VATE Literature Perspectives 2018

A Room of One’s Own
A Taste of Honey
Ariel
Art
Foreign Soil
Only the Animals
The Anchoress
The Passion
VATE Literature Perspectives 2018

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A Room of One’s Own
Perspective by Margaret Saltau

Introduction

The phrase that has become part of our lexicon, ‘a room of one’s own’, whether we are familiar with its original context or not, and which is read as a rallying call for literary feminism, was coined by a woman who distrusted the word ‘feminism’. In spite of having observed, suffered because of, and worked against the inequities in the treatment of women and men, Virginia Woolf might also be seen from our contemporary viewpoint as having lived a privileged existence. She was born Adeline Virginia Stephen in London, in 1882. She died on March 28 in 1941 when she left her home in the Sussex village of Rodmell (where she and her husband had lived during the summers since 1919), filled her pockets with stones, then walked into the River Ouse, and drowned.

She was born into a wealthy, cultured and academic family; her father, Leslie Stephen, a philosopher, critic and biographer, was considerably older than his wife. Julia Stephen had been married before, and had had three children—George, Stella and Gerald Duckworth—who were adults when she died of influenza in 1895. There is reasonable evidence to accept that George Duckworth sexually abused Virginia when she was a child. Leslie ‘was obsessed with the idea of chastity in women; the names of his daughters are testimony to his dependence on male literary images of virginity’.1 Julia, who had modeled for some of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, has been described as an ‘anti-feminist’.2 It might be simplistic to claim that ‘Virginia grew up to equate virginity with freedom’3, but a reading of the first chapter of A Room of One’s Own certainly suggests that one of the constraints excluding women from the sort of education and productivity—economic and creative—offered to men is the bearing and nurturing of children. Monk’s House, the Woolfs’ summer home in the Hampshire village of Rodmell, is open to the public; the bed in Virginia’s writing room is white-covered, narrow and ascetic—virginal. Virginia and Leonard Woolf had a close and loving relationship, but in many ways it was unconventional. Leonard had made the decision not to have children, with his wife’s well-being in mind; this certainly gave her the time and energy to devote herself to intellectual pursuits. In addition, their relationship could also accommodate Virginia’s close relationships with women, most notably with Vita Sackville-West.

Throughout her life, Virginia Woolf suffered periods of severe mental illness and breakdown. Perhaps today she would be diagnosed with, and treated for, bipolar disorder. In the language of her time, she was described as ‘mad’ during these episodes. Her first breakdown occurred after her mother’s death when Virginia was thirteen, while the second followed her father’s death nine years later. Until then the family had lived in Kensington, perhaps the equivalent of Toorak in Melbourne. Soon after Sir Leslie Stephen died, Virginia, her sister Vanessa and brothers Thoby and Adrian moved to the suburb of Bloomsbury, a move more or less like moving to Carlton in Melbourne. It is here that the ‘Bloomsbury Group’ came into being. Writers and artists lived and worked there and formed a rich, fluid and creative environment. The ‘group of intellectual friends shocked many contemporaries by their belief in sexual freedom, equality and lack of formality, calling each other by their Christian names on first meeting—a breach of Victorian etiquette which still held sway over social conventions. Their complicated marital, inter-marital and extra-marital relationships were the subject of scandalised public gossip.’4

Bloomsbury became synonymous with avant-garde art, formalist aesthetics, libertine sexuality, radical thinking, rational philosophy, progressive anti-imperialist and feminist politics, conscientious objection during the Great War, and antifascism in the 1930s.5

In 1912 when she was thirty, Virginia married Leonard Woolf, one of the Bloomsbury Group, recently returned from Ceylon. She continued to be plagued by mental illness, in spite or perhaps because of publishing her first novel, The Voyage Out in 1915. By the time of the publication of A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf was established as an important avant-garde novelist, critic, essayist and activist.

In 1928, the year she gave the lectures which became A Room of One’s Own, she won the Femina Vie Heureuse prize for To the Lighthouse.

1 Marcus 1981, p. xviii
2 ibid. p. xix
3 ibid. p. xix
4 Smart 2008, p. 27
5 Goldman 2006, p. 8
First published in 1929, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* needs to be read in the context of a continuum of women’s rights and the legislation affecting those rights in the author’s world. However, to read it is to read the work of an author at the height of her creative powers. It is helpful to have knowledge of important dates and milestones, but Woolf herself signals many of these in her essay.

**Some important dates**

1869
John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* is published. As MP he supported suffragists, but when he and Henry Fawcett moved to amend the Reform Act in 1867, their attempt to introduce universal suffrage was defeated.

1870
The Married Women’s Property Act allows married women to be legally the owners of money they earn, and to own their own property. Previously, when women married, their property transferred to their husbands. Divorce heavily favoured men, allowing property to remain in their possession. This act allows women to keep their property, married, divorced, single or widowed.

1903
Emmeline Pankhurst founds the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU).

1906
The word ‘suffragette’ is used to describe these more militant women campaigning for the right to vote.

1913
Emily Wilding Davison throws herself under the King’s horse at the Epsom Derby and is killed.

1918
Representation of the People Act doubles the electorate, giving the parliamentary vote to about six million women. At this time, the population of England is over 33 million.

1919
Nancy Astor becomes the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons.

1928
Women are given the vote at the age of 21—the same as men.

1929
Margaret Bondfield becomes first woman cabinet minister.

**Suggested classroom activities**

- Research the Bloomsbury Group, presenting cameo portraits of Clive Bell, Vanessa Bell, Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Lytton Strachey.
- Write three short portraits of the life of a typical woman of these times—before 1880, in 1929, and in your own era. What has changed? What has stayed the same? What is important for women as writers?
- A documentary about Virginia Woolf’s life and work (especially helpful in giving students a sense of what England was like when Virginia Woolf was growing up) can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Hnls8WyPE
- A short (9 minute) discussion of Virginia Woolf, with archived comments from her sister, husband and friends: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03ng3ds This podcast also includes the only existing recording of the writer’s voice.
- At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-9itxGIt_c, the rock band The Smiths performs ‘Shakespeare’s Sister’.
- Students may be familiar with the names of many of the writers and other personages mentioned by Woolf, and may have studied some of their writings. However, there could be unfamiliar (and significant) names such as Aphra Behn. A useful and enjoyable task would be to compile biographies. This can be done as an orientation task, or as names arise in classroom discussions, with students taking turns to explain to the rest of the class.
- What is the power in the idea of ‘a room of one’s own’? Does it still resonate today? Has it greater significance as a metaphor now? Students could reflect on what ‘a room of one’s own’ means to each of them. Along with this, they could have a brainstorming session on famous lines from literature and popular culture, starting with ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged’, and ‘Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn’. Why are such lines so important? What has contributed to making these lines so well-known and often-used?
Perspective on the text

*A Room of One's Own* is based on two papers read to audiences of female students and academics at Newnham and Girton colleges at the University of Cambridge in 1928. From the opening word 'But' of the published version of the talks, which were too long to be read in full on these occasions, we can almost hear Woolf’s voice as she appears to engage in a conversation with her audience. It seems a relaxed, chatty, humorous voice speaking as readers are swept gently along in her stream of consciousness rambling. However, *A Room of One's Own* does not ramble; it is tightly structured, and Woolf’s movement through the physical, social and historical world of women is a unifying device that ushers readers towards the author’s passionate conviction that woman must be free to write fiction, and that that fiction must be both an individual achievement and a collective effort, so that it will be possible for the fictional Judith Shakespeare to be reborn through future female authors and to write as her real brother did, in 'the common life which is the real life' (p. 98).

*A Room of One's Own* is cited as the locus classicus for a number of important modern feminist debates concerning gender, sexuality, materialism, education, patriarchy, androgyny, subjectivity, the feminine sentence, the notion of ‘Shakespeare’s sister’, the canon, the body, race, class, and so on.6

Jane Marcus writes:

Writing, for Virginia Woolf, was a revolutionary act. Her alienation from British patriarchal culture and its capitalist and imperialist forms and values, was so intense that she was filled with terror and determination as she wrote.7

Yet the tone of most of *A Room of One's Own* is controlled, sardonic, even humorous, and it can be argued that this has contributed to the essay's power and influence. She brings all the skills of the novelist, the fiction writer, to bear as she builds her essay/argument/speech. It is difficult to choose a 'label' to describe the genre of *A Room of One's Own*. In her introduction to the Vintage edition of the text, critic and biographer Hermione Lee lists some possibilities relevant to Woolf’s writing: 'fiction, history, biography, essays, elegy, poetry, drama' (p. xi), and 'part fiction, part essay, part conversation, part history, part meditation' (p. xiii).

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an increasingly industrialised and urbanised society, they often wrote of the alienating effects of their world. Virginia Woolf lived through World War 1, the general strike, and the significant social changes of the 1920s and 1930s, and she killed herself during World War 2. The world she had been born into no longer existed. She wrote in Moments of Being that when Lytton Strachey uttered the word ‘semen’, the ‘veil of Victorian propriety…was torn aside’ and ‘…all barriers of reticence and reserve went down.’8 When we read Modernist literature we are likely to encounter stream of consciousness writing, in which we find the use of multiple voices, non-chronological narration, the concentrated use of symbols and references to earlier works. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, and T. S. Eliot are all representative of literary Modernism. These, and other, authors felt it necessary to challenge traditional forms of thinking and of expressing ideas.

The text itself, in its dense intertwining of generic devices, demonstrates Woolf’s point that the world and thus all human relations had changed. In its apparently meandering shape, as the persona moves through the world she is creating for us, the essay’s style seems typical stream of consciousness—formless, ambling through the mind’s workings. Thus, as with much stream of consciousness writing, readers are confronted with a new way of discovering meaning in a text, and this necessity to analyse and discover how the author is making meaning also forces us to stand back, to assess matters in an intellectual fashion that precludes identification with characters and situations. In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf invites us to scrutinise, evaluate and think, to consider her ideas; the lightness of her tone helps to avoid arousing the anger and resentment that many readers might feel. In fact, in comparing the Brontë sisters’ writing with Jane Austen, she argues that the books of those who feel angry and repressed, who do not have a room of their own, ‘will be deformed and twisted’ (p. 59), a point of view that it would be interesting to debate in the classroom. Woolf organises her writing tightly through the six chapters, which provide shape and form for a dense exploration and argument. In the sixth chapter, she returns her attention to her audience in Oxbridge, having brought her claim that ‘a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’ full circle.

Features of the text

Fictional devices

Woolf writes non-fiction using the devices of fiction, including fictionalising places and people. An analysis of the first chapter of A Room of One’s Own shows how she does this, almost in a musical way, as she moves from one setting to another, from one idea to another, weaving in and extrapolating on thoughts and impressions, then returning to her main theme or melody.

Marys

Woolf lays out her thesis at the start of her essay. Her opening ‘But’ gives the impression of an on-going exchange of ideas, of a conversation, perhaps an argument. Defiantly, she justifies her approach: rather than discuss famous female writers of fiction, she is going to tell lies in order ‘to seek out the truth’. She is going to create setting, character and an ‘I’ (p. 2). Goldman recommends ‘two critical and theoretical questions that we should ask of the texts of this period’ in order to understand their complex narrative points of view: ‘(1) Who is speaking? and (2) Where is she?’ The nebulous and shifting sense of identity and subjectivity—of the self—is suggested by Woolf’s ‘call me…by any name you please’ (p. 2). Why Mary? Apart from the obvious connotation of the Virgin Mary, Woolf suggests the Marys Beton, Seton, Carmichael. Not only can Mary be seen as a generic name, broadening the individual instance to a kind of Everywoman, but there is probably a reference by Woolf to the ‘Four Marys’ or ‘Maries’. The sixteenth century ballad refers to Mary Hamilton, and this Scottish song finishes with the lines, ‘There was Marie Seton, and Marie Beton, / And Marie Carmichael, and me.’ The sense of a community of women gained from the ballad is central to Woolf’s argument in her speech/essay.

When, two pages into A Room of One’s Own, Woolf’s voice becomes that of Mary Beton, it also enables her to use this narrator to function as a sort of naïve explorer of the history and status of women writers. She is able to discover, poke fun at, express disbelief at those events, institutions and characters of which Woolf herself is all too aware. This voice ingeniously exposes the appalling injustices of women’s lives—appearing to debate whether or not the blame for failing to ‘get two thousand pounds together’ rested on the ‘old lady’, and considering whether Mrs Seton, who while being a good and faithful wife of a minister of the church and producing thirteen children, ‘may have been a

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8 Dawson 2013, p. 67.

The setting, and the exploration of the world—physically, academically, socially and economically—the self and its landscape

The stream of consciousness narration is anchored in the physical movement through Woolf’s world as it was in 1928. It is very much the habitat of a cultured, highly educated, brilliant and radical member of the English intelligentsia. But the author is insistent that her audience, which is intrinsically privileged in terms of knowledge and education, has a duty to all women. In her opening justification for ‘offer[ing] you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction’, Woolf is addressing her audience of women at an ‘Oxbridge’ college. By combining ‘Oxford’ and ‘Cambridge’, she is, as she does with the Marys and the ‘I’, moving from the particular to an all-embracing concern with all women. By applying the typical characteristics of all universities to her fictionalised, created one, she can encourage the reader to adopt a more analytical and objective stance. Her deprecating ‘one minor point’ is disingenuous, as this ‘point’ is the crux of her argument. In Chapter 1, Woolf moves back in time, and from the college to the river bank. Here, as she hurries across the grass with the idea that she has ‘caught’ like a fish, the Beadle is rather comically aroused to ‘horror and indignation’ by the sight of a woman walking on the turf rather than the gravel, but the result is that the ‘Fellows and Scholars…in protection of their turf…had sent my little fish into hiding.’ Here, Woolf explicitly demonstrates cause and effect: precious, original thought (the fish as idea, slippery—hard to hold onto) is destroyed by male privilege, which has excluded women from accessing the physical buildings and landscapes wherein learning is found and made possible.

Next, the narrator approaches, and is denied entry to, the library. The light tone—‘That a famous library has been cursed by a woman is a matter of complete indifference to a famous library’ (p. 5)—distances readers from her fury and at the same time emphasises the unjust stupidity of the exclusion. Next, the narrator passes the chapel, which she does not attempt to enter, finding more beauty outside than the dirge-like music suggests will be found on the inside. She muses on the history and building of the university, imagining ‘an unending stream of gold and silver’ making it possible. At lunch, signaled by the striking of the clock, she describes the lavish meal in rich and sensuous detail; its effect is to make the diners feel ‘how good life seemed’. The mood turns with the narrator’s turn to the window where she sees ‘a cat without a tail’. She remembers another, similar luncheon party held before the war, yet realises ‘Everything was different’, perhaps because of the ‘humming’ of the music of poetry by poets such as Tennyson and Rossetti. She laughs at the thought, pretending the laughter is provoked by the Manx cat. It is late, and she begins to walk to the women’s college of Fernham where she will eat dinner, the words of the poems singing ‘in my blood’. As she thinks about the joy and beauty of poetry and love—which seem less prevalent since the war—and asks ‘Why…not praise the catastrophes…that destroyed illusion and put truth in its place?’ (p. 12), she misses her way and must retrace her steps.

Throughout this chapter, Woolf emphasises the voluptuous beauty of the autumn landscape of Oxbridge, suggesting a dissonance between the natural world and the institutional world erected and maintained and policed by men. The name she gives the women’s college, Fernham, evokes both the soft lushness of growth associated with nature, and reminds us of Jane Eyre’s final home and haven, Ferndean, where she and Rochester live, thriving away from society. As the narrator approaches the college, she has an impression that she sees Jane Harrison, a famous feminist and scholar as she ‘raced across the grass’. Yet the spontaneous enjoyment of the natural world, untrammelled by rigid, discriminatory rules designed to establish and protect male power and privilege, is sharply undercut by the description of dinner. The flat language used to describe the food and drink (water instead of the heady wine) culminates in ‘That was all’. Intrinsic to this account of ‘plain’ and ‘homely’ fare is the clear contrast with the luxuriant detail of the luncheon; here the ‘sprouts [are] curled and yellowed at the edge’; there, the sprouts were ‘foliated as rosebuds but more succulent’. Woolf comments, ‘One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.’ (p. 14). The role of money continues to be relevant; the narrator would have preferred to have eaten in her friend Mary Seton’s rooms, but that is not possible in this poorly funded college. Mary Seton’s description of the painstaking scraping together of £30,000, described as ‘long struggle…and utmost difficulty’, is very different from the ease with which the rivers of wealth flowed into the men’s colleges. Here Woolf simply presents...
contrasting situations, forcing readers to connect and condemn.

This leads to the narrator, very disingenuously, wondering why women were not left generous legacies by their mothers that could have endowed their colleges, and Mrs Seton becomes representative of the ‘wastrels’ who neglected to do this. Each experience described by the voice of the narrator inspires her thought, so that a walk through Oxbridge in the autumn is also a progress in the thinking and arguing of the writer’s mind, with male ‘blockers’ policing the boundaries that she wants to penetrate. Her ‘pondering’ continues as she returns to her inn, in the silence of late night. The culmination of meaning of the day’s journey in Chapter 1 is suggested in the final paragraph: ‘thinking of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and of the poverty and insecurity of the other’, the speaker ‘thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in’ (p. 19).

Suggested classroom activities

• Construct a running sheet for A Room of One’s Own. Students can contribute a chapter each to a ‘master sheet’ which uses colours, placement and arrows to create a visual representation of the text and its components, especially of its structure.

• Develop close analyses of all six chapters, modeled on the example above.

• Find the lyrics of the Scottish ballad The Four Marys, research the Marys, and listen to folksinger Joan Baez: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z06eWnwDLX0

• Why has Woolf chosen to speak most of A Room of One’s Own in the voice of Mary Beton? Why has she chosen the name Mary?

Time

Woolf punctuates and orders her writing, not only through the physical and metaphorical exploration of the world, but by using time to give it shape and form. The clock strikes as a reminder that it is time for lunch, but also to signal to the reader that one segment of the day is complete, and another section is about to begin.

Despite the huge span of time through which A Room of One’s Own ranges, the action is confined to two days. Chapters 1 and 6 work as frames, with the ‘Mary persona’ being adopted in the first chapter, and relinquished in the final one, so that Woolf’s voice is the first and final voice we hear. The concrete information that Chapter 6 opens on the ‘26th of October 1928’ indicates one of the major oppositions of the text, the difference between the ‘reality’ of everyday life and the imperative relationship between that reality and literature. If women are not part of the ‘real world’, if they do not have access to ‘the money and the room’, they cannot write fiction.

Imagery

Woolf’s writing is rich with imagery, evoking vivid pictures of what are often complex ideas, ‘it reads in places like a novel, blurring boundaries between criticism and fiction’. 10 Examples of this include the shining, pulsing fish that is an idea, a thought, destroyed by entrenched male privilege. The congregation ‘busying themselves at the door of the chapel like bees at the mouth of a hive’ is diminished by this simile; not only are they reduced to mindless ‘busyness’, but this is enforced later when the narrator tells the whistling anecdote. These dons are figures of impotent fun. The bee image suggests the limited dominance of these old men; inside the hive is where bees—the drones—die in their thousands.

Another powerful simile is found at the beginning of Chapter 3—‘fiction is like a spider’s web…but still attached to life at all four corners’. The image of the fine, delicate yet sticky gossamer of fiction-writing which cannot be ‘unstuck’ from the process of living introduces Woolf’s central imaginative image of the woman whose material circumstances proved lethal because she was a woman—Judith Shakespeare. Appearing first in the middle of the text, her presence is still felt at the end. Woolf employs the notion of Judith Shakespeare to make one of her strongest points: if Shakespeare had been a woman we would be without the poetry which, arguably, dominates English literature. ‘For it needs little skill in psychology’, writes Woolf, ‘to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.’ (p. 41). Here Woolf’s tone is fully serious, perhaps reflecting the torture of her own life, one that was a great deal easier than that of her fictional character.

The story of Judith Shakespeare recurs through A Room of One’s Own and this repetition takes on the role of a sort of musical punctuation. Returning to Shakespeare’s sister in the final chapter, Woolf makes a new use of the story, bringing the girl buried ‘where the omnibuses now stop’ 10 Goldman 2006, p. 96.
back to life, rising phoenix-like, living ‘in you and in me, and in many other women’, in a triumphant assertion. She becomes an emblem of all women denied personal growth and identity, commodified by the patriarchy. To be a sister is to be demeaned and confined, to be destroyed. Woolf’s use of repetition, which throughout the essay has created a sense of form and pattern, culminates on the final page in the long, stylised sentence beginning ‘For my belief’ and ending ‘so often laid down’. Lyrically, she offers hope, encouragement and challenge to her audience; the repeated use of “if” emphasises the difficulty and lack of sureness but the soaring hope of her tone overpowers the doubt as she exhorts listeners to embrace ‘the common life’ of female community.

A new style of writing?
Not only does Woolf use the language devices of fiction in the writing of a piece of non-fiction, it has been suggested that the stream of consciousness technique is peculiarly suited to a more ‘feminine’ fluid style of writing, as opposed to what she finds in the novel of Mr A, in Chapter 6, whose writing ‘indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself’ but who, she claims, is writing like other male authors ‘only with the male side of their brains’ (p. 87). Once again Woolf employs motifs of blocking and barring of the way of women’s identities, as the male ‘I’ becomes a shadow, ‘a straight dark bar’, in contrast to the multiple ‘I’s she creates in A Room of One’s Own. Posed against the excluding and imprisoning ‘I’ is the fluid androgynous female self and voice.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation

Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations
In this Area of Study, students focus on how the form of text contributes to the meaning of the text. Students develop an understanding of the typical features of a particular form of text and how the conventions associated with it are used, such as the use of imagery and rhythm in a poem or the use of setting, plot and narrative voice in a novel. They use this understanding to reflect upon the extent to which changing the form of the text affects its meaning. By exploring adaptations, students also consider how creators of adaptations may emphasise or understate perspectives, assumptions and ideas in their presentation of a text. Teachers may decide that A Room of One’s Own is not ideal as a basis for this Outcome.

There is an adaptation for the stage of A Room of One’s Own, by Patrick Garland, who directed it at its premiere in 1989 with the famous Eileen Atkins as Virginia Woolf: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFxRBUlPsSUQ The brilliant performance of Eileen Atkins is certainly valuable in bringing the text alive for students, but it might be difficult to compare genres and find major changes in meaning in what is essentially a filmed stage performance, a reading.

A video performance by Coco Fusco in 2006 (http://www.contramare.net/site/en/a-room-of-ones-own-performing-the-female-at-war/) offers richer possibilities for students’ writing and oral and multimodal presentations, with the comment from the website worth considering:

The title of the piece carries in itself a series of meanings inherent to critical interpretations of Virginia Woolf’s famous essay by the same name. But there’s an oddity, something simultaneously disturbing and ironic about how Woolf’s room, symbolic of a space for the liberation of female expression, is used as a metaphor for a space of torture and aggression. What is the thread that links this (sic) two spaces used within a distance of 80 somewhat years? How did a woman’s need for creative solitude come to be viewed as a space for her to act as agent of patriarchal oppression? Whose ‘room’ is this and has the representation of women in art shifted from a passive role objectified in the male gaze, to an active role serving the same purpose?

Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts
This Outcome requires students to demonstrate a close knowledge and understanding of the text through a focus on the imaginative techniques used for creating and recreating a literary work, and this will be demonstrated through the written reflection accompanying the piece. Students should keep an account of the process of planning and creating as they develop this reflection.

Some suggested tasks
• Transpose A Room of One’s Own from 1928 to our current time. Questions to ask in writing such a piece could include: What persona would you adopt/create? If you are speaking/writing in Woolf’s voice, has her audience changed? Does
this necessitate a change of genre, of language? Would her subject matter need to change, or is it as relevant as it was in 1928?

- Deliver a monologue from a member of Woolf’s original audience.
- Write and deliver a monologue as a modern audience member, or make a really confronting multimodal presentation, perhaps deriding Woolf’s emphasis on the importance of women being able to write fiction.
- Write Chapter 7. What is its theme or main concern?
- A male lecturer gives his ‘take’ on A Room of One’s Own the week after Woolf has delivered her lectures.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

In a statement of breathtaking all-inclusiveness, Laura Marcus claims that in spite of a period in the 1950s and 1960s when Woolf’s importance as novelist, critic and feminist was diminished,

her work has been used as key evidence and example in the most significant and recurrent feminist debates: ‘realist’ versus ‘modernist’; the existence of a specifically female literary tradition and of a woman’s language; the place of feminist ‘anger’ or radicalism; the feminist usages of ‘androgyny’ as a concept; the significance of gendered perspectives and ‘the difference of view’ as a counter to difference-blind assumptions of the universal; the relationships between socialism and feminism, feminism and pacifism, patriarchy and fascism. 11

In addition to viewing the text through a multifaceted feminist lens, it is possible to read A Room of One’s Own from many different literary perspectives with which students may already be familiar—psychoanalytic, cultural materialism, Marxist, queer, narrative theory, for example.

- Depending on the degree of familiarity with literary perspectives, students can apply several of these to A Room of One’s Own, discussing their relevance and exploring how they illuminate and reflect the views and values of Woolf and the reader.

  • One good source of information about literary perspectives can be found at: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/722/1/ It is clear, with a ‘common space’ section which lists characteristics of the major perspectives, and additionally, provides questions which we can ask of a text when reading it through the lens of a particular perspective.

  • If there is time, students could research and present or summarise a range of literary perspectives, and through close discussion of the perspectives in conjunction with the text, decide on several which are most apt.

  • A materialist position looks at the limitations imposed on women throughout history, not merely in literature, arguing that the actual material circumstances of women’s lives and situations have dictated their fates. Such aspects as education, access to ownership of property, control of their bodies, social status, are all relevant. Students could examine the text from this point of view.

  • Shakespeare’s sister and Freud: students could read Freud’s comments on ‘Femininity’ (1933) in conjunction with Woolf’s treatment of Judith Shakespeare. How might Freud have used these ideas to analyse Woolf’s depiction of Judith Shakespeare? How might you argue against a Freudian interpretation of women’s experience? 12

  • The value of £500 in the early twenty-first century would be roughly similar to about AUS$40,000 today. Using a Marxist lens, students explore Woolf’s views and values about power and money, and about social class. What would a Marxist reading of A Room of One’s Own look like?

  • The teacher could choose two or more perspectives for the students to work with.

  • One possible approach to literary perspectives on A Room of One’s Own is to use a table to help students clarify relationships between perspectives, views and values and reader response. Students could adapt, develop and use the table to summarise their analysis, and use it as the basis for planning for their assessment task (See Figure 1).


12 Zilboorg 2004, p. 79.
Analytical topics

- ‘Virginia Woolf suggests that it is only by understanding the past that we can control the future.’ Discuss.
- ‘Woolf depicts the female identity as fluid and communal, while she sees the male identity as fixed and egotistic.’
- ‘Woolf sees the family as a microcosm of the patriarchal society.’
- ‘Woolf critiques and condemns a patriarchal society that denies women a voice.’ Discuss.
- Consider the proposition that in A Room of One’s Own Woolf is fighting for both psychic and physical space.
- ‘In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf argues that middle-class women are just as imprisoned by the class system as those who live in poverty.’
- Consider the proposition that it is necessary to have a good independent income ‘and a room with a lock on the door’ if you are to write fiction or poetry.
- ‘In A Room of One’s Own, Woolf paradoxically depicts women as victims of social and economic conditions, yet as bearing the responsibility for empowering women of the future.’ Discuss.
- To what extent does Woolf depict women as defined by their gender?
- Consider the proposition that Woolf’s ideas, as explored in A Room of One’s Own, are only applicable to women who are part of the middle class; that the poor who have no hope of being left an empowering legacy, and who share rooms with large families, can never be authors.
• ‘Virginia Woolf argues that women's relationships with other women are more important than those with men.’ Discuss.

In producing an interpretation of the play using two different literary perspectives to inform their view, students are assessed on how they:
• understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism
• identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways
• develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism
• analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.

Area of Study 2: Close analysis

Students complete two assessment tasks in this Area of Study, each on a different text. In developing their written interpretation of A Room of One’s Own, their close textual analysis includes scrutinising the language, style, concerns and construction of the text, examining the ways specific features and/or passages contribute to the overall interpretation, and considering context, ideas, images, characters, situations, and language. The Study Design says that students may:
• select and discuss the role and significance of particular sections of a text in interpreting the text as a whole
• analyse how certain literary features contribute to an interpretation of a text
• analyse the linkages, parallels and contrasts between different passages from a text.

The assessment task is similar to Section B of the examination, but not identical.

Suggested classroom activities
• Teachers could use the passages below as practice or for assessment.
• After discussion of the nature of this task, students could list the passages which they deem important in the text, justifying their choices.
• Students could choose sets of three passages themselves, justifying the combinations and suggesting possible approaches. Encourage them not to aim for too much ‘sameness’; find passages which contrast as well as link with each other. How will they write about these?
• As a class, convert the guide from the Study Design into a set of questions to be asked about each set of passages; for example, what is the function, the role of this passage in the text? What literary features are discernible in these passages? How do they vary? Develop?
• Develop thesis statements which grow out of each set of passages. Practise opening paragraphs which start with one or a combination of these statements.

Passages for close analysis

‘But, … how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money.’ (pp. 1-2)

‘Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister … outside the Elephant and Castle.’
(pp. 39-40)

‘How can I further encourage … not in tens and twelves.’
(pp. 96-97)

‘What had our mothers been doing then … liberally endowed professions.’ (pp. 16-17)

‘What could be the reason, then, … Mr Oscar Browning’s opinion of; . . .’
(pp. 22-23)

‘And when one is challenged … Nothing will grow there.’
(pp. 85-86)

‘Money dignifies what is frivolous … Earn five hundred a year by your wits.’
(pp. 55-56)

‘At any rate, she was making the attempt … in another hundred years’ time.’ (pp. 80-81)

‘And I will end now in my own person … a mere flea-bite in comparison.’ (pp. 91-92)

‘Thus, I concluded … men who have minded beyond reason the opinion of others.’ (pp. 46-47)

‘And with Mrs Behn … despotism was in the nineteenth century too.’ (pp. 54-55)

‘Even so, the very first sentence … into that tremendous stream.’ (pp. 89-90)
Students are assessed on how they:

- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions
- consider the effects and nuances of the language, style and form in the text
- understand the views and values presented and analyse how the writer reveals these in the text
- develop their own interpretation that is an analysis of the significance of the selected passages, connections between them, the ways that they reveal developments in the text, and their relationship to the text as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation.

References


A Taste of Honey
Perspective by Warren Whitney

Introduction

A foreboding sense of imminent and sweeping social change hovers over the characters in Shelagh Delaney's groundbreaking play A Taste of Honey. The central relationship between teenager Jo and her mother Helen dominates the play, igniting its most intense dramatic moments. Mother and daughter sustain an epic level of mutual hostility for almost the entire play; Delaney captures their isolation and precarious existence on the social margins of post-war Britain. As the play opens, both characters are seen by the audience entering a bleak flat in an impoverished section of the industrial city of Salford, part of the greater city of Manchester. Their relative poverty is apparent from the fact that the flat is old and run-down—after the war, when heavy bombing and subsequent slum clearing had led to improved government housing, people like Helen often were able to access council flats that provided welcome features such as running water and ‘mod cons’, but Helen claims she can only afford ‘this old ruin’. Their impoverished circumstances are also startlingly indicated by Delaney’s stage direction describing Helen as a ‘semi-whore’. This short note immediately indicates the play’s intense interest in sexual behaviour, sexual politics and gender identity.

Jo and Helen have lived precariously for many years and the hostility that exists between them is made clear in Jo’s relentless allegations that Helen has failed to perform her role as a mother. Helen has instead pursued her own sexual desires in her many extra-marital relationships with an interchangeable array of men, frequently abandoning Jo for the duration of these affairs.

One of the great achievements of Delaney’s seminal work is how acutely she captures the isolation of these two women. Jo, still a teenager and approaching the end of her peripatetic education, longs for her chance to get a job and finance her escape from the deprivations of her role as the only daughter of an impoverished single mother. Jo is cast by her mother as ungrateful, indolent, a perpetual irritant and a living reminder of the choices Helen herself made as a younger woman. Like many young people with working class origins in Britain in the post-war years, Jo is able to aspire to independence and social mobility, although at the same time she seems cynically resigned to the inevitability of her situation, blaming her mother for giving her a father who was ‘retarded…an idiot’ (p. 73). However, the play suggests it is her mother’s promiscuity that has led to Jo’s sense of abandonment, and her mother’s attitudes that have fostered Jo’s cynicism and anger. Jo’s relationships with first a black man and then a gay man can be seen as radical acts of rebellion against her mother, a woman who tolerates abusive men but not immigrants, homosexuals or people of colour.

Dominating the play is Delaney’s acute sense of the immediate social context that oppresses both female characters, who are trapped in the restricted gender roles available to women at the time as well as the poverty of post-war working class housing. The single location of the play, their dull, featureless, dirty flat comes to resemble something of a cell, but although women like Helen and Jo seem to condemn themselves to poverty by the ‘choices’ they make—usually with regard to their relationships with men—this confined setting suggests Delaney’s condemnation of the British class system rather than of the women. ‘You bet Delaney was angry,’ writes Rachel Cooke in The Guardian, ‘fed up with Britain’s still rigid class system, and especially the role of women within it, she had big things to say both about the way social reforms had failed to improve the lot of the poor, and about sexuality’ (Cooke 2014).

Delaney’s play is set in a time of deeply unsettling social change in Britain. British people varied greatly in their reactions to the arrival of immigrants from far-flung regions of the old British Empire such as the West Indies—from extremely hostile to fascinated—a difference in attitudes which was often generational. Similarly, the deeply unsettling social change in attitudes to love, marriage and sexuality was a change to which the younger generation was more able to adapt than the older generation. Even as the boom in marriage and babies was happening in the post-war years, the old ideas about marriage as a pragmatic institution were, according to Claire Langhamer (2013), giving way in the 1950s to ideas about marriage as individual emotional commitment, love, sex, and personal fulfilment. Homosexual behaviour was still illegal, but gradually this new idea that relationships are about personal gratification would lead to changes in attitudes to gay relationships too. Roles available to women were still restricted by ‘a model of economic behaviour that prescribed male breadwinning and female dependence’ (Langhamer p. 145) —women were expected to leave work when they married. Marriage was the most reliable path to economic stability for women, and it could offer the promise of upward social mobility to a woman who could ‘catch’ a ‘well set-up’ man like Peter
Social norms for ‘matrimonial success’ included such mandatory requirements as pre-wedding chastity, similarity in religious and ethnic background, and a slight disparity in age—with the male slightly older. The ‘exchange value of virginity remained high’ in the 50s (Langhamer p. 140) and the fear of pregnancy affected both males and females. A number of the Angry Young Men texts illustrate how pregnancy could ‘cause them to lose their shot at educationally driven social mobility’ or see them condemned to living unhappily with in-laws as is seen in the film *A Kind of Loving* (1962). But as Delaney’s play shows, pregnancy and unwanted motherhood could really ‘ruin’ the lives of women.

The modern Britain Delaney exposes to her audience is one that is characterised by uncertainty, and for those already living in poverty, a state of precariousness, especially for women like Helen and Jo. Helen is forty, which means that she grew up in the inter-war years and came to maturity at the outbreak of the war. This suggests that her early adult life was dominated by the conflict and the intense conditions of instability, violence, death and destruction that was the experience even of non-combatants during the war. Salford, as an industrial city, was heavily targeted by the bombing campaigns launched on Britain by Nazi Germany. Late in the play, Helen describes a poignant childhood memory to her daughter:

> Have I ever told you about the time when we went to a place called Shining Clough? Oh, I must have done. I used to climb up there every day and sit on top of the hill, and you could see the mills in the distance, but the clough itself was covered in moss… I’d sit there all day long and nobody knew where I was. (Act Two, Scene 2, p. 124)

Delaney here portrays Helen, as she is about to become a grandmother, expressing nostalgia for her childhood in the years between the wars. Despite this sentimental nostalgia, Helen’s life has undoubtedly been hard and she is consequently tough and resilient in her own way. She has ‘a wallet full of reasons’ (p. 62) for marrying Peter, not least of which is the prospect of a large white house. She may be unreliable and promiscuous, but she is an indomitable survivor. However, is she also an oppressive, neglectful parent, with outdated attitudes from which her daughter will struggle to break free?

**Student activities and discussion**

- Research the conditions of life in post-war Britain. To what extent had conditions improved a decade after the war? Was such improvement widespread, or evenly distributed? Did areas of poverty continue to exist during this period? How does *A Taste of Honey* attempt to depict particular aspects of working-class life in the industrial North and in cities such as Salford? How does Delaney show in her play the social divide that appeared to persist between the Northern region of England and the more prosperous South? How are these differences or divisions dramatised in the play? Does Delaney take a pessimistic view of these regional differences or does she suggest that they can be viewed as a source of strength for her characters? Discuss as a class the extent to which Delaney provides an accurate version of life in England’s Northern cities, what aspects she depicts convincingly.
- Students should know something of the history of British colonialism, the use of slaves in the sugar plantations of the West Indies, and the post-war patterns of migration to, and from, Britain.
- They could also research the British New Wave and work of the Angry Young Men.
- Watch Ken Russell’s short documentary ‘Shelagh Delaney’s Salford’. After viewing the film, discuss as a class how Delaney evokes the lives and aspirations of ordinary working class people in her play. What qualities of working class life are prominent in her play? How does she capture the regional qualities of life in Salford? In what ways does Delaney provide a portrait of her city as much as of the characters themselves? Is there evidence that the play develops a specific commentary on the values that are unique to the industrial North of England? Why is the setting of the play so important to the overall quality of the play?
- Look at the realist British cinema of the post-war period, particularly those films that, like Delaney’s play, explore the experiences of working class characters. The following films bear a suggestive comparison with Delaney’s play: *A Kind Of Loving; Saturday Night, Sunday Morning; This Sporting Life; Billy Liar*. What do these films and *A Taste of Honey* have in common? How do they view the changes that were occurring in post-war Britain? Are the male protagonists of these films faced with
the same challenges or problems as Jo in *A Taste of Honey*. Is Delaney's play responding to a common set of issues to those that defined the realist cinema of the period?

**Perspective on the text**

*A Taste of Honey* explores a remarkable diversity of themes and issues: current attitudes to family, race and sexual identity; generational conflict, social inequality, poverty and the barriers of social class; Britain's slow economic recovery after the War and the unequal opportunities this has created, especially for women; and finally Britain's character as a modern society, as it moves, reluctantly, out of its imperial stage and relinquishes its role as the centre of a colonial empire. Delaney fearlessly addresses all of the interlocking issues that confront the nation a decade after the end of the Second World War, portraying for her audience the socio-economic and generational tensions in a country which has not achieved the type of recovery or renewal that victory in the war had appeared to promise.

A central concern of the play is the failure to recover from some prior setback. Helen has never really recovered from a loveless marriage to a man who refused to satisfy her sexually, which resulted in her seeking intimacy with another man, Jo's father, who Helen delights in describing to Jo as mentally deficient, introducing the theme of family inheritance, which causes Jo tremendous anxiety because she believes her mother's choice to have a child by such a man displayed her characteristic disregard for her daughter; Jo sees this as Helen's original act of neglect and lack of maternal protection. A failure to recover from some original calamity, combined with this theme of being inevitably condemned by the circumstances of one's birth, organises the dramatic structure of the play as Jo herself makes the choice to pursue intimacy with a 'fantasy' object of desire, the unnamed 'Boy', a black sailor who promises to marry her and by whom she becomes pregnant. 'Boy', who we later learn is a young man named Jimmie from Cardiff, functions as a fantasy escape for Jo, but ultimately condemns her to playing out the identical role of her mother: bringing a child into the world for whom no conventional or traditional family arrangement exists, a child who may be similarly condemned by the circumstances of birth.

The drama that plays out within the bleak confines of Jo's flat expresses a wider sense of the social malaise that continued to grip Britain more than a decade after the war, the mood that John Osborne had explored in his era-defining play *Look Back in Anger*. Osborne's play gave spectacular expression to the burgeoning mood of rebellion, defiance, cynicism and despair that was a younger generation's response to their parents' outdated, irrelevant values and to what they viewed as an archaic establishment still entrenched in Britain's former imperial past.

But whereas Osborne's play focused on male pain, Delaney's play adopts a different perspective, providing a more balanced exploration of gender, and the emergent demands of new identities, racial and sexual. The 'break-up' of Britain's traditional social consensus is dramatised in the play by Delaney's uncompromising representation of minority identities—black, gay, proto-feminist.

*A Taste of Honey* shows this outdated system of values reduced to hostile responses—hostility to the new demands for recognition or to the creation of new arrangements that might replace the old. The play captures a moment of painful transition, when the relics of a system that condemned women to the binary roles of mother/whore, and other groups to the violent suppression of their identities and claims for recognition, were giving way to the 'swinging sixties' and the new society of modern Britain.

**Features of the text**

Delaney's play contains few extended monologues that may be typical of other plays on the VCE Literature list. Characters speak in shorter bursts, reactively, usually to some barbed comment by another character in the scene. Delaney's realism in terms of character speech acknowledges that these characters do not typically indulge in prolonged, reflective soliloquies, preferring instead to express their thoughts and feelings in declarative outbursts. These shorter statements and replies still create a rich texture of local, colloquial speech that is rooted in the everyday lives of these working class characters and the city of Salford.

Delaney employs a clever theatrical device of having characters directly address the audience in a style reminiscent of British music hall performance: 'She can never see anything till she falls over it.' ‘Wouldn’t she drive you mad?’ ‘The way she bangs about! I tell you, my head’s coming off.’ ‘Which one does she mean?’

Helen, in these examples from the first scene, speaks directly to the audience—at her daughter's expense—in the familiar style of the Music Hall performer sharing a ‘private’ joke with the audience. This is one of a range of different theatrical styles, including melodramatic exchanges, momentary fantasy images and the recitation of nursery rhymes that Delaney employs to vary the tone of her otherwise realist play.
Delaney's drama remains unresolved at the end, ‘which is either an uncompromising statement of the play’s groundbreaking realism, or its biggest structural weakness’ (Hickling 2014). What is going to happen to Jo’s baby? Has Helen just popped out for a drink, or is she never coming back? Will Jimmie, the Boy, return when he leaves the navy? Will Jo turn into her mother?

Student activities and discussion

There are two acts in the play, each with two scenes. Performing the play in class is an essential starting point. Teachers may decide to show the film adaptation before reading the play, but performing the text is an important means to allow students themselves to inhabit the world of the play and listen to each other speak in the voices of the characters. Students could be encouraged to arrange the classroom into a small theatre space, arranging chairs into rows, clearing a performance space for individual students to stand, move, and interact during their reading of the play. Creating a sense of the physical space of the play will contribute significantly to understanding Delaney’s themes of confinement, the limited scope for movement and the physical barriers to personal freedom that Delaney explores in her play. Moving beyond a passive recitation should be a goal for at least some sections of the text.

Invite students to work in pairs where they memorise and perform a short scene from the play and present it to the class. This should represent a carefully prepared, rehearsed performance that students can also use to deliver a short oral explanation of how they approached performing the scene. A report explaining the rehearsal process, decisions they made together on interpreting the scene and the characters could also be required.

Discuss Delaney’s staging choices as a class. How does Delaney create a space for her characters? What aspects of staging are significant in the play? How does Delaney organise shifts in time, scene transitions, and the interlude between acts? What are the central images that the audience views in the play? What else are audiences invited to see on the stage beyond the apparent poverty of the setting? How has Delaney attempted to capture and define the world of her two main characters by depicting this particular room? How does the stage setting comment on the lives of Jo and Helen, the choices available to them and the ways in which they are positioned by the society around them?

Discuss how A Taste of Honey would have to be re-contextualised if the play were to be set in the present day. Delaney’s character Jo becomes pregnant with a black sailor who then abandons her, stands up to an abusive drunk who is about to marry her promiscuous mother, and lives with a gay art student who wants to help bring up her child. How would audiences today react to this scenario? Would today’s audience be shocked by the same things as the 1950s British audience, or by different things? What changes would be necessary in characterisation, setting, performance, the relationships explored by Delaney? Would the play’s perspective on gender have to be fundamentally re-defined for an audience in 2018 or 2020? Is the play to be considered strictly as a ‘period piece’ whose concerns are largely superseded today?

Organise class debates around the following topics:

- Delaney’s view of gender is an essentially conservative one.
- Delaney is more angry about the injustices of class than about feminist issues.
- Helen’s relationship with her daughter is more shocking for today’s audience than it would have been in the 1950s.
- Jo is no longer a progressive female protagonist for audiences.
- The message of the play is that women can never escape their biological destiny.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation

Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations

Delaney’s play was adapted as a film in 1961 owing to its tremendous stage success but clearly also because it had anticipated the importance of a range of issues that were becoming increasingly more relevant to audiences. When a play is adapted so soon after its first appearance on the stage it can be expected that there will be a close similarity between the two versions. However, this is not exactly the case with Tony Richardson’s adaptation. What is striking is that the play is now situated in the physical world of Northern England and the streets of Salford. This does not necessarily add to the play’s already powerful realism but it does allow the audience to see the physical world the play depicts with a different type of clarity.

In examining the changes of meaning that occur when the form of a text changes, students may wish to consider how the filmmaker and the performers have attempted to preserve the realism of Delaney’s play. Where has the film adaptation attempted to translate some of the play’s overtly theatrical elements into the more ‘naturalistic’ style of a realist film? Has the film, intended for a popular audience,
compromised any of Delaney’s explicit subject matter and language? How for example does a popular film depict the relationships that Delaney explores: interracial, non-sexual, and promiscuous?

Students may wish to focus on particular scenes and develop a close analysis of the dramatic elements in each medium and how changes in meaning occur when these elements undergo formal transformations. In particular, how do the elements of film—editing, lighting, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, performance style, camera movement and camera angles—contribute to alterations of meaning and the creation of entirely new meanings?

Film adaptations are often prone to the criticism that they have diluted the intensity of the original text, subjecting it to a popular interpretation, or a sentimental rendering of its more difficult or challenging ideas. Does this appear to be the case with Richardson’s adaptation? What aspects of Delaney’s play have been adapted with a clear sense of their centrality to the play? Have the characterisations of Jo and Helen remained authentic?

If using the play for this Area of Study, the film is the sixth text for study. Nevertheless, a useful activity for students is to stage their own adaptations of particular scenes and even perform these before the class. Students could either attempt to preserve the original period setting of the play or re-contextualise the play by adapting it into a more recent setting. Do the ideas in the play retain a relevance today? Can its treatment of relationships still convey a truthfulness more than half a century after it was first produced?

Questions of the play’s dependence on its period setting and physical location in Salford might also be explored. How do we now view the attitudes of some of the characters, for example Peter and Helen, to black and gay characters? Students comparing the play and film for assessment are assessed on how well they:

- know the forms and conventions of the two different texts, and how these affect meaning.
- understand the ways creators of adaptations present assumptions and ideas about aspects of culture and society that reflect or are different from the original text.
- identify and analyse the similarities and differences between the play and the film *A Taste of Honey*, and select and use textual evidence from both.
- analyse the extent to which meaning changes when the form of a text is changed, and understand the construction of the texts.
- write or speak about the above.

**Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts**

For this Area of Study, the play lends itself to a wide variety of uses. Students might choose to approach a creative response by exploring the internal world of the text, that is, by writing from ‘within’ the world of the play. This can be done in different ways; for example, write a scene two months after the birth of Jo’s baby. How are Jo and Helen managing their relationship now that a third member has been added to their family? How does Jo view Helen now that she herself is a mother? What takes place when Jimmie returns to find that Jo has given birth to their child? How do Helen and others see their relationship? What would occur were Geof to return and stake his claim as Jo’s most dedicated companion and carer? How would others view his claims?

In this spirit, students might extend the period quite dramatically and revisit the characters in the play at a distance of ten years. Are Jo and Helen still in contact? How has motherhood shaped Jo’s life and influenced her choices? How have her choices been determined by the larger changes occurring in society? Has she escaped the family ‘inheritance’ she feared was her destiny?

A creative response to the play could also re-contextualise the action and transfer it to a more recent setting. How might this re-define many of the play’s central concerns? How would race, gender, class and sexual identity need to be substantially revised in light of the changes that have taken place over the last half century? What original concerns in Delaney’s play continue to demonstrate relevance in a new century? Have we completely transcended the conflicts and divisions that appear in Delaney’s play?

Students provide their reflective commentary in written or oral form. They reflect on the connections between Delaney’s text and their own, analysing the language choices and literary features of *A Taste of Honey*.

**Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts**

**Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives**

As an exemplar of the so-called school of ‘kitchen-sink realism’, with its insistence on the depiction of social class, the determining force of poverty and disadvantage, exclusion, prejudice and the elaborate discriminations attending on region, accent, education and family history, the fundamental division in British society between the industrial North and the economically privileged South, *A Taste of Honey* can be expected to lend itself in some seemingly uncomplicated way to the critical perspectives
associated with Marxism. While this seems to make a kind of straightforward sense, it should not be taken for granted that Delaney’s play in itself is expressing a typical left-wing perspective. Delaney’s play appeared just prior to the emergence of the New Left in Britain, a movement that quickly found intellectual expression in the journal *New Left Review* with writers such as Stuart Hall, Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn. *A Taste of Honey* quite uncannily anticipated what would become the principal concerns of many of the new movements of the sixties—the significance of culture as a determinant of identity, and race and difference as among the nation’s most pressing issues in a post-colonial setting that was witnessing the winding down of empire and the immigration of formerly colonial subjects to the imperial centre.

A Marxist perspective would need to take note of the play’s highly contemporary concern with new issues and questions for an understanding of social change—how, for instance, do the newer issues of culture and identity modify the more traditional issues of class, community and economic circumstances? The classic work that looks at post-war British literary culture is Alan Sinfield’s indispensable study *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*. This is a comprehensive study of the evolution of literary culture in the post-war period, charting the emergence of the precise themes explored in Delaney’s play. It provides a detailed discussion of the intersecting currents of literary and popular culture and the ways in which popular culture became an influence on literature and how literary forms treated the subject of the popular in forging and articulating youth identity. The influence of popular culture can be explored through the work of the early Cultural Studies theorists such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, particularly their work on working class identity.

The most pertinent critical perspective from a feminist/ Marxist theorist would be the work of Angela McRobbie. McRobbie has examined the construction of female working class identity since the early seventies and has developed an exceptionally sophisticated approach to the issues of how gender identity, particularly in young girls, teenagers and young women, is fostered through popular cultural forms such as magazines, popular music and dance. McRobbie’s work has particular relevance to Delaney’s play, not least in their shared focus on working class women’s identity. McRobbie has developed highly suggestive accounts of the limitations of certain types of cultural theory that overlook the significance of gender by failing to address the differential access to cultural identity that is based on access to public space, and that minimises the extent to which women, particularly working class women, are restricted to the domestic sphere. This insight is explicitly dramatised in Delaney’s play where Jo is shown as confined to the squalid flat after her pregnancy, dependent on Geof or her mother to see her through the stages of her pregnancy. Jo is also seen dealing with behaviour and language from Peter that McRobbie (2016) says is the sort of ‘menace and the threat of violence (that has) a particular address to women’. McRobbie contends that ‘(a)lthough anti-feminism is always changing its colours, it never goes away’ (2016); she sees feminine and feminist ideals as oppositional, and ‘romantic individualism’ as denying young women the opportunity of solidarity because it puts them in competition with each other as they seek ‘true love’ (Hollows 2000). She contends ‘that middle class or upper bourgeois women … transmit cultural capital to their children (and simultaneously) use this to ensure the docility or fear of their working class counterparts who do not know’ the rules for manners and etiquette or how to eat unusual food. She refers to this as an ‘overt form of symbolic violence’ that intimidated working class people in the past and that still exists in the post-feminist era where neo-liberal values are ascendant (McRobbie 2011).

Articles, theses and reviews can be found online with a variety of perspectives on the play. For an assessment task, teachers could select extracts from these, or use whole articles on which students could base their own interpretation. Comparing the views of contemporary critics with those writing in the 50s such as Kenneth Tynan (who referred to Geof as ‘the skinny painter … the queer’) may stimulate discussion. The 50s mock-shocked summary of Delaney’s play in the *Daily Mirror*, for instance, described it as ‘the story of a trollop’s daughter who has a baby by a Negro sailor and sets up house with an effeminate artist’ (Sweet 2014), whereas Jeanette Winterson writing in 2014 to praise Delaney’s play irritably asks, ‘Who else, in 1958, was writing about an unmarried pregnant teenage, her gay friend, a gentle sexy black sailor, and a single mother?’ Also with a more contemporary view, Nye (2017) sees Jo as a woman in a ‘desperate search for someone to love and care for her’, while Taylor (2014) draws attention to ‘the abrasive music hall double-act quality in the funny, painful slanging matches’ between Helen and Jo.

To explore how Delaney’s text reveals views and values about class, race, women’s issues, and gender, teachers could consider the perspectives of feminist, gender, Marxist, post-colonial and perhaps psychoanalytic literary theory, along with questions such as:
• In what ways can *A Taste of Honey* be considered a feminist play? Five years after this play was first staged, ground breaking feminist texts such as *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan would describe the dissatisfaction of American women and lay the foundation for the women's movement that would later emerge. Yet, in 1958, Delaney represented the extreme limitations placed on the lives of working class British women, the narrow choices available to them, their apparent dependence on men and their unresolved captivity within ideas of motherhood, their responsibilities to nurture, and a strict insistence on their biological difference from men. While other contemporary dramatists such as John Osborne highlighted the ‘unique’ masculine anxieties of the era, valorising these with the use of currently fashionably existentialist themes, Delaney examined the practical aspects of women’s experience without accompanying this with the type of tragic loss conferred on the anti-heroes of other plays such as *Look Back in Anger*. How does Delaney introduce a specifically gendered perspective in her play? In what ways are the issues, ideas and themes of the play focused on the unique aspects of women’s experience? What might have been seen by audiences at the time as ground breaking in the play’s treatment of women and the forces that oppress them? Does the play still express pertinent views about the social roles of women despite the passage of sixty years?

• How does second wave feminism relate to Jo’s apparent rejection of breastfeeding and motherhood? Is this a contested area for a feminist analysis of the play?

• Does Delaney’s portrayal of the character Geof reveal an ambiguity about what would be referred to today as sexual orientation or identity? Is the character a deliberate representation of ‘true maternal values’? Critics observe that this character is the most moral, stable, normal (middle class?) character in the play. If so, what does this tell us about Delaney’s views and values, and is it why the British censor lifted the ban on mentioning homosexuality in the theatre when this play was first staged?

• Peter identifies himself in the role of Oedipus. If analysing Delaney’s play through the lens of psychoanalytic literary theory, is Jo the character who must negotiate between impulses of the id and the hyper-rationalism of the super-ego?

• What views and values are represented in the character Peter? In the 1950s the character would have challenged normative values about age difference in married couples, and about sexual infidelity or ‘womanising’, but in the twenty-first century we might see him primarily as an abusive male. Do audiences and critics interpret Peter differently in different decades?

• Is Delaney’s portrayal of the relationship between Jo and Boy a form of racial stereotyping—or a radical normalising of inter-racial relationships? Much has been written about attitudes to inter-racial sexual relationships, in both the American and British contexts where slavery figures prominently in the nation’s history, and especially about white women’s attractions to and for black men. In what way is Delaney trading on these colonialist attitudes?

• Consider Boy as the child of immigrant parents—what views does the play convey? Does Delaney mean to imply that Jo would be ‘marrying up’ if she were able to stay with Jimmie? Would a 1950s British audience, however, have thought of her as ‘marrying down’ if she partnered with a second-generation migrant ‘coloured boy’ (p. 49)?

• Might Jo’s language and attitudes signify that the playwright values middle class cultural capital? Are such attributes as politeness, interest in old furniture and in different types of food, desire to work, and rejection of some aspects of motherhood signifiers of aspiring to upward social mobility?

• Is Delaney’s Helen merely a realist portrayal of a tough, resilient lower class woman? Or does the character reveal Delaney’s rejection of working class values? Or does the character represent a valuing of community over individualism, and of pragmatism over romanticism? How do the critics interpret Helen?

• Is Helen being pragmatic in trading sex for financial support, or is she pursuing a dream of individualist romantic fulfilment?
Analytical topics

1. ‘The importance of Delaney’s play is that it introduced gender, race and class to the postwar British stage.’ Discuss.

2. In *A Taste of Honey*, to what extent does Delaney portray her characters as victims of their class and gender?

3. ‘In *A Taste of Honey* Delaney portrays the strength of working class women.’ Discuss.

4. To what extent is Jo shown to have outgrown her mother’s dependence on men?

5. ‘Though set during a period of intense social change, Delaney’s play is pessimistic about change in the roles open to women.’ Do you agree?

6. How does Delaney show that the characters in *A Taste of Honey* are oppressed by the dominant values of their society?

7. ‘In *A Taste of Honey* intolerance and prejudice are the most destructive human traits.’ Discuss.

8. ‘*A Taste of Honey* rises above the initially bleak view of postwar Britain to reveal the potential for genuine progress.’ Discuss.

9. ‘In the character of Jo, Delaney did more than simply portray a female version of the “angry young man”.’ Discuss.

10. ‘Delaney portrays many of the social tensions that affected young and old in Britain after the Second World War.’ Discuss.

11. ‘In *A Taste of Honey* Delaney challenges the conventional definition of family.’ Discuss.

12. ‘At the close of *A Taste of Honey*, Jo’s future is far from certain.’ Discuss.

In producing an interpretation of the play using two different literary perspectives to inform their view, students are assessed on how they:

- understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism.
- identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways.
- develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism.
- analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.

Area of Study 2: Close analysis

If using this text for one of the two assessment tasks in this Area of Study, students need thoroughly to re-read and annotate the play, and to revise information about features of the text. Examples of close analysis of selected passages are provided, with questions to prompt further discussion of how Delaney’s views and values are presented through the language and features of the text, and to assist students in developing their own interpretations of the play. Students or teachers could select their own passages for close analysis, either for an assessment task or for exam practice. Students will need to adapt their skills in close analysis to the rapid, violent shifts between characters in Delaney’s play.

Students are assessed on how they:

- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions.
- consider the effects and nuances of the language, style and form in the text.
- understand the views and values presented and analyse how the writer reveals these in the text.
- develop their own interpretation that is an analysis of the significance of the selected passages, connections between them, the ways that they reveal developments in the text, and their relationship to the text as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation.

Passages for analysis

**Act One, Scene One, pp. 30-31**

‘Jo What I wouldn’t give for a room of my own! ... Helen Wouldn’t she get on your nerves...Oh! My poor old nose.’

In the opening scene Jo and Helen enter their new flat. Jo is equally appalled by the condition of the flat and the fact that she must share it with her mother. How does Delaney establish the relationship between Jo and Helen in this scene? What is the effect of Helen referring to her daughter as though she were absent from the scene? How are ideas of motherhood, family, responsibility and non-conformity introduced by Delaney here?

**Act One, Scene One, pp. 36-37**

‘Helen You can’t sing, can you? ... Jo I’m not just talented, I’m geniused.’

Jo indicates that she intends to get work in a pub, her first
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Delaney avoids any ‘serious’ discussion of their inter-racial relationship, allowing the romance to remain on an ecstatic plane of innocent fantasy, elevated above the mundane aspects of race prejudice. What dramatic purpose is served by Delaney’s choice to depict Jo and Boy’s relationship in such fantasy terms? Is the audience invited to view Boy himself as a fantasy invention of Jo’s? In what ways does the scene express Jo’s yearning for an escape from her deprived upbringing and the creation of an escapist dream? To what extent is Boy intended by Delaney to be viewed as a ‘real’ character and not merely a figment of Jo’s imagination? Delaney’s contemporary audience would have viewed the young white female character’s comment, ‘There’s still a bit of jungle in you’, in various ways. What issues appear to have been Delaney’s intended focus by portraying an inter-racial relationship in the play?

**Act One, Scene One, pp. 43-44**

‘Peter (petting her) Now you know I like this mother and son relationship. … Jo I should have thought their courtship had passed the stage of symbolism.’

The entrance of Helen’s lover Peter introduces a new note of tension into the scene. Peter is a younger man who openly flaunts the Oedipal nature of his relationship with Helen. Peter is the latest of the many men who have come between Jo and her mother and Jo expresses contempt for Peter’s mock display of devotion to Helen. It is clear in this scene that Jo has witnessed this pattern many times before and she makes no attempt to disguise her weariness with the pretences both Peter and Helen indulge in. What view of romantic love is developed in this scene? How does Jo’s cynicism here compare with her devotion to Boy at the end of Act One? What is suggested here about attitudes to marriage? In what ways does Jo’s cynicism reflect her upbringing?

**Act One, Scene Two, pp. 50-51**

‘Jo It’ll give us a chance to save a bit of money. … Jo I don’t care where you were born. There’s still a bit of jungle in you somewhere. …A young girl’s got to eat you know.’

The playful romance between and Jo and Boy contrasts with the cynical affair Helen tolerates with Peter. Their interaction suggests a type of innocence and follows an almost dream-like logic. Boy is portrayed as something of an ideal figure upon whom Jo projects her romantic fantasies.

**Act Two, Scene One, pp. 80-81**

‘Jo He came in with Christmas and went out with the New Year. … Jo Shut up! I’m not planning big plans for this baby or dreaming…The baby’l be born dead or daft!’

Jo and Geof discuss the nature of love and the consequences of relationships that result in pregnancy. A single, pregnant teenager and a young gay man examine what might constitute a modern relationship that is not bound by the conventional attitudes of their society. In this exchange Jo and Geof explore the hypocrisy of dominant values about private experience and expose the contradictions behind expectations of ‘moral’ behaviour and the reality of how children are raised. Is Delaney challenging the view that marriage must be based on a heterosexual norm? When Jo admits ‘I don’t know much about love’, how does this comment on the nature of her relationship with Boy and her decision to proceed with her pregnancy? What view of her mother’s choices is developed in this scene? Is Jo portrayed as feeling defeated by heredity and socio-economic circumstances, or is she confident about her future?

**Act Two, Scene One, pp. 86-87**

‘Geof What’s wrong now? … Jo It shows it’s alive anyway. Come on, baby, let’s see what big sister’s making for us.’

The relationship that develops between Jo and Geof is clearly unconventional. Delaney portrays Geof as the most responsible male character in the play, whose devotion to
Jo is not based on any sexual desire. Jo and Geof exchange views on the nature of family life and the impact of generational poverty on the quality of family life. To what extent does Delaney condemn the conventional view of the heterosexual nuclear family? How is Geof presented as the moral conscience of the play? In what ways is Jo's relationship with Geof shown to be just as much of a fantasy as her previous relationship with Boy? Is the audience invited to see Geof as a practical solution to Jo's problems?

**Act Two, Scene One, pp. 90-91**

‘Jo I think there's going to be a storm. …

Geof Oh, all right…I bet you didn't struggle when he made love to you.’

Geof attempts to press his claims as a legitimate partner for Jo who rebuffs him by declaring her newly discovered sense of egocentric independence. The scene examines gender as very much a contested social space, its versions open to challenge and negotiation. The sense that young women and gay men might contest the universality of heterosexual norms is openly addressed here. In this scene, does Delaney show that gender norms can be openly challenged? Is Geof portrayed as being ambiguous about his sexuality? What does the scene expose about different forms of discrimination and prejudice? How does Delaney evoke sympathy for the separate and conflicting desires of the two characters in this scene?

**Act Two, Scene One, pp. 96-97**

‘Helen You know what they're calling you round here? A silly little whore! … Jo Yes, buzz off, Geof! … go and make a cup of tea.’

Helen has returned and is interacting with both Jo and Geof in her usual abusive way, accusing Jo of being promiscuous and describing her as a ‘bloodsucker’, and telling Geof to ‘shut up’. She now attempts to reassert her dominance over Jo, threatening violence. She suggests she should have had Jo aborted and Jo agrees, adding that Helen ‘did with plenty of others’. Geof is attempting to be a moderator as they fight, but both Jo and Helen are dismissive of him. After Geof has accused Helen of being a bully and asked both women to ‘stop shouting’, Helen informs him that she and Jo ‘enjoy it’ and then ridicules him as a ‘pansified little freak’. Jo defends Geof, but she is also cross that he was the one who ‘brought her here’ and she tells him to go make a cup of tea. To what extent does Helen reveal her intrinsically conventional views in this scene? What is Delaney's dramatic purpose in exposing Helen’s depth of prejudice? In a play centrally concerned with the question of parental inheritance, what does Helen appear to fear here? How difficult is it for the audience to regain sympathy for Helen after her vicious humiliation of Geof? To what extent would the audience agree that both Jo and Helen ‘enjoy’ this verbally aggressive way of interacting?

**Act Two, Scene Two, pp. 111-112**

‘Jo Ah well, it doesn't matter if you fail. …

Geof Oh well, the dream's gone, but the baby's real enough.’

Here Jo and Geof explore the roles and expectations of family life. Jo violently rejects such expectations and expresses a refusal to conform. Motherhood is viewed by Jo as another form of entrapment, especially the expectation of some natural bond between mother and child. There is a sense of unreality, and a suggestion that romance is delusional in this exchange between Jo and Geof; she says that Boy ‘was only a dream I had’ and when Geof refers to Boy as Jo’s ‘black prince…Ossini’, it’s as if he is having his own fantasy of an exotic Italian as lover. Why does Jo insist that Boy was ‘only a dream’? Does Jo believe that getting free of her mother is just a fantasy too? Jo clearly intends to proceed with her pregnancy yet is adamant that she will not fulfil normative expectations. How does Delaney dramatise these contradictions? What is the effect for the audience of Jo’s outburst, Geof’s gift of the baby doll, and their unconventional image of family?

**Act Two, Scene Two, p. 117**

‘Helen Why were you so nasty to him? …

Jo Why were you so nasty to him? … Helen Well, you can't do two jobs at once, you know. Who's going to nurse it? Him?’

Mother and daughter confront their differing views of motherhood and family responsibility. Helen appears to have acquired a far more conventional view of motherhood compared to her opening speeches. Jo insists on her determination to be independent, an aspiration that hasn't changed for her. Jo and Helen, despite their continued antagonism, seem to be able to discuss issues of real importance to them by this stage of the play, yet Jo’s values and attitudes clearly differ from Helen’s—how do they differ? Has Jo and Helen's relationship changed over the course of the play, or have they changed? Does Jo now view her mother more sympathetically, understanding the need for women's dependence on men? Even if Jo genuinely
intends to ‘work for the baby (her)self’, will she be able to be an independent woman? How does Delaney portray Jo’s defiance of social expectation here, and the realities of her socio-economic circumstance? Is there evidence that the future for Jo and Helen will be different from their past? When Helen kicks Geof out, is this a sign of her maternal love or is she behaving like a jealous control freak? Are these two main characters condemned to isolation by their class and gender, or do they ‘enjoy’ (p. 97) a close relationship?

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Reviews, analysis, criticism


Introduction

_Ariel_, Sylvia Plath's most famous collection of poems, was first published in 1965, two years after Plath had taken her own life. The apparent uncoupling of the art from the life of the artist (done, in this case, physically) is misleading; the relationship between Sylvia Plath the person and Plath the artist is indivisible. Plath's almost too vivid and all too brief life informs many of the interpretations and criticisms made about her work, so it is useful to know and understand a little about her background.

Plath (1932-1963) grew up in the East Coast of the United States. Her father Otto Plath died when she was nine, after which her mother, Aurelia, raised Sylvia and her brother single-handedly. Her father haunts Plath's poetry (her mother haunts her letters), he occupies a strange and ambivalent place in her life and her art. He seems to have been both hero and villain—an acclaimed professor of entomology but a domestic tyrant. Plath's childhood overlapped the Second World War and she was acutely aware of the genuine terrors of Hitler, the appalling human cost of the war, and the profound changes wrought by the Holocaust. Some biographers have equated Otto Plath's domestic rants with Hitler's speeches (see, for example, Rollyson 2014), and we can certainly find connections in her poetry. A precocious child, and amply supported and encouraged by both her parents, Plath excelled at school, winning a scholarship to the prestigious women-only Smith College. (For a thinly veiled and brilliant account of her early life, read _The Bell Jar_, her only novel and published a few weeks before her death.) From Smith, Plath went on to win a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England. Here, she met the poet Ted Hughes, whom she married. The couple had two children: Frieda and Nicholas. At this time, she began to find an audience for her poetry, and acclamation for her first collection, _The Colossus._

But Plath also suffered from a number of nervous breakdowns and the final one seemed to precipitate her suicide in 1963. The months before her suicide, she and Hughes were estranged due to his infidelities. Ironically, in these months she seemed to be deeply inspired, writing almost all the poetry included in the _Ariel_ collection. The rage, darkness and grief that permeate the poems, along with the love and regret, are suggestive of an individual in touch with deep emotions with the power to both destroy and heal. Her poetry veers between apoplectic rage and violence, and almost unbearable love and longing. In this emotional war, it seems that darkness won out. James Parker in his article in _The Atlantic_ on Plath argues that she could have 'won'. She might have found a way through the rage and the demons to prevail. But she didn't, and the legacy of her poetry is always weighted through the battle she 'lost' on February 11, 1963.

Perhaps no reading of Plath's poetry (and particularly her late poetry) could ignore the powerful and sometimes visceral feminist voice. In one of her most famous couplets, Plath declares that ‘I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air.’ Certainly, in the time since her death, she has been embraced by the feminist movements of the seventies and eighties as a powerful voice that expresses the volcanic but often silenced or muted rage of women. There have been a number of writers who have entered in to the arena of Plath, her life and death, as literary actors. Famously, Robin Morgan, an American academic and feminist, wrote a poem in the early 1970s called ‘Arraignment’ which begins ‘I accuse/Ted Hughes’.

There is so much written about Plath, her marriage to Hughes, her battle with mental illness, her work and her suicide that it is probably impossible to divorce her life from her art. But there are other ways of seeing her work. The richness of her poetry invites interpretation; her intense and uncomfortable honesty, her twisting and turning in repeated images of bees, the atrocities of the Second World War, mythology, reproduction and children, and the natural world offer many entry points for a reader to create sense.
Perspective on the text

Once a love affair with Plath’s poetry has begun, it is hard to shake. This might be because she has such a powerful arc in her work. She takes a reader from love and connection ('Morning Song') through despair and recognition ('Tulips') and into blind rage and revenge ('Daddy') through beautifully realised lyrics and entirely recognisable events and relationships. It might also be that she is accessible to read, and her voice has a kind of intimacy that suggests she is speaking to you as the reader—a trusted friend, a compatriot. Her voice feels like a friend.

Plath has been claimed by Western feminists since the late 1960s and remains a powerful voice and image of rebellious women who speak out, who name their grief and rage, and who rail against their ‘place’ in society. Plath explores the ways women have to work to move beyond the constructs they are subject to by fathers, husbands, children and society in general. She laments the dangers of motherhood ('Morning Song', ‘Balloons’), she rants against the tyrannies of fathers ('Daddy'), she fearlessly offers herself as the monster woman ('Lady Lazarus'), and reminds us always that while women might be exploited and betrayed, they also have sharp edges that cut and damage.

Her mental illness, so well documented both by biographers and in her own writings, is another entry point for the reader. Her breakdowns and multiple suicide attempts (culminating in her taking her life in 1963) permeate her poetry (and her novel The Bell Jar) and provide insight into the individual in emotional agony, the self in crisis. We might see this in a more benign and optimistic way in ‘Tulips’ but in a fragmented and desperate manner in ‘Lady Lazarus’.

However, there are certainly readings of Plath’s work that critique her voice. While a feminist reading might construct her as Everywoman, the site from which she speaks is powerfully privileged. She is white, western, educated and—though this might be contentious—beautiful, and her representations of race and ethnicity can be problematic. In terms of race, we can see the third stanza, for example, in ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’, constructs a darkly colonial image of slave transportation, where human beings were loaded like cargo onto slave ships. In her bee box, Plath tells us ‘It is dark, dark, /With the swarmy feeling of African hands/Minute and shrunk for export./Black on black, angrily clambering.’ This construction of danger and commodification echoes eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas about races from the ‘dark continent’. Her crowning herself, late in the poem, as a benevolent ‘sweet God’ who will ‘set them free’ is equally problematic in the context of race and colonial constructions.

In addition, the cultural appropriation Plath has made of the Holocaust in her poems has raised the ire of readers. In ‘Daddy’, in particular, her equating of her difficult relationship with her father with the suffering of six million Jews in the Holocaust is a contentious part in her work: ‘An engine, an engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew./A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen./I began to talk like a Jew./I think I may well be a Jew.’ The reading here might be that an individual so indelibly situated at the top of the social, cultural and geographical hierarchy sees and locates their suffering within the event that perhaps represents humankind at our most malignant. That Plath places herself at the site of some of the most obscene human suffering to illustrate her discomfort with her father does smack of a profound sense of superiority—and, to the contemporary reader, of a profound misunderstanding about the nature of genocide.

Features of the text—poetic structures and features

Stanza

Stanzas are the discrete sections of the poem (referred to as verses in a song). The translation from the Italian is ‘room’, and this is a useful metaphor for the poetry student; we can move from one room to another as the poet walks us through the ideas. Each new stanza offers perhaps a new perspective on the concepts, turns the reader into another possible view of the ideas, confuses or confounds what has come before. Referring to stanza is a handy way to nominate what is being discussed or is under consideration. Stanzas can be various in the number of lines, but it is important to pay attention to this and why a poet chooses the length of any given stanza. Plath moves from lengthy stanzas in a poem like ‘Tulips’ to two line stanzas in ‘The Munich Mannequins’.

Rhyme

Rhyme is the linking of words through a sound pattern. For many people, rhyme is the essence of poetry. We most often look for rhymes at the end of a line—in the shape of a couplet for example:

I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. ('Lady Lazarus')
Couplets, or these strong end rhymes, can often indicate certainty or a kind of 'truth' in the work. This rhyme offers stability for the reader. But it is important to see this idea in the context of the poem; at times couplets can mock certainty and stability. Many poems use a formal rhyming scheme, identified by patterns like abab, abba, abcba and so on, but Plath isn't a poet who applies this certainty in her work. Plath does use uneven and unexpected rhyme. Some other rhyming schemes she uses are:

- half rhymes or slant rhymes where there are similarities in sound but not a perfect rhyme. We might see this in the combination of 'stir' and 'there' in the twenty-fifth stanza of 'Lady Lazarus'.
- pararhyme where different vowels appear within identical consonant pairs. We see this, for example, in ‘The Applicant’ and the use of ‘crutch’ and ‘crotch’ in the first stanza.

These two rhyming patterns can create discomfort in the reader. We are looking for a more satisfying connection, but are abandoned by the rhyme. This use of rhyme can suggest a disconnect between appearance and reality. It can create discord between the images offered, or can explore untruths or lies. Social and cultural assumptions might also be suggested in these more difficult rhyming schemes.

In addition, poems can contain internal rhymes. This is where words within one line rhyme, as in:

The blood flood is the flood of love
(‘The Munich Mannequins’)

Internal rhymes can intensify the idea or image in the poem. In ‘The Munich Mannequins’, the juxtaposition between the emptiness of the beautiful mannequins and the flawed fecundity of the human woman is made more urgent by the internal rhyme in this line.

Rhythm

Rhythm can be constructed by the use of rhyme (see above) but the length of line can also construct a rhythm in the work, and the use of punctuation that guides the reader through the poem. The regular length of line—iambic pentameter, for example, where there are ten syllables per line, five stressed and five unstressed as we might see in Shakespeare—will create a rhythm without the use of rhyme (blank verse). Rhythm can be constructed through repetition, and particularly repetition of phrases, for example, the repeated words in ‘The Applicant’ (‘talk’, ‘marry it’) or the more extended repetition in ‘Lady Lazarus’ of ‘I do it so it feels…’. A more fluid or flowing rhythm in a poem can offer a more upbeat or positive quality, and conversely, a more staccato pattern can slow a poem and suggest negativity. But note that ‘Lady Lazarus’ has rollicking rhythm (created through rhyme, enjambment—see below—and repetition) but is a grim poem.

Figurative language

Arguably the bread and butter of poetry, the use of metaphor, simile, personification, anthropomorphism and imagery drives the poem and creates much of the emotional quality of the work as well as the sense of meaning. Plath has recurring images woven through her works. We see the recurrence, for example, of moons, horses, bees, Nazis and Jews, and trees. Making links between these recurring images can offer a cohesive discussion of the work, and can suggest multiple ways of considering similar or linked ideas.

‘Soundscape’

This element of poetry involves the use of sounds within words to create effect. It has something in common with rhyme but there are different strategies in play. For this feature, we look to alliteration, assonance, consonance, sibilance, and onomatopoeia. While the words themselves might hold connotative and denotative meaning (and figurative qualities too), they also hold a sound pattern, and when placed in a sequence or order, will construct a particular effect. In ‘Nick and the Candlestick’, the sharp sounds that characterise the sixth stanza, ‘vice’, ‘knives’ and ‘piranha’, speaking of dangers, give way to the open vowel sounds of ‘O love’ and ‘O embryo’ and ‘blood blooms’ and a more hopeful and positive feel.

Enjambment

Enjambment (and end stops) creates the flow of a poem. Enjambment is, in effect, the absence of end stops, where two or more lines flow into one another without the application of punctuation at the end of a line to prevent this movement. Enjambment can create a cascading effect, as the reader is propelled into new ideas and new possibilities. Enjambment can suggest chaos and a lack of control. It can disrupt a rhyming scheme, and ask the reader to see the connection created by the rhyme in a new light. Plath uses enjambment across most of her work, and not just over multiple lines, but also across stanzas.
Caesura

Caesura often comes with enjambment and involves the use of punctuation mid line to halt the flow of the poetry. The reader is forced to stop at the punctuation point, and in a kind of conflict with the ‘natural’ flow of the lines. The use of it asks the reader to pay attention to the moment we have been stopped. The balance of the line is disrupted too, and so it is useful to consider what has been disrupted, and the idea or emotion that has been highlighted.

Voice

As in any writing, we look to the pronouns in a poem to determine who is speaking. Clearly, there is a persona who inhabits or occupies the poem, but in what form? The pronouns offer clues into this—first, second or third (limited or omniscient) person, or a combination of any of these. Plath often used first person voice in her poems (as she does in her novel *The Bell Jar*), creating the confessional quality to her work that so endears her to so many readers. It is important that students distinguish the poet (Plath) from the speaker (sometimes also called the persona). The speaker is the character of the poem.

Features of the poems set for study

‘Morning Song’

This poem was reportedly written in response to the birth of Plath’s first child Frieda. The ‘I’ and the ‘you’ of the poem construct a dialogue of new mother and new child finding some kind of understanding and connection. The poem begins with the word ‘Love’—a touchstone, foundation word for parent/child relations—but Plath then inserts a mechanical image of ‘a fat gold watch’. Like the ‘New statue’ later in the poem, the child has irrefutable value, but somehow economic and cultural value rather than emotional value. In contrast, the mother is ‘distil[ed]’, ‘reflect[ed]’ and eroded by the ‘wind’s hand’, not solid on any level, and not valued in any cultural construction. Plath’s ambivalence is clear here, but it seems to be ambivalence about the role or the construct of mother/child. And the second part of the poem, when we are in the house with the mother and child, reinforces this sense. In her home, the persona is made solid (though the imagery used for both mother and child is distinctly animal—the mother is ‘cow heavy’, the child has ‘moth-breath’ and a mouth like a ‘cat’), the connection between the mother and child is somehow beyond the language that constructs values and into the deep emotional. The communication is through breathing, the sound of a ‘far sea’, a ‘cry’ and a ‘handful of notes’. In this poem, Plath might critique the place mothers occupy in the cultural consciousness, but she celebrates the personal, individuated joy manifest in the physical relationship.

‘Sheep in Fog’

Certainly a more impressionistic poem than ‘Morning Song’, and with less of a narrative, ‘Sheep in Fog’ seems to explore the experience of loneliness and despair. The landscape the persona (or speaker) is in—this large and pastoral scene of ‘hills’ and ‘fields’ and ‘flower’, with only a squeak of a sense of others in the ‘train’ that is leaving in the distance—mirrors her feeling of aloneness. The hills, images of certainty and solidity, step off as if they are mobile and vulnerable. The morning, which usually offers lightness and brightness, is inverted into ‘blackening’. Paired with this earthly landscape of depression and impermanence are the celestial bodies that, too, are in crisis. The stars are disappointed by the speaker, heaven threatens and is starless and fatherless. This is a bleak place to find the self; there is no relief in the speaker, heaven threatens and is starless and fatherless. This is a bleak place to find the self; there is no reward in the hereafter.

‘The Applicant’

This seems to be a poem of pure rage about the commodification of marriage and emotional connection. This marriage of the poem is not a meeting of the hearts, minds or souls. This is not organic, based on mutual desire or recognition. This is a connection forged in the cynical language of commerce, economics and capital gain. The applicant is a man who is being carved or formed by society (‘How can we give you a thing?’), and is learning the role he must play in the dance of marriage. It is interesting to note here that the man of the poem has only limited agency (the woman has none) but that he too is subject to the rigid expectations and designations of social mores. Both are in a sense dehumanised, reduced to parts as if they are robots, ‘hand’, ‘eye’, ‘hole’. The man of the poem can be held together with ‘this suit’, while the woman too is a set of parts to serve her husband, ‘a poultice’ for a hole, ‘an image’ for an eye—and her actions are those of servitude, ‘bring’, ‘roll away’, ‘swe’, ‘cook’, ‘talk’. Marriage, in this poem, is the worst form of slavery for women, and dehumanising for men.
‘Lady Lazarus’

Perhaps her most famous poem, ‘Lady Lazarus’ is an extraordinary, rage-filled exploration of surviving both suicide and mental illness. One of the poems that is almost impossible not to read as profoundly autobiographical, Plath tells her reader of her near death experiences, ‘The first time…’, ‘The second time…’, and clearly presages the capitalised ‘Number Three’ and her tragic suicide at age thirty. At the beginning of the poem, she is a miracle survivor of her own holocaust—she is reawakened from the unimaginable horror of a lampshade made from human skin. But the pleasure of her survival is all external to her experience; it is others who enjoy her survival—the ‘peanut-crunching crowd’. While this is a deeply disturbing poem, we are compelled through it by the use of enjambment and rhyme that create an irresistible, cascading effect and, at points, an edgy, grotesque feel of a carnival. Her suffering, her despair is somehow the entertainment of others. But her revenge will be pure, as the last lines suggest, when she reminds us that she will rise out of ash, and eat men like air.

The rhyming scheme in this poem lacks any kind of pattern, but has moments of intensity and strength. It is interesting to note at what points Plath produces these powerful rhymes, and what this might suggest to the reader. Clear rhyme often connects to a sense of certainty or a ‘truth’ in the poem, but we might see the opposite in Plath’s work, as if she is looking to mock this structure.

‘Tulips’

‘Tulips’ is an interesting poem to read alongside ‘Lady Lazarus’. Arguably placing the speaker in a similar role—that is, coming back from a near death experience—the speaker in ‘Tulips’ has none of the rage-filled responses to her resurrection. Instead, the speaker is numb, unable to feel much emotion, or to respond to either her illness or the possibility of redemption. But the tulips—here perhaps a symbol of the care of others, of the love of a family or another—tempt her with their possibilities. She also sees them as dangerous; they weigh her down, they hurt her, although this danger is also the willingness to open up to emotions, to being vulnerable to others. And once the speaker can move from fear to love, she is able to allow her heart to ‘open’ and ‘close’. Importantly, she is able to release and her tears herald the potential of ‘health’ as she tastes their ‘warm’ and ‘salt’ essence.

‘Cut’

A poem in which the ‘thrill’ of a self-inflicted wound is explored. Offering the reader an initial, mundane event—cutting a finger while in the act of cooking—Plath transforms it into a horrific and impressionistic exploration of self-harm. But it is also a confusing poem in which we see images of disgust, even self-hatred, align with some empowering and even joyful images. The ‘cut’ of the title is a ‘thrill’, it is also ‘pink fizz’ and ‘a celebration’. These two images might well be ironic, but they might be read as the ambivalence felt by the speaker. The cut, however, is also a scalped ‘pilgrim’ a ‘Redcoat’, a ‘trepanned veteran’ and a ‘dirty girl’. These are damaged individuals, and mostly damaged by the acts of others in wars and conflicts. The speaker thus can relish the act, but is also a split subject; the self in conflict or a Cartesian split of the mind and body. There are a number of readings of this poem; some have seen it as profoundly feminist while others read it is as a poem trying to come to terms with suicidal impulses.

‘The Night Dances’

One of the more esoteric of the collection, this poem offers a number of readings. There are many who argue that this poem describes her son Nicholas as he sleeps, while others explore the idea that she is writing about Ted Hughes, her estranged husband. We can read the poem, too, as a more abstracted exploration of human connections, and our place in the wide and frightening universe. Our significant gestures to others to mark our emotional connections (like love) are ephemeral and easily lost. Our ‘smile’ is, at once, ‘irretrievable’. The movements we make at night, too, are lost. The use of ‘night’ here might speak of dreams or the movements in sleep, but it might also suggest intimate connections, sex and desire. The speaker looks for more permanent assurances like ‘mathematics’, but then turns to the natural world of flowers and animals that are anonymous to us—they live and die and are therefore ephemeral too, but they are replaced by exact (or apparently exact) replicas. And while the universe seems permanent and frightening, the speaker comes to see its gifts too are only temporary; the snowflakes that fall are both ‘blessings’ and ‘nowhere’. There is certainly loneliness in this poem, but there is also a sense of understanding: that the loss we experience in our human interactions is mirrored by the events in the universe. Our loss is therefore not ephemeral as much as eternal.
‘Poppies in October’

A poem that appears aligned, in terms of imagery and conclusion (though perhaps not to the same degree) with ‘Tulips’. As in ‘Tulips’, the speaker in the poem is haunted by flowers that seem to have been given as a token of love and well-wishing. But the reader is much more located in time; that there are poppies in October (late autumn in the Northern hemisphere) seems discordant, and out of rhythm. The natural world of the ‘sun-clouds’ is startled by the bright ‘skirts’ of the flowers, as is the woman who occupies the ‘ambulance’. Like so many of these poems, the self is in deep crisis—her heart is visible not only through her skin, but through her ‘coat’; she is vulnerable in a manner that seems unbearable. But it is also a proof of life, as it were, that this woman has survived against what seems like appalling odds. And so have the poppies, which have no place in late autumn. The voice moves from third person in the first stanza to first person in the last, as if the dispassionate observation of the self cannot be held, and the ‘out of season’ or ‘out of rhythm’ expressions (the poppies, her struggle, her agony, possibly her passion and rage) turn back on the speaker. The cry ‘O my God’ seems unbidden, as if realisation has burst through to disrupt her place in the world. What surrounds her is ‘dulled’, is ‘forest of frost’ and ‘ice’ and ‘knives’ and a ‘piranha’. The speaker is acutely aware of this danger. But then the mood changes; the candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world’s ill, does redeem her share of it.’

And this might allow a reader to see the poem as a problem with a solution; that the poem offers the world as a dark entity that is mitigated by the existence of the child. But as with most of Plath’s work, it is not so simple, and the relationship between the world and the child is not poison and antidote. The speaker, the mother of the poem, enters the child’s room with a candle, but the room is a cave, and there seem to be dangers here for both mother and child: ‘the baby in the barn’, a reference perhaps to Jesus. The child as saviour is certainly a motif suggesting new beginnings, the speaker’s salvation; but is the child necessarily a victim, a sacrifice for the surrounding world—or is it, unlike the speaker, ‘solid’ and snug ‘in the barn’?

‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’

These two images recur in a number of Plath’s poems, so it is interesting to see them highlighted and placed together in this poem. In a wider reading of these images, the moon is often associated with women (Plath herself does this in “The Munich Mannequins”), with benign guidance or watchfulness, while yew trees are often seen as eternal and renewing. In other words, these images are often positive and welcome. In Plath’s poem, however, the moon and the yew tree are cold, dark, black and deathly. Some critics have speculated that the moon is Plath’s mother and the yew tree her father. The speaker in the poem calls the moon ‘my mother’, though there is no accompanying claim for a father. These two images or symbols seem to stymie the speaker—the moon has no door, there is no tenderness but an ‘O-gape of complete despair’. The yew tree rings the graveyard that separates the speaker from a place ‘to get to’. The trees are Gothic, blackness and silence. It is difficult not to read this poem as a cry of terrible desolation and, if the images do stand for parents, an aggressive attack on the dark influence they had on her life. The image of the moon recurs in many of Plath’s poems, often associated with alienating women like Plath’s mother and Hughes’ lover Assia Wevill.

‘Letter in November’

The poem takes the reader on a journey through colours, connecting the reader with the emotions of the speaker and her relationship to the places and the people that surround her. ‘Love’, she tells us, creates ‘colour’ in the world. There seems little doubt, later in the poem, that love is that of a family—children, perhaps a partner. But in the early part of the poem, we seem to be elsewhere. The world, initially, is black and putrid. The place is lit by streetlight ‘at nine in the morning’, so it is winter and possibly an urban setting. The light comes through the ‘rat’s tail / Pods of the laburnum’, a poisonous plant. But because of love, the black and the Arctic ‘turns, turns colour… / There is a green in the air’. There is happiness here and love, and the speaker seems to
be in a rural setting. The speaker is 'stupidly happy' so there is ambivalence about this happiness, but the greens, reds and golds of the poem are reassuringly joyous. But, as ever in Plath's work, there are warnings. There are the 'barbarous holly' and the 'wall of old corpses', for example. We might imagine, as readers, that the speaker is returning to a time, a memory, of joy that has been destroyed or disrupted by subsequent events. Certainly the final line, and the 'mouths of Thermopylae', suggests both the courage and the possibility of defeat in a battle that is a desperate last stand. The 'letter' of the title might be a reference to the memory of a golden time, or the catalyst that has exiled the speaker from, or propelled the speaker into, the glowing landscape of happiness.

‘Daddy’

Like ‘Lady Lazarus’, ‘Daddy’ is one of Plath's more famous poems. Interestingly, like ‘Lady Lazarus’, this is a poem of blind and tearing rage, and of taboo both in content and language. In this poem, Plath constructs the infantile and formative rage of a child denied, sparing nothing—not herself, not her father, not history. The rage of the poem is compounded by Plath using one rhyme only; the sound ‘oo’, which she employs right through the poem through different sequences and with different matched and true rhyme. As she returns and lands on that sound over and over again, the poem emerges like a bruise, hitting the same spot repeatedly. Like many of her other poems of this collection, Plath appropriates the Holocaust to illustrate the relationship she has with her father, and to qualify her suffering. She takes us to the horrors of 1930s and 1940s Europe, the concentration camps, and mass extermination. In this poem, her father is the Nazi invader and mass murderer, and the speaker occupies the role of persecuted Jew. As in ‘Lady Lazarus’, the speaker aligns these images with images of suicide—in ‘Daddy’, despite the repeated cruelties, the speaker seeks to ‘die’ to get ‘back, back, back to you’. Plath’s all or nothing approach—either hatred or love—is powerfully evoked. The final line, with its taboo language: ‘Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through’ has resonated through literature since Plath put it on the page. The juxtaposition of the term of endearment in ‘daddy’ and the rage-filled ‘bastard’ has captured, for many, the problems women face with the patriarchy—one moment protected, the next, abused and condemned.

‘You’re’

This poem is one of Plath's most playful and delightful. It, like all Plath's work, still has darkness and ambivalence, but it is more descriptive and impressionistic than it is emotional or judgemental. In this poem, a pregnant woman addresses her unborn child; numerous lines could begin with the poem's title. The poem begins with the image of a clown, turned upside down and walking on hands, and moves through a number of imaginings about the foetus—animals and birds—and finally to the span of time that the child will remain in her womb. The second stanza moves through more images, geographic and physical, as the speaker imagines the baby through the sensations she experiences as a mother—the ‘jumpy’ as a ‘Mexican bean’, the ‘ripples’ like an ‘eel’. But, in the final line of the final stanza, the speaker concedes the identity of the baby—the ‘clean slate’ that will forge its own destiny, the individual with its ‘own face on’. Critics have argued that there is ambivalence in this poem; it is interesting to examine which images in the poem have positive and negative associations, and why. The poem is constructed through two nine-line stanzas. There are no rhymes evident in the poem, but some interesting rhythms. The final two lines of the second stanza, for example, have a lovely rhythm to them, a satisfying, almost summative moment, where the child is released from the mother's constrictions. There are other rhythms that might be worth considering in this poem.

‘The Arrival of the Bee Box’

This is one of a number of poems in which bees play a key role. Plath’s father was a leading expert on bees, and this autobiographical aspect of the poem is explored by a number of critics and readers. It is, of course, possible to read the poem free of this element. The poem offers a keen insight into attraction/revulsion or curiosity/disgust. It has an ominous opening, a box that could be the ‘coffin’ for a ‘midget’ or a ‘square baby’. These images are distortions of ‘normal’. (To contemporary readers, the use of the term ‘midget’ is clearly problematic, as are the images of race.) But these ‘distortions’ are not the primary site of distress in the poem, it is the ‘din’ that is troubling. What is within the box is overwhelming, and could overwhelm the speaker if she allowed it. But she is in control for much of the poem, darkly curious. The bees are the ‘Other’ when they are ‘African hands’ and, in numbers, could destroy her. They are also the violent and potentially revolutionary ‘mob’, sent to usurp her power. But she is able to exert her will, to starve them, to set them free, to send them back. She is, she reminds her reader, the ‘owner’, ‘sweet God’ and the box is
‘only temporary’. We see in this poem fragility and fear as well as the power that can be exercised in a hierarchy.

‘The Munich Mannequins’

The ‘perfection’ of the mannequin—the representation of female beauty—is ‘terrible’ because it cannot ‘have children’. Women, like the snow, have ‘no voice’; men, like gods (‘no more idols but me’), construct ideals of female beauty in ways that deny real women’s bodies and real women’s lives. While this sterile beauty might be admired, it offers us nothing of substance. Without the capacity for flaws and mistakes, without the messy reality of women’s bodies, there is no possibility of new life. The mannequins appear to become surrogates for a superficial society that values sterile beauty over flawed fecundity. The images are brittle and lonely, with status hiding vulnerability (‘Naked and bald in their furs’), the poisonous yew trees blowing where perfection ‘ramps the womb’, and the images of male power—polished shoes, black phones—are ‘glittering and digesting’ as if devouring the voiceless. And even the image that appears to have some agency in the poem—the snow—is left with nothing in the end.

‘Balloons’

Allegedly the final poem Plath ever wrote (either this poem or ‘Edge’), ‘Balloons’ is haunted perhaps by this status. It describes living with colourful celebratory balloons long after the celebration is over; the poem conveys a sense of joyful action (‘Moving and rubbing…scooting…trembling’) although peril lurks (‘drifts’, ‘shriek’, ‘attacked’, ‘pop’). With small children fascinated by the balloons, but unaware of their properties, the balloons seem to be both joyous and a welcome relief from the everyday, the ‘dead furniture’. We can see this poem as a delightful observation of the play of the speaker’s children, their innocence and joy. But this innocence is fragile and finite too; the broken balloon at the end, in the hand of her son signals the end of something. This might well be innocence (considering that this is the last or the second last poem Plath would ever write), or happiness (we might imagine the grief of the little boy with the shredded balloon in his hand). While it is wise to hold art and life apart as much as possible, it is notable in this poem that the loss of innocence of the son in the poem found its unbearably tragic end in Plath’s son Nicholas taking his own life in 2009.

‘Words’

The speaker considers the power of words. In this poem, words are dangerous, they wound and destroy. There is, of course, a power in this, but not when those words are turned on the self, as they appear to be in this poem. The blunt force of the opening image of ‘Axes’ sets loose a chain of events, all of which create destruction and death. The blow of the axe ‘rings’ out and ‘echoes’ and, further intensified by the use of an exclamation mark, seems to suggest an unbearable sound. The wood then cries (or bleeds) sap and this turns into a struggle between water, rock and weed, none of which appear to prevail. There is no unity between the elements here—they are in combat. In the third stanza, the speaker moves through time, and ‘years later’ finds again these axe-like words. They haunt her; the words that travelled like riderless horses are now disembodied ‘hoof-taps’. These words (said or written?) will never vanish but will continue to be heard. The final three lines seem to shift the gaze of the poem elsewhere, but the image of ‘fixed stars’ underwater appears also to be contradictory; the stars that are fixed surely belong above rather than below. This distorted and uncomfortable construction of stars implies a distorted and uncomfortable view of their ability to ‘govern a life’. The idea that a wordsmith like Plath would see words as enemies, and as elements that defeat and destroy is an interesting one, and
The following ideas might be used to guide students.

• Take one line from the selected poem with an interesting metaphor, voice or angle, and extend that into an original poem.
• Take the setting of the poem and insert yourself in the scene.
• Use the events of the poem but change the setting (or the other way around).
• Use the events and the setting of the poem but change the voice from first person to second or third (or the other way around).
• Use the events of the poem but write them from the voice of another character in the poem (child, parent, friend).

Themes

Through a closer study of the set poems, students begin to identify and develop an appreciation of the thematic concerns of Plath’s work. They can group the poems thematically and trace any repetition of poetic voice, techniques and images. If there are clear repetitions and links, students can experiment with themes they are interested in, using relevant poems to inspire their work.

Students can attempt to move beyond the central preoccupations of Plath’s poetry to look at the underlying sense of her work. Plath seemed to have underpinned her poetry with irreconcilable binaries. Karen Swallow Prior (2013) explores this concept in “The “Always” and “Never” Life of Sylvia Plath.” In this article, Swallow Prior argues that Plath was always caught between two untenable positions: the intellectual and the debutante, the artist and the wife; and in her own construction of the world, the ‘always’ and the ‘never’. Swallow Prior argues for the ‘both/and’ in this scenario, something that Plath could not seem to access. Students could then explore irreconcilable elements of their own experiences: student/adult, privilege/powerlessness, healthy self-esteem/guilt or other combinations. They can work with the problems of reconciliation and balance, or leave questions open on the relationships of the binaries.

Looking at structures

Realign the poetry written to this point in light of the ways in which Plath employs poetic structures and features. There is a good chance that some of these appear in the first poem written by students. It is important to ask them to justify the use of them, to consider their effect on ideas and images. Students should play with a number of poetic structures and techniques. Plath herself played with her poetic technique in her attempts to find sense in her ideas and themes.
Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

This Area of Study offers both opportunities and difficulties for students and teachers. It is important to provide students with a number of examples of critical exploration of Plath’s work—reviews, opinion pieces, and literary criticism that draws from the various theoretical perspectives—and then allow them to develop their own responses using the ideas that fall from these examples. Working with an individual interpretation from a specific writer might be too limiting, though this, of course, will depend on the piece. Students may need to be given some kind of grounding in literary theory in order to offer a more wide-ranging lens through which to approach this Area of Study. As students engage with, for instance, a feminist or structuralist reading (or psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, etc.) they ask: what views and values in Plath’s poetry are foregrounded by considering the text through this particular lens?

Students need to be able to write about at least two different literary perspectives when being assessed on this outcome (one in the final examination). Students will need to feel comfortable with considering a wide range of ideas through their selected perspectives. The task requires students to produce their own interpretation of the poetry using two different perspectives to inform their view.

Using the following topic, I will attempt to tease out how teachers might think about ways that students could approach the assessment task.

‘Consider the proposition that, in Plath’s poetry, the relationship between the child and the parent seems irreconcilable.’

Feminist

Sylvia Plath’s work lends itself to a feminist literary perspective in part because she seems to be very much a proto-feminist who anticipates the second wave of feminism of the ’60s and ’70s, and in part because she was heralded by this same movement as both a voice for female oppression and rage, and an example of a woman crushed by sexual double standards, by the societal assumptions about childbearing and rearing, and by the marginalising of women’s art. The feminist lens is essentially a political lens; the focus is on the voices and representations of women in text and the ways in which they might be seen as victims of the patriarchy, and warriors against it. The feminist lens will necessarily lend itself to biographical readings of Plath’s...
poetry, where meaning is made through an intersection with her life. However, this lens will offer students a number of ways to consider the ideas in Plath’s work and is relatively accessible.

In light of the concerns of the question posed above, we might ask ourselves what, in the poetry, gets in the way of a reconciliation between the parent and the child. In a feminist reading, the parent would more fittingly be recast as the ‘mother’, and what gets in the way of a reconciliation might well be the conditions required of women in their mothering role by the patriarchal society. For women, the very act of parenting becomes a place of oppression. The relationship, therefore, between mothers and children in this construction is necessarily a site of conflict. We see Plath consider the ways in which her children erode her, and the ways she is diminished by their presence. Fathers are strangely absent in these moments. Where fathers are present in Plath’s poetry, they are cast as oppressors, and they personify patriarchy. The child—in this case the daughter—of Plath’s poetry is unable to subvert this power structure, and it is this power inequity that, in effect, stands between the parent and the child. But, arguably, when power is neutralised by love, there can be some reconciliation. In the poetry, when Plath finds love with her children, she can abandon the tyranny of the power structures that oppress women. Often these moments seem almost primordial, occurring outside language and within the arms of the natural world. These moments seem fleeting in Plath’s work but they also seem to be strongly felt.

The interpretation then focuses on power dynamics created through patriarchal assumptions made about mothers and daughters, the space occupied by fathers, and the concept that love can subvert, at times, these dynamics.

**Structuralist**

Teachers might want to look to a structuralist reading of Plath, although structuralism is very abstract, and can present conceptual problems for students. In addition, we find a number of different definitions and understandings of structuralism, which might confuse all parties. One of the more accessible ways into this lens is to consider the text through a series of binaries, and that meaning is made through the interplay between these oppositional forces in the text. Like the feminist lens, this lens can be applied with some flexibility in responding to topics. Topics may provide a contrast or what look to be oppositional ideas for students to explore.

In Plath’s poetry, the child almost always occupies the position of innocence. That innocence takes on different functions according to perspective and voice in the work. When the poem constructs the child through the eyes of the parent (that is, the poem is written through the voice of a parent, and the child is the Other), the innocence of the child is clearly rendered. The child is associated with objects of benign play like balloons, or with sweet sleep. They are also aligned with domestic animals like cats. The innocence of these ‘Othered’ children provides a sense of strangeness too. They are loved by the parent of the poem, but seem unknown. They are marvells but not quite human according to the parent of the poem. At times, then, in the poem, these ‘Othered’ children are also difficult. Their marvellous innocence is separate from the parent and therefore not shared. These children must be protected, at least in part because of their essential innocence, but this is an impossible task. The construction of the parent in these poems seems one of helplessness. The parent is often seeking the child, or observing the child, but there is little physicality between them. The parent is in awe often, but not connected. In this constructed relationship, the child is contained by innocence, and the parent exiled from it.

The child is too simple or innocent to meet the complex problems (or understandings) of the adult. The child doesn’t know or can’t know the parent, and the parent can’t know the innocence of the child. They seem to appreciate one another; they seem to need one another, but they face one another across an impossible divide.

In contrast, when the voice of the poem is the child, we see another version of this construct. Rather than the parent disarmed by the innocence of the child, the parent in these poems exploits the innocence, and corrupts it. We see a transfer here, as innocence becomes the site of complexity, while the parent’s experience is simplified. The parent in these poems means harm to the child, creating conflict and darkness and death. It is the knowledge or the experience of the parent that seems to create this darkness—the child’s innocent desire for connection is a fragile light in this darkness.

The competing representation of child/parent in Plath places this binary in some kind of crisis. The representation of the child across both constructions seems to value it at a higher level than the parent, but in both cases, the parent seems to have some kind of knowing control. The reader is on edge here because there seems to be no possible resolution. These forces cannot necessarily reconcile because, by their construction, they act in opposition. But Plath also returns to the binary repeatedly, obsessively, to explore the qualities of the binary—the intersection between innocence and experience, and between vulnerability and power. We require each to make sense of the other, to invest
value in one or the other. Without these oppositional forces, we would fail to create sense or identity. Plath does not reconcile because she can never find an adequate balance between them, but the subtext might be that the human project is to find that balance, is to make the forces equal one another.

The interpretation then focuses on the concept that oppositional forces can construct sense and value, and an exploration of the binary of parent/child sheds light not just on this impulse to see sense through opposition, but the difficulties in finding reconciliation, and the desire to accord balance.

**Suggestions for assessing Outcome 1**

The assessment task enables students to produce their own written interpretation of the text, using two different perspectives to inform their response.

One way of constructing an assessment task is to present students with two critical perspectives, and invite them to develop an interpretation of *Ariel* in response to these perspectives. Some critical perspectives and reviews are shown in References below.

Another way is to invite students to base their interpretation on a single or series of short statements that reveal particular perspectives on the collection, perhaps statements such as:

- “Behind these poems,” (Hughes) wrote in a 1965 essay on Ariel, “there is … a child desperately infatuated with the world. And there is a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her ‘hood of bone’, floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters.” (Parker 2013)
- ‘the poems straggle across the page like disemboweled nursery rhymes’ (Parker 2013)
- ‘If patriarchy is in her sights, she admits her own complicity…Plath’s gaze is relentlessly turned on herself, which results not in a poetry of faux grief…but militant argument.’ (Shivani 2013)
- ‘Plath’s poetry shows her distaste for the submissive and insubstantial role a woman in the 1950s was expected to play (but also) makes plain that she had accepted some of that role for herself on her own terms: a common theme throughout the writing is the author’s intense desire to be a beloved and loving wife.’ (Kinsey-Clinton 1999).

Or students could be invited to respond to a topic, using two critical perspectives. For instance:

‘Consider the idea that it is the contradictions in Plath’s poetry, her “black-and-white, dialectical tendency” (Swallow Prior 2013), which draws the reader to her poems.’

**Additional topics**

1. ‘In the set poems from *Ariel*, Plath employs poetic forms to explore the problem of identity.’
2. Discuss the idea that the set poems from *Ariel* explore experiences and behaviours that are extreme; there is no middle ground in Plath’s work.
3. Reflect on the notion that the set poems from this text are strongly critical of women’s place in society.
4. In what ways do the set poems from Plath’s *Ariel* confront social taboos?
Area of Study 2: Close analysis

Using *Ariel* for one of the two assessment tasks in this Area of Study enables students to practise developing an interpretation of the text through the language of the work; language, rather than theory or a lens, is at the heart of this response. Interpretation, understanding of the views and values in the text, analysis of the features of the text, and synthesis of these elements, are the key skills. Students show these skills as they analyse the poetic language in the given passages.

An interpretation is a large idea about the work as a whole. Interpretations need to be expansive ideas so students can respond in complex ways. A statement about the poetry may be useful as a beginning:

- Plath’s poetry shows a woman in crisis.
- Plath’s poetry provides insight into mental illness.
- Plath’s poetry highlights the suffocating roles women are forced to occupy.
- Plath’s poetry can find delight in the ephemeral.
- Plath’s poetry explores social and cultural taboos.
- The language of Plath’s poetry reveals some contradictions in narrative voice.

Students could prepare by creating a number of these ideas to work with, across as many of the poems as they can manage. Encourage students to develop their own voice, and to connect with the ideas on an intellectual and emotional level; through the work they do in class, both orally and in writing, with the literary critics as well as their own readings, the aim is to develop expressive and coherent writing and complex and perceptive ideas. A statement might begin as: ‘Plath’s poetry explores social and cultural taboos’ and then develop to:

‘The highly charged evocation of a “big strip tease” to describe a failed suicide attempt in Plath’s poem ‘Lady Lazarus’ alerts the reader to the social and cultural taboos that surround the language of death.’

Showing an understanding of the views and values in the text can be quite difficult, particularly as the text was constructed in a very specific time and culture. In the case of Plath, we might assume that many of the attitudes Plath intends to confront or critique remain current in contemporary society. In their writing, students can show they understand views and values through their use of verbs. Invite students to move beyond language like ‘shows’, ‘suggests’ ‘is’ or ‘illustrates’ (though, of course, these verbs also have their uses) and into verbs that hold greater value like: ‘condemns’, ‘attacks’, ‘judges’, ‘enlightens’, ‘threatens’, ‘thrills’, ‘elevates’, ‘silences’, ‘highlights’, and ‘celebrates’.

Just in this short list, it is evident that a student can indicate how the text endorses or condemns certain views and values. There is scope too to suggest how the reception of the poems might also inform notions of views and values. Plath’s elevation as a great poet by feminist critics says much about her views and values.

Students also need to consider their use of adjectives and adverbs when exploring Plath’s work. If, for example, students are exploring the idea that a poem is a cry for help, they need to consider the quality of that cry, and where they find that in language. If they suggest that the cry for help is ‘painful’, they need to offer examples of that quality in their selection of quotes.

In close analysis, students discuss voice, language and poetic technique to thoroughly investigate and explicate their interpretation. They focus most of their attention on the set passages (although they can draw from other parts of the text), analysing how key passages and/or moments in the text contribute to the interpretation. There is no need for students to systematically move through the passages sequentially. They can be more flexible and fluid with their engagement, taking from each passage as it is most useful to their discussion.

Detail is the key here. If a student is developing, for example, the idea of social and cultural taboo, they could:

- explore the teasing repetition that creates a ‘reveal’ as well as a rhythm
- look at the way enjambment pitches the reader from the parody of a side show into the deeply shocking exploration of death
- compare the use of imagery of strip tease with suicide and death
- suggest the use of the ‘voyeur’ to further create taboo (the reader might occupy this space as well as the ‘peanut-crunching crowd’)
- explore the confronting use of a first person voice.

Quoting from the poetry is important, but students shouldn’t be inserting great chunks of the work; short and pithy illustrations of their ideas are sufficient for this task.
Passages below could be used for an assessment task, or for practice for the examination.

**Students are assessed on how they:**

- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions
- consider the effects and nuances of language, style and form
- understand the views and values in the text and analyse how the writer reveals these
- develop their own interpretation that analyses the significance of the passages, connections between them, and their relationship to the collection as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation

**Passages for close analysis**

**Group 1**

‘Morning Song: Love set you going like a fat gold watch. … The clear vowels rise like balloons.’ (p. 3)

‘Daddy: … You stand at the blackboard, daddy, / In the picture I have of you, … Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.’ (pp. 49-50)

‘Words: Axes … Govern a life.’ (p. 81)

**Group 2**

- ‘Poppies in October’
- ‘Tulips’
- ‘Sheep in Fog’
References

Ford, Karen and Nelson, Cary 1999, ‘About the Bee Poems’ (this is a collection of opinion and ideas around Plath’s poems associated with bees and bee keeping) Modern American Poetry, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_t/plath/beepoems.htm


Plath, Sylvia 2015, Ariel, Faber and Faber, UK.

Plath, Sylvia 1966, The Bell Jar, Faber and Faber, UK.

Plath, Frieda and Plath, Sylvia 2013, Sylvia Plath: Drawings, Faber and Faber, UK.

Rollyson, Carl 2013, American Isis, Picador, USA.


Art
Perspective by Briony Schroor

Introduction

*Art* is a contemporary French play which, in the words of the playwright, holds up ‘a mirror, a sharp reflection’1 to a society that is very similar to our own. As such it challenges us as its audience to consider our sense of self, our values and our relationships with others. It is therefore not an entirely comfortable text, but it is a compelling one. It is also at times a very funny drama, one that should play well in a classroom.

Yasmina Reza is a French playwright, but as the daughter of migrants to France, she writes as an outsider, observing the behaviours of her characters, rather than finding herself entirely implicated in their actions, which accounts for the detachment which we feel as we experience the text. Further, in *Art*, her three characters are male, which also contributes to our sense that this female playwright is watching the action from a distance with a satirical eye, mocking the foibles and preoccupations of the upper-middle-class men, who themselves seem distinctly removed from any of the real challenges of daily life.

Reza, unlike her characters in *Art*, has two children—a friend of her son was the inspiration for a later play, *God of Carnage*. Although she had written plays before, and had been an actor, *Art* was the work that propelled her to national, then international fame. Written in French and first performed in Paris in 1994, the play was later translated into English and premiered in London in 1996. It has since been translated into more than thirty different languages and has earned more than A$300 million. *Art* opened on Broadway in 1998, and has won several prizes.

Christopher Hampton translated *Art* into English but Reza was involved in the process, recalling how she and Hampton ‘reworked and reworked’2 the script until she felt happy with the English version. Hampton describes the process of translation as a ‘crossword puzzle or a math conundrum’3 which involves not simply translating the words of the play, but also the culture of the playwright from one context to another. Although we read *Art* in translation, the artistic and literary merit of the text is not lost, but multiplied in the process of relocating the text from a French-speaking situation to an English one. Significantly, the English version of *Art* remains set in France, again contributing to our distance from the text.

*Art* has not been made into a big screen film, though there are filmed versions of performances available on YouTube4, (some of these are in French). Given the commercial success of the play it seems odd that Reza has refused permission for a cinematic adaptation; it is tempting to see in her refusal a defence of the theatre as an independent art form and it leads us to question the importance of this form, and of the creative process, to our understanding of the story. Like the canvas at the heart of *Art*, the theatre is increasingly an arcane high culture form; when we watch the play and laugh as the protagonists explore the importance of high culture, we sit in a theatre, a temple to high culture, and our detachment is suddenly less absolute.

Perspective on the text

I saw *Art* when it was performed at the Melbourne Theatre Company in 2001, and I remember being horrified by it. The pettiness of the characters repelled me, and their deliberate cruelty to each other struck my twentysomething self as unrealistically and unnecessarily nasty. The romanticised notion that friends support each other, so routinely promulgated in such series as *Friends* and *Sex and the City*, that friends are, in the horrible cliché of youth speak, there for each other is mercilessly mocked on Reza’s stage and I was appalled. I was also shocked that grown-ups could behave so childishly, that adult men could think of nothing more important to discuss than whether or not they liked each other’s taste in art, and even more worrying, that

4  https://vimeo.com/6789494
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kd49ax7hlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoM44Rtz3I
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1FeLnxHlHI (just Yvan’s monologue)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DTVhCxdwA (part of the play)
http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x66105_art-de-yasmina-reza-la-piece-aux-2_fun (this one is in French)
they liked each other. Although I did not realise it, Reza's piece worked its magic extremely effectively on me. I left the theatre angry with the playwright, and I attempted to be dismissive of her satire, but I could not put the play away. *Art* has a dreadful power to make us reflect on our failings, to make us reconsider the bases of our friendships and, for the Arts graduate, *Art* forces us to recognise the extent to which we have drifted into poses and positions that are a little artificial, a little self-indulgent, a little ridiculous. Fast forward sixteen years, and I am more able to laugh with Reza at the trivialisations of adult life; because I am less caught in the thrall of callow intellectualism I can see the emperor's new clothes effect of the Antrios painting instead of bridling at Reza's mocking of modern art. I know now that grown-ups are often just like children, so the behaviour of Reza's characters does not shock me, and I see more clearly the value in her social comment on the nature of friendship. I am now in my forties, older than Reza was when she wrote *Art*, but I start this perspective in so personal a tone because I suspect that high school students may feel much as I did when I first saw the play.

**Postmodernist**

On one level, *Art* is an entertaining satire with a strongly self-reflexive element, which would lend weight to a post-modernist reading of the text. The play revolves around ‘a canvas about five foot by four: white. The background is white and if you screw up your eyes you can make out some fine white diagonal lines’ and it is funny to watch Serge, Marc and Yvan try to make meaning from what is essentially a blank painting. Indeed, Hampton commented that at the premiere of the British performance of *Art* the audience:

> started to laugh before anyone had spoken because the spectacle of Albert Finney [Marc] and Tom Courtenay [Serge] standing looking at this white painting started people laughing right away. And at the end of the piece she [Reza] turned and said to me, ‘What have you done to my play?’ And what I'd done is translated it. We just find, the English find, pretentiousness about art very, very amusing, probably more so than the French.5

The challenge to modern art is compounded by the rest of the set which is ‘as stripped down as possible. The scenes unfold … nothing changes, except for the painting on the wall.’ So not only are we watching a series of men try to understand a blank canvas, but we too are involved in interpreting a blank stage, on which very little of apparent substance occurs; we are as ridiculous as Reza's characters, as involved as they are in a vacuous pursuit of high culture, especially if we think about how much we paid for our tickets.

Of course Reza bases the Antrios painting on various famous paintings including most obviously pop artist Robert Rauschenberg’s *White Paintings* which was created in 1951, and which is housed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The history of the critical response to these works reflects the Antrios experience very closely:

> Considered shocking and even characterized as a cheap swindle when they were first exhibited publicly in 1953, the White Paintings have gradually secured a place in art history as important precursors of Minimalism and Conceptualism.6

As such Reza compromises even further the comforting distance between us and her satirical stage. Given that a post-modernist text can be understood to be one which contains within it a tacit or explicit recognition of the possibility of a multiplicity of readings within, or in response to, a text, including those readings which involve or implicate the reader, *Art* is clearly a post-modern text. It engages with the meaning of text, ostensibly the Antrios artwork, but a post-modern reading recognises that in fact Reza asks us to consider our own responses to her art form as well. The play and the painting are similar artefacts of artistic dispute, and in engaging with discussion of one, we are involved in the discussion of the other. We are part of the contention on the stage, we are not separate from Marc, Serge and Yvan, we are implicated in their dispute.

**Psychoanalytic**

In part because of the minimalist set, it is also tempting to read *Art* as a psychoanalytic treatise, with Yvan as the central figure who has to choose between the impulse of the id and the hyper-rationalism of the super-ego in negotiating between his two friends. Yvan himself comments that he has ‘discussed you both [Serge and Marc] with Finkelzohn’ his therapist. The focal nature of Yvan is further confirmed in his position on the threshold of marriage; he is caught on a Freudian nexus between the demands of his fiancée

[5](https://theopenmic.co/literary-translation-art-and-christopher-hampton/)

[6](https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/98.308.A-C#overview)
and his mother, neither of whom appears on the stage, but whose voices he reports as they replay vividly through his consciousness. Further, because of his ‘new job as a sales agent for a wholesale stationery business’, he is the owner and provider of the ‘felt tip’ that writes upon the canvas, he is the consciousness who controls the pen. What is difficult in this reading is identifying who represents impulse, and who is the giver of the law. Is it Serge who has made an emotional choice to purchase the painting who speaks in the voice of the id, or is it Marc whose scatological dismissal of the painting as ‘this shit’ who takes this impulsive role? Is it Serge who has made a sound investment, and who attempts to engage in the field of ‘contemporary painting’ who is the rationalist or is it Marc whose pragmatism causes him to reject the ‘sheer snobbery’ of the pretentious art world who is the voice of reason? The ambiguity of these definitions makes this a fertile lens for students in negotiating the play: their understanding of the text will shape the way the interpretation develops.

Feminist

The very deliberate marginalisation of female characters in the play dares a feminist reading of the text. The careful arrangement of the off-stage female figures into the cultural female stereotypes of (notional) virgin, Yvan’s fiancée Catherine, wife, Marc’s partner Paula, and crone, Yvan’s long-suffering mother, further suggests that Reza is deliberately mocking conventions of femininity through exaggeration. Indeed the ways in which the women are described and the manner in which the male characters appear to feel themselves and each other hen-pecked adds to our sense that Reza is challenging social stereotypes. Significantly in this reading, the female characters have little discernible effect on the drama, despite being discussed by the protagonists. Yvan’s mother does not get the wedding invitation she desires, nor is Catherine happy with the outcome of this dispute. Paula is reduced to the position of an object—Serge draws a parallel between his acquisition of the Antrios painting and Marc’s earlier acquisition of a partner. His telling comment ‘When you asked me what I thought of Paula … did I say I found her ugly, repellent and charmless?’ reflects a clear sense that both the Antrios painting and Paula are equally subject to the judgement of the three male protagonists.

Queer theory and gender studies

The absence of the female characters on the stage also allows space for the queer theory question about the exact nature of the relationship between Marc and Serge. The 2016 London Old Vic revival of Art slyly hints that Ritter’s Marc was once sexually enthralled by the raffish glamour of Serge, an interpretation which raises some interesting points about the nature of male friendship. These three characters exist in a curiously intimate relationship with each other, and the questions Reza asks about the nature of friendship, especially when compared with the largely unsatisfying relationships the characters reportedly have with the women in their lives, are engaging. How do we choose our friends? Do we need to be like our friends in order to maintain relationships with them? What do our friends say about us? And what loyalty should one friend demand of another? These questions will no doubt capture the interest of students, as they themselves negotiate the question: ‘what sort of friend are you?’ The curious dependence the characters have on each other also challenges traditional patriarchal notions of the independent alpha male, secure in himself and his judgements. Serge has made a bold decision, but requires his friends to ratify his choice to spend ‘Two hundred thousand francs!’ (about AUD $43,060.24) on a work of art. Yvan is similarly feminised in his self-proclaimed professional failure and his inability to control either his mother or his fiancée. Marc is the most traditionally masculine of Reza’s characters, but even he is un stereotypically reflective about his relationships with the two men on stage. Part of the discomfort of the text is watching the shattering of traditional masculinity into confusion and eventually kindness.

Marxist

Of course, one of the most shocking aspects of the text is the artwork itself, and the amount of money it cost Serge. The figure ‘two hundred thousand francs’ is repeated consistently throughout the text (updated in 2016 Old Vic production to €100,000, about AUD $141,306.50) either in tones of outrage by Marc, or with giggling hysteria by Serge and Yvan who ‘roar with laughter’ at the thought of such a ‘crazy’ amount of money spent. Reza asks us to consider both what is the value of art, and whether someone who is ‘comfortably off, but … hardly rolling in money’ should spend such a sum on art. Whether the Antrios canvas is art, or a pretentious illusion, is a matter for discussion both in the play and in the classroom. What makes an artwork valuable, and whether our responses to art are, or should be, dictated by the market is not resolved by Reza; the canvas is defaced, but it is ultimately restored, leaving this central question open for interpretation.

7 https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/dec/21/art-review-rufus-sewell-tim-key-old-vic-london
Features of the text

Plot and structure

*Art* is a short play, it runs for only 90 minutes, it involves only three (speaking) characters, and although the action of the drama moves from one home to the next, the set is consistently the same throughout, except for the artwork on the walls. The plot is also fairly straightforward: three friends squabble about the value of the Antrios painting, then in a climactic moment, Serge invites Marc to draw on the painting with one of Yvan's pens. The play ends with Serge and Marc co-operating on the restoration of the artwork, and Serge's secret revelation that he knew the pen was not indelible. There is no articulated division of acts, though it is variously argued that the text can be divided into as many as seventeen sections. It seems natural to recognise the movement from location to location as breaks in the drama, but Reza's failure to separate the play in this way suggests that we should understand the similarities between the different settings to be more significant than the differences. The lack of breaks also contributes to a feeling of claustrophobia in the text; although the characters discuss leaving each of their locations, we never accompany them outside their apartments, remaining instead trapped in the location of their dispute, confronted with the artworks which so divide them. The play starts and ends with Marc, in Serge's apartment, reflecting on the Antrios painting, but because the characters speak approximately the same number of lines, there is no one figure whose view dominates the text, rather it is the relationships of the men which capture our attention.

Writing style

Reza has commented that 'there's no point in writing theatre if it's not accessible.' Her style of writing is therefore not overtly complex, and the language of the play is simple. Further, because she has been an actor, and has experienced theatre from the point of view of performance, her play is easy to stage. It requires little in the way of props, and the setting is minimal. With this relatively limited palette, Reza manages to create considerable meaning, returning again and again to some key ideas which resonate throughout her play. It is interesting, particularly given the subject of this text, that Reza says 'I work like a painter'; although her play is quite brief, Reza's satire is unrelenting, she mocks her characters and their preoccupations, and she mocks us in our efforts to find meaning in their suffering. But she is also fond of her characters, they find their way back to each other, and though the resolution to the play is based on 'a lie? ... A lie!', the play ends kindly, ruefully accepting the frailties of the men, and showing their more positive qualities.

The paintings and the pens

The only two visual symbols are the paintings and the pens. Each character has a painting in his home. Serge, of course, has the Antrios painting, whose white background and faint white lines challenge both Marc and the audience to consider the nature of contemporary painting. At first Marc sees nothing but pretension in the painting, describing it as 'a white painting tarted up with a few off-white stripes' and complaining that the painting demonstrates that Serge 'has let himself be ripped off … through sheer snobbery.' By the end of the play however, he has engaged with the artwork, commenting that 'it represents a man who moves across a space and disappears.' This is in fact the image he earlier drew on the artwork, and it appears that Marc refers to Serge, or perhaps to himself, in this final statement. In accepting the artwork, he either loses himself, or Serge, and either way, he is saddened. Paradoxically, of course, the Antrios painting is thus shown to be a powerful work of art, capable of eliciting such strong emotions from those who engage with it.

Yvan has 'some daub' on his wall; this dismissive description in the stage direction, which is confirmed later in the text, by both Marc and Serge, is reflective of Yvan's role in the text. He is not a character of strong intellectual conviction, though he remains committed to uniting his warring friends. His painting makes no significant artistic statement, it 'was painted by his father' and reflects his commitment to the frailties of the men, and showing their more positive qualities.

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8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_(play)
9 https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jan/22/yasmina-reza-interview-carnage-polanski
10 https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/jan/22/yasmina-reza-interview-carnage-polanski
engagement with ordinary, everyday pursuits, the stuff of life, as different from the arcane interests of his friends. The landscape on Marc’s wall is, by contrast, a political choice. Marc believes in the value of figurative art, art which is ‘…evocative…expressive’. Serge believes that this reflects his social conservatism and his inability or unwillingness to engage in intellectual discussion and debate. Their different artworks are metonymic of their different social values, and one of the key questions Reza asks us is whether Marc and Serge, and the attitudes they represent, can find, or be brought to, some form of common ground. Reza uses their negotiation of a restaurant for the evening to demonstrate how difficult achieving resolution can be, particularly when the antagonists appear to enjoy their antagonism, but Serge’s sacrifice of the purity of his painting to Marc’s graffiti, and Marc’s participation in the subsequent cleaning of the canvas, suggests that mutual regard can overcome significant obstacles.

Dramatic features
The insight we have into the characters in the text is as a result of the monologues and soliloquies which Reza uses throughout her play. As well as Yvan’s extended monologue11 about his wedding invitation, which dominates the middle section of the text, and effectively silences the squabbling of his two friends, periodically throughout the narrative each of the characters speaks directly to the audience, creating a curiously intimate, yet also strangely alienating tone to the text. They reflect on the action of the play, often on an event that we as the audience have just witnessed, as for example after Marc first sees the painting. Because the versions they offer of these proceedings sometimes vary quite considerably, we are also encouraged to judge the events, participating in the subjective interpretation of the action on the stage. Further, the reflective tone the men use in these soliloquies suggests that the speakers are each in some kind of talking cure therapy, an idea which is confirmed by Yvan’s consistent reference to his therapist Finkelzohn.

Because of the breaks in the narrative caused by the soliloquies, the realism of the text is compromised, and we recognise the play as having a strongly philosophical element; we are in a context that sounds sometimes very like a Socratic dialogue, during which different intellectual arguments are presented and considered. To the extent that we are distracted from the human drama of the characters on the stage, Reza’s play asks its audience to consider rationally the nature of art and the value of friendship, but despite the breaks in the action of the text, we cannot be distracted from the emotion of the story for long; the power of Reza’s writing rests in her ability to engage both our intellectual and our emotional selves through her deliberate mixing of styles.

Like the alienation caused in the partial compromise of the fourth wall, Reza’s mocking humour prevents us from seeing her play simply as an intellectual exercise. Beyond the consistent visual joke of the Antrios canvas, the pettiness of the characters—their self-absorption and their apparently uncontrolled oscillation from serious to superficial—creates a sharply satirical humour on the stage that has the audience laughing, sometimes uncomfortably, even as we are asked to consider Reza’s serious discussion of social and artistic value. The move from the bitter denunciation of Yvan’s painting to Serge and Marc’s mutual horror at the realisation that the daub was ‘painted by his father’ startles a laugh from the audience. The repetition of the cost of the Antrios, and the discussion of the type of white used in the canvas, ‘there are degrees of white! There’s more than one kind of white’ become progressively more funny each time they are asserted, highlighting the underlying ridiculousness of the debate between the characters. Even Yvan’s therapist’s serious treatise on the nature of friendship, which captures the heart of the debate of the play, is rendered amusing by the circular style in which it is expressed:

… If I’m who I am because I’m who I am and you’re who you are because you’re who you are, then I’m who I am and you’re who you are. If, on the other hand, I’m who I am because you’re who you are, and if you’re who you are because I’m who I am, then I’m not who I am and you’re not who you are …

Beyond this, the humour is created through the performance; when Marc draws on the painting towards the end of the play, for example, this moment can be either more tragic or more comic depending on the way it is played.

Ultimately though the play rests in the distance between us and the characters on the stage. Interestingly, in his translation Hampton has chosen to keep the play in France, which removes non-French audiences from the text in a way that Reza’s original audience was not removed. Women in the audience are marginalised from the action by the way that female characters do not appear on stage; this is a male world which women do not enter, though they are discussed. And although he is not wealthy Serge is clearly able to spend 200,000 francs on art which places him in a very particular financial bracket. Despite these alienating

11 see Wahid 2015
features, the human drama of Art compels us. Reza’s characters are real enough, their humanity is manifest in the careful details of her play. Marc, Serge and Yvan squabble about where they will eat, they are nasty, then regret their nastiness, they giggle hysterically and they swear, all of which makes their world real to us, and their problems compelling.

**Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation**

**Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations**

*Art* lends itself to both Adaptations and transformations and Creative responses. As a play, *Art* changes very much from performance to performance, some of which are available online; these include semi-professional performances and a professional performance in French. Using *Art* for Outcome 1 would have the benefit of helping students understand the importance of performance in the creation of meaning in a play, and would also help them to see some of the humour in the text, which might be lost when the text is read.

Students could read the play aloud, performing parts of the text, and providing at least the props of the three paintings. An early activity in the teaching of this text could therefore be creating the paintings for classroom performances. Students would have to explain and justify their paintings with quotations, and explain which one they thought was ‘art’ as they understand it. They could also define the different positions of the characters Marc, Serge and Yvan on this point, as part of this activity.

Prior to watching a performance, students could create their own playbills, using visual material to indicate what they consider significant in the text. This task can be developed further by asking that students use a particular theoretical lens in the development of their posters, showing how they read the text. If time allowed, students could also create a video preview of their imagined performance of the play (like this one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKEiyWdKJWI). These various expectations could be compared with the official performance, to encourage discussion and reflection of which was the most accurate / most effective presentation of the play.

Having some students hot seat the actors in the performance and asking them to explain and justify their performance choices will help students identify key performance choices. Students can then identify key points of difference between the performance and the written play and discuss how these affect our understanding of the text; formal or informal debates about the presentation of particular scenes or sections or even lines can be useful in consolidating student views. Students could be assigned to find and read reviews of performances of the play, in order to develop an understanding of how others viewed the transformation they are to write on.

Students could orally present a performance essay style of response using clips from performances, and analysing and explaining choices made in alternate dramatic interpretations of the play.

**Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts**

*Art* lends itself well to the creative response. Students could compose and perform monologues for Catherine, Paula, Yvonne (Yvan’s step-mother), Yvan’s mother, Catherine’s step-mother or her father, Serge’s ex-wife Françoise or Antrios the painter. In groups, students could compose and perform imagined scenes beyond the play itself: the moment when Marc realises that Serge knew the pen was in fact washable would be fun to stage, for example, or the birthday of one of the characters (probably Yvan) and the gifts that the men give to him. A scene from Yvan’s wedding might also prove fertile ground for imagined conflict.

It might also be effective for students to write and perform eulogies for any of the characters, delivered either by one of the protagonists of the play, or by one of the unseen figures in the text. Students could write obituaries for the characters, to appear in different newspapers, depending on the character; Serge might have an obituary in an art magazine for example, or Yvan in a stationery industry newsletter.

Students might also like to develop the play’s discussion of art by writing, for instance, the introduction to the ‘Huntingdon Gallery Antrios retrospective’, or a catalogue of an exhibition at the Pompidou which includes Antrios’ work. This might be presented as a PowerPoint with oral or written commentary, and might be completed with a soundtrack which enhances our understanding of the work. Students could write a spirited polemic for a conservative Sunday newspaper’s Arts section; this could attack Antrios and painters like him, and defend figurative art. A spirited polemic could also be presented as a radio program (like ‘Counterpoint’ on Radio National), and submitted as a podcast or vodcast.

Hearing from Finkelzohn might also be interesting; students could present a therapy session between Yvan and Finkelzohn or write up Finkelzohn’s notes after one of his sessions with Yvan. Either of Yvan’s friends might also
find their way to Finkelzohn, then students could have the therapist consider the nature of the men’s friendship. This might be delivered as a lecture to a group of Finkelzohn’s psychoanalysis undergraduate students with relevant PowerPoint slides or presented in pod/vodcast mode.

Students who are less comfortable with dramatic performance could present imagined interviews with Reza, or Antrios, or any of the characters.

These creative options could be presented in written form, with the reflective commentary presented orally, although that may seem a wasted opportunity when the creative itself could be presented orally accompanied by a written reflective commentary.

In preparation for a creative response, students should track the similarities and differences in the language of the characters in the play. Finkelzohn, for example writes in a very circular way, Marc swears consistently, Serge’s language is more pretentious than his friends, and Yvan is quite emotional in his speech. Comparing and contrasting the soliloquies of the characters will assist students in developing their understanding of the appropriate style for their own writing. Collecting all references to a particular focal character is also a good way to begin a creative response, particularly about a minor character. This can be done in a table which records the comment, and who makes it.

Students should know and understand the form they intend to write in, when preparing for a creative assessment task. Reviewing the features of the play they intend to replicate will assist with this, looking closely at the features of the monologues and soliloquies, noting the length of sentences, and references to the past, for example. Students who move beyond the play into a new form, should read and/or view examples of the style they wish to respond in, whether it be looking at art magazines, or listening to radio programmes.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

Art can profitably be read through a variety of critical literary perspectives, and as the play is short but dense, it is also a useful text for one of the passage analysis tasks because students can get across the whole text thoroughly. Because Art is a French play, much of the critical material is also in that language. However, some articles in English are referenced below, and there are reviews of performances of the play online which might also be useful as critical material.

Encouraging students to recognise the different meanings available in the text through different theoretical perspectives will help develop their understanding of the play, and the ways in which it can be read. Students could start by identifying the significance of the central preoccupations of the three characters, and the theoretical perspectives which these represent. Yvan speaks from a perspective which privileges psychoanalytic concerns. Serge from either a Marxist perspective (ungenerously—if we believe that he values the Antrios painting for its financial value) or a post-modernist one (generously—if we believe that he values the Antrios painting because of the insight into himself that it affords him). Marc from a structuralist view which values figurative art because it is accurate in its presentation of lived experience; this accounts for his changed view of the painting at the end of the play, when he recognises that the painting does in fact represent a truth.

To consolidate this idea, students could write a description of the Antrios painting from the point of view of each of the characters, and identify what perspective the characters are using in making their judgement of the Antrios painting. This activity could be extended to the other paintings in the text, and even to the choice of restaurants in the play. Behnaz Armani, in ‘A Deconstructive Reading of Yasmina Reza’s Art’ explores the significance of the painting in the text, and notes that the characters interpret the canvas differently. Some of her article is quite complex, but students do not need to understand Derrida’s notion of differance to grasp the central idea that the painting is open to interpretation; it is essentially a blank canvas upon which different meanings are imposed.

In his article ‘Yasmina Reza: from Art to The God of Carnage’ Michael Karwowski also considers the nature of the Antrios painting, though he places Art and its concern with ‘the meaning of life while at the same time providing a
good night out" in the wider context of Reza’s other works. This more biographical reading of the play can be a fruitful one for students, who could research Reza, and discover her views on Art, which are well documented in English as well as in French. Emily Beach, in her 2004 thesis, reads the play through the lenses of subjectivity and feminism, while Tilger’s reading notes ideas about masculinity. Podstolski reads the characters in Freudian terms and sees the play as primarily about the creative process. Wahid reads Reza’s play as suggesting that ‘language often lulls us into a false sense of understanding’ (p. 44), while Julian Cha discusses a reading of the play in which ‘whiteness’ is seen as central to the power structure entrenched in the exclusive art world, and in society in general.

Having identified the different readings of the canvas, including students’ own views of the Antrios piece which could also be identified as springing from a particular evaluative framework, students could reflect on the conclusion of the text, and determine whether or not Art has a positive ending. Applying the judgements of Yvan, Marc and Serge to this question would help students understand the views of the characters and the different perspectives they speak from. Students could interview each of the characters and try to explain why the play ends well or badly, and what information is privileged in the making of these judgements. Yvan is moved to tears by the outcome and the proposed peace between his friends; Serge is pragmatic in his treatment of the situation, allowing his Antrios painting to be defaced, but not devalued, he retains both the artwork and his friend. Marc accepts the purchase of the Antrios painting, and recognises that it has value (though his notion of value is not the same as Serge’s) though he is suspicious of Serge’s gesture in allowing him to draw on the work. In his largely accessible article ‘Friendship and Yasmina Reza’s Art’ Noel Carroll explores the nature of friendship in the text and considers the significance of the dispute the characters have in the play over a difference in artistic taste. To consolidate their understanding of this reading of the text students could take on the role of mediator between the three friends, providing advice from an online agony aunt to demonstrate an awareness of the cause of the problems between the friends and the difficulty in achieving harmony between them.

This assessment of the different readings of the conclusion of the play could be further developed by bringing in some of the unseen characters of the text. Imagining how Françoise, Paula and Catherine felt after watching Art would help students develop a feminist reading of the text, and presenting Finkelzohn’s view would allow the development of a psychoanalytic reading.

Suggestions for assessing Outcome 1

One way of constructing the assessment task is to present students with two critical perspectives, and invite them to develop an interpretation of Reza’s play in response to these perspectives. Another way is to invite students to base their interpretation on a single or series of short statements that reveal particular perspectives on the collection; there are many such statements in the reviews suggested in the references. Or students could be invited to respond to a topic, using two critical perspectives.

Possible topics

1. ‘Art suggests that it is impossible to put a value on art.’ Discuss.

This topic invites a Marxist reading, but could also be tackled from a psychoanalytic perspective, considering the way Serge and Marc value their friendship with each other more or less than their taste in art.

2. Consider the idea that there is no true friendship in Art.

A structuralist reading of this text reveals that despite their ostensible dispute, these three characters spend a considerable amount of time together, suggesting that theirs is a strong bond. A feminist reading suggests that the three protagonists are more concerned with each other, and their friendship than they are with the women in their lives.

3. Reflect on the idea that Art suggests we are nothing without our family and our friends.

A feminist reading suggests that female characters are silenced in this play, suggesting the relative lack of importance of family in the text; male friendships however are shown to be highly valued and highly valuable. A psychoanalytic reading looks at how the characters appear to define themselves in terms of their relationships with both family and friends.

12 Karwowski 2009
13 Tilger 2016, p. 5
14 Podstolski 2000
15 Wahid 2015
16 Cha 2010
4. Discuss the proposition that in *Art* sacrifice brings happiness.

A psychoanalytic reading highlights the fragile nature of the resolution at the end of the text, and shows that although Marc and Serge aim to remain friends, they cannot really sacrifice their beliefs to their relationship. A Marxist reading identifies that very little real, financial sacrifice is made, and this is what creates happiness.

5. Discuss the proposition that Reza’s play *Art* shows that performance is everything.

A post-modernist reading looks at the value of the Antrios painting and emphasises that the value of the painting exists in the discussion around it. A post-structuralist reading asks to what extent do the characters perform for each other—that is, to what extent is their relationship with each other a performance.

**Students are assessed on how they:**

- understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism
- identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways
- develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism
- analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.

**Area of Study 2: Close analysis**

Although her language is written to be accessible, the complex ideas in Reza’s play are reflected in the language styles adopted by her characters. The play is an interesting balance between tense moments of stichomythia and the artificial breaks provided by the soliloquies, and students should note the differences between these in terms of the mood of the play, particularly in performance. The stage directions are also quite specific and students should engage with these in their passage analysis writing. Performing parts of the play in the classroom will help students to recognise the significant contrasts in the text’s style.

The way the characters repeat and echo each other’s lines is also a significant feature of the text. Marc, for example, calls the Antrios painting ‘white shit’, a condemnation which is later quoted by Serge. The phrase alters each time it is repeated, but the repetition itself demonstrates the closeness of the men, despite their apparent antagonism. This careful repetition is again evident later in the play when the three men are discussing Yvan’s response to the painting:

> Serge: He finds these colours touching! He’s perfectly entitled to!
> Marc: No, he’s not entitled to.
> Serge: What do you mean, he’s not entitled to?
> Marc: He’s not entitled to.
> Yvan: I’m not entitled to? …

Here Reza’s style creates humour, showing the similarities between the three men while presenting them in a dispute. The oscillating power relationships between the characters is also apparent in balance of the dialogue; when discussing Marc’s response to the Antrios painting, for example, Yvan responds to Serge’s extended complaints with single word answers, which are ambiguous to the audience, if not to Serge. This scene can be read either as a situation in which Serge dominates his friend, or as Yvan failing to endorse Serge’s taste as emphatically as Serge requires; whichever interpretation students choose, the disparity in the dialogue highlights the power struggle. Students can track the balance of speech in the text quite mechanically, counting characters’ words in scenes, and recognising those characters who are silent or silenced in order to develop their understanding of this feature of the play. Annotating their play scripts to emphasise who is on stage when and where will also help students understand details of the text.

As well as noting details of phrases and lines, students should be encouraged to look at patterns in the performance more broadly. Reza sometimes uses parallel scenes to show
the hypocrisy of Marc, Serge and Yvan which students should consider in their writing. We are first introduced to Yvan, for example, in two parallel scenes: first we see him discuss Serge with Marc, then he discusses Marc with Serge. Reza emphasises the difficulty of his position, demonstrating how demanding his two friends are by replicating the scene in which he interacts with them independently. It might be interesting for students to trial substituting one character for another in a scene which excludes the third figure, to note the similarity of scenes and the hypocrisy demanded by the characters' quest for absolute loyalty.

Passages for close analysis

The suggested passages are grouped in three and could be used for an assessment task or exam practice. Teachers or students could also select their own passages, or change the combinations of passages.

**Group 1**

‘Serge exits and returns with the Antrios … Serge: He told me it was shit a completely inappropriate description.’ (pp. 12-14)

‘Serge: I want to know what the bastard said, all right? Shit! … Yvan: You’re wrong. It’s very profound.’ (pp. 41-42)

‘Serge: So here we are at the end of a fifteen-year friendship … Marc: I’d prefer it if you stopped refereeing, Yvan, and stopped imagining you’re not fully implicated in this conversation.’ (pp. 54-55)

**Group 2**

‘Marc: You paid two hundred thousand francs for this shit? … Marc: Because it is. It’s shit. I’m sorry.’ (pp. 3-4)

‘Serge: When you asked me what I thought of Paula … Serge: That’s right. Her method of waving away cigarette smoke condemns her out of hand.’ (pp. 45-46)

‘At Serge’s. At the back, hanging on the wall, the Antrios. … Yvan: … nothing great or beautiful in the world has ever been born of rational argument.’ (pp. 61-62)

**References**

Amani, Behnaz, ‘A Deconstructive Reading of Yasmina Reza’s *Art*,’ ISSN 1411-2639 (Print), ISSN 2302-6294 (Online) OPEN ACCESS, http://kata.petra.ac.id


Introduction
Maxine Beneba Clarke was born in Sydney in 1979, of Afro-Caribbean descent. Her grandparents and parents migrated from Jamaica to England and then to Australia. She has written in many genres: short fiction, novel, poetry, memoir and a children’s book, *The Patchwork Bicycle*. In recent years she has received several awards for her writing, and she is a slam poet.

Clarke dedicates *Foreign Soil* to ‘Australian fiction writers of colour’ (p. 267). Ethnicity, colour, race and racism are certainly at the heart of these stories, as are the issues of social and political justice that are central to such a focus. Clarke's stories are also concerned with gender fluidity, social class, personal experiences of women and children, and the effect of conflict on people's lives. Her characters find their horizons expanded or challenged through education or migration. They experience fear, restlessness, suffering and joy; some are courageous, kind, thoughtful, determined or neighbourly, while others are mean, cruel, weak, narrow-minded or morally compromised.

In the references cited at the end of this document, several interviews can be found in which the author talks further about her background and the influences on her writing.

A note on the text
Page numbers in this guide are from the 2014 edition published by Hachette, which is the edition listed for study in VCE Literature. Eight stories are set for study. If teachers are using the 2017 edition, note that it includes an extra story (but is otherwise the same); there are, thus, three stories not set for study, ‘Harlem Jones’, ‘Foreign Soil’ and ‘Aviation’.

Throughout this guide, the terms ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘race’, and ‘colour’ are used, as these are the terms used by the author herself and by characters such as Nathaniel, Ella, Solomon. The language of the stories contains some obscenities that may be confronting to some readers, sometimes uttered even in the voices of children, and teachers will therefore need to consider the appropriateness of these stories for their students. As well, depiction of racial violence, terrorism, racial taunts and sexuality may prove challenging for some students.

Background information
Students will find it helpful to research the geographical, cultural and historical contexts of the stories. What issues sit in the background of each story, what historical figures and events are drawn on? Teachers may need to discuss the difference between asylum seekers and refugees, Australian immigration policies, and social attitudes to issues of gender and sexuality in Australia and the USA. Cricket fans may need to explain the significance of the Test series of 1960-61.

Settings of the stories
- Sudan, Darfur, Khartoum, Haskanita (‘David’)
- Jamaica, Kingston (‘Hope’ and ‘Big Island’)
- Kellyville in Sydney and Footscray in Melbourne (‘Shu Yi’ and ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’)
- UK, 121 Railton Road Brixton (Lambeth Council and the squatters) (‘Railton Road’)
- USA, Mississippi Delta, Mississippi River Delta, New Orleans, Louisiana (‘Gaps in the Hickory’)
- Sri Lanka, Dehiwala, Gampaha, Kelani River (‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’).

Background for understanding historical, political and cultural issues
- migration from former British colonies to the UK, in particular from the West Indies
- 121 Railton Road Brixton in the late 60s, early 70s, and Lambeth Council’s conflict with the squatters (see *Wojtek* blog post), women such as Olive Morris and Althea Jones, Michael de Freitas, (Darkest London blog), National Front UK
- the Black Panther Movement (UK, USA) and Malcolm X, the Janjaweed (Sudan), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan (Sri Lanka); are these organisations freedom fighters or terrorists?
- Genesis 9:20-27 and the story of Noah and sons, Babylon (‘Railton Road’); Lot, Moses and President Andrew Jackson (‘Gaps in the Hickory’)
- Songhay (Songhai) people of Niger, goddess Mawu-Lisa (‘Railton Road’)
• the conflict in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) between Sinhalese and Tamils, which came to international prominence in the 1980s, although its origins go back much further, and of course the stilt fishermen of Kathaluwa

• Australian policy on detention of asylum-seekers and conditions in detention centres such as Villawood.

Perspective on the text

*Foreign Soil*, a collection of stories that at first seem diverse, explores aspects of the lives of people who are in some sense displaced; they may have migrated or may be the children of migrants, or may in some other way be located on the margins of society. Sometimes the stories focus on critical incidents, moments when things change or are redefined, whilst on other occasions the experience is brought to light over a considerable period of time. The stories are set in locations as varied as Jamaica, London, Melbourne, Sydney and the southern states of the USA. The two stories that frame the collection are both set in Footscray, in Melbourne’s inner west. Relocation, dislocation, disruption and discontinuity characterise the lives of the characters. Their sense of belonging is interrupted. Their difference from others around them is often a focal point in the stories. This is shown in many ways through their voices, which are sometimes different from the voices of the society in which they are located.

Voice is important in Clarke’s writing—her ear for the rhythms of spoken English, particularly in the vernacular, is a notable feature, as is the descriptive writing which superbly evokes the minutiae of daily life. But the reader is not meant to feel comfortable while reading these stories; the book’s epigraph, a quotation from the famous African writer Chinua Achebe, suggests a postcolonial reading and invites us to keep wondering about the author’s intentions: ‘Let no one be fooled by the fact that we may write in English, for we intend to do unheard of things with it’.

In Clarke’s stories, the personal often meets the political. Clarke confronts issues of race and racism, skin colour and identity, narrow-mindedness, bullying, and political and social injustice. The reader may see a liberation struggle such as that depicted in ‘Railton Road’ in binary terms, but Clarke frequently subverts binaries. One reviewer asks: ‘Is this post-colonial literature? Or is this a collection of writing that, like Nam Le’s *The Boat*, seeks to tell the stories of marginalised people in a society that privileges white, middle-class male voices?’ (Heinrich 2014). Another writes that ‘Clarke’s stories remind us that discrimination and alienation are universal’ (Laidlaw 2014).

The stories are about the particular experiences of people who are different (or ‘the Other’) within the society in which they live; can they also be read as being about experiences common to anyone who experiences dislocation, displacement or difference? ‘Clarke’s stories all follow an emotion connected to cultural displacement: sadness, anger, confusion’ (Macauley-Gierhart 2017). Does the reader’s response to the stories depend on his/her own experience—whether personal or vicarious—of dislocation or difference? Do male and female readers interpret them differently? Do people of colour and white people read them differently? These are the sorts of personally confronting questions which Clarke’s stories invite, or perhaps demand.

Herself a child of serial migrants, Clarke’s international outlook is aptly summed up in the words of the character Nathaniel ‘Ye know, like mi own self is part ov de globality ov it all’ (p. 181).

In this country, you look at a person, and you know them. It is the inside-out way the people of this country wear their soul … Asanka likes it—this casual unguardedness that comes from never really knowing fear. (p. 228).

Asanka, on the other hand, arrives in Australia from a country where he has known way too much fear: ‘The Tigers taught him … scanning for threats … He will never be rid of who they have made him. Never.’ (p. 228).

Views and values in this collection will provide opportunity for important and stimulating discussions. Like one reviewer, some readers might think that Clarke ‘throws racism in our face’, but others will see in her stories something more nuanced—a fascination with the sounds and rhythms of language, a demand for social and political justice, a complex portrayal of how one struggle for rights can work with or against another, a valuing of education and of the rights of women, and a heartfelt sense of the centrality of family life.

…………………………

1 Heinrich 2014
Features of the text

‘David’

This story is set in contemporary Melbourne, in Footscray’s Barkly Street and surroundings, but could equally be imagined in some other suburbs. In this discontinuous narrative there are two main voices, both women from Sudan, the first a young single mother who is adventurously breaching convention by dressing in jeans, riding a bicycle, having a child out of wedlock and having left the child’s father, and a second woman, Asha, who is older and must be respected as Auntie. The latter has lost her son David in violent conflict, but what she remembers most is his ‘patchwork bicycle’ and the searing moment of his death. What is uplifting in this story is the way in which ‘Auntie’ daringly attempts to ride the bicycle, defies the strictures of her culture and connects with her son’s achievement.

- Find out more about the conflict in Sudan during the period 1950s to 2011, the creation of the new nation-state South Sudan, and the role of the Janjaweed in the civil war.
- How do the two women, Asha (‘Auntie’) and the unnamed first-person narrator, later referred to as ‘Little Sister’, differ? Do they come from the same country? What fears and opinions does the story suggest Sudanese women bring with them to their new country? Has migration to Australia granted new freedoms to the young mother?
- What is the importance of the afternoon’s encounter to the two women? What is the significance of the younger woman naming her bike ‘David’?
- What does a bicycle represent to the characters?
- Discuss words and phrases that (a) show aspects of the story which a reader might easily miss, and (b) connect the sections narrated by the two different narrative voices.

‘Hope’

This story is set in Jamaica in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Millie grows up in a large family (‘ten bowls on the table’) in St Thomas, an eastern parish of Jamaica, but her father realises her potential and desires that she continue her education in Kingston, not Port Royal. She goes to work for Willemina, a seamstress and sewing teacher who is eager to take on Millie as a boarder and student. Millie meets Winston Gray, with whom she falls in love during his last period of leave before he returns north for the beginning of the new cane-cutting season. She becomes pregnant but hears nothing more from him, even though she later discovers that he has written to her and sent money. After the baby is born, Winston returns and reveals that he had written to her, believing that she ‘gwan be mine’, despite what the other workers had said.

- To what extent is Millie’s future determined by her father, by Willemina or by Millie herself?
- Is Millie’s relocation to Kingston a positive move or otherwise?
- How are the men in this story (Millie’s father, Winston, and the man who assaults Millie) portrayed?
- Winston talks of a passage to ‘Inglan’. Has he accepted the baby as his? How do you see their future?
- In what ways is the title apt?

‘Shu Yi’

This story is set in 1992, ‘the hottest summer on record, at least since I’d been born’, comments Ava. Ava, the child narrator, feels excluded from her peer group and, as a result, always seeks refuge in the library. Shu Yi, the new Asian girl at Cooper Hill Public School, is a recent immigrant who speaks little English and is also bullied at school. Ava’s mother recognises that Shu Yi is being bullied and confronts the principal about it. When he is reluctant to take action, she speaks with the class teacher, Mr Wilkinson, who asks Ava ‘to help Shu Yi to feel comfortable in her new school’. Although she of all the children best understands Shu Yi’s situation, Ava seizes the temporary respite from the teasing of the other children and rejects Shu Yi, all the while knowing what she is doing. She even copies the offensive racist language she had heard Melinda Meyer use.

For teachers and students who are not familiar with the demographics of Sydney, significant information is available on the Australian Bureau of Statistics website. For instance, according to the 2016 census, the population of Kellyville (a north-western suburb of Sydney where the story is set, adjacent to Baulkham Hills) was 27,971. 61.0% of residents were born in Australia and 64.3% of residents spoke only English at home. It is a predominantly Anglo-Celtic area with small Asian minorities. Ava, the narrator, describes it as ‘typical everyone-knows-everyone-else’s business-and-can-I-borrow-a-cup-of-milk-for-the-kids’-breakfast-please suburban blond-brick Australia. The white-picket-fence dream was alive…’ (p. 86).

Windsor, on the other hand, is an historic town, the third-oldest settlement in Australia, dating from about 1791,
a product of British colonisation. While it was once a separate township, it is now an outer north-western suburb of Sydney. 78% of the population have at least one parent born in Australia, and many of the rest have the other parent born in the UK or NZ. In nearly 90% of homes, only English is spoken. These comparative demographics give a fine edge to Melinda Meyer’s comments, clearly reflecting her mother’s, that immigrants are not welcome. In commenting that ‘even Baulkham Hills is starting to look like another fucken country … Oh, Africa, I suppose’ (p. 92), Melinda displays airy ignorance of the fact that Africa is not a country and that few immigrants in her area have African origins. She confidently voices her mother’s prejudices and uses them to attack her classmate Ava, in a knowing and powerful way that highlights Ava’s difference. (Note: Ann M. Martin’s Babysitters Club was a popular series of books in the 1980s and 1990s.)

- Whose voice is narrating this story? Is it merely a child’s voice?
- How do we know that until Shu Yi arrived, Ava was the one who was bullied?
- What is suggested by the fact that Mrs Dalley confronts the school principal with ‘Oh, come off it, Ian…’?
- What is the response of Ian James, the principal, and how do you react to it?
- How is Mrs Dalley’s firm stance revealed in the story?
- How is the reaction of the class teacher, Mr Wilkinson, different from that of the principal? What ideas may lie behind this difference?
- Why is Ava chosen to be the one to help Shu Yi settle in to the school? What do you think of this strategy?
- ‘Our mother had worked tirelessly to fit our brown-skinned family of five into the conservative white neighbourhood in which we somehow found ourselves.’ What has Mrs Dalley done, to fit in? When she sees another woman of colour, what does she do?
- How is it that Melinda appears to wield so much influence in the class?
- How and why does Ava try to avoid the responsibility she is asked to carry out? What are the consequences, and how does Ava feel about what she has done?
- A strong image of personal distress appears at the end of this story, and also in another story. Such mirroring of imagery occurs throughout the collection. Keep a note of these mirror images.

‘Railton Road’

This story is set in Brixton, a London suburb, during the late 1960s when 121 Railton Road did actually house squatters and was a centre for activists. Railton Road leads up to the Brixton Station and Brixton Market, heart of a strong multicultural community that is home to many migrants from the Caribbean and other former British colonies.

Solomon lives in a rebel squat and teaches a class in Black History to the other squatters. He reinterprets the Bible in a way that claims Africa as the origin of civilisation and feels a deep identification with his African roots and tries to inculcate that in his audience. When De Frankie, one of the leaders in the Black Panther movement, comes to visit he questions Solomon in great detail, and commands him to prove himself. Solomon is to assist in the attack on a young black woman who is, De Frankie claims, betraying her people by associating with a white man. She is subjected to a humiliating punishment.

This story has some similarities with ‘Harlem Jones’, although Solomon is presented as a much more sympathetic character. Solomon is using his education to fight for the rights of his people. However, his commitment to the cause is severely challenged by moral ambiguities that he is thoughtful enough to perceive—he himself has fathered children with white women, for instance—and he begins to doubt De Frankie, particularly his attitudes towards women.

- Investigate the story of 121 Railton Road in the late 60s and early 70s (Haynes 2013) and of Michael de Freitas, who changed his name to Michael X—to what extent has Clarke based this story on those events and people?
- Investigate the influence of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the Black Panther Movement (early 70s in the UK), which provide background context for this story.
- Investigate the position of women in the political resistance movements of the 60s and 70s in western countries. Women such as Olive Morris at Railton Road seem to have been equal actors in political struggles; however, in many of the political movements women were in fact often treated as servants to, or possessions of, the men. Which attitude emerges in this story?
• What is the ‘Curse of Canaan’ referred to in this story? (pp. 105-7). Read Genesis, Chapter 9, verses 20-27.
• Describe the narrative voice of this story.
• What are Solomon’s strengths?
• How does Solomon convince himself to become involved in the attack on the young ‘sister’, and why does he fail to call the police?
• What has the young woman done that De Frankie considers punishable?
• What conflicts in Solomon’s mind are revealed to us? Why is he angry after the attack?
• What is the significance of the chain? (What does it represent? Who made it? What is likely to happen to the woman?)
• Why are we left with the impression that De Frankie (‘or whatever the shape-shifter chose to call himself today’) will merely slip away, and continue as he is?
• What sympathies can we feel for Solomon and the young unnamed woman?

• On rereading the story, what clues lead the reader to construct the story of Delores’s past as Denver?
• Are the female characters shown to be strong? How is this shown?
• Why is Delores sympathetic to Jackson’s son Carter? What do we gradually learn about Carter?
• What is the significance of the title? Do you think the seventh President, Andrew Jackson, has any significance in this story?
• What features of the writing could be used in a creative response?

• ‘Minute that chile an her lay eyes on each other, they gon know they kin. It’s gon feel like they finally home.’ (p. 172). What do you think happens after Delores unbolts the apartment door? Why does Clarke provide the reader with such an open ending?
• The Still ’crept its way here cross the Delta … New Orleans trap this kinda heat … they jus gotta wait for the breeze to break it some way.’ (p. 140). What is the significance of New Orleans in this story, and of the heat?

‘Gaps in the Hickory’
This long story is set in New Orleans and also Newmarket, Mississippi, USA, with alternating narrative voices. In Mississippi, Gram Izzy has died and her grandson Carter is bereft. His father joins night-time Klan ventures in which the men dress in red or white hoods and matching capes and set fire to wooden crosses with flaming torches.

We are given most of this story through the eyes of Delores, referred to as ‘Izzy’s best friend’, who used to live in Mississippi but now lives in New Orleans as a white woman. She has become estranged from her son, Jackson, and her grandchildren. She has befriended a neighbour, the young child Ella, about six; they are ‘an unlikely pair’ (p. 138) and Ella is perhaps too knowing for her years. There are many clues about Delores’s past gradually emerging in this story, and readers need to piece together the various hints in order to construct the story from this fractured narrative.

When we read a story, we as readers are developing a narrative somewhat in parallel to the author’s story. It is like the act of reading a detective story, in which readers are creating and constantly revising their own constructions of the events in order to find a narrative of best fit.
• The narrative voice appears to be a character; whose voice is it?

‘Big Island’
Nathaniel Robinson works at the port in Kingston, Jamaica, loading the ships that pass through and go to England. Forced to leave school early to work in the fields, following the death of his father, he has never learned to read or write, a secret he hid from his wife Clarise until after they were married. He is a person reasonably content with his lot, whereas his wife is restless—she has ambitions for him, which he regards as nagging. Clarise sets about teaching him to read and write, in a very systematic way, one letter a week. It embarrasses Nathaniel when others see that he is still learning, for instance by identifying letters on products in the supermarket, but this knowledge of reading and writing gradually gives him some empowerment.

Learning that ‘J is fe Jamaica’ constitutes a pivotal moment in his life, when he discovers on the globe what a tiny place Jamaica is. He is equally surprised to find that England, the place to which so many of his countrymen have migrated, following their hopes and dreams, is also very small. And then, when the front page of his newspaper shows that the West Indies Cricket Team is feted in Australia during the ‘Calypso Summer’ of 1960-61, he wonders what country this is, this ‘big islan’, ‘dat offah such reception te black West Indian man. Treat us like we kings!’
The Australia vs West Indies Test Series that summer was indeed an exciting series2 (including as it did the ‘most incredible game’, the tied test3), and the West Indian cricketers were the famous celebrities of the day in Australia. Nathaniel particularly imagines the cricketers being cheered, and notices the pictures of them lying on large sunny beaches: ‘E is fe envy’. Nathaniel has now become discontented like his wife and as he notices all the small and ugly things of his life, he recognises that ‘R is fe restlessness’.

• Why does Clarise believe that it is important for Nathanial to learn to read?
• In what ways is learning to read both a positive and a negative experience for Nathanial?
• Restlessness is a common motivation for migration, and it is often a female partner who initiates the decision to emigrate. Will Nathanial now seek to leave Jamaica? What might happen?
• Why would Clarke choose as a focal point for this story the Test series of ‘60–’61? What is the effect, for an Australian reader?

‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’

Asanka, a child who was taken from his family and forced to fight with the Tamil Tigers, has fled Sri Lanka on a small crowded fishing boat which is making its way to Australian waters. The boat is intercepted by an Australian Navy vessel and Asanka is incarcerated in Villawood Detention Centre.

The stilt fishermen of the title (who fish while perched on a stilt platform, wrapping one arm around a pole planted in the waters off the beach) are noted around the south coast of Sri Lanka, a tradition since WWII days, particularly near Galle and Koggara and Kathaluwa, and seem to inspire visions in this young man’s dreams. He ‘sees’ the Australian ship long before it appears, as the fishermen told him.

One Saturday at Villawood, he meets a lawyer, Loretta, who works with asylum seekers and has previously met with Chaminda, a fellow asylum seeker who befriended him during the voyage but has since died in Villawood. Chaminda has previously described Loretta to him. Loretta is struggling to deal with aspects of her own life, let alone the lives of asylum-seekers. Unable to rid himself of the images of blood on his body and the memories of his past violence, Asanka takes drastic action.


T eachers and students are advised to read the story ‘Foreign Soil’, even though it is not listed for study, in order to compare some of its ideas about trauma, entrapment, violence and racial stereotyping with other stories in the collection. In ‘Foreign Soil’, Mukasa, a Ugandan doctor living in Australia, takes Ange back to Uganda with him, where he becomes controlling and abusive, confining Ange to the house. Ange is trapped. She is trapped in both an abusive relationship and geographically: ‘Uganda was locked by land … Every escape would be ever more foreign soil’ (p. 85). Have both she and Mukasa been, in a sense, drawn by racial stereotyping into a relationship that traps them both? In ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’, Asanka has been so traumatised by his time with the Tamil Tigers (when as punishment for trying to escape he was locked in a box), that when he is again in a confined space trying to escape to Australia ‘the tears feel strange welling in his eyes—foreign’ (p. 194); when he gets to Australia, he is the victim of Australia’s (race-based) asylum-seeker policies. The reference to his tears in turn takes us to ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’, where ‘Sukiyaki’ is ‘a song about ignoring the tears welling in your eyes’ (p. 249).

• Take the three narrative threads (Asanka’s journey with Chaminda, the relationship between Loretta and Sam, and Loretta’s meeting with Asanka at Villawood) and place the events in chronological order.
• How do the conditions faced by Asanka on his journey predispose our sympathies towards him?
• What images are suggested by the ‘stilt fishermen’? (Consider the image of the three crosses on Calvary?)
• Why is Asanka so focused on measuring time?
• Why does Loretta feel that she cannot help Asanka?
• Why does Asanka take the action that he does?

‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’

Set in a contemporary Footscray, Melbourne, in a flat in Irving Street that looks out over the railway line where the trains from Footscray Station rumble and roar and toot past, this story in some ways sums up the collection. The main character, from whose point of view we witness events,
is an unnamed writer, a single mother of two, faced with numerous rejections of her stories, some of which appear in this collection. Therefore, we can assume that the story is at least partly autobiographical.

Meanwhile, in the story she is currently writing, she is struggling to find a positive conclusion. Avery, a seven-year-old child, is trapped, abandoned, hanging upside-down on the monkey bars after the other children have left to go back to class. Our writer struggles to solve the narrative situation. Avery’s story is quietly understated but is interwoven with the narrator’s story. ‘Sukiyaki’ is ‘a song about ignoring the tears welling in your eyes’, ‘a song about sadness lurking in the shadows, sadness lurking behind the stars and moon’ (p. 249)—but the writer seems determined to observe the joy in her children and to put her ‘armour’ back on against the rejections, as she says to herself, ‘I have hung Avery wrong side up, alone and afraid. I was not going to do this again’ (p. 258).

In order to understand the references in this story, teachers and students are advised to read the story ‘Harlem Jones’, even though it is not listed for study. Harlem Jones is a rebellious Afro-Caribbean boy caught up in the Tottenham (London) riots of 2011, protesting against the police killing of Mark Duggan. He rejects the idea that ‘We are all Mark Duggan’, but near the conclusion of the story he claims ‘They’re all angry. They’re all Harlem Jones.’ The story concludes at the moment just before Harlem, arm poised, throws the Molotov, so the ending is ambiguous—the reader wonders whether he threw it, and what happened when he did. How, then, do we as reader react to the publisher’s suggestion in ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’ that the writer should not have Harlem Jones throw the Molotov, but have him ‘on the straight and narrow’ instead?

• What is the real meaning of the song ‘Sukiyaki’, originally ‘Ue O Muite Arukou’ (‘I Shall Walk Looking Up’), and how has the teacher presented it to the children? (Here is a YouTube clip of the song as it was released to the US pop charts, with the name changed to a word more familiar for US audiences, and the sadness theme largely excised; lyrics are in both Japanese and English: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C35DrtPlUbc)

• Consider this extract from the story (which is from pp. 257-258 in the listed edition, and pp. 277-278 in the 2017 edition): ‘Slotted into the emerald-green milk crate that I use for a bedside table …. “I Shall Walk Looking Up”.’ Why have the narrator’s stories been rejected?

• The publishers seek ‘Work that has an uplifting quality. Ordinary moments. Think book club material’. They suggest they ‘would be interested in working with you to bring some light to this collection with a view to discussing its potential publication.’ They want the stories changed, ‘But what if he didn’t hurl the Molotov in the closing paragraphs?’ What is the author being asked to do? Are these ‘very minor edits’ or are they more significant? If you were the author, what would you do?

• How does the writer solve the impasse in the story she is writing? What might this signify?

• What do you think of that ending?

• What do you think is the meaning of the title ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’?

Classroom activities

• Divide the class into groups, with each group taking responsibility for a particular story and presenting it to the class, according to a set of guidelines. Such presentations could include class papers, readings of excerpts and commentary, research into the setting of the story including images of settings, maps, multi-media presentations, and activities for the rest of the class such as character profiles.

• Jigsaw: Divide the class into four ‘home groups’, each with the responsibility for a given story. The students jointly prepare their commentary, then the class re-forms into four or six groups, each with a member of the original group. Each member teaches the other members of the new group about their particular story, with the other members taking notes and discussing the stories. Various mathematical combinations (3x4, 3x5, 3x6, 4x4, 4x5, 4x6, [or 3x4 + 3x4]) can be used to make this grouping work. If you have odd numbers, weaker students can be doubled up in a group.

• Maintain a class blog or Edmodo discussion or Wiki or Dropbox with a requirement that each student contribute a certain number of postings (possibly a valuable activity for the summer vacation, as part of holiday homework). Offer a set of prompts for discussion, with due dates for contributions to the discussions.
Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation

This collection of stories does not lend itself equally to each of the four outcomes. It is likely to be most suited to the second Area of Study in Unit 3 and Unit 4, although it would also serve well for developing the skills needed for Outcome 1 in Unit 4 because the stories are mostly short and several literary perspectives foreground the collection’s views and values in interesting, sometimes contradictory, ways. Therefore, teachers could conduct several mini-tasks for class work and practice, in order to explore some different perspectives.

Although there are three stories not set for study (meaning that they will not be used for Section B of the Examination), there is nothing to prevent students from making incidental reference to them in the exam, to support a general claim based on the given passages, nor from using them as a stimulus in the creative responses, as the assessment allows students to ‘submit an original piece of writing, presented in a manner consistent with the style and context of the’ short story collection.

Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations

Although there may be some works which draw on similar events and ideas, there are no known adaptations and therefore *Foreign Soil* is not suitable as the basis for assessment in this Area of Study.

Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts

*Foreign Soil* may be eminently suitable for Outcome 2 and it is certainly a suitable text for holiday homework, bridging into Year 12 from Year 11. Outcome 2 could be undertaken before Outcome 1.

The reflective commentary (10 marks) lends itself well to the requirement that one assessment task in Unit 3 must include an oral component, although a dramatic monologue or interview with a character as the response could also fulfil this requirement. This latter approach could work well in situations where students are adopting the voice of a character and can present it strongly.

Features of the stories that could be adopted in constructing a creative response:

- the use of distinctive narrative voices, including standard and vernacular English (dialect, creole or patois)
- marginalised and dispossessed people as characters
• discontinuous narration, switching from one voice or point of view to another (a common feature of the stories), sometimes alternating voices, sometimes multiple voices
• shifts in time of the narration, forward and backward
• certain phrases and sentences are used to overlap between segments of ‘Gaps in the Hickory’—what effect is created by this device?
• gradual revelation of the narrative as the story progresses
• gaps or silences to be filled by the reader, including open or unresolved endings.

Some suggestions for assessing Outcome 2

Students could create their own story to add to Clarke’s collection, selecting their own marginalised narrator and English vernacular. If using this as an assessment task, the reflective commentary could be in oral form, and include the student reading some of his/her own story to reflect on the language choices and literary features in relation to Clarke’s. The reflective commentary is thus useful for assisting students to consider and compare the range of narrative voices that Clarke inhabits in the collection.

Or students could construct a creative response to just one of the stories, and perhaps use the reflective commentary to discuss features of the collection as a whole:

‘David’
• Imagine another meeting between Asha (Auntie) and Little Sister in which they share a part of their stories and their different views of life in Sudan and Australia.

• Construct a monologue in which the primary narrator tells her toddler son Nile about the events of the afternoon as she prepares him for bed. Alternatively, construct a conversation in which the narrator tells a friend about the day.

‘Hope’
• Tell part of Millie’s story as if she were narrating it.
• Write the sequence of letters from Winston to Millie (that she never received).
• Write a sequence of letters between Millie and her parents in which she tells them of her pregnancy and the birth of her baby.

• Write the sequel. How will ‘hope’ be realised? Assuming that Millie and Winston and their baby Eddison make a future together, what will it be?

‘Railton Road’
• Construct an interior monologue for Solomon after the attack on the young woman.
• Tell the episode from the young woman’s point of view.
• How does De Frankie report on the event of the evening to his Black Panther colleagues?
• Imagine that Solomon meets the young woman some months later in Brixton Market or nearby. Write the scene.

‘Shu Yi’
• Tell the story of Shu Yi from her point of view. Where does she come from? How does she feel about her new school and the other children in her class at Kellyville? (You may wish to preserve her halting English speech but you must be able to express her internal feelings and thoughts in more expressive English.)

• Construct a conversation between Ava and her mother after Mrs Dalley learns that her daughter has not been generous in the way that was hoped.

• Imagine a subsequent conversation that discusses approaches to bullying, between Mrs Dalley and the Principal or Mr Wilkinson or Mrs Meyer (Melinda’s mother) or a school council meeting.

‘Gaps in the Hickory’
• Create an interior monologue for Carter, spanning the time from when Lucy was born to the time when he is taken to New Orleans to live.

• How does Carter’s story continue after he moves to New Orleans?

• Insert another segment into the story at a point where you think there is a gap to be filled. Who will narrate it?

• Tell aspects of the story from Jackson’s point of view. (This task may be challenging for some students and should be undertaken with care.)
Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

The body of critical work available consists almost exclusively of reviews and interviews. These do not necessarily draw on any particular school of criticism but they nevertheless offer interesting perspectives on the text. In addition, teachers will find it easy to draw on feminist theory, postcolonial theory and Marxist theory in presenting their own perspectives on the text as a whole or on individual stories. Hovering behind some of the stories is the issue of the generational effect of slavery, which is foregrounded by each of the literary perspectives suggested here, in readings of ‘Hope’, ‘Railton Road’, ‘Gaps in the Hickory’ and ‘Big Islan’. Teachers may also find it interesting to consider the stories through other critical lenses such as a structuralist or reader-response perspective.

Identify the time and place of the setting of each of the stories. What historical and cultural issues sit in the background? For example, migration from former British colonies to the UK, social attitudes to issues of gender and sexuality in Australia and the USA, Australian immigration, refugee intake and asylum-seeker policies and history.

- Who is telling the story? Through whose eyes?
- Whose voices are heard?
- How do we know? How is/are the voice/s conveyed?
- Which voices are not heard, or are silenced? How? Why?
- Who holds the power? How is this power represented? What are the consequences of this? Does the power shift during the story?
- Where are we, the readers, invited to stand? Whose gaze do we inhabit? Does this viewpoint shift at all during a given story?
- Most of the stories depict an experience different from that of Australian white middle-class communities. How does this difference unsettle the majority viewpoint?
- What differences are evident in the representation of males and females, affluent and poor, adults and children, whites and non-whites, former colonial powers and their former subjects?
- How do these differences influence our readings, the kind of reader we are asked to be or cannot be?
• What perspectives do we most naturally bring to our readings of these stories and which perspectives are least comfortable or more challenging? Why?

• What views and values are foregrounded as we consider the stories through the lens of each of these literary perspectives?

**Gender**

If you wanted to look at any of the stories or the collection as a whole through a feminist lens, you would ask questions such as:

• How are women depicted in comparison with men?

• Who has the power? How is this made evident?

• Are women in that society allowed to be strong and influential? Does this entail disempowering men?

• How, if at all, do women gain freedom and personal agency? (Think, for instance, about the role of literacy in ‘Big Islan’, the freedom conferred by the bicycle in ‘David’ and the role of the mother in ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’.) Contrast these stories with ‘Foreign Soil’, in which the formerly confident and assured Australian woman Ange loses her autonomy in moving to Uganda. Think too about the transgender issues raised in ‘Gaps in the Hickory’, a story in which gender identity is rendered problematic by the society but not by Izzy and Delores or Ella. Stories such as ‘David’, ‘Big Islan’, ‘Shu Yi’, ‘Gaps in the Hickory’ and ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’ also depict strong women who are prepared to lead and act against the grain of what others might expect of their gender or their cultural background, and their experiences are validated by the stories. Jeanie acts decisively to protect her son against what her husband might do, Delores has chosen to leave Newmarket and live another life in New Orleans, Mrs Dalley stands up to the principal, ‘Little Sister’ forges her own life in spite of the expectations of her culture. We see, too, the prospect that their children may grow up with more positive views of women. In contrast, in ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’, Loretta, an activist lawyer, is more or less submissive to her husband (she gives up a job she enjoyed at his behest), is encouraged by her mother-in-law Theresa to take on traditional wifely roles, yet seems powerless to try for the ‘pair of rowdy flame-haired daughters with his olive skin’ (p. 203) that she really wants.

• Consider the ways in which men and masculinities are portrayed. What is it to be masculine? Do the female characters define themselves only against what is seen as masculine and strong? Does masculinity presume strength and control? Some of the men in the stories are involved in war or social conflict, some are absent, leaving partners and children to cope alone, some are abusive or controlling. Yet others are shown in a far more positive light. Masud is a caring, almost father-like figure to David, Antonio is a social worker who is committed to a job that pays far less than he is qualified for, and Chaminda adopts a caring, almost fatherly, role towards the young Asanka. Asanka has suffered as a result of a conflict that he did not create and is placed in a situation in which he can be only a victim.

**Race**

Race, and the variations in colour of skin that goes with it, is a differentiating concept in many of the stories. Indeed, Clarke has written a personal memoir (The Hate Race, Hachette, 2016) describing some of her experiences of discrimination as a non-white child/young woman growing up in Australia. Even though born in Australia, of British parents, she was seen as the ‘Other’. Some of those experiences are clearly transmuted into moments in various stories in this collection. Consider the ways in which racial difference leads to discrimination and disempowerment in the stories, especially ‘Railton Road’, ‘Shu Yi’ and ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’. As Cahill puts it:

> For those who are peripheral to official history, for those whose ancestors and their communities have been assigned to the footnotes by colonialism, by slavery or caste oppressions, it is difficult to even begin to grasp the extent to which race inscribes us, through trauma, broken time, creolised language and diasporic interruptions. Yet, by necessity, this is the task of our writing.

Of the stories set, ‘Railton Road’ is probably the most explicit in its depiction of racial conflict, repression and rebellion. Views and values evident here are clearly about

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5 Cahill 2016
race; questions to ask when viewing a text through the lens of race include ‘What is the significance of race in contemporary (British/Australian) society?’ or ‘How does the text reflect the experiences of the victims of racism?’ The reader is initially positioned to see sympathetically Solomon’s point of view about the Black Panthers’ values, but his point of view gradually shifts: ‘Solomon had read all about the man’s views on the matter, heard him on the radio talking about betrayal and lynching black girls who take up with white fellows, making mockeries of black men.’ (p. 112). The extremely confronting violence inflicted on the young black woman, along with Solomon’s own moral self-awareness, shifts us to read the story with a feminist lens as well (and even in contradistinction to the lens of race). Ultimately, the pivotal conflict in values is between the Black Panther views of black rights and heritage as represented (ironically) by De Frankie, and the rights of an innocent young woman who offends them only because of her choice of partner. ‘Shu Yi’ and ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’ illustrate some of the consequences of ethnic and cultural difference. In the former, Ava is conscious of her different skin colour and the bullying she suffers, while Melinda, the leader of the group that bullies her, reflects her mother’s views:

We’re thinking about moving out to Windsor because even Baulkham Hills [a suburb adjacent to Kellyville] is starting to look like another fucken country. … ‘What country is this place starting to look like?’ asked Glenn Hopkins. ‘Oh I don’t know. Maybe Africa or something.’ Melinda smirked across the reading circle towards me as she turned the page of her Golden Book. (p. 92).

The Golden Book series, of course, is an image of childlike innocence, but the situation here is far from innocent. It shows the innate potential for unthinking childhood cruelty. The trauma for a child who suffers this cruelty because she looks different is poignantly conveyed when Ava ceases to be bullied because Shu Yi has become the new target: ‘my thankful mother had finally taken the plastic undersheet off my bed’ (p. 93).

In ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’, race is an inescapable element of the story. Asanka would not be in detention at Villawood were he not an asylum-seeker who had escaped from persecution in Sri Lanka and fled to Australia on a boat controlled by people-smugglers (men who are portrayed as similarly cruel and ruthless, thus inviting a Marxist reading too). His severed thumb and small finger bear witness to the fact that as a former child soldier he is right to fear returning to Sri Lanka. This is undeniably a political story, calling into question the way in which asylum-seekers are treated. Asanka is presented sympathetically, as is his compatriot and protector Chaminda. The solicitor, Loretta, who used to work for the Asylum Seekers Support Centre, now volunteers on Saturdays to visit detainees, but although sympathetically presented, she is seen to be overwhelmed and powerless in the face of the dimensions of the task, and a bit ‘neutral’ like the interior-decorating colours she prefers.

Even in a story like ‘David’ in which both women are from Sudan, cultural discrimination is still evident because they appear to be from different ethnic groups, judging each other, even though there is little evidence of discrimination from their Australian neighbours. Again, a feminist lens reveals that older women judge the younger woman for her adoption of the values of Australian society around her, her right to freedom and self-determination.

Postcolonial

A postcolonial reading would consider the role of colonial power in ‘Big Islan’ and the situation of immigrants in ‘Railton Road’ and ‘Shu Yi’ as well as Australian policy on asylum seekers in ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’. Even though Australia is not the colonial power in these contexts, the impact on people who seek asylum in Australia or people who have been subjugated by former colonial powers (eg. British control of Jamaica), and even people who have migrated to Australia since the revocation of the White Australia Policy, is evident in these explorations.

For instance, in ‘Big Islan’, Nathaniel observes ‘Wen im look up Inglan on de globe, im surprise at how teeny it is. Likkle place like dat rapin and pillagin de whole rest-a de world. It a madness unheard ov.’ (p. 182). Kingston is a port through which ships pass constantly, the dockworkers daily feeding them with export cargo, to supply England and its appetites for tropical fruit and sugar. As Nathaniel voices it, it is exploitation of the colonies by the coloniser. Although it is often argued that British rule left a good legacy, in fact the economics of imperial exploitation left the colonised people with minimal benefits and little education. However, many smart West Indian people, like Nathaniel’s wife, realised it was logical to follow the money and power that accumulate in the colonising nation by migrating to Britain themselves, and they set about doing whatever was needed to get there.
Social class

It is inevitable, when we consider marginalised groups or individuals (whether marginalised by race, colour, immigrant status, gender or poverty) that we confront issues of class, for it is almost axiomatic that these people are an underclass who probably live in impoverished circumstances, lacking access to adequate housing, employment and education, struggling to get by. A perspective based on class might start from questions about the unequal distribution of wealth in the various societies depicted in the stories: Who is able to access the housing, employment and education that would provide a sense of personal power, and who cannot? Reading against the grain through a Marxist literary lens also takes us to questions such as ‘What social classes do the characters represent?’ and ‘What is the social class of the author?’ which in turn takes us to the question of the role of education in social class.

Many characters in the stories set in London and Melbourne are trapped in situations in which poverty limits their achievement and scope of movement. Take, for example: the squat in Railton Road; the Housing Commission high-rise in Melbourne that Little Sister, the unnamed narrator of ‘David’, has escaped; the flat overlooking Footscray Station in ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’, which our narrator can rent only through Gumtree, not a licensed real estate agent; the military coercion arising from poverty in Sri Lanka; the need for Millie to leave Port Royal for Kingston in Jamaica; and the other references to poor housing, with negligent landlords, and so on. In what ways do the stories side with those who lack privilege and wealth? If you are also studying North and South, compare this with Gaskell’s sympathetic treatment of Margaret Hale, a comparatively affluent character, who nevertheless has extensive sympathies with the working class of the factory town of Milton.

However, the reader also notes that characters such as Solomon, Ava, Shu Yi, Nathanial and the mother and children in ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’ are gaining from their education the likely benefit of becoming middle class; similarly, Millie and Winston (and possibly Nathanial and Clarise) will improve their situation through migration. Students may also be interested to investigate and consider the lives and views of historical figures associated with 121 Railton Road such as Olive Morris and Althea Jones, who encouraged young black British men and women to expand their knowledge by reading major revolutionary texts such as Eric Williams’s Capitalism and Slavery and Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, and who themselves had used education to advance their own status within the colonising nation.

Suggestions for assessing Outcome 1

The assessment task enables students to produce their own written interpretation of the text, using two different perspectives to inform their response. One way of constructing an assessment task is to present students with two critical perspectives, and invite them to develop an interpretation of Clarke’s text in response to these perspectives. Macauley-Gierhart 2017 (Writer’s edit) and/or Heinrich 2014 (Newtown Review of Books) and/or Wright 2014 (Sydney Review of Books) could serve as basis for such an assessment task.

Another way is to invite students to base their interpretation on a single or series of short statements that reveal particular perspectives on the collection, perhaps statements such as:

• ‘With Foreign Soil, Clarke’s exquisite prose illuminates some very ugly and very uncomfortable truths about the world. From the Klansman of Mississippi to the Black Panthers of London, from the confines of a Sydney detention centre to the casual racism of the Australian school yard, Clarke’s stories remind us that discrimination and alienation are universal.’ (Laidlaw 2014)

• ‘The stories in Foreign Soil are ultimately concerned with social justice.’ (Foster 2014)

• ‘Dealing in issues of race, gender, and trans-sexuality, “Gaps in the Hickory” asks us to consider the thin line between rescue and abandonment. … the tug between rescue and abandonment is felt also in the (other) stories.’ (Okparanta 2017)

• ‘Another issue strongly present in Clarke’s work is race relations. … Foreign Soil throws racism in our faces, and adds complexity to societal stereotypes.’ (Heinrich 2014)

• “David” is an example of this unresolved storytelling that shocks readers with the senseless killing of a child. … Clarke does give her characters slivers of happiness amongst such devastation: this mother, relocated to suburban Melbourne, is able to find the same fleeting freedom her son did before his death, as an older hijab-clad woman laughing and crying as she speeds along on a footpath on a borrowed red bike. Clarke’s stories all follow an emotion connected to cultural displacement: sadness, anger, confusion.’ (Macauley-Gierhart 2017)
Area of Study 2: Close analysis

If using this text for one of the two assessment tasks in this Area, students need to re-read and annotate the set stories thoroughly. As with any collection of short stories, close analysis of Foreign Soil requires students to be attentive to the narrative elements that are common throughout the collection, as well as the differences. When comparing short stories, it can be useful and interesting to explore how each story begins and ends. In Clarke’s collection, the endings are open and unresolved, inviting the reader to participate actively in each story. Creating a chart of the opening and closing sentences of each of the stories selected for study (including the opening sentence of each distinct voice) may provide students with stimulus to discuss Clarke’s various narrative voices, as well as the views and values she is revealing.

Students could consider the title of the collection, Foreign Soil. In what ways is this an apposite title? To what extent does it encapsulate key ideas in the stories? What is the experience of ‘foreignness’? Discuss whether it is the same for all characters. How do characters deal with the foreignness of a new location, relocation or dislocation? What challenges does migration or relocation present? A new language? Disempowerment? Cultural expectations? How are their lives changed?

To what extent does the metaphor of ‘foreign soil’ work, not only in terms of migration from elsewhere to an English-speaking country like England or Australia, but also from Australia to somewhere else? This might also be a fruitful idea for a creative response.

Students should be guided in constructing possible generalisations to make links between the stories when writing a close analysis. For example:

- In some stories, gender is the defining variable; women such as the unnamed narrator Little Sister in ‘David’, Mrs Dalley, Clarise, Millie and Willemina, Izzy and Delores are strong, capable women, even though they may not receive support from the male characters in the stories.
- Maxine Beneba Clarke has created many characters who have distinctive voices, such as Nathanial in ‘Big Islan’, Solomon in ‘Railton Road’, and Delores in ‘Gaps in the Hickory’. Examine the ways in which these voices shape the narratives.
- Ethnic differences associated with migration also characterise many of the conflicts in the stories: Ava and Shu Yi are different from the other children of Kellyville; their experience of being

- ‘Speaking and writing, in Foreign Soil, are never simple acts… they are, at the same time, inextricably implicated in wider social circuits of violence, of bodies politic, of privilege and power. … Clarke wants us to be uncomfortable, to lose our bearings; she wants us to squirm. She wants us to have to adjust our expectations and learn the different languages in which her characters speak. She wants us to feel different and out of our depth. And she wants us, above all, to learn how to listen.’ (Wright 2014)

Or students could be invited to respond to a topic, using two critical perspectives.

Possible topics

- Reflect on the idea that who we are is in part determined by where we live.
- ‘The desire to belong is a fundamental human impulse.’ How is this idea explored in the stories in Foreign Soil?
- To what extent is it true that our voice is part of our identity?
- In what ways are the opportunities of the characters limited by their social situations?
- Consider the claim that it is the women in these stories who have more autonomy and power than the men.
- Discuss the idea that, in these stories, racial difference is a source of pain and disadvantage in a predominantly white society.

Students are assessed on how they:

- understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism
- identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways
- develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism
- analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.
bullied is epitomised in Melinda Meyer, whose dominating voice reflects her mother's opinions. The consequences for Ava and Shu Yi of being marginalised and bullied (in the ways we now understand bullying) are poignantly explored.

In most of the stories, reading 'across the grain' can reveal much about the complexities and nuances of the author's views and values. Solomon in 'Railton Road' and the characters in 'David' are immigrants in predominantly white, English-speaking communities, and the young Afro-Caribbean woman in 'Railton Road' is ostracised because she does not conform to the ideals of the emerging Black Panther Movement. This young woman represents a twist on the 'outsider' motif, as she is an outsider in both white and black communities; in a feminist reading she represents a critique of domineering exploitative masculinity, regardless of colour. In ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’, Asanka, as an asylum-seeker from Sri Lanka, suffers the multiple cruelties of injustice in his homeland and racist injustice in Australia. He is primarily an abused child—forced to become a child soldier for the Tamil Tigers and ordered to commit acts that no child should witness or commit, he is further abused by people-smugglers and is now incarcerated in Australia, his mental health shattered. An outsider in Australian society, he is an asylum-seeker whose persecution in Sri Lanka surely would qualify him as a refugee—he represents an issue with which we are consistently confronted in the media.

Students could create a concept map of the stories, to reflect the connections and common preoccupations or contrasts among the stories. Present each story in a separate table cell; cut up the rectangles and arrange them on an A3 sheet of paper, using adhesive glue and different pens to group and make links between the stories/groups of stories, in order to display their conceptual links. Although this might seem like a mere 'cut and paste', it can be a very thoughtful exercise. Each group then presents its concept map to the class. Display the results.

This activity can also be used, simplified, for practice with examination passages. Ask students, individually or in small groups, to make a selection of three passages and present a justification for their choices. These selections can be used as practice exam sessions. Students preparing to write on a short story collection in Section B of the examination should note ‘it is important that students … present an interpretation of the collection as a whole…rather than viewing the three passages as discrete entities. They should therefore be aware of the ways in which the selections may represent different aspects of the whole but may not represent the totality of the work.”

Students are assessed on how they:

- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions
- consider the effects and nuances of the language, style and form in the text
- understand the views and values presented and analyse how the writer reveals these in the text
- develop their own interpretation that is an analysis of the significance of the selected passages, connections between them, the ways that they reveal developments in the text, and their relationship to the text as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation.

Passages for analysis

The initial three sets of three passages can be used for assessment tasks or exam practice. A comment with each set suggests possible links. Following are passages from each story, which could be combined in order to discover or comment on links, or used singly.

**Group 1**

In ‘David’, ‘Hope’ and ‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’, despite the pain that has preceded, there is some sense of optimism for the future.

‘It is David. Somebody hear my prayer … racing my David, for the fun.’ (pp. 12-14)

‘Millie stared at him from the doorway … mi call im Sonny. Sonny fe short.’ (pp. 58-59)

‘The laptop screen flickers. … hers was going to be a story about love.’ (pp. 256-258)

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6 VCE Literature Examination Report 2016
Group 2

These passages capture some sense of living in disadvantage or on the margins of society, even though there are some positive moments.

‘Solomon delivered his closing rhetoric, … that all of them felt electric with it.’ (‘Railton Road’ pp. 108-110)

‘Jeanie look over at the empty washin basket. … An sure enough, eventually they did.’ (‘Gaps in the Hickory’ pp. 145-147). [Teachers may wish to cut this passage near the top of page 147, to avoid presenting the ‘n-word’ in an assessment task.]

‘Is ironic dat dem start it all wid ackee … Si. It nyah so difficult affer all, dis readin.”’ (‘Big Islan’ pp. 176-177).

Group 3

These passages present strong women who act somewhat against the grain of expectations in their communities, a characteristic seen elsewhere in the stories.

‘The school bell rang, and from where … I had never before heard her swear.’ (‘Shu Yi’ pp. 96-97)

‘Been years since her days in Newmarket came to Delores like that, so clear and unforgivin. … You Delores now, an Delores the only ways we knows you.”’ (‘Gaps in the Hickory’ pp. 152-153)

‘Clarise fole de clean clothes inte de laundry basket … Seem dem gettin a likkle famous ovah dere.”’ (‘Big Islan’ pp. 186-187)

Additional passages

‘David’

‘Rain was starting to fall now …. The whole of Barkly Street seemed to go quiet.’ (pp. 8-9)

“Auntie walked along next to me, … Little Sister. Thank you. I will have a try.”’ (pp. 11-12)

‘Hope’

‘One evening after closing time, … Fat tears streamed down Millie’s cheeks.’ (pp. 57-58)

‘Shu Yi’

‘A skinny pair of legs and bright red Cooper Hill Public School backpack …. as she turned the page of her Golden Book.’ (pp. 91-92)

‘I hurried out of class at lunchtime … from between her slightly crooked teeth.’ (pp. 98-99)

‘Railton Road’

‘The man at the booth selling sweets and newspapers … young woman looked towards Solomon, nodded good evening and eased past on those been-standing-most-of-the-day-on-some-factory-line-without-a-meal-break legs.’ (pp. 113-115)

‘Solomon stepped back into Francis Lane, … wait longer just for the spectacle of it all.’ (pp. 118-119)

‘Gaps in the Hickory’

‘Ella. I been havin trouble tellin you … Seem to me now’s good a time as any.’ (pp. 140-141)

‘Delores lef Newmarket when Jackson … one parent he thought he could trust.’ (pp. 158-160)

‘Delores pick up Izzy’s cup, … He put the fork down.’ (pp. 164-165)

“Where we at?” Panic hittin Carter now, … open the door, step out the car.’ (pp. 170-171)
‘Big Islan’

‘E is for Inglan. … invitin hardship an trouble te go always a-seekin-seekin.’ (pp. 182-183)

‘On de front-a de paper, de West Indies cricket team … im whisper citedly te imself.’ (pp. 187-189)

‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kathaluwa’

‘10.16.55. Asanka waits until the lawyer lady … so unbroken does not seem real.’ (pp. 228-229)

‘The other boat’s moving towards them faster now … They will help us.’ (pp. 234-235)

“‘You going to help me get out of here?” … wanted to do this work in the first place.”’ (pp. 235-236)

‘The Sukiyaki Book Club’

‘Avery can’t pull herself up. … A tear rolls from the corner of her eye, down her forehead, into her hair.’ (pp. 255-256 or 275-276) (Try drawing this unusual image).

‘For a few minutes, the apartment falls silent again. … They laugh, shake the water from their faces, drum on their tummies, go unashamedly ragtime.’ (pp. 262-264 or pp. 282-284)
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Other


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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qktOvVNXwc


Only the Animals
Perspective by Sam Weir

Introduction

Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals* is a difficult text to categorise. While ostensibly a collection of short stories, to label it as only thus would be to understate the scope of Dovey’s artistic vision in the creation of this text. Many reviewers have observed that the collection ‘doesn’t behave’\(^1\) in the manner that we have come to expect from similar texts. From one short story to the next, Dovey moves with deft skill between a range of narrative voices, so that her collection as a whole is a kaleidoscopic mix of form, style and genre.

Given the range of animal voices narrating the stories in the collection, it is in some ways fitting that the text itself adopts some of the qualities of the chimera. ‘It slips between categories’\(^2\) as it moves from contemplative ruminations on the different forms of genius found amongst some of the twentieth century’s more celebrated writers (‘Plautus: A Memoir of My Years on Earth and Last Days in Space’) to a frenetic and hyper-sensory emulation of the best from the Beat Generation (‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’). As it leaps nimbly from one tale to the next, Dovey’s collection ‘both defies and celebrates the possibilities’\(^3\) of short form fiction. Each story in the collection draws pointedly on references to one or more of the major human conflicts that have marred the past century; however, while Dovey’s writing is grounded in the unsettling facts of human warfare and bloodshed, her narrators are rarely bound by a need for precise historical accuracy—flights of fancy and moments of outright invention are allowed within the portrayal of these conflicts.

Besides each story being set amidst the violence of a particular human war, the tales that each animal narrator tells are also populated with real figures from the literary world. The challenge for the discerning reader then, is not only become familiar with the context of the collection’s publication, but also to seek out background information about the ideas, events and biographical details of the writers who appear within the text.

Ceridwen Dovey was born in South Africa in 1980 and lived for some years in Pietermaritzburg. As an adult, she has commented on the impact of living under the apartheid regime as a member of the privileged white community:

> We as a family certainly benefited in some ways under apartheid, even though we were staunchly opposed to it. Family relationships were often very complicated. I remember having to cope with grandparents whom I loved but whose very different political beliefs I couldn’t understand.\(^4\)

The inner conflict that Dovey experienced when reconciling her love for her grandparents with her political and social opposition to apartheid may in some ways be reflected in the stories of her animal narrators.

Dovey was also raised in Australia, and after teenage years spent as a student at a selective state school in North Sydney, she studied at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The degrees she completed at Harvard in Anthropology and Visual and Environmental Studies are interesting to consider in light of the ideas and concerns explored in *Only the Animals*. Before coming to writing, Dovey had spent some time exploring a career in documentary film-making. *Aftertaste*, an examination of the ongoing legacy of slave labour in South African vineyards, presents viewers with some of the social themes that will arise in Dovey’s later fiction writing. A portion of the film can be viewed at: http://www.der.org/films/aftertaste.html.

Dovey’s first novel, *Blood Kin*, offers a fictional account of an unnamed country during a time of revolution. The novel’s interest in issues pertaining to violence, power and control will surface often amongst the stories found in *Only the Animals*. Dovey writes non-fiction as well as fiction, and is a contributor to *The Monthly*.

Published in 2014, *Only the Animals* speaks directly to our own contemporary experiences of geopolitical unrest. Read as a collection of wartime stories, it charts a haphazard path from conflicts of the early twentieth century to today’s arenas of war. Dovey’s stories invite other readings too. A collection of ruminations on philosophical ideas, they also explore how certain writers since the modernist period have chosen to construct the self. The text is a collection of ideas about humanity’s relationship with animals, posing questions about the way humans use animals, construct

\(\end{equation}\)

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2. Ash 2017
3. Ash 2017
human-centred versions and views of animals, and exercise power over animals (just as they do over each other). Dovey’s stories, with their word play and intertextual games, invite the reader to explore issues of self and community, of morality and ethics, and yet also to bring to their reading the perspectives of contemporary literary theory.

The epigraph to the collection foreshadows some of the views and values to be revealed in the stories: Dovey’s quotation from fellow Australian/South African writer, J M Coetzee, establishes that there will be important concerns about animals; and she quotes the Polish poet Milosz, who believed that the work of writers can reveal truths, that literature brings ‘luminosity, trust, faith, the beauty of the earth’, whereas without the truth-revealing imagination of writers there is ‘darkness, doubt, unbelief, the cruelty of the earth, the capacity of people to do evil’.

**Activities**

Students could be advised to be Googling as they read the stories. Some key figures, ideas and events that students should research are listed here, with the writers at the top of each list. (See Figure 1 below).

**Figure 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’</th>
<th>‘Hundstage’</th>
<th>‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette</td>
<td>Herman Hesse</td>
<td>Jack Kerouac (Sal Paradise in <em>On the Road</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War I (France)</td>
<td>World War II (Europe / Germany)</td>
<td>World War II (the Pacific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathilde de Morny (Missy)</td>
<td>Heinrich Himmler</td>
<td>Allen Ginsberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry de Jouvenel, Cocteau, Ravel</td>
<td>Prof. Walther Wüst</td>
<td>William S Burroughs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiki-la-Doucette (fictional character)</td>
<td>Felix Kersten</td>
<td>Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty in <em>On the Road</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernism</td>
<td>Buddhism and Daoism</td>
<td>Mussel taxonomy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Plautus: A Memoir of My Years on Earth and Last Days in Space’</th>
<th>‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’</th>
<th>‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, Bertrand Russell, Tom Stoppard</td>
<td>José Saramago, Pliny the Elder</td>
<td>Sylvia Plath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War I, World War II, Russian Revolution, the Cold War</td>
<td>Mozambique Civil War, Prussian Siege of Paris</td>
<td>Ted Hughes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Vladimir Yazdovsky, Veterok and Ugolyok (dogs), Zond 5</td>
<td>Castor and Pollux</td>
<td>J M Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth Cady Stanton</td>
<td>‘Psittacophile’</td>
<td>Douglas Adams</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Gustave Flaubert
- Julian Barnes
- 2006 Lebanon War
Perspective on the text

Dovey’s concerns often lie with how the legacy of past abuses manifests in conflicts. The collection, which charts in chronological order some of the major human conflicts of the past century, begins with a story set in late nineteenth-century Australia. ‘Bones’ is not one of the stories selected for study in VCE Literature, but while Australia’s frontier wars have often been overlooked, ignored, or even flatly denied within Australia’s public discourse, Dovey’s story positions them (as do most historians) as arenas of conflict deserving of attention. And Dovey’s insistence on our need to consider the silences and gaps in our histories and in our storytelling is apparent throughout the collection. Like ‘Bones’, the story set in Mozambique, ‘I, the Elephant Wrote This’, invites a postcolonial reading.

The animals who populate the collection (both the narrators and the other animal-characters who appear) find themselves caught up in the bloody conflicts of the human realm, and it is from their point of view that we are asked to reconsider and recast our understanding of these moments from history. Most of the conflicts that are examined in the collection have been the subject of countless other representations and retellings in novels, film, poetry and art. For both the First and Second World War in particular, it can feel at times that all narrative possibilities have been exhausted. What Dovey’s text suggests is that there are still many voices left unheard, and many lessons for us to unearth from the rubble and ruin of the wars of the past century. In doing so, the collection also draws us quite pointedly into a contemplation of otherness. The stories within the collection resist being read as allegorical, and readers are asked to enter into an imaginative space where we accept that it is indeed the soul of a cat, dog or mussel that is narrating their experience to us. Reading Dovey’s stories is an act of ostranenie, as we encounter familiar narrative landscapes in a manner that is wholly strange.

The narrators’ existence as animals disrupts some of the questions that might arise from a Marxist reading of the text. While each of the narrators can be categorised according to gender (although, some even resist this, as in the comical testimony of Plautus), they cannot as easily be labelled according to the human classifications of class and ethnicity. In this way, they can offer an observation of human conflict that is remarkably free of parochial feeling or cultural bias. In this way the narrators achieve a certain distance from the political context of the events, narrating from a space of (often gently compassionate) neutrality. They do not castigate or condemn their human counterparts for their violence; but nor do they shy away from making plain the awful brutality that humanity inflicts upon itself. Consider the thoughts of the parrot, with which the collection comes to a close: ‘What choice did she have?’

The collection also serves as a meditation on the function of stories and the role that storytelling plays in our lives. Our capacity for storytelling is perhaps what best defines the difference between humanity and the other creatures with whom we share our planet. Jane Goodall once observed that she is certain the great apes have the same capacity as we humans to consider the meaning and mystery of their world, but that the advantage we hold is in our ability to communicate our contemplations to one another via the medium of storytelling and our other arts. The most remarkable thing about animals in Dovey’s collection, then, is that they have discovered an aptitude for the most human of traits: to craft and relate a story. Notably, it is the ‘soul’ of each animal that relates their story, suggesting that in their death each creature has transcended the limitations of their animal minds and habits. Even so, not every narrator is equally aware of their role as a storyteller. While Barnes the parrot shows himself to be capable of stepping beyond his own immediate story, adopting the near omniscience we might expect of a traditional third-person narrator, and while Sprout the dolphin is painfully self-conscious of her own narrative voice, Kiki the cat seems less aware (or perhaps, in true feline fashion, less concerned) that her observations have an audience beyond her own musings.

The presence of a number of esteemed writers from throughout the past century also indicates that one of the collection’s chief occupations is the place that narrative art holds in our lives. By placing her three key narrative strands together in each story—an animal narrator; a particular conflict; a set of literary figures—Dovey asks her readers to consider the value of human endeavour and behaviour. If our capacity for storytelling represents the sublime peak of our existence, then the depravity and violence of our conflicts is the awful ditch into which we all too regularly stoop. However, the text is not pessimistic in its outlook, nor is it devoid of humour and good will. Our animal counterparts look upon us with compassionate eyes, and most of Dovey’s narrators seem to sense (in the manner that only an animal can) that there is a goodness that lies at the core of what it means to be human.
Features of the text

Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals* is a collection of ten short stories. Of these ten, seven are selected for study in VCE Literature. Dovey offers her own notes on the sources of each of her stories. These are available online at: http://www.ceridwendovey.com/assets/Uploads/Only-the-Animals-sources.pdf. As Dovey adopts a distinct narrative voice for each short story within the collection, some observations on each of the stories selected for study are offered below. However, the text as whole, with its shifting narrative voice, has a kaleidoscopic quality—we are aware of its shifts in shape and colour and meaning as we view the concerns of the text in each narrative—so some general comments about the literary features of the text as a whole are also offered:

• Each of the stories moves inexorably towards the death of its narrator. Despite the imminence of their death (and the often cruel circumstances under which it occurs), the narrators are rarely despondent or despairing. In her review of the text, Delia Falconer observes that what sets Dovey’s animal narrators apart from their human counterparts is that each narrator seems unburdened by the anger or the fear that colours human thought in the face of violence and death.\(^5\) Another reviewer sees this device as making an important statement about the death of animals in particular. It is interesting to consider what else this feature might represent: the imbalance in power between humans and animals; the misuse of animals by humans; or the extinction of whole species.

• The stories appear in chronological order, each new story moving the text further forward through the human conflicts of the last century; there are also thematic developments that occur over the course of the collection as a whole. What do we infer from the chronology of the stories?

• In each story there is a narrator, a main literary figure, a twentieth-century conflict, and one or more significant historical figures. Students could make notes about these figures and events as they read each story, including the name and gender of the narrator, and what philosophies, beliefs, or ideas appear relevant to the conflict/s.

• Why have certain animals been chosen to report on certain conflicts or particular literary figures? The ordering and development of the choice of animal-narrator bears some consideration. Linking Kiki-la-Doucette to Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette makes historical sense, and connecting a tortoise with Tom Stoppard is playful; however the links between a dolphin, Sylvia Plath and the 2003 Iraq War are less immediately obvious. An interesting study exercise might involve students considering how each of the different animal voices might have reported the other stories in the collection.

• The stories are highly referential, alluding to literary, biological, scientific, historical figures and events, and each pays homage to at least one writer who has written about animals, sometimes more.\(^6\) The text also pays homage to writers of the self; Dovey, in the course of reviewing another writer’s work, makes observations about autobiographical writing, for instance, that it can be ‘reading as voyeurism’ and it ‘constructs a self for the writer’.

• Dovey plays with form in her narrative; her narrators variously write in the form of a letter, a memoir, reportage, diary, autobiography.

• Word games are a feature; riddles, conundrums, paradoxes await the literary sleuth throughout the narrative. Dovey’s word play is sometimes light and humorous, and sometimes serious. The beginning of ‘Psittacophile’ alerts us to the significance of word play, and leaves us with the collection’s final interrogative puzzle.

Activities

• What is the effect of the order in which the stories are arranged?

• Which writers in Dovey’s stories wrote autobiography and/or other forms of self-writing?

• Why might Dovey use the various narrative forms?

• Which writers wrote about animals, and how did they use animals in their writing?

• What do students make of the ending in the final story, and of each of the endings?

• Considering that intertextuality is a device based on readers’ prior knowledge, how do students react to Dovey’s many references to other writers and other texts?

• What is the effect of the quotations that preface most chapters?

• Find examples of word play in the stories.


\(^6\) Coates 2014
'Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I: Soul of Cat, Died 1915, France'

Our narrator, Kiki-la-Doucette, offers her story as a series of vignettes, each with their own title (Waiting for the tomcat; Neighbours; Fufu and the egg; Dumb animals; Glowing in the dark; Sulphur and orange blossoms; Turtle derby; and Going home). The sense of novelty and variety that these titles suggest is at odds with the grim reality of the setting, as Kiki’s tale takes place amongst the daily drudgery and macabre monotony of life in the trenches of World War I.

Much of the episodic plot follows Kiki’s encounters with other animals found in the trenches, with each case detailing how the ordinary domestic duties of these creatures have been adapted and repurposed in order to suit the demands of the human conflict that they find themselves caught up in. Each of these creatures bears mention as the narrative moves forward by reporting on the lives and occupations of each: the tomcat, a companion and ratcatcher for those in the trench, and a determined guide to Kiki (despite his interest in her being unrequited); Fufu, a pony commandeered to work with the medical corps, dragging ‘stretchers piled with the wounded’ (p. 25); the mules who work to carry supplies to and from the frontline, their vocal chords having been cut to prevent them making any noise that may attract enemy fire; the dog from Avignon, trained to work as a sentry through the night yet desperate to return to his master and his sheep in the south of France; and the mud turtles, made to race for the brief amusement of the stultified soldiers. At no point does the text encourage us to read any member of this menagerie as proxies or stand-ins for their human counterparts. Likewise, the tale resists an allegorical reading—it is an account of a cat’s experiences from the cat’s own point of view.

As will be the case with many of the stories in the collection, Kiki’s tale is interlaced with reflective observations on the ideas, views and values of a prominent literary figure of the time. In Kiki’s case, it is her owner (and cat-lover) Colette who becomes the background focus of the narrative. The strange and delicate balance between Kiki’s experiences in the trenches and her memories of life with Colette allow the story to examine a sweeping array of concerns in a manner that is concise, but never abrupt: sexuality, love, duty, sacrifice, class, the concerns of the modernists and the futility of war are all given time and space for compassionate contemplation. Kiki’s tone is cynical and sharp, which adds to the sense that she has much in common with Colette. She tells us that ‘Colette and I...consider ourselves hybrids of a sort, never quite able to fit within the boundaries of our sex or species’ (p. 26) and that what others might consider bad manners can be—for her and presumably for Colette—‘the highest form of authenticity.’ ‘Colette, like all writers, is selfish with her time’ and she slips ‘into her own mind to write’; she believes the writer must always embrace experience—““Look!” must be our final word and thought’ (p. 41).

The question that this dual-narrative approach leads to is haunting: do literature and the arts have any place in a world torn asunder by war? Can there be any ‘room for frivolity in Paris, or anywhere, after this winter’ (p. 34) of conflict and bloodshed? By the end of the tale, Kiki seems convinced not, as she suggests that the army’s carrier pigeons be replaced with bats, as they ‘would better suit these sinister times’ (p. 40).

‘Hundstage: Soul of Dog, Died 1941, Poland’

Throughout her collection, Dovey allows the lines between historical reality and imaginative details to blur. In ‘Hundstage’ our narrator is the fictional brother to Blondi, the historically real German Shepherd raised by Hitler in the midst of the Second World War. Blondi’s unnamed brother lives under the care and attention of Heinrich Himmler and spends the first half of the narrative recounting his time spent living in the Wewelsburg castle. Within the castle walls, the dog’s recollections offer glimpses of Felix Kersten and Walther Wüst: the former as he responds to Himmler with ambiguous silence, and the latter as he feeds Himmler’s delusions of grandeur. Himmler’s dog tells his story with gentle, self-deprecating naïvety. With unyielding loyalty to his master as his guiding value, our canine narrator remains innocent (or ignorant) of the horror that is occurring around him. When at one point he protests that ‘My Master is not to blame’ (p. 89) his voice is earnest and sincere, with no trace of irony.

As well as exploring the development of the narrator’s awakening from innocence to experience (which, when it occurs, is abrupt and violent), this story serves as vehicle for Dovey to ruminate on the place and power of myth, particularly as it informed the ideology of the regime in Nazi Germany. Himmler’s dog is ever eager to believe in the goodness of his master and the stories that he hears, despite the confusion wrought by the contrary evidence of his own senses. In a deft manner that matches the practised movements of Count Wenhui’s cook, Dovey demonstrates the dangerous potency of a well-crafted story: capable of empowering and enslaving its listeners at one and the same time.

Paradox permeates this story. The canine narrator finds the thought of being reincarnated as a human being ‘intoxicating’ (p. 78). His master, impressed by Hermann
Hesse’s book *Siddhartha*, expresses the view that ‘respect for animals is something you find in all Indo-Germanic people’; he believes ‘every animal has a right to live’ (p. 78), yet his ‘hypnotic voice’ brainwashes his dog to sacrifice himself to the toxic ideology of domination. Himmler’s interest in vegetarianism and fables, in Hinduism and Buddhism and Daoism, provides a shocking contrast to his ideology.

While Dovey’s collection eschews the moral lessons found in the animal-fables of other writers, if some moral meaning were to be found in this story it is perhaps hinted at in the scoffing voice of the pig, who announces to our narrator (borrowing from Alexander Pope, but with new and bitter meaning in the context of this tale) that he is ‘His Highness’ dog at Kew; pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?’ (p. 88). This story is a chilling critique of how storytelling can mutate into an ideology that justifies conflict, domination, and genocide. The pig seems aware of this, and of how it will destroy the dog, when he says ‘my mind was not always my own’ (p. 90).

**‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me: Soul of Mussel, Died 1941, United States of America’**

It is no small praise of Dovey’s skill that the wild and freewheeling adventures of Myti/Sel (and his mussel companions Muss and Gallos) do not feel out of place following directly on from the painful story of the misplaced loyalty of Himmler’s dog. Myti is the first animal in the collection to have no direct relationship with a human, although curiously he is the most human of the narrative voices. This is in part due to the appropriation of Jack Kerouac’s narrative style, with Myti serving as an aquatic proxy for Sal Paradise from *On the Road*.

The pace and energy of Myti’s narration is frenetic. Myti, Muss and Gallos are in constant motion, and moments of humour, pathos, banality and spiritual insight collide together in such a way as to be inseparable from each other. Unlike other stories in the collection, where human warfare is a constant and palpable component of the narrative, the events of World War II (in particular, the bombing of Pearl Harbour) have little impact on Myti’s story until the final two pages. When war does interrupt, its arrival is brutal and graphic: ‘suddenly around us in the water were things that should never be seen in the sea: valves, legs, fittings, heads, coins, arms, helmets’ (p. 115).

It is interesting to consider Myti’s story as a companion piece to ‘Soul of Dog’. Both narratives take place in 1941, albeit in two separate arenas of the Second World War, and both end with their narrator thinking about their idolised figure as they die. However, what are the differences? The chilling implication of the dog’s soul ‘broken free from my chains…’ is that, in hypnotic thrall to the myths of his Master’s Nazi ideology, he breaks out in order to totally dominate others, not to free the self. Myti, on the other hand, has just been on ‘a search, a trip, a ride’ with his mates and is surprised to have spawned a ‘young beatific generation’ who think ‘that life should have meaning’ (p. 113). The three friends were merely seeking self-focused experience and ‘freedom’, or so they thought. They believed in the self as the agent of ‘so many things to do and tell and feel and write’ but in the end Myti feels that the self only exists in the gaze of another. ‘What would Muss be without my gaze on him, what would any of you be?’ In Myti’s dying protest we sense that perhaps the 1960s idea of selfhood, as portrayed by Kerouac, did not ultimately satisfy the individuals who pursued it: ‘this isn’t the way it was meant to be’ (p. 116).

**‘Plautus: A Memoir of my Years on Earth and Last Days in Space: Soul of Tortoise, Died 1968, Space’**

Using a famously long-lived animal, the tortoise, as a narrator affords Dovey the opportunity to tell a story spanning many decades. Plautus’ memoir is arranged as a series of chapters, each reporting on a new time and place in Plautus’ life journey. Each of the titles is a reference for the reader to deconstruct: 1. The Hermitage; 2. Her Woman Friday; 3. A Terrarium of One’s Own; 4. Tortoises All the Way Down; 5. Deedle Dum Dum; 6. Blue Water Sailor. As the chapters progress, Plautus moves from one human owner to another, spending parts of her life with notable literary figures including Virginia Woolf, George Orwell and Tom Stoppard. Plautus makes a series of implausible transitions from one owner to the next, but the reader suspends disbelief and accepts the apparent serendipity at play in the narrative.

Ruminations on ethnicity play a role in the story, and feminist ideas are again highlighted. Although Plautus is female, she is often thought of as male; and her identity as a Russian is carved into her shell. Her long lifespan also means that Plautus is witness to seemingly constant human warfare from the beginning of her narration in 1913, to her death in 1968. How does her death compare to the others in Dovey’s menagerie? The humans who drive the mission suspend disbelief and accepts the apparent serendipity at play in the narrative.

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In Plautus's tale Dovey inserts excerpts from Virginia Woolf’s writing (*Flush: A Biography*) directly into the narrative. In a manner both playful and self-conscious, Dovey permits Plautus to pass some comment on the possible pitfalls that humans may encounter when seeking to inhabit the narrative voice of an animal. Plautus, though, shares with us the voices of the space dogs Veterok and Ugolyok from her interview with them.

The Roman playwright after whom the hermit Oleg had named Plautus ‘valued imagination and the fantastic above anything he could scavenge from real life’, but Plautus complains to the reader that Oleg read voraciously in his solitude ‘without ever letting the knowledge he was acquiring really change him’ (p. 121). With her next hermit, Tolstoy's daughter Alexandra Tolstaya, Plautus is fascinated by the different quality of ‘female solitude’—she wants to know, more than anything, what answers Alexandra is seeking from her intensive reading. Thus Plautus learns that books ‘have become signs to interpret and follow’ for people who have lost the religious framework of fatalism. Plautus becomes acquainted with the writings of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an important early American feminist; she is affected by Cady Stanton’s ‘The Solitude of Self’ speech, and although running away paradoxically seems an interesting option, she recognises that the solitude and contemplation of the hermit ‘must lead, in the end, to engagement’ (p. 131). What she learnt about solitude also helps when she is at the point of death; she ‘felt grateful to have (her) own thoughts to keep (her) company’ (p. 150).

Plautus likes the fact that Virginia Woolf shows Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her dog Flush ‘as equals in their inability ever to fully understand each other: not so different then, from a biographer trying to get into the skin of her subject’ (p. 135). She doesn’t like George Orwell so much (nor perhaps the ‘mortal combat’ she now sees, between capitalism and Marxism) but he takes her to a lecture by Bertrand Russell where she hears about orbiting the earth—and where the reader may recall Russell’s paradox. When she goes into space herself, she is grateful for Cady Stanton’s words about having one’s own thoughts to keep oneself company, although ultimately she does have company as she flies around the moon.

On some levels, ‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’ operates as a meditation on the role that storytelling has as an agent of cultural transfer and tribal initiation. The twin sister elephants, like other children in an African society, live out their ancestors’ ‘great moments on earth’ (p. 155) in the oral tradition of the tribe, passing their stories from one generation to the next. While the elephant-narrator of this story hears (and later, tells) the same set of stories throughout her life, their meaning and impact shifts and changes depending on the time and context of the story’s telling. As she grows into motherhood, our narrator appreciates how her acquisition of knowledge and experience irreversibly shapes her understanding of the stories. As a child, she is desperate to know the secrets of adults’ stories; as a mother she seeks to shield her own daughter from hearing too much, too soon.

The story of Paris' famed elephants Castor and Pollux (and their namesakes, the Dioscuri), and the infamous ending that they meet during the Prussian siege of the city, is woven through the story of our narrator’s experience of drought and war. Just as the story of the zoo elephants progresses with grim certainty towards its ugly ending, so too our narrator’s story moves towards her own death. Against this dual backdrop, Dovey invites her readers to consider how we might judge acts of depravity in times of desperation. Her story also takes into its scope the issues of maternal experience, forced migration, the spiritual power of myth, and the devastation of the post-independence conflict in Mozambique. (Like Angola, Mozambique had been a Portuguese colony, and after independence in 1975 conflict raged for decades between the socialist ruling party and the anti-Communist resistance movement which was supported by Rhodesia and South Africa; civil wars in both Angola and Mozambique were proxies for the Cold War). The story of Suleiman the elephant—an exotic animal in the collection of Maximilian II, until he is killed and stuffed for challenging the humans by writing in the sand—also invites postcolonial and Marxist readings. The words of Pliny the Elder (p. 158) and the Portuguese poet José de Sousa Saramago (p. 155) add poignantly to these perspectives.

Like ‘freedom fighters’ everywhere, the two elephant sisters initially thought that ‘mass historical death would be grand’ (p. 156), but their new lives as mothers ‘cauterised our old longing for a glorious death’, and ultimately they thought that the elephant who ‘died for her family’ had ‘the most heroic death of all’ (p. 174).

*I, the Elephant, Wrote This: Soul of Elephant, Died, 1987, Mozambique*

As with Myti from ‘Somewhere Along the Line’, the elephants in this tale have little contact with any human characters, until the final devastating moments of the story.
'A Letter to Sylvia Plath: Soul of Dolphin, Died 2003, Iraq'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the narrator of the dolphin’s tale is also the most self-aware of the voices that Dovey inhabits in her collection. From her opening testimony, Sprout is aware that she tells her story amongst a collection of ‘other animals who have told their stories’, and she feels burdened by the ‘ridiculous history’ (p. 203) of attempts to foster communication between humans and dolphins. She understands and contemplates ideas about subjectivity—wanting to use ‘the third person, to avoid becoming a parody of myself’, she nevertheless finds that ‘as it turns out, “I” is irresistible’ (p. 204). She likes her ‘I/thou’ relationship with her trainer/partner (p. 215), she understands ‘awareness of self’, and she notes that her daughter was ‘her own complete, discrete self as soon as she was born’.

Sprout’s narrative takes on a distinctive form, as it is composed in the manner of a letter. Some stylistic elements also become apparent when making comparisons between this story and others in the collection. For example, whereas the cat Kiki reports on her time in the trenches in present tense, seeming to experience the events even as they are narrated, Sprout is aware from the outset that she is telling ‘the story of [her] death’ after the fact (p. 203). The story she ‘must tell’ to Plath is of her mother, herself and her daughter, each born into captivity and trained and used by the Navy. It reveals much about wartime military hierarchy, the ‘ancient cycle of predator and prey’—in this story, the wars in Vietnam, Iran-Iraq, and Iraq 2003.

While the mid-portion of Sprout’s letter is concerned with the details of her life (and self-willed death), her epistle is bookended with material addressed specifically (and intimately) to Sylvia Plath. As such, Sprout’s tale does not end at the point of her death, as each of the other stories in the collection do. Indeed, Sprout herself insists that there has been ‘enough of this death talk. My tale should end with life’ (p. 229). Within the letter itself, Sprout’s narrative explores pregnancy, birth and motherhood and the place of genuine humanity within the machine of the United States military. She sides with Plath against Hughes: Plath understands that ‘human women need no reminder that they’re animals’ and her journals and poetry ‘counterbalance the relentless maleness of Hughes’s writing voice’ (p. 206), whereas Hughes’s use of the animal as symbol for men’s most predatory instincts she ‘saw right through’ (p. 204). She shares with Plath an understanding ‘of a good cleansing female rage’ (p. 209). But she does agree with Hughes that letter writing is ‘good practice for conversation with the world’ and she seems to like his poem ‘Moon Whales’.

As with elsewhere in the collection, there is a playfulness in Dovey’s references to historical and literary figures. For instance, Sprout mentions that she has become friends with ‘the soul of Elizabeth Costello’, a fictional character from the works of J M Coetzee, who himself is another South African writer who found a second home in Australia, and she quotes Douglas Adams (‘So long and thanks for all the fish’). The story certainly invites a feminist reading, as it also questions the objectification of animals, and it pays homage to poetry and language: ‘There is nothing quite like a child’s gorgeous listening energy, ravenous for her mother’s voice.’ (p. 230).

‘Psittacophile: Soul of Parrot, Died 2006, Lebanon’

Barnes, the avian narrator of the final story in the collection, speaks for the most part with the voice of a traditional third person narrator. While the portions of the story that pertain to him are relayed in first person, elsewhere Barnes is privy to a seemingly omniscient level of detail, well beyond his plausible knowledge.

An interesting component of this final story is that Barnes’ voice as a narrator is somewhat at odds with his portrayal as a character. (Dovey’s implication could be that the parrot and Flaubert share characteristics.) Describing himself as ‘a toddler’ (p. 237), Barnes’ behaviour as a character within the text is primal and base: his daily routine consisting of whining, grinding, screeching, sleeping and shitting (p. 239). As the narrator, Barnes’ voice possesses poise and perception, for instance when he shows a rather mature awareness by stating that ‘I, Barnes, …would—if she cared for me attentively—grow to love and depend on her as my parent, partner, mate’. He is aware of (and passes judgement over) the thoughts and feelings of his owner, even before she came to purchase him. The point at which Barnes-as-character and Barnes-as-narrator meet is in the jealousy that both display when Marty enters the narrative.

The reader’s understanding of this story is enhanced by knowing that one of the central themes of Julian Barnes’ novel Flaubert’s Parrot is subjectivism; that Gustave Flaubert travelled through the Levant (the Middle East, the ‘Orient’) in 1850, spending a month in Lebanon where he had ‘an acquisitive interest in the wares spilling out of market stalls’; and that in Flaubert’s story, Un Cœur Simple (A Simple Heart), a woman devotes her life to a largely ungrateful family, but in later life loves a parrot, Loulou, whom she regards as the incarnation of the Holy Ghost. Flaubert, author of Madame Bovary and friend of George Sand, had his house occupied by Prussians in the 1870 siege of Paris, and is a writer admired by J M Coetzee.
Activities

• Discuss the title of each story.
• Collect and discuss the quotations that preface each story. How do they inform our interpretation of the text as a whole? Why might Dovey have chosen Czesław Miłosz as her first-quoted writer? His view of the writer’s life was that he/she ‘has no choice but to … express what seems to him to be true … the artist worships truth, which is what allows him to save his soul.’
• Compete in groups to see how many different sentences can be created with the beginning ‘Only the animals …’. The sentences must be derived from, and comment on, Dovey’s views and values as expressed in and through the stories.
• Create a chart with the opening and closing sentence of each of the stories selected for study (an outline is suggested below). What views and values about war and/or death, are conveyed by the endings of the stories?

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation

Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations

While there are no known professional adaptations of the stories from Ceridwen Dovey’s collection, the text may still be of interest and use in this Area of Study. Dovey’s stories could themselves be investigated as adaptations of earlier texts. Students might read:
• ‘Bones’ and explore it alongside Henry Lawson’s ‘Hungerford’ and ‘The Bush Undertaker’ (‘Bones’ is NOT one of the stories selected for study, but it does show how Dovey has drawn on earlier texts in the creation of her own);
• translated excerpts from Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette’s Dialogues de Bêtes and explore how Colette’s portrayal of Kiki-la-Doucette compares to the tone and disposition of the narrator in ‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’;
• excerpts from Jack Kerouac’s On the Road alongside reading of ‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’, using this as a platform to discuss Dovey’s emulation and appropriation of other writers and narratives;

Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts

Dovey’s collection is well suited to assessing Outcome 2. The collection is itself a series of creative responses to the life and works of other writers. Students consider the central components of Dovey’s artistic project: the point of view/voice/soul of a particular animal; a particular written form and writing style; word play and references to other texts; a human conflict of the twentieth century; historical and literary figures of the modern era. Students examine how these components interrelate within Dovey’s stories, as well as how they convey her ideas, views and values. In their own creative response, students can emulate some of Dovey’s techniques in their writing, and represent their own ‘particular concerns or attitudes’.

Working towards generating their own creative response provides students with scope to interrogate Dovey’s authorial decisions. For example, why a female dolphin as the narrative voice to explore the 2003 Iraq War? How is the voice of each animal achieved, and how does it affect the overall meaning and impact of the story? How do narrative voice, form and style convey Dovey’s views, concerns or attitudes?

As they begin to shape their own creative response, students might consider some of the human conflicts that have not been explored in Dovey’s collection, and propose suitable animal narrators to offer an account of these events. For example, the soul of an ibex in Afghanistan, of a lizard in Bosnia in the 1990s or a hedgehog in Aleppo in 2016; or a flamingo or alligator living through the 50-year conflict in Colombia. They may choose to expand on the historical scope of Dovey’s work, and look at conflicts prior to the 20th century. For example, a story exploring the Boxer rebellion in China (1899-1901), the Spanish invasion of the Inca empire (1532 CE onwards), or Japan’s Boshin War (1868-69 CE). Making these decisions should in turn bring students to consider the conflicts that Dovey has chosen to

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focus on, and to question why she has explored these events, and not others.

Students could consider other writers and historical figures of the past century to explore in a quasi-historical story of their own. For example, a pet goldfish owned by Ernest Hemingway during his years in Cuba, or a young mare ridden by Patrick White during his time at Bolaro in the Snowy Mountains, or a wallaby abandoned in Spain in 1936 by Christina Stead. This too may bring students into dialogue with Dovey’s collection, the particular canon of writers that she has drawn upon, and the ways they relate to the conflicts. Students could hypothesise if and how there are connections to be made amongst the writers that Dovey chose to include in her collection. This allows them to present arguments about whether other writers would or would not fit neatly within the narrative landscape of *Only the Animals*. For example, would the appearance of T S Elliot fit neatly within Dovey’s collection (in a tale presumably told by a cat!), or are his writings and his persona at odds with the other writers in *Only the Animals*? Teachers might propose a list of ten writers from the past century and ask students to rank them according to how well they might fit within Dovey’s works.

When planning and drafting a piece of writing, students should carefully consider the impact that their choice of animal may have on the narrative voice and style that they adopt. The animals in Dovey’s collection are rarely predators, and those animals that are have either been domesticated (the cat and the dog) or imprisoned in zoos (the bear). It may prove interesting to consider how more aggressively predatory animals might tell stories of human conflict. For example, how might a bird of prey retell the events of ‘Hundstage’, or a fox the events of ‘Plautus: a Memoir’? Likewise, the voices of rodents are absent from Dovey’s collection, and so it may be of interest to consider how the voice of a rat or a squirrel might interpret events in the human world.

Each of Dovey’s stories presents opportunities for students to enter into the world of the text and to expand on plotlines left untold in the original narrative. Retelling ‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’ from the point of view of any of the other animals present in this story (such as Fufu the pony or the dog from Avignon) could make for engaging reading, or retelling ‘Hundstage’ from the point of view of the pig. Exploring the lives of the dogs fooled by the Allies into acting as suicide-bombers against German tanks would make an interesting companion story to ‘Hundstage’.

In ‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’, Sprout the dolphin makes these initial observations about her own narrative voice: ‘I said I’d participate [in Dovey’s collection] only if I could use third person, to avoid becoming a parody of myself, the self-aware dolphin wielding “I” like a toy ball propped between my fins. But as it turns out, “I” is irresistible’ (p. 204). With Sprout’s comments in mind, students could attempt to retell a portion of one of the stories in the third person, exploring the impact that this has on the meaning and impact of the story, and on Dovey’s artistic project as a whole.

It is Sprout the dolphin who provides this clue for the discerning reader of Dovey’s stories: ‘Word games as primers, Ms Plath, you’d appreciate that’ (p. 203)—word games can be seen in each story. Students should thoroughly explore Dovey’s word play and use of paradox before constructing their own creative response. There are obvious examples such as the play on mussel taxonomy in the names Sel/Myti, Muss and Gallos, and the poetry that the stoned lobster detects in ‘Sessile species, special specious, Seychelles series, seashell spacious’ (p. 114). Humour is often evident, as when Officer Bloomington cracks up at ‘So long and thanks for all the fish’ (p. 214), or the more adult humour of the ‘regular game’ for avant-garde modernists in Colette’s salon, ‘to think up imaginary titles of books’ such as ‘Diary of a Pussy in Mourning…’ (p. 23). There are less humorous examples, such as in ‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’ where dolphins constantly ‘scan’ humans and understand everything about them (p. 230) but they also have to scan underwater for mines. And there are quite serious word games, such as the dog in ‘Hundstage’ considering he’s on a ‘journey towards enlightenment’ (p. 93), or the tortoise representing evil in one (human) belief system (p. 123), yet in another she’s holding up the whole world (pp. 141, 151).

Suggestions for assessing Outcome 2

Students select their own animal narrator, well-known writer, war or conflict, historical figure or figures, and narrative form and style; they create a story to add to Dovey’s collection.

Students provide their reflective commentary in written or oral form. They reflect on the connections between Dovey’s text and their own, analysing the language choices and literary features of *Only the Animals*. The reflective commentary is useful for assisting students to consider and compare the range of narrative voices that Dovey inhabits in her collection. Students can present their reflective commentary orally, comparing their own work to three or more of Dovey’s short stories. Reading excerpts from Dovey’s stories and their own may allow students to explore the points of similarity and difference between their story and each of Dovey’s.
Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

In this Area of Study, students explore different ways of looking at the text, with a view to developing their own interpretation. How do the literary critics view this collection of stories? What meaning do they find in Dovey's stories? What views and values in the text are foregrounded by considering the text through the lens of a particular literary critical theory? Why does Dovey use such a variety of narrative voices, and what is the effect of this?

How does the variety in form, style and narrative voice contribute to conveying Dovey's views on, and values in relation to: the relationship between humans and other animals; writing (in particular, writing of the self); fantasy and imagination; uses of mythology, ideology, folk tales and fables; war and conflict; women's experiences; constructions of gender? Is it death per se, or animal death in particular—or death caused by war—that Dovey seeks to explore? Why does Dovey have an animal as the 'subject' who observes the world rather than a human—what does this suggest about identity and the self? Is ecology one of Dovey's concerns?

A number of book reviews are referenced below. Along with exploring the views of other readers, Only the Animals provides students with a useful opportunity for them to explore and consolidate their understanding of a range of literary theories, and how these theories may be applied to inform our reading of a text. As they look at the ideas and concerns revealed in this text, a number of literary perspectives may be useful lenses through which to explore Dovey's views and values.

Posthumanist perspective, ecocriticism

One reviewer comments that although this text has many postmodern features, there is nothing postmodern about the concept of the individual soul. Dovey's fellow Australian writer, J M Coetzee, is one of the two quoted writers in the frontispiece; he too uses a soul as a narrative voice. Nevertheless, it is this device of the animal soul as writer that positions animals as subject rather than object in this text. The world of this text appears to be not entirely centred on the primacy of the human being, thus inviting the reader to consider what views and values are foregrounded by viewing Only the Animals through a post-humanist (or ecocritical) lens.

'Anthropocentrism, with its assured insistence upon human exceptionalism, is no longer an adequate or convincing account of the way of the world' Bloomington claims.

An article of particular interest comes from Leigh Dale, writing for the Animal Studies Journal. Dale interprets Dovey's work of fiction as 'an intervention in the theorising of animal subjectivity through literary experimentation.' She sees Dovey's stories as about narrative experimentation and animal subjectivity, as playing with ideas and problems of storytelling in order to focus on animal deaths. A copy of Dale's review can be found at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol3/iss2/7/

The idea that humans are not necessarily the sovereign subject of history, nor the unique and universal essence at the centre of things, appears to be a view underpinning Dovey's stories, and there are ethical implications when we expand the circle of moral concern and extend subjectivities beyond the human species. Each narrator in this text has a voice, a personality, abilities, interests; each has a construct of selfhood that includes gender, parenting (or not), playfulness (or seriousness), and style—Kiki has a cynical modernist French style; Plautus a serious intellectual style, and Myti/Sel a humorous style.

A posthumanist or ecocriticist literary perspective draws our attention to Dovey's views and values about the many ways in which humans 'use' animals, from writers using them as imagery or symbols in their writing, to men (the perpetrators of conflict are seen to be mostly men) using them as military personnel or suicide bombers. Such a perspective also draws our attention to the causes of animal death, including by implication the dramatic problem of our time, widespread species extinction. Dovey's views and values are starkly in evidence when she gives us, through the device of a dog's naïve subjective view, a chilling critique of the use of (Germanic) mythology and mysticism in creating the ideology of Nazism, an ideology that sought ultimate domination (‘I am the great wolf Fenris…) and led to genocide. Through the device of a tortoise's subjective view she reveals a feminist critique of how writers like Ted Hughes use animals as symbols for their own (masculinist) views. And through the souls of cat, dolphin and elephant we access the lived experience of females.

Gender / feminist perspective

For much of her collection, Dovey's text openly welcomes a feminist reading, as it consciously explores issues of gender and invites readers to reconsider cultural norms.

Gibson 2013
Certainly the text challenges some of the binaries that we may otherwise accept in other texts, such as masculine/feminine. (Other binaries challenged in the text are the distinction between life and death, and between human and non-human.) Students might explore how the notions of femininity and masculinity are portrayed in relationship to the conflicts that occur in the background of each story. In many of the stories, conflicts and selfish behaviour are presented as almost exclusively the domain of men, while female characters are linked to notions of motherhood and artistic endeavour. As the collection progresses from story to story, this men/women distinction becomes one of the chief thematic concerns of the text, and is crystalised in Sprout the dolphin’s observation that whereas men ‘weave a web of intricate justification around any wrongdoing’, women after behaving badly ‘don’t have the ego necessary to sustain the same justificatory web, we die of guilt’ (p. 205).

The history of feminism is directly referenced in ‘Plautus: a Memoir’ when our intellectual tortoise narrator becomes ‘acquainted with the writings of the early American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton’ (p. 126). Dovey’s portrayal of feminist ideas in Sprout’s letter invites close study—how far does Dovey go, for instance, in siding with Plath (whose poetry was being written right at the start of second-wave feminism)? Dovey’s antidote to the destructive civil war in Mozambique (a largely male affair) is the capable, nurturing female behaviour evident in the matriarchal society of elephants.

Students might make comparisons between the manner in which masculinity and femininity is presented in each short story; for example, comparing the portrayal of female molluscs in ‘Somewhere Along the Line’ to the portrayal of female dolphins in ‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’. Dolphins are selfless and intelligent; the molluscs in their selfish pursuit of ‘freedom’ are rather dim-witted. The masculinity of the parrot is childish and self-focused (is he a kind of ‘childman’?), while that of the German Shepherd is blindly, obsequiously evil. Himmler’s dog refers to his human as ‘my master’ and seemingly without question embraces his Nazi ideology; does he represent Dovey’s view of a hierarchical masculinity in which the perpetrator of violence is often also himself a victim, in which the one who seeks dominance is also subservient?

Dovey’s representations of parenthood also appear more sympathetic to the female end of her gender continuum. After joyously spawning thousands of offspring our mussel narrator is horrified to realise something is now expected from him (‘We had become the elders within the colony, all of a sudden expected to be the Founding Fucking Fathers’); while our elephant narrator, on the other hand, rejoices in her newborn (‘For hours I could not stop rumbling with pleasure and love…’) and lives in a herd which keeps its vulnerable members ‘bundled within their vortex’, using their bodies to protect the young.

Dovey portrays gender as a fluid concept, particularly in the narratives of the tortoise and the cat. ‘Oleg…believed me to be male…a misconception I’d encouraged for my own amusement by periodically mounting a large rock warmed up by the sun…’ (p. 124) explains our tortoise. ‘Colette and I have always been interested in mules, perhaps because we consider ourselves hybrids of a sort, never quite able to fit within the boundaries of our sex or species’ (p. 26) explains the cat.

**Postcolonial perspective**

Who are the colonisers, who is colonised? The views and values foregrounded by this lens are similar to the concerns brought into focus by a Marxist lens, although Dovey’s stories invite readings against the grain within African and Asian contexts. The elephant mothers try to keep secret the ‘history of the herd in our own birthplace’, but an older cousin tells the twins about the Mozambique war for independence, and how the Portuguese de-tusked the elephants before they fled the country. Suleiman the Asian elephant was taken from Portuguese Goa and his stuffed skin remained in Europe. But it isn’t only the colonialists who exercise power unjustly over the animals, it is also the hungry Mozambican villagers who kill the elephants. Whose voices does Dovey suggest are often silenced? To which actors do her stories seek to give a voice?

**Power, work, ‘owner’ and owned—a Marxist lens**

Dovey’s use of animal narrators invites discussion about class and social hierarchies, about work and the sense of usefulness it brings, and about who has power or who benefits in an exchange. Who are the trainers and how do their workers (the trained animals) benefit from their work? Are there any humans with whom an animal narrator seems to gain something in the owner/owned exchange? How do the tensions of France’s social hierarchy manifest themselves in the trenches of WWI in ‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’? What is the link between art and the aristocratic class in ‘Plautus: A Memoir’? While the wealthy of Paris are eating elephant meat, how are the proletariat sustaining themselves in ‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’?

One of the questions that the text asks as a whole is in regards to the link between systems of entrenched power and global conflict. The animal narrators never deem to ask
why it is that their human counterparts wage war, or what it is that they are fighting for. They do seem to be aware that the burden of suffering that war imposes is weighted far more heavily on the impoverished (the hungry villagers near Lake Urema; the locals of Beirut unable to clamber into helicopters that ferry Western ex-pats to safety) than on those with access to wealth.

It is the pig in ‘Hundstage’ who quotes a ‘wise friend’ saying that ‘kindness, like cruelty, can be an expression of domination’ (p. 89). Viewing the stories through this lens tells us much about Dovey’s views and values.

**Form and structure**

As Dovey moves between a range of literary forms or genres within her collection, students could compare the effect of each short story in terms of its formal elements of structure, language and style. They could rank the stories in the collection in terms of how successfully each meets the conventions of the genre or form that it sits within. They might discuss the nature of the text as an extended exercise in style, as the author creates new forms of narrative. Some familiarity with the ideas of structuralist and post-structuralist literary criticism, and of formalism, could be useful.

The concept of ostranenie, or de-familiarisation, could enable students to consider the text through a formalist lens. The Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century considered habit the enemy of art and looked to the writer to take the reader outside usual patterns by making the familiar seem strange or different (this could be likened to Derrida’s concept of difference). Tolstoy was said by the formalist critics to use the technique of de-familiarising things and viewing them out of context. As Dovey’s text challenges readers to think much more radically about how humans relate to animals, it sits within the concept ostranenie: ‘what was shocking yesterday is all too familiar today, thus demanding an ever greater level of shock’.

Paradoxically, Dovey’s preliminary quotation from the Portuguese poet Czesław Miłosz invites a structuralist reading. On the one hand ‘there is luminosity, trust, faith, the beauty of the earth’, and on the other there is ‘darkness, doubt, unbelief, the cruelty of the earth, the capacity of people to do evil’. This binary idea is reflected in the stories.

**Suggestions for assessing Outcome 1**

The assessment task enables students to produce their own written interpretation of the text, using two different perspectives to inform their response. One way of constructing an assessment task is to present students with two critical perspectives, and invite them to develop an interpretation of Dovey’s text in response to these perspectives. Sinclair (Global Comment) and Falconer (Sydney Review of Books) could serve the purpose.

Another way is to invite students to base their interpretation on a single or series of short statements that reveal particular perspectives on the collection, perhaps statements such as:

- ‘For Dovey, the animals are not ciphers of humans, but nor are they used to invoke the Otherness that writers who try to write animals AS animals tend to rely upon.’ (Sinclair 2015)
- ‘readers are forced to assess the actions and impact of the human species’ (Hielscher 2014)
- ‘these stories are foregrounding the experiences of the forgotten, the tangential, the collateral damage of human activity, in a way that a story about a person – no matter how well told – could never do.’ (Sinclair 2015)
- “…book with a fable-like surface, and a whole churning world beneath.” (Ash 2016)
- “…reading fiction to trace what it tells us about animals themselves, or about the complex entanglements of our lives with theirs.” (Falconer 2014)

Or students could be invited to respond to a topic, using two critical perspectives. Possible topics:

- ‘By using animal narrators in her stories, Dovey re-examines the whole relationship of humans with animals.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Dovey’s stories are more about life than death.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Consider the proposition that the animal narrators in Only the Animals see females as constructive and males as destructive.’
- ‘Only the Animals explores the nature of the creative act of writing, but shocks readers with the death of each of its narrators.’ Discuss.
- To what extent do you agree that Only the Animals both defies and celebrates the possibilities of the short story form?
Additional topics

1. Consider the proposition that Dovey’s short stories endorse motherhood and maternal care as a positive balance against humanity’s destructive impulses.
2. Reflect on the idea that Only the Animals presents conflict as inevitable and portrays humanity as inherently violent and destructive.
3. Both the animal and human characters in Dovey’s stories fail to establish fulfilling relationships because they routinely struggle to communicate with each other. To what extent do you agree?
4. Many of the stories in Only the Animals suggest that storytelling and literature represent the peak of humanity’s accomplishments as a species. Discuss.
5. The animal narrators in Only the Animals are unconcerned with the divisions of class and ethnicity that often lie at the heart of human conflict. Discuss.

Area of Study 2: Close analysis

If using this text for one of the two assessment tasks in this area, students need to re-read and annotate the set stories thoroughly. As with any collection of short stories, close analysis of Only the Animals requires students to be attentive to the narrative elements that are common throughout the collection, as well as to the points of difference (stylistic and thematic) between each story.

When comparing short stories, it can be useful and interesting to explore how each story begins and ends. In Dovey’s collection, where each story ends with the death of its animal narrator, comparing the tone and manner by which these deaths are related is particularly important. Creating a chart of the opening and closing sentences of each of the stories selected for study may also provide students with stimulus to discuss the range of narrative voices that Dovey employs, as well as the views and values the author is revealing. (See Figure 2 below).

Students are assessed on how they:

• understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism
• identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways
• develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism
• analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.

Figure 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’</th>
<th>‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’</th>
<th>‘Psittacophile’</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opening line</strong></td>
<td>‘It is long after midnight and still the tomcat has not returned to his parapet about the trench adjacent to mine.’ (p. 17)</td>
<td>‘A long time ago, thirty years to be precise, when my owner asked her ex-husband … their impending nuptials, he said, “Great. Excited.”’ (p. 233)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Closing line</strong></td>
<td>‘I will hear Colette saying that she and I must be curious until our final living moments … and I will know that I am almost home.’ (p. 41)</td>
<td>‘And I thought of Muss, and thought of Muss, and I thought of Muss until I died.’ (p. 116)</td>
</tr>
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<td>‘I first met Muss right when I’d decided that everything was dead, when I was sick of putting down the world with theories.’ (p. 99)</td>
<td>‘What choice did she have but to hook my cage to the awning overhead and leave as quietly as she could, before I realised I was alone?’ (p. 245)</td>
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</table>
Students might also compile a set of comparative notes on the use of key narrative elements in each story. A table of the following sort may prove useful for students to begin this process. (See Figure 3 below).

**Students are assessed on how they:**
- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions
- consider the effects and nuances of the language, style and form in the text
- understand the views and values presented and analyse how the writer reveals these in the text
- develop their own interpretation that is an analysis of the significance of the selected passages, connections between them, the ways that they reveal developments in the text, and their relationship to the text as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation.

When preparing students for Section B of the examination, teachers could note the reminder that, when discussing short stories, ‘it is important that students are able to present an interpretation of the collection as a whole… rather than viewing the three passages as discrete entities. They should therefore be aware of the ways in which the selections may represent different aspects of the whole but may not represent the totality of the work.’

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**Passages for analysis**

The following sets of passages may be suitable for use as assessment tasks, or as classroom practice. As well as examining each set of three passages as an individual task, students may benefit from discussing how changing a passage from one set to another may influence the focus and scope of their analysis, or they could select their own passages. Particular attention should be paid to the order in which each story occurs in Dovey’s collection, and how the distinctive narrative voice employed in an individual story compares and contrasts with the voice employed in other stories.

**Group 1**

‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’
‘I’ve kept a low profile … and the red leaves of the cherry trees quivering in the November dawn.’ (pp. 18-19)

‘Hundstage’
‘Our favourite place of all … reverberating around the crypt.’ (pp. 80-81)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘Officer Bloomington’s fear all along … to be constantly under siege?’ (pp. 224-225)

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**Figure 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>‘Soul of Cat’</th>
<th>‘Soul of Dog’</th>
<th>‘Soul of Mussel’</th>
<th>… and so on</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tone</td>
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<td>Form, structure</td>
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<td>Use of dialogue</td>
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<td>Features of narrative voice</td>
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<td>Key imagery</td>
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<td>Thematic concerns</td>
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</table>
Group 2
‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’
‘Two carrier pigeons, both male … and I will know that I am almost home.’ (pp. 40-41)

‘Somewhere Along the Line, the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’
‘And so they would go on until the sun … it was holy to him and solved most everything.’ (pp. 101-102)

‘Plautus: A Memoir of my Years on Earth and Last Days in Space’
‘On 15 September 1968 … there are no tortoises holding it up.’ (pp. 149-151)

Group 3
‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’
‘Autumn was always her favourite season … the soldier whispered, looking up. “You’ve got company.”’ (pp. 19-20)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘The herd waited for the full moon … not for them, nor for us.”’ (pp. 161-163)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘I wonder sometimes if the man I killed … what your own wise ancestors used to know.”’ (pp. 228-229)

Group 4
‘Hundstage’
‘In the morning, the forest’s silence unnerved me … “The suffering of the fish?”’ (pp. 87-89)

‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘One day I heard the staff at the wildlife park … they weren’t quite sure which).” (pp. 142-143)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘Their new lives cauterised our old longing … “Time to nap.”’ (pp. 164-165)

Group 5
‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’
‘I thought of our apartment … just as my needs are sometimes opaque to her.’ (pp. 23-34)

‘Hundstage’
‘His voice was so soothing … “I cannot bear this!”’ (pp. 84-86)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘Some of our herd recognised the foreign men’s … towards the Mussicadzi.’ (pp. 166-167)

Group 6
‘Somewhere Along the Line the Pearl Would be Handed to Me’
‘My friend Gallos who’d crashed on my pier … open their shells wide, and get down to business.’ (pp. 99-100)

‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘Did you two get on up there? … come at you worse than before.’ (pp. 147-149)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘We were a day’s walk from … and there are the stars of their tails.’ (pp. 174-175)

Group 7
‘Pigeons, a Pony, the Tomcat and I’
‘“Dear sir,” Fufu recited … probably be put to work carrying munitions.”’ (pp. 26-27)

‘Somewhere Along the Line’
‘Something splashed into the water…… and I thought of Muss until I died.’ (pp. 115-116)

‘Psittacophile’
‘She and Marty knew each other well enough…… life in the East.’ (pp. 242-243)
Group 8
‘Hundstage’
‘The pig soul paused. … taking their leave without ceremony.’ (pp. 90-91)

‘Somewhere Along the Line’
‘Muss came back after feeling up … not the root of anything.’ (pp. 103-104)

‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘I was accepted into the Soviet Space Program … after it parachuted back to earth.’ (pp. 144-146)

Group 9
‘Somewhere Along the Line’
‘The whole goal was detachment … to drown in the Carolinian sea.’ (pp. 105-106)

‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘I watched one of the spiders squeeze … the spider and I.’ (pp. 151-153).

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘One morning in the autumn… a fitting military title as a first name.’ (pp. 218-219)

Group 10
‘Hundstage’
‘The men brought water down for us … broken free from my chains…’ (pp. 95-96)

‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘Virginia had taken a great interest in the training … stones to put in her coat pockets.’ (pp. 137-138)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘I turned to the animal poems Hughes wrote … and sometimes as humans?’ (pp. 205-206)

Group 11
‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘Owning a pet tortoise seemed to strike George … and dismissed the audience.’ (pp. 140-141)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘“A giraffe was purchased … never to be seen again.”’ (pp. 158-160)

‘Psittacophile’
‘Four days passed … before I realised I was alone?’ (pp. 244-245)

Group 12
‘Somewhere Along the Line’
‘Muss and I forgave each other … sometimes I hate it.”’ (p. 108-109)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘My first tour of duty …that she found it ridiculous.’ (pp. 216-217)

‘Psittacophile’
‘No, no, she insisted … at least say she’d been perspicacious.’ (pp. 233-235)

Group 13
‘Plautus: A Memoir’
‘You may think that I was dismayed at finding myself … and her books on the bed.’ (pp. 124-125)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘By far my favourite parts of your journals and poems … reminded you of your own.’ (pp. 207-208)

‘Psittacophile’
‘Her routine began to revolve around me … I’d sleep for twelve hours straight.’ (pp. 238-239)

Group 14
‘Hundstage’
‘“Herr Kersten,” my master was saying … their feathers floated through the air.’ (pp. 78-79)

‘I, the Elephant, Wrote This’
‘One hot afternoon … exactly what or why that was.’ (pp. 168-169)

‘A Letter to Sylvia Plath’
‘My daughter and I communed … to commit the thudding pattern to memory.’ (pp. 226-227)
References


Dovey, C 2007 ‘Ceridwen Dovey: The Darkness of my Golden Years,’ The Independent, November 18, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/ceridwen-dovey-the-darkness-of-my-golden-years-400618.html


The Anchoress
Perspective by Sara Taylor

Introduction

I came across this word ‘anchoress’, wondered what it was, started to read a bit more and was absolutely horrified, fascinated, really thought it was just a terrible, terrible thing. I just kept reading and in a way, it wasn’t essential to the thesis, but I was so fascinated by it that I just kept reading. (Cadwallader, R in Prior 2015).

The thesis, to which Robyn Cadwallader refers in the interview above, was for a PhD about the thirteenth-century Passion of St Margaret of Antioch with whom Sarah, her anchoress in the novel, becomes fascinated. Born in England but educated, between regular visits to Britain, in Australia, Cadwallader’s attraction to medieval history commenced as an undergraduate student at Monash University, where she was required to study Middle English as part of her Honours degree. Her meticulous research and academic rigor are evident in the text. While she has published short stories, plays, poems and non-fiction, and has been a lecturer at Flinders University, this is her first foray into full-length fiction. Cadwallader now lives near Canberra.

Published in 2015, this historical novel The Anchoress is set in the English Midlands in the small fictional village of Hartham and its surrounds in 1255-1256 AD. The controversial King Henry III is on the throne of England and life for the peasants is hard and unrelenting, beholden as they are to the wealthy nobles who live in comparative luxury in their manor houses. The Roman Catholic Church dominates every aspect of daily life for king, nobleman and peasant alike, and the Crusades are still a popular cause. Almost everyone believes in God, Heaven and Hell, people pay their tithes to the church, and daily life from the cradle to the grave revolves around the pageantry and celebrations of the church. Its religious rites, celebrations and holy days—such as Yule, Epiphany, May Day, All Soul’s Day, and Michaelmas—shape the calendar, and its teachings underpin behaviour, attitudes, morals and ethics. The church is highly organised, with a system of governance, law and economy. The countryside is divided into regions controlled by archbishops, and then into dioceses under the sometimes tyrannical control of the bishops. The parish or village church provides the sacraments and determines the religious festivals that villagers and nobles alike adhere to and attend.

The church is hierarchical, with a clerical structure that includes the Pope, archbishops, and priests, and a monastic structure that includes nuns, priors, monks, and abbots. These are men and women who seek the Christian monastic life and who must pledge obedience, celibacy and poverty. They live in closed communities with minimal interaction with the outside world. One of the most fascinating and extreme examples of monasticism is that of the anchoress, from the ‘Greek verb anacwre-ein, which means to withdraw’ (Hazenfratz 2000). The anchoress is a woman who voluntarily retires from the secular world and is sealed into a tiny cell, or anchorhold, often attached to a church, to live a life of prayer, contemplation and asceticism. She must adhere to an alternative third vow of ‘stability of place’ (p. 18) that demands she remain withdrawn from society for the rest of her life. While isolated in her cell the anchoress has an assistant or assistants who provide for her meagre physical needs, such as food and waste removal, accessed through a small window. She is able to see into her parlour and talk to her female visitors through a shuttered window covered with a black curtain with a white cross that she could open if she wishes. She is able to see the altar and sanctuary, and hear the services and voices of the supplicants, via a squint, a tiny narrow window cut on an angle to limit her view and avoid anyone in the church being able to see her. The anchoress is consecrated before internment, in a manner similar to the funeral rite, as she is expected to remain ‘dead’ to the world for the remainder of her life. Despite the requirement to lead a secluded life, the anchoress is literally anchored to the world by her cell’s physical connection to the church. She is required to pray for the village women who visit her with their daily concerns, and to follow a strict regimen of prayers and devotion. The only men she is allowed to converse with, but not see, are her confessor and the bishop. The anchoress obeys an anchoretic Rule of Life, one example being the Ancrere Wisse for female anchorites, adhered to by Sarah, the fictional anchoress of the text. Ancrere Wisse or Guide for Anchoreses, written sometime between 1225 and 1240 AD, ‘represents a revision of an earlier work, usually called the Ancrere Riule or Anchorites’ Rule, a book of religious instruction for three lay women of noble birth, sisters, who had themselves been enclosed as anchoresse somewhere in

Ancrene Wisse or Guide for Anchoresses

Perspective by Sara Taylor
the West Midlands, perhaps somewhere between Worcester and Wales. The author was apparently either an Augustinian canon or a Dominican friar, and by the time of the revision, Ancrene Wisse’s readership had expanded to include a much wider community of anchoresses, over twenty in number according to the text, scattered mainly in the west of England.’ (Hazenfratz 2000). The Rule outlines the daily devotions to be made by the anchoress and provides guidelines for her behaviour. The Ancrene Wisse is divided into eight sections; one and eight refer to her ‘outer life’, and two to seven to her inner life. They give an insight into its rigid expectations of the anchoress. Here is one translation of these sections:

- The first part is all about your devotions.
- The second is about how you should use your five senses to guard your heart, in which are order and religion and the life of the soul. In this distinction there are five chapters, that is, five sections corresponding to the five senses, which guard the heart like watchmen wherever they are faithful; and it says something about each one separately in turn.
- The third part is about birds of a particular kind which David compares himself to in the Psalter as if he were a recluse, and how recluses are similar in nature to those birds.
- The fourth part is about both carnal and spiritual temptations, and comfort against them, and about their remedies.
- The fifth part is about confession.
- The sixth part is about penance.
- The seventh, about purity of heart, why Jesus Christ should and must be loved, and what deprives us of his love and prevents us from loving him.
- The eighth part is all about the outer rule: first about food and drink, and other related matters; then about the things you are allowed to receive, and what things you are allowed to guard or keep; then about your clothes and related matters; then about your handiwork; about haircutting and bloodletting; about your maids’ rule; finally, how you should teach them lovingly. (Millett 2003)

**Perspective on the text**

Sarah, you suffer. He smiled sadly and I felt a hand on my head. It slipped down my neck and across my back, his skin on my skin. We embraced, his arms around me, his warmth flowing into my flesh, his lips on my cheek, my neck, my mouth. I had never known such warmth in every part. My soul left its sleep and ran toward him, lifting my body. I arched my back so that we touched, skin upon skin in every place, even into the hollows of his stomach. His love was a pain deep in my belly that I had desired for so long, a pain that I could hardly bear, so sweet was it. I would never leave. My beloved, he whispered as I swooned. (p. 178)

Was ever a more sensual passage written? But this is not a moment of sexual consummation between a man and woman, it is the anchoress Sarah longing for union with Jesus Christ. This novel challenges the reader on many levels. To a twenty-first century reader, the idea of a seventeen-year-old-girl voluntarily incarcerating herself in a minute cell, to forever shun the eyes of the world and live in extreme deprivation, is confronting enough, but that she does so as an act of penance, for the love of God and of His son Jesus Christ, is overwhelming although nevertheless compelling. Sarah chooses to flee the reality of the outside world, where women regularly die in childbirth, a local nobleman feels he has the right to the bodies of women he desires, and where alternatives to being a wife and mother are extremely limited; however, it is not an easy option. Sarah desires to be healed by a loving Christ and to share his suffering. Reneging on her vows and leaving the cell would be a ‘grievous sin’ (p. 18) and the consequences dire. As ‘they hammered…the nails’ (p. 22) into her door, Sarah’s physical world becomes reduced to a nine by seven pace cell with a rough bed, a desk, an altar and crucifix, a few books, an oil lamp, her Rule of Life, a small chest, a fireplace and eventually a cat called Scat, the only animal allowed by the Rule.

The reader, however, quickly becomes aware that this is not a sterile environment with limited potential for dramatic narrative. Sarah’s life is surprisingly busy and rich, much to her intense distress at times. She can read, pray, converse, sew and embroider. She has two maids whose personal lives impact on her religious life, particularly Anna, a victim of Sir Thomas’s lust and desire for revenge. Village women regularly visit the ‘holy woman’ (p. 15) that Sarah hopes
to become, to seek solace and to ask her to pray for them. She has regular visits too, as required by the Rule, from her first confessor Father Peter and her second, Father Ranaulf, a Prior, whose story we read in the ‘RANAULF’ chapters. Sarah can hear the sounds from the church through the squiret designed to allow her to see only the crucifix and altar. These sounds are sometimes uplifting and beautiful, but she also hears young people from the village making love, a leper begging for food and the ‘angry muttering’ (p. 196) of hungry and poverty-stricken peasants forced to surrender their handmills to Sir Thomas to enable him to maximise his profits. From beyond her cell she can hear the merriment and curses of the villagers on All Hallows Eve and the ‘song, laughter, brawls and shouting’ (p. 90) of the Yule holidays. She can smell the smoke of fires and enticing food being cooked. Flashbacks to Sarah’s previous life take her, and the reader, out of her cell and into the world of the poor villagers, their backbreaking labour in the fields, into the stables of the predatory, violent nobleman, and the reality of bloody, life-threatening childbirth.

Ranaulf’s chapters reveal the tensions between his desire to copy and write beautiful texts and his responsibility as confessor to the anchoress of Hartham, as well as the political intrigues that determine the success of St Christopher’s Priory. It is Sarah’s inner journey, however, which is so intriguing, as her first-person narrative allows us inside her cell and inside her mind. While the novel is rich with socio-historical detail as we are transported back to the Middle Ages, Cadwallader is at pains to enable us to travel with Sarah as she negotiates her new world. Cadwallader’s narration gives readers the sense that we too wake before dawn, we walk around her tiny space, we starve with her as she tries to suppress her bodily needs, and we freeze with her as the chill dampness invades every nook and crevice of her stone cell. We feel her hair shirt and finch when she self-harms. We hear the interminable prayers that fail at times to assuage her feelings of guilt and sin. We agonise with her as she ponders her response to the leper, and we sense her struggle as she tries to do her duty to everyone who demands so much of her. Sarah’s senses, despite her Rule demanding that she ‘Deny the senses’ and ‘Look only within’ (p. 98), are heightened by her seclusion, evidenced by her very real communion with Sister Agnes who is buried beneath her cell, whose ‘eyeless sockets peered into (her) heart, saw (her) desires’ (p. 98). She channels the disgraced Sister Isabella, who broke her vow of ‘stability of place’ and left her cell. Unable to see the outside world, Sarah learns to identify the sounds of ‘curses, sighs, laughter, the moans and gasps of bodies joining, grunts of tiredness, frustration, sadness’ (p. 121) as they breach her walls. She learns to recognise the ‘shit and mouldering, hay and corn and dried rushes, parsnips freshly dug, ale spilled and stale, drying blood, drying fish, the sweat and dirt’ (p. 121).

Cadwallader gives Sarah’s voice intensity and richness, which has the effect of authenticating her experience and making the story seem credible and compelling. One reviewer found Cadwallader’s insistence on bringing the external world into Sarah’s cell rather contrived, and having the ‘dead hand of didacticism…characters and scenarios seemingly invent to illustrate points about medieval power structures and the predicament of women…’ (Issicratea 2015). On the other hand, any anchoress, like the fictional Sarah, necessarily had reasons for choosing this life; the author’s research suggests that while the specifics of Sarah and Ranaulf’s experiences are a result of a fertile imagination, they are derived from historical sources. This is fiction after all, and poetic licence is permissible. The fire that puts Sir Thomas out of action is perhaps a little contrived as a punishment for his rape of Anna and its tragic consequences. Sarah’s request for a walled garden to be attached to the anchorhold, while permissible, could be seen as a convenient way to resolve her dilemma. It is Cadwallader’s ability to convincingly evoke the intensity and demands of the Christian faith on the recluse, and its horror, revealed so graphically through the story of St Margaret’s humiliation and torture, that remains with the reader. Both Sarah and Ranaulf’s worlds are narrow and confined, but their stories are worth telling. As Cadwallader herself says: ‘Whatever we think of the extreme enclosure an anchoress accepted, it’s worth considering the ways that narrowing down a view can help us focus more clearly. As William Blake suggests, we can “see a world in a grain of sand”. And by seeing the small and perhaps uncomfortable aspects of the past, we might discover more about ourselves.’ (Cadwallader 2015a).

Nevertheless, when reading against the grain as students are encouraged to do through the Literary perspectives Unit, students may need to ask to what extent can the historical novelist authentically reconstruct the past, especially a past as far distant as the thirteenth century? Teachers might refer to the ideas of Stephen Greenblatt1 or of Inga Clendinnen2 or Hilary Mantel3 about the historical fiction genre.

1 Greenblatt: ‘What matters (in the historical novel) is the illusion of reality, the ability to summon up ghosts. The historical novel then is always an act of conjuring…’
2 Griffiths 2015
3 Mantel 2017 ‘If we write about the victims of history, are we reinforcing their status by detailing it? Or shall we rework history so victims are the winners? This is a persistent difficulty for women writers, who want to write about women in the past, but can’t resist retrospectively
Literary works are socially and politically implicated within their own historical context; is this novel, therefore, not so much an historical portrayal of the past as a process of negotiation between its twenty-first-century author and reader? *The Anchoress* operates, too, as a sort of dialectic that "oscillates between the extremes of sameness and otherness", so is the author (and are her readers) treating the past as "Other", as a sort of ghoul's fascination? Can we really know anything about English society in the Middle Ages by reading this novel? Is the novel fiction or history? Does this novel (or our reading of it) reflect the views and values of an English-speaking dominant culture of our own time, rather than the views and values of a past time?

empowering them. Which is false.' 'A reader of a novel knows they are entering a project with the author … readers may think this is the “truth”, when actually the truth can’t be known … does it matter? The past sees and hears differently. I don’t deny the harshness of the past but we treat it like a horror film.’

Veenstra 1995

**Features of the text**

**Plot**

The plot is fairly straightforward and the events of the text nominally occur over a year and a half, but by using flashbacks we are made aware of events that occur prior to Sarah’s enclosure and thus the time span expands. Sarah, the seventeen-year-old daughter of a wealthy cloth merchant, chooses to become an anchoress. Sir Thomas, the eldest son of the local nobleman, Sir Geoffrey Maunsell, has propositioned her (having given her the impression that he had wanted to marry her despite his father’s objections) in his stables at the manor, an unwanted approach, but one that stirs her, against her will. Her mother has died not long after giving birth to her brother, and her adored sister Emma has died in childbirth. There is pressure from her father to marry well to ensure the family’s ongoing wealth and position after the loss of a valuable shipment of cloth at sea.

The tiny cell attached to the church provides an escape from the outside world where she can pray and ‘love Christ’ (p. 19) and avoid the ‘weaknesses and excesses’ of her body. Once enclosed, her life follows a daily pattern of prayer—Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers and Compline. She is required to deny her personal needs and desires; however, the outside world intrudes and Sarah has to confront the reality of her role as an advisor to the local women, theoretically a holy woman who is still the prey of the manipulative and dangerously vicious Sir Thomas. Her two maids, Anna and Louise, provide for her daily wants and liaise between her and the village beyond her cell walls. Women—Maud, Avic, Jocelyn, Lizzie, little Eleanor, and others—are permitted by the Rule to visit her to seek her prayers. Her only sanctioned male visitors are her two confessors and the bishop, but Sir Thomas pushes his way into her parlour and the outside world resonates again. In her naivety and passionate love for Christ, Sarah makes herself seriously ill by extreme fasting, flagellation and self-denial, before she learns to moderate her penance and reach a balance that can sustain her and enable her to respect the Rule. Father Ranulf, her second confessor and in charge of the local Priory’s manuscripts, develops a spiritually intimate relationship with Sarah, and as the story progresses their separate journeys toward self-awareness develop. Her cold, bleak cell, where abstemiousness is the order of the day, heightens her senses, and she becomes very responsive to imagination and the power of suggestion. Her relationships with the dead Sister Agnes and the ostracised Sister Isabella, both of whom lived in the cell before her, provide a supernatural overtone to her incarceration, and the one with Agnes nearly causes her death. She is also fascinated by the horrific story of the virgin martyr, St
Margaret of Antioch whom Sarah sees as a role model, and whose dizzying heights of self-sacrifice and pain tolerance enthral her. Ranaulf is asked by the devious Sir Thomas to provide Sarah with a copy of St Margaret’s story. Against The Rule’s stipulation about the anchoress’s male visitors, Thomas forces himself upon her and demands an audience. He continues to reproach Sarah cruelly, regardless of her seclusion, for not surrendering to him. As an ultimate insult and punishment he rapes Anna, Sarah’s young assistant. Anna’s pregnancy and the subsequent birth of her child, followed by her death, force Sarah to reassess her role as anchoress.

Setting and historical context

As an historical novel, Cadwallader’s research and use of the historical sources is significant, as the text cannot be separated from its setting and historical context. While Sarah speaks with a contemporary voice, we are provided with the minutiae of thirteenth century life in the English countryside. While the world beyond Hartham, Cramford, Leeton and Friaston is implied rather than explored in detail, some knowledge of the history and sociology of the period is advised: the Ancrene Wisse (which Cadwallader references in her ‘Afterword’ and from which extracts in the text are taken); the anchoresses themselves; medieval daily life; the ‘agricultural and ritual cycle of the village year’ (p. 312); and the role of the scribes and illuminators. Teachers could also conduct a class discussion or debate about the nature and construction of historical fiction.

Structure

The Foreword

The novel opens with a description of a jongleur or acrobat performing as part of a travelling troupe on market day when Sarah was quite young and the restrictions of womanhood had not yet stolen her imagination. Sarah is enthralled and renames Roland, the jongleur, ‘Swallow’, to reflect his ability to soar into the air, to leave the temporal world and fly free. Sarah believes her enclosure would enable her to fly to God who would embrace her. The reality is somewhat different. Swallow reappears throughout the novel, as Sarah struggles with a life which, despite her longings, is lived very much on earth. The text opens and ends with Swallow, a beautiful symbol of freedom who reflects the Rule itself:

True anchoresses are like birds, for they leave the earth—that is, the love of all that

is worldly—and, as a result of their hearts’ desire for heavenly things, fly upwards toward heaven. And though they fly high with a high and holy life, yet they hold their heads low in mild humility, as a bird in flight bows its head, and they consider all their good actions to be worthless. (p. 26).

Sarah has to learn to bow her head.

Chapters

Sarah’s first person narrative is interspersed with Ranaulf’s third person narrative. Their first chapters each commence with a very specific reference to place and time—‘The Church of St Juliana / Hartham, English Midlands / St Faith’s Day, 6 October 1255’ (p. 5) in Sarah’s case, and ‘St Christopher’s Priory / Cramford, English Midlands / St Crispin’s Day, 25 October 1255’ (p. 36) in Ranaulf’s—firmly establishing the historical context and the locality of the residence of both characters which are so pertinent to the narrative. While some readers may find Ranaulf’s intrusion into what is predominantly Sarah’s story, unnecessary, or even contrived, his gentle and troubled male experience of Christian faith and his own journey to self-knowledge provide a counterbalance to the disturbing insight into medieval society that Sarah’s story provides for twenty-first century readers.

Main characters

Sarah

As this novel is about ‘an inner journey … inner awareness’ (Prior 2015), as Cadwallader herself describes it in this interview, it is fitting that Sarah’s story is told in her own words. Part of Sarah’s impact on the reader is due to her vibrant, distinctive voice. As Sarah herself says, ‘You might think there would be nothing to tell about those four walls, two windows, a squint, and darkness, but the stones carried so many stories. And they would carry my story, every moment of my time here. My only witness.’ (p. 13). She is the only witness, so she must narrate this story. So much of her time in her tiny cell is taken up with self-analysis and contemplation of Christ’s suffering that it is Sarah’s voice which helps readers to develop empathy. Momentarily we too are inside her dank cell, and our senses are heightened. Our ‘hairs … lifted’ and the ‘skin on’ our ‘knees prickled’ (p. 15), just like Sarah’s when she is made aware of St Agnes’s body beneath the floor. We suffer as she self-flagellates and takes her self-denial to the dangerous level of
starvation and collapse, all because there is no intermediary to interpret her thoughts and actions. Her voice is clear and intelligent throughout. Medieval women may have been oppressed and powerless in a patriarchal world, considered 'lustful and tempting' as Ranaulf had been taught at school, or as the Fathers claimed, 'daughters of Eve', 'gateway of sin', 'foul flesh', 'deformed men' (p. 69), whose 'virginity' is their 'fragile treasure … jewel, the blossom' of their 'body offered to the Lord' (p. 16), yet in the novel they are also intelligent, resourceful, and capable. We sense their strengths through the stories of the women of the village, Isabella's determination to risk damnation, and St Margaret's martyrdom. But they are also flawed and needy, as is Sarah. She is impatient and quick to anger, and longs for human touch, the warmth of the sun and the sweetness of an apple. The text is enhanced by the carefully placed flashbacks into Sarah's memory, thereby allowing the reader to experience vicariously her childish excitement on All Hallows Eve when her parents exhorted her to build fires and ring bells to frighten the spirits of the dead, or to relive her horror at her sister's death. We are taken into the stables to be witnesses to the catalyst for her decision to be enclosed, and we understand her sexual desire, despite her revulsion at Sir Thomas' advances.

Ranaulf

Father Ranaulf's personality and piety are evident throughout the third person omniscient narrative, as we are made privy to his most intimate thoughts. He is a learned man, a lover of beautiful illuminations and of words written on parchment. These 'marks on the page' he sees as 'signs that could communicate such complex ideas: precise dogma of creed and the rules of church discipline, or the deep love of God and the sacrifice of Christ's Passion.' (p. 39). He craves time in solitude to copy religious texts, but also relishes the conversations with his fellow brothers about the books and their ideas. He is impatient to write his own words one day, but the constant interruptions to his work and the demands of the priory to focus on paying commissions frustrate him. Then he is instructed to visit an anchoress, a woman, he has heard, who is faithful and has 'some intelligence' (p. 68). Soon he knows that 'the order of his days (is) threatened' (p. 73) by this woman, the first with whom he has had any contact since a child. His anger when Sir Thomas insists on personally giving his carefully copied Life of St Margaret, in spite of the directive of the Rule of Life that no man other than her confessor can visit her, is evident in the vivid description of his angry trashing of the trees and his blasphemous curse as he realises Sir Thomas will do exactly what he wants. Ranaulf's 'face was throbbing with pain, his ears were ringing, and he had blasphemed' (p. 149). Ranaulf's equilibrium, but not his faith, is challenged by Sarah's intellect and preparedness to tell the truth as she sees it, by Anna's pregnancy, and by the truth about Sir Thomas' culpability for Anna's death. The real world of men and women, of 'justice, anger, passion' (p. 269), has shaken his confidence and forced him from his quiet copying, writing and literary discussions into a world he had not sought. By the end of the novel Ranaulf and Sarah 'understood each other' (p. 300) and, in a reversal of role, it is Sarah who consoles him. This character is crafted from a detailed knowledge of medieval monastic life, the role of priorities, and the importance of the written word in Christian iconography.

Language

The language of the text is accessible; however, there is a need to acknowledge the medieval references which must be understood to fully appreciate the historical context. Creating a glossary would be a valuable task for students to complete, as would a translation of the Latin prayers and chants (pp. 9, 40, 74, 94, 239, 251, 277). They enrich the text and immerse the reader in the era, so their meanings and relevance need to be clarified. For example:

Catholic terminology: sanctuary, crucifix, confessor, squint, Mass, priory, Matins, manuscripts, illumination, scriptorium, vows, anchorhold, confession, penance, dean, bishop, absolution, martyr, corrody, Christ's passion, rectory, sermon

Prayers: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, Compline, Prime of the Holy Ghost, Prime of Our Lady, Psalms, Hours, Aves, Pater Noster

Religious texts: Breviary, Psalter, Rule of Life, Book of Hours, Summa on Penance

Religious festivals: St Faith's Day, St Crispin's Day, All Hallows Eve, May Day, Advent, Yuletide, Michaelmass

Historical figures: Augustine, Anslem, Bernard, St Margaret of Antioch, King David, St Christopher, St Antony, St Cuthbert, Raymond of Penafort, John the Baptist, St Margaret

Medieval life and laws: pottage, charms, amulets, Statute of Merton, Reeve.

There are also a number of extracts from the Rule of Life (pp. 11, 18, 12, 26, 43, 95, 120, 135, 173, 186, 194, 219, 220) translated from the original Middle English; these add a sense of historical authenticity to the novel.
**Views and values**

In identifying and analysing views and values in the text, students could discuss any differences there might be in the views and values of the author, the characters (and their society), and the twenty-first century reader, in respect of:

- the position of women in medieval society
- the role of the church in daily and religious life
- the perils of childbirth
- a monastic or religious life
- the power of faith and prayer
- relationships between men and women
- a patriarchal and misogynist society
- the need for connection and touch
- the desire for isolation and seclusion
- sexuality and sensuality
- medieval mysticism
- domestic violence
- spirituality
- power and influence

What issues, ideas and contexts has Cadwallader chosen to explore? What views and values can be identified in the novel? What does the novel suggest to us about the cultural, social, historical and ideological context of England in 1255 AD? Is Cadwallader’s gender significant when considering the views and values suggested in the novel? How does the novel reflect or critique aspects of human behaviour or society? What views and values do we, as readers, bring to this novel?

**Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation**

**Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations**

As there is no known professional adaptation of the novel (and as the sixth text must be an adaptation of this particular novel if used for assessment), *The Anchoress* is not a feasible text for assessment in this Area of Study. Nevertheless, it may be interesting to view the 1993 black and white film, *Anchoress*, directed by Chris Newby. The film is available on the DailyMotion.com website.

- Compare how author Robyn Cadwallader and director Chris Newby visualise the medieval period of the text in their respective novel and film.
- Compare how the author and director present the character of an anchoress within their texts.
- Enact an episode from the novel *The Anchoress* to perform in front of the class, explain reasons for selecting the particular incident in the novel, and outline possible set, costuming and casting decisions.

**Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts**

The creative response is an opportunity for students to work very differently with the texts and to come to an understanding of how creators of texts construct them. It enables students to enrich their understanding by moving into the world of the text and its characters. Students could identify gaps in the narrative, identify characters whose voices are neglected by the author, or consider how the text might be transformed in another time and place.

- Consider how Cadwallader creates the physical, historical and social landscape of medieval England in her novel.
- Prepare questions to ask Robyn Cadwallader about the novel. In an interview situation one student is selected to be the novelist and to respond to selected questions.
- Consider the third person narrative used by Cadwallader and compare Sarah and Ranaulf’s chapters.
- As a class brainstorm possible creative response ideas. Select one and write (or present orally) a reflective commentary that explains the connection between the creative response and the original text, and identifies and justifies the language choices and literary features that would be used.
Suggestions for assessing Outcome 2

- Write a new chapter in the third person from Anna, Sir Thomas or Louise’s perspective.
- Write an internal monologue from Sir Thomas’s point of view when he hears of Sarah’s decision to be enclosed.
- Write another chapter in Sarah’s life after she has access to her garden.
- Using the information provided in the text, write a description of the physical and social environment of the text. (The village of Hartham, the village of Leeton, Cram Hill (p. 146), the Church of St Juliana, Sarah’s cell and parlour, Colley’s Hill (p. 115), and the nearby St Christopher’s Priory, Cramford.)
- Write a part of Agnes’s story in first person.
- From a twenty-first century perspective, and with knowledge of medieval life as revealed in the text, write an opinion piece expressing your views about the treatment of women at that time.
- Write another chapter from Ranaulf’s perspective to be added to the end of the text.
- Write a first person narrative from St Margaret’s point of view at a particular point in her journey to martyrdom.
- Write a first person account from Sister Isabella’s point of view of her decision to leave her cell.
- Adapt a part of The Anchoress into a scene for a play script ensuring that the ideas and concerns of the text are evident. Consider the stage directions, the set, costuming, the use of sounds, casting and so on.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

Literary perspectives can be found in reviews, peer-reviewed articles and transcripts of speeches, or based on literary theories. There are a number of reviews listed in the References section of this guide. Some are accessible directly online as indicated and others are available to members of the State Library of Victoria.

Students could:

- in small groups, consider how different readers may respond to the world of the anchoress as explored in the text. What does a twenty-first century reader think of the enclosed life of Sarah, an anchoress in medieval England?
- write a review of The Anchoress for classmates to read, considering their personal perspective on the text, their reading experience, their engagement with the novel, and identifying aspects they enjoyed and those with which they struggled. Compare reviews and reflect on the differences and similarities between them.
- read two or three critical perspectives and identify the similarities and differences between them. Consider whether they reflect particular literary theories or are individual perspectives. Create a table which reflects the aspects of the perspective that are significant, with examples from each of the perspectives. (See VCAA Advice for Teachers p. 22.)
- research another literary theory that may apply to this text other than those referred to below, e.g. structuralist, psychoanalytic. Identify the main concepts, consider what views and values are foregrounded in using this critical lens, and identify some literary criticism that reflects this idea.

A feminist/gender perspective

The idea of a young woman choosing the type of incarceration and seclusion required to be an anchoress, will probably be an anathema to contemporary readers. The roles and positions of both women and men in medieval society and within the church hierarchy are explored here in an unusual manner. What view does the author portray of masculinity and of femininity? How might readers of different genders respond to the novel? How does the novel reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes? Why might the author have chosen to write this historical fiction narrative?
• Make a list of the main female characters and identify their place and role in the society: Sarah, Agnes, Sister Isabella, Eleanor, Louise, Anna, Maud, St. Margaret, Jocelyn, Ma, Lizzie, Emma and Lady Cecilia. The medieval women here range from the lady of the manor to the poor victim of domestic violence, Jocelyn, from the saintly St. Margaret to the loyal devout Louise. Identify the role (and construction of masculinity represented by) the male characters such as: Father Peter, Father Ranaulf, Father Simon, Sir Geoffrey Maunsell, Sir Thomas Maunsell, Prior Walter, Hugh, Roger, Gwylim, Sarah’s father, Brother Cuthbert.

• Consider each character’s age, position in society, experiences, daily life and living conditions, their interaction with other men or women, how they deal with major events in their lives, death if applicable.

• Consider Cadwallader’s treatment, in a literary sense, of women and men in her novel. Is she more sympathetic to her female characters? Are all her male characters stereotypical of their time? Does the reader feel only sympathy for the women or only antagonism towards the men?

• Consider the relationships between men and women. Are they all unequal relationships? For example, both Sarah and Ranaulf have chosen a monastic life that requires self-discipline and great faith. How different are they? Does Cadwallader’s portrayal of women and men in her story reveal ‘the dead hand of didacticism with characters and scenarios seemingly invented to illustrate points about…the predicament of women…’ (Issicratea 2015)? Is the placing of a young woman in a seven-by-nine pace cell, devoid of human touch, a metaphor for women’s subservient and powerless position in society?

• Consider whether the historical setting of the novel enhances its relevance for contemporary women. Cadwallader has commented ‘That’s the thing that they kept saying to me, that they were astonished that it could be so clearly set in the past, so clearly evoking the past, but offering not just a way in but talking about issues that we can all think about today…Things like isolation and the need for connection, the need for touch, [gender politics], attitudes to the body, acceptance of the body, acceptance of self—all of those issues, they were saying, are remarkably relevant.’ (Prior 2015). Discuss this in comparison with Hilary Mantel’s comment about the difficulty for women writers ‘who want to write about women in the past, but can’t resist retrospectively empowering them. Which is false.’ (Mantel 2017).

• Is The Anchoress only a girls’ book? How do male readers respond to the text?

• Read some reviews and determine if the writer is using a feminist/gender lens and explain how that is evident. What evidence does the writer use to validate a feminist reading?

Power and class—a Marxist perspective

The text lends itself to a consideration of both social (religious) and economic power in medieval England. Viewed from this perspective, the concerns are power, economics, class differences, fairness and questions of equality in the society. It is based on an assumption that ‘the wealthy class exploits the working class by forcing their own values upon them, usually through control of working conditions and money.’ (Appleman 2015, p. 18). Students can consider, in light of their reading of the text, portrayals of inequality between various characters, and how the medieval society of the novel condones, acknowledges and encourages this inequality. Who exploits whom, how and why?

Students can consider the economic power relationships created by the corrody: the arrangement between Sir Geoffrey and the Priory to provide for the anchoress and her assistants, and the villagers’ economic reliance on the Lord of the Manor. At one stage Sir Thomas plans ‘to take land from the common fields to pasture his sheep. That’s land the villagers need for their own animals, their hay crops and the like.’ (p. 139). Father Ranaulf, with the 1335 Merton Statute (see References) which he believes protects the villagers, confronts Sir Thomas about the rumour, but Sir Thomas brushes his concerns aside. At Michaelmass, however, the villagers’ anger, overheard by Sarah, is evident. Sir Thomas’ Reeve, Gwylim, is in the village to collect rents and fines due to his master, both of which the villagers can scarce afford. He then informs them of a new blow—their handmills, used to grind wheat, must be collected for Sir Thomas’ sole use. Another method of making income is removed. When Hugh yells that it is unlawful, the response is, that it is ‘Not for you to say what Sir Thomas can do…You should be grateful you have a place at all.’ (p. 197). The plans are enacted, but the villagers momentarily get their own back when Sir Thomas is at death’s door and Gwylim is dead.
This perspective also invites a discussion of how the Roman Catholic Church exercises its authority, in a social and economic sense. Students could investigate how the Church’s power in the Middle Ages was derived from a combination of belief, money and illiteracy. People believed that they could only get to Heaven through the auspices of the Church; tithing gave the Church incredible wealth, and it did not pay taxes, although it did own land. Illiteracy meant that people had to rely on the Church to interpret the biblical texts. The church plays, arguably, a more important role than the monarchy or the feudal hierarchy in determining the lives of Sarah and Ranaulf and everyone with whom they come into contact.

• Consider the relationship between Sir Geoffrey and the priory, as exemplified by the corrody for Sarah the anchoress of Hartham. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement that guaranteed the lord of the manor’s soul, and for the villagers, provided ‘pasture for their sheep, rental money from the arable land, wood from the forest for building … All in return for the care of three devout women.’ (p. 38)

• Consider that Cadwallader exposes a church that uses its authority as a weapon. It condones a Rule of Life regardless of the consequence for the anchoress. It approves of, and encourages a woman to enclose herself and forgo normal relationships and human touch. It controls her by constant reminders that her ‘virginity’ is her ‘fragile treasure’, her ‘jewel, the blossom’ of her ‘body offered to the Lord’; in her cell ‘it is sealed, kept whole’ (p. 16), but is under constant threat outside. It deems that, as an anchoress, Sarah, is as ‘worthless to the world’ as it is to her (p. 16). It promotes the gruesome death of the martyred St Margaret of Antioch as a model for women, her horrific self-sacrifice a symbol of devotion and piety. It condones asceticism to the extent that Sarah starves herself into not having regular periods and is at death’s door, and most confronting for the reader, hallucinates about embracing Christ like a lover. However, there are glimpses of a more compassionate church too; we meet the wise, gentle and compassionate Father Peter, Sarah’s first confessor, who tells her she should not suffer needlessly, and witness the kindness of Martin, the local priest’s assistant, who succours the leper whom Sarah refuses to assist.

• Consider the author’s views and values. Has Cadwallader written a critique of the Catholic Church? What is her belief system? She says in an interview:

I’ve been connected with the church, but… I have massive problems with the institution. I know some absolutely wonderful people who are in the church and I know of some terrible things about the church and the way the institution functions, so I hang loose to it. But I’ve always had an interest in a sort of spirituality. (Prior 2015).

Suggestions for assessing Outcome 1

Students write their own interpretation of the novel using at least two different literary perspectives to inform their view. The following suggestions are based on models for assessment tasks provided in the VCAA Advice to Teachers.

• Select a short extract from the novel and provide two different critical perspectives to prompt the student’s written interpretation. For instance, use this passage: ‘The next day a woman came for counsel … lay shrivelled on the edge between us.’ (pp. 61-63) and two reviews such as: Isiscratea 2015 (particularly the final paragraph) and Sarah Moss’s 2015 review.

• Provide an essay topic that invites a written interpretation requiring the use of two different critical perspectives. For instance: ‘Consider the proposition that Cadwallader’s The Anchoress is an overtly feminist narrative.’ Or ‘How do we in the twenty-first century reflect upon the enclosed life of Sarah, an anchoress in medieval England?’

• Use two short critical perspectives (e.g. ‘A review’ by Gretchen Shirm 2015, and ‘The inner life of a medieval nun’ by Sarah Moss 2015); invite students to develop an interpretation in response to The Anchoress and to the perspectives presented in each article.
• Provide a single or series of short statements that reveal particular perspectives on the novel. Students use one or all of these statements as the basis for their interpretation, using two different literary perspectives. Example statements (use one or more):
  1. ‘…this villain is somewhat two-dimensional, both as evil landowner and lusting man. But then in a world where Eve is always the problem, Adam is allowed to get away with anything, including rape. More subtle is the push-pull between Sarah and her reluctant confessor, who is better at copying words in the scriptorium than engaging with the real world: Even for good men, it seems, women remain temptation.’ (Dunant 2015)
  2. ‘Cadwallader plays gracefully with medieval ideas about gender, power and writing: if the Bible is the written word of God, who may read it? What might women learn from their exclusion? The classic early-modern poetic comparisons between the room, the womb and tomb…’ (Moss 2015).
  3. ‘a deeply interesting examination of madness, faith, grief, anger and freedom. It is an intimate novel that deals closely with the wants and desperate desires of its characters, and provides insight into the burdens carried by women of that time.’ (Kenwood 2015).
  4. ‘historical fiction tells us something about our own world as it narrates a story of the past. While reading The Anchoress, I was struck time and again by the operation of power along gender and class lines.’ (Curtin 2015).
  5. ‘The contest between the physical and the spiritual is central to the novel and to the Rule governing anchorites, which acknowledges that the “outer rule” of physical comfort may need to be varied to ensure the functioning of the “inner rule” of spiritual practice. This dualism of inner and outer, physical and spiritual, is echoed in the paradoxical image of the acrobat that recurs throughout the book’ (Funnell 2015).
  6. ‘Although she is fairly forthright about the extent to which anchorites’ extreme practices of asceticism reflect morbid fears of sexuality and the body that we would tend to understand now in psychological, or psychiatric, terms, she treats Sarah’s spiritual impulses sympathetically and doesn’t deconstruct them entirely’ (Issicratea).
  7. ‘characters and scenarios seemingly invented to illustrate points about medieval power structures and the predicament of women’ (Goodreads).

Additional topics
• Consider the extent to which the characters in The Anchoress are oppressed by medieval society’s rules and expectations.
• ‘Through Sarah’s story in The Anchoress, Cadwallader invites her readers to reassess their attitudes towards those who voluntarily withdraw from everyday life.’ Do you agree?
• ‘Cadwallader’s story of an enclosed life shows that an individual conforming to society’s expectations may be respected, but the personal cost can be huge.’ To what extent do you agree?
• How does Cadwallader reveal medieval power structures, and does this have any relevance for a twenty-first century reader?
• ‘The Anchoress is just as critical about the status of women in medieval England as it is about the power structures that limit them.’ Discuss.

Students are assessed on how they:
• understand, compare, analyse and evaluate perspectives presented in literary criticism
• identify and analyse the views and values in the text, explaining how literary criticism foregrounds particular views and questions texts in particular ways
• develop their own interpretation through selection and use of significant detail from the text and literary criticism analyse how literary criticism informs interpretations of texts.
Area of Study 2: Close analysis

If using this text for one of the two assessment tasks in this area, *The Anchoress* is rich with opportunities. Students should consider the historical context of the novel, the characterisation, the narrative structure, and the language of the text. In preparation for this task, they could carefully annotate one short passage from *The Anchoress*—annotations could identify language choices, views and values, authorial choices, links to other events in the novel, characterisation, stylistic and literary devices, historical details, significant dialogue, and plot development—and then write a close analysis, or present their analysis to the class using the projected passage. Or students could select three short passages and justify their choices to the class, explaining the language features, views and values, and connections between the three passages, and how these affect the student’s own interpretation of the text.

**Students are assessed on how they:**

- analyse key features of the text, using appropriate conventions
- consider the effects and nuances of the language, style and form in the text
- understand the views and values presented and analyse how the writer reveals these in the text
- develop their own interpretation that is an analysis of the significance of the selected passages, connections between them, the ways that they reveal developments in the text, and their relationship to the text as a whole, using textual detail to support their interpretation.

**Passages for close analysis**

**Group One**

- ‘I had always wanted to be a jongleur … I was still leaping in the air with Swallow.’ (pp. 1-2)
- ‘The Merton Statute, that was it. … God be with you, Father. And with dear Sister Sarah.’ (pp. 147-148)
- ‘One morning, a breeze … That moment of risk—not it was mine.’ (pp. 308-309)

**Group Two**

- ‘I’ll introduce you to the anchoress, … I’m sorry to hear of Father Peter.’ (pp. 71-72)
- ‘I thought then about my own sore back, … my cell and the world outside it.’ (pp. 151-152)
- ‘The villagers worry. … Now they all know.’ (pp. 254-255)

**Group Three**

- ‘The path straightened as the land levelled out … “deformed male”.’ (pp. 68-69)
- ‘I ran my fingers along the edge of my desk, … the soft curve just below her ear.’ (pp. 137-138)
- ‘The story of St Margaret. … filled only with invisible demons.’ (p. 214)

**Group Four**

- ‘I blenched, fright jagged in my chest … the slow creep of death.’ (pp. 32-35)
- ‘The anchoress listed her sins, … the silence that sat there with him.’ (pp. 159-160)
- ‘The night was cold, … but it might have been the wind.’ (pp. 275-276)

**Group Five**

- ‘The autumn rain fell, … to see her asleep in her nest of straw.’ (pp. 49-50)
- ‘I looked toward Christ, … bore him insensible, away.’ (pp. 198-199)
- ‘Father Ranaulf decided to remove the nails … rejected Roger’s offers of help.’ (pp. 283-284)

**Group Six**

- ‘The prior opened the door. … Now Ranaulf wondered if he was able, after all.’ (pp. 41-42)
- ‘I ran my fingers along the edge of my desk, … soft curve just below her ear.’ (pp. 137-138)
- ‘I pictured the women gathered around … cause her no harm.’ (pp. 250-251)
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The Passion
Perspective by Karen Lynch

Introduction

Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Passion* (1987) was published just two years after her early memoir *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. Importantly, this latter publication became a critical success and allowed Winterson to pursue a full time writing career. So distinctive at the time of writing, *The Passion*, in retrospect, sits comfortably in a body of Anglo (predominantly British and American) feminist/queer fiction that is interested in the fluidity of identity, of narrative, of history and in particular in the constructed nature of sexual identity.

Winterson’s own interest in sexuality stems from her formative experiences as a young lesbian in the 1970s. Winterson was born in Manchester in 1959 to a young, single, factory worker, Ann. As was the sad convention at the time, Ann couldn’t keep her daughter, so she was adopted by the Wintersons. Jack and Constance Winterson were evangelical Christians, and all books other than religious texts were forbidden in the household. However, one slipped through, and the relevance of Jeannette’s fondness for and use of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*—the stories of the search for the Holy Grail, the forbidden love between Lancelot and Guinevere—will become apparent in the course of this study guide. So too will Winterson’s interest in Christianity and her determination to flout, and even scandalise those with, traditional religious views. Jeanette was raised to be a missionary, a destination that was quickly short-circuited when she, at 16, fell in love with a young woman. The love affair was known to the family, and Jeanette was threatened with eviction from her family home. She persisted in the affair, however, and when Mrs Winterson asked why she continued to see her girlfriend with the consequences of homelessness looming over her, Jeanette simply replied ‘She makes me happy’. The mother’s reply, ‘Why be happy when you can be normal’, became, famously, the title to Winterson’s 2011 memoir.

*The Passion* is an exploration of forbidden love, unrequited love, religious and erotic ecstasy. It also explores the liminality of history and story, and the constructed nature of ‘reality’, be that historical ‘reality’ or personal identity. ‘I’m telling you stories, trust me’ is the refrain that runs throughout the text, a refrain that exposes the shifting sands of reality. The postmodern concept that what is conceived of as reality is actually based on texts (textuality) is a concept embraced by Winterson. Her novel’s reality is based on a series of competing and discontinuous narratives; historical narratives, personal narratives, fictional narratives. The text also explores the frustrating limitations imposed on human constructs of reality when expressed in the only medium we have to convey this reality: language.

The novel is set out in four sections, The Emperor, The Queen of Spades, The Zero Winter, The Rock, and is narrated in turns by its two main protagonists. The first section is narrated from the limited first person perspective of Henri. Henri, a peasant’s son with some book learning, has become a soldier in Napoleon’s army. When the narrative opens it is 1804, and the Grande Armée is about to embark on the failed invasion of England from Boulogne. Henri is a cook, but quickly rises to become a personal waiting servant to Napoleon. Henri’s passion is for Napoleon. He loves him, as all of France loves him, and at this point Henri sees him as a semi-divine raison d’être. Napoleon’s passion is for chicken and conquest. His gluttony for this humble bird is deliberately paired with his lust for power and the careless loss of lives he expends in order to satiate his desire for his expanding empire. Henri is not a born soldier, he does not kill, he misses his mother, he is sickened by the waste of war. His friends, Domino and Patrick—a dwarf and a lapsed priest—each with unique talents, share aspects of Henri’s doubts, although each remains loyal for the time being to their soon-to-be Emperor. In the second section, The Queen of Spades, the narrative shifts to the perspective of Villanelle, a boatman’s daughter who lives in Venice, also in 1804. Now under Napoleonic rule, Venice, a city of duplicity, masquerade and carnival, has completely given way to riotous pleasure: ‘We became an enchanted island for the mad, the rich, the bored, the perverted. Our glory days were behind us but our excess was just beginning.’ (p. 52).

Venice is also portrayed as a magical, labyrinthine city of ancient secrets and custom. It is rumoured that all the boatmen of Venice—and all boatmen are males—are born with webbed feet; it is further rumoured that they can walk on water. Villanelle was also born with webbed feet, a genetic aberration that, in some ways, problematises her gender. Villanelle embraces this ambiguity and, on many occasions, dresses as a Venetian male when she works the card tables of a Venice casino. She likes gaming, but she also enjoys the ‘game’ of identity—and keeping people guessing about the sex that lies behind her disguises. Independent and capable, Villanelle’s equilibrium is thrown completely
off balance when she falls in love with an unnamed card player, the Queen of Spades. The Queen steals Villanelle's heart; it is some time before she can get it back again.

The remaining two sections see the meeting of Henri and Villanelle and an increasing tendency for the narrative perspective to change between the two, particularly in the last section. Henri transfers his infatuation for Napoleon to his love for Villanelle; however, this love remains unrequited—as is the nature of ‘passion’. Passion, desire, is necessarily and by definition unfulfilled. The problem of ‘passion’, for example, the unrequited love that is experienced by both protagonists, remains unresolved in the novel. The suggestion is that passion is irresolvable; desire is precisely located in lack, not fulfilment.

**Introductory activities**


Show students artists’ impressions of the retreat from Moscow (simply google ‘Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow’) and get students to look for heroic versus more despairing images. Students could write descriptions for each.

Show students the famous painting *The Coronation of Napoleon* (Le Sacre de Napoléon) by Jacques Louis David. Students could spend a short time investigating the painting, the fact that David was an ‘official’ painter of Napoleon, and the magnificent proportions of the work.

Divide students into four groups to investigate:

1. The Fall of Venice to Napoleon
2. The history and/or images of Venetian Carnival
3. The various significances of Venetian masks
4. Investigate images of early nineteenth century Venice

**Perspective on the text**

Thirty years after its publication, *The Passion* sometimes comes across as self-consciously ‘postmodern’—a text that deploys a great many postmodern narrative devices, often, in this reviewer’s opinion, at the expense of good writing. Postmodern writing can be deftly and beautifully handled; Umberto Eco, Angela Carter, A S Byatt are just a few cases in point. In my opinion, *The Passion* falls well short of such writing. Its postmodern tropes are somewhat heavy-handed and often seem to overshadow, rather than complement, the narrative. This may not be apparent to (nor the opinion of) others, and certainly the very proliferation of postmodern elements is a useful starting point for students and teachers alike who are approaching postmodern theory for the first time. So, having stated my opinion of the text’s limitations, here are some examples of postmodern perspectives, many of which may lend themselves to further exploration in terms of literary theory.

**The carnivalesque**

The city of Venice is presented as a fantastical city where its tourists and inhabitants indulge in masquerade, carnival, sinful indulgence and performance. Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin coined the phrase ‘carnivalesque’ to describe moments where authority is transgressed through the disruption and excess of a carnival. For Bakhtin, carnivals have four categories—each of which conforms to Winterson’s representations of Venice:

- **Familiar and free interaction between people**: the carnival atmosphere has the potential to bring together people from different walks of life and encourages interaction and free expression. Winterson demonstrates this in several unlikely pairings: Villanelle with both the Queen of Spades and later, the ‘fat rich man’ who becomes her husband, and the anonymous soldier to whom she loses a bet.

- **Eccentric behaviour**: behaviour that is usually unacceptable is welcomed and accepted in carnival, and this behaviour can be indulged in without fear of consequences. Thus Villanelle’s sexual promiscuity, and her cross-dressing, are not only tolerated but accepted by her fellow Venetians.

- **Carnivalistic misalliances**: the familiar and free format of carnival allows everything that may normally be separate to reunite—Heaven and Hell, the young and the old, etc. Winterson’s description of passion describes this unification:

  Somewhere between the swamp and the mountains. Somewhere between fear and sex. Somewhere between God and the Devil passion is and the way there is sudden and the way back is worse. (p. 68).

Similarly, Villanelle’s descriptions of Venetians:

We are a philosophical people, conversant with the nature of greed and desire, holding hands with the Devil and God. (p. 57).

**Sacrilegious**: Bakhtin believed that carnival allowed for sacrilegious events to occur without the need for punishment. Villanelle’s description of ‘church basking’
could be deemed sacrilegious; she describes it as ‘taking what’s there and not paying for it. Taking the comfort and joy and ignoring the rest’ (p. 72). It’s enjoying the pomp, the ceremony, the architecture without belief or worry about sin. Statements made by Villanelle and others in the text are flagrantly irreligious. For example: ‘If I went to confession, what would I confess? That I cross-dress? So did Our Lord, so do the priests.’ (p. 72). And in an earlier episode Patrick describes the Immaculate Conception as a form of sexual violation. For this reason Patrick believes Mary, mother of God, holds a grudge against men. Patrick advises men to ‘go straight to Jesus’ instead:

‘Don’t you pray to her?’

‘Sure an’ I do not. We have an arrangement you might say. I see to her, give her proper respect and we leave each other alone. She’d be different if God hadn’t violated her.’

What was he talking about?

‘See, women like you to treat them with respect. To ask before you touch. Now I’ve never thought it was right and proper of God to send his angel with no by your leave and then have his way before she’d even had time to comb her hair. I don’t think she ever forgave him for that. He was too hasty. So I don’t blame her that she’s so haughty now.’

(p. 40).

Winterson’s depiction of Venice as an embodiment of the carnivalesque—a profane world that defies authority, and embodies other, alternative modes of existence—will be discussed at more length in the next section.

The monstrous feminine

In her seminal text, Powers of Horror (1982), feminist psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva describes the phenomenon of the ‘abject’.

The abject is something so vile, or so utterly profane that it stands outside of what post-structuralists term the ‘symbolic’ order. The symbolic order is, essentially, the psychologically acceptable world in which humans form themselves as individual subjects and identities—as the seemingly holistic and contained self, the ‘I’. For feminists, this symbolic order is also heavily patriarchal, dominated by ‘the Law of the Father’ and a repudiation of the ‘feminine’ and the mother. Prior to ego formation, all humans are inseparable from female bodies. In utero and as babies there is a primordial connection where the child does not experience itself as separate but rather one with the mother. The abject, thus, is often associated with the feminine, and with the superfluity of femininity (fluids, breast milk, the flesh of female bodies) that needs to be rejected—that one needs to be separated from—for one to enter the symbolic order. Yet, even as it is rejected, the realm of the abject is necessary as a point of difference. Kristeva asserts that it is necessarily the thing which we must reject to continuously assert our subjecthood. The self-contained ‘I’ needs constantly to assert its separateness from the ‘m/other’. This theory thus asserts that the symbolic/patriarchal order rests on a repudiation of the feminine—and for this reason, due to its complete difference, or what poststructuralist theorists term ‘otherness’ (and its threat to subsume ourselves) this non-symbolic entity is viewed with horror—the monstrous feminine. This analysis can be a useful tool for feminist theories of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. Representations of the monstrous-feminine illustrate the ways in which femininity is feared and ‘abjected’ in contemporary society.

The Passion draws on this concept in several key moments in the text. The most obvious embodiment is the depiction of the prophetic hag who has the uncanny knack of materialising at key moments in the text to issue warnings to the protagonists. She lives in a secret back-alley waterway where swarms of gypsy children and other outcasts live their lives:

I cannot tell how old she may be, her hair is green with slime from the walls of the nook she lives in. She feeds on vegetable matter that snags against the stones when the tide is sluggish. She has no teeth…She still wears the curtains that she dragged from her drawing-room window… (p. 54).

Pauline Palmer (1999) argues that the prophetic hag acts as Villanelle’s doppelganger—the darker side of the carnival, who stands as an omen for potential risk takers, particularly women, particularly lesbians who already stand on the margins of society. She also sees her as a monstrous image that society projects onto feminine power and, more specifically the image projected onto the lesbian whose desires stand outside, even defiant of, the symbolic order.

Elements of magic realism in the text, particularly associated with Villanelle, also evoke the trope of the monstrous feminine. Villanelle’s webbed feet are a male (and fantastical

1 https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html
at that) trait of the Venetian boatman. As a woman, Villanelle’s extra skin (the webbing between the toes) marks her out as different, and a gender paradox. In traditional patriarchal cultures, genetic ‘abnormalities’ that confound stereotypes of gender have often been viewed as an unfortunate aberration at best, a complete horror at worst. Luckily for Villanelle, her parents, particularly her step-father, are unfazed by the little girl’s abnormality. When the midwife fails to cut off the offending parts, the distraught mother is comforted by her husband’s reaction: ‘He was a man of the world and not easily put off by a pair of webbed feet’ (p. 52). Thus Villanelle is accepted and what could have been considered a disastrous marker of difference (and certainly one that prefigures her bisexuality) is indulgently tolerated. In another episode Villanelle requests Henri to recover her heart, which is in the keeping of the Queen of Spades. Quite literally, Villanelle has no heartbeat and when Henri recovers it he is amazed at the method of ‘repossession’:

I heard her uncork the jar and a sound like gas escaping. Then she began to make terrible swallowing and choking noises and only my fear kept me sitting at the other end of the boat, perhaps hearing her die.

There was quiet. She touched my back and when I turned round took my hand again and placed it on her breast.

Her heart was beating. (pp. 120-121).

The mission of Henri is initially one of a knight-errant who valiantly journeys on a quest to save his ‘lady’. However, this narrative is soon overthrown in Villanelle’s animalistic and devouring repossession of her heart. In this and other ways, Villanelle’s monstrousness is somewhat contained—contained by the doppelganger, the hag; contained by her kind parents; contained by Henri’s faith. It is, nevertheless, a marker of Villanelle’s difference, her association with the abject and her repudiation of symbolic order, ‘the Law of the Father’.

The performativity of gender

Winterson’s presentation of gender derives from insights from both feminist and queer theory. From its earliest expression in for example Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, feminists have made the important distinction between biological sex and cultural gender: ‘One is not born but rather becomes a woman’ as de Beauvoir succinctly puts it. Since this time, many theorists have discussed the various and culturally specific ways in which gender is ‘performed’. This shifts gender away from ‘essential’ aspects of self, and more into the realm, not only of performance but also of ‘play’. These theories have formed much of the basis of the postmodern view that the individual has no ‘essential self’, but rather a provisional subject status. The self, the ‘I’ is not fixed and immutable, but rather subject to process, change, in constant flux. When Villanelle dresses as a boy in the casinos she describes this as a game:

I dressed as a boy because that’s what the visitors liked to see. It was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste… (p. 54).

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994) are useful texts exploring performativity as a way of destabilising fixed notions of sex and/or gender.

In the context of *The Passion*, Villanelle’s cross dressing ‘illustrates how perceptions of external “appearance” and internal “essence” interrelate in a problematic state of flux’ (Doan, p. 148). In fact, Villanelle’s drag preferences question the whole fixity of the binary of the ‘truth’ (female) hidden behind a ‘disguise’ (male), for there is not an essential self that is being covered; Villanelle feels comfortable as either, as both. As Villanelle asks herself when debating whether to disclose her biological sex to the Queen of Spades: ‘And what was myself? Was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters?’ (p. 66). The often-repeated ‘You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play.’ also captures the performative (role-playing) conception of gender, particularly explored by Villanelle’s fluid gender displays. Winterson’s deliberate inversion of the gender of her protagonists will be discussed in the next section.

‘Gendered’ spaces

*The Passion* deliberately contrasts gendered spaces. Masculine space is represented in the colonialist, expansionist ambitions of Napoleon—conquest, military advancement, military tactics, cartography and all the spoils of war, including ownership of land, buildings, treasures, peoples. This is contrasted with ‘feminine’ maternal spaces, such as Henri’s childhood home and the carnivalesque Venice, which are essentially unmappable, a watery ‘underworld’ that defies the logic of cartography. Quite literally (and disastrously) Napoleon marches his army into ‘the zero winter’ of Russia. The advance is written as progression—travelling from point to point—as it is
mapped and conquered. Stowers (1995) explores the nature of ‘travel’ in the text:

On the one hand, there are Henri’s infantry expeditions and questing after Napoleon; on the other, the alternative model of Villanelle’s shape-shifting, fluid Venice. Napoleon personifies the masculine linear force of history-making, rationality and war, where the feminine, woman’s history, becomes charted out of sight, considered to have no place on patriarchy’s official map of world events. (Stowers p. 142).

This becomes immediately apparent to Henri when he returns to Venice with Villanelle:

I got lost from the first. Where Bonaparte goes, straight roads follow, buildings are rationalised, street signs may change to celebrate a battle but they are always clearly marked. Here, if they bother with street signs at all, they are happy to use the same ones over again. Not even Bonaparte could rationalise Venice. (p. 112).

When he complains that ‘he needs a map’, Villanelle explains ‘...it won’t help. This is a living city. Things change.’ The self-enfolding ‘unmappable’ Venice is described by Henri:

This city enfolds upon itself. Canals hide other canals, alleyways cross and criss-cross so that you will not know which is which until you have lived here all your life. Even when you have mastered the squares and you can pass from the Rialto to the Ghetto and out to the lagoon with confidence, there will still be places you can never find… (p. 113).

Venice’s association with carnival, subversion, fluidity and ‘unknowability’ align it with the ‘feminine’ rather than masculine spaces. However, as some critics have argued (Pfister, 1999), Winterson’s representation of Venice could be viewed as a very stereotypical one, utilised by Western writers from Shakespeare onwards:

Such stories construct Venice as a place of ardent and illicit, or transgressive passion…of love and madness, of sensuality, licentiousness, prostitution and sexual perversion—as an Other that exceeds and endangers the symbolic order of the Self. (Pfister, p. 16).

Ellam notes that Venice and Villanelle double each other—Venice falls ‘from the status of republic to being a colony’ and Villanelle surrenders her independence both when she marries the ‘meat man’ and then when she is further enslaved as a prostitute in the service of Napoleon’s army. She too, however, recognises the criticism offered by Pfister:

Geographically, Venice unites East and West and Pfister notes how it has been recalled textually as a symbol of Western power and for the exoticism which is typical of Orientalism. (It is a place that has become the archetype of colonisation.) Pfister builds on Tony Tanner’s arguments and describes literary presentations of Venice as ‘one-way traffic’, in that Venice is predominantly written about by ‘outsiders’, that is, non-Venetians. (The paradox of using Venice as a trope for colonisation, whilst also making it exotic, is then observable in The Passion.)

Winterson’s reliance on Venice as a means to depict both constraints on freedom and potential for change is ironically one more act of colonisation. (Ellam, p. 76)

Activities

Teachers may choose to teach some (and more) theoretical aspects of the text. However, each postmodern trope comes with its own problems. Some discussion points might include:

• How helpful is the concept of the ‘monstrous feminine’ to a feminist politics? On the one hand, it seeks to articulate patriarchal culture’s ostracism of the feminine, and ‘horror’ at female power. On the other hand, does it play into cultural stereotypes of female power?

• What do you think of the feminist distinction between sex and gender? Is there any part of one’s sex that particularly designates a gender role?

• In what ways is gender ‘performed’ in the 21st century? How does gender performance differ across cultures? Across generations?

• Why would Venice be such a ‘drawcard’ for writers wanting to represent ‘otherness’? Think about its geographical positioning (it was a trade port for the East), its canals, carnivals and separation from the mainland.
Features of the text

As so many features of the text are caught up with various postmodern perspectives, one should consider all the perspectives above as relevant in terms of the literary features. However, one of the most predominant features of the text is its contribution to queer and feminist fiction and theory in its representation of alternative models of sexuality, desire and passion. Despite Winterson's deliberate bifurcation of the feminine and masculine spaces of the novel, her male and female protagonists, Henri and Villanelle, are deliberately (mis)aligned to opposing genders. Henri is in many ways feminine, and metaphorically aligned to the feminine throughout the text. Not only a reluctant Henri is in many ways feminine, and metaphorically aligned to Villanelle, are deliberately (mis)aligned to opposing genders. The narrative voices of Henri and Villanelle become further intertwined in the third and the fourth section. Here one could argue that the narrative structure of the book performs a deconstruction of privileged perspective, a theme we shall come to shortly. First it is the 'historical' male perspective (Henri), albeit a 'feminised' character who puts forth an account of war and his love for a man. Secondly it is the female perspective (Villanelle), a figure associated with the masculine, who puts forth an account of Venice and her love for a woman. When both meet in The Zero Winter section, both have had the heartbreak of spurned passion, or, especially in Henri's case, disillusionment in the love object itself. Pairing up as a team, with Villanelle the obvious leader, they travel out of the freezing wastes of war back to Venice—and become more involved as each helps the other. The final section, The Rock, interweaves the subjective narratives more thoroughly; the reader is still able to distinguish narrative voice, but what is less clear is what story is true, or whether, with multiple narrative strands, the ideas of 'truth' and 'illusion' are even legitimate. Is Henri mad, or is he really being visited by his dead mother, friends, and even Villanelle's father? In the end, a multiplicity of narrative possibilities is the driver of the text.

Henri's hopeless love for Napoleon deliberately echoes Villanelle's love for the Queen of Spades. Both dwell on the erotic 'risk' of passion, and each narrator repeats the phrase 'You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play'. When Henri sees a game of noughts and crosses he observes that 'It's the playing that's irresistible. Dicing from one year to the next with the things you love, what you risk reveals what you value…' (p. 43). Similarly, Villanelle observes the gamers in the Casino and theorises that it is the risk, not the winning, that fuels the gambler's desire; 'What will you risk? Your watch? Your house? Your mistress? I like to smell the urgency on them. Even the calmest, the richest, have that smell. It's somewhere between fear and sex. Passion I suppose.' (p. 55) and at a later point she says 'Gambling is not a vice, it is an expression of our humanness.' (p. 73). Love for both protagonists is a gamble—Villanelle loses her heart, Henri his sanity. But it is taking the chance, the throw of the dice, the risk of love that is the point of it all. Without it, as Henri muses, we may as well remain a 'lukewarm' sort of people. Both muse on religious passion, (and it cannot be escaped that the very title itself evokes The Passion, Christ's suffering for the love of humanity) and both seem unable or unwilling to convert the extremes of their emotions into religious ones. Both of the first sections end with references to religious worship on New Year's Eve.

The narrative voices of Henri and Villanelle become further intertwined in the third and the fourth section. Here one could argue that the narrative structure of the book performs a deconstruction of privileged perspective, a theme we shall come to shortly. First it is the 'historical' male perspective (Henri), albeit a 'feminised' character who puts forth an account of war and his love for a man. Secondly it is the female perspective (Villanelle), a figure associated with the masculine, who puts forth an account of Venice and her love for a woman. When both meet in The Zero Winter section, both have had the heartbreak of spurned passion, or, especially in Henri's case, disillusionment in the love object itself. Pairing up as a team, with Villanelle the obvious leader, they travel out of the freezing wastes of war back to Venice—and become more involved as each helps the other. The final section, The Rock, interweaves the subjective narratives more thoroughly; the reader is still able to distinguish narrative voice, but what is less clear is what story is true, or whether, with multiple narrative strands, the ideas of 'truth' and 'illusion' are even legitimate. Is Henri mad, or is he really being visited by his dead mother, friends, and even Villanelle's father? In the end, a multiplicity of narrative possibilities is the driver of the text.

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Seaboyer argues that the structure of *The Passion* was heavily influenced by T S Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

Like that poem, the novel recalls a musical structure. Its four sections could suggest a composition for two voices in imitative counterpoint—a fugue, perhaps. The voices are very different, but each turns upon the theme of passion, love and loss. The opening theme is presented in a first movement by Henri. It is taken up and repeated in a different key, in a second movement, by Villanelle. In the third movement and in the closing coda, the voices interweave. Themes, phrases, and leitmotifs introduced and repeated in one movement by another voice are taken up and modulated in another movement by the other. It is a kind of dialogue, but it also suggests the way in which the repressed returns…(p. 493).

'I'm telling you stories. Trust me'

The refrain ‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me’ is often repeated throughout the text, even mouthed by lesser characters, such as Patrick. The reassurance (trust me) of veracity of various tales deliberately runs at odds with the foregrounding of the very nature of narrative artificiality (stories). In a postmodern conception of ‘reality’, there is no truth—no essential ‘thing’ that lies behind accounts or narratives—only the narratives themselves. *The Passion* certainly seems to be promoting a postmodern view of textuality. It deliberately challenges the traditional binaries of fact and fiction, of history and literature, blurring and playing with these oppositions. In particular, the episodes that recount actual Napoleonic battles and events fulfill Linda Hutcheon’s (1989) term ‘historiographic metafiction’—a fiction that rewrites or parodies history in light of present concerns.

The text goes further though, challenging personal accounts—our knowledge of our own selves. Henri’s insistence on writing in his diary to preserve his thoughts, to stop time from blurring his memory, for example, is challenged by his friend Domino: ‘The way you see it now is no more real than the way you’ll see it then.’ (p. 28). For Domino, the past and the present are non-existent, ‘There’s only now’ (p. 29) he insists and later, when Henri asks Domino to defect, his friend represents war with the word FUTURE crossed out. Henri reflects:

Eight years had passed and I was still at war, cooking chickens, waiting to go home for good. Eight years of talking about the future and seeing it turn into the present… Future. Crossed out. That’s what war does. (p. 86)

The veracity of Henri’s journal degenerates further when he has gone mad and lives on ‘The Rock’ at San Servolo. Yet the accounts he gives are comforting and the reader is not so much led to question Henri’s sanity; what is more important is that Henri’s accounts are true for him. And he is, finally, quite content.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 3: Form and transformation

Area of Study 1: Adaptations and transformations

There has not been any adaptation of *The Passion*. However, in 2000 Winterson’s script for *The Passion* was rejected. An article in relation to this can be read here: https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/dec/18/filmnews.books

Area of Study 2: Creative responses to texts

Students responding to this outcome are presented with the challenge of capturing Winterson’s writing style and one or more central thematic concerns. The stylistic components are straightforward in some ways, and challenging in others. Firstly, on the face of it, introducing students to limited first person narration is quite straightforward; this is the style of the first two sections of the novel and first person overlaps in the third and fourth sections. In all cases, the first person narration is conversational, intimate and at times confessional in tone.

However, a number of complicated elements make the creative response a complex task and these need to be considered before using this text in this Area of Study. In particular, Winterson’s use of aphorism, magic realism, repetition, mirroring and postmodern/queer theory can make this a challenging task for students.

Firstly, consider Winterson’s tendency to write in aphorisms often, but not always linked to passion, identity and story. Students will be set with the challenge of creating thematically sympathetic aphorisms. As a preparatory activity, it might be fun and instructive to have students work on compiling aphorisms in a group. Ensure that each aphorism or saying is connected to a particular theme in the
In coming to terms with magic realism, students need to pay particular attention to the moments of its appearance in the text and the fact that the ‘magical’ aspect (the webbed feet, the missing/swallowed heart, the magic eye etc.) requires no particular explanation, but works alongside the (for lack of a better word) rational or realistic elements of the text. Students could similarly brainstorm ideas which require moments of suspended belief, and are of a supernatural or fantastical character.

Students must also be prepared to foreground or disrupt traditional elements of the novel genre. Some possible disruptions include using ‘postmodern’ techniques such as: deconstructing or questioning the binary of authorised or ‘reliable’ sources (e.g. history) with story; disrupting or questioning the gender binary of masculine/feminine. At times, Winterson uses mirroring and repetition in her narrative to achieve these sorts of deconstructions. Both Henri and Villanelle repeat or mirror each other in the first and second section, albeit with subtle differences.

Suggestions for assessing Outcome 2

- You are an outsider on your first trip to Venice. Describe your experiences—this may or may not include a trip to the casino or an encounter with Villanelle.
- You are a contemporary military historian in the employ of Napoleon who is attempting to write a positive account of Napoleon’s disastrous Russian campaign for the purposes of political propaganda. However, you are seized by bouts of moral conscience and doubt. This doubt or guilt begins to manifest itself in your writing; it may appear in marginalia, or in poetry or lyrics or riddles.
- Write from the perspective of the Vivandiere (this could be Villanelle) who are forced to ‘service’ the soldiers of Napoleon.
- Write two competing accounts about one central event in the book. Ensure the accounts are from different sources and genres (e.g. propaganda news versus personal diary; or political speech versus private conversation).
- Imagine you are a boatman (or woman) travelling into the deeper recesses of Venice. What do you find there?
- Like Villanelle with the webbed feet, you have one significant anatomical difference that you feel you must conceal. Describe your condition. Does it give you any special powers? Does it unsettle notions of gender or sexuality?

text that students can articulate. It might also be helpful if students can go on to write a small piece of writing based on an aphorism, ensuring the use of at least one simile or metaphor that can be associated with it. Here are some of the aphorisms Winterson uses:

I’m telling you stories. Trust me. (p. 5 and repeated)

St Paul said it is better to marry than to burn. (p. 9)

For myself, with no one to love, a hedgehog spirit seemed best and I hid my heart in the leaves. (p. 21)

…we can’t remember what it is about women that can turn a man through passion into something holy. (p. 27)

Lie still at night and Dark is soft to the touch, it’s made of moleskin and is such a sweet smotherer. (p. 33)

You play, you win, you play, you lose. You play. (p. 43)

Wherever love is, I want to be, I will follow it as surely as the land-locked salmon finds the sea. (p. 44)

Miss your way, which is easy to do… Find your way, which is easy to do… (p. 49)

Beware the dice and games of chance. (p. 54)

In the dark you are in disguise and this is the city of disguises. (p. 56)

We are a philosophical people, conversant with the nature of greed and desire, holding hands with the Devil and God. (p. 57)

In between freezing and melting. In between love and despair. In between fear and sex, passion is. (p. 76)

What you risk reveals what you value. (p. 91)

Beware of old enemies in new disguises. (p. 115)
It is this decisive distance from contemporary sexual politics that most clearly distinguishes Winterson’s fiction and determines the way in which it will approach questions of history, identity and community. Such issues for Winterson are transcendent; her characters are engaged in the production of histories, identities and communities that do not vary predictably along the lines of gender, sexual practice or historical period … unlike other postmodern lesbian novelists … Winterson is not intervening in or attempting to correct homophobic representations of or assumptions about lesbian relationships. (Makinen p. 59)

Paulina Palmer, on the other hand, argues that The Passion is a political lesbian novel very much concerned with sexual politics and is particularly concerned with challenging homophobic representations. She suggests that the feminised representation of Henri challenges traditional gender assumptions, but more specifically, his rejection by Villanelle questions the assumptions of heterosexuality in relationships. She addresses the ‘outsider’ status of lesbian love, noting the particularly poignant scene where Villanelle watches the Queen of Spades in an intimate, loving and private moment with her husband:

A particularly moving incident, one which depicts the position of the lesbian in heteropatriarchy as ‘problematic’ in the extreme, is the episode in which Villanelle, positioned in the marginal role of outsider and voyeur, to which throughout history the lesbian has generally been relegated, gazes through the window of the Queen of Spades’ villa and watches her conversing with her husband in the social and financial security of the family home. He plants a kiss on his wife’s forehead, affirming his ownership of her and signaling the control which he exerts on her life. This episode illustrates the constraints which a phallocentric economy imposes on women’s lives, separating and inhibiting relations between them by curtailing their sexual and social freedom. (Makinen, p. 70)

For Palmer, in contrast to Moore, The Passion is very much a political novel, foregrounding as it does the marginalisation of women, femininity and lesbianism in our culture.

Another critic, Julie Ellam, takes Moore’s reading to task:

- Write an alternative account of the night Villanelle was born—you may choose to take the perspective of the midwife, the mother or stepfather, or you may juxtapose different accounts.
- Use omniscient narration to describe Henri on The Rock—traditionally omniscient narration is known as the ‘god’s eye’ view, the narrative ‘truth’ that sees all. Then contrast with a compelling first person account. The idea is to disrupt or question the authority of omniscient narration.

Possible uses in the classroom for Unit 4: Interpreting texts

Area of Study 1: Literary perspectives

As previously described, The Passion is decidedly a postmodern text, and much of this guide has attempted to introduce teachers to the range of postmodern perspectives offered in the text. In this section I will focus on two areas of conflicting readings of the text, as students are to ‘compare and analyse two pieces of literary criticism reflecting different perspectives, assumptions and ideas’.

One question in The Passion centres on debates within postmodern theory and whether postmodernity necessarily means eschewing the ‘old categories’ of identity politics. Identity politics—for example, black power, feminism, lesbian activism etc.—was on the rise in the 1970s and then, at least in part, was challenged by the rise of postmodern theory in the 1980s. One could argue that in its purest form, postmodernity rejects or at least questions the concept of ‘identity politics’ as it also problematises the notion of a unified subject, an ever-present, eternal ‘I’ that identifies as, for example, a feminist. In the context of The Passion then, a critical debate that naturally arises is: can The Passion, as a work of lesbian fiction, be considered an example of political intervention? Lisa Moore (1995) argues that Winterson’s narrative defies easy categorisation as either a lesbian or a postmodern text. Moore is not rejecting the presence of lesbian eroticism in the text. In fact, she uses several scenes—for example the scene where Villanelle and the Queen of Spades indulge in the ‘sweet and precise torture’ of lengthy kissing—to argue that the text is concerned with female love. She cites French feminist Luce Irigaray, who has used much of her career discussing feminine and lesbian eroticism; Moore is particularly concerned here with her 1977 essay When Our Lips Speak Together. However, Moore argues, while Winterson is engaging in a lesbian aesthetic, she is not necessarily engaging in lesbian politics. Moore contends that the novel’s focus on female love is actually a device that distances it from political intervention:
Lisa Moore claims that Winterson barely touches on the issue of homophobia … and goes so far as to state that Winterson’s novels ‘may be read politically, but they themselves make no explicit political argument…’. Moore’s interpretation effaces Winterson’s project, which begins in Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit. Here Winterson tries to make normal what has previously been perceived as abnormal in dominant discourses. (Ellam p. 545)

The essays of Moore and Palmer are complex. Teachers should take time to introduce the postmodern deconstruction of subjecthood and demonstrate ways in which this deconstruction can be subversive to ‘identity politics’. Perhaps it would be useful if only sections of the essays were offered to students. Teachers need to remind themselves and their students that one of the central tenets of this different critical perspective is whether the act of writing is necessarily political—and, especially, whether texts by marginalised people (queer fiction in this case) are necessarily political. It might be helpful and constructive in terms of this debate to introduce students to Roland Barthes’ seminal essay The Death of the Author. The intended meaning of a text is thrown open in this context, as Barthes denies the power of authorial intention and asserts the power of the text—the writing out on its own—which can enable multiple readings (political, non-political etc). It is language which speaks, not the author; the death of the author gives rise to the birth of the reader. However, students should understand how this concept may be frustrating to marginalised groups who want their work to be read as politically instructive. It is an interesting and very involved debate.

Possible topics

• ‘The characters of Villanelle and Henri demonstrate to the reader the separation between sex and gender.’

• ‘Jeanette Winterson contrasts masculine spaces of war and conquest with feminine spaces of fluidity and flux.’

• ‘Even as she attempts to deconstruct tropes of masculinity and femininity, Winterson’s The Passion reinforces them.’

• Consider the proposition that in The Passion Winterson suggests that history, like memory, is merely another story.

• Discuss the ranges and types of passion explored in Winterson’s novel The Passion.

• In what ways do the narratives of Villanelle and Henri complement each other? In what ways do they contrast with each other?

• ‘Winterson’s construct of the city of Venice—as an exotic site of excess, carnival, madness and magic—reinforces rather than challenges long-standing stereotypes.’ Do you agree?

• ‘Despite the presence of a bisexual protagonist, Winterson’s novel is not a political challenge to the dominance of heterosexuality in romantic texts.’

• Reflect on the idea that The Passion uses ‘gaming’ and ‘playing’ to cast light on postmodern theories of identity, sexuality and reality.

Area of Study 2: Close analysis

As always, students should prepare for the two assessment tasks in this outcome (and for the exam) only after several readings of their texts. Students should be familiar with Winterson’s writing style—her blend of the familiar (the intimate or confessional tone) with the philosophical, as found in the reoccurring aphorisms. Students should be on the lookout for repetition, mirroring or doubling between passages, as this is one of the key devices of the text.

Teachers would have prepared students with the significant range of postmodern tropes used by Winterson, and ideally, students will not only be able to identify these tropes, but have formed personal opinions regarding their effectiveness in the narrative.

Passages for close analysis

‘Thanks to my mother’s efforts and the rusty scholarliness of … I’m telling you stories. Trust me.’ (p. 12-13)

‘Noon. The rain is running off our noses … oats made us smell like a manger.’ (p. 24-25)

‘It was after the disaster at sea that I started to keep a diary. … There’s only now.’ (p. 28-29)

‘He told me other stories too. … I had never thought of the Queen of Heaven in this way.’ (p. 40-41)

‘From the wooden frame above where the gunpowder waits … My heart is a reliable organ.’ (p. 59-60)

‘On an afternoon when the Casino didn’t want me … You play, you win. You play, you lose. You play.’ (p. 65-66)
‘My philosopher friend was on her balcony. … a calm and a way that put a knife to my heart.’ (p. 74-75)

‘He wrote, FUTURE. And then he put a line through it. … leave the horses. They were the present.’ (p. 86-87)

‘I have always been a gambler. … The wager was a life.’ (p. 89-91)

‘Many of my friends were dead. … Men are violent.’ That’s all there is to it. (p. 108-109)

‘I need a map. … One of her hands had only three fingers.’ (p. 113-114)

‘Villanelle was hunched in the boat … This is the city of madmen.’ (p. 120-121)

‘When passion comes late in life … like those sad spirits whom Orpheus fled.’ (p. 145-146)

References


Other references


Explainer for INRI, the Latin form of ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews’ is ‘Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum’, INRI.
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A Room of One’s Own
A Taste of Honey
Ariel
Art

Foreign Soil
Only the Animals
The Anchoress
The Passion

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