
UNIT 1 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

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

1.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

**Contemporary Australian
Poetry (1970 onwards)**

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

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

The Broad Bean Sermon

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 POLITICAL ISSUES

1.2.1 Republicanism

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

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

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

For a Pastoral Family

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

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

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

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

1.2.2 Vietnam

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

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

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

Letters to Live Poets

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

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

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

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

Homecoming

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

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

1.3 SOCIAL ISSUES

1.3.1 Immigration

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

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

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

Wogs

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

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

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

1.3.2 Suburbanisation

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

Drifters

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

**Contemporary Australian
Poetry (1970 onwards)**

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

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

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

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

1.4 CULTURAL ISSUES

1.4.1 Indigenous Culture

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

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

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

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

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

from The Song-Circle of Jacky (1986)

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

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

1.4.2 The World of Women

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

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

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

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

1.5 LET US SUM UP

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

1.6 GLOSSARY

adzes
cant

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

corseted

crofts

gramnivorous

libidinous

propaganda

ute

wog

xenophobia

given support by tightly laced

innerwear

small farms

grass-eating

lustful

news disseminated to create a

specific (one-sided) impact

utility vehicle such as a van

Western Oriented Gentlemen

(pejorative term for non-Caucasian

who imitates Caucasian cultural

practices)

unreasonable fear and dislike of

foreigners or strangers.

Contemporary Australia

1.7 QUESTIONS

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

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

Buckley, Vincent (ed.) *The Faber Book of Modern Australian Verse*. London, 1991.
Palmer, Alan (ed.) *The Dictionary of the British Empire and Commonwealth*, London, 1996.

UNIT 2 BRUCE DAWE & LES MURRAY

Structure

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

2.0 OBJECTIVES

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

2.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

2.2 'AT SHAGGER'S FUNERAL'

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

AT SHAGGER'S FUNERAL

Bruce Dawe and
Les Murray

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

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

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

2.2.1 The Social Context

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

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

2.2.2 The Literary Context

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

2.2.3 The Text

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

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

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

2.3 'THE QUALITY OF SPRAWL' & 'BLOOD'

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

The Quality of Sprawl

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No, sprawl is full-gloss murals on a council-house wall.
Sprawl leans on things. It is loose-limbed in it s mind.
Reprimanded and dismissed
it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail
of possibility. It may have have to leave the Earth.
Being roughly Christian, it scratches the other cheek
and thinks it unlikely. Though people have been shot for sprawl.
(1983)

Blood

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

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

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

The shadow of a cloud moves down the ridge,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.1 The Social Context

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

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

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

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

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

2.3.2 The Literary Context

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

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

Bruce Dawe and
Les Murray

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

2.3.3 The Texts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Verse 6 offers a somewhat complex illustration. It begins by explaining that sprawl is not criminal presumption or an arrogant display and parade of power for its own sake. An example of such arrogance it is said was that of Pope Alexander III in 1493 who used his papal office to secure a sea-based or maritime empire for Spain and Portugal. This is an account of his action. 'The Pope had risen to the occasion. He had drawn a line down the globe from pole to pole, a 100 leagues west of the Azores, giving all lands discoverable to the west of it to Spain, and on the east to Portugal' (Trevelyan, 295). The arrogance of the Pope's act lies first in his assumption of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.4 COMMON CONCERNS

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

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

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

2.5 LET US SUM UP

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

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

2.6 GLOSSARY

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

2.7 QUESTIONS

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

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

Bennett, Bruce & Jennifer Strauss (ed.) *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Melbourne, 1998.

Gombrich, E. H. *The Story of Art*. 19172, repr. Oxford, 1989.

Trevelyan, G. M. *History of England*. 1926, repr. London, 1952.

UNIT 3 CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE & GWEN HARWOOD

Structure

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

3.0 OBJECTIVES

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

3.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.2 'MELBOURNE'

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

Melbourne

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

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

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

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

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

3.2.1 The Social Context

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

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

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

Chris Wallace-Crabbe
& Gwen Harwood

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

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

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

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

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

3.2.2 The Literary Context

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

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

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

3.2.3 The Text

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

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

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

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

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

3.3 'IN THE PARK'

In the Park

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

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

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

3.3.1 The Social Context

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

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

3.3.2 The Literary Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3.3 The Text

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 COMMON CONCERNS

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

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

3.5 LET US SUM UP

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

3.6 GLOSSARY

complacency
disclaimer
indictment
adjure
searing
torpor

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

3.7 QUESTIONS

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

3.8 SUGGESTED READING

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

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

UNIT 4 EE TIANG HONG & KEVIN GILBERT

Structure

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

4.0 OBJECTIVES

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

4.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

Ed Tiang Hong &
Kevin Gilbert

4.2 'COMING TO'

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

COMING TO

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

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

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

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

4.2.1 The Social Context

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

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

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

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

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

4.2.2 The Literary Context

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

4.2.3 The Text

Ec Tiang Hong &
Kevin Gilbert

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

4.3 'MISTER MAN'

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

MISTER MAN

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

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

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

4.3.1 The Social Context

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

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

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

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

4.3.2 The Literary Context

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

4.3.3 The Text

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

4.4 COMMON CONCERNS

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

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

4.5 LET US SUM UP

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

4.6 GLOSSARY

Sinophobia	the fear of and distrust towards the Chinese race
apartheid	originally, separation on the basis of ethnic origin which lasted until 1992 in South Africa, used here more colloquially to indicate cultural apartness.
arraigns	accuses
subliminal	of which one is not consciously aware
pidgin	language that is a mixture of two or more languages
limpid	clear.

4.7 QUESTIONS

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

4.8 SUGGESTED READING

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

UNIT 5 MUDROOROO NAROGIN & GIG RYAN

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
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- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
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5.0 OBJECTIVES

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

5.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

5.2 'HARIJAN'

HARIJAN

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

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

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

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

5.2.1 The Social Context

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

5.2.2 The Literary Context

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

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

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

5.2.3 The Text

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

5.3 'IF I HAD A GUN'

IF I HAD A GUN

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

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

5.3.1 The Social Context

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

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

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

Mudrooroo Narogin
and Gig Ryan

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

5.3.2 The Literary Context

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

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

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

5.3.3 The Text

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

5.4 COMMON CONCERNS

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

5.5 CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN POETRY : AN OVERVIEW

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

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

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

5.6 LET US SUM UP

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

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

5.7 GLOSSARY

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

5.8 QUESTIONS

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

5.9 SUGGESTED READING

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

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