HSC STANDARD MODULE A ELECTIVE 2: The distinctively visual world of Vertigo a pastoral by Amanda Lohrey

HSC Standard Module A requires students to identify a range of human experiences and explore their portrayal in texts by examining forms and features to determine meaning. In Elective 2: Distinctively Visual, students analyzing prose texts, such as Vertigo, sometimes struggle to understand how verbal language can be effective in creating images. For that reason we need to start the teaching much earlier.

By encouraging students to reflect on the concepts of a novel, we can provide them with the ‘big ideas’ that are important in structuring an extended response. These themes then become the basis for creating thesis statements and topic sentences. Figurative language features are explicitly taught in Stages 4 and 5 English, using a conceptual framework which is an effective way for students to compose sophisticated responses by avoiding the commonplace retelling of textual events.

Vertigo a pastoral, written by Amanda Lohrey with images by Lorraine Biggs, is a “fable of love and awakening” (back cover) that explores the sea change made by a married couple, Luke and Anna, following the death of their unborn child. Published by Black Inc Books in 2009, and at 140 pages, this novella is an achievable read with audio versions available. Students can explore contemporary Australian life through rich descriptions of urban and rural environments, as well as representations of human relationships. In addition, Lohrey effectively constructs two important motifs to direct our awareness of Luke and Anna’s growing emotional recovery: images of birds and ‘the boy’.

Syllabus and text

When introducing the module rubric, and during reading, it is worthwhile developing a word bank of synonyms for students to begin using in their discussions, both verbal and written.

Suggested Word Bank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Synonym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>distinctive</td>
<td>unique, exclusive, peculiar, particular, special, typical / atypical, uncommon, individual, distinguishing, characteristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visual</td>
<td>graphic, image, illustration, vision, picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>effective</td>
<td>successful, potent, powerful, strong, valuable, useful, convincing, compelling, valid, impressive, plausible, credible, lucid, coherent, interesting, essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluate</td>
<td>assess, judge, examine, analyse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vertigo</td>
<td>disorientation, dizziness, unbalanced, imbalance, giddiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pastoral</td>
<td>rural, countryside, rustic, spiritual, idyllic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>numinous</td>
<td>divine, sacred, mysterious, unearthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maelstrom</td>
<td>Vortex, eddy, swirl, turmoil, chaos, upheaval</td>
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Context and purpose
Now living in Tasmania, Lohrey writes from an Australian perspective and has personally witnessed the drama and flames of bushfires. In a radio interview (accessible online), Lohrey explains that she wanted to create ‘something mysterious’ and deliberately chose a short form, believing too much information and description obscures ‘capturing and exploring the mystery of being’ (Koval, 2008). Black and white images are peppered throughout the text and were chosen in collaboration with Biggs. These photographs are ambiguous, deliberately small, yet suggest landscapes and ideas. Written beautifully, Lohrey’s novella offers an exploration of important moments in life – loss, grief, adapting to a new environment, the beauty of nature – however, be cautious when introducing this text to students: her vivid writing makes dramatic moments all too real.

Style and structure
Vertigo is a linear narrative written in third person, with Anna and Luke revealing details of their backstory through reflective contemplation and flashbacks. The three distinct parts lack specific chapters, yet Lohrey effectively takes us into the world of the Worleys, and provides opportunities for students to explore contrasting images of Australian life. Remind students of relevant metalanguage to incorporate in their responses, and encourage them to write one or two succinct sentences to outline the plot. Retelling and descriptive writing too often restricts a student’s ability to access high range grades.

Contrasting urban and rural spaces
Lohrey depicts an unhealthy and unaffordable city as catalyst for the Worley’s move to the coast. United in their decision, Anna and Luke are indecisive about the site of their relocation:

Some inland towns stood frozen in time: a dusty high street; a melancholy war memorial ... But there were other towns that could almost have been outposts of the city, where an art gallery with kelim rugs and carved wooden birds might be found beside a sleek new wine bar.

The Worleys agreed that they wanted to live in neither, not the old or the new ... (Lohrey, pp. 10–11).

Ideas of living spaces and ownership are linked closely with contentment:

Instead of being confined to a boxed-in apartment they are free now to roam through its many rooms, to experience the joys of nooks and alcoves, not to mention their favourite hang-out, the wide veranda. In the city they had a small balcony off their apartment, but it wasn’t the same. You looked out to a smoggy curtain across the built-up sky or down a long drop to the bitumen road below. You were not earthed. What you desired was a space between two worlds, that dream-like threshold (Lohrey, pp. 21–22).

We become increasingly aware of the spiritual element of being, of the ‘numinous’ within our lives and students may be challenged to consider the complexity of adulthood in everyday life choices.
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Over a few pages in Part I, we come to understand the lifestyle changes for the Worleys, such as lounging together on the ‘wide veranda’ instead of heading to a café on Saturday mornings. Focusing on pages 18–24, students could identify other aspects of their new lifestyle and record evidence in a simple table.

Contrasting workspaces and leisure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Garra Nalla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luke rented one room office</td>
<td>Climbs ladder to ‘sun-struck eyrie in the roof’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna worked in a tiny second bedroom</td>
<td>‘retires to the back sunroom ... look west to the smoky blue hills’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘neither had used so much as a trowel’</td>
<td>‘Now they have calluses on their hands and the pleasure of rhythmic physical movement, like raking leaves, can bring on a state of mindless contentment’</td>
</tr>
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Reality of the bush

Just as we are seduced into accepting the romanticized idyll, Lohrey introduces divergent pictures of the ‘garden’ with the brutal opening of the final paragraph of page 24:

But this is not Eden, this is drought country. Behind the coast are hills of dry sclerophyll forest and between the hamlet and the forest are pastures cleared for sheep, grasslands that are dried out and dun-coloured from seven years of drought … it has begun to sound biblical; a curse.

Biblical allusions are paralleled in a travel diary subtitled ‘An Account of a Tour in Palestine’ that Luke finds in the shed, where the desert of Judea is a ‘mean country’ and the town of Bethlehem is ‘un-reedemably ugly’ (Lohrey, pp 38 – 43). The inevitability of the bushfire is signaled with a poignant stand-alone sentence ‘There are days when they speak only of water’ (Lohrey, p. 25).

Friendship and Community

An important aspect of successfully moving from the city is the ability of Luke and Anna to develop connections with local people. Lohrey creates two interesting character portraits of the Worley’s neighbours who represent different aspects of masculinity. Firstly, we meet Gilbert Reilly, their nearest neighbour who is an elderly widower: “Gil is tall with a long beaky nose and ginger-grey hair that is thin on top and acts as a source of local lore and advice when he stops in for coffee and a regular ‘natter’ (Lohrey, p. 25). Gil’s friendly and reliable personality is shown through colloquial language and Australian idioms. Similarly, a second neighbour is portrayed through appearance and actions yet readers are negatively positioned through emotive terms:

Rodney Banfield, the local plumber, a short, thickset man in his late twenties with a long blond pony-tail and an ugly dog, a black Staffordshire cross that barks and barks all night until Rodney comes home in the small hours of the morning. (Lohrey, p. 26)

In Part II, Anna and Luke settle deeper into the village and become close with the Watts family. We learn that Alan and Bette are practical members of ‘that coastal tribe’ with two children, Zack and Brion. Anna admires their simplistic lifestyle:

Bette is a part time nurse and competition kayaker, an athletic woman with cropped dark hair. Alan is a tall, barrel-chested man in his early forties who teaches maths at Brockwood High School, in and around the pursuit of his passion for collecting rustic hardware (Lohrey, p. 49).

Grief, loss and distance

With their acceptance into Garra Nalla comes opportunities to more closely scrutinize their reasons for moving, both consciously and unconsciously. Though Anna and Luke do not actually discuss their child’s death, both deal with their emotions in different ways. Anna senses a distance between herself and Luke – he used to have a sharp mind ‘that sees through bullshit’ but ‘Now he goes about with a happily bemused expression on his face, like he’s stoned, or sits cross-legged on the veranda drinking wine with Rodney’ (Lohrey, p. 83). The men talk violently of falcons and ‘dead common’ crows, while Anna ponders the meaning of life past everyday survival.

And the thought of this brings on a rush of vertigo, a dizzying sense of disorientation, as if she is about
to fall, but that when she falls she will be weightless. She has lost her roots, her anchorage to the earth ... the world is spinning away from her’ (Lohrey, pp. 85–86).

This epiphany closes the second part of the novella, allowing the reader to reflect on the Worley’s future.

Threat, aftermath and survivors

Lohrey’s domestic opening to Part III – a trip to the nursery to purchase she-oaks planted on ‘a day of baking heat’ before we glimpse Anna and Luke share an intimate moment (pp. 89–90) – simply prepares us for the catastrophe that is to come. Just as Henry Lawson created iconic images of gritty characters determined to survive in the Australian landscape, Lohrey acknowledges references to Henry Lawson’s poem The Fire at Ross’s Farm and his short story titled Bushfire.

Typically, as a husband, Luke seeks to re-assure Anna as she becomes concerned about the smoke ‘seeping into the sky like a release of octopus ink’ (Lohrey, p. 91). A sense of urgency is effectively portrayed by the use of present tense in describing the bushfire:

The speed with which the fire-ball engulfs them is something they will replay in their heads, over and over, because it is scarcely credible. One minute the squall line of cloud, the next a maelstrom of smoke and flaming embers hurtling into the backyard ... a geyser of white-hot cinders sprays above the fence line like a giant Roman candle ... (Lohrey, p. 115).

The locals repeatedly state that bushfires ‘never reach the coast’ contrasting ideas of complacency, bravado and a false sense of security.

Lohrey vividly captures the shocked reaction felt by Anna and Luke immediately after the fire:

When they stumble out of the church hall into the smoky morning light, they are surrounded by the charcoaled remains of a holocaust. Across the lagoon, the southern end of the beach is a crust of glowing embers ... sheets of corrugated iron are strewn on a carpet of ash. The trees are black skeletons with crowns of scorched foliage, a rust colour that is like a pale imprint of the flames’ (p. 124).

In the closing pages of the novella, Lohrey reveals that ‘The settlement of Garra Nalla has survived a perfect firestorm’ (p. 128). By retelling individual vignettes of survival, we see the tenacity of Gil and the Watts who cling to rocks on the edge of the ocean, and come to understand the quirk of fate that allows Anna and Luke to be rescued by fire fighters. In quintessential Australian style, the locals celebrate their survival by gathering on the bluff and Bette decorates a ‘small bush conifer for a Christmas tree’ (Lohrey, p. 135). This detailed description is successfully contrasted with a brief, emotionally laden sentence: ‘Mercifully there is no wind’ (Lohrey, p. 135). We see typical summer family activities, such as a cricket game and picnics, yet later, Anna ‘looks over to where the men are clustered, like a flock of birds’ (Lohrey, pp. 135–136). Vertigo references birds throughout, allowing us to chase these fleeting motifs as metaphorical representations of human emotions.

Images of birds

The opening page foretells Luke’s growing interest in bird-watching: There are birds in the city, but in the city you rarely notice them (Lohrey, p. 3). He is unable to identify a ‘mournful bird cry’ and cannot rely on his father for guidance as Ken doesn’t know the ‘difference between a raven and a blackbird’ (Lohrey, p. 4). Birds hold a powerful and ancient symbolic role as messengers of the gods, communicating through eerie calls and their ability to fly. Rather than being overly religious, Lohrey tries to capture the protagonists’ burgeoning sense of “being a small part of a great whole” (Sullivan, 2008). It is worth closely studying Lohrey’s ability to contrast vivid and specific descriptions of bird life in the bush with Luke’s reaction to another unidentified bird on pages 28–29.
Images of the boy

The recurring motif of an unnamed ‘boy’ comes to embody the projected imaginings of the Worley’s stillborn child. Lohrey sees the boy as ‘another dimension of reality’ which allowed her to write a fable to demonstrate the sense of disorientation that accompanies us when we ‘move from the city to the country’ (Koval, 2008). As an apparition or haunting presence of dead child, the boy’s presence in initially shared by Anna and Luke:

In the claustrophobic spaces of their dark little apartment his appearances were erratic and unpredictable, but once out on the freeway they would glance behind them and there he would be, lap-sashed on the back seat and with an enquiring look on his face; that dreamy, expectant expression that children get when they are travelling to an unknown destination (Lohrey, p. 10).

He is there as they explore their new world ‘... as they caught their first glimpse of breaking surf the boy suddenly sat upright. Roused from his torpor on the back seat he craned his neck ...’ (Lohrey, p. 11), yet is experienced in increasingly separate situations which mirrors the growing estrangement between Luke and Anna.

Luke encounters the boy most commonly in a recurring dream which begins after the Worleys take up canoeing. A benign tidal wave submerges the town and Luke swims beneath the sunlit surface like a water baby. And the boy is there, swimming alongside. His face is radiant and there are small translucent fish darting around his head … his small but supple limbs beat against the current (Lohrey, p. 37).

These symbolic and ephemeral visitations of the boy contrast with Anna’s more visceral exposure, such as when she ‘wakes and thinks that she hears the boy crying. Or has she dreamed it? Still, she is not alarmed; she knows that he will return’ (Lohrey, p. 56). Luke’s catharsis comes after the fire as he ‘stumbles, weeping, through the powdery ash, climbing over the still-warm charcoal of the fallen trunks, and he is back in the delivery room, two years ago, when Anna had given birth to the boy; his tiny, curled-up body with its grey translucent skin, his dark, wine-red lips, the pinkish white of his eyelids, closed to them for all time’ (Lohrey, p. 130). This particularly harrowing description reveals an image of masculine grief and highlights the
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expectation in our society that males are less able to express their emotional pain.

Through childbirth, Anna has a very different link with the child she carried and lost, and after the fire she undergoes a poignant farewell.

That night the boy comes to Anna in a dream. And this is odd, because she never dreams of him, but tonight here he is, at the back door. The garden as it was before the fire, perfect in every detail, mellow and bathed in afternoon light, and the boy is in the open doorway, waving. But before she can wave back, the figure in the doorway has dissolved in the light. And she wakes crying (Lohrey, p. 134).

When viewed as a whole, there is a sense of symmetry in Lohrey’s synthesis of conflicting emotions and experiences that people participate in when dealing with pain, loss and grief. Students should consider the macro concepts before explaining their effect through micro language forms, features and the use language in creating distinct visual representations.

* This paper is based on a presentation delivered on March 22, 2014 as part of the ETA Exploring Module A day, with some ideas originally discussed at the *Innovation* ETA Conference 2013 as part of the ED Talks for Mod A.

References


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**PRAC SNACK:**
Prac students report on their experiences

Jessica Thompson, Charles Sturt University

*What did you like most about teaching English in the classroom?*

The most important thing about teaching English is the range of ways you can teach one topic. Students learn in different ways and the English curriculum allows for a range of activities to be part of the lesson. Another great thing about teaching English is that students can be educated in a range of ways through books, plays, movies and poetry.

*What were the best lessons, and why did they feature highly for you?*

Some of the best lessons involved a range of activities that would incorporate the elements of different learning styles such as hands on, audio and visual learning. I found that catering for a class allowed for the best lessons – some classes work and learn more with group projects while others prefer individual study approaches.

*What was best about being with your mentor teacher?*

My best mentor teacher allowed me to come up with ideas that he did not think would work but he allowed me to do it anyway which was great for both of us, as I taught with more group focus and small group activities. I’ve had other mentor teachers who are also very involved in the ways I want to teach and continually give me guidance.