

Notes written by Karen Ford

VCE Presentation - 2007
Unit 3 / 4 English / Literature 2008 Text
Selection.

The following are notes taken from Karen Ford's VCE power point presentation in 2007. Karen presented a number of Penguin titles that appear on the English and Literature lists for 2008.

ENGLISH

LIST 1: NOVELS

Home by Larissa Behrendt (A) (2)

Generals Die in Bed by Charles Yale Harrison (3)

LITERATURE

LIST A: NOVELS

The Rose Notes by Andrea Mayes (A) (1)

LIST B: NOVELS

Regeneration by Pat Barker (2)

SHORT STORIES

Hunting the Wild Pineapple by Thea Astley (A) (3)

English: *Home* by Larissa Behrendt List 1

From VCAA Text List 1: **(A)**

Larissa Behrendt, a practicing lawyer, has had a distinguished career lecturing and writing extensively on the Law. 'Home' is Behrendt's first novel. It is a heartfelt and largely autobiographical account of the impact of government policies which saw the removal of indigenous children from their families. Candice, a successful city lawyer, visits her ancestral country and begins a personal journey as she learns of Garibooli, her grandmother, who was wrenched from her family as a young girl. Through Garibooli and her extended family, Behrendt explores issues of race, identity, loss, and ultimately, survival.

Other Themes:

- love
- guilt
- ignorance
- racism
- abuse
- belonging
- motherhood
- rights
- forgiveness
- memory

Strengths:

- ✓ Clear, defined, titled chapters. Most chapters focus on characters/family members
- ✓ Chapters often linked to events within Australian History
- ✓ Simple structure, easy to read. Shifts in time clearly identified.
- ✓ Puts the plight of Aborigines/Aboriginal stories within 'white' Australian context:

White Settlement
White Australian Policy
World War I – Conscription / The Great Depression
World War II – Aboriginal soldiers overseas
Communism
Irish Famine
Adoption
Stolen Generation
Land Rights
Homosexuality
Government Policy

Extract:

“When he would die, at age sixty-five – pilot, expert on Greek antiquities, lover of Mark, eldest brother of five siblings, exile – he would still be ashamed of his secrets. Ashamed of his mother’s Aboriginality, ashamed of his father’s German name and ashamed that his lifelong love was another man. Death came like a releasing kiss, leaving behind an epitaph, which puzzled everyone who saw it, including those who though they knew him best: There shall be wings. If the accomplishment be not for me, ‘tis for some other. – Leonardo da Vinci.” p220

English: Generals Die in Bed by Charles Yale Harrison List 1

From VCAA Text List 1: (A)

Drawing on his own experiences in the First World War, Charles Yale Harrison tells a stark and poignant story of a young man sent to fight on the Western Front. This novel brings to life a period of history seen through the eyes of a 20-year-old narrator, who reminds us that there is neither glamour nor glory in war.

Other themes:

- suffering
- camaraderie
- isolation
- loneliness
- insanity
- loss of innocence
- identity
- masculinity

Strengths:

- ✓ Clearly labeled and defined chapters.
- ✓ Simple, affecting narrative and reflections by the narrator. As a memoir, the war episodes are immediate, powerful and present obvious authenticity. Harrison’s text is exceptional as it unconventionally condemns war at a time (end of WWI) when war was largely glorified.
- ✓ Relies on the senses and encourages the reader to ‘hear’, ‘smell’, ‘touch’ what he experiences. Lovely contrast between the situation of war and eloquent, often rhythmic language.
- ✓ Largely writes using short sentences. This provides an unsentimental view of war. His reflections are without glory or eloquence.

- ✓ Presents the horror of war from both sides. Is without nationalistic sentiment or bravado.

Extract:

“Endlessly in and out. Different sectors, different names of trenches, different trenches, but always the same trenches, the same yellow, infested earth, the same screaming shells, the same come-tailed “minnies” with their splintering roar. The same rats, fat and sleek with their corpse-filled bellies, the same gleaming gimlet eyes. The same lice which we carry with us wherever we go. In and out, in and out, endlessly, sweating, endlessly endlessly... Somewhere it is summer, but here are the same trenches. The trees here are skeletons hiding stubs of stark, shell-amputated arms towards the sky. No flowers grow in this waste land.” p45-6

Literature: *The Rose Notes* by Andrea Mayes List A

From VCAA Text List A: (A)

The Rose Notes is a contemporary novel set on a farm in the southern Riverina of New South Wales. Pearl Kinnear, a middle-aged woman, lives on the farm with her elderly father, Dobie, who is struggling to come to terms with his failing powers. An easy relationship exists between the two. Pearl is lovely and finds the small community judgmental and suffocating, yet she is tied to the farm both financially and emotionally. She takes solace in tending the beautiful rose garden established by her mother, Alice, who died when Pearl was fifteen. Dobie, whom the author describes as having a ‘Lear-like’ character, is resentful of any life Pearl tries to establish for herself and sees her purpose as taking care of him. Thomas Hearne, the son of Henry, a rose grower who helped Alice establish the garden, comes to the property with a message from his father for Alice. The message helps Pearl to understand a little more of her past and to face the future with a self-confidence she has not had before.

Other Themes:

- family
- freedom
- home
- secrets
- man and landscape
- loyalty
- women in society
- implications of ageing
- loneliness

Strengths:

- ✓ Lear-esque relationship between ageing, dogmatic father and daughter.
- ✓ 'voices' of characters and their observations provide insight into them and those around them – like asides.
- ✓ 'The arrival of the stranger' – parallels with *The Glass Menagerie* and generates many of the same responses.
- ✓ Evocative descriptions of the Australian landscape – sympathetic and critical.
- ✓ Pearl's ageing and her middle-aged issues (menopause) provide an alternative to other text female protagonists. Her dependence on alcohol brings a particularly contemporary element to the text – addresses the issues of (female) life.
- ✓ The text provides a genuine, unaffected examination of human weakness.
- ✓ Motifs include fertility and sterility, water-the river-and cleansing, Fire, roses.

Extract:

"No vodka before tea-time, she's vowed, seeing spectres of herself, fat and fifty with grey straggly hair, blood-shot eyes and a permanent hangover. It's up to you Pearl, she tells herself. Who else is going to save her? But she's jumpy as hell and no matter what she does or where she turns, there is the vodka bottle. I can do it, you bastard, she tells the bottle.

She puts the washing out on the line and works amongst her roses for a couple of hours. Now, she thinks, a cup of tea, a cheese and ham sandwich, a piece of Sara Lee chocolate cake and an hour or so of sitting in the garden with Alice's rose book.

She settles in her garden chair between the sun-warmed wall and the first curving flush of roses, delighted that so many of the ones she's planted here are named on these old lists in her mother's scrapbook. A slight breeze carries the scent of roses. The rose beds fan out in alternating and overlapping curves, set at a comfortable width for the ride-on mower to pass through. There is no direct path to Pearl's door. To reach it, you must meander a little." p204-5

Literature: Regeneration by Pat Barker List B

From VCAA Text List B:

Regeneration is based on events that took place in 1917 when poet Siegfried Sassoon published his declaration against the war. To avoid scandal, the Army declared him to be suffering from 'shell shock' (now known as post-traumatic stress disorder) and sent him to Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland. At Craiglockhart, Sassoon befriended Wilfred Owen and Dr William Rivers, the psychiatrist and anthropologist who was endeavouring to treat patients

using Freud's analytical approach. *Regeneration* is a profoundly anti-war novel that deals with the damage caused by warfare and the process of recovery, rather than with the details of combat.

Other Themes:

- madness – notions of
- guilt/shame
- social order
- nurturing/protection
- war
- love/male/homosexuality
- grief
- masculinity/emasculatation

Strengths:

- ✓ Combination of fact and fiction provides a greater sense of authenticity- documentation of real people's lives
- ✓ Sensitively written – sensitive study of male relationships/bonding.
- ✓ Explores the psychological impact of war; whether one can be repatriated after war, denial of feelings such as detachment, grief, guilt.
- ✓ Provides students with opportunities to explore Sassoon, Graves and Owen's writings.
- ✓ Anti war text-insight into madness, sanity and consequences of war. Text allows students to consider subsequent anti war texts and madness such as Robert Lowell and Orwell.
- ✓ Third person narrator allows for distance from the characters. Remains unobtrusive. Insight into characters is largely their own voices.

Extract:

*"And **do** you call yourself a pacifist?"*

A long pause. 'No. Do you?'

'No'

'It's funny, you know, I never thought about it at all in France.'

'No, well, you don't. Too busy, too tired.' Sassoon smiled.

*'Too **healthy**.'*

*'It's not just that, thought, is it? Sometimes when you're alone, in the trenches, I mean, at night you get the sense of something ancient. As if the trenches had always been there. You know one trench we held, it had skills in the side. You looked back along and ...Like mushrooms...It's as if all other wars had somehow...distilled themselves into this war, and that makes it something you...almost can't challenge. It's like a very deep voice saying, **Run along, little man. Be thankful if you survive.**'*

For a moment the nape of Sassoon's neck crawled as it had the first time Campbell had talked about the German spies; but this was not madness. 'I had a similar experience. Well, I don't know whether it was similar. I was going up with the rations one night and I saw the limbers against the skyline, and the flares going up. What you see every night. Only I seemed to be seeing it from the future. A hundred years from now they'll still be ploughing

up skulls. And I seemed to be in that time and looking back. I think I saw our ghosts.” p83-4

**Literature: *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* by Thea Astley
List B**

From VCAA Text List B:

Leverson, the narrator at the centre of these stories, calls himself a ‘people freak’. Seduced by north Queensland’s sultry beauty and unique strangeness, he is as fascinated by the invading hordes of misfits from the south as by the old established Queenslanders. Leverson’s ironical yet compassionate view makes every story, every incident, a pointed example of human weakness - or strength.

Other Themes:

- Compassion
- conceit
- maternalism
- isolation
- marginalization of women
- sexuality
- failure/success
- man and the landscape
- contempt for middle class
- man’s purpose/futility

Strengths:

- ✓ Consistent narrator provides fluidity and coherence. His ‘voice’ and views permeate the short stories.
- ✓ Complex study of womanhood and motherhood. Provides students with strong subjects and issues central to several SACs
- ✓ The ‘bleakness’/harsh reality of the anthology and the central theme of searching provide a challenge to students to question Astley’s motivations.
- ✓ Intertextuality – links to Hardy and Browning allow for comparisons between 19th and 20th writing/styles/conventions.
- ✓ Astley weaves into the stories the fundamental link between Man and the Landscape – a common trait in 20th Century Australian writers/poets
- ✓ Characters are flawed and often misguided. Astley often projects her dislike of some. This intrusion provides an interesting contrast to other 3rd person texts.

Extract:

“So they sat and inspected each other and he sipped water while she messed around with her tea and he repeated his remark, ‘I eat natural foods only’, tempering it with a smile this time. She responded understandingly. Natural foods need only apply. ‘Nuts. Fruit. Never meat, you understand. Lots of vegetables, raw. And I rarely cook. Cooking destroys essentials.’ His hands emptied out something useless and she wondered if that last dab of blusher had destroyed her own. Hating herself, - and she didn’t know this was to be a pattern – she found she was clucking phrases like ‘You’re right, of course’, ‘There’s a lot to be said for it.’

‘There’s everything to be said for it.’ There was only the merest adumbration of menace. ‘Everything.’

His blatant disbelief in his rightness was affecting her like sun-stroke. She knew, oh she knew already, she had made a mistake. It all seemed like a bad joke, one gone wrong, whose wacky thrill would be the later jocular recounting...’ Ladies Need Only Apply p119