as we get to Nora finding physical pleasure with another person. That Arch followed a sort

The fact that she finally went completely insane and murdered her family, may seem a dramatic development, but it cannot help but remind us of the dangers of repressing people's inner nature.

4.3.2 The Search for 'Camelot'

'Kneeling in that chair, I was scarcely present at all. My other landscape has absorbed me... I already had my Camelot... Because that landscape had become a region of my mind.'

The very pointed reference to 'The Lady of Shalott', early in the book, and repeated references to Camelot throughout the narrative, leave us in no doubt about this theme. Everyone knows about King Arthur and his legendary castle. For hundreds of years, particularly in the English speaking world, Camelot has represented the notion of an ideal or perfect world. Nora, like most people wished for the ideal. Her story is to some extent an attempt to journey down the river towards Camelot. What then was Camelot for her?

It might be taken perhaps in two primary senses. The most obvious is the emotional dimension. Nora's desire to be loved, the equivalent of the Lady's passion for Sir Lancelot runs through in her life. There was firstly the fleeting glimpse in some party of John Porteous, the dark older man who looked like her ideal, and whose image stirred her. There was Arch, the passionate younger man whom she may not have rejected if he hadn't been so young, and she so embarrassed at the nature of her response. There was the American who reminded her of Arch, with whom she had a passionate but brief affair on the ship going to England. All of them in some way were echoes or reflections it seems of her dead father. We are not hypothesising here an erotic component or anything Freudian - merely the normal desire for *unconditional love*, provided (we assume) during her childhood by her father (Note: 'Hold me tight'), and then never again by anyone else. There were false Lancelots along the way, particularly the regrettable Colin, who offered himself as a 'Prince charming, Nora's fate, like the unfortunate Lady to whom we see so many references, was to never find the true love she so yearned for. Emotional fulfilment eluded her. She was forced to compensate - finding solace in friendship and in the pleasures of being with her young nephew Peter.

The other major dimension of the Camelot quest is a suitable career. Nora was convinced, no doubt rightly, that suburban Brisbane was not the place for her. She desired to go to Sydney, the glittering southern capital which might, she thought, represent her Camelot. Indelibly soured by her failed marriage to Colin, Sydney turned out not to be Camelot after all. There is a strong hint that London then became the new Camelot, the place onto which she projected her aspirations and fantasies. In due course London revealed its reality as less than ideal. At that point, just before the war intervened and prevented her from returning to Australia, Nora had realised that London was not Camelot either.

Her desire for a glamorous and exciting career was itself a search for fulfilment. In this she had at least partial success, though overlaid by her characteristic self-doubt. She did turn out to be a first rate dressmaker and clothing designer, and fulfilled her artistic potential. Though she later decries these accomplishments, we see that at least in one thing she did find the fulfilment she wished for. Overall, the novel's message is a rather bleak one, if Nora is taken as any sort of representation. The idea, it argues, does not exist. Life is a series of compromises, of adjustments, of accepting whatever is possible, and gradually perhaps losing sight of the ideal.

4.3.3 Trauma, Grief and Breakdown

If we look at 'The Lady of Shalott' once again, perhaps the most notable thing about

fatal glimpse of Lancelot, and then chooses real death as her only way out. *Tirra Lirra by the River* too is very much a novel about grief, loss, an existence seemingly cursed. It goes beyond mere day to day unhappiness. Several characters have complete mental breakdowns. Dorothy goes completely wild, killing her family and then herself. Fred becomes totally paranoid and has to be committed to an institution. Nora herself gets so close to despair that she attempts suicide. Gordon Rainbow, the traumatised survivor of the Dorothy tragedy, has clearly become a shell of a man, one who just endures. In fact, the book reminds us very much of how close break down is to all of us, given certain precipitating circumstances.

What is the problem with Nora? Clearly the loss of her father – so painful that she represses it until the very last moment, when, as an old woman, she finally sees the moment of happiness when her father was still alive, and then almost immediately the grief of realising that he had died – is integral to her lifetime of unhappiness. The trauma of losing a beloved father at an early age has initiated her lifetime of repression and detachment. She endures, but the grief, which has never been dealt with adequately, sours her relationships with other people, preventing her from obtaining the emotional fulfilment she so desires. To add to her misery, life provides more traumas after the initial one. Her unhappy marriage to Colin, her near fatal abortion, her bouts of illness, her loss of youth and beauty, the botched facelift – all chip away at her ability to cope, and the final one leads her to attempt suicide.

Yet, she is pulled back from the brink. The fortuitous intervention of Hilda and the job which gives Nora at least partial satisfaction, the finding of fellow spirits in the people at No.6, keep her going. Later, as an old woman back in Australia, she begins to go over her life again and, the novel seems to argue, allowing the traumas up out of the shadows of her past is itself part of the healing process. Remember the metaphor of the many-faceted ball spinning. By allowing the 'dark-side' of the ball to turn towards her and dealing with the pain of those memories, she gradually gets better.

Psychologists argues that repression is not a workable strategy. A person needs to go through the experience of grief, accepting the sufferings as part of the penalty for eventual healing. The famous psychoanalyst Jung argued that people had a 'shadow side, a hidden part of their personality, which they attempt to repress at their peril. Nora, when old, allows the shadow side to accept what really happened, including finally the ultimate trauma of the long repressed memory of her father's death. At this point she passes beyond breakdown and grief and into the calmer state of acceptance. Thus the novel argues in favour of the possibility for rehabilitation and the attainment of peace.

4.3.4 Role Playing and the Pressure to Confirm

You'll never be simple and neither shall I. We both had to start disguising ourselves too early.'

These words, said by Nora to Olive, tell us something quite central to an understanding of the novel. It goes beyond the bald feminist argument alluded to above. This issue has less to do with gender than with the inevitable conflict in human society between those who conform to society's expectations, following the accepted routes and role behaviour, and those individualists who want to do their own way. Nora admits at another point in the book of a 'secret life'. She is one of those people who doesn't want to do what her mother and husband and social milieu dictate. She wants to do her own thing. She is an individualist in a conformist world

Yet the penalty of nonconformity is high. Not to accept being a wife and mother in a chauvinistic time is to court irritation and angst. To want a career of one's own when most of one's peers are expected to play a domestic role, causes real conflict, even in her own family. To want to mix with people, considered socially undesirable (like the unfortunate Lewie) is to invite criticism. To flaunt the codes of sexual morality,

as she does in her shipboard romance, with its unfortunate result, is to fly in the face of social approval. Throughout her life, Nora faces criticism for simply wanting to do things *her* way and be herself. Her remark when after the attempted suicide, she is taken by Hilda and the others at No.6 is a reminder of how little she came to expect: 'I had fallen among people who would accept me for what I was.' It has been a rare experience to be thus accepted. Only with her mother and sister gone, now a very old woman, back in the empty house of her childhood, is she able to feel beyond reproach, to find a type of acceptance. The novel is set in a period when pluralism (i.e. the idea of different styles of behaviour and living) was not an accepted assumption as it is in these more tolerant times.

Nonetheless, Nora's predicament has not entirely dated. People are still generally intolerant of those who are 'different' for whatever reason: marital arrangements, sexual preference, personal eccentricities. Society still lays down accepted patterns and paths, which most follow easily, but which a few individuals challenge, at their peril. The pain of Nora's life is to some extent the pain of someone trying to follow her own intentions, and fighting off the pressure to conform.

4.3.5 A Portrait of the Artist

As a young girl, Nora was intrigued by the pictures she imagined through the distorting glass of the window. She devoured the rich literature of her father. She fantasised. The pressures of ordinary suburban domestic life attempted to force her into a conventional mould, but Nora continually attempted to break out. She didn't want to be a silent witness to other people's lives. She had something inside her which yearns to be expressed. This something can be defined in a sense as her inner creativity. Like the Lady of Shalott, who weaves the tapestries, representing the things she sees in her mirror reflecting the real world outside her tower, many artists spin their art out of themselves. Nora, like other creative people, wished to say something, to make something beautiful.

She is not alone in this. Other artists referred to in the novel include Olive (the novelist), Lewie (the painter), Ida (the dressmaker), Hilda (the actress), the unnamed watercolourist and even, if we are to read into her some untapped potential, Dorothy Rainbow. What almost all of them have in common is the *difficulty* of being an artist. The pain of being 'different', the difficulty of functioning smoothly in a conformist world, the hard and long search for an individual pathway, the nagging self-doubt – all of these are explored in the portrait of Nora and the others. The consolation however is of knowing that they have created something worthwhile. When old Nora looks somewhat reluctantly at the embroideries that she created when young, she understands with a shock that she was indeed good. Sometimes this is the only recognition an artist may get in his or her lifetime. But it is the knowledge that keeps the artist going. Pain, self-doubt, occasional glimpses of how worthwhile the struggle is – these are the variations Anderson seems to offer on the theme of being an artist.

4.3.6 The Search for 'Home'

The old folksaying has it that 'Home is where the heart is'. Nora spent much of her life looking for home. She was constantly aware of being displaced, in transit, homeless. The irony is that she rejected her own home, her childhood home, in the urge to find herself and her Camelot. Yet it is to her childhood home that she finally returns, having understood that the false or illusory Camelots she has been pursuing are just that – illusions.

Where is Nora's heart? Perhaps we understand from the final scene that her heart was with her family. Her tortuous relationship with her mother and sister is finally resolved through the forgiveness of old age and understanding. The long buried pain of the loss of her father is finally allowed out into the light of understanding. Sitting in Grace's lush garden, recollecting how much she loved her father, belatedly give

Nora a sort of peace. Home is indeed where one finds contentment and a sense of belonging.

4.4 WHAT DO THE CRITICS SAY?

Tirra Lirra by the River is rather an arch title for a novel of some genuine charm, emotion and gentle revelation of character.

Jessica Anderson writes sensitively, with a real understanding of the things that hurt people.

Mostly her people are hurt, not often overjoyed. Her tone is reflective, simple and warm. She can touch us with sudden images of what it must feel like for a woman to have an abortion or to lose a husband or a friend or a beloved cat.

Her central woman, Nora Porteous, coming back to a country Australian life after a long stay in England, looks back from old womanhood to herself as a child, a wife and a lonely spirit in Brisbane, Sydney and London.

Her moods, relationships and minor tragedies and joys are shown to us with humour, skill and in depth. (John Miles, 'Reality vs. Romance', *The Advertiser*, October 7, 1978).

There is a peculiarly English quality about Jessica Anderson's excellent Australian novel.

Tirra Lirra by the River almost reeks of English middle-class sensibility of novelists from Jane Austen through E.M. Forster... to L.P. Hartley... it has an awareness of the nuances of class and personal relationships, appreciates the importance of the apparently trivial and is imbued with a gentle sense of comedy rather than distinguished by sharp displays of wit.

But it has a strongly Australian flavour as well. This goes far beyond the superficiality of references of mango trees in Brisbane and descriptions of Bohemian life in Sydney between the wars. Although Jessica Anderson is writing, in a rather old-fashioned way, within the traditional mainstream of an English style of fiction, her characters are distinctly Australian and this story (apart from a brief excursion overseas) is planted firmly in their country.

All the standard ingredients are here - baffled dreams of puberty, the failure of a marriage built on romance and sullied by emotional and intellectual antipathy, the brief on the rebound affair, the search for an accommodation between the desire for independence and the instinct for commitment to other people, and the reluctant recognition that in old age... happiness probably depends on a reappraisal of the past.

Anderson says much about all these things, by implication and inference rather than through direct statement. The journey over familiar territory is made with considerable originality.

(Neil Jillett, *The Age*, September 30, 1978)

Tirra Lirra by the River is a polished piece of work that exhibits great subtlety in characterisation and structure. The two stories: Nora as an old woman returning to the tower of her youth, and all it represents to her, and the idealistic young Nora departing from it, are skilfully balanced. There are no chapters as such, but seven sections, each a day in the life of the old lady, which adds weight to the idea of the diary. Each section commences with life the present, with the old lady arriving back,

meeting the neighbours, falling ill, being nursed back to health, and so on, and each fresh experience jogs her memory and propels her back into the past.

If *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a study of a mind haunted by a failed life. [Its], view is finely drawn, the emotional landscapes meticulously rendered. Again one is reminded of the young Nora and her painstaking.....

Tirra Lirra by the River is very much a mood piece that takes great delight in resurrecting the past, and shows great skill in evoking atmosphere. I found it a joy to read, and re-read; it pursues well-worn themes with honesty, sensitivity, and insight.

(Clifford Hanna, 'Camelot between the Wars', in
Southerly, Vol.40, No.3, September, 1980).

Jessica Anderson is an Australian novelist who writes with considerable poetic intensity. In *Tirra Lirra by the River*, her talent shows in the sensibility of its elderly Australian heroine, Nora Porteous. Its title is from Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott.' In the poem, the Lady of Shalott is cursed, so that if she looks on reality some terrible fate will befall her. She sits by her mirror and weaves pictures in cloth from the reflections of life, going on in Camelot outside her window.

There is no self-pity in Nora's story. She is a brave, interesting and resilient heroine whose strong sense of herself is never seriously under threat. She simply wishes to discover where she missed Sir Lancelot.

The Australian part of the novel works best. Miss Anderson's knowledge and feeling for the small town and Sydney give depth and conviction to the characters and the times. London seems shadowy in comparison. Nora's experiences in England are less immediate and involving, and the English characters are not so strongly delineated. The relationship between Nora and her three London friends is not very convincingly portrayed. However, the clash of Nora's youth and old age in Australia is sufficiently absorbing for this not to matter much. *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a very short and beautifully written novel.

(Harriet Waugh, 'Living without Lancelot', in
New York Times Book Review, February 19, 1984)

A layer of sadness sits on (*Tirra Lirra by the River*) like a fine powder; though the plot is sentimental, its emotional grip is hard to shake off. Nora's story – the sensitive housewife oppressed by society and circumstance – is, admittedly, a tired theme, but Jessica Anderson is a graceful storyteller with the rare and quirky ability to transcend platitudes through the emotional fidelity of her writing. A best-selling author in her native Australia, her prose is lean, intense, and clear. The perspective of an old woman, at the end of her life, with no time to change things but the will to resolve them, is cathartic: it makes a lasting impact.

(Rona Berg, in a review of *Tirra Lirra by the River*, in
The Village Voice, Vol XXIX, No.21, May 22, 1984)

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have analysed the major characters as well as minor characters. Also, we have discussed the major themes like 'The Oppression of Women' and 'The Search for Camelot'. We have also given you the comments of a few critics.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the characters of Nora Porteous.
2. Discuss the role played by the minor characters.
3. Do you think 'the oppression of women' is the main theme in the novel. Discuss it with appropriate examples from the novel.
4. "*Tirra Lirra* is essentially a portrait of the artist" - Discuss

UNIT 5 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Narrative in the Mirror
- 5.3 Aspects of Narrative Form
- 5.4 The present, the past, and the story
- 5.5 The Telling of the Story: Some more aspects
- 5.6 The 'Other': A Perspective
- 5.7 Important Images
- 5.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.9 Questions
- 5.10 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will examine the narrative processes employed by the novelist. As was pointed out earlier, in literature the mode of presentation of the narrative is of central importance. Through this unit we will examine the narrative techniques used by Anderson to achieve the optimum effect.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Since literature and ideology are very closely associated, any challenge to dominant ideologies or presentation of alternative ideologies is bound to be reflected in literature. The questions of women and the representation of women in cultural apparatuses have been discussed and debated throughout the century. *Tirra Lirra*, through employing new techniques of presentation questions the monolithic approach to women in literature. Anderson actively participates in the process of finding new ways of constructing and representing female subjectivity.

Literary texts are intentionally and meticulously constructed systems. Hence, it is crucial to understand the impact created by a particular narrative. It is important to construct and understand absences in narratives – the narratives that could have been. Since the writer chose a particular narrative over others, that choice has to be understood in its context. Particular attention needs to be given to the elements such as the point(s) of view in the narrative, the relations among story, the teller and the audience. The historical coordinates often play a very major role in influencing the shape, content, and impact of narratives.

5.2 NARRATIVE IN THE MIRROR

The narrative of Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River* has an interesting generic history; it started as a short story, was then written as a radio play, and finally published as a novel in 1978. You may imagine the kinds of changes Jessica Anderson had to make in order to translate her story from one genre to another. What sorts of elaboration does the novel form allow which a short story cannot accommodate? What would be the balance between the narration and dialogue in a

radio play? A film version of *Tirra Lirra* is apparently also planned. How would you tell Nora Porteous's story in a visual medium?

The following discussion will assume that you have read the novel. If you have not, you should do so now. Take notes as you read, and pay particular attention to the following aspects of the text.

- narrative form (point of view, positioning of the reader, chronology) and the importance of formal features in shaping the meaning of the story;
- intertextuality (in particular, you should consider the relationship between Anderson's book and Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shalott', from which the title is taken, together with another, and very different text also based on Tennyson's, Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'The Gentleman of Shalott');
- What this novel has to say about themes that were highlighted in the preceding discussion of a number of Australian short stories? viz. suburban values and their impact, for example, or the roles of women in Australian society); and
- The role of memory; and of story telling, in shaping our perceptions of the past.

5.3 ASPECTS NARRATIVE FORM

Early in the novel we come across the following passage:

"Where do you want them Mrs. Porteous?"
'Just there, thank you, Mr. Cust'
His anxiety changes to indignation.
'But the front bed room's all fixed up for you.'
'Then please, put everything in there'
He does. He does that. And at last he does.

It is wonderful to stop smiling. I feel that ever since setting foot in Australia I have been smiling, and saying, 'Thank you' and 'So kind'. I have one rather contemptible characteristic. In fact, I have many. But never mind the others now. The one I am talking about is my tendency to be a bit of a toady. Whenever I am in an insecure position, that is what happens. I massage the smile from my face by pressing the flesh with my finger tips, over and over again, as I used to do when I had that face lift, all those years ago. I long more than ever for that hat bath, but am too tired to move. I am troubled too, by guilt, because I was irritable with Jack Cust, who was so kind. I shut my eyes, and when, after a few minutes, I open them again, I find myself looking through the glass on to a miniature landscape of mountains and valleys with a tiny castle, weird and ruined, set as one slope.

In its effect, the passage is immediate and very particular but the pertinent question is: **who is telling this, how and to whom**. There are three voices present: the slightly formal polite voices of Mr. Cust and Mrs. Porteous in conversation, and the third 'voice' which one identifies as the 'private' thoughts of Mrs. Porteous through which the episode is told. The narrator appears to be represented as thinking (and therefore no one is being addressed), yet the style of writing adopted by Anderson is conversational, as if the narrator were aware of an audience and offering intimate and confidential explanations of her behaviour: 'But never mind the others now. The one I am talking about is...'

The teller, or narrator of *Tirra Lirra* is the novel's central character, Nora Porteous, her first-person narrative is 'internal' and confidential. And while there is no identified narratee in the story, its intimate tone invites the reader (who is reading, of

course, not listening) to assume the role of Nora's audience, perhaps even with the sense of inhabiting Nora's mind, of seeing her life the way she sees it, remembering its past, and experiencing its present. You may want to compare Anderson's use of first person narrative here with other, and very different types of 'voices' created for such narrators: Holden Caulfield, in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye* gives a strong impression of speaking in his narrative, whereas Pip's story in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, has more of a written quality. Consider, in each of these cases how the narrative mode positions the reader in relation to the events of the story. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator, Marlow, is telling his story to a small group of friends on a ship. How does the presence of actual narratees in the story itself affect the responses of the reader? I have given you some questions to ponder over. Give a thought and get back to the next section.

5.4 THE PRESENT, THE PAST, AND THE STORY

The narration of *Tirra Lirra* takes place in two main time frames. There is the virtual present, narrated in the present tense as if Nora were not constructing her own story, but merely experiencing it as it unfolds. It is this time frame in particular which creates the sense of direct, unmediated experience, and therefore the illusion of authenticity. This virtual present covers the period (probably a few weeks) of Nora's illness and slow recovery. Here you may give a thought to the issue of her illness affecting her narration. Then there is the narration of her earlier life in the past tense, told as a series of retrospectives, or as memories triggered more often than not by skips or 'accidental spins' of the globe that is her image of memory. Yet her recall does not have the random, fragmented character of memory; it constitutes a much more conventional narrative interspersed with that of the present. This past covers more than sixty years of Nora's life, from the brief glimpse of her father, who died when she was six, through to the present, when she returns to her childhood home in Brisbane a woman in her seventies. The ordering of the remembered past is not quite chronological; the novel ends on Nora's recovery of a vision which has been repressed but which has haunted her all her life her father's funeral

Of course, this juggling between Nora's various voices and perspectives, and between the present and different moments in a remembered past does not exist as a mere showcase for Jessica Anderson's mastery of narrative technique, nor is the impression of 'authenticity' its only effect: its purpose is ultimately dramatic. It explores the workings of memory, and the ways that memory constructs (through omission and rearrangement) a sense of self. A new significance is thrown on the past through the experience of the present and vice versa. Events widely separated in time and place are brought together in conjunction that throw a new light on both, revealing to the reader, and to Nora herself, hidden patterns and meanings in her life. Each section of the novel – you remember, there are seven sections in all – has a similar structure, each being a miniature narrative in itself, beginning in the present then moving to a linked episode or sequence from the past. There is always a causal link. And each finishes at a satisfactory 'end', even where the endings are abrupt, they are never cut off or interrupted. Taken together too, the memories with some exception form a straightforward chronology of Nora's past life. The exceptions include two memories that are buried or repressed (please note that the novel does invite such psychological interpretation) and are only slowly brought to light and faced; Nora's confused sexual responses to the thirteen year old Arch Cust and her grief at the death of her father.

Within the fiction, Nora is herself aware that memory is a major subject of her story. Quite early in her narrative (please see p.25), she offers an image of her memory (or 'past life') as a spinning globe in her head which always presents a bright face to her

view; but which has a dark, rather, concealed side. She contrasts this with other more fixed or linear views (or stories) of the past:

“Liza used to say that she saw her past life as a string of roughly – graded beads, and so did Hilda have a linear conception of hers, thinking of it as a track with detours”

Nora’s globe - which with its light and dance sides is psychologically and narratively more interesting is something over which she exerts a form of control: images may be summed up, manipulated and even edited so as to reflect a chosen truth. And yet she must be vigilant in anticipating those involuntary spins of the globe outside her control.

This globe, will spin in response to a deliberate or an accidental flick. The deliberate turns are meant to keep it in a soothing half-spin with certain chosen parts to the light, but I am not an utter coward, and I don’t mind inspecting some of the dark patches now and again. Only I like to manipulate the globe myself. I don’t like those accidental flicks. In fact, there are some that I positively dread, and if I see one of these coming I rush to fore stall it, forcing the globe to steadiness so that once more it faces the right way.”

As a creative writer might do, Nora values the deliberate manipulation of her memory so that she can examine coolly, reshape, and evaluate the images of the past.

Now, here are a questions for you to ponder over and come out with answers.

- i) To what extent do you consider the spinning globe is a useful metaphor for the way that the author herself constructs the novel?
- ii) The story of Nora’s early married life is told through a series of brief overlapping episodes, in a dramatic, almost abbreviated style – why is this so?
- iii) Certain events of the past are delayed by the narrative. For example, the sudden flash of memory which brings back Arch Crust, Nora’s little Arcadian lover’, brings past and present into a new juxtaposition. Why do you think, Nora has ‘forgotten’ about the episode, and why does it appear when it does, in her memory and in the novel? What light does it throw on the theme of unfulfilled sexuality?
- iv) The full story of Dorothy Rainbow (which was mysteriously withheld for so long, then, when told, understated) ushers in the last sequence of the novel. Why is it delayed? Why is it linked to the return to Nora of the best of her embroideries?

5.5 THE TELLING OF THE STORY : SOME MORE ASPECTS

In this section we reiterate some of the points mentioned earlier. In distance education, repetition is meant for reinforcement.

Anderson uses a narrator to address the readers. Nora Porteous, an old woman recounts some of her past experiences (importantly, only to herself) on her return to her childhood home. The readers are then eavesdroppers and are made aware of the private nature of Nora’s experience. She recollects incidents that she has not even shared with her close friends in number six. She even pretends that she does not remember some events from her past (the Arch incident, for example). Anderson cleverly posits the truth value of the narrative by excluding some instances from the

other characters in the novel. The reader is thus involved in the process or the retrieval of a self-presentation of a public self under the guise of a private self.

The novel begins with Nora's arrival at her childhood home. Realizing her mortality Nora desires to reconstruct and understand her past. Her return is not just to her home but also to her self. Anderson uses multiple orientation to establish the unstable nature of subjectivity. Nora remembers some incidents and presents them through the eyes of a younger Nora. This presents the incidents at two removes from reality. However, even more interesting is her memories of her presentations for her friends at No 6. The real experience has got so entangled with the imagined that even Nora herself is unable to distinguish between the two. Anderson poses the important question of the nature of reality. If reality is subjective then all that Nora remembers is "real" for her and nothing else matters: Is there no reality beyond her memory?

Nora uses words used by other characters in her presentation of the narrative. Her mother's, sister's, husband's, and mother-in-law's words come back to haunt her reminiscences. On the one hand this method of recounting the past is very close to the modernist style of using the stream-of-consciousness. Thus, it underlines the subjectivity of experience. On the other, it indicates the process of narration itself. Every narrative involves the process of selection and suggestion. Nora's choice of certain words over others indicates her process of reconstruction of other characters. Since all characters are viewed only through her eyes, her selection of material is geared towards making the readers see only as much as she desires. Her control over the narrative is indisputable. We know that Grace and she are a lot like each other only because she recounts Betty's statement. However, there is very little that we are told about Grace except that she was an oppressive sister. Nora reconstructs other characters to highlight her isolation from each one of them. Whether it is the Custs or the Porteous family, Olive or even the group at No.6, Nora finds herself isolated from the others.

The novel is divided into seven sections, each standing for a day Nora spends in her childhood home. Each section begins with the chronological present but lapses into various time periods. Overlapping of time where images from different time periods mingle underlines the attempt of the mind to coalesce diverse experiences. Sounds from the shooting range resemble those from the tennis court to Nora. The mind unifies the experiences a person undergoes and the present can be understood only in terms of the past. Hence, Lyn Wilmot appears to Nora as being a likeness of Una Porteous. However, since the subject itself is always in process such conceptions change over a period of time. Nora's attitude to her sister changes during the course of the narration and she moves to that part of the house that was occupied by Grace before her death. When she hears Betty recount Grace's words, she is still "unwilling to allow that Grace (had) touched her heart at last".

Through creating a text with a disregard for chronological time, Anderson questions the artificial division of time into hours, minutes and seconds. She seems to be an adherent of the notion of conceptual time, that is time that is experienced, rather than historical time, that is time that belongs to the public sphere and is depersonalized. Those who believe in conceptual time argue that since human experience is at the level of the mind, that is the "real" time. Nothing exists outside the arena of mental experience. Time is then stretched when one is unhappy and seems to flow at a great speed when one is happy. The notion of conceptual time highlights the subjectivity of human experience.

Anderson's use of the first person narration is in keeping with the feminists deployment of experimental, autobiographical and personal modes which created "a contrapuntal effect, breaking into the monolithic and monologising authorised discourse". The "I" mode is an attempt to centre ourselves, to articulate the relationship of that "I" to the social and political forces that have shaped us. Nora's use of the technique shows how she is marginalized from all existing structures.

However, in her own narrative, she has the power to reconstruct any person as she deems fit. The creative power of imagination and narration gives her an alternative power structure where she is the centre rather than the marginalized. Her "I" narrative is then more than personal; it is a way of reenvisioning the personal as political.

5.6 THE "OTHER": A PERSPECTIVE

It is a well-known fact today that women have over the years in various societies of the world been treated as subservient to men. Whether as Devis (Goddesses) or as witches, they have always been treated as the 'other' in an attempt by patriarchal structures to control female behaviour. It is now commonly known that sex (the biological condition of being male or female) and gender (the sociological modes of behaviour associated with the biological condition) are two distinct categories. While the former is natural, the latter is culturally constructed.

There is, in feminism, the emphasis on the "constructedness" of femininity, that is, on matters such as conditioning and socialisation, and the influence of images and representations of femininity in literature and culture. In the initial phase of the feminist movement, an attempt was made to break power structures and to render status and relationships more equal for inequality had been created through exclusion. Early feminists were concerned with social and political change. It was only later that feminists realised that literature was a powerful cultural weapon in the hands of male hegemony to perpetuate its sexual politics in the name of universality, objectivity and neutrality.

In early women's writing issues of marriage and respectability occupied central space. Though more and more women were finding representation in literary texts, they were still seen and presented from the male point of view. Debates among feminist theorists about the suitability of such representation and the possibility of "feminine" writing changed the way women were represented in literary texts. No longer requiring adhering to conventions set up by the patriarchal structures, women's writing became delightfully experimental constantly searching for new ways of representing women.

Writing offered women the space to escape from the world. It did not require repetition or reproduction of the world as it is. In fact, it gave them the space to reinvent and reproduce alternative realities. Stories about the self, stories by women and about women's selves had enormous power in the creation and sustenance of feminist consciousness. Literature was actively used as a mode for creating a community of women. Through literature dominant political and patriarchal structures were challenged. Feminists deployed experimental, autobiographical and personal modes which created "a contrapuntal effect, breaking into the monolithic and monologizing authorized discourse".

Since the basis of the sociological difference between men and women was the biological, many feminists use the female body metaphor to react to the gender issue. The feminists believe that everyone's experience of sexuality is constructed by the conventions of culture and that there is nothing natural about it. Hence motherhood and child-bearing were not seen as natural instincts of women.

In *Tirra Lirra*, the rejection of possible motherhood by Nora (by opting for an abortion) and Dorothy's "unnatural" act of killing her own children are indictative of this change in the role envisaged for women. Rejection of accepted roles is a political act challenging accepted roles for women in the society. Since child-bearing is within the familial structure (which is a patriarchal institution), refusal to have a child translates into a rebellion against the patriarchal institutions. Further, Nora's association of the plume with not a romantic lover but with her father's funeral

ceremony negates the notion of romantic love. Possibility of happiness that would tempt her to leave her secluded world metamorphoses into a fearful experience best relegated to the back of her mind. The notion of romantic heterosexual love is dependent on viewing the men as saviours and as agents of change. Nora's memory of the plume challenges the established convention of romantic love.

One of the terms in critical theory that needs to be addressed at this point is "subject". The humanists had floated the notion of a single, coherent identity. The term "subject" is opposed to this notion of an indivisible and stable identity. Unlike the humanist self, subjectivity is not single, complete and resolved but *in process*, never fully realized. The subject does not create the world but is the product of language and culture. S/he does not control his/her world but is subject to certain available positions in the culture. For feminists it has meant the recognition that all identities are products of socio-historical processes, a fact they had been underlining for a long time. It has meant the repudiation of their position that identities are engendered.

In a world that privileges youth and has no space for economically unproductive categories, old women are twice-marginalised. One of the greatest autobiographical themes is that of ageing. Since our social roles, our bodies and our subjectivities change over time, how we define ourselves as women also undergoes a substantial change. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* deals with the issue of double marginality of old women. The shock of recognition of our own old age comes from outside ourselves. We are made aware of our old age only through the gaze of the other, by seeing ourselves reflected in the eyes of others or by seeing ourselves in the mirror as though through the eyes of a stranger. The mutilated body brings about the recognition of mortality.

Nora's awareness that she is close to death acts as an impetus for her to delve into her memory to reconstruct her own self. Out of her many encounters with the mirror there is one that deserves special mention. It is a moment of recognition of her mortality. "In the bathroom mirror I look with equanimity at an old woman with a dew-lapped face and hands like bunches of knotted sticks. I lean calmly to the cool water. Well, I am what I am." Nora is able to look at herself as if through the gaze of another. She is able at this point to accept her old age and can therefore continue with the process of self-examination.

5.7 SOME IMPORTANT IMAGES

5.7.1 The Globe

Anderson uses the cinematic flashback technique to further the narrative process. Hence some images assume a symbolic significance. The portrayal of Nora's memory as a globe is one such recurrent image. It is important to remember that a globe is a replica and therefore at one remove from the real. It is also much smaller in size compared to the original and would therefore not portray all nuances of the original. Again, unlike the original, it can be maneuvered. Nora's memory has all the three aforementioned characteristics of the globe. It is closely related to the real but does not reflect the real. Therefore, it is at least at one remove from the real. Again, it consists of selected incidents and does not present a detailed picture of Nora's life. And like the globe, her memory can be controlled and she can choose which incidents she wants to view and when. Since the movements of the earth are taken into consideration for determining time, the globe image also depicts Nora's attitude to chronological time. Her ability to turn the globe around at will shows her complete disregard of chronological time. She has the ability to twirl it around to make which side she liked to be exposed to light.

5.7.2 The Mirror/Glass

The mirror is used as a metaphor in literary texts to indicate the process of self-realisation through viewing oneself through the gaze of the "other". Nora's

realisation that she has become old is conveyed through the use of a mirror. "Through the long mirror of the big hall stand I see a shape pass. It is the shape of an old woman who began calling herself old before she really was, partly to get in there first and partly out of a fastidiousness about the word "elderly", but who is now really old. She has allowed her shoulders to slump." The third person mode used in this part further highlights the process of viewing oneself through another's eyes. Anderson uses the mirror to discuss issues around the construction of an identity. However, she uses the process of looking through glass to draw a comparison between her and the Lady of Shalott: "I no longer looked through the glass. I no longer needed to. In fact, to do so would have broken rather than sustained the spell, because that landscape had become a region of my mind, where infinite expansion was possible, and where no obstruction, such as the discomfort of knees imprinted by the cane of a chair, or a magpie alighting on the grass and shattering the miniature scale, could prevent the emergence of Sir Lancelot." This quotation from the text clearly indicates the extension of the landscape that she viewed through the glass into the landscape in her mind. Nora finds the mental landscape more appealing as it could be manipulated by her. This further indicates the substitution of perceived reality by her creative imagination. Anderson drives home the point that since reality is itself a matter of perception, there is no change in the hierarchical status if such subjective reality were to be replaced by creative imagination.

5.7.3 The Artist/Creator

The novel contains many stereotypical images of women as creators. Such images were dominant in nineteenth century literature where they were used to depict women in their dual roles of nature and nurture. Women were depicted as being confined to the domestic space. The use of this association of women with the process of reproduction emphasizing their difference from men in this novel needs careful consideration. Grace's obsession with the garden, Olive's novels, Hilda's dressmaking and Nora's embroideries offers them a space where they can be the centres of the structure.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

The narration of *Tirra Lirra* takes place in two main time frames. There is the virtual present, narrated in the present tense as if Nora were not constructing her own story, but merely experiencing it as it unfolds. Then there is the narration of her earlier life in the past tense, told as a series of retrospectives, or as memories triggered more often than not by skips or 'accidental spins' of the globe which is her image of memory. Jessica Anderson uses the cinematic flashback technique to further the narrative process. Hence some images assume a symbolic significance.

5.9 QUESTIONS

1. What narrative techniques does Anderson apply to emphasize her thematic interest in women?
2. Discuss the dominant images used by Anderson.
3. Discuss the role of memory, and of story telling, in *Tirra Lirra*.

5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Haynes, Roslynn D. 'Art as reflection in Jessica Anderson's *Tirra Lirra by the River*'



Uttar Pradesh
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MAEN-08
AUSTRALIAN
LITERATURE

Block

8

THE REMOVALISTS

Block Introduction

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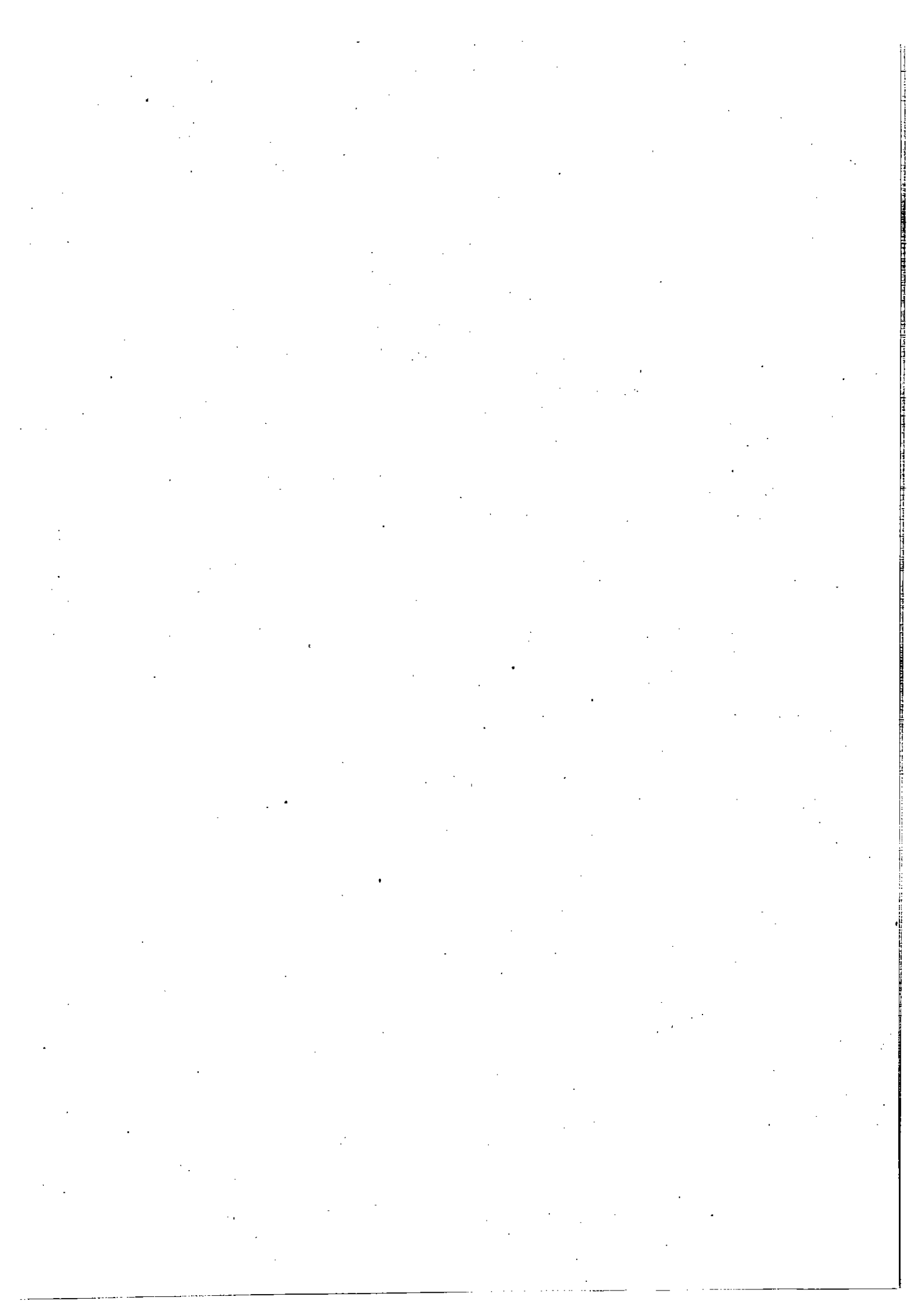
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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this block you will be studying the only play in your course on Australian Literature: David Williamson's *The Removalists*. The aim of this block is to introduce you to Australian drama as well as to Williamson's works.

Hence, in the first unit, we will be looking at the history of Australian drama. In settler countries like Australia, when we talk about their culture (including literature), we usually mean that of the settlers. Thus the history of Australian drama begins after the arrival of the white settlers. This also means that we usually study only drama written in English. But the original inhabitants of Australia, the native Australians, also called the aborigines, have a performative culture as well. Thus, we should take cognisance of their ritual performances though we will be looking at their more recent interventions in Australian theatre in this unit. In Unit II we will look at Williamson's oeuvre. While we examine his plays in brief, we shall try and identify the themes that have fascinated him over his long career and also trace the contours of his theatrical journey. In Unit III, we shall look at *The Removalists* in some detail, examining the various moments in the play that propels the action forward. The attempt will be to see how the play manipulates and builds on our responses as audiences/readers. In the last unit, Unit IV, we shall discuss the play in detail, examining the themes and characters in the play, and exploring the features of Williamson's craft including the use of language.



UNIT 1 AN OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Pre-Lawler Australian Drama
 - 1.2.1 Burn, Melville and Harpur
 - 1.2.2 Birth of the Archetypal Australian Male and the Indigenous Element in Drama
- 1.3 Australian Drama in the Nineteenth Century
- 1.4 Post-Lawler Australian Drama
 - 1.4.1 The New Wave
 - 1.4.2 Theatre in the 1970s
 - 1.4.3 The Second Wave
 - 1.4.4 Aboriginal Theatre
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will see how Australian drama has gone through various phases of development from the colonial times. We will attempt to trace the dominant themes and techniques as also look briefly at the major dramatists. This should help you to place David Williamson's works in their context. We shall only be considering drama written in English and, obviously, since this is a history of the theatre in a settler country, the history of the drama will basically deal with that of the settlers. The performative culture and history of the Aborigines does not form part of this history except in later, more recent, interventions in this theatre.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We in India hardly get to hear of Australian dramatists and hence I would not be surprised if Williamson is the first Australian dramatist you have heard of. Further, considering the fact that Australian drama came into its own only in the 1950s and that you may not even know many English playwrights who have written after that, given the nature of our academic curricula and our theatrical experiences, it should not surprise anyone if you cannot name a single Australian playwright other than Williamson. It is a curious coincidence that contemporary theater in both England and Australia were able to establish themselves roughly around the same time in the mid-fifties. If John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* took the London stage by storm in 1956 and seemed to usher in a new era of English drama, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* had already done that in Australia in 1955. In both cases it was an initiative to discover new dramatists that provided the breakthrough. The beginning of Australian play-writing/drama can be fixed at 1955 with the premiering of Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. Despite the fact that Australia's first professional theatres operated from the 1830s, as H.G. Kippax in his Introduction to *Three Australian Plays* says, it "was one of inspiration rather than achievement." The reasons why theatre did not receive an impetus before 1955 (p.7-21) are many and could include one more of the following:

- theatre suffered a setback during the Depression,
- it was faced by stiff competition from the world of cinema,
- Australian audiences refused to watch local talent, until the plays won acclaim abroad,
- there was a marked distrust between local writers and 'commercial theatre'
- most of the playwrights went abroad in search of artistic sustenance,
- the myth of the great Australian legend, made the playwrights turn towards the Bush for inspiration, furthering leading drama into the wilderness.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll premiered in Melbourne in 1955 and by the time it was taken to Sydney to rave reviews it had already been acknowledged as a theatrical event. It was hailed as a truly authentic Australian play of international caliber. The London Times reported on 30th November 1955 that Hugh Hunt, the executive director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust had called *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* "the best play ever written about Australia – purely Australian but in quality to be compared with the work of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Sean O'Casey". This play which was one of the two to share the first prize in the competition held in the previous year by the Playwrights' Advisory Board seemed to mark a watershed in Australian drama. What this allows us to do is to demarcate the history of Australian drama into two phases – pre-Lawler and post-Lawler.

1.2 PRE-LAWLER AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

It is logical to expect that the first plays on a settler colony like Australia would try to depict the different environment and lifestyle of the settlers. The most distinguishing characteristic of Australian life was that of life in the bush, an almost American wild-west kind of scenario. The bushranger, a desperado who fought the law, was the stuff that action heroes were made of. All the claimants to the position of the first Australian play deal with the bushranger.

1.2.1 Burn, Melville and Harpur

David Burn, who is often called the first Australian playwright on account of his considerable output, wrote his first play *The Bush Rangers* partly in Tasmania. A man who had a foot in both the mother country and in the colony, he completed the play in Scotland and presented it on stage at Edinburgh in 1829. Burn's play was not performed or published in Australia till 1971 when it achieved both distinctions. This play deals with the life of a real life bushranger, an escaped convict named Matthew Brady who was the leader of a gang in Tasmania. The real Brady was captured and hanged in 1826. In the play, Brady is shown as defiant of authority and a seeker of true liberty. He is a Robin Hood figure who saves a woman from being raped and a settlement from being massacred by "wild natives." An episodic play, its aim seems to have been to give an idea of life in the settler colony as much as to depict the adventures of an outlaw. Burn, whose other plays include a fair number of historical romances never wrote another play quite like *The Bush Rangers* which was written in prose unlike his other poetic plays. As Leslie Rees says in his history of Australian drama (see Suggested Reading), Burn must be given "full credit for being the first playwright to present an Australian subject from first-hand knowledge." (p. 15)

However another play called *The Bushrangers: or, Norwood Vale* was printed and performed in Hobart, Tasmania, in 1834. This was written by Henry Melville, a newspaper publisher, who printed the play in his own Hobart Town Magazine in April that year. It was performed in Hobart in May 1834. A three act play, *The Bushrangers* is a made up of a tableaux. The play depicts a party of bushrangers attacking a settler's house in the bush; the settler is saved by his daughter's lover

whom he disapproves of, and a native Australian. Perhaps this is the first Australian play staged in Australia.

In 1835, Charles Harpur published a poetic play, which was later known as *The Bushrangers*, in the *Sydney Monitor*. This was in serial form and was then called "*The Tragedy of Donohoe*". This was however never produced and Harpur seems to have revised the play time and again. Though the credit for the first published Australian play should perhaps go to "*The Bandit of the Rhine*" written by Evan Henry Thomas, which was published in 1834 in Hobart by the author himself with the help of prior subscription from buyers, it is of interest to note that the other three early plays we looked at have all dealt with the subject of bushrangers.

1.2.2 Birth of the Archetypal Australian Male and the Indigenous Element in Drama

The bushranger seems to have inspired a certain respect and admiration among the early Australian writers. This was because the bushranger seemed to typify the Australian spirit as well as appear a romantic figure. The highway robber was a romantic figure in England in the eighteenth century and the early Australian settlers seemed to have regarded the bushranger in similar light. The distinctive Australian ethos that developed also had a lot to do with both the convict and working class attitudes. Thus the bushrangers were perhaps seen as more Australian than others. They were defiant of law and authority and thus, 'free'; they had to be resourceful and loyal to each other. Further they had the image of being Robin Hoods stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, of being essentially kind people. This gave them a romantic aura as well. In their defiance of authority and their comradeship you can already see the birth of the figure of the archetypal Australian male.

I must also mention that in Burn's play the aborigines perform a corroboree – a dance drama rooted in their rituals and traditions. While Burn may have been breaking new ground in including the Aboriginal corroboree in a 'white' English play, it would have provided exotic local colour and entertainment to its audiences. Very often the corroboree itself was performed for the entertainment of early Australian settlers. In fact the earliest available entertainments in Perth (which was founded in 1829) were corroborees. The interest in corroborees has lived on and like folk forms all over the world the corroboree too is now decontextualised and performed for the entertainment of audiences across Australia.

1.3 AUSTRALIAN DRAMA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The state of drama in Australia in the nineteenth century was not anything to write home about but it was not anything very much at 'home' in England either, as we know. There were specific historical reasons for the lack of good dramatists in England in the very century that theatre actually established itself but this lack translated into a similar lack in Australia as well. In contrast the latter half of the century saw great dramatic and theatrical activity in Europe. Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekov and company did not find any immediate answering echo in England or Australia. In Australia what ruled the stage were conventional melodrama and light comedies and domestic plays just like in England. You also had verse drama on historical themes that claimed a literary status.

Among the various pioneers of Australian drama was Walter Cooper who wrote *Colonial Experience*, *Foiled*, or *Australia Twenty Years Ago*, *Sun and Shadow*, and *Hazard*. He wrote in the late 1860s and 1870s. A Sydney based playwright, Cooper wrote popular plays and perhaps his play *Foiled* contains the first instance of what

Indian film goers are so used to – a person being tied to a log in a timber mill and moved towards a mechanical saw, only to be saved at the last minute.

By this time Australia had many established playhouses in Melbourne and Sydney. Further there were also established actor-managers on the scene. Thus the theatre was alive if not flourishing and the most successful playwright of this era, Australia's first successful playwright, emerged on the scene at that time. This was Bombay-born Francis R. C. Hopkins. His plays were however, not particularly Australian, being adapted from European novels. The actor-manager Alfred Dampier had a great role to play in his triumphant career. Hopkins' *All for Gold: or, Fifty Millions of Money*, an adaptation of a French novel by Eugene Sue, was their first major hit. It premiered at the Victoria Theatre, Sydney, on 10th March 1877 and then toured the rest of the country, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, and England.

Another successful play by Hopkins, *Good for Evil* (published as *Clay and Porcelain*), was set in London, Paris, and Venice. In his dedication, Hopkins talks of the central character as a Mephistophelian Iago. He gives his reason for both the settings and the Mephistophelian Iago character by saying that the play was inspired by a popular novel by Ouida. Hopkins adapted Alexandre Dumas' *Chicot the Jester as Only a Fool* in 1880. His other plays, *L.S.D.*, and *Russia as It Is: or, Michael Strogoff the Courier of the Czar*, were also adapted from European sources. The last play was based on Jules Verne's novel. This play is remembered chiefly for a scene depicting a fight with a bear, a trained animal being used on the stage.

The question is not whether Hopkins had any originality or not. He does seem to have written in new characters and done more than re-arrange incidents in his adaptations. What is of interest to us is that the first successful Australian playwright saw his work as an extension of and heir to European literature and culture. The sources as well as the locales of any significance lay in Europe, not in Australia. Hopkins continued to write in the twentieth century and was the author of an anonymously published play in 1909. This play called *Reaping a Whirlwind* is his Australian play. It exhibits Hopkins' fear for the future of Australia. This fear is the fear of the Asianisation of Australia. In the play, Mother Britain lets Australia down by first signing treaties with Asian countries and then again when under invasion herself issues a proclamation suspending the Aliens Exclusion Act throughout Australia. The play's last line is, "The Asiatics will enter this country without firing a shot. Oh, my God." When the sources of Australian culture are seen as white and European, any significance the Australians derive has to be from the umbilical cord that joins them to Europe. Obviously the threat then is from the proximity of Asia. Hence the first successful Australian playwright sets almost all his plays in Europe and derives them from European sources and in the play he sets in Australia, which is born of his own fears and emotions, he writes of the possibility of racial and cultural pollution from the Asiatic menace. The Australia of high culture had to maintain its connections with and derive its sustenance from white Europe and the biggest threat to this was its proximity to its Asian neighbours.

What we must remember is that Hopkins had literary ambitions. Other playwrights who wrote for the public had no qualms about setting their plays in Australia. The foremost among them was George Darrell. He too wrote in the 1870s and 1880s and was a hit with the box office even if not with the critics. Some of his more popular plays were *Transported for Life* (1877), *Back from the Grace* (1878), *The Sunny South* (1883), and *The Soggarth* (1886). *The Sunny South* was the biggest box office earner of its times, even having a triumphant production in London. The papers of the day ran down these home brewed plays as of no literary merit. But plays about convictism and other plays set in Australia contributed to the self-image of Australians, especially the construction of the notion of the Australian male.

When we talk about nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian drama we have to mention the people who controlled the theatrical spaces. The most famous of them and the most powerful was J C Williamson who along with Tallis and Ramaciotti

owned almost all the theatre companies in Australia. J C Williamson did not believe that there was any Australian drama worth presenting on stage. His was a commercial empire and he did not see any reason to encourage untried and hence potentially unprofitable local talent.

An Overview of Australian Drama

Hence the Ibsenian revolution in Europe happened without affecting Australian drama. Independent theatres came up in Europe and England in the 1890s without finding a successful echo in Australia. The notion of an Australian nation came into existence in other genres of literature and other cultural forms but did not find expression in Australian theatre of the first decades of the twentieth century. There was no Henry Lawson in theatre. Australian theatre was so caught-up in the grip of commercial interests that in such a short introduction to the history of Australian drama one could safely skip the first half of the twentieth century. But I shall lead you through this period briefly mainly to show you where Lawler's *Seventeenth Doll* came from.

Almost throughout the nineteenth century the stage seemed to be available to Australian comedies. This was not the case in the early decades of the twentieth century. Bert Bailey's success with the adaptations of Steele Rudd's novels was a rare exception. It would seem that even home-spun humour had gone out of fashion. A few alternative sites did exist and soldiered bravely on – like, e.g., in Melbourne where you had Gregan McMahon's repertory (1911-1917), William Moore's Annual Drama Nights where only Australian plays were performed (1909-1912), and the seasons of the Pioneer Players (1922-1926). The Pioneer Players performed five plays by its founders Louis Esson, Stewart Macky, and Vance Palmer. The music hall tradition was flourishing as was cinema. In fact Australian cinema was very popular between the two world wars. So there was an audience for Australian essence in Australia but it could not be found in the theatre. The lack of support, which would have enabled the dramatists to work with repertory companies and sharpen their craft, meant that there were no unperformed masterpieces from that era either. Peter Fitzpatrick (see Suggested Reading) actually finds the Australian plays that belong to the first half of the twentieth century "more interesting for their flaws, or their marks of potential, or their reflections of their society, or their evidence of the problems confronting the playwright, than ... as dramatic achievements." (p. 6)

Expectedly these plays are preoccupied with defining Australian-ness, their difference from Europe and the European dramatic tradition. This meant merely the adding on of local colour to some playwrights but more importantly it involved the construction and establishment of Australian characters and the exploration of their problems. The dramatic tradition and idiom remained European but the land and the lifestyle that it imposed that needed to be depicted in a manner as un-European as possible.

The dominant dramatic form then was **naturalistic** well-made play, which in Europe dealt with the lives of characters in almost claustrophobic interiors in the cities. The life that the Australian dramatists portrayed on stage was that of the outback, of the attempt to tame nature. Naturalistic plays looked for causality and psychological understanding and examined the individual. The Australian playwrights were attempting to forge the myth of nationness. They were less interested in individuals and more interested in depicting the Australian. There is an obvious mismatch here. Further, designing sets for the great outdoors and depicting catastrophic natural events would have been almost impossible then. Hence most events would have to occur offstage and reportage would have to fill in for action.

Among the major dramatists of this period, Arthur Adams overcame these problems by not facing them at all! His Ibsen-influenced three act plays were set in the towns. Even the other playwrights wrote other than outback plays but their significance is in the number of outback plays that they did write. Foremost among them was Louis Esson. His outback plays include one-acters like *The Drovers* (where a man is mortally injured after a stampede) and *Dead Timber*, and a three-act play *Mother and*

Son. It may interest you to know that one of Esson's town plays called *The Sacred Place* is about Indian muslim hawkers. Even Katherine Susannah Prichard, prize winning novelist, wrote plays set in the outback. *Pioneers* was a one-acter adapter from her prize winning novel of the same name, *Brumby Innes* won a prize for itself in a three-act play competition held by the Triad magazine. Another major playwright who set his plays in the outback was Vance Palmer. There are other playwrights and plays (Douglas Stewart's *Ned Kelly* for instance) which you could read and/or read about, including the trend in the forties to writing verse drama, but I am afraid that we have to move on in our history to the formation of the Australian Elizabethan Theater Trust in 1954. This was set up to encourage Australian drama and the first new Australian play that it staged was Ray Lawler's *Seventeenth Doll*.

1.4 POST-LAWLER AUSTRALIAN DRAMA

Though this section is called Post-Lawler, what we really mean here is the theatre after the successful staging of Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in 1955. You must read this play for it is a watershed in Australian drama in more ways than one. If it seems to be the starting point for a truly Australian and energetic theatre, it is also the culmination of earlier efforts to forge the myth of the outback, to create the authentic Australian character with his ideals of mateship and other macho characteristics.

Summer of the Seventeenth Doll is a well-made play and its three-act structure is extremely well crafted. It is a naturalistic play and it overcomes the problems faced by earlier playwrights in wedding this form to life in the outback by presenting the action within the living-room, a space more attuned to the form. The characteristic conflicts of outdoor life, the conflicts in the bushman image are thus acted out indoors. The play allows the examination in a changed setting and allows time to think of the values that Australians had lived by and prided themselves on. The play's characters though stereotypical have achieved the status of independent figures – Roo, Barney, Olive, and Pearl are almost people you know and sympathise with. This is a play that looks hard at the ideals of male bonding (mateship) and physical prowess within the confines and needs of domesticity and societal stability. The romance of the bush fails and while it may be a question of youth Vs age the play does enough damage to the ideals themselves.

Thus the *Doll*, which is a watershed in Australian drama, marks the culmination of the earlier period and efforts rather than the beginning of a new era. You will have to go through the suggested reading before you can know enough to agree or disagree with me but for now you will have to take my word that no significant movement came out of the *Doll*. We have to wait till the late-sixties and seventies and the New Wave dramatists before anything of equal significance takes place in Australian theatre. Not that nothing was written or produced till then. Lawler himself wrote other plays including two others on the *Doll* characters to eventually complete the *Doll* trilogy. Two significant plays that followed the *Doll* were Richard Beynon's *The Shifting Heart* (1956) and Alan Seymour's *The One Day of the Year* (1959), both of which are naturalistic plays about characteristic Australian concerns and characters. These and other plays of this era examine the notion of Australianness that was yet to be redefined in the wake of post- World War II immigration.

The generational conflicts that had come into being because of higher education becoming available to hitherto deprived classes also provided subject for drama. Beynon's play is about the acceptance of immigrants while Seymour's is about generational conflict that flares up around the 'venerable' institution of Anzac Day, the celebration of the Australian participation in World War II that is marked by the battle at Gallipoli. Playwrights like Patrick Wright, who is more famous as a novelist, Patrick Kenna (who along with some other-playwright forms part of the group called

the lonely playwrights because they wrote outside the institutional framework of established theatres), and Dorothy Hewett also lend some weight and importance to this period.

1.4.1 The New Wave

The New Wave that followed this period broke free of various dramatic conventions and theatrical spaces. This radical period saw plays performed in alternate venues like converted factories and warehouses, and streets and other public spaces. This was the time of the Vietnam War and conscription into the army and this saw a politically aware and committed generation taking to the boards. This was 'rough' theatre at its best – anti-establishment, anti-tradition, anti-pomp and anti-pretence. This theatre identified itself with the working class. But the audience was not very different or more democratic in class composition. These were plays for educated, young, middle class audiences. Politics took centre stage over aesthetics and audience intervention was a welcome part of the performance. These plays demolished earlier stereotypes and the Australian male was satirised instead of being mythicised. The 'ocker' figure, which came into being now, was actually questioned and critiqued rather than romanticised. These plays were urban and less masculine than the earlier plays even though the influence of feminism was yet to be felt. They contested received social values and were heavily influenced by American writing and politics as well as European theatrical practice (e.g. that of Brecht).

The received aesthetics of Australian theatre – the three-act play, various traditional forms, the demarcation of high and low drama, and accepted language (the anglicised upper class accent) – came under attack. Not that earlier writers had not employed Australian speech patterns in their plays (see e.g. Esson) but now the attempt had a political basis. A new Australian generation was defining and representing itself on stage. Older, popular forms like **vaudeville**, and stand up comedy, were deployed in this theatre and deployed usually to satirise the icons of the older generation. Melbourne was an important centre of this activity and the dramatists who learnt their craft during this period were Jack Hibberd, David Williamson himself, John Romeril, and Barry Oakley in Melbourne, and Michael Boddy and Bob Ellis in Sydney.

We must also look at the figure of the 'ocker' (the etymology of this term is obscure). The 'ocker' is pushy and crude; he asserts his masculinity through his heavy drinking and tough talking and boasting about his female conquests. The 'ocker' is aggressively articulate in opposition to the earlier taciturn stereotype of the outback hero. He does not want to make any effort mental or physical and lives for material pleasures. Nothing or rather nothing else matters to him. This is the figure that comes to typify a certain kind of Australian who is the product of the era of national affluence and complacency.

Patrick White and Dorothy Hewett, both important though not popular playwrights, had already moved away from stage **naturalism** to experiment with **expressionism** and **surrealism**. Poetic speech, symbols, and music, as well as the expression of the inner life of the characters moved their plays well beyond the limits of **realism**. The New Wave, with their political commitment and community oriented theatrical practices changed Australian theatre even more radically. Along with alternate venues came in a more intimate theatre where audiences learnt to interact with the actors.

1.4.2 Theatre in the 1970s

But this politically committed theatre had a natural end when a reformist Whitlam government came to power in 1972. The need for continued funding also governs the life cycle of such theatrical movements. Earlier, in 1958, the National Institute of Dramatic Art had been established at the University of New South Wales by the Theatre Trust. The trust was replaced as a funding body by the Australian Council for Arts in 1968. The Council decided to support state theatre companies rather than a

national company. It also decided to support the Australian Performing Group (APG) in Melbourne and Sydney's Australian Drama Foundation. This ensured an expansion of theatrical activity in the 1970s.

The reputation of the APG was established by plays like Jack Hibberd's *White With Wire Wheels*, Alex Buzo's *The Front Room Boys*, and Jack Romeril's *The Man From Chicago* (later called *Chicago, Chicago*), all of which were performed at the Festival of Perth in 1970. 1970 also saw the first performance of *The Legend of King O'Mailey* in Sydney. This is a comic musical play, and along with other plays like Barry Oakley's *The Feet of Daniel Mannix* (1971), and *Beware of Imitations* (1973), and Jack Hibberd's *Dimboola* (1969), *A Stretch of Imagination* (1972), *Les Darcy Show* (1974), and *A Toast to Melba* (1976), it developed what has been called the historical pantomime. These are political satires which use music hall techniques and devices. David Williamson also had his first full length play, *The Coming of Stork*, premiere in 1970 but we shall look at his plays in the next unit.

Of this first wave only Williamson, John Romeril, and Alex Buzo continued to write plays in the 90s. And among them, only John Romeril shows the same political commitment to working class values, and to the collaborative process of play production that characterised the New Wave. Romeril has gone on to engage with the Asian experience. Romeril's *The Floating World* (1975) is a classic (of the same status as the *Doll* and Hibberd's *Stretch of Imagination*) and is a frequently performed play. This play is about the disastrous re-encounter with the Japan of Lee Harding, an ex-Japanese prisoner of war. Romeril defines the Australian character in an international context and this links him to the second wave of dramatist like Stephen Sewell and Louis Nowra. His community theatre work is another important strand in contemporary Australian theatre.

You would have noticed that there is a dearth of women playwrights in the short history sketched above as well as the fact that Australian drama's explorations of Australian-ness is in terms of the white male. The two facts are quite obviously interlinked. The predominantly male authorship of Australian drama including the New Wave ensured that the demise of the bush stereotype was succeeded by the emergence of the 'ocker'. Buzo, Hibberd, and Williamson, among others, portray negatively the rituals of male bonding, and establish the alienation, the meaninglessness of the lives of essentially overgrown unpleasant boys. But what this endorses paradoxically is the strength of the male stereotype and its importance in the construction of their Australia. While they struggle to break out of the earlier constructions they never move out of this territory. This caused the formation of various women's groups in the 1970s and 80s. For instance, The Women's Theatre Group separated itself from the APG in 1972 and produced *Betty Can Jump*. This was a group devised play as was the more successful *The Hills Family Show* (1975). Feminism had a later impact in Sydney and other theatre centres. Now there are feminist theatre groups in all the states. Adelaide's *Vitalstatistix* (est. 1984) is a performance group, while Sydney's *Playworks* (est. 1985) is a national organisation committed to nurturing and developing women writers.

While speaking of theatre of this period we must also take note of the work done by Circus Oz. The development of the circus as an area of Australian performative excellence was due to the efforts of some members of the APG. The Circus Oz's distinctiveness derives from its politicisation of the circus. It not only lampoons politicians, it also makes an ideological point about not using animals. We must also remember that the circus in Australia has from its very beginning, two centuries ago (in the 1840s) exploited the Australian liking for athletics, horsemanship, and clowning. There are many such circus groups in Australia now.

The first wave's long lasting influence has thus been in the area of alternative and experimental theatre. It was also responsible for the cultural confidence that has since then characterised Australian theatre. Since the theatre companies formed then were quite often associated with universities and were funded by the Australia Council,

they not only were professional, but, they also had a higher survival rate than earlier companies.

1.4.3 The Second Wave

The second wave of dramatists who emerged in the late 1970s gave new directions to Australian drama. Their plays are characteristically complex and deal with important issues. These theatrically ambitious plays do not look to the masculine stereotype for their exploration of Australian-ness. The Australian-ness that they chart is in terms of a quest. But the playwrights who began to write now, like Stephen Sewell, Michael Gow, and Louis Nowra, like their older contemporaries Dorothy Hewett, Patrick White, and Alma de Groen, have been largely unsuccessful in terms of popularity.

Sewell began his career as a Marxist and his early plays are intensely political and international. They are deeply moral plays that show a wide range of theatrical influences. *Traitors* (1979), *Welcome to the Bright World* (1982), the first set in Russia and the second in Germany, deal with revolutionary history. *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea* (1978), *The Blind Giant is Dancing* (1983), and *Dreams in an Empty City* (1986) explore contemporary Australian politics. These are apocalyptic visions of the resurgence of fascism, the collapse of capitalism, and the power of multinational companies. *Hate* (1988), *Sisters* (1991), and *The Garden of Granddaughters* (1993) are family psycho-dramas. Sewell's plays are very different from Williamson's who is an extremely popular playwright because Sewell's plays are demanding and obtuse, using structures of myths, classic archetypes, and symbolism.

Louis Nowra's early plays are also internationalist and vast. *Inner Voices* (1977), *Visions* (1978), and *The Precious Woman* (1981) are set in Russia, Paraguay, and China respectively. Nowra's break with naturalism is more in terms of form than Sewell's. He frequently uses the play within the play and like Pirandello draws attention to the artificialities of the theatrical representation as well as the narrative. His postcolonialist ideology is evident in his representation of the Aboriginal Australians. He dramatised Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia* in the Bicentennial year (1988). The predicament of the Aborigines is present in other plays of his as well – *Inside the Island* (1981), *Sunrise* (1983), *Crow* (1994), and *Summer of the Aliens* (1992). *Summer of the Aliens* is a semi-autobiographical play as is *Cosi* (1992) and interestingly Aborigines are present in both. Apart from these visions of displacement and alienation, Nowra has also a farce satirising corporate greed, *The Temple* (1993), and a play on the recent history of Queensland, *The Incorruptible* (1995).

Among the other playwrights we would like to introduce you to the works of Dorothy Hewett. She was one of the first playwrights to write challengingly about female sexuality. All her plays (other than *The Old Man Comes Rolling Home*, which was written in 1966) are anti-naturalistic. They make interesting use of music and pageantry, caricature and comedy. Her plays including the semi-autobiographical *The Chapel Perilous* (1971), and *Bon-Bons and Roses for Dolly* (1972), *The Tatty Hollow Story* (1974) and even *The Golden Oldies* (1967) focus on women's lives and deconstruct the conventions of feminine attractiveness. She weds the popular and high culture and in her later plays – *Catspaw* (1974), *Pandora's Cross* (1978), *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), and her radio play *Swannah's Dreaming* (1981) – focusses on the Australian landscape with a poetic intensity and concerns herself with environmental issues as well.

Patrick White is also a revered figure in Australian theatre. Though he began his theatrical career quite early with *The Ham Funeral*, written and set in London in 1947, which was produced in 1961, *The Season at Sarsaparilla* (1962), *A Cheery Soul* (1963), and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1964), his career received a boost only in the second half of the 1970s. His plays, which are characterised by an intense symbolism and poetic speech, attack what is seen as Australian philistinism as they

explore the spiritual side of human character. Not very successful on stage, it was director Jim Sharman's production of *The Season at Sarsaparilla* in 1976 that revived White's theatrical career. He wrote *Big Toys* in 1977, a play about political corruption. Sharman also directed *Netherwood* (1983), and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987), while *Signal Driver* (1982) was directed by Neil Armfield.

Alma de Groen has a lot in common with Dorothy Hewett, mainly because both are women playwrights sensitive to their position in a male dominated industry. Her plays have developed from an exploration of alienation to enunciate a feminism that looks at women's problems as tied to that of men's. The first theme can be seen in *The Sweatproof Boy* (1968), *The Joss Adams Show* (1970), *Perfectly All Right* (1973), and *The After-life of Arthur Cravan* (1973). Her feminist philosophy is present in *Vocations* (1982), *The Rivers of China* (1985), and *The Girl Who Saw Everything* (1993). These are extremely challenging plays. For example, in *The Rivers of China*, which has two time-scales and plots, the personality of the writer, Katherine Mansfield, is grafted into the body of a young man. According to Helen Thomson "De Groen's complex theatricality, her explorations of a variety of non-naturalistic modes, places her firmly in the experimentalist group of playwrights who continue to define a national drama in terms that transcend the national."

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, American popular culture made steady inroads into Australia as elsewhere. What happened was an internationalisation of popular culture. The idea of national identity gave way to that of various special interest groups. When we look at the 1990s, the main characteristics of the decade is its theatrical diversity. The Arts Festivals held in all the major Australian cities has ensured that quality drama is accessible to all but that at the same time it rubs shoulders with the experimental and the alternative performing arts. These huge tourist attractions have a truly international ambience in both their audiences and their productions. The commercialisation of theatre has led to its funding by private enterprises and its promotion by the tourism industry. One positive effect it may have had is that in the bid to cater to tourist interest, the indigenous Aboriginal theatre received a big boost.

1.4.4 Aboriginal Theatre

This may have sounded like a pejorative comment about Aboriginal theatre but it was meant to show up one of the ironies of life. Aboriginal culture has always been a performative one with a narrativising impulse. Thus the emergence of Aboriginal theatre should be seen in terms of using that cultural energy to conquer traditionally white spaces and audiences, to rewrite Australian history. Jack Davis, a Nyoongah Aborigine from Western Australia, is a pioneering Aboriginal playwright. Davis has lived in both cultures and when he began to write his plays, which address both white and aboriginal audiences, there were no Aboriginal actors to play his roles. The situation has changed since then with the establishment of many Aboriginal theatre companies.

Aboriginal drama is expectedly political in its need for self-definition and assertion. Jack Davis's *Kullark* was for example written and produced because of the omission of Aborigines from Western Australia's sesquicentenary celebrations in 1979. It is an Aboriginal version of Western Australia's history encompassing the times before and after the arrival of the whites in Australia. *Barungin (Smell the Wind)*, which depicts black deaths in custody, was a protest against white bicentennial celebrations in 1988. The major danger for Aboriginal drama is that of appropriation, for after all it is written in the language of the oppressors. Such protest also calls for realism in terms of characterisation and style. Even so, Aboriginal drama contains disruptive elements like indigenous music (the use of didgeridoo, and click-sticks, for example), Aboriginal dancing and storytelling, and the use of untranslated Aboriginal language.

Aboriginal theatre's very existence is to contest white values. These plays contrast white and black cultures making use of comedy subversively. Aboriginal characters

are individualised in contrast to white stereotypes. White bureaucracy is shown to be destructive, while the Australian counterparts of the American "Uncle Toms", 'coconuts' (black on the outside but white on the inside!), are denigrated. You will also find the audacious trickster figure who outwits the whites. Expectedly Aboriginal theatre has come to portray the complexity of the formation of the Aboriginal identity and performance styles – moving away from a sense of being victim to confident self assertion.

Some of the other Aboriginal dramatists that you may come across are the pioneering Kevin Gilbert, Jimmy Chi, whose musicals *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) and *Corrugation Road* (1996) have been highly successful, Mudrooroo (whose status as an Aboriginal has been under debate in recent years), and John Harding. Aboriginal drama is addressed to both blacks and whites and hence has a potentially larger audience. This theatre because of the very resources it exploits and the urgency of the issues that it raises seems to be one of the most exciting sites in Australian theatre. Hence, Aboriginal theatre seems poised to assume a bigger role in Australian theatre in this century.

One area of theatre that receives least attention in theatre history is community theatre. There is a very strong community theatre movement in Australia and various special interest groups organised in terms of locality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, different abilities, etc, have their own theatre groups. These groups obviously address social concerns and give a lower priority to aesthetic values. This can be read as a questioning of the notions of High Art. In any case what this community theatre ensures is the representation of as large a cross section of the Australian population as possible. This plurality and democratic inclusiveness can be seen as an extension of the contemporary contestation of any unitary homogenised Australian identity. By the end of the twentieth century Australian theatre had moved away as far as it could from its earlier notions of Australianness as well as its conception of theatre.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In the nearly two centuries since the first performance of plays in Australia, Australian theatre has struggled to establish its distinct identity. Various forces including those of its cultural links to Europe hindered its full development till nearly the middle of the twentieth century. But the final decades of the twentieth century saw the flowering of Australian drama into a more representational space to carry further the task that Australian theatre has seemed to have accepted for itself – that of defining Australia and Australianness.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write down in point form the history of Australian drama till 1955. Name some major dramatists, identify their concerns, and note the dominant dramatic forms and techniques.
2. Write a short note on the figure of the 'bushranger' in Australian drama.
3. What was the tension between form and content in early 20th century Australian plays. Which plays tackled it successfully and how?
4. Write a short note on the New Wave.
5. Who are the major playwrights of the Second Wave? What are their theatrical concerns?

6. Comment on the masculinity in Australian drama.
7. Write a short note on Aboriginal drama.

1.7 GLOSSARY

- Apocalypse:** the showing of hidden things, especially the telling of what will happen when the world ends.
- Capitalism:** represents a development of meaning in that it has been increasingly used to indicate a particular and historical economic system rather than any economic system as such.
- Expressionism:** the term refers to a movement in Germany early in the 20th century in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. The term can be applied to literature as well but, only judiciously.
- Ibsen:** Henrik (1873-1906), Norwegian dramatist, generally acknowledged as the founder of modern prose drama, who came to fame at a time when the theatre in Europe was at a low ebb. He deals largely with the relation of the individual to his/her social environment and particularly the case of women in marriage.
- Lampoon:** the term derives from the French lampon, said to be from lampons 'let us drink', used as a refrain. It dates only from the 17th century. The verb lamper means 'to swig' or 'to booze'. This suggests excess, coarseness, a rough crudity; a lampoon in fact is a virulent form of satire. It is more likely to be found in graphic caricature than in writing.
- Naturalism:** a term used to describe marks of literature which use realistic methods and subjects to convey a philosophical form of naturalism, or a belief that everything that exists is a part of nature and can be explained by natural and material causes - and not by supernatural, spiritual or paranormal causes.
- Pantomime:** (GK 'all imitator') it may be merely a synonym for mime, but its principal modern meaning is an exotic and spectacular entertainment particularly suitable for children. It first became popular in England in the 18th century, when it was a variation on the Harlequinade. By the 19th century, it

had established itself. Modern pantomime is based on fairy tales, and includes popular songs and topical comedy. Tradition requires the hero or principal boy to be played by a girl, and the comic older woman, the dame, to be played by a man. The term has also been used to describe mine plays, dumb show, melodrama and 18th century mythical ballets. In ancient Rome actors sometimes performed a kind of pantomime, with the aid of masks, in the dramatisation of fabulous tales called *fabula Atellana*.

Philistinism:

the Philistines were an alien and aggressive tribe who inhabited the southern coast of Palestine. From there they continually raided the Israelites. Mathew Arnold, criticised those whom he regarded as the Philistines of England - namely the bourgeois classes who accepted wealth as the measure of greatness.

Pirandello:

Luigi (1873-1935) - Italian dramatist and novelist born in Sicily, who challenged the conventions of naturalism and greatly influenced European drama. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934.

Pirandello anticipates the theatre of Brecht while probing the conflict between reality and appearance, self and persona, actor and character, face and mask.

Realism:

realism is a difficult concept to define. The old doctrine of realism was an assertion of the absolute and objective existence of universals, in the Platonic sense. 'Realism' was first used in French from the 1830s and in English from the 1850s. It developed four distinguishable meanings: (i) as a term to describe, historically, the doctrines of Realists as opposed to those of Nominalists; (ii) as a term to describe new doctrines of the physical world as independent of mind or spirit, in this sense sometimes interchangeable with Naturalism or Materialism, (iii) as a description of facing up to things as they really are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be - 'let us replace sentimentalism by realism, and dare to uncover those simple and terrible laws which be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern'; (iv) as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art and literature - at first an exceptional accuracy of representations, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist.

Surrealism:

this movement originated in France in the 1920s and was a development of Dadaism. The surrealists attempted to express in art and literature the workings of the unconscious mind and to synthesise these workings with the conscious mind. The surrealist allows his/her work to develop non-logically (rather than illogically) so that the results represent the operations of the unconscious.

Vaudeville:

a form of variety entertainment popular from about 1880 to 1932, by which time films and radio had driven it into decline; a stage play on a trivial theme interspersed by a satirical or topical song with a refrain. The term is still used in France and England to describe light, theatrical entertainment of a knockout kind, with musical interludes.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

We would suggest that you read as many of Australian plays as you can get hold of. You must read *The Doll*. Given below is a list of secondary readings.

Fizpatrick, Peter. *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama since 1955*. Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979.

Holloway, Peter (ed). *Contemporary Australian Drama*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1987.

Rees, Leslie. *A History of Australian Drama* (2 Volumes). Sydney: Angus and Robertson Publications, 1978, rept. 1987.

Thomson, Helen. "Drama since 1965" in Bruce Bennett, et al (eds) *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Auckland: OUP, 1998.

UNIT 2 DAVID WILLIAMSON'S DRAMATIC WORLD

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Williamson's Early Plays (1970s)
 - 2.2.1 The Coming of Stork
 - 2.2.2 Don's Party
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 - 2.2.4 What if You Died Tomorrow
 - 2.2.5 The Department
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- 2.3 Williamson's Later Plays
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- 2.4 An Approach to Williamson's Plays
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Glossary
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will look at the entire range of Williamson's plays. Williamson has also written for movies and has directed plays as well. In this unit we will look closely at his early period (1970s, the period to which *The Removalists* belongs) and refer to all his plays in chronological sequence, and try to identify his principal themes and concerns, and mark out the parameters of his theater.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As we saw in Unit 1, David Williamson is one of the few Australian dramatists of the First Wave to have a long and successful career. Williamson is important not just because of his success in commercial terms but because of his continued success in representing the contemporary concerns of white urban middle class Australia. Predominantly satirical of his chosen territory, Williamson's plays over the last thirty years of the twentieth century chalk out the social history of white middle class Australia.

Williamson was born in Melbourne in 1942, and thus grew up during the 'permissive' sixties. He graduated in Mechanical Engineering from Monash University and lectured at the Swinburne College of Technology, Melbourne, on Thermodynamics as well as on Social Psychology. The latter was to be a major preoccupation in his plays.

Williamson started writing plays in the 1960s but the early plays were mostly *revues* and a couple of short plays, which he himself does not think much of. He gained

prominence as a dramatist with his first full-length play in 1970. Given below is a list of his plays:

The Coming of Stork (1970)
The Removalists (1971)
Don's Party (1971)
Jugglers Three (1972)
What if You Died Tomorrow (1973)
The Department (1974)
A Handful of Friends (1976)
The Club (1977)
Travelling North (1979)
Celluloid Heroes (1980)
The Perfectionist (1982)
Sons of Cain (1985)
Emerald City (1987)
Top Silk (1989)
Brilliant Lies (1993)
Dead White Males (1995)
Sanctuary (1995)
Heretic (1996)
Play a Life (1997)

2.2 WILLIAMSON'S EARLY PLAYS (1970s)

2.2.1 The Coming of Stork

Williamson's first full-length play, *The Coming of Stork* (made into a film later), was performed by La Mama Company, which revelled in taking on censorship in 1970. They had performed Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* a year earlier and had received much publicity. *The Coming of Stork* seemed to be tailor made for them and their audiences, it was after all full of four letter words. Fitzpatrick says that the dialogue of the play "has all the subtlety of footballers in the showers" (p.113). Those were heady times for theaters around the English speaking world, when dramatists experienced a sense of liberation, having their characters speak and behave with complete abandon. Williamson uses this freedom to shock but to shock into a sense of recognition. A satirist, he chronicles the life and times of urban Australia.

The Coming of Stork is a play about three young men who share an apartment and an interest in scoring with the opposite sex. The three – Tony, Clyde, and West – are pursuing different careers and dreams. Tony is writing his doctoral thesis, Clyde wants to make money and live on a cattle farm, and West is a salesman. There is a girl, Anna, who comes and goes, willing to sleep with whoever, though she seems to be Clyde's girl. Stork, a beer swilling graduate who works as a gardener, the first of Williamson's larikins, enters the scene and wants to be part of it all including sleeping with Anna. He succeeds in his ambition when Anna, having fought with Clyde, picks him up and takes him off to bed. But Stork is not about to have the full relationship with her that he had earlier dreamed of because she has been 'kind' to other men as well including an older married man.

To cut it short, Anna gets pregnant, and the older male friend of hers, Alan drifts off to his family. Clyde is to marry Anna, and Tony is to marry another girl. Stork and West, who are the best men, flush the rings down the toilet, continue to drink and decide to clear out. The play ends with this gesture against the institution of marriage.

This is a raucous comedy, played out in short scenes strung together in the absence of any attempt at plotting (this absence of plotting is something that David Williamson is constantly accused of). The women are referred to less than politely throughout the

play, as 'chicks' and 'tarts' and 'molls', and their only purpose seems to be to give the males some sport.

In this ripping take off, Williamson shows the pressure on the Australian urban male to 'stoop' to a low register in their speech. It is almost as if they have to deny their sophistication and other ambitions and lives and play out the roles of adolescent vocabulary deficient males. Other aspects of their lives are sources of embarrassment and have to be referred to if at all in a parodic tone.

Peter Fitzpatrick says that "*The Coming of Stork* anticipates *The Removalists* not only in its vigorous crudity, but in the presentation of masculine roles and the rituals, insecurities and competitiveness that surrounds them." (p 114) Others have traced the influence of Jack Hibberd's *White with Wire Wheels* in the play. This may be so but it only proves that *The Coming of Stork* was a play about its times written by a playwright who was aware of other contemporary Australian plays.

The major criticism about the play is that it has no alternate world-view, it does nothing but caricature and parody. This is true of all early Williamson plays where he shows things as he sees them but without pontification or bitterness. His are plays of great wit and to be approached as such. Williamson himself has this to say about the play:

The Coming of Stork is played out among graduate technologists, a group known for brazen and rather awkward openness as far as sexual matters are concerned, but an almost complete lack of communication concerning ambitions, fears, hopes and joys. (Introduction to *Three Plays by David Williamson*, Currency-Methuen, Sydney, 1974)

Perhaps this is time for you to pause and think about the play in your course, *The Removalists*. Is it also a play that lacks structure? What are the issues that the play deals with? What can you say about its language? *The Coming of Stork* is accused of having no rounded characters. Can you say that of *The Removalists*? Does the playwright go beyond satire and parody? Is more than the surface of the social life depicted in the play? What role does humour play in *The Removalists*? Does the play shock you? Is the shock intended by the playwright? These are some of the questions you could ask yourself.

2.2.2 Don's Party

His other play, *Don's Party* (1971), is perhaps the most successful of David Williamson's plays. It is an all out comedy and the lack of violence makes it quite different from *The Removalists*. This seemingly light comedy depicts the state of middle class Australia. Once again Williamson explores the institution of marriage even as he looks at the state of politics and Australian democracy.

Williamson uses the device of a party to bring together on stage a number of people with common interests and backgrounds. Don and Kath who are in their thirties are the hosts. Don is a teacher and an author (though a failed one). Their guests are friends from Don's university days and their women. This is election night and they have also come to celebrate a Labour victory that does not happen. Each of the randy men has been asked to bring a pornographic object to be displayed to others (one of them brings a nude photograph of his estranged wife). Thus you almost see the protagonists of *The Coming of Stork* a decade or so older.

In this mix, you have two of Kath's friends who are Liberals, the pigeons among the cats. While the main ambition of the men seems to be to seduce the women, what we see is the dissatisfaction of both sexes with each other and the state of the nation. In this wicked comedy, Williamson shows the complete lack of any redemptive values, the men do not even succeed in their acts of seduction and the Labour party loses and the only non-University person complains that the graduates are uncouth.

The life of the party is Cooley of the foul mouth, who has a reputation to protect, that of being an honest, straight talking philanderer. He nearly succeeds in taking two of the women to bed but one of them is his own wife who is a part-time stripper. Cooley who is a lawyer by profession is a larikin like Stork. He carries the play with his 'crude' energy. The only way the graduates can bond still is through low talk and sex exploits. The others cannot keep this up for long stretches and have to fight their middle-aged material comfort orientation through their identification with the Labour party and their denunciation of marriage, a denunciation both sexes agreed up on. This is a discontented and bored Australia, but an Australia that yearns for a different way of life.

This is again a play that does not show great deal of plotting or any major differentiation of characters in terms of speech or concerns. But what should be clear to the reader by now is that Williamson's intent is not to shock but to portray things as they are. The number of characters could be quite a problem in production (an overcrowded stage hardly ever makes good viewing, when the characters are to be perceived as individuals), but Williamson seems to have the pulse of his society in this party.

2.2.3 Jugglers Three

Williamson's next play *Jugglers Three* has the Vietnam War as its background. The play was written and first performed during the War years, in 1972. This is a play that Joe Orton, the anarchic British playwright, would have been proud of. A Vietnam War veteran, Graham is back to find that his wife, Keren, is living with a University teacher, Neville. Neville tries to set things right between himself and Graham but only succeeds in upsetting Graham even more. There is a table tennis game between the younger Graham and the older Neville, which must take some doing on stage. If Graham is the foul mouthed University educated Williamson character who is out to shock, Neville is not too far from Williamson's usual cast either. He is not only having an affair with Keren, he is married, has a child and he and his wife are expecting another.

The next character who we see is Neville's pregnant wife, Elizabeth. Then two other war veterans arrive. The first, Dennis, has just robbed a service station. He too has found out that his wife is having an affair with another man. The next, Jamie, is a medical practitioner who is now involved in a project concerning Aboriginal children. Jamie is Keren's ex-lover! Keren arrives and almost predictably dumps Neville who finally returns to his wife and family. A policeman arrives to arrest Dennis but finally ends up sharing the spoils with all the men. Keren and Graham it seems will stay together.

The play shows once again the topsy turviness of the moral universe of middle class Australia. Marriage is a dead institution and nothing else has taken its place. Gender relations are fraught with problems. Language has to be fashionably of the lowest common denominator. It is the University graduates who have to establish the anti-intellectual atmosphere of Williamson's world. Graham claims to have failed in English, spouting lines like "Shakespeare is a shit of a writer." But again like other successful plays by Williamson, this is a thoroughly entertaining and fast moving play full of characteristic verve in dialogue. Adding to the entertainment in performance, for the actors and the audience, is the fact that Williamson not only has his characters playing pin pong on stage, he has them drinking beer throughout!

2.2.4 What if You Died Tomorrow

What if You Died Tomorrow (1973) was first performed nearly a year and half after *Jugglers Three*. In this curious hotch potch of a play, which has been seen as autobiographical by some critics, Williamson explores the world of writers and agents and publishers. Andrew is a successful doctor turned author, who has walked out of his marriage and left his children to live with another woman, Kirsty, and her

three children. He does not get along with Kirsty's children and even his relationship with Kirsty seems to be on the downward curve. His agent wants him to publish his next novel with a new publisher, but the old publisher, Harry Bustle, arrives on the scene to lend it great verbal vigour. Bustle is the Cooley-like Williamson character we have learnt to expect.

Curiously, others lack the same vigour. Williamson adds some complication by introducing Andrew's parents, Ken and Irene, who end up discussing the sexual problems they have had. Ken has intimations of his mortality because of his bad heart and this enables the play to make a point about our transitoriness. But the point gets emphasised later in the play when Gunther, a European who has arrived with Andrew's parents, tries to commit suicide. The agent is a homosexual and this adds to the sexual diversity that is examined. Andrew and the proposed new publisher, Carmel, attempt to make love but are discovered by his parents and Kirsty. A suitably chastised Andrew is shown playing with children's building blocks at the end of the play.

In a play that does not maintain the usual standards of energy, Williamson tries to do a bit more than denigrate marriage. He also makes known his point of view about literary works and their modes of circulation, but as Rees puts it,

The play is about the transitoriness of life, of the fragility of our hold on life, the difficulty of seeing what it is all about, of reconciling self-realisation and social or moral responsibility. It's about the muddle of life... (p 134)

There is also an attempt in the play to go beyond Williamson's own generation, in the portrayal of Andrew's parents and his relationship with them.

2.2.5 The Department

Williamson's next play, *The Department* (1974), is a wonderful expose of manipulative politicking that finds a place of pride in universities across the world. The play is set in the thermodynamics lab of a university and takes the form of a staff meeting. So once again in Williamsonish manner we have the dynamics of interaction among a group of people as the material of a play.

Robby, the manipulative head of department, has called the meeting. The setting of pipes and tubes dominates the stage where the human characters play out their petty power struggles. We are told that an enormous and expensive tank has been built by mistake in the mezzanine floor and nobody had had the temerity to fill it. The department jokes about this folly even as Robby tries to manipulate getting another building constructed. He tries valiantly to keep the staff together even as they take offence at each other's behaviour. Present in the meeting are all shades of academics a resident radical, a scholarly embarrassment, a prickly lecturer, and a pious liberal.

Almost everybody needs the college and if manipulated, they become willing participants. Only the mechanic, Gordon, seems to be an individual in his own right and that is because he is indispensable. As the play roars to its end Gordon has filled the tank and it has miraculously held. A satire that mirrors the world of academics and public service people, the play is a good read and lends itself to successful staging. This is the first of the plays that does not lambast the institution of marriage even if one of Robby's motivations may be the sad state of his marriage. But Williamson is more a dramatist of the surface than of psychological depths.

It must have been clear to you for a while now that Williamson's plays could be classified as **comedies of manners**. His plays seem to be based on reality – the audience surely recognised their upper middle class Australia in them, and yet have laughed at him on his way to the bank. That to me is where his talent lies. Like all great writers of comedies, he takes the familiar and even as it is recognisably familiar makes it comic and different. This has to be a meeting like any other meeting or the

points about manipulative institutional politics would be lost, and yet the play succeeds in making the situation engagingly different. This is Williamson's strength.

2.2.6 A Handful of Friends

His next play, *A Handful of Friends* (1976), is again set in Melbourne. In a play that deals with the world of films (Williamson knew this world intimately by now, having written film scripts) and the academia. The stage is used interestingly – it is divided into two spaces, one depicting the house of Russell and Wendy, who have just returned from the United States of America, and the other depicting the flat that Jill, Russell's sister, lives in. Russell is a historian and Jill a journalist. Their 'handful of friends' include Mark and Sally, who are soon to arrive. Mark is a film producer and Sally is an actress. Mark is making a film and has put Russell in as a character. Sally wants the leading role in the film.

As usual with Williamson, things are quite complicated as far as relationships go. Russell is established quite early to be a philanderer. He seems to have encouraged Mark to sleep with Wendy. Jill seems to have a crush on her brother, but she has had a crush on Mark as well, and perhaps an affair with Sally. Wendy is the one character who does not have much to say in this play whereas much is revealed as is concealed. Everything ends in shambles mainly because Jill publishes a scurrilous article about Sally in a cheap tabloid. Wendy leaves Russell, Sally no longer wants to play the leading role, Mark is happy to pillory Russell in the film... The end of the play has the return of Jill with a casserole and the news she imparts to Russell that people have liked her article.

Marriage is again a non-starter. People feed off people especially in the creative world. What kind of a society is this? "A pleasant little society we live in, isn't it" says Jill at the end of the play. Relationships are tangled by definition. But for the first time Williamson does not feel the need to shock with his language!

2.2.7 The Club

The Club (1977), his next play, resembles *The Department*, and is equally well written. By now Williamson is a master of comic structure and *The Club* is a neat demonstration of his abilities. This play explores the goings on in an Australian Rules Football Club in Melbourne. It is an all male play with six characters. Ted is the president of the club and Gerry the secretary. Laurie, the coach, has just announced to the papers his intention of resigning because the team is not doing well, helped in no way by being forced to pick Geoff, a star player, for every match. Ted had backed Geoff, going to the extent of adding his own money to Geoff's salary. Naturally he speaks of Geoff's bad patch. Danny, a player, threatens to organise a strike if Laurie resigns. Then there is Jock, an ex-leading player of the club who wants to be president.

Williamson is all about surface as we have seen in play after play and *The Club* is no different. We see the hilarious unfolding of petty politicking, which ends in the defeat of the board room manipulators by the players who simply play to win now. Even Geoff, a spaced out non-trier, joins the rebellion realising that playing is easier than not trying. Thus the machinations of Gerry and Jock are defeated while Ted walks out.

This is slight play, slighter than the rest so far. But even here, Williamson's comic genius ensures that the reader/spectator has a rollicking time. There is a hilarious confrontation scene between Jock and Geoff literally on the board room table where Geoff explains himself by "confessing" to making love to his legless sister and then his mother and thus driving his father to suicide!

2.2.8 Travelling North

Williamson's last play of the seventies, *Travelling North* (1979), is quite different in tone and temper in comparison to the other plays. In it he looks at the migration to

sunnier climes in later life that many people in many parts of the world dream about. Does retirement make for a happier life? What happens to relationships in later life? These are some of the questions that run through the play.

Frank, in his seventies, and Frances, in her fifties, have decided to live together and have left Melbourne for the north. They seem to be happy in spite of their age difference. Frances would like to be married if only to please her daughters who live in Melbourne. Frank is the one who does not want marriage. The daughters want their mother back, even if it is for taking care of their children. Frank is not too well and is increasingly irritable. Frances leaves for Melbourne only to return. As Frank grows worse he too makes a trip south, but returns to die on the verandah listening to classical music. Frances decides to travel further north.

In a nuanced examination of the tangled webs that we weave in our relationships, Williamson seems to present a more universal picture than he has done so far. This could have something to do with his experiment with rewriting Shakespeare. After *The Club* Williamson had been commissioned by the Alexander Theatre Company at Monash University to adapt *King Lear*. Williamson's brief was to make Shakespeare more accessible to contemporary audiences in terms of language and dialogue. There is an interesting direct reference to *King Lear* in *Travelling North* – Frank calls Frances' daughters "Goneril and Regan". Like *Lear*, *Travelling North* is about perennial subjects like love and relationships, old age, decay, life and death. Brian Kiernan points out in his study of Williamson's plays that the constant scene changes in *Travelling North*

draw attention to the structure as expressive: as the play develops, the audience sees a significant pattern, and a view of life that is not articulated by any one character, emerge. Structure becomes form, a metaphor for life.

(*Southerly*, 1986, 1, p11)

This is not to suggest that the play lacks a socio-historical specificity. The geography, seasons, and politics are all clearly marked in the play. But it seems to say more than just depict the socio-political history of Australia.

2.3 WILLIAMSON'S LATER PLAYS

In this section we shall look briefly at some of Williamson's later plays, plays from the next two decades of the 20th century.

2.3.1 Celluloid Heroes

Nimrod's tenth anniversary was celebrated with a commissioned play by Williamson in 1980. This was *Celluloid Heroes* (1980), a farce about the world of films with which Williamson was increasingly familiar. In this a producer plans a film which will be a tax write off, i.e. a guaranteed box office disaster! This satirical look at the commercial aspects of the film industry immediately after *Travelling North* perhaps signalled that Williamson was not going to desert the local for the metaphoric universal. He was also going to work within a broad range of comedy.

2.3.2 The Perfectionist

His next play, *The Perfectionist* (1982), is back to Williamson's favourite patch – the state of the modern marriage. This is the subject matter of the play foregrounded throughout in the battle of wits that the play deals with. Feminism, Utopian Marxism are all on view but finally they are seen to offer no solutions in the here and now. Stuart and Barbara are the couple who fight over the terrain. Stuart's father, Jack Gunn, who is a successful lawyer, is the defender of faith in the traditional marriage with its fixed gender roles, while Stuart's mother, Shirley, is an example of what the

frustrations of such a marriage can do. Early in the play, Shirley, who had to give up a stage career to marry, states that "Women of ability and intelligence have only one option, and that's never to marry and never to have children", but the play does not take that any further. Any revolution is in the future, and the play ends with Barbara willing to come back to Stuart hoping to balance family life and career. A wonderful comedy, it again offers a slice of life, even as it examines gender relationships.

2.3.3 Sons of Cain

Sons of Cain (1985) is about a newspaper office but it is also about the stuff of headlines – corruption and the nexus between the government, the police, and big business houses, and their implication in drug trafficking. The journalists of the *Weekly Review* discover that the Minister of Justice and the Prime Minister are involved in drug trafficking. The issues raised then are of a moral as well as a practical nature – how are the management and the journalists to approach the matter when the political establishment uses the laws of libel to silence the press. Obviously a play such as this is more political than Williamson's other plays. Just as *The Perfectionist* allows the audiences to debate issues of social engineering, however disappointed some may be with his positions, *Sons of Cain* allows the audience to debate issues of good governance and corruption. It raises many intriguing questions – for example, would you rather have a corrupt government that works for the welfare of the people or have a government which has never had people friendly policies even if it were the model of probity?

Obviously, *Sons of Cain* was a topical play when it was staged but given the nature of human greed and hunger for power and the nature of hierarchical structures, the situation that the play examines will recur time and again in every democratic society. If the newspaper proprietor allows journalists to do stories that are against those in power, is it out of altruistic motives or is it because the proprietor is striking a deal with the opposition? A host of serious issues are raised in what is a typical Williamson comedy. Williamson plays around with stereotypes (is this one of the ways in which he constructs his famous recognisable characters?) – Kevin, the macho investigative journalist, hard drinking and hard working; Crystal, the feminist radical; Nicole, the hardened careerist; Bronwen, the dedicated reporter who still has to learn the ways of her profession and of the world. Why does Williamson make Kevin hire three women reporters – is it only for the jokes on women and feminism, or is it because Williamson wants to investigate the challenges to what had traditionally been male dominated professions? He of course typically does both!

The play has forty one scenes that cut from one to the other. Williamson merges documentary realism (many in the audience tried to guess who was who in Australian public life) with elements of farce, and much like the Hindi film *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron*, the play shows public life itself to be a farce. Brian Kiernan says that *Sons of Cain* is more like Williamson's early plays in its "combination of realistic, satiric and comic elements" (p. 15).

2.3.4 Top Silk

In *Top Silk* (1989), Williamson tackles corruption of law, and political correctness in universities provides him the subject matter for *Dead White Males* (1995). In *Heretic* (1996), where Williamson moves away from stage-naturalism, he tackles the 'nature versus nurture' debate attacking Margaret Mead the famous Anthropologist, while supporting David Freeman.

2.4 AN APPROACH TO WILLIAMSON'S PLAYS

If there is one characteristic of Williamson's plays that every critic is willing to grant, it is that he creates a recognisable world in his plays. His Australian audiences

identify with the characters and situations in his plays. He raises in his early period all the pertinent issues that middle class white Australians faced in that period.

David Williamson's
Dramatic World

We must warn you that this classification of Williamson's early period is completely arbitrary. The aim here was to chart his course through the first decade of his writing to trace his growth as a dramatist through a description of his plays in order to highlight any changes in his craft and concerns. Can you, on the basis of your reading so far, suggest how the plays of this period itself can be divided?

John McCallum thinks that the following plays constitute Williamson's early period, the period that established his reputation: *The Coming of Stork*, *The Removalists*, *Don's Party*, and *Jugglers Three*. Why do they form a group? They are all satirical comedies that explore, in Williamson's memorable phrase, "the awful Australian uniqueness". Williamson defines this uniqueness as

composed of an abrasive cynicism on the surface, and a rather mawkish warmth underneath. Even the warmth must be expressed negatively: hence the Australian (male) habit of greeting each other with abusive, four-letter expletives. It is also a celebration of Philistinism, and the rejection, ultimately, of cultural values drawn from Europe. It is anti-intellectualism, and a frantic materialism; and a recognition that there are class differences in the sense of material wealth, but no substantial differences in lifestyle.

(Sydney Morning Herald, 3.7.1972)

If the early plays seem to poke fun at this Australianness, they also seem to celebrate it. As Helen Thomson says about the plays of Buzo, Hibberd and Williamson, "the sheer exuberant energy and excess of the depictions ironically... [serves] to celebrate what was being satirised." (p. 192)

This also explains why critics talked and talk of objectivity in his early plays. Williamson's exuberance ultimately makes it difficult to talk about good or bad characters. Stork may be obnoxious but audiences/readers cannot condemn him or dislike him. The play seems to construct a sympathy for him. This is true of both characters as well as other plays. What about Kenny in *The Removalists*? What is your opinion about him? And the other larrikin, Cooley, in *Don's Party*? Cooley is the star of the play, but he is everything – crass, insensitive and vulgar. But audiences like the rich, successful, honest Cooley. But nobody would like to live with him, or would they?

Thus Williamson seems to explore the male world of educated ockerdom, the world of low language and heavy drinking and sexual aspirations. *Jugglers Three* is no different in its concerns. But how different are the other plays? In terms of characters, they get older and more gentle, and the emphasis seems to be more on relationships and the power games that people play. The two themes have always been there in Williamson, only they take centre stage now. We see this exploration of relationships and the games people play in *What if You Died Tomorrow* and in *A Handful of Friends*. The power struggles are the subject matter of both *The Department* and *The Club*. *Travelling North* is still about tangled relationships and motivations.

Another element that unites all these plays is Williamson's comic flair. Even his most serious play, *Travelling North*, is full of gags. From his first play onwards, Williamson has been famous for his one liners and gags straight from revues. But he is also known to have written naturalistic plays. The gags are obviously theatrical, so how does that jell with his naturalism? How does his humour survive his so called objectivity? The answer is best heard from Williamson himself. This quotation also tells you why his plays lack plots of even complex stages:

I'm not experimental. As far as my own writing goes, it's naturalistic with – in the earlier plays – some farcical overtones in the writing, but, I hope, not in the playing style.... I don't use purely theatrical devices. I can't even bear on

stage now a first-act, second-act type format. I think partly because film does it so much better, it just looks clumsy to change scenes on stage and go from scene to scene, so all I find myself able to write for stage now is an ongoing social situation, where people come on stage and interact for two hours and then the play ends. So they're not theatrically innovative at all. They're an attempt to study a social situation.

(Talk at Monash University, 1974)

In the same talk Williamson identified as the strength of the theatre its ability to make audiences feel intimate with the characters on stage and identify with them. This affords him the opportunity to take what he calls a "total social situation, a tight social situation" and explore it naturalistically. This, he feels, implicates the audience, making them part of the situation.

These plays have also been seen as chronicling the political life, the hopes and the despairs of middle class white Australia. As John McCallum puts it:

In his map of Australian society we have seen the transition from what Donald Horne has called the 'Time of Hope' (up to the late sixties), through what Frank Moorhouse has called the 'Days of Wine and Rage' (in the early seventies), to the disillusionment of the late seventies...

(McCallum, p.354)

McCallum is referring to the hopes raised by the Whitlam-led Labour government that came to power in 1972 (the election after that of the *Don's Party*, which belied earlier hopes), and the growing disillusionment with it.

What we have discussed so far is the extraordinary first decade of an extraordinary playwright. As we have seen Williamson carried on from here in his comic journey, exploring issues of relationships and social structure.

As we have said earlier, Williamson's career maps the social history of middle class white Australia. As Helen Thomson puts it, "Williamson has grown, along with his audiences, his plays changing from undergraduate ockerism to the polished self-examinations of an educated middle class living through numerous social changes." (p. 293) His plays have mirrored his own life – leading at times to the airing of dirty linen in public. This autobiographical element has actually meant that there is a certain directness and sincerity in his writing and this is what has led to recognisable characters and engaging issues. His concerns are those of his audiences.

Five of his plays have been successfully filmed – *The Coming of Stork*, *Don's Party*, *The Removalists*, *The Club*, and *Travelling North*. He has also written numerous other film scripts. If his mid-career move from Melbourne to Sydney seemed to signal to his contemporary Melbourne writers his betrayal of Art for Money, he has actually played a major part as the myth maker of the suburbia. Sure he moved, but he continued his theatrical quest – the staging of the drama of middle class life, its concerns, its politics, its daily life. And his audiences have always been mainly people like him.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Williamson has worked with the idea that people should identify with the characters on stage (is this why his plays are dismissed as conservatively naturalistic?), and that audiences should feel intimate with the characters. A play then is the interaction between characters/actors and audiences which leads to the exploration of a social situation. Williamson is highly successful in all his aims and if there is any reservation about him it is based on the maxim that good serious writing cannot make

money! His comic genius should not obscure the fact that he is making serious explorations of a specific social territory and that it is entirely possible to extrapolate a set of values that forms the core of his moral assumptions. His plays can after all be read as crusades against corruption, against disloyalty, against institutionally sanctioned but meaningless relationships, against petty rivalries within organisations, against blindness to the dynamics of personal relationships.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. What are the themes that recur in Williamson's plays?
2. Write a note about Williamson's dramaturgy, his ideas about theatre and the techniques he employs.
3. Why is the larikin/ocker figure important in Williamson's works?

2.7 GLOSSARY

Comedy of manners:	this genre deals with the behaviour and the lives of men and women living under specific social codes. It tends to be preoccupied with the codes of the middle and upper classes and is often marked by elegance, wit and sophistication.
Nimrod:	a theatrical group founded in 1970. Nimrod developed its women in theatre group; also popularly known as the Nimrod theatre.
Revue:	light theatrical show with songs and dances but no story. A revue normally contains jokes about the events and fashions of the moment.

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

These works are in addition to the works already cited in Unit I.
We do think that you should read as many of Williamson's plays as you can access.

Fitzpatrick, Peter. *Williamson*. North Ryde, NSW: Methuen Australia, 1987.

Kiernan, Brian. "The Development of David Williamson", *Southerly*, 4, 1975.

Kiernan, Brian. "Comic-Satiric-Realism: David Williamson's Plays since *The Department*," *Southerly*, 1, 1986

Kiernan, Brian. *David Williamson: A Writer's Career*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1996.

McCallum, John. "A New Map of Australia: The Plays of David Williamson", *ALS*, Vol. II, No. 3, May 1984.

UNIT 3 READING *THE REMOVALISTS*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Act I
 - 3.2.1 The Author's Note
 - 3.2.2 Comic Beginning
 - 3.2.3 Establishing "Mateship" through Authority
 - 3.2.4 Women as objects of Desire
- 3.3 Act II
 - 3.3.1 The Removalists
 - 3.3.2 Tragic Ending
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Questions
- 3.6 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will familiarise ourselves completely with the text of *The Removalists* and try to arrive at our own evaluation of the play. We will look at the plot, trace the manner in which the action builds up and identify the themes and study the characters in action.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know *The Removalists* is one of Williamson's early plays. It premiered in July 1971 at Melbourne's Cafe La Mama with Williamson playing the removalist. Within three months it had travelled to Sydney and to its London performance at the Royal Court theatre and then to the United States. This, the second of his plays, established Williamson's international reputation. The play won the 1971 George Devine Award in Britain. It was the first time that this award was presented to a playwright from outside the United Kingdom. It also won two Australian Writers Guild Awgie Awards in 1972.

But it proved offensive to many people in the various audiences and even if the shock of the language has worn out over the years, the violence of the action can still leave us disturbed. Is that all that one can say about the play – that it is shocking? Does it have any other values to recommend it? Why do critics like Fitzpatrick call it Williamson's strongest play? These are some of the questions we will ask ourselves as we read the play.

It may help you to write down whatever you feel about the play at this point. Do you like it? If so, why, if you do not like then too, why is that so? What do you think the play attempts to do? What is its major theme? What are its other themes? What is Williamson's dramatic technique? Do you have any other comments to offer? But first, what is the action of the play? Try and recollect it sequentially.

3.2 ACT I

Before we begin delving into the play itself, let us take a look at the question of violence in Australian society. No doubt you must have read the play by now and the violence in the play might also have struck you. We hope it has, because the violence

depicted through the language certainly provided us with ample food for thought! If you happen to get hold of the Currency Play Press Publication of 1984, you would have noticed three articles before the actual play begins, entitled, "Reflections on Violence", by Ian Turner, "Authority and Punishment, The Australian Inheritance" and the third, "Police: Authority and Privilege", by Frank Gellsally and Kerry Milto. It is alright if you do not have this publication. It will be included in the reader, but we would like you to read them before you begin, reading the rest of this unit. What does Turner talk about in the first article? He says, *The Removalists* raises three questions: one socio-cultural (is Australian society violent of its essence?); one political (do not forces of "law and order" rest on violence?); one psychological (do all of us have the kinds of aggressive instincts or behaviour pattern which Williamson depicts?) (p.7). This has also been discussed in unit 4 later.

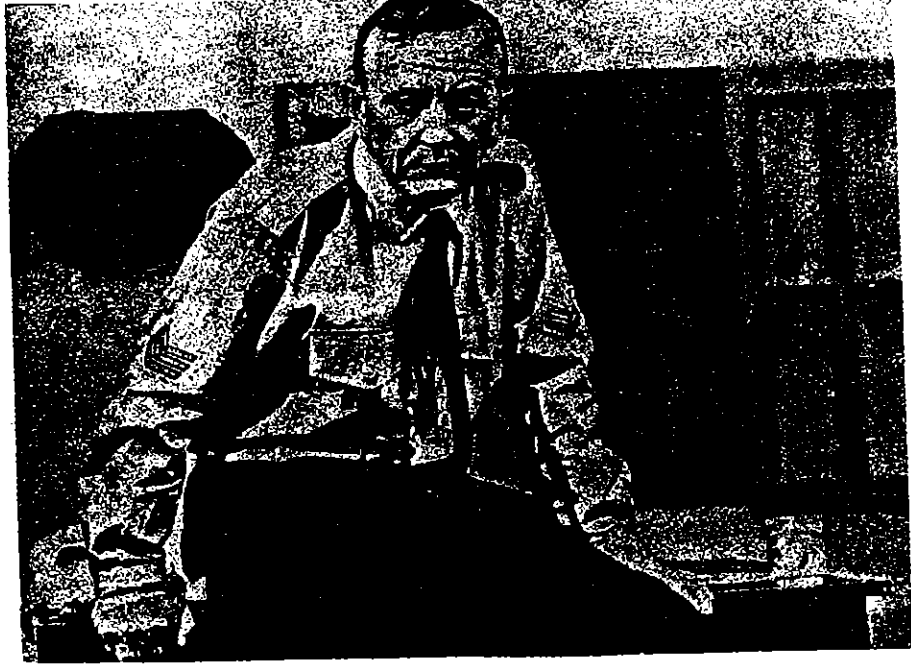
Having reached the end of the VIII Blocks on Australian Literature, we shall not hesitate to presume that you do know something about the history of this island nation. Needless to mention, we are all aware that Australian society was born in violence - the convict system bears testimony to this fact. On the face of it, Ian Turner mentions, that Australian society is relatively more peaceful than most, "but that is all at the public, surface level." (p.9) He feels that violence lies latent in this society and finds various means of release. He gives various instances from the play, where violence is depicted, be it against women or against men, and the process through which violence is accorded - physically, mentally and verbally. He concludes by saying that such violence can end only when "a new society is created, one which would recognise the unique rights of all individuals, and generate ways of living in which now the aggressions which pervade our community would simply not be needed any longer." (p.12)

Stop for a while and reflect on what is being said and on what you have read. Is violence prevalent in our context - the Indian context, what about police brutality and domestic violence? Have you heard of such occurrences or are you aware of any such incidents? Now read the second article carefully, does it shed any light on the matter or contribute to your understanding? In the final article, we find reasons behind the brutality of policemen. They cite two main reasons that help such brutal policemen, one being that the other members of the police force do not or have failed to take action against their colleagues and two, that the courts do not take such charges against the police force seriously. After having read these three articles, you should now proceed towards analysing the play. Actually, before you start reading the rest of this unit, pick up a pencil and a notepad and quickly do the following exercise. Given what you already know about Australia and her literary history, start jotting down relevant details or points, about the First Fleet's landing at Botany Bay, the people that were transported, what Australia meant to Britain then, the crimes that were inflicted upon the convicts, the bushrangers, work your way slowly to 1972, when this play was written. You must have already jotted down relevant points as you read the above mentioned articles and from your reading of the play. Now keeping the play as the centre of focus, do not hesitate to tear the play apart, then put it back together again. When we say 'tear the play apart' we mean, try and see if any of the historical events or incidents are echoed in the play - how would you explain the brutal nature of the two policemen - Ross and Simmonds, the class struggle, between Kenny and Fiona's family, what about gender roles? What sort of picture of Australian society do you get? Stop and reflect on your findings for a while, then continue reading the rest of the unit.

3.2.1 The Author's Note

Even before you read the play there is a prominent 'Author's Note' that you could not have missed. In it, Williamson states that the play is not "an attack on the police forces as such" and that the "play is paramountly about authoritarian behaviour and the processes whereby ordinary individuals are drawn into it." This is a statement of intent by the author, but one that has to be corroborated by our own reading of the play. How then does the action of the play unfold in Act I?

3.2.2 Comic Beginning



Don Crosby as Simmonds

The first characters we meet are the policemen – Sergeant Dan Simmonds and Constable Neville Ross. The setting is a new but already decrepit police station. The Sergeant is trying to pump the Constable, who is new to the job. What do you think is the purpose of this scene? Is it merely to raise some laughs? What happens before other characters come in and why? If the ‘why’ bewilders you, what is being said here is, what does the author attempt to establish in the interchange between Ross and Simmonds?

Simmonds is obviously trying to assert his authority, to take charge of Ross. He is making sure that Ross, the younger man, is no threat to him. This is a classic case of power play, the defence of territory and assertion of supremacy by the older male. Notice how his references to others who preceded Ross at the station rises to a crescendo with the ejection of a younger male from the police force itself.

The stage direction at the beginning of the play states that Simmonds is surveying Ross “as if he were auditioning him for a crucial role in some play.” The long pause that begins the play is finally broken by Ross asking for instruction, Simmonds has already scored a point, already asserted his supremacy. He now acts the old seasoned policeman who is willing to extend his patronage to the young constable if the constable is willing to play by his rules. The first question he asks is about Ross’s father. He has already established that Ross is a callow youth and now checks out on the father whose place of authority he has taken over in Ross’s workday world. Ross is embarrassed to talk about his father and this immediately provides Simmonds with enough sport.

Simmonds has begun the scene by emphasising the essentially corrupt nature of the world of the police in a very matter of fact way – “The money could be good if you happened to be in the right places but this isn’t one of them. No pay-offs here, boy. A few perks but no pay-offs.” He speaks of incompetence in the world of carpenters, having been told that Ross’s father is a carpenter of sorts. He then talks of his daughter and the trouble she has because her husband is a Catholic (“mick”). Simmonds’ wife is a Catholic too, but Ross is not. Since Ross is not Catholic, Simmonds gives up that line of conversation because it has no profit for him. So he moves on to talk about the money that he has made without too much effort. He advises Ross to ‘organise’ himself. This entails not working by the rulebook, “Life’s

got its own rules." What you have here is the attempt by a seasoned campaigner to browbeat a younger male into accepting his authority and worldview. While breaking down Ross's defences, the Sergeant is also recruiting him and ensuring his personal loyalty.

Reading *The Removalists*



Gordon Glenwright as Simmonds and Max Phipps as Ross in the Playbox Theatre season, Sydney 1972, produced by Harry M. Miller and directed by John Bell

Hence, when Ross once again tries to be pro-active in the conversation, and asks about the station he is told that it is in the "city's geographical centre of crime." Simmonds leads him a catechism of inaction saying that since there are only two of them in the station they cannot handle anything big and anything small is not worth handling. Hence their workload is pretty much what they decide it to be. Simmonds says he does anything that looks interesting and then insults Ross by saying that he is not interesting enough. Then he makes his first reference to Ross's predecessors, to one that was "a young smart arse." He asserts that "There's only one person in authority here and that's me." He follows this up with questioning Ross about his father's profession again and Ross resists actively, in what seems a final show of defiance. Simmonds is reduced to threatening him, to reminding him about his complete lack of experience, and to taunting him about his educational qualifications. So far we have had a comic flux of action, when even while the joke has been on the

younger man he has withstood his ground with intermittent resistance against the older man.

3.2.3 Establishing "Mateship" through Authority

Ross is then warned to be smart, to think on his feet. He is told that he has a lot to learn before they can become a team, and that first he has to unlearn what he has been taught at the academy. Simmonds is then sarcastic about the kinds of violence taught at the police school, "They teach you how to shoot people then beat 'em up as well?" He is proud of the fact that in his twenty three years in the force he has never drawn a gun or made an arrest. When Ross asks aggressively what he does then as a policeman, Simmonds pulls rank, seniority and age and when Ross still does not tell him what his father does, Simmonds narrates the story of the constable whose sister had been raped. His over-reaction to another case of alleged rape costs him his job in the force. Simmonds thus seemingly proves that he needs to know everything about Ross and asks him again about Ross's father who turns out to be a coffin maker. Simmonds insists that Ross is embarrassed to talk about his father because he deals with the dead. The two sisters, Kate and Fiona, arrive at the station almost immediately after this. Thus, begins a different movement in the action of the play. Simmonds has Ross where he wants him, subservient to his authority.

3.2.4 Women as Objects of Desire

The arrival of the two women seems at first only another opportunity to test Ross. By the way, have you noticed that the play refers to the two men by their surnames while it refers to the two women by their first names? Simmonds begins with a double entendre – "(Grinning lecherously) Let's have it." The sisters have come to report marital violence, Fiona has been beaten up by her husband. Full of homilies – "It's pretty terrifying when the family unit becomes a seat of violence" – Simmonds goes on a fishing expedition to find out more about the sisters. He is also investigating whether there are any possibilities for sex with the two women.



Peter Cummins as Simmonds, Kate Fitzpatrick as Kate and Jacki Weaver in the film *The Removalists*, produced by Margaret Fink and directed by Tom Jeffrey

As the scene proceeds Simmonds inspects Fiona's bruises lecherously. Kate encourages this almost in a conspiracy with the Sergeant. It is already evident that there is some kind of sibling tension regarding Fiona's marriage and that Kate is trying to assert her authority over her sister. Simmonds is soon sitting with his arm

around Kate while Ross takes polaroid photographs of Fiona's bruises. It is clear that Kate would like Fiona to divorce Kenny but Fiona herself is not too sure about what she ought to do next. Kate is masterminding Fiona's separation from Kenny and has even fixed a house for her. Fiona is to shift the next day but Kenny does not know about it yet. It turns out that the next night is the perfect night because it is Kenny's drinking night and thus the coast would be clear for Fiona to remove the furniture that Kate seems to set such store by. Simmonds suggests that he could arrange a removalist to move the furniture and that he and Ross could be there to help as well as to warn Kenny off. Simmonds then offers to keep an eye on them in the future as well.

The arrangements are finalised though not without a hiccup, because Ross is unaware of the sexual possibilities in the arrangement. When the women leave, Simmonds puts it to him bluntly that they are in for a sexual treat and that Simmonds is pairing up with Kate. Ross's only reply is that he hopes his girlfriend does not find out.



Max Phipps as Ross, with Don Crosby, Jacki Weaver as Fiona and Carole Skinner as Kate in the Nimrod Street Theatre production, 1971. Photo by Robert Walker

This is the end of Act I and by the now Ross has been completely co-opted by Simmonds, and Williamson has managed to establish that human life is full of intricate moves to dominate others. This is not just the pastime of males but women indulge in it as well. If Simmonds dominates Ross who in turn tries to resist, Kate tries to dominate Fiona who too resists her. Every encounter between men and women is one of sexual possibilities and every reference to women in the play so far has been in terms of their looks or sexual behaviour – including the references to Simmonds' wife and daughter. Women are to be hunted and the older male ends the act by asserting his authority by taking first choice of the 'kill'. By the end of the act we are even expecting a sex comedy, a bedroom farce, in the second act. We seem to have travelled quite a distance from the comic act between the two men that began the play. Or is this play about all kinds of corruption in the police force and the other by-plays are just that?

3.3 ACT II

Again, the first stage direction is of interest to us. As an alternative to intermission, Williamson suggests that slides of the family life of Ross and Fiona be shown. This scene begins immediately after Ross expresses hope that his girlfriend Marilyn not

The Removalists

find out about him and Fiona. Ross is thus looking forward to a liaison with Fiona who in turn is walking out on her husband with the child and the furniture. The slides to be shown are of Ross with his family and with Marilyn and of Fiona with Kenny and their baby and of Kate with Fiona's baby. The idea of a slide with Kate holding Fiona's baby serves as a visual reminder that Kate wants to take over Fiona's life. The slides demonstrate and destroy any ideas we might have of a happy family life.

3.3.1 The Removalists



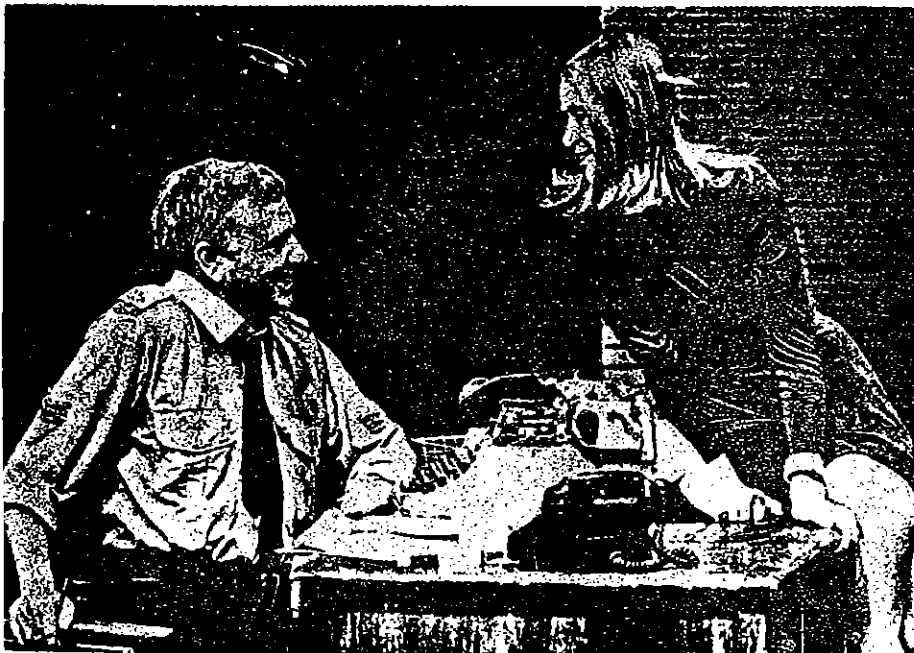
Ed Deveraux as Simmonds, Carole Mowlam as Fiona, Struan Rodger as Ross, Mark McManus as Kenny and Dalene Johnson as Kate in the Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Jim Sharman. Photo by John Haynes

The setting is Fiona and Kenny's flat. It is the next evening and Fiona is getting ready for the move. The scene opens with Kenny coming in unexpectedly and giving Fiona "a long gropy kiss which he evidently enjoys more than she does." Fiona is obviously taken aback by his appearance on the scene and tries to shake him off. His immediate suspicion that she must be seeing someone else and his examination of underwear sizes provides humour but the scene also sets up various facts about their household. Kenny is a macho male, uncouth in behaviour and speech. The gender roles are fixed as far as he is concerned and he is doing the right thing by his wife simply by walking in to drink at home instead of with his male friends and he thinks that his wife should be happy to fix him a meal. He is after all the master of the house.

It is soon obvious that he has come back home because he is in the mood to make love and in the ensuing conversation it is made clear that they had made love even the previous night, the night after which she had made up her mind to leave him, and the night he had beaten her up immediately after making love, because she had not emptied the "kitchen tidy". He feels that a wife and a mother should have done it by herself and the punishment he had meted out was just. It is also established that Kenny resents the role played by Fiona's family in his life. Obviously there is a class difference at work here, and as much as they look down on Kenny's ways he resents their posh behaviour. Kate's arrival now allows him to put on a show for her of the lower class brainless uncouth male. Because Williamson wants us to see him playing a role to the hilt, Kenny's native wit is demonstrated early in the exchanges between him and Kate. When Kate asks him what he is watching, he replies, "Television. It's a new electronic wonder that's just filtered down to the lower classes. Keeps their brains nice and soggy." He deliberately stuffs himself in front of Kate and glaring at her, asks her, "Don't you like my manners?"

How do you picture Kenny at this moment. Are you more sympathetic to him or not? It may be useful to note down for yourself here what your views about Kenny are at this moment in this play. You have already read the entire play and have a certain reading of his character but we are asking you to do something different, to give your reading of his character at this point of the play, in order to show you how Williamson manipulates/constructs the action, and how this is reflected in our reading of characters and the situation at various points. If you had expected to see a boorish wife-beating character, do you feel that Kenny lives up to your expectations? Is he more intelligent than you expected? Do you feel that he is as much if not more sinned against than sinning?

When Kenny decides to go after all to the pub and his friends, the Removalist arrives. It is clear already that the women do not want to confront Kenny at all and that they desperately want him out of the way. When the Removalist arrives, they retreat into the kitchen, leaving the situation to play itself out. There is a funny little scene played between Kenny and the Removalist which ends in Kenny threatening violence but the Removalist standing his ground. The women pretend they have not heard this exchange at all but when Kate offers to go and talk to the Removalist, the plot and the action get a major push forward with the literal gate crashing entry of the two policemen.



Ed Deveraux and Darlene John in the Royal Court production. Photo by John Haynes

Simmonds springs into action immediately in order to take control of the situation and succeeds after a couple of initial hiccups to get Ross to handcuff Kenny to a table, and later to the door handle. Kenny is told that he is being arrested for beating his wife, then for resisting arrest and assaulting the Removalist, and then for using indecent and abusive language. We realise at once that the whole episode is a frame up and that the policemen are abusing their authority. Simmonds kicks Kenny in the thigh, and while Kenny complains that "You can't walk into a man's house and kick him", you realise that not only has the Sergeant done so, he seems to feel that he has a right to do so. The level of violence escalates inevitably because Kenny's anger comes out in vituperative language directed at everybody, but especially at Kate, Simmonds' prospective date. Kenny also discovers the plot now, and realises that Fiona has planned to walk out on him.

While Ross becomes the de facto assistant to the Removalist, Simmonds punches Kenny every time he steps out of line in the way he speaks to the five of them. Williamson's stage direction reads, "THE SERGEANT punches KENNY in the gut. He is in command of the situation and enjoying it." Punching a handcuffed Kenny is an assertion of his authority. It is also made clear that Simmonds takes pride in the fact that he can hit without leaving tell tale bruises on the victim. The Removalist is the only one that he has no control over but otherwise controls everyone else's actions. He keeps his cool even when Kenny taunts him to have a fist fight because he realises that he does not stand to gain anything but trouble in a brawl. In the arguments that follow between Kenny, Fiona and Kate, various skeletons come tumbling out of closets. It turns out that Kate has not only a "healthy" sexual urge but that she had propositioned Kenny himself. She calls for a taxi to leave and the Sergeant is left with the prospect of a lost opportunity.

To make it worse Kenny finds the perfect provocation - talking about his own sexual prowess. He says that Fiona had five orgasms with him the previous night - "She came five times in one grapple, Sergeant." When Simmonds loses control and beats him up ferociously, Kenny exults that now he would have bruises to show. He provokes the Sergeant again by speaking to Fiona and asking her to say how she cannot get enough of him sometimes. Simmonds loses control again but then he makes an important statement. He claims that the test of manhood is self-control. His wife had developed medical complications when their son had been born and that he had not been allowed near her for five years after that because his wife was not to become pregnant. His wife he has already informed us is catholic, and hence against family planning. Thus it seems that the Sergeant is a sexually frustrated man who tries to find other women and, further, is insecure about his own prowess. There is a lull after this outburst, a lull in which, while the furniture is still being moved, Kate and Simmonds talk about their families. By this time Kenny is genuinely afraid of the violence that Simmonds can unleash. This particular movement in the action ends with the Sergeant castigating Kate for her extra-marital affairs. Having been denied by circumstances from more intimate relations with her, he ends up talking of her immorality. This is a clear indication of the ultimate hypocrisy practiced by the male.

The Sergeant and the women go off-stage during the Sergeant's tirade and there is a revealing bit of interaction between the three other characters. Kenny tries to get the Removalist to ring for the cops while Ross has gone out to ask for further instructions on behalf of the Removalist. The Removalist refuses to get involved, for after all, Simmonds and Ross are cops themselves. When Ross comes back he is in a rage because he has obviously been ticked off for interrupting the argument. He ticks both the Removalist and Kenny off, and he reprimands Kenny for speaking sarcastically saying that he is not the one who has hit him. But Ross is still the follower, not the authoratative figure and this is illustrated by the Removalist obeying Simmonds rather than the former (Ross) in removing the same dresser that both of them had suggested he move next.

It becomes apparent to Kenny now that not only has his wife's family ganged up on him – his mother-in-law is giving money for the flat – but that he will be expected to pay for the maintenance of his daughter. He complains that "In the old days if a man didn't give his wife a thrashing every week or so she wouldn't respect him. Nowadays you give 'em a love pat and they shoot right through on you." No male in the play ever contradicts his position. Simmonds tries to proposition Fiona, now that Kate has decided to leave, in front of Kenny and enjoys their discomfiture. While Kenny warns her, Fiona is completely confused by the turn of events. Kate comes back to ask Fiona to accompany her in the taxi. By now Simmonds wants to help Fiona shift in order to cover his losses but Kate takes charge and marches Fiona off after warning the Sergeant not to go over either to or near the new flat. Kenny tries to get Fiona have him released but Simmonds is not going to be denied some sport at least. He says Kenny's offences have been against the policemen and thus the women go off with Kenny still handcuffed to the door and at the mercy of the two policemen.

3.3.2 Tragic Ending

Now Simmonds starts ragging Kenny and involves Ross in the action. Ross refuses to let Kenny be beaten even though Kenny has been made to speak against him. Simmonds knees him anyway. The next piece of action is actually initiated by Kenny because the policemen finally release him writhing on the floor and begin to walk away when he threatens Simmonds. Ross is ordered to arrest him but Kenny threatens him with a chair and also abuses him calling him a coward among other things. This is the final straw for Ross who launches himself on Kenny in a ferocious assault which continues off-stage.

Ross comes back convinced that he has killed Kenny. Simmonds continues to give him 'valuable' lessons in beating up people without leaving any evidence as also about writing reports. He finally goes to have a look and he too thinks that Kenny may have died. The seemingly still comic play suddenly changes track. When Ross suggest they cover it up, Simmonds has only objections to it all and says that Ross has to take the rap for what he has done. It is then that Ross, who is increasingly anxious, says that he could pin the murder on the Sergeant because there have been witnesses to the Sergeant's assault on Kenny. They are both hysterical about what has happened and its probable consequences when Kenny staggers in. They do not even notice him till a little later. For the moment comedy seems to have returned and we can actually sit back and relax in our chairs. While Ross is relieved and wants to get a doctor for Kenny, Simmonds does not want any evidence to be recorded at all and vetoes the idea of a doctor.

When Kenny states that he is going to have his wounds certified by a doctor any way, Simmonds offers him a quid pro quo – female companionship. Kenny negotiates with Simmonds about the call girls and they both agree to the terms. Kenny wants his by-weekly free visits to the call girls to continue even if Fiona comes back to him. Ross is bewildered by it all and even as they drink beer, Ross gets further lessons in police work. This is pure satire at work – you are not allowed to feel any sympathy for Kenny or even for Ross. But just then Kenny actually dies and the two policemen are back in their hysterical state. They blame each other again and Simmonds once again tries to pin the responsibility on Ross who, in turn, advocates collective responsibility. Ross begins to hit Simmonds saying that if they hit each other sufficiently they could make it look as if Kenny had gone berserk. The play ends here with the stage direction stating that "the fight almost takes on the air of a frenzied ritual of exorcism." The play begins with a verbal skirmish between an older and a younger man, with the older striving to assert his authority, to defend his territory, and ends with a ritual fight between them. This is a fight called for by the young man not so much to displace the older man as to defend his own sense of security.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

We can see that the action of the play consists of a series of dramatic movements. The initial 'interrogation', the verbal skirmish between the Sergeant and Ross, is almost petering out when the women arrive to move the play forward. The Kenny-Fiona scene is getting nowhere when Kate arrives. We do not want to argue this out completely but the play moves forward again with the arrival of the policemen. The verbal and physical violence that ensues is again acted out in units which are interconnected by small catalysts of action. You can identify these units easily. The play is prolonged to its final conclusion because of Kenny's taunting of the policemen. The penultimate unit is caused by Kenny staggering back and the action takes on a surrealist comic hue when they discuss the call-girl scheme. The final unit is the result of the actual death of Kenny. Every time you think the action is going to flag, the play gets a push from someone's arrival or something that is said. This, in a way, is a fair reading of the way in which the action of the play is constituted, i.e. the structure of the play.

This allows the play to use the readers'/audiences' reactions or expectations, playing them off against what actually happens in the play. Since the action is broken up, and we cannot be sure at any point where the play is going, we end up reflecting on the action, evaluating it and the characters, noting the by play between characters, and wondering where it will all end. We are not caught up in the rush and tumble of unitary action that moves inevitably and inexorably towards a conclusion, however unexpected. What we see is almost a series of accidental interactions between characters who feel forced to behave in a certain manner. We see a society where sexual prowess, physical strength and stamina play a great role in the lives of men, and, because of the gendered hierarchical nature of society, in the lives of women as well.

3.5 QUESTIONS

1. Identify the discrete units of action in the play. How are they joined together?
2. How expected is the ending of the play? Substantiate your answer.

3.6 SUGGESTED READING

This is essential reading obviously:

Williamson, David. *The Removalists*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1972, rept 1984 by Currency Methue Drama Pty Ltd.

UNIT 4 THEMES AND TECHNIQUES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Themes
 - 4.2.1 Concerns
 - 4.2.2 Characters
 - 4.2.3 Violence in the Play
 - 4.2.4 The Marriage Motif
- 4.3 The Title of the Play
 - 4.3.1 Language
- 4.4 Techniques
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will explore the various themes of the play, see the concerns that Williamson exhibits in this play, analyse the characters, examine the language and identify the dramatic techniques that Williamson employs.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

What are the major themes of the play? Now that we have had a close look at the action of the play can we agree with Williamson that the play is not simply an anti-police play? Take a few minutes and write down what you think are the major themes dealt with in *The Removalists*.

Does your listing look like this – police brutality; violence of various kinds, marital, authoritarian, and macho; the state of marriage; sexual morality and/or behaviour and its impact on society; all kinds of social degradation in contemporary Australia.... Our aim is to identify the major themes and concerns of Williamson in this play and the manner in which he expresses them in this play. This means that not only do we have to examine our list of themes but also examine the text of the play closely in order to see how Williamson employs language and other theatrical devices.

4.2 THEMES

Other than the note that Williamson has placed in the beginning of the play denying that it is specifically targeted against the police, he has also written an article on the play which we shall refer to here. This was published in the *Meanjin Quarterly* in December 1974 (Volume 33, No. 4) and is called "*The Removalists: A Conjunction of Limitations*". In the article, Williamson argues that the play is not an anti-police play and that he does not "and cannot write from an ideological standpoint – at least not from a simplistic ideological standpoint." (p. 414) This misreading, he says, had led to arguments in the first production when some actors had wanted to toughen the play in its supposed anti-police stand. In his opinion the others had no actual acquaintance with policemen, while he knew some personally, especially his own uncle. Williamson's uncle had never punched anybody in his life and, interestingly,

"he proudly claimed to me once that he had made not a single arrest for fourteen years." (p. 415) (You can see how Williamson uses the last statement so creatively in the play.) Williamson's position is that ideology oversimplifies characterisation and the complexities of a given social situation. His interest he says is in the interaction between the three major male characters in the play – Simmonds, Kenny, and Ross.

4.2.1 Concerns

Williamson had got the plot of the play from a story told to him by a removalist that he had used. The removalist told him about "the 'great day' he had had last Friday." (p. 415) He was shifting the furniture of a wife leaving her husband and a couple of cops had come to help the girl and her sister. When the husband had got 'stropky', the policemen had given him a beating. Williamson felt that what was interesting was that the removalist had identified with the policemen. He felt that the husband deserved a beating and that the policemen had every right to beat the man. This gave rise to the play where the situation is let to run to its ultimate conclusion. So obviously, the removalist represents the silently collaborating voyeuristic society that collaborates by acceptance in the violence. Not only is the violence accepted, it is admired as the natural and necessary expression of authority. Hence, the interaction of the characters is not only an expression of their individual personalities but also of societal structures and conditioning. Thus the play is a profound indictment or exploration of the way in which violence underpins Australian society and its mores.

The two prefatory articles in the Currency Methuen edition emphasise this. They, especially the second article, argue that Australia was constituted in violence and that its history has more than a dose of violent incidents. Galbally and Milte state that violence on behalf of the state, on the side of law and order, has always been a problem, its solution lies in education and a more, not less, permissive society where there is greater personal freedom. They also argue that violence against the state and other citizens is often the result of societal pressures. Some of the violence perpetrated by the police may thus be because the frustrated policeman has a sanctioned avenue to vent his individual frustration.

In the first article, Ian Turner says that

The Removalists raises three questions: one socio-cultural (is Australian society violent of its essence?); one political (do the forces of "law and order" rest on violence?); one psychological (do all of us have the kinds of aggressive instincts or behaviour patterns which Williamson depicts?) (p.3)

His answer to the first question is that Australia is "a more peaceful society than most." (p.5) But he feels that there is a deeper level of violence in Australian society but that this finds expression "in outlets which are socially approved or in mores which are unthinkingly accepted socially." The obvious example are the games that Australians love, Australian Rules Football in particular. The violence of the game is mirrored in the accepted behaviour on the grounds as well as in the expectations and approval of commentators. The mores which are unthinkingly accepted which are imbued with violence are those that relate to male-female relationships. Turner feels that this is so not only because of the anti-woman nature of the Judaeo-Christian culture but also because of the Australian code of masculinity which positively isolates women in their role as sex objects. The answer to the third question is that we are all capable of violence because of the nature of power and we will only change when social structures change enough to recognise the unique rights of all individuals.

4.2.2 Characters

How do these two articles help you in understanding and evaluating the play? While Australia may have its own unique history, is violence not endemic in most societies, in our own society? Is this because of inherent inequalities? Is violence an issue only

in Australia? Obviously not. But Australian history has given rise to certain values which may contribute in unique ways to a culture of violence. What we can see immediately is the Australian construct of masculinity, its valorisation of physicality, of stamina and strength, that gives rise to situations where violence is both the medium for and the expression of such masculinity. If you are a real man you have got to take it and dish it out too. The ocker can know or do no better than this.

The ocker figure here is of course Kenny. What are we told about him, what is he like in action, what do we make of him? In Williamson's own words, in the article we have already referred to, Kenny's "self-esteem is totally bound up with a conception of himself as a great fucker and a great fighter – a man who can absorb any amount of punishment without giving visible signs that he is hurt." (p 415) As pointed out in Unit 1, the ocker is pushy and crude. He asserts his masculinity through his heavy drinking and tough talking and boasting about his female conquests. The ocker is aggressively articulate and lives for material pleasures. Nothing else matters for him. Does this define Kenny? The problem with the ocker figure is that even if you find him likable in his anti-authoritarianism, you will have to admit that he is no individual who respects the rights of another's unique individuality. The ocker who has to boast of his sexual conquests cannot imagine a world of gender equality. Further, almost by definition, he will have to bow to forces superior to him in their drinking, sexual, or physical abilities, an anathema to him. Hence, he has to keep proving his superiority in these fields.

This seems to explain quite a bit of the action. Kenny the stud cannot stomach the idea of Fiona leaving him because it seems to question his sexual prowess. This is why he keeps asserting how good he is in bed and how much she wants him. He has to assert his masculinity, he is not losing his wife due to any inadequacy of his. In a revealing outburst he tells his wife:

You think this's going to be one great big ball, don't you? You're in for a bloody great shock. One in every three men is a premature ejaculator. Did your sister ever tell you that? One in three's got a bloody weak back. You ask her. You've been dying to try it all out for years, haven't you? Well, don't come crawling back to me!....

As Williamson says, Kenny's "secret fear is that Fiona is leaving him because of some lack of sexual prowess." (p. 416) He runs down other men because of this, because he has to show himself as the better class of performer, as a stud. Obviously, he is not so certain of his prowess, or he would not have this particular insecurity. Just as contrast, consider his belief in his fighting ability – that never flags throughout the play. His secret fear is in that area where qualitative comparisons are impossible for him to make. But it is a crucial area because his self-esteem is not constituted by how many women he makes love to but his ability as a lover. Is this the major reason for the compromise that he is willing to work out at the end – his call girls visitation rights. He is after all a stud and needs more than his wife to satisfy him.

The very end of the play becomes inevitable because of his need to assert his physical superiority. He has lost his wife but he is not going to be a loser in all markers of his manhood. He has been handcuffed and beaten and he cannot allow himself to be released and left there. He has to stand up for himself, show the policemen that he is man enough to take them on. He taunts them back into killing him. When they are leaving he threatens Simmonds with retaliation:

Get out! Go on. Get out, you animal. You'll step out of your house one dark night and you'll get it, boy. Kenny Carter doesn't forget somethin' like this. Now piss off to your police station and crawl back into your woodwork!

He has mates who will help him get even. But when he is threatened with arrest again, he turns his anger onto Ross who cannot see that the abusive language directed seemingly at him is actually meant for Simmonds. But then he himself may also be

hitting Kenny as a substitute figure for the Sergeant. Simmonds is the coward hiding behind his uniform but poor Ross who has got it from everyone throughout the play finally loses control and attacks Kenny viciously. Even when Kenny staggers in later he talks of his ability to absorb punishment, he is still a man. And as pointed out, he is 'man' enough to negotiate terms and conditions for the call-girl racket as price for keeping quiet about the incident. Before he dies, he has done his bit for his image – he has shown that he can take savage punishment, that he is not afraid of authority, and that he is an extremely sexually active male. He is uniquely Australian.

John McCallum has a different reading of the action. He sees Kenny as the celebratory element in the play, "the lovable ocker... the scapegoat figure." (p. 347) While Kenny is violent, McCallum feels that his violence is acceptable, because it is within marriage. He notes "his humour and resilience and generally lovable vulgarity – resisting the nastiness of the institutional fools by his individualism." What McCallum finds problematic is then Kenny's enthusiasm for the call-girl scheme towards the end, "implying as it does his total complicity in the violent, inhuman system which is about to result in his sudden death." If this is in character, as we have argued, then the character lets critics like McCallum down. He writes that the "character that we have affectionately accepted as representative of the awful Australian uniqueness has betrayed us, and we are left with a very bleak view indeed." He feels that sympathy is built for this character, and while the end may question the sympathy, the reasons for the positive reaction are never explored. He finds the whole thing a dramaturgical trick. What McCallum does not examine at all is that sympathy is built in for other characters as well – Ross and Fiona in particular. So a reading which looks at Kenny sympathetically, even if only for a while, is totally flawed. But that is our opinion. You'll have to make up your own minds. In any case, do you find violence within marriage any more acceptable than outside the home?

This is not to deny that one has sympathy for Kenny – beer drinking, amorous Kenny who does not know what he has walked into or that he has caused a great deal of consternation to his wife and her sister by coming home unexpectedly. We do not expect him to die and the situation is full of comic possibilities. He is quite an energetic character who can cock a snook wonderfully at his wife's posh family whose disdain for his social he is well aware of. In Rees's view, if the play so far and later "manages to exhibit virtually all the meanest traits in human nature", it also offsets the darkness "with the noisy good nature of the larrikin Kenny" and Williamson's use of language (p. 121). It seems that it is not so much the "good nature" of Kenny that offsets anything but the comedy inherent in various situations including those involving other characters. The fact that the play finally ends in the death of Kenny cannot negate the comedy that runs through the play. It may not be necessary to read the play from Kenny's point of view, whatever that may be. Kenny does not need to be read as the only good guy, if only a rough diamond, in the play. There are no good guys here. If there is sympathy for Kenny, it is for a man who cannot know better. The same level of sympathy can be extended to Ross or actually even to Simmonds. They are all products of their society and even if Williamson provides some data for reading them individually, psychologically, they are ultimately characters who act out the values of a system. Williamson himself feels so.

He says that

To those critics who have suggested that I am unsympathetic to Kenny, the Sergeant and Ross, I can only answer that I'm not. I am deeply sympathetic. They are not horrific, but their conditioning is.

(Meanjin, P. 416)

Williamson goes on to give a reading of the characters and their conditioning and then says that the circumstances that lead to the end of the play could have been avoided if any of the three characters had been less constrained by their conditioning. He ends the article saying that "in a society which conditions its inhabitants in a primitive and violent way, you are sure to find primitive and violent behaviour."

4.2.3 Violence in the Play

Kenny is as complicit in the system that finally kills him as the others who beat him up or watch it happening. For each of the male characters their notion of the self is bound up in performative terms, in terms of sexuality, authority, and approval. They have to find assurances about their manhood in these terms. We have talked about Kenny but Simmonds is no different. Simmonds, as we saw in our reading of Act I, is the older male safeguarding his territory from possible challengers from among the young. This territory is the police station. He is Simmonds the Sergeant. Notice how he is always referred to either by his surname or designation. It is the formality of his authority that defines his being. People had better respect him, he has his own police station. His examination of Ross in the beginning of the play is to assert his authority, to impress on the young recruit that he is dealing with a master of their vocation. He ensures throughout the action that Ross does not forget his position. Furthermore, he creates or grabs opportunities for sexual liaisons. The call-girl racket mentioned at the end of the play only confirms our opinion of him. He is full of prejudices, for example against Catholics. His anger with the Catholic faith's attitude to contraception is explained poignantly later when he says that he could not make love to his wife for five years because she was not allowed to get pregnant. Five years was all he could wait though! He has the same attitude to women as any true blooded ocker – they are game to be had at will. He acts the tough policeman for the benefit of the ladies, but quite enjoys it. His position allows him to hit without fear of retaliation. He too is a stud in his own estimation.

What is seemingly contradictory is that he is willing to castigate Kate about her sexual behaviour, calling her immoral. But this is not an inconsistency of character. Simmonds loses control first when Kenny shouts out his own sexual prowess. One can see immediately that Kenny's outburst angers Simmonds more than anything else till then. The man either does not like considering the competition that other males are capable of or he does not like talking directly about sex. The latter is incorrect because he has already talked about the possibility to Ross in the first act. Hence we have a scenario where every young male is a threat and every statement of performance an attempt at dethroning him. He truly feels insecure, perhaps even inadequate. Notice how he does not take on Kenny's offer for a straight fight. His sense of insecurity/inadequacy cannot stomach the fact that a woman has just walked out on him, a woman who, it transpires may have picked him up rather than the other way around. It was not he who was going to score, she was. This outrages his sense of order and authority, women cannot play the same games as men, not to the same rules. Hence his castigation of Kate. His value system is no different from Kenny's. She will not have him, she is proactive in sex, she is a whore who has to be castigated for her immorality. He is not inconsistent, he is only a frightened insecure man puffed up into a bully by the uniform.

Violence is thus an expression of power as well as its defence. This can be in any space including the domestic. Ross is learning valuable lessons in all this. He too sees his worth in terms of his competence as a policeman, in others approval. He is willing to go along with the sexual liaison so long as his girlfriend does not come to know about it, he willingly participates in the voyeuristic photographing of Fiona at the police station, and he can look away from all violence and does. And the final lesson he implements is in the use of violence to protect his domain, to cover up the consequences of his behaviour, of his violent behaviour. He is shown as willing to bask in "his new notoriety" when Kenny and Simmonds talk about his temper. His coy smiles also indicate that he could easily be persuaded to participate in the call-girl racket. As Kenny says, he has learned more about law and life in this one day than he could have in a whole year at Coliege. He has also learnt a lot more about himself.

Even the Removalist with his "ten thousand dollars worth of machinery tickin' over out there" is party to all this. He is never referred to by his name, he is completely

identified with his profession. He is quite willing to exploit the inexperienced Ross, making him carry all the furniture, and he is quite willing to look away while the Sergeant is beating up Kenny. He does not only look away, he approves of the beating. When it seems to be getting out of hand, and when Kenny pleads with him to call for help, the Removalist not only says that he cannot afford to get involved, he states his philosophy of life:

Sorry, mate. I've got a pretty simple philosophy. If there's work I work, and if nobody interferes with me then I don't interfere with nobody.

I mind me own business, if other people mind theirs, and that's the way I play the game.

He is more respectful to the Sergeant than to Ross, and he does not care about Kenny. He is more bothered about money than anything else, and he is prejudiced against undercutting immigrants. He is your normal, run of the mill male who subscribes to all the dominant values of his society. His self-esteem is in doing his job with competence and as little sweat as possible. As Williamson says in his article, "there are many other parameters of self esteem: reasonableness, tolerance, compassion, and humility – to name a few – yet none of the men in the play are able to define themselves or identify with qualities such as these." (p. 417)

How do the women define themselves and what is the role they play in the violence that the play explores? This is an important question because it is a common complaint that Williamson does not create fully developed women characters in his early plays. I would suggest that in *The Removalists*, the women are presented the way they are because of their 'dramatic' world, because of the nature of the society being explored.

To start with the elder sister, Kate seems to object to the Fiona-Kenny marriage on grounds of class. Why did she then want to seduce Kenny? But it is not only Kenny that she has desired sexually. Kenny tells the Sergeant gleefully that Kate cannot resist any man. From Kate's embarrassed admissions it is clear that she has had her share of men while still married. If you go back to the first Act, you will remember that the Sergeant gets Kate's attention by the simple expedient of showing interest in Fiona. What you then have is a character who defines her being by her attractiveness to men. Objectified by a masculine society, her self-esteem is her sexuality. She is, without realising it, a threat to the men, to the Sergeant in particular. She has imbibed the values of the society only too well, and she willingly accepts the help offered by the Sergeant. She may not have expected the violence that takes place but she does nothing to stop it. Fiona is alarmed and remonstrates the Sergeant even if ineffectually but Kate does nothing to stop the beating up of Kenny. It quite serves her purpose. She is decisive, wants to exercise power over everybody in the play, and she can understand and even approve of the needs and strategies of the others to do the same. Violence is part of the power struggle, and is part of her mental landscape.

Fiona is quite different. She is married to Kenny and from all evidence in the play, she is not too unhappy with him. It is the class difference that her family feels so acutely about (and Kenny's reaction to it) that seems to have been a constant source of pressure for her. She is vulnerable to her sister's authority and is someone who does not challenge any power structure too hard. This explains her behaviour in the police station, where she lets herself be physically inspected and photographed. All through she makes clear that she does not agree with her sister fully and that she does not think much of the idea of the policemen coming home to help in the shifting. But she acquiesces to the arrangement. And while she is alarmed at the turn the situation takes in the Act II, she does not do more than remonstrate feebly. At the end when Kenny pleads with her, she takes back her complaint but when the Sergeant refuses to release Kenny, she allows herself to be dragged out by her sister. It is not that she has lacked initiative in life (after all she had tried to get out of Australia in the trip where she met Kenny), it is that there seems to be no viable alternative for her in this male

society except perhaps a sexless retirement for a while. If these are the values that men live by, and those values define at least one kind of Australia, then what role do women have in that Australia? They can only make ineffectual noises and moves.

Thus Fiona is the typical housewife of an ocker home – her husband will have his mates and his drinks. She will have to be there for him when he wants her, and run his household as efficiently as she can. She will be pushed around and beaten at times by her husband. She accepts the way this society functions. It may be a mistake in time reference in the play but, as the text stands, she and Kenny have made love even the night before Act II, after which she has made her complaint to the police in Act I. From the reference in Act I, it seems that she had been beaten by Kenny the day before the action begins. And in Act II, Kenny reminds her in the beginning that she had enjoyed making love the night before, i.e. Thursday night. And she tells him that she had, but he had beaten her immediately afterwards – “Well, it hardly inspires confidence that you’re made love to one minute and bashed up the next.” He says so to the Sergeant as well, when he boasts of her enjoyment of his lovemaking the previous night. But she has been beaten again. This seems to be then a pattern that she is tired of now, but that she has accepted as the order of things so far.

The sergeant says in Act I, that “It’s pretty terrifying when the family unit becomes a seat of violence.” But this seems to be just a platitude from a man who is out to impress two women who he sees as physical objects to be enjoyed, the way he sees all women. The family unit is the seat of all violence and marital violence seems to be an accepted fact of life. Husbands beat wives. Just as all authority figures are violent in the exercise and defence of their authority. Men are violent to each other in order to establish the pecking order, and more so in front of women in order to establish their manhood. Inherently inequality engenders violence even to maintain itself.

4.2.4 The Marriage Motif

And how is marriage, the punching bag of early Williamson, depicted in the play? You have three marriages, two that are talked about and one that is depicted – the Sergeant’s, Kate’s, and Fiona-Kenny’s. The institution of marriage comes off pretty badly, doesn’t it? It seems that Kate stays on in her marriage for purely economic reasons. As she says about Ralph, her husband – “He’s provided a good life for me and my children and he’s a fine man.” She has affairs, sexual liaisons, with various men and argues that too much fuss should not be made about affairs these days. Marriage seems to be a bad trap which the partners try to make the best of in their own ways. The duty of a husband may still be to provide, but what are the other responsibilities that come with marriage? And what are the duties of the wife? It seems that what we have is travesties of traditional marriage. The men seem to set no store by ideas of fidelity, the women do not seem to care much either. Kenny thinks that it is the duty of the woman to do all the household chores and that it behoves on him as the man of the family to beat her up if she fails to do her chores to his satisfaction. The Sergeant finds the medical condition of his wife a great strain, and they then proceed to have children against the doctor’s orders. The risk is all the woman’s but it is part of her duty to keep her husband sexually satisfied. There is no hope for marriage in this society – see where the potential union between Ross and Marilyn is already heading.

As we saw in our close reading of the play all these issues jump out of the pages of the play/text. We have explored the problem of violence in society, within and outside marriage, and explored its relation to the idea of the Australian male. This leads us to both sexual morality and the state of the marriage. The whole of society seems infected with this malaise of people lacking all sense of direction and even good sense. The ending of the play with the two men taking part in a fight that “takes on the air of a frenzied ritual of exorcism” is emblematic of a society which has defined itself in such a physical, limited masculine way.

Fitzpatrick says that *The Removalists* is not "the kind of play one can forget, and in relation of its guaranteed shock-value to some very provocative sociology and very assured craftsmanship, it remains the strongest of Williamson's plays." (pp 114-15) He feels that the play's limitation is in not exploring the characters in terms of individual psychology, in that "the characters' roles are explored more for representativeness than particularity...." (p 119) But, he concedes, the organising ideas and the plot are "strong enough to make *The Removalists* compelling in the theatre...." (p 119) In any case, I think we can safely agree that the play is not merely about police atrocities however much our own situation may tempt us to read it in that manner. This is a complex play that compels us to read not only Williamson's Australia but also our own India because we have to ask ourselves how many of these values we accept as well. It is a bleak play because it exploits our laughter to make us complicit in the violence of the action. But we must remember that we are manipulated (as well as shocked?) as much by the language of the play as by its structure and action. This is what we will examine next.

4.3 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY

Have you paid close attention to the text? I am sure you know it inside out by now. What then is the significance of the title? Note, if you done so, have not, that it is in the plural. Who are the removalists in the play? Is it a jocular reference to the fact that Ross assists the Removalist in shifting the furniture? Is it a reference to the fact that the policemen change roles when they offer to help the women shift house? Are the policemen the removalists? And if they are, is it only a simple reference to the role that they want to play in the lives of the two women? Are they removalists for the life changing (change place taking here) impact they have on people's lives? Isn't Kate also a removalist? Is there not enough evidence in the play that she not only encourages but has actually persuaded Fiona to move? Why, even Fiona's mother who is contributing towards the new flat is a removalist! But people who move you from one unit to another in the same structure reinforce the structure and in fact profit from it. They are removalists and not revolutionaries. The Removalist thinks only of money, the policemen of the women and authority, and Kate of getting rid of the lower class Kenny. Even the death of Kenny is accidental, the policemen do not really want to remove him from this world – there is no profit in that for them. In the struggle over territories of various kinds, everybody acts the removalist, whether consciously or unconsciously. Have you heard this word-Removalist before? I doubt it, in India this term is unheard of, in the United States, they are normally referred to as the "movers". In fact, this term seems particularly Australia.

A play which makes you say all that by the act of the insertion of a letter at the end of a word asks for careful reading. This is a warning that should be taken seriously because a number of contemporary plays, including many of Williamson's, seem to care less for language and more for form. This only means that they are not full of quotable quotes, picturesque speech, or are not poetic enough. Their content and intent calls for a different use of language. As said earlier, much of the violence in this play is inherent in the language itself. Take for instance the references to women in the play. What is the language used by the men about women and relationship with them?

4.3.1 Language

The first reference to women in the play is to the Sergeant's wife and daughter. The Sergeant describes his daughter to Ross in these words – "Not bad looking, mind you, and a good arse, but she's an irritable bitch, Her mother all over again." These lines thus refer to both women from his family and Simmonds describes women in terms of their body, and their character is described in terms of the animal world. The next reference is in the story the Sergeant tells about a previous constable. The girl who complains of rape in the story is a "little tart", "the tart", "the biggest bike", and a

"Silly bitch". And all the boys had "been through her". This is in Act I of the play which ends with the Sergeant calling the Constable "a stupid great arse" who "nearly ballsed" an opportunity. He assures Ross "We'll be in like Flynn there tomorrow night. We'll thread the eye of the old golden doughnut -- no worries." And he then shares out the women, "I'm having the dentist's wife. Snooty bitch but she goes for it." Every reference is derogatory and male-female relationship is always in terms of male performance.

There is a lot more of this in Act II of course. The first term of 'endearment' that Kenny uses for Fiona is "you lazy bitch". He is suspicious that she wants to get rid of him because she is expecting another man, but tells her that it cannot be so because she is "too bloody lazy", even as he calls her a "Bloody slut". Fiona's mother is an "old bitch". 'Bitch' is the basic expression used for women in this act. When Kenny speaks insultingly to Kate, the Sergeant beats him up and explains to Fiona that he cannot stand women being addressed as if they were from the gutter. To which, Fiona replies, "It doesn't worry us, Sergeant. Really. We're used to it." This is true of the society, the women are used to being addressed as sex objects and described in the crudest terms. They are all "twat flashers". And in what is perhaps the most picturesque of descriptions, Kenny says that Kate "Bangs like a bugged tappet" after having called her a "bloody trollop". In this world even love-making is described as a "grapple", a wrestling bout, and Kenny's prowess in bed is in making his wife "squeal like a stuck pig". All that men want to do with women is, in Kenny's words, get "your end in".

Since the man-woman relationship seems to be one of power and domination and the men attempt this physically -- violently and sexually. Kate's angry retort to Simmonds when he threatens her is, "What will you do if I don't? Chain me to the bloody door and rape me?" That Turner is right in the prefatory article when he says that "the male-female relationship in Australia rests on a frightening sub-stratum of violence" is corroborated beyond doubt by Kenny's 'reasonable' complaint -- "In the old days if a man didn't give his wife a thrashing every week or so she wouldn't respect him. Nowadays you give 'em a love pat and they shoot through on you." In this world of male violence and women's objectification, the deadliest interest for a man is to be referred to as a woman, especially if the term used is derogative to women in the first place. When Kenny is left free by the Sergeant, Kenny provokes him by calling him a "dead cunt".

This then is the language that makes Rees say that the play's impact is made "by way of an astonishingly direct, fluent, uninhibited dialogue, often scatological, and very free about sex and other matters in a very funny way." (p 120) Fitzpatrick notes that Kenny and Simmonds have a "shared attitude toward women [that] is brutal and it is confirmed in the fabric of the play's language." (p 117) He goes on to say that "The fact that the terms of most violent abuse are sexual ones acquires special significance in a play where sex is so often talked about as the abasement of the female.... the vocabularies of sex and violence are interchangeable in more specific ways." (pp 117-18)

The shock of recognition that critics often talk about in Williamson's plays has also to do with the language. He manages to use the rhythms and the current vocabulary of the spoken language of the street very effectively. Men talk about sex and women in this manner even if Williamson seems to use this language in a limited concentrated way in this play to bring out its brutality. In a play on violence, the language plays as much of a role as the physical action in order to weave together a reflection on contemporary society.

4.4 TECHNIQUE

This is a seemingly conventional realistic play in terms of technique. A traditional two-act play, it makes use of realistic devices of the **proscenium** theatre. As John

Bull says in "Directing *The Removalists*", his note appended to the text of the play in your edition, he and the cast "were a bit apprehensive at first about its foursquare, conventional structure and unfashionably strong naturalism." (p 122) He feels that the physical space that they enacted their production in had a lot to do with the impact of the play. The actors were never more than five feet from the audience, and often seemed to be about to fall on the first row laps. He says that coupled with the play's unpredictability and the built in shocks, "this sheer physical proximity generated a fair deal of real nervous excitement." (p 124)

In Fitzpatrick's opinion, the traditional form and the startling subject of Williamson's play work together to ensure that the audience has "enough insulation... to be reflective... but never cosy." (p 116) The violence may numb an audience forcing them to see it as the artificial construct that it is, while the shock of recognition in terms of dialogue as well as the world referred to makes them identify with the issues raised as well as with the characters. What this means is that even if the violence acts as an alienating device, the identification means that the audience does get involved in the action, emotionally and mentally. This seems to be a marriage of the realistic play and the happening that was in vogue in the sixties and seventies, in which was the attempt to involve the audience directly in the action. We may agree with Fitzpatrick's reading that in *The Removalists* the audience is part of the theatrical experiment – in that the mixed reactions of the audience "are as much a part of the play's sociological treatment of violence in Australian society as the action of the stereo typical characters." (p 116)

The action consists of what McCallum describes as "a series of little, almost accidental moments". (p 347) What this should alert us to is that Williamson's plays are only apparently naturalistic. Williamson is hardly an Ibsen, and we do not mean this pejoratively but state this to highlight his difference. *The Removalists* is full of gags and one liners, what else do we laugh at? This is straight from the music hall, from the revue. No self-respecting naturalistic dramatist would employ this technique. Williamson is not interested in psychological characterisation and is more than willing to play around with stereotypes and representative characters. The failings of characters are not in their past or their fathers' but reflective of the society they live in. Hence the criticism about the women's roles being neither well developed nor original does not detract from the value or impact of the play in any way.

As we have seen, the reversal of action at the end of this play has been complained about. It is startling but realistic. The complaint is thus because of the conventions of the well made play which has traditionally been the vehicle of naturalism. While this play like all Williamson's early plays is broadly realistic, it uses the conventions of stage naturalism as much as it uses any other convention available to it in order to explore its concerns fully. For example, he is willing to use slides in between Act I and Act II which illustrate our idea of happy family life. Thus he is willing to highlight the constructed nature of theatre without any second thought. This is a compromise no naturalistic/realistic writer will allow himself/herself. Williamson's attempt is to give a convincing and interesting play, to shock the audience, to make them laugh and think. And he does that very well.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have seen the various themes that *The Removalists* addresses and studied the way the play uses language and the conventions of the realistic play in order to fully explore its concerns as well as to involve the audience in the action and the subsequent reflection. You can see that the play fits in very well in the broad range of Williamson's concerns that we identified when examining his early plays.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the title of the play.
2. Write a detailed note on various aspects of violence in the play.
3. How does *The Removalists* fit into the early phase of Williamson's career?
4. How is *The Removalists* a critique of Australian society?
5. Write a note on the women characters.
6. What is the impact of the language in your interpretation of the play?
7. Write a critical note on Williamson's "naturalism".
8. What is the role of humour in this play?
9. Give your analyses of the three major male characters.

4.7 GLOSSARY

proscenium:

proscenium is the front arch of a theatre stage where a curtain may be lowered between scenes, it also refers to the part of a stage that comes forward beyond this.

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

Williamson, David. "*The Removalists: A Conjunction of Limitations*", *Meanjin Quarterly*, Summer 1974.