

The Floating World

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

The Floating World is set around a group of characters who are from the Australia of the 1970s. In order to develop students' critical reading responses, a meaningful understanding of the political, economic social and cultural context of the time is necessary. Some discussion, research and pre-reading activities are important so as to acquaint students with those contexts.

Activity 1. (Pre-reading activity)

In their writing journals, students should be given one minute to think of everything they can about the 1970s in Australia or elsewhere, and asked to make a list. This list may include names of songs, people, family, brands, events, politicians, etc. The image set [You know you're a child of the 70s if...](#) could be a useful prompt for this. Similarly the Australian Government web page, [The Changing face of modern Australia – 1950s to 1970s](#) provides helpful context for the questions below. Students should also watch the [1970s' Australian advertisement called "Have A Go"](#).

From their research they will then be asked to make some inferences of life in the 1970s based on their viewing of the images, using the following questions to help them:

- How would you describe life in 1970s' Australia?
- What kind of values do you think were the norm at the time?
- What kind of individuals and social groups would have been excluded from this world view?
- How is the modern Australian society that you are living in different and/or similar to life represented in the texts and other resources you have viewed?

(ACELR038) (ACELR039) (ACELR040)

Activity 2. (Vocabulary)

Students are to compile a vocabulary list in their journals as their experience of the play's terminology develops over the course of the drama. To begin this activity, they should write the following words in the journals. They should then define each word and try to think about how each word is relevant to the play and their society. They could use different tables for different types of jargon, for example, dramatic terms/themes/language.

Word	Definition	Relevance to play	Relevance to you
Larrikinism			
Australian			
Working class			
Tragedy			
Comedy			

(ACELR045) (ACELR046)

Activity 3. (The opening scene)

Once students have read the opening scene, they should consider the following questions:

1. How do the opening stage directions set the tone for the play? What symbols and characters are featured? What impressions do we get of them?

2. What does the narrator, Harry, reveal in his monologue? Why has the playwright chosen to represent the information in this way?
3. How is Les presented in Act 1, Scene 1? What can we expect from this character?

Responses are to be recorded and kept. When they finish reading the play, they are to revisit their ideas and add to their answers.

(ACELR047)

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT

Over the course of the play, students should read and think about the following questions as they conduct their critical analyses, which will also incorporate their personal responses to their reading.

An activity to encourage this would be through a weekly book club, during which students can discuss with each other the evolving ideas of the play. They should also be encouraged to note their own and their classmates' ideas in a journal. The following are some guiding questions which will help them formulate and develop their responses to the play.

Questions and comments while reading the text

- Why has the playwright chosen to present the information in this way? In what other ways could he have represented this information? How would that have changed the tone or style of the play?
- What happened immediately before or after this action?
- How is dramatic tension created?
- What questions are you left wondering about the characters/text?
- In developing your understanding of the themes as the play progresses, how have your understandings changed?

Personal connections with own experience

- Can you think of anyone in your family or society who is similar to the characters presented?
- Is Australian society different or similar to Romeril's representation?
- What is your favourite quote from the play?

Identification with characters and situations

- How is this character's dialogue and language different to the other characters' and what does that reveal about class?
- Which character do you like or relate to most and why?
- What is the purpose of the minor characters in the play?

Reflection on completion of the play

- Is there any part of the play you would change, and if so, why?
- What do the unresolved problems reveal about the bigger issues of the play?
- What themes that surface in the play are still reflected in Australian society today?
- What is the point of creating literature such as this?

(ACELR038) (ACELR040) (ACELR045) (ACELR047) (ACELR052)

OUTLINE OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT

Plot

Timeline plot

Students should keep a chronological record of Les and Irene's holiday on the cruise ship. It would be helpful to include the flashbacks that Les has from his past, since these are integral to one of the play's biggest thematic concerns, and it is in these moments that Les's deeper psychological issues are revealed and explored.

Activity

Students are to draw a representation of this journey by mapping the chronology of events onto an actual physical map of the route from Melbourne to Japan that the cruise ship would have taken.

Narrative plot

The plot of the play is about the struggle of the internal world that exists within the casing of the external world. Students should draw an outline of a soldier, and as the narrative of the plot develops, they can choose to track the developments through visual diagrams inside this outline.

Characters

Character chart

Students are to keep a Characterisation table for each of the characters in the play. This will help them track and develop their understandings of the characters. They should find and incorporate a range of synonyms for the adjectives they use for the characters.

Examples of character language/clothing/dialogue/behaviour

Examples from the play (direct evidence is encouraged)

Analysis

Character relationships

In order to develop an understanding of the relationships between the characters, students are to construct a linked or webbed diagram of the characters' relationships with each other. They should also list the relevant page numbers to support their observations.

(ACELR044) (ACELR045) (ACELR046) (ACELR047)

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

Students will rewrite the ending in Romeril's style to re-imagine a different outcome for Les. They will discuss the impact of the different endings and how each makes its meaning clear.

(ACELR045) (ACELR047) (ACELR048) (ACELR050)

THE WRITER'S CRAFT

STRUCTURE

The play is a linear narrative that follows the chronological journey on board "The Women's Weekly" Cherry Blossom cruise in the Pacific. It is through this physical journey that Les's past inner torment as a prisoner of war unravels through a series of flashbacks. In order to balance their understanding of the inner world versus the outer world of the play, and thus develop an understanding of Romeril's political message, students should be encouraged to think about how Romeril used the presentation of the play's plot to develop the antiwar tone in his narrative.

Activity

- Students should track the development of the play's themes through Les's behaviour and actions as the play progresses. To do this, they should keep an online diary or blog from Les's perspective about how the events and people on the cruise ship have affected his memory and identity. They should also be encouraged to write using his 'voice' and may refer back to his dialogue to help them achieve this purpose.
- They might also consider developing the tensions in their character's thoughts that align with the play's exposition, rising action, climax and resolution.

(ACELR044) (ACELR045)

Approach to characterisation

The personal history of Les is crucial to understanding his psychological demise. In order for students to develop a better understanding of this, they should undertake research online or in their library to source nonfiction texts such as news articles, essays, speeches, documentaries etc. that develop their understanding of long-term postwar trauma and shock on soldiers.

Activity

Referring to sources such as "**The Shock of War**" and "**History of PTSD**", students should demonstrate their understanding of Les's condition in a table such as the one below:

Readings and research on PTSD	Examples from <i>The Floating World</i>	Analysis of Les's condition
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Students should also consider the relationships between Les and the other characters. In many instances, he hallucinates that the people around him, including his wife, Irene and the Malaysian waiter, are ghosts from his past, who clearly still haunt his memories of his time as a prisoner of war.

Activity

Look through the following pages where Les's hallucinations appear. For each hallucination, students are to write a monologue from the perspectives of Irene, the Waiter and Robinson about how they feel about Les during his hallucinations.

- Les imagines/dreams that he is with McLeod (p. 22)
- Les hallucinates that Irene is Muriel (p. 54)
- Les hallucinates that the Malaysian waiter is a Japanese soldier (p. 60)

Activity

Students may also want to look at entire scenes that depict Les's extended monologues, and consider why Romeril has chosen to present the themes in this way. They should be encouraged to pay close attention to particular words and phrases that connote particular ways of thinking about this character and his experiences. Refer to:

- Part 1, Scene 6 (p. 17)
- Part 2, Scene 7 (p. 67)
- Part 2, Scene 9 (p. 69)

(ACELR041) (ACELR047)

Setting

Aside from the characterisations, the physical, temporal and social settings in this play echo the dominant values and ideologies common in 1970s' Australia, as well as the play's central concerns. One of the ways in which Romeril conveys this is through the titles of each scene.

Activity

Students make a list of all the titles of the scenes and consider, before re-reading the scenes, what impressions they get of the settings and thus the tone and atmosphere created by them. After reading each scene, they may want to re-evaluate their impressions.

Activity

The play is broken up into Part 1 and Part 2. Part 2 occurs when the cruise ship sails above the equator. Students should look up the meaning and importance of the equator and think about why this is symbolic to the play. What themes are developed in Part 2 that are reflected in the change in setting?

(ACELR045)

Language and style

Students need to pay close attention to the words and dialogue used by the main characters. As they are reading the play, they should make a list of these words and phrases, and then, at the end of the play, look back on their lists and consider the following questions.

- How do these words reveal the characters' identities?
- What kinds of values do you think this character is associated with, based solely on language use?
- What do you think this character looks and behaves like?
- Can you think of a famous person, friend or family member you can imagine playing the role of this character?

Writing tasks

1. Students are given any extract from the play and asked to write a short commentary of around 300 words in length on the effectiveness of Romeril's dramatic and literary style in evoking the play's themes. Quotations from the extract should be used.
2. Focusing on the play as a performance piece, students can address the question, 'How does Romeril use dramatic and literary techniques to portray complex ideas of cultural identity in *The Floating World*?' Their work of around 500 words in length should include a range of examples from the text.

(ACELR042) (ACELR043) (ACELR045) (ACELR046) (ACELR047)

TEXT AND MEANING

Exploration of themes and ideas

Activity

The play carries many of the dominant socio-cultural values and ideas present in 1970s' Australia. Students should be encouraged to record how Romeril presents his vision of Australian culture at various moments in the play. They might choose to think about whether their own values were challenged or upheld by the play using the table below.

Themes (explore what you think Romeril's messages are)	Examples in the play	Are your views about this theme upheld or challenged by your reading?
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Racism

Effects of war

Australian identity

Gender

(ACELR041)

Meaning in context

Activity

Students will be divided into four groups, and using some of the resources referred to in the Initial response section and others, will be asked to do some specific research on 1970s' Australia relating to the themes of racism, identity, gender and the effects of war. They are to then present their findings in a tutorial presentation to their classmates. They may use the following guides to help them.

Group 1: (Gender in 1970s' Australia)

- Research the perceived roles and status of men and women in 1970s' Australian society.

Group 2: (Racism and multiculturalism in 1970s' Australia)

- Explore the impact of the White Australia Policy and the impact of the Vietnamese "boat people".

Group 3: (An evolving Australian identity)

- Investigate changing attitudes to being an Australian and Australia's place in the world in the 1970s.

Group 4: (War and its short and long-term effects)

- Research the ways Australian servicemen and women from World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars were treated on their return and how many of them suffered as a consequence of their experiences at home and on active service.

(ACELR039) (ACELR040) (ACELR041)

SYNTHESISING TASK

Using the first scene of the play, students are to write a commentary about how Harry, the narrator, foreshadows some of the themes that become dominant in the play as it develops.

(ACELR041) (ACELR043) (ACELR045)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

Students are advised on how to read the text using various strategies and through different lenses or perspectives. The following critical reading methods are helpful for a broader understanding of the play:

- Dominant, resistant and alternative readings.
- Social readings (for example, gender, race, class).
- Close reading (for example, investigating literary conventions etc.). NB: The earlier Close reading section of this unit outlines strategies for this approach.
- Contextual reading.

Extra information on different readings of texts can also be found in literature guides such as [Brian Moon's, Literary Terms](#).

Dominant reading

Students should first consider the dominant or deliberately constructed meaning that the playwright intends. The dominant reading often becomes a process where the students can unearth the playwright's purpose and intention, as well as the more widely accepted interpretations of a text. In order to help students identify the dominant reading of *The Floating World*, they should think about the following questions as they read the play.

1. What is the literal meaning of the text? (A summary of the plot will be useful here.)
2. Through the plot summary, can you locate the main message of the playwright? (You might want to consider what happens to the characters, the resolution, how they change, and what we are encouraged to feel about these events.)

Resistant reading

Once students have thought about the dominant reading/meaning, they should consider how a resistant reading would change their thinking. In this instance, they should see resistant reading as a reading lens which opposes, challenges and contradicts the dominant messages of the play. They should investigate:

1. Which social groups or individuals would feel excluded, alienated or opposed to the play's messages and why?
2. What are some ideas in the play that you found controversial or didn't agree with?

Alternative reading

An alternative reading differs from the dominant, and the most common way of reading the play. In order to locate alternative readings, students should think of these questions:

1. Can you think of other texts (films, advertisements, books, articles etc.) that cover similar topics/themes but have competing messages to this play?
2. Think of a social group that the play has represented (for example, women/soldiers). In groups, consider how women from all sorts of different backgrounds might respond to the play. Similarly, for those with experience of the military.

Social readings (gender, race, class)

a) Gendered reading

Gendered reading explores, in particular, the roles of masculinity and femininity in the play. Students are to examine the way the play represents female and male characters through dialogue, action and events. They should consider whether the play enforces gender stereotypes or disrupts them, according to the time of the play's production, in today's context, as well as from within their own personal contexts as readers.

Students should research and conduct in-class discussions on the following terms that will help them in their gendered readings:

- patriarchy,
- matriarchy,
- feminism,
- femininity,
- gender binary,
- social stratification,
- gender inequality.

As an additional activity, they could collect quotes and images from popular and significant texts and media from the 1970s to help them frame their understanding of the dominant ideologies of gender, and what values were associated with it. Texts such as Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* will be useful here.

b) Race reading

Students should be introduced to the idea of colonialism as it proliferated in the 19th and 20th centuries and consider how it was such a significant factor in the Second World War, Les's defining experience. In particular, they should consider:

1. How is colonialism still relevant today? Students need to understand xenophobia and the ways it manifests itself today. They could locate news articles that help illustrate this notion (for example in relation to Australia Day celebrations, refugees and asylum seekers).
2. As a manifestation of colonial imagination, can you find examples of how Australia reflects and/or challenges the colonial mindset?
3. Some reviewers have suggested that *The Floating World*, although it deals with racism, is itself a racist play. Conduct a class debate about this idea, ensuring that students use direct evidence from the text to support their ideas and assertions.

c) Class reading

Conduct a class discussion on what is meant by social class. Focus upon how the 'working class' and 'upper class' characters in the play are different to each other. Explore how the playwright uses dialogue, props and staging to convey these differences.

As part of this examination key terms such as: larrikinism, meritocracy, social mobility, Marxism, working class and upper class should be defined, discussed and exemplified. How does the notion of larrikinism fit into the Australian identity?

(ACELR037) (ACELR038) (ACELR039) (ACELR040) (ACELR041) (ACELR045) (ACELR046)

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER TEXTS

Laconic literature

The role and power of humour as part of the Australian identity is crucial to this play. In *The Floating World*, humour is maintained through a **Vaudeville style** of theatre. Students should research the notion of the Laconic tradition in Australian literature as well as in Vaudeville theatre. They might consider referring to other writers and texts that support comedic representations of the Australian stereotype. These include:

- Banjo Patterson
- Henry Lawson
- C. J. Dennis
- Barry Humphries
- Roy & HG
- Kath & Kim

Students should consider how *The Floating World* maintains this genre and style and thus upholds the Australian literary canon's tradition of delivering social commentary in this manner. Another avenue for investigation is how laconic literature is as equally politically potent as other more traditional forms of literature.

Versions of the text in other modes, media and contexts

Once students have finished reading the play in its entirety, they may consider experimenting with how genre affects meaning through the following activities:

- Write three journal entries from the perspective of one of the minor characters in the play. Each of the three entries should access and fill in the various narrative gaps that exist in the introduction, climax and then resolution of the play.
- Write a news article for Les and Irene's local newspaper, featuring a story on Les's arrest and incarceration in a mental institution.

(ACELR048) (ACELR050) (ACELR052)

Evaluation of the text

As representative of Australian culture and its significance to the world of literature

As an introduction to the activities below, students work in groups to look at the 'Australian' values portrayed in *The Floating World*, addressing ideas such as their prevalence, both then and now, the nature of Australian society, both then and now, and the relevance of the play to today's audiences. With this contextual background, they are then to undertake the following tasks.

- Write a three-minute speech to be delivered to next year's Year 12 literature students about the importance of studying Australian plays such as *The Floating World*.
- Having watched a sample episode of the ABC's **First Tuesday Book Club with Jennifer Byrne**, students are to form groups of four to conduct their own book club discussions on *The Floating World*, focusing particularly on whether or not Romeril's text is an iconic representation of Australian literature.

(ACELR041) (ACELR044) (ACELR047) (ACELR049)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE MODE)

This two-part task requires students to read a contemporary Australian short story, "**Neighbours**" by **Tim Winton** ([available in PDF format here](#)) and use it for each of the following tasks.

Part one:

As part of their close reading of “Neighbours” students are to compile a commentary or log as described in both the Initial response and Close reading sections of this unit, noting structure, plot progression, characters, dialogue, rising and falling action, themes and issues, and stylistic conventions and techniques.

Part two:

With this at hand and their journals, notes and previous work from their study of *The Floating World*, students are to write a substantial comparative essay or commentary using both texts, to explore how literature develops our understandings of the cultural layers of Australian society.

(ACELR037) (ACELR038) (ACELR039) (ACELR040) (ACELR041) (ACELR042)
(ACELR045)

SYNTHESISING CORE IDEAS

Students should be encouraged to reflect on the core ideas of the play through their journal writing, and especially on the following questions and ideas. These should be shared with others in the class after they have carefully considered their own thinking and points of view.

- Did you expect the ending? Do you think Romeril had intended to shock his viewers? How is the tragedy developed and brought to a climax in the play?
- Do you think Les deserved to be put into the mental institution? Who could be to blame?
- How do you think Romeril sees his role as a playwright in his community?
- Do you think the themes of the play are relevant to you and your society in 2016? Why or why not?

(ACELR037) (ACELR040) (ACELR045) (ACELR044)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (PRODUCTIVE MODE)

Protest poetry

Again this assessment task is in two parts; one is research based and the other a creative endeavour.

Firstly, students should select a range of war poetry from different periods in history and focus on three or four different examples of the genre and the way each work protests against both the notion and the carriage of war. Poets could include: **Wilfred Owen**, **Robert Graves**, **David Campbell**, **Kenneth Slessor**, **Bruce Dawe**, but especially those that deal with the psychological impact of the war experience on its victims and protagonists. (Students should note that there are extensive *Reading Australia* teaching units on the works of both **Kenneth Slessor** and **Bruce Dawe**.) In class, they are to discuss the stylistic features of the different poets and the effectiveness of the language used to convey purpose.

Secondly, students are to create their own poem that protests against war, focusing particularly on its psychological effects on soldiers as a theme. Students are asked to write in the form and style that suits them, but should model some of the approaches they use on those from their selected poets and works from the first part of the task. Finished work can be published in a class anthology. The “**English for the Australian Curriculum (e4ac)**” Year 10 unit on **Protest** and in particular protest against war, “**Ironical voices and visions**”, could be useful to students here.

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Unit Suitable For AC: Senior Secondary (Literature Unit 3)



Duration Five weeks

Curriculum Summary

Find a **summary table** for Australian Curriculum: Literature Unit 3 content descriptions.

Themes

Anzac Day, Australian humour, Australian identity, gender, marriage, memory, national spirit, racism, the past, war

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Understanding, Literacy, Personal and Social Capability

Cross-curriculum Priorities

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

FURTHER DETAILS

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