

Hotel Sorrento

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

Introduction to the concept of 'culture' in general, and 'Australian culture' in particular

Introduce a definition of culture as the learned beliefs, values, attitudes, customs and knowledge shared by a particular group of people. These are transmitted through language, practices, arts, media, ideological systems, institutions, material objects and taboos.

(i) In a class discussion, brainstorm the cultural characteristics of Australia today.

- Prompt students to consider politics, religion, customs, values and attitudes, economics, celebrations, leisure.
- Follow this up with a consideration of where we get our understanding of Australian culture from? That is, how is Australian culture perpetuated?
- Consider the impact of multiculturalism on redefining Australian culture. Pose the question: has Australian culture changed or has it remained static?

(ii) Explore the following sources; each gives an overview of Australian culture. Set students to complete these activities:

- Compare and contrast the four sources, noting in particular the commonalities across them. What aspects do you agree upon as characteristic of Australian culture?
- Explain the extent to which you agree with this definition.
- Write your own definition, adding to or improving those you found here.
- Identify the purpose and audience of each source. How might these influence its representation of Australian culture?
 - **Source 1:** from the Griffith University website
 - **Source 2:** from the Everyculture website
 - **Source 3:** from the Australian Government website
 - **Source 4:** from the Kwantessential website

(iii) Explore the *Screen Australia* statistics on the highest grossing Australian films in the USA as an example of how Australian culture is represented to international audiences. You can find the information [here](#).

- Looking at the top 30 films that feature a particularly Australian context, the list is dominated by *Crocodile Dundee* and its sequels, *Mad Max* and sequels, *Australia*, *Wolf Creek*, *Lightning Jack*, *Muriel's Wedding* and so on. Conduct a class discussion identifying the representation of Australian culture in such films, and how it compares with the versions explored in the previous four sources.
- If time permits, explore some of the Tourism Australia's global marketing campaigns to see how this agency actively represents Australia and its culture to the world. In particular, consider the controversial '*Where the bloody hell are you?*' campaign and the Baz Luhrman '*Walkabout in Transformation*' campaign.
- Students should then draw up a table comparing the popularised image of Australian culture to its reality.
- Considering the previous activities, ask students to identify the attributes of Australian culture that we seem to idealise as a homework task.

Introduction to the concept of 'centre and periphery'

This concept stems from post-colonial studies. In an Australian context it examines the impact of Australia's position on the fringe of the British Empire, still evident in many ways today in Australia's ideological position at the global periphery.

(i) Print [these](#) (PDF, 92KB) sports to a sheet of card and cut up into individual cards. Draw a large circle on the board to represent our national 'focus'. Using Blu-Tak, have students place the sports within the circle according to the amount of focus they believe – nationally – the sport receives. The more focus, the closer it should be to the centre. It is likely that sports such as AFL and cricket will feature highly, while badminton and dancesports would be considered more peripheral. Use this to explain the concept of centre and periphery.

- Consider the attitudes that accompany such placement: what would the dominant culture's feelings be towards those sports on the margins?
- How does this affect the majority's perception of this sport, as well as its participation rates, audiences, broadcasting and reporting, funding etc.?
- Apply a second example. Consider the British literary canon: discussing which writers are focused on historically (white, male and often middle class) and in contrast which are pushed to the periphery (female, people of colour, working class).
- Next, consider in terms of Australia's colonial history: what was at the centre of the British Empire? What was on the periphery? Encourage students to understand that Australia was certainly not the only peripheral colony. Discuss the implications Australia's location on the periphery might have had in constructing – over 200 years – a set of ingrained attitudes regarding the value of Australian culture.
- You might like to take this discussion further in considering the global platforms for which Australia is respected: sport, for example, and increasingly our film stars. However, these achievements are frequently accompanied by phrases such as "punching above our weight" which implies low expectations and posits success as a surprising accomplishment. (The film industry is an interesting example to interrogate, in light of the activities that follow, as while Australian actors are doing exceptionally well internationally, Australian-made films aren't doing that well – particularly here in Australia – despite critical acclaim. See [this source](#).)
- Consolidate this thinking by asking students to write a 300 word journal entry explaining the concept of centre and periphery and where they see Australia in its current global context.

(ACELR019) (ACELR022)

Introduction to the concept of 'cultural cringe'

Cultural cringe was a term first coined by Melbourne critic A. A. Phillips to describe Australia's inferiority complex in regards to its thinkers and artists, believed to stem from Australia's colonial heritage and position on the global periphery.

- Have students complete the '[How bad is your cultural cringe?](#)' survey. Use this as a discussion starter about what the term 'cultural cringe' might mean.
- In the More Resources tab at the bottom of this page is a list of sources on cultural cringe. Create a simple Padlet page (you will need to set up a free [Padlet](#) account first) to share these resources easily with your students. Assign pairs of students (or individuals) to read and make notes from each particular resource. Use a jigsaw-style group discussion to share their findings. Use [these cards](#) (PDF, 90KB) and group students firstly by number to share initial findings and then by letter to refine understandings.
- Return to the discussion of Australian culture from earlier. Ask students to reflect on the attributes of Australian culture we value or even idealise. Are these the same qualities at which we also cringe? Consider the popularity of texts such as *The Castle* or *Kath & Kim*. How do we reconcile our sentimentalism for the very qualities we see as unsophisticated?
- Introduce students to a few of the key intelligentsia most often accused of perpetuating the cultural cringe: [Germaine Greer](#) is a notable example. Others include [Clive James](#) and [Barry Humphries](#). [This blog post](#) points out a few examples of the way current media perpetuates

our national inferiority complex. Ask students to locate an example of their criticisms of Australia for homework. Share these with the class and discuss students' responses.

- For students requiring extension, introduce them to Leonard Hume's essay "**Another Look at the Cultural Cringe**" in which he argues that the concept of cultural cringe was 'invented' to deflect unwanted criticism; that is, that people use the term to dismiss critics of Australian art and literature rather than accept the truth of their criticisms.

(ACELR019) (ACELR022)

Read Rayson's own introduction, "A Sweet Pensive Sadness"

Set reading this introduction as a homework task, guided by the following questions to which students should record paragraph answers.

- To what extent do her questions regarding Australian literature (pp. vi-vii) reflect the existence of cultural cringe?
- Why did Rayson choose a novelist as her central character?
- What role did Peter Carey play in inspiring this character?
- Aside from the exploration of Australian cultural identity, this play is also a family drama. What inspired Rayson in regards to this aspect of her play?

(ACELR019) (ACELR022)

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT:

Which team?

After reading the play, but prior to deep analysis, have students identify which of the sisters they side with. Set three corners of the classroom to represent each of the characters and have students move to the appropriate corner: are they on Team Hillary, Team Meg or Team Pippa? Each of the sisters represents a different connection to their hometown as well as different responses to Meg's novel. Ask representatives from the resulting groups to explain their choices. Follow up with some journal writing, 300 words on the topic: 'With whom is the student most sympathetic and why?' If needed, the teams could be extended to include Marge and Dick.

(ACELR027) (ACELR029)

Responding to Rayson

In her introduction, Rayson asked whether we could "look for profundity and passion in our own [i.e. Australian] literature". For homework, have students undertake some journal writing to respond to this question, encouraging responses of around 300 words. Do the students feel that *Hotel Sorrento* reflects both profundity and passion? Share responses next day either in small groups or via class discussion.

(ACELR027) (ACELR029)

OUTLINE OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT

Reading the play

- Drama texts always benefit from being read aloud. It is worth the investment in time over several lessons to read aloud as much of the text as you can, with students picking up the various roles.

Students should annotate their texts as they read along, either in the book or using Post-it notes, which can be colour-coded to indicate personal response, themes or dramatic conventions. During the first few scenes, the teacher should take a more active role, pointing out significant ideas,

quotes and conventions. After that, however, appoint a student as 'director of the day' to take charge of the dramatic reading, and directing their peers in their annotating.

- Assign each 'director of the day' a number of scenes or pages. Prior to the dramatic reading in-class, each student needs to have read the allocated section thoroughly and to have prepared annotations to allow for successful direction of others.

(ACELR023) (ACELR027) (ACELR031)

Plot graph

A quite traditional but nonetheless useful activity is to construct a plot graph, charting the peaks and troughs of tension throughout the play. From this, students should be able to see at a glance the sequence of events, but also how audiences are engaged throughout. Discuss when the peaks and troughs of tension are evident in the play. How do these correlate with scene/act breaks?

(ACELR020)

Themes

Dr Tess Brady says that Rayson is a playwright of "really big ideas". Sort students into small groups and have them consider what those "big ideas" are in *Hotel Sorrento*, writing each specific idea on a slip of paper. Have the students themselves categorise the various ideas, grouping similar ones from across the various small groups via negotiation. These categories should end up reflecting the main themes of the play: family, loyalty, betrayal, home, identity – both personal and [Australian] cultural, art and literature. In addition, students may come up with additional themes not explored here. If possible, pin this work to the walls for further reference and refinement as the students undertake close study of the text.

(ACELR029)

SYNTHESISING TASK

Production program

Ask the students to imagine that they have been tasked with designing the program for a new stage production of *Hotel Sorrento*. They need to provide a detailed summary of each act, distilling them down to their most crucial aspects of character and plot development. One page should be devoted to thumbnail sketches of each of the characters. In addition, they need to include an introduction which welcomes patrons to the production and outlines the themes explored. Finally, an appropriate design, including image and colour palette, needs to be chosen to reflect the mood of the play.

(ACELR020) (ACELR021) (ACELR033) (ACELR034)

THE WRITER'S CRAFT INCLUDING SUCH ELEMENTS AS:

Exploring structure: the prodigal son

Explore the biblical parable of 'The Prodigal Son'. If you are unfamiliar with it, this parable can be easily located on the internet. [This site](#) explains how the parable has been adapted as a common narrative trope. Essentially this trope involves a character living with his/her family, typically in luxury. Then he/she is forced to leave home, either because of a crime they have committed or due to dissatisfaction with where (or with whom) they are living. Once abroad, the character experiences a famine, either literal or metaphorical, and is forced to return home to make amends with those he or she abandoned. The returning character's siblings are resentful whilst the loving father welcomes the returning child with open arms. Sometimes, the returning character is responsible for 'saving the day' from some crisis.

- Complete [this table](#) (PDF, 96KB) as a small group or individual activity, comparing the plot of *Hotel Sorrento* with 'The Prodigal Son'.
- Consolidate students' understanding with the following short answer questions:
 - What is the 'inheritance' Meg takes with her when she leaves Sorrento?
 - Hint: What do her sisters feel resentful about, that Meg has squandered or abused?
 - Essential answer: The sisters' integrity; they feel Meg has abused their memories and characters for her personal gain.
 - What is the 'famine' that Meg experiences whilst abroad?
 - Hint: Consider the source of Meg's angst in conversations with Edwin. What does she feel she lacks?
 - Essential answer: Meg feels she lacks credibility, being a female Australian artist, but more significantly she feels she lacks recognition and admiration from her family for her achievements.
 - How is Meg received by her family upon her return?
 - Hint: Compare the different reactions from Troy, Hilary and Pippa. Look carefully at 1:21, comparing Wal's reactions to Pippa's homecoming versus Meg's.
 - Essential answer: Hilary and Pippa are resentful of Meg's 'use' of their history in her novel. They also feel Meg is wallowing in her own grief at the expense of theirs. Troy is more curious to establish a relationship and discover the truths about his own history. Although Wal dies before Meg arrives, he expresses his enthusiasm in scene 21.
 - In what ways does Meg's homecoming differ from that of the prodigal son?
 - Hint: Consider the event that closes Act 1.
 - Essential answer: Wal has died and is not there to welcome Meg back.
 - Explain the resentments expressed by Meg's siblings on her return.
 - Hint: Look at the evidence in 2:1, 2:7, 2:10 and 2:11.
 - Essential answer: The sisters resent Meg for appropriating their lives in her book, for the 'selfish' nature of her grief upon her return, her 'abandonment' of Hilary to look after their father, the unspoken tension about the sisters' various relationships with Troy's father, their perception that Meg lacks loyalty to her family.
 - Is reconciliation between the siblings achieved?
 - Hint: How do you interpret the last scene, 2:19, and the selling of the house?
 - Essential answer: Very much open to interpretation; the selling of the family home may represent an implied 'moving on' from the conflicts surrounding belonging or instead the complete fracturing of the family.
- Conduct a class discussion into the ways in which the prodigal son trope is adhered to and the ways in which it is subverted.
 - The two major subversions are in the death of the father, Wal, prior to Meg's homecoming and the ambiguity of the resolution. Consider the following:
 - To what extent do the secondary characters of Troy and Marge replace the welcoming figure of the father?
 - How does Wal's death work to further complicate the return of the prodigal Meg and provide another layer of conflict?
 - Why might Rayson have avoided a neat family reconciliation? How does the lack of reconciliation connect to the larger themes of the book about cultural identity? Consider the conversation between Meg and Troy about reconciliation in 2:4 (p. 55).

(ACELR019) (ACELR022) (ACELR024) (ACELR027)

Exploring structure: pacing

Aubrey Mellor in "The Quest for Certainty", states that the play is not quite naturalistic in style, that in fact the scenes are carefully paced so that a thematic rhythm develops.

- Assign individuals or pairs of students to two–three scenes each (depending on the size of the class). For each scene, students should identify the themes that are developed, the action, the characters who are involved, the length and the degree of tension in the scene.
- Use coloured paper to represent each of the various themes, e.g. green for cultural identity, blue for family etc. Have students select the most appropriately coloured paper to then record their scene summary.
- Pin these to a wall in a horizontal sequence to visualise this thematic rhythm. The effect could be further enhanced by trimming the sheets of paper to represent the length of the scene, and arranging them vertically to represent shifts in tension.
- For those who are more technically literate, the same effect could be created by using software such as MS Word or Excel.
- Read Mellor's essay (in the Currency edition of *Hotel Sorrento*) and have students evaluate the writer's interpretation by writing a 300 word response in their journals for homework. More can be read on naturalism and realism [here](#).
- Mellor also suggests that this is a play of debate. A curious feature of *Hotel Sorrento* is that, despite having an ensemble cast, the majority of scenes feature just two characters engaged in dialogue, particularly in Act 1. Discuss the effects of this sequence of debates. Consider, too, when the debates open up into discussions between several characters: it is only after we have been exposed to the varied viewpoints that the characters meet to 'thrash it out' between themselves.

(ACELR027) (ACELR023)

Characterisation: the three sisters

The conflict arises from the reunion of three very different sisters. Despite coming from the same working-class Australian background, the three sisters have moved in very different directions: Meg moved to London to pursue a literary career, Pippa to New York and an executive career, while Hilary remained in Sorrento, in the family home, raising a child and caring for her father.

- In groups of three, have students select one character and search the text for evidence of the nature of their character. Each character is complex and on occasion, contradictory. For example, criticising the pedestrian nature of Australian culture (as she perceives it) whilst being nominated for a prestigious award. Pippa is a talented executive but is the most submissive of the sisters and seeks their approval. Hilary is a strong and defiant woman but takes on the domestic role within the family.
- After this initial research, merge groups who were researching the same character so that they can share and refine their findings. These larger groups should collaborate on a Powerpoint (or similar) presentation to disseminate their character portraits to the rest of the class.
- Consolidate with the following questions for homework:
 - Meg
 - Why does Meg live in England? Is she happy there? Why won't she return to Australia?
 - Why does she not want to sell the family home?
 - What do Meg and Edwin's arguments reveal about Meg's values and contradictions?
 - Why does Meg resent Hilary?
 - Why has she written *Melancholy*?
 - Pippa
 - Why did Pippa also leave home? Why do you think she has returned?
 - What does Pippa want her sisters to notice about her?
 - What is the basis of Pippa's resentment of Meg?
 - Meg accuses Pippa of being hard. Does she have "any softness"?
 - Why does Pippa fear that Hilary will shrivel up if she stays in the house?
 - Hilary
 - Why did Hil stay when her sisters left? Is she made to seem inferior?
 - What was she hoping would one day happen with her sisters?

- Why do you think she has never discussed her husband's affair with her sisters before, despite knowing about it?
- Is Hilary as strong as she presents herself to be?
- What is significant about the fact that Marge identifies with Hilary's character in *Melancholy*?

(ACELR027)

Characterisation: Marge

Marge functions as a kind of 'Greek chorus'. She observes the action that takes place, the conflict that arises, and provides an outsider's perspective. She often balances the emotive nature of the other three women offering commentary without the pain of feeling the 'betrayal' of Meg's novel so personally.

- For homework, ask students to research the convention of the Greek chorus. What was its function in Greek theatre? Which other dramatists employ this convention?
- Use the **think, pair, share method** to have students consider the extent to which Marge can be seen as fulfilling this role. Consider the following scenes:
 - 1:1: pp. 1–2: Marge introduces the setting of Sorrento, the melancholic nature of Meg's book and foreshadows its 'autobiographical' potential.
 - 1:9: pp. 22–24: Marge offers an insight into the value of Meg's writing in representing Australian culture.
 - 1:19: pp. 37–38: Marge challenges Dick on his criticism of Meg.
 - 2:9: pp. 60–63: Marge shows Hilary that the characters in Meg's book can speak to others too, helping Hilary to understand that Meg hasn't just appropriated her sisters' lives.
 - 2:11: pp. 70–71: Marge breaks the ice when the conversation gets awkward, asking questions to encourage other characters to consider different perspectives.

Aside from this role, Marge also has an important role in developing one of the themes: the transformative power of art. This is most evident in her reactions to Meg's novel, clearly articulated in 2:14. She feels it speaks to her, she sees herself represented within its pages and it has encouraged her to look at Sorrento differently and has "awakened [her] passion." It is further reinforced in the symbolism of Marge's own artistic endeavour: her painting. Initially she begins with watercolours but, as she tells Meg, she has "started to use oils". The rich, vibrant nature of oils reflects Marge's new found passion for Sorrento, and her new vision of life. As such, she represents the potential for Australia to change, to be invigorated by art and in response to contribute to the production of a more vibrant culture.

- Students should write a 300-word response to the following question:
 - If Marge is a representative of the 'Australian audience', how are we to interpret her response to Meg's novel?

(ACELR027)

Characterisation: Dick

Dick functions in ways both similar and different to Marge. He is featured to provoke Meg and to act as a polemic against Meg's views, particularly in regards to the state of Australian culture.

- Ask students to compare the way that Dick attempts to change characters' minds with Marge's approach. Examine the language they use, the tone in which they address characters. Who has the most success? This could lead to an interesting discussion on gender differences.
- Like Marge, does Dick represent Australia's potential for change? Does he contradict or reinforce Meg's criticisms of the Australian male? Discuss in small groups.

(ACELR027)

Characterisation: the minor characters of Wal, Troy and Edwin

Each of these characters fulfils a highly significant function in the text. Wal represents the stereotypical Australian male, the very type of man to whom Meg seems so opposed. Edwin represents his polar opposite, the refined Englishman. Troy, as the younger character, represents the new Australian male. He is close to his grandfather, the patriarchal roots of Australian tradition, yet has been influenced heavily by the strong women in his life. He is an intermediary between them and also functions to solve the mystery of what really happened to his father and the impact this had on his mother and aunts.

- Debate whether Wal and Edwin are mere caricatures or whether they are more subtly constructed than that.
- Create a mind map of the various functions that Troy, as a character, fulfils.

(ACELR027)

Symbolism

Setting

The choice of setting is highly symbolic. Sorrento is a small sea-side town rather than a large cosmopolitan city. This allows for a more acute representation of Australian culture. Its seaside location reminds audiences of Australia's isolation, its location on the periphery. It is also a liminal space: a place of change, transition and uncertainty. It is also named for another Sorrento, a town on the Italian coast, which connects with the idea of cultural cringe – original Australian names almost not being 'good enough'. Within Sorrento we have the family home, nicknamed Hotel Sorrento. It is this setting that gives the play its 'kitchen sink drama' aspect.

- Construct a table with the students that identifies the various characters' emotional connections to Sorrento.
- Based on this, develop a discussion that explores how Sorrento functions symbolically both at the personal and then cultural level.

(ACELR022) (ACELR027)

Art

Art and literature are a significant motif throughout the play. At the heart is the novel that causes so much family tension, but there are other uses too: Marge's painting, references to other writers and the painting of the 'Hotel' Sorrento itself. In addition, there are other 'artistic' references, such as Meg's description of herself as a "pale watercolour". These of course all connect with the issues being debated: Australian art and our complex relationship with it as a culture, the transformative power of art and the function of Hotel Sorrento itself.

- Set the following table as a homework activity, with students connecting these symbols or motifs with the characters and ideas of the play. Add further references identified by students.

Symbol or motif	Explanation of meaning	Connected characters	Important references	Connections to themes/ideas
Meg's novel <i>Melancholy</i> – its success, themes and impact on the family				
Other literary figures referred to by characters				
Marge's painting				
The painting of the family home				

- Consider the post-modern nature of this motif. *Hotel Sorrento* is itself a work of art, being used to express themes and ideas about the power of art on both the individual and a culture. Stronger students may wish to tease out this phenomenon in a journal entry.

(ACELR027) (ACELR024)

Language: the Australian vernacular

In the play, the Australian language is criticised as being “obvious”, a “language of tawdry dreams”. One of the contradictions in the play is that it is written, generally, in the vernacular. Yet Marge also reveals that you can look for a culture in “the broad brush stroke”. Instead, it is in the finer details.

- Have students explore this contradiction by hunting for these finer details. Create a list of examples of Rayson’s exquisite uses of detail that work to raise her play about the ‘everyday’. One example is in the pun that Marge generates: she criticises Dick’s desire for broad brush strokes while as a painter her art has “exquisite” detail. Students should select two or three of these examples for the aesthetic appeal or profound effect and conduct a close analysis of the language features used in their construction. Each response should be around 150 words.
- Consider Rayson’s own question about whether Australian literature can be both profound and passionate. Lead a class discussion on the literary merit of the Australian vernacular.

(ACELR020)

TEXT AND MEANING

Major theme peer teaching

In groups of four, have students consider one of the broad themes of ‘family and loyalty’ and ‘Australian cultural identity’. Have the students engage in deep discussion of the text and its construction, developing a reading of the play in regards to their particular theme. Within the group, there may be variations of readings, which should be encouraged and could potentially lead to discussion of the concepts of dominant, alternate and resistant readings. Use these guided reflections as the basis for the students’ investigation:

- [Family and loyalty](#) (PDF, 124KB)
- [Australian cultural Identity](#) (PDF, 123KB)

After students have come to a cogent reading or set of readings, split the four students in each group into two pairs. Each pair is then to connect with a pair who explored the other theme. In turn, each pair within this new group is to guide the other in understanding their explored theme.

This could be followed up with whole class discussion on each theme for greater cross-pollination.

(ACELR020) (ACELR022) (ACELR029) (ACELR031)

Individual theme exploration

Assign students one of the remaining themes:

- art and literature
- place
- personal identity
- gender identity

As homework, each student is then to locate a single scene that they believe offers an insightful comment regarding this theme. Students should write a 300-word exploration of this comment, drawing closely on textual evidence. These should then be brought to class to be shared with their

peers, so that each student has a collection of closely analysed scenes related to each theme.
(ACELR020) (ACELR027) (ACELR022)

Theme summary

For homework have students complete a summary table, correlating Rayson's ideas at both familial and cultural levels.

Theme **Loyalty to one's own Identity Art & literature Place Gender identity**

Family level

Cultural level

(ACELR031) (ACELR032)

Close study of the climax

Act 2, scene 11, the ill-fated luncheon, can be considered the climax of the play. Photocopy this scene onto A3 paper, leaving plenty of white space around for annotations. Either in student-directed groups, or as a whole class teacher-guided activity, undertake a close analysis of this important scene. Identify how the various thematic concerns coalesce, and how the inclusion of (in particular) Dick into this family scene allows Rayson to transition between her themes and issues at both a familial and cultural level. Students could use different coloured highlighters to trace the appearance of each theme throughout the scene.

Conclude by returning to Rayson's question as to whether Australian literature can reflect passion and profundity. Engage in a class discussion of students' responses to this statement in light of their close reading of this complexly crafted scene.

(ACELR019) (ACELR020) (ACELR022) (ACELR023) (ACELR027) (ACELR031)

The [TES Australia website](#) has some additional activities which could be used to further develop students' understanding of theme, if time is available.

Theme reflection

Set the following topic as an in-class essay or timed writing exercise:

"As a playwright I am concerned with the task of posing questions... as a vehicle for both playwright and audience to embark on a genuine line of enquiry together." (Rayson, H. (1988). "A Sweet Pensive Sadness", in *Hotel Sorrento*. Currency Press: Sydney, p. vi)

What do you consider to be the most significant question asked within this play and how have you, as an audience, responded to this enquiry?

Relevance today

In 1988, themes of national identity and addressing the cultural cringe were at the forefront of Australia's thinking as a culture, due largely to the Bicentennial celebrations. But does *Hotel Sorrento* continue to hold relevance for Australian audiences? Have students consider this question in small groups. Have them construct a brief report on what a revival production of Rayson's play might encompass. In essence, students should be prompted to debate whether Australia still suffers from the kind of cultural cringe represented in the play and whether the issues of gender identity are still of concern to Australians today. Have them consider the following prompts:

- Which themes are still relevant to contemporary Australian audiences?
- Which themes seem less relevant to such audiences?
- What changes could be made (if required) to update or refresh the play for such audiences?

As part of their abstract, students should find evidence (news or feature articles, for example) that reflects their position in relation to the topics above.

(ACELR019) (ACELR022) (ACELR029) (ACELR031)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (PRODUCTIVE)

Creating: Write a scene from *Melancholy*, Meg Moynahan's novel.

Meg: That's the thing you have to be careful about with fiction. It leads us to believe that reconciliations are possible...

Troy: It doesn't happen in real life, you mean?

Meg: Not always. No.

Troy: Well, why did you write it then?

(*Hotel Sorrento*, 2:4)

Meg's infamous novel *Melancholy* is set in Sorrento, and features characters apparently based on the Moynahan family. Using evidence drawn from *Hotel Sorrento*, students should write a scene from Meg's novel that develops the theme of reconciliation. This theme is broad enough to be interpreted in various ways, such as reconciliation between family, with one's cultural or personal identity or with the choices one has made. Within their writing, students should try to capture the mood of "sweet, pensive sadness" that supposedly permeates the novel.

After writing their scene, students should write a brief **exegesis** to reflect on the construction of their creative piece, evaluating their use of literary techniques and their success in meeting the brief.

Students should aim for 1000 words of creative writing and 300 words for their exegesis.

See [here](#) (PDF, 199KB) for a sample rubric.

(ACELR027) (ACELR033) (ACELR034) (ACELR036)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

"What I Wrote" (a)

Snodger Media have produced a short film on **Hannie Rayson** and *Hotel Sorrento* as part of the 'What I Wrote' series, screened on the ABC. It can occasionally be viewed on ABC iView, purchased from **Snodger** or **Ronin Films**, and is also **accessible with a ClickView subscription**. Watch the film with students, focusing on the general introduction to Rayson and her life and the section on *Hotel Sorrento*. Discuss presenter Dr Tess Brady's reading of the play. To what extent do students agree with Brady's reading? Students might construct a **Venn diagram** to compare their individual reading with Brady's.

(ACELR022) (ACELR030) (ACELR030)

Gender reading

Much of the conflict in *Hotel Sorrento* arises from the complex relationships between three sisters. This allows for a gender reading of the text. *Hotel Sorrento* features a cast of female characters who might be considered as representing 'second-wave' feminist politics: they are professional, working women who balance careers with domestic relationships. **Fensham and Varney (2005)** note that the rise in power of the female in Australian society is reflected within the rise of the female character within literature itself, which certainly seems evident here. The narrative is driven by female characters who tend to defy the patriarchy although Rayson avoids cliché in constructing characters who are as flawed as they are heroic: an interesting tension that will inform any gender

reading. Qualities commonly ascribed as feminine in western culture – strong emotions, emphasis on interpersonal connections, the deeply felt emotional wounds – come to the fore in the conflicts between sisters. Despite the strong female characters of Meg, Pippa and Hilary, Rayson also reveals how females have been marginalised, through characters such as the sisters' mother, and Marge. Students should be encouraged to write a 600-word gender reading of the play, exploring how Rayson's characters are representative of shifting gender ideologies.

More able students might be invited to consider the play from a 'third-wave' feminist perspective, addressing one of Fensham and Varney's comments that "[the female characters] reflect the ethnically dominant anglo-celtic middle class feminine. They are also feminism's daughters: the white, educated, middle class dolls who are the products and beneficiaries of the social and economic gains of second wave feminism" (2005, p. 1).

Sections students may be directed to explore include:

- 1:2 (p. 7–8): Meg complains about how women writers are dismissed as writing diaries.
- 1:4 (p. 9–10): Pippa and Hilary compare the family responses to their mother and father, and 1:4 (p. 12) where Troy reads the review of Meg's novel, with its focus on gender representations.
- 1:5 (p. 13–14): Marge and Dick discuss Meg's novel, with Marge describing it as "very female".
- 1:8 (p. 19): Hilary and Pippa discuss their sisterly relationship.
- 1:9 (p. 21): Marge offers a feminist reading of Dick's friend's actions.
- 2:6 (p. 56): Dick accuses Marge of not believing he has any feelings.
- 2:9 (pp. 60–63): Marge and Hil discuss the character of Helen.
- 2:11 (pp. 65–66): Edwin comments on the gender divide at lunch as reflective of Australia's ingrained misogyny.
- 2:11 (pp. 67–70): The family talk about their parents.
- 2:11 (p. 71–74): The sisters argue about family loyalty.
- 2:12 (pp. 75–76): Meg reveals the affair to Troy.
- 2:18 (pp. 85–86): The sisters' final argument.

See [here](#) for a brief overview of the 'waves' of feminism.

See [here](#) for further resources about feminist readings.

(ACELR019) (ACELR020) (ACELR022) (ACELR030) (ACELR031)

COMPARISON WITH OTHER TEXTS:

"What I Wrote" (b)

(i) Watch the rest of the 'What I Wrote' film, where Rayson's other plays are discussed: *Life After George*, *Two Brothers*, *Inheritance*, *Falling from Grace*, *Competitive Tenderness* and *The Glass Soldier*. Students should be encouraged to make notes throughout their viewing of the film, identifying Rayson's social and cultural concerns as reflected in her plays. In their close study of *Hotel Sorrento*, students were encouraged to reflect on the representation of Australian cultural identity. Have students reflect on the ways this introduction to her wider body of work adds to their initial understanding of Rayson's view of Australian culture.

(ii) In particular, students may make notes on issues such as the family relationships, commercialisation of tertiary education, issues of class and race, asylum seekers, politics, gender issues and modern feminism, marriage, mateship and the memorialisation of Australia's wartime heritage. Consider what this range of thematic concerns suggests about Rayson's views of modern Australia. Significantly, most of Rayson's thematic concerns reflect issues in flux in Australia's cultural identity; that is, issues where cultural attitudes are changing or are in conflict. Use these ideas as the basis of a class discussion on Australia's shifting cultural identity and Rayson's role as a political writer.

(iii) Students should then write a 600-word reflective response in their journal, considering the following comment from Dr Tess Brady:

“One of the things to notice about Rayson’s plays is that at the heart is a family. She doesn’t write family sagas but she uses family as if it is a landscape or a large canvas for her characters to play out these big ideas.”

(iv) Within the film, Rayson indicates that she draws on the traditions established by other writers, both Australian and international. For homework, have students select one of the following writers and conduct research into their life and works: [Arthur Miller](#), [Anton Chekhov](#), [David Williamson](#), [John Romeril](#), [Jack Hibberd](#), [Louis Nowra](#), [Katherine Thompson](#). (Teachers should note that there are *Reading Australia* teaching resources on the works of John Romeril, Louis Nowra, Jack Hibberd and David Williamson). Students might create a [Glogster](#) presentation to share this information with their peers. If time permits, students might read a significant work by their chosen writer and explore how *Hotel Sorrento* draws on this writer, either stylistically or thematically. [\(ACELR019\)](#) [\(ACELR024\)](#) [\(ACELR029\)](#) [\(ACELR030\)](#) [\(ACELR031\)](#)

Considering the film

(i) Individually or in small groups, students should pick a scene from the play and prepare a screenplay version of the text. Alternatively, teachers may prefer students to construct a storyboard instead.

- Prior to preparing their screenplay version, have students consider carefully how they would translate one medium to another. A play is designed to be viewed on a stage, from a single viewpoint, which limits the ways setting can be established. Film offers greater flexibility in terms of location and viewpoint. As a class, brainstorm other ways in which the two media differ. Construct a table that identifies the limitations and freedoms of each medium.
- Considering Rayson’s description of the set for their chosen scene, students should plan the location for their film version. Will they remain faithful to the play or do they believe the flexibility of cinema will allow them to make changes for the better? Encourage them to consider how they will capture the mood and atmosphere of their scene and how their chosen location will work to develop this vital aspect.
- Have students read the dialogue carefully. Consider if this will translate effectively to film or whether it needs to be edited.
- Consider the role of cinematography. How can various camera shots and edits be used to enhance the experience of the play for the audience, while remaining faithful to Rayson’s text?
- Soundtrack should also be a careful consideration; the role of diegetic and non-diegetic sound is important to creating both realism and mood. (See [here](#) for an explanation of diegetic and non-diegetic sound.)
- After this planning, students should prepare their screenplay and/or storyboard.
- In groups, have students share and workshop their screenplays/storyboards to explain them. In so doing they can seek advice for further refinement and gauging audience response.

The following resources can be provided the students to use independently:

- See [here](#) for a great video tutorial on formatting a screenplay.
- See [here](#) for a video tutorial on storyboarding.
- See [here](#) for a video tutorial revising camera shots and their use.

(ii) Watch Richard Franklin’s [1995 film adaptation](#) of *Hotel Sorrento* (also [accessible with a ClickView subscription](#)). Begin with a general class discussion of how faithfully Franklin translated Rayson’s original script. Returning to their groups from activity (i) above (or as individuals) have students conduct a close review of Franklin’s version of their chosen scene from Rayson’s text. Set the following tasks for students to complete.

- Compare Rayson and Franklin’s versions, noting careful similarities and differences between the scripts and recording these in a table.

- Consider Franklin's cinematography, specifically identifying how the flexibility of film has been used to 'enhance' Rayson's script.
- Make a considered judgement as to which version seems more effective and/or appealing, explaining your reasons.
- Compare Franklin's interpretation of Rayson's scene with your own, accounting for the differences between the two.
- Reflect on your own translation, considering your success in adapting literary and film conventions for purpose and effect.

(iii) Read [this US review](#) of the film version of *Hotel Sorrento*. Students should answer the following questions in their journals:

1. To what extent do you agree with this reviewer's characterisation of the film?
2. Consider the statement: "The film is steeped in a homey provincial atmosphere that is at once comforting and stifling, and that gives some substance to the talk about the complacency and materialism of Australian society and its indifference to artists." How does this compare to your understanding of the representation of Australian culture within the film or the play?
3. How do you feel this reviewer views Australian culture? Consider his conclusion: "Although the movie, which is based on a play by Hannie Rayson, has three sisters ruminating about their lives, it is not Chekhov Down Under. It is more like a wistful high-toned soap opera laden with a subtext of anxious, nationalistic self-scrutiny."

(iv) Compare the NY Times review with [this Australian one](#).

1. What similarities and differences can you identify between the two reviews?

(v) Students should then write their own 500-word review of the film, characterising it in terms of the quality of its adaptation of the play and offering their own reading of the text as representative of Australian culture. Encourage students to shape the language of their review for a particular publication.

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(ACELR031) (ACELR032) (ACELR033) (ACELR035)

EVALUATION OF THE TEXT AS REPRESENTATIVE OF AUSTRALIAN CULTURE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TO LITERATURE

The Australia Council for the Arts grant application

Rayson indicates in her introduction that she visited London as part of her research for *Hotel Sorrento*, made possible by a grant from the Australia Council. The Australia Council provides grants to successful applicants who seek to produce works that "deliver benefits to the arts sector and wider public, including national and international audiences" ([Australia Council for the Arts, 2015](#)). From the perspective of Rayson herself, and in the context of developing her initial draft of *Hotel Sorrento*, students should write the rationale that forms part of an application for such a grant. In the rationale, students should explain the potential significance of the play and the benefits it will provide for audiences both at home and abroad. In doing so, students should engage with the play's aesthetic value as well as its role as a cultural artefact and/or social commentary.

Focus questions that may be used to guide preparation:

- Why is this play aesthetically significant? How does it use the conventions of drama in innovative and/or effective ways?
- What issues does this play seek to explore? Why are they culturally significant (in the context of 1986)?
- What responses is this play intended to provoke?
- How does it seek to participate in a dialogue about Australian culture?

- How does this play intend to both explore and enact ideas about the value of literature, particularly within an Australian context?
- Why does this play need to be written?

(ACELR019) (ACELR021) (ACELR029) (ACELR031) (ACELR032)

SYNTHESISING ACTIVITY

Debate

Divide students into groups of six, comprising two teams of three. One team will be the affirmative and the other the negative. Prepare and conduct a formal debate within each group on the topic: *'That Hannie Rayson suffers from cultural cringe.'*

In doing so, students will need to evaluate the extent to which Rayson may be accused of perpetuating a representation of Australia's cultural identity as peripheral or unsophisticated. They will need to consider both sides of the argument in preparing both their contentions and rebuttals. In their debates, students should be expected to draw closely on their analysis of *Hotel Sorrento* as well as the wider reading and viewing they have undertaken within this unit of work.

Resources to assist in the preparation of a debate can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

(ACELR029) (ACELR031) (ACELR032)

SYNTHESISING CORE IDEAS

Preparation for the following Rich assessment task will assist students in synthesising their understandings.

Study groups

Organise students into groups of four or five. Teachers may wish to consider how they group students. Groups of similar ability students may ensure equity in workloads, or alternatively different ability student groupings may allow for peer teaching, with stronger students supporting others.

In groups, students are to undertake the following activities. Allow the students to determine how they will share the tasks, in order to develop skills such as negotiation, team-work, compromise and independence.

- Summarise the themes and ideas of the play to articulate them in a concise but thorough fashion.
- Share and discuss individual personal responses to the play and its themes and ideas, and consider these as potentially representative of a wider contemporary audience.
- Collate research into the historical context of the play, identifying the significant cultural influences that shaped Rayson's play.
- Conduct research into current Australian cultural context, noting similarities and changes between the two time periods.
- Refine understandings of Australia's position on the periphery, and the extent to which this holds true, as evident in recent articles on this topic.
- Refine understandings of the notion of cultural cringe, and the extent to which this attitude still prevails, as evident in recent articles on this topic.
- Discuss and develop individual positions regarding the continuing relevance of Rayson's work, theorising about potential alterations a contemporary director may have to impose on *Hotel Sorrento* to cater for contemporary audiences and contextual understandings.

(ACELR019) (ACELR020) (ACELR022)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE)

Responding: Write a speech to pitch a new production of *Hotel Sorrento*.

It might be argued that the cultural context of Australia today is quite different to that of the 1980s. Has *Hotel Sorrento* and its themes stood the test of time to remain relevant to Australian audiences today? This question will be at the centre of this task.

From the perspective of a bold, new director, students will write a speech to pitch a new production of *Hotel Sorrento* to the board of a theatre group. This is a complex task that will require students to effectively synthesise several understandings.

In their speech, students will need to demonstrate a clear understanding of the play and its themes, as well as the cultural context which spawned it. Students will need to demonstrate insight into Australia's current cultural climate in order to argue why the play remains relevant to contemporary Australian audiences. Students will need to draw on their close study of the text and their personal response to it, as well as their research into current and historical contexts, their understandings of concepts such as 'centre and periphery' and the 'cultural cringe' and finally their understanding of the role of literature in exploring the cultural milieu, in order to craft a compelling argument. Furthermore, students will also need to reflect on the processes of textual production and reception in order to justify any adaptations they believe are required of the text.

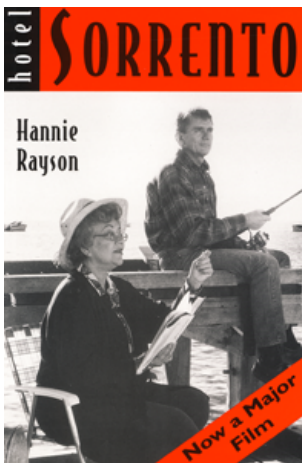
This could be presented either as a written text or as an oral presentation, depending on the constraints of time and the size of the class.

Finally, students should write a reflection evaluating not just their finished piece, but also the process of collaboration engaged in during the preparation phase, considering how they developed their own and others' ideas.

See [here](#) for a sample assessment rubric (PDF, 172KB).

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Unit Suitable For AC: Senior Secondary (Literature Unit 2)

Duration Five weeks.

Curriculum Summary

Find a [summary table](#) for Australian Curriculum: Literature content descriptions for this unit.

Themes

[art](#), [Australian identity](#), [family](#), [gender](#), [identity](#), [literature](#), [loyalty](#), [place](#)

General Capabilities

[Critical and Creative Thinking](#), [Intercultural Understanding](#), [Literacy](#), [Personal and Social Capability](#)

FURTHER DETAILS

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