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Textual

Exploring Senior English

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UNCORRECTED SAMPLE PAGES – Chapter 1

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Introduction

Reading and responding to the various theories of literary criticism is challenging and, possibly, uncharted territory for many high school students. The terrain is usually characterised by sophisticated academic writing, unfamiliar terminology or jargon, and allusions to various historical and literary figures associated with particular theories.

We hope to provide signposts in this book to help you find your way around the world of critical theory. While you may think that the English classroom is a world away from such theoretical concerns, the very activities we engage in when reading, responding and composing are actually shaped or informed by critical theory.

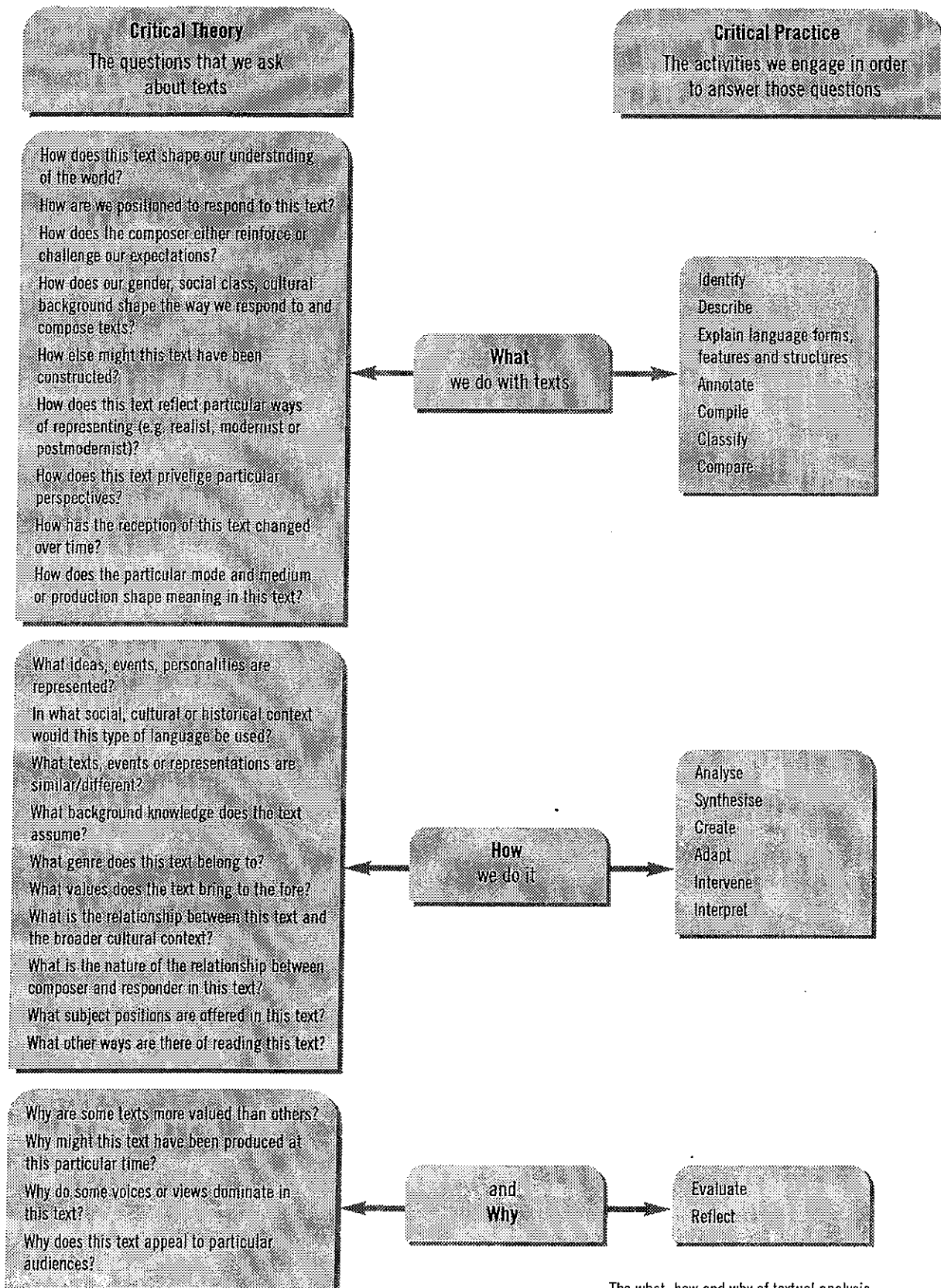
These activities are such a natural part of what we do when we study English that we sometimes do not stop to question the assumptions underlying those activities. For example, why do we study some texts and not others? Do we distinguish between 'literary' and other kinds of texts, such as films, advertisements or popular fiction? What kinds of questions do we ask about texts? Are some texts considered timeless in their value and appeal? How do we work out the meaning of the text? Is a text's meaning the author's intention or the reader's opinion? If the latter, which reader's? What does it really mean to study *English*?

Searching for answers to these questions forms the basis of this book. Detours, culs-de-sac, one-way streets and multi-lane highways are the metaphorical equivalents of literary criticism. The debates and differences are often heated affairs, as can be seen in David Williamson's satiric play *Dead White Males*, in which Williamson champions the cause of liberal humanism against its upstart competitors, postmodernism and poststructuralism.

While the differences between critical theories are very significant, there are some arguments that seem to have been resolved. For example, most critics would now agree that there is no neutral or innocent reading of a text. The historical, cultural and social context of a text helps to shape meaning, as does the particular reader's perspective. Nor is there any longer a simplistic search for meaning in the life of the author. Questions about the canon and about which texts should be included in it are also less likely to cause controversy today than they did in the past, and there is probably broader acceptance of the need to include a wide range of text types in English syllabuses.

'Text' now refers to much more than a select group of literary texts in the form of novels, plays and poems. Certainly, in the New South Wales syllabus it also refers to film, television, multimedia, media and non-fiction. So, alongside our study of Shakespeare, Austen and Coleridge, we also explore films like *Clueless* and *Blade Runner* and television satire like *Frontline*.

Context also forms an important part of the approach to texts. The term 'context' refers to both the immediate circumstances of a text's production and the larger historical and cultural frame of reference. Without understanding the exploration of the New World undertaken by the Elizabethans, for example, and the contemporary debate of nature versus nurture, it would be difficult to understand the fascination of the undiscovered island world of *The Tempest* and the character of Caliban. Similarly, the idealisation of nature found in Wordsworth's or Coleridge's poetry is a response to the urban excesses of the industrial revolution. The study of context means also that



The what, how and why of textual analysis.

we consider what is left out of a text as well as what is included in it. These omissions may include a range of different types of voices, particular classes of society or historical events. The effect of such omissions and silences on representation and meaning forms an important part of our explorations in this book.

The chapters are organised according to different signposts: Meaning, Text, Context, Intertextuality, Representation, Composers, Responders, and Values and valuing. The chapters have been organised around these syllabus concepts rather than around particular theories. The reason for this is two-fold: first, the chapter titles represent the basic syllabus terminology that you need to be able to use confidently throughout the Preliminary and HSC courses; and second, the syllabus does not require you to study the different theories closely. However, we think that knowledge of aspects of these theories and their practical application can certainly enhance both your responses to prescribed texts and your own compositions. It provides you with other ways of looking at texts.

Therefore, the first chapter, 'Meaning', is like an umbrella chapter. It will introduce you to many of the concepts and theories that subsequent chapters will explore in more detail. The **Signpost** section of each chapter orientates you in the chapter's terrain, pointing out the ideas and content to be explored. The next section, the **Terrain** section, is the area to be traversed and inspected. It will include discussion of relevant theories and introduce the names of influential people or texts that have shaped the outline and contours of the area. The Terrain concludes with a summary under the heading 'Intersections'. This heading is meant to suggest the meeting point of theory and application, for the next section, called **Exploration**, is where we provide case studies of textual analysis that are consistent with the terrain. We also include many 'navigating' activities for you to complete, to allow you to become the explorer of the terrain. Some of these activities are short. Others are more extensive and include specific criteria to be addressed.

Definitions of important terms appear in the margin of the page when they are first introduced, and a composite glossary can be found at the back of the book. Also at the back is an appendix giving a very brief summary of the complex theories that are explained in the text, along with the names of key theorists.

We do not want you to think that there is a 'right' way of responding to texts or that critiquing is necessarily a negative activity that involves criticising the ideas and values of the original text. We hope that you become audacious, bold and confident young explorers, agreeing with and endorsing, or disagreeing with and challenging, particular ways of looking at texts – and, in the process, discovering new textual delights.

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Content overview

Chapter	Scope of content	References to texts	Links to syllabus
1 Meaning	This chapter explores the idea that texts can be read in different ways.	Charlotte Bronte's <i>Jane Eyre</i> Emily Bronte's <i>Wuthering Heights</i> Shakespeare's <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> David Williamson's <i>Dead White Males</i> Gwen Harwood's poetry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Underpins the approach of the syllabus in all modules Special emphasis on Module B (Advanced): Critical Study of Texts
2 Text	This chapter <ul style="list-style-type: none"> focuses on the emergence of different theories, from structuralism to poststructuralism shows students how texts shape our understanding of people, events or ideas rather than simply reflect these things. 	Bruce Dawe's poetry Paul Keating's 1992 Remembrance Day speech Peter Carey's <i>True History of the Kelly Gang</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module B (Advanced): Critical Study of Texts Module C (Advanced): Representation and Text
3 Context	This chapter explores the significance of historical and cultural 'context' when critiquing a text.	Jane Austen's <i>Emma</i> Tom Stoppard's <i>The Real Inspector Hound</i> Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> Ridley Scott's <i>Blade Runner</i> and Aldous Huxley's <i>Brave New World</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module A (Advanced): Comparative Study of Texts and Context Module B (Advanced): Critical Study of Texts
4 Intertextuality	This chapter explores different types of intertextuality by referring to the ideas of some important theorists, such as Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva.	<i>Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i> Jane Austen's <i>Emma</i> and the 1995 motion picture <i>Clueless</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module A (Advanced): Comparative Study of Texts and Context
5 Representation	This chapter explores the different paradigms of realism, modernism and postmodernism.	<i>The Breakfast Club</i> A number of texts in a variety of media that deal with the late Princess of Wales Mark Baker's <i>The Fiftieth Gate</i> Sally Potter's 1992 film <i>Orlando</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module C (Advanced): Representation and Text
6 Composers	This chapter examines the shift in the way in which we understand the role of the 'author' or composer.	John Fowles's <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> Poetry of John Donne Television series <i>Frontline</i> Multimedia text <i>Samplers: Nine Vicious Little Hypertexts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module B (Advanced): Critical Study of Texts Module C (Advanced): Representation and Text
7 Responders	This chapter explores the idea of different subject positions that the responder can occupy and the ways this influences response to texts.	Bram Stoker's <i>Dracula</i> <i>Muriel's Wedding</i> Gwen Harwood's poem 'The Glass Jar'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module B (Advanced): Critical Study Texts
8 Values and Valuing	This chapter explores both established or dominant values in texts and the ways in which they are challenged.	Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> Tim Winton's <i>Cloudstreet</i> Aldous Huxley's <i>Brave New World</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Module B (Advanced): Critical Study of Texts



Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of our families, friends, colleagues and students.



Meaning

Signpost

This chapter on meaning will explore the idea that texts can be read in different ways. This idea reflects a shift from earlier critical approaches, where meaning was seen to be something that the individual 'author or composer' intended, and where readers had to search to uncover the 'true' meaning of a text. Newer critical practices suggest that a text has a range of possible readings rather than a single, coherent 'theme' or meaning. Making meaning is an active process that often challenges previous dominant readings. It relies on our wider cultural understandings and our experience of other texts. Our sense of recognition when we read or see a new text springs from the connections we make between the text and this wider experience. Chapters 3 and 4 will develop this idea of connections much more fully when they explore context and intertextuality.

Different readings of texts also imply different values so that there is always something at stake in the notion of different readings. Some readings will support particular views of the world and how it should be; other readings will resist such views and affirm different values. There is an assumption, then, that there can be no innocent or neutral reading of texts.

We will explore different readings of selected texts in this chapter.

Terrain

Working out the meaning of a poem is familiar terrain for most students of English. Meaning is presented as a puzzle. Sometimes the puzzle is more cryptic than at other times, but we assume that, if we work our way through the clues, including biographical information about the composer's life and critics' opinions, we will be able to solve the puzzle, and thus extract the meaning from the text.

However, our understanding of the meaning of texts changed in the last half of the 20th century. Rather than searching for 'the meaning' of a text, we explore 'how' we make meaning and how that is shaped by such factors as the type of text, its context, its purpose and audience, and our understanding of other texts. In other words, the meaning of a text is not located within the covers of a book or the frame of a film. It is always located within relationships between text and context, composer and responder.

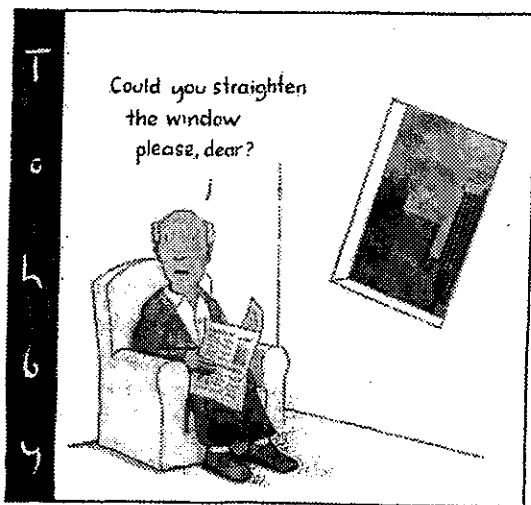
In fact, the very distinction between the covers of a book and the 'world' supposedly reflected within them is no longer regarded as simple or obvious. The cartoon on the left provides a humorous insight into questions of meaning and this relationship between 'art' and 'real life'.

The distinction between 'real life' and text here is ironically and humorously blurred. There's the picture of the man with a newspaper (one of the texts we use to make meaning of our world) sitting in front of a lopsided image that could be a visual text – say, a painting – but which is referred to as a window. The 'view' could be of the 'world beyond' the room or it could be a constructed image that represents a particular view of the world beyond. What is the cartoonist suggesting about how we make sense of our world? It seems that it is almost impossible for us to tell the difference between 'real life' and the way it is represented. We use our knowledge of texts as much as our direct experience to make meaning. Texts can be said to intervene in the world, presenting particular versions of it and thereby suggesting how it is or should be.

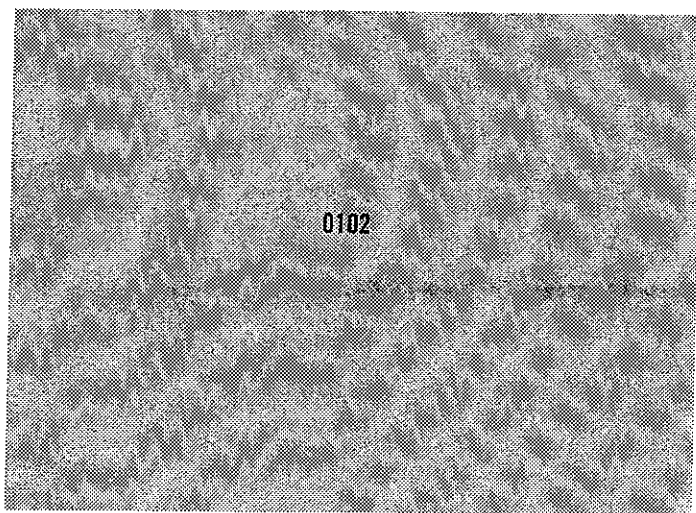
Other examples of how meaning-making relies on a wider cultural context and on knowledge of other texts are evident in many of the films that we see. The fairy tale of Cinderella has been retold in many different versions, including such contemporary films as *Pretty Woman* and *Ever After*. Wes Craven's 1996 movie *Scream* parodies our understanding of the gothic horror genre.

This film recycled all the clichés of the gothic horror genre and turned them inside out. Its success relied on a knowing audience who could recognise all the staple features of such movies.

The idea that new texts often involve 'putting a spin' on older works can be seen in a number of texts to be examined in this book (*True History of the Kelly Gang*, *Clueless*, *Buffy*, *the Vampire*



Cartoon by Matthew Martin, from the *Good Weekend Magazine*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 January 2003.

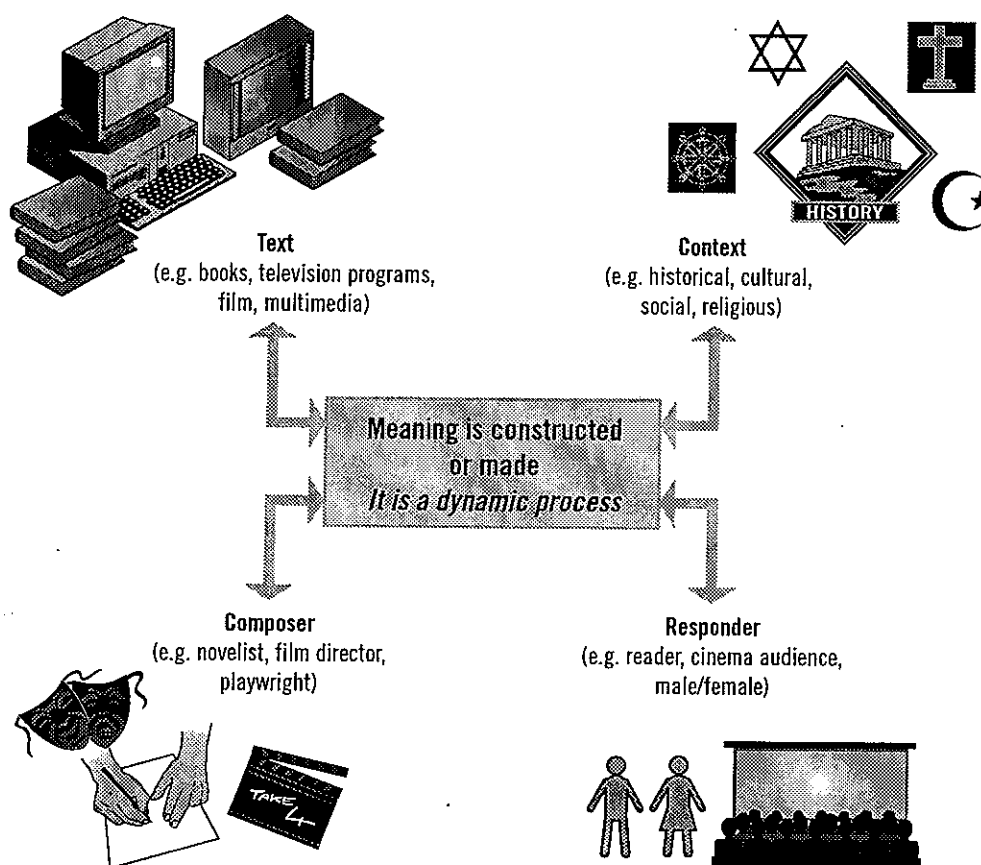


Scream publicity poster

Slayer etc.). The meaning of the newer text always contains traces of the 'original' text's meaning, but with a different slant or perspective.

In summary, then, meaning-making involves a dynamic relationship between past and present, between composer and responder, and between text and **context**. Central to this idea of meaning as a dynamic process is the notion that we construct meaning rather than just find it in the text. This represents a shift in our understanding of meaning from *what* texts mean to *how* they mean. The diagram below represents meaning as a dynamic and relational process.

context
The circumstances surrounding a text's production and publication, including its historical and political milieu.



The construction of meaning.

Examples of meaning as a changing, dynamic process

If meaning is the result of a dynamic process, which depends on the relationship between text, context, composer and responder, then meaning is open to change and text to reinterpretation. Simply put, if one element in the chain of text, context, composer and responder changes, then meaning shifts.

The 'meaning' of this cartoon below, for example, is dependent on our understanding of current political debate around issues of Aboriginal reconciliation. It's set on the eve of the new millennium and depicts an Aboriginal elder and child on the shores of Sydney Harbour. It alludes to the long history of Aboriginal settlement in Australia before European 'discovery' and so ironically targets cultural assumptions about the meaning of the term 'millennium'. Celebrations around the world to mark the

'second' millennium derive their meaning from the Western practice of marking history in relation to the birth of Christ. This cartoon can be said to 'foreground' those aspects of our history that are often glossed over or placed in the background.

Such foregrounding of Indigenous Australian perspectives is evident in a range of texts that are contemporary with this cartoon: Jane Harrison's play *Stolen* and films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence* and *Australian Rules* are all examples of texts that foreground those aspects of our past that have often been neglected or marginalised in dominant Australian literary and cultural traditions. When we read the cartoon, we make meaning from that wider cultural context as much as from the cartoon itself.



Cartoon published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 January 2000.

Navigating 1

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- ➊ demonstrate an understanding of how meaning is shaped by connections between texts and context
- ➋ compose and respond
- ➌ compose texts appropriate to audience purpose and context.

- 1 Imagine this cartoon was to appear in an anthology of political cartoons to be published on the eve of Australia's tercentennial celebrations. Write the text that would need to accompany it so that the readers of 2088 would understand and appreciate it.
- 2 Complete the following table to show how meaning shifts according to the relationship between text, context, composer and responder. The topic is: 'What it means to be an Australian in 2003'. The first row is done as an example for you. Suggest some other alternative meanings by supplying one or more examples for each of the headings: text, context, composer, responder and meaning.

Text	Context	Composer	Responder	Meaning?
Ceremonial speech	Anzac Day	Prime Minister of Australia	Those gathered at Canberra's War Memorial for the Dawn service	Being Australian is about courage in the face of adversity; mateship
Anti-war poster				?
	National Sorry Day, May 26			?
		Young Australian of the year		?

Shifts in meaning also occur when texts from the past are reinterpreted and reproduced in the present in different forms and media. Consider the following texts:

- ☉ Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*
- ☉ Simon Langton's 1995 television serialisation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*
- ☉ Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, based on the 19th-century novel by Mary Shelley.

In each of these examples, the contemporary context affected interpretation. Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, for example, combined contemporary, Elizabethan and futuristic settings. It was replete with visual and pop culture influences, such as MTV, Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, Quentin Tarantino and episodes of *Miami Vice*, and the police siege was reminiscent of the end of James Dean's famous movie *Rebel Without a Cause*. Our enjoyment of the text is enhanced through these connections.

Interpretation is also affected through the application of new techniques and technology to represent the ideas of a text. Branagh's transformation of Shelley's novel, for example, demonstrates the impact of visual images on meaning. The repeated overhead shots of Frankenstein reveal his human rather than god-like qualities, thereby making the audience aware that his perceptions of his power are inflated, misguided and out of touch with reality. He is not in control.

Yet, even if the representations of these texts were as faithful as possible to the original text, they would still be viewed through 21st-century eyes. This means we notice things that may have been unremarkable at the time the text was composed, or question things that may have been a matter of common sense to people of earlier times.

So, if we argue that meaning is not fixed but can shift and vary, can texts mean anything we want them to mean?

Clearly we would not be able to communicate if this were the case. Communication depends on some degree of shared understanding. Shifts in meaning do not imply that 'anything goes' with texts, but rather that at different times, particular meanings or readings are dominant. In one sense there is always a contest or challenge for such dominance. So meaning is closely tied to wider cultural debates about ideas and values.

From blond to *the* blonde

One example of how dominant meanings have shifted according to cultural context can be seen in an examination of what it means to be blonde. Clearly 'blonde' stands for more than just a hair colour. Images, headlines and stories of 'blondes' all rely on responders interpreting the meaning of 'blonde' in particular ways: the fairy-tale princess, Barbie, 'dumb blondes', sex symbols, 'dangerous blondes', the 'girl next door', the 'mischievous blonde', the 'ice queen'. Whenever we encounter a text featuring a blonde — whether a story, an advertisement or a film — these readings help 'fill in any gaps' in the text. That is, we have 'already read' the blonde before we encounter the specific text. Let's examine some of the different readings of blonde available at different times:

It all began once upon a time when a beautiful woman [Rapunzel] let a man climb her long golden tresses and enter her bedroom. They lived happily ever after, with the image of this blonde's inviting beauty proving just as everlasting.

By dictionary definition, to be fair is to be light in colour and also to be free from anything that spoils appearance or character. This feminine attribute typifies fairytale heroines who are usually fair in both senses of the word. The evil inclinations are left to those of darker shades — the wicked stepmother is never blonde.¹

Navigating 2

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- 1 demonstrate an understanding of the ideas and values expressed in texts
- 2 demonstrate an understanding of the impact of the medium of production on meaning
- 3 compose an imaginative text suitable for a particular audience and purpose.

- 1 Examine the following visual and verbal texts. Identify the qualities associated with blonderness. What readings of the blonde does each text support? The first one is done for you.

Text



Botticelli's Venus

The meaning of blonde in the text

'The Birth of Venus', the most famous blonde of the Renaissance, painted by Botticelli

Light colours dominate the painting. Venus, the Roman goddess of love, is represented as both innocent and alluring.

This interpretation is part of a wider set of readings that include depictions of the Virgin Mary and early saints and martyrs as blondes.

Once upon a time there lived the daughter of a king, who was so beautiful that there was nothing quite so beautiful on earth; and because she was so beautiful, she was called Beauty with the Golden Hair, for her hair was finer than gold and marvellously wondrously blonde, all curly, and fell to her feet. She was always covered by her wavy hair, and clothes embroidered with diamonds and pearls, so that you could not look on her without loving her.
(Mme d'Aulnoy, 1696)

A maiden meek, and young, and fair;
Her eyes were blue as flowers o'lint,
Her cheeks the roses' bonniest tint,
And streamed in golden waves of hair.
(A musical version of *Cinderella*, around 1889)



Marilyn Monroe in
Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,
1953

Text

The meaning of blonde in the text

It was a blonde. A blonde to make a bishop
kick a hole in a stained-glass window.
(Raymond Chandler, *Farewell my Lovely*, 1940)



Reese Witherspoon in
Legally Blonde, 2001

One of the glaring absences here is any depiction of male 'blonds'. Since some boys and men also have fair hair, their absence from cultural representations of blondness emphasises the gendered reading of 'blonde'.

- 2 Use one of the representations above (either visual or verbal) for a new advertising campaign featuring blondes. Decide what the product will be. You may subvert the ideas and values represented in the text to create a sense of irony. Or you may use them to promote the values represented. Your campaign could include:
 - a a label for the product
 - b a storyboard for a television advertisement
 - c a script for a radio advertisement.

The development of different readings as critical practice

First, it is important to stress that readings aren't like recipe cards in a file that can simply be shuffled and selected at random. You are always required to engage personally with texts and to evaluate different readings.

Second, the idea of different readings has challenged previous approaches to literary criticism, which emphasised close analysis of 'the words on the page'. However, this doesn't mean that we no longer analyse texts when we employ different readings. What it does mean is that we ask different questions of the text. We look for what isn't there as well as what is; what is foregrounded and what is marginalised; the gaps and silences in the text.

Earlier critical practices are known as 'Practical Criticism' and 'New Criticism', and are associated with the English scholars F R Leavis and I A Richards respectively. While Leavis placed more emphasis on the importance of the author's intention and Richards on the words of the text itself, both shared the following assumption: meaning, or 'truth', is to be found in a text that is self-contained and unchanging, unaffected by changes in real life. Leavis is also attributed with helping to create the **canon** of English literature. William Shakespeare is central to the canon. Other composers include Geoffrey Chaucer, John Keats, William Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Henry James, George Eliot, T S Eliot and D H Lawrence.



F R Leavis.

canon

The body of literary texts that have been judged to be classics and therefore worthy of study. Their understood value transcends popularity or fashion.

Challenges to practical and new criticism

By the 1960s and 1970s, new theoretical viewpoints began to challenge the dominant approach to literature represented by Leavis and Richards. These new viewpoints cannot be separated from the social and political changes that overtook the world in the 1960s and in the following three decades. These changes include the rise of **feminism**; the decolonisation of Africa, the Subcontinent and South-East Asia; the growth of multiculturalism; the break-up of the post-war communist bloc in Eastern Europe; and the growth of globalisation. This late 20th-century world was characterised by the idea of difference, of 'the other', and of what difference implied.

Literary critics started questioning the assumptions of practical and new criticism. They argued that, while close reading may be seen as a neutral activity, it actually involved applying preconceptions about what is important or what matters in a text. Aspects of a text considered central might in fact only reflect the ideological preoccupations of the reader or of the time in which the responder lived. Critics also questioned the assumption that texts displayed coherence and focus, pointing to the contradictions or ambivalences within texts. New ways of reading evolved.

feminism

A social and political movement that seeks to redress the power imbalance between men and women. It began in the 19th century, when its principal concern was achieving the right to vote for women. Today, it embraces a range of political views, from moderate or liberal feminism to extreme, separatist feminism.

metaphor

A figure of speech in which one word stands for another, e.g. 'She was a rose among thorns'.

New ways of reading texts

Cultural materialism Questions the past, but insists we return to the present to explore meaning. A play by Shakespeare, for example, would be examined as a product of a particular historical context (perhaps by looking at the social structure of Elizabethan England and the system of artistic patronage that operated), but the play's meaning would be explored in the context in which it was produced or reproduced. In other words, a 16th-century production of a play would have a different meaning from a 19th-century production of the same play; and a 20th-century film of the play would have a different meaning from a 20th-century stage production. Cultural materialism will focus on the racism, sexism and social exploitation that texts deliberately or unwittingly reveal.

Feminism

Questions the past in terms of the representation of women and of the relationship between men and women, rereading texts for the assumptions of gender that underpin them. For example, a feminist perspective of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* might focus on Ophelia's story (or lack thereof). The play witnesses her betrayal by her father, brother, lover, court and society; her increasing marginalisation and descent into madness is paralleled by the literal as well as metaphorical loss of voice.

New historicism

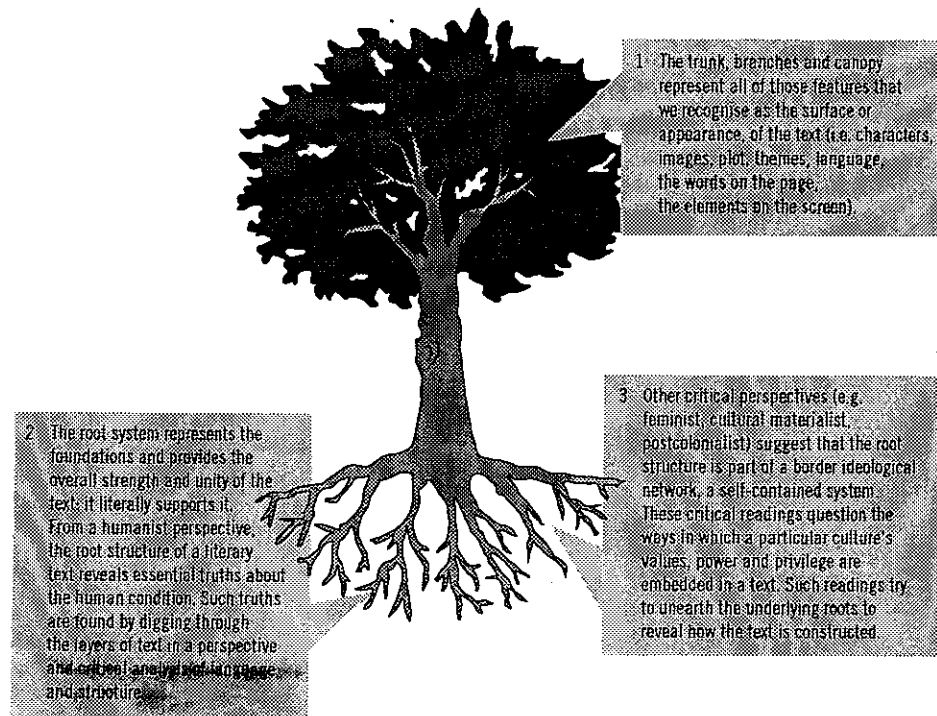
Questions rather than accepts the representation of the political and social conditions of the time in which a text was produced. It examines the way texts have been produced and reproduced according to the politically and culturally determined priorities of the time. New historicism asks what is missing from texts as well as what is actually present.

New ways of reading texts

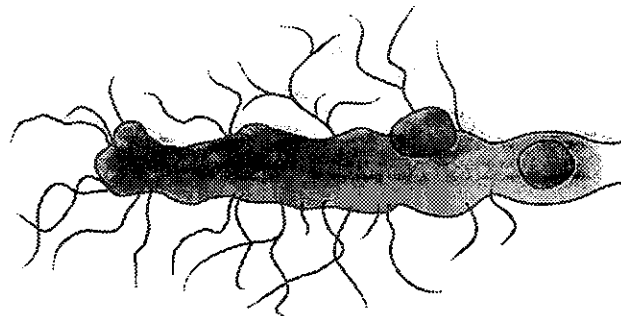
Postcolonialism	Questions the notion of what is considered 'worthy' literature and insists that the dominance of texts in the English language ignores the rich traditions and texts of other cultures. Postcolonialism also challenges the way minority or previously colonised cultures have been depicted in English-language texts and insists on the value of hearing previously silenced voices.
Postmodernism	Challenges the idea of meaning as a reflection of deeper values and suggests that meaning is in fact constructed through textual connections between texts, i.e. what lies beneath a text is a number of other texts, not an essential truth. Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film <i>Moulin Rouge!</i> , for example, shows how our ideas about love are constructed through 'movie love' and 'song scripts'. Postmodernism also questions the distinction between popular culture and so-called high art.
Psychoanalysis	Sees meaning in terms of the psychological profile of the author; that is, a text is a symptom of the author's unconscious and conscious desires and needs. Psychoanalysis stresses the collective unconscious common to all cultures and the way this is reflected in archetypes , symbols and myths in literature. More contemporary psychoanalytic criticism owes much to the work of the French theorist Jacques Lacan, who believed that language itself acts like the unconscious in reproducing a split between the world and how we see it. Since it is through language that we attempt to understand ourselves and our world, there is always a gap between the real and the naming of the real. The earliest recognition of ourselves as individuals is accompanied by a sense of loss: the 'I' we recognise in the mirror resembles, but is not the same as, the 'I' that looks.
Reader response	Emphasises the effect of a text on the individual reader and the way meaning is made by the reader in response to the text. The reader is seen to bring knowledge and understanding to the text rather than receiving these things from the text. Readers are asked to empathise with characters and to question how their own values and context shape their understanding.

archetype
An original character type, e.g. the femme fatale, the rebel, the hero, the county bumpkin.

A visual analogy can help us understand how it is that texts can be read in different ways. We can examine two very different structures taken from the natural world: the tree and the rhizome.



The arborescent way of reading a text.



Rhizomes are stems that run horizontally beneath the surface. They sprout roots downwards and shoots upwards. The root-and-shoot system of the rhizome is a good way of visualising the postmodernist approach to text, i.e. that all texts are connected to one another laterally.

The rhizoid way of reading a text.

postmodernism

Literally meaning 'after modernism', this movement is a reply to modernism. While the modern rejected the past, the postmodern insisted it must be revisited – but with irony, not innocently. Postmodern style is hybrid, and postmodern texts self-consciously cultivate a teasing or ironic interaction with responders.

If we could imagine a text closest in structure to a rhizome, it would probably be the World Wide Web with its vast lateral network of connections. The crux of the analogy between rhizome and **postmodernism** is the absence of a divide between surface structure and a supposed foundation. Sometimes postmodernism is called the 'depthless model' because it accepts surface as being all there is. The postmodernist argument is that, if we were to dig beneath a text, we would find a lateral connectedness with other texts rather than a root structure that holds everything together. We will discuss this in much more detail in chapter 4.

Intersections

Contemporary critical theories challenge previous certainties about the nature of texts and critical practice by arguing that:

- ⊕ meaning is not simply extracted from a text, but is negotiated and contested over time
- ⊕ different readings of a text reflect different values and depend on the cultural context of production and **reception**
- ⊕ it is time for new voices to be heard and old texts to be reread.

reception

The response to a text after it has been produced or published. It may include critical reviews, informal comment and word-of-mouth appraisal.

Exploration

We will now discuss different ways of reading particular texts so that we can put theory into practice. The first examples provide a general overview of what different critical approaches might look like. We will then have the opportunity to explore specific texts in more detail.

1 Reading *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Brontë's 19th-century novel features an orphaned girl, Jane Eyre, who is adopted, but unloved, by her aunt and cousins. After a moment of rebellion against unjust treatment at the hands of her horrid cousin, Jane is sent to a boarding school in which conditions are harsh and treatment is cruel. Ironically, she experiences her first real feelings of friendship and affection there.

As a young woman, she is employed as a governess for the brooding Mr Rochester at Thornfield Hall. Against all expectations, Rochester falls in love with Jane and her with him. However, the discovery that Rochester is already married to a violent 'lunatic' who is locked in the attic at Thornfield ruins any romantic prospects for Jane and Rochester. Her stubborn refusal to be his mistress, followed by exile and eventual reunion and subsequent marriage on her terms, has made Jane something of a feminist heroine in some readers' eyes. However, others see it differently. Here are some of the possible readings of *Jane Eyre*:

- ⊕ Practical criticism would explore the significance of what Brontë had to say about love, truth and the individual struggle for freedom.
- ⊕ A postmodernist reading might look at how we make sense of the novel through our understanding of the gothic horror genre and the various appropriations of *Jane Eyre* in contemporary texts.
- ⊕ A new historicist reading might explore class struggle and inequality, as well as exploring the controversy the novel caused at the time of publication.
- ⊕ A cultural materialist reading might foreground the way the novel exposes the inequality and exploitation of industrial England. However it might also emphasise that the novel evades a 'realistic' or political outcome. Jane's rather unconvincing and belated inheritance and marriage to Rochester avoid the harsher question of her otherwise bleak options.

genre

A style of text that is characterised by a specific form, structure or theme, e.g. film noir, science fiction.

- A feminist reading might explore Jane's struggle for independence. Her status as a feminist heroine would be central to the debate. However, contrary feminist readings might be critical of the final narrative solution. That is, for all Jane's early independence of spirit and rebellion, her only chance of happiness is seen to be in terms of her final role as wife and mother.
- A psychoanalytic reading would focus on the exploration of the unconscious in the novel through the significance of symbolism and the dreams. It might also explore the degree to which the mad woman, 'Bertha', could be seen as Jane's alter ego (or other self).
- A postcolonial reading would foreground the novel's defence of Empire, imperialism and Christianity. Rochester married his first wife, the 'mad' Bertha, when he visited the West Indies (a British colony at the time) for commercial gain. Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a fictional prequel and postcolonial challenge to *Jane Eyre*. It provides a West Indian perspective on England, Christianity, colonial conquest and masculinity. It gives humanity to the mad Bertha Mason.

paradigm

A conceptual worldview or way of thinking. *Paradigm shifts* occur when the old paradigm is no longer adequate in the face of new evidence or knowledge.

2 Reading *Wuthering Heights*

Navigating 3

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- explain and evaluate the effects of different contexts of responders and composers on texts
- explain and evaluate the different ways of responding to and composing texts
- demonstrate understanding of how relationships between composer, responder, text and context shape meaning.

The following questions are about Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, the story of the passionate but doomed love between Cathy and Heathcliff. The questions reflect different readings.

Match each group of questions with one of the **paradigms** listed below.

- A cultural materialism
- B feminism
- C new criticism
- D postcolonialism
- E postmodernism
- F psychoanalysis
- G reader response

- 1
 - a What does this text suggest about the position of women at the time in which the novel is set?
 - b What ideas of romantic love does this text represent?
 - c How are the relationships between men and women represented?
 - d How does Brontë present different versions of masculinity (e.g. Heathcliff and Edgar Linton) and femininity (e.g. Isabella and Catherine)?
- 2
 - a How do you respond to the text?
 - b Which characters do you empathise with in the text?
 - c Which characters do you dislike and why?
 - d What connections can you make between this text and your own experience?
 - e How did you feel about the ending of the novel?

- 3 a What elements of the romantic and the gothic genres are found in *Wuthering Heights*?
 b How effective is the method of narration used by Brontë?
 c How is landscape used to reflect character?
 d To what extent does Brontë effectively reveal the conflict between innocence and experience in the novel?
- 4 a In what ways does the novel provide an insight into Emily Brontë's state of mind?
 b Explore the way Brontë uses symbolism in the novel to reveal the needs and desires of her characters.
 c How does Brontë use dream sequences (e.g. Catherine's dream that she is thrown out of heaven) to reveal the inner nature of the characters?
- 5 a What happens when Heathcliff leaves England to make his fortune, and why is it left a mystery?
 b How is Heathcliff presented as 'the other' in the novel (e.g. the images of him as devilish and vampiric).
 c What versions of Christianity are represented through the characterisation of Joseph and Nelly?
- 6 a Who holds the power at Wuthering Heights and how is this represented in the relationship between master and servant?
 b How was this text received at the time of publication?
 c What does the text reveal about the society of the time?
 d How did Brontë represent differences in class between the Earnshaws and Lintons?
 e What does the text reveal, through Heathcliff's acquisition of wealth, about the rise of the middle classes?
- 7 a What aspects of fairy tale does Brontë draw on for this novel?
 b In what ways does Heathcliff resemble Shakespearean characters like Iago (*Othello*) and Edmund (*King Lear*)?
 c In what ways is Jane Campion's film *The Piano* an appropriation of *Wuthering Heights*?
 d Explore the way Heathcliff is appropriated in contemporary texts as a Byronic hero.

Check your answers against those at the end of the chapter.



Still from *Wuthering Heights* showing Heathcliff and Catherine.

3 Reading *Cleopatra*

Read the opening scene of Shakespeare's play *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In this speech by the Roman Philo, we have a picture of Cleopatra as the archetypal whore; the deceitful and lustful woman who destroys men through her beauty and sexuality. Anthony is described as being in her 'thrall' and unable to be the great soldier that his standing and reputation in Rome demand.

PHILO: Nay, but this dotage of our General's
O'erflows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front. His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a Gypsy's lust.

Take but good note, and you shall see in him
The triple pillar of the world transform'd
Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see.



icon

An object accorded a privileged position because it represents or symbolises a value or values of a particular culture at a particular time.

Cleopatra on a gold coin.

In Cecil B De Mille's 1930s film of *Cleopatra*, the queen, played by Claudette Colbert, is a feminist icon.





The 1963 film of *Cleopatra* starred Elizabeth Taylor. Her real-life romance with co-star Richard Burton during filming overshadowed the story of Cleopatra.

This Roman view is one slice or fragment of narrative information that we receive. It is developed through repetitive reference to Cleopatra in terms of sensuality and sexuality. She is constructed through her contrast to the world of Rome – both to the single-minded political ambition of Caesar and the ‘holy, cold and still’ character of Caesar’s sister, Octavia, whom Anthony marries for political gain. What is presented about Cleopatra is a series of fragments made up of the following elements:

what she says

what she does

what others say
about her

Even if we synthesise all the information contained in these narrative fragments, how do we construct readings of Cleopatra? How do we fill in the gaps? If texts are ‘already read’, then we read Cleopatra from a range of available readings about women like her. We recognise her as the evil temptress, femme fatale, the siren, the dangerous but alluring woman. In modern times she might be the ‘corporate bitch’. Given that the only image we have of how she looked is the image on the side of a coin, we can only surmise from the range of ‘Cleopatras’ represented over time in literary texts, movies and advertisements that she is constructed from a range of readings – both visual and written – of ‘bad’ women. We don’t make these readings up; they are already available as socially constructed readings of women. However the impact of movements such as feminism and postcolonialism has provided some alternative or resistant readings:

- ☉ A feminist reading would examine the play’s perspectives on gender. Cleopatra is an archetypal woman who both embodies men’s desires and causes men’s ruin. The feasting and sensuousness of her court in Egypt is juxtaposed with Caesar’s politically ruthless regime in Rome. She is denounced in gendered terms: she resists male power and refuses to be the matron a woman her age is expected to be.
- ☉ A postcolonial reading would examine the treatment of the Egyptian colony at the hands of Rome.

Navigation 4

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between representation and meaning
- demonstrate an understanding of the ideas and values expressed in texts.

Complete the following table by suggesting both the dominant readings of Cleopatra and alternative or resistant readings. These are taken from the play *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The first is done for you.

Textual fragment	Dominant readings	Resistant readings
<p>What Anthony says</p> <p>The play begins with Anthony being summoned back to Rome on the news of the death of his wife Fulvia. In public with Cleopatra he is scornful of the summons. However in private he expresses regret:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'These strong Egyptian fetters I must break, or loose myself in dotage' (I.ii.123-4) • 'I must from this enchanting queen break off' (I.ii.137) • 'She is cunning past man's thought' (I.ii.154) • 'This foul Egyptian hath betrayed me ... Triple-turn'd whore' (IV.xii.12-15) <p>This is said after the battle of Actium, when Cleopatra turns sail and Anthony follows, leaving his forces to the mercy of the Romans.</p>	<p>Anthony describes himself as captive to Cleopatra and in danger of coming completely under her spell and 'losing' his identity and reputation. This reading is consistent with the reading of woman as 'femme fatale' – beautiful but dangerous to men.</p> <p>The combination of words such as 'cunning', 'enchanting', 'betrayed', 'whore', 'witch', 'foul' and 'sold' construct her as the archetypal evil woman. Sexuality and power are linked in ways seen to be dangerous and unnatural.</p>	<p>Describing Cleopatra in this way removes responsibility from Anthony for starting and maintaining the relationship. His concern for himself could be seen as merely self-centred, without any real regard for the effect on Cleopatra.</p> <p>Anthony's tirades minimise his betrayal of Cleopatra in marrying Caesar's sister for purely political gain. The fact that she is not named except through complete identification of her with her position as Queen of Egypt stresses the degree to which this story is about political conflict and emphasises that Cleopatra is defending her territory.</p>
<p>What Caesar says</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'This is the news: he fishes, drinks, and wastes/ The lamps of night in revel; is not more manlike/ Than Cleopatra, nor the Queen of Ptolomy/ More womanly than he.' (I.iv.4-7) 		

Textual fragment	Dominant readings	Resistant readings
<p>What Cleopatra says</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'If you find him [Anthony] sad;/ Say I am dancing; if in mirth, report/ That I am sudden sick.' (I.iii.4–6) • 'Eternity was in our lips and eyes;/ Bliss in our brows bent; none our parts so poor/ But was a race of Heaven.' (I.iii.43–5) • 'The quick comedians/ Extemporally will stage us, and present/ Our Alexandrian revels: Anthony/ Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see/ Some squeaking Cleopatra by my greatness l'th posture of a whore.' (V.ii.252–7) 		

4 Reading *Dead White Males*

David Williamson's 1995 play *Dead White Males* represents some of the conflicting approaches to meaning that have been discussed in this chapter. Even its title alerts us to the use of 'dead white males' as a short-hand criticism of the restricted nature of the canon of literature. His play vigorously defends the canon, symbolised by the character of Shakespeare, as still relevant and worthy. His play is a **satiric** depiction of the academic and social conflict between the ideas and values of **liberal humanism** and the theories and perspectives that have challenged it. Williamson locates the conflict within both the university and the family; the central character, Angela Judd, a 19-year-old university student, links the two worlds.

Synopsis

As the play opens, Angela is reading Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare materialises on stage, only to be shot by a man in his thirties wearing fashionable casual clothes. Shakespeare is the symbol of liberal humanist values in the play. His chief antagonist is Dr Grant Swain, Angela's Cultural Studies lecturer at New West University. Swain is a poststructuralist who denounces liberal humanism as outdated and patriarchal and who favours his own project: non-essentialist feminism and multiculturalism.

Angela's task is to examine the extent to which her family has been constructed by patriarchal **ideology**. She starts out believing what Dr Swain has been telling her, but she quickly starts to doubt the truth of it the more she learns about her family.

At the end of the play, she becomes Shakespeare's (and Williamson's) mouth-piece. She says to Swain, 'The more I listened to the tapes of my family, the more convinced I became that there is a human nature and that it consists of more than just

satire

The ridiculing of established ideas, personalities and institutions.

liberal humanism

A philosophy that espouses reason, freedom, truth and progress and which grew out of the 18th-century Enlightenment. It emphasises the human being as the source and origin of meaning, action and history.

ideology

A system of beliefs, attitudes, ideas and values that shapes the way we see the world. A *dominant* ideology reflects the views of the most powerful sectors of society at a particular time and in a particular place; *subordinate* or *resistant* ideologies challenge the dominant ideology.



Shakespeare: a dead white male.

demons or ideology ... and it must have something to do with why the great writers like William Shakespeare can still speak to us across the ages'.³

The play indicates the extent to which challenges to traditional approaches to literature have caused debate, disagreement and even hostility.

A cultural materialist reading

A cultural materialist reading would examine the cultural and political context of the play's production and reception. The overarching questions might be: Why has such a play appeared in Australia at this point in our history? How does it strike a chord with people? What resonance does it have with the wider cultural context? What is at stake in the conflict that Williamson presents? What values are implied by different readings?

The social, political and cultural context of the play's production (1995)

In order to explore such questions, we need to establish the context of the play's production to evaluate the extent to which it helps to shape meaning and influence response.

Discuss the following questions in relation to Australian society in 1995:

- 1 What has the term 'political correctness' come to mean and why?
- 2 What evidence is there of a backlash in Australia over issues such as feminism and multiculturalism? Here you might explore the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, for example. What other texts have suggested that males are the new victims in society?
- 3 What has the use of the term 'Black armband views of history', coined by historian Geoffrey Blainey, come to mean? Who uses it? Why?
- 4 How has the study of English been challenged both at schools and in universities by new literary theories – especially those of the French?

In the foreword of the published play script of *Dead White Males*, academic Keith Windschuttle praises Williamson's efforts in asserting 'the value of literature' in the play. He claims, '*Dead White Males* is ... about literary critics but goes much further than departmental politics. It is a play about the value of literature itself and of the attempts by some people within the university system to destroy it'.⁴

The values represented in the play

A cultural materialist reading would examine the values that underpin *Dead White Males*. What is it defending? What is it criticising? This would involve examining how the audience is positioned to respond to different characters and the respective values that they represent.

- 1 How is the conflict between Swain and Shakespeare constructed as a struggle between good and evil? What values does each character represent? With whom do we sympathise?
- 2 How is Col's role as tragic hero achieved through structure and allusion to King Lear? What values does Col represent?

- 3 How is the world of the university represented?
- 4 How is the world of working class men represented?
- 5 How is the world of business represented?

The following extract deals with Steve's decision to leave university and is a good example of the way that the play invites its audience to respond to particular characters and values in certain ways.

MELISSA: Seen darling little Angela's mark? A plus.
 STEVE: Yeah.
 MELISSA: It's disgusting. Suck up to Swain or fail.
 STEVE: Yeah.
 MELISSA: This isn't education, it's full on indoctrination. Join the post-structuralist feminist multiculturalist project or fail.
 STEVE: That's the message.
 MELISSA: I'm so bloody furious. If I fail it effectively adds another year onto my course.
 STEVE: This is going to be my last year in any case.
 [MELISSA looks at him enquiringly.]
 I'm failing all my subjects. It's all just words, words, words. I hate this place.
 MELISSA: Why are you here?
 STEVE: My father's an academic, my mother's an academic, and they can't believe that I'm not. You know what I really like doing? Fixing cars. I spent seven hours putting a mate's engine together last weekend and it was great. Not that I can even tell them that.
 MELISSA: Why not?
 STEVE: They think that only slobs fix cars. And so do you and Angela.
 MELISSA: Everyone should do what they like doing.
 STEVE: Yeah, yeah.⁵

- 1 How is the audience invited to sympathise with the character of Steve?
- 2 What values are closely associated with the academic world?

A feminist reading

A feminist reading of *Dead White Males* would examine the ways that men and women are represented in the play and the relationships between them. It would question the play's understanding and assumptions about what feminism means. Williamson identifies the play's real concerns as 'the relationship between males and females in the last ten years of the twentieth century'.⁶ Windshuttle refers to the subplot of the play as 'the impact of feminism on a typical suburban middle-class family'.⁷ Feminism is clearly the culprit and men are the new victims.

While there are a number of female characters in the play, other women, both real and fictional, are referred to throughout the play. Analysing and evaluating the following statements about women illustrates how to undertake a feminist reading:

What is said?	Who says it?	How the audience is positioned to respond?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'All those vile "feminist" books that are thy mothers ...' (p. 81) • 'Every man who is not Petruchio doth wish he was, and every woman who is a Shrew doth wish she was not.' (p. 81) 	William Shakespeare to Angela	Shakespeare is juxtaposed with the odious Swain as the champion of liberal humanism. He also defends the innate differences between men and women, and sets up feminism as the culprit in the contemporary debates about relationships and love.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'You lot have to have the babies. Much as you hate it, that's a truth and you're stuck with it.' (p. 51) • 'If you're going to have your little bundle of joy you've got to find some idiot to start it and look after you.' (p. 51) • 'I think mothers should be with their children. And you should have one brother and sister at least. If you're going to have kids it's a crime just to have one.' (p. 53) • 'Men get excited about women who look good. Sorry but no one "constructs" that fact either.' (p. 55) • 'Point one for your bloody feminist theories – when there's a war on and some poor fools have got to go it's blokes who get sent ... Like most of your sex, you'll end up sitting on your bum somewhere working at a desk ... Point two for you feminists. If a bloke has kids he's the one who finally has to earn the dough.' (pp. 56–7) • 'I'd just like the occasional woman somewhere, sometime to realise that and say "thank you".' (p. 58) 	Col Judd (Angela's grandfather) to Angela	Williamson raises Col to the level of hero through the story of his selfless support of a former work-mate (which is revealed at the climax of the play). Col is depicted as the wronged father (as was King Lear) and his comments appear to be similar to Shakespeare's, but expressed in the language of the working man.

What is said?	Who says it?	How the audience is positioned to respond?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'So this is the truth of it, is it? Women scream at us for being brutes and tell us to get sensitive and caring or they'll walk, but all the time they secretly want ... Petruchio!' (p. 69) 	<p>Martin Judd (Angela's father) to Angela</p>	<p>Martin is represented as a sensitive new age guy (SNAG) and the victim of an overbearing and ambitious wife. He is shown sympathetically, as the modern man who is trying to be what women want but is still rejected.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'You want to know the truth? If your Dad had a job I'd resign. Ten years ago this job was the pinnacle I desperately aspired to, but now I just don't want to be a pioneer anymore. In twenty years time, it might be better for women ... I'm battle weary.' (p. 63) • 'Angela, I read <i>The Female Eunuch</i> the day it was published and danced in the streets with joy. I've been a founding member of every women's group ... but if you want my honest advice, go find yourself someone with heaps of money, marry him and raise six kids!' (p. 64) 	<p>Sarah Judd (Angela's mother) to Angela</p>	<p>Sarah is represented as the stereotypical feminist of the 1960s or 1970s who is now jaded and bitter; her achievements are represented as trivial compared with what she has given up in terms of love and family. She and her sisters, Jessica and Monica, are likened to the three daughters in <i>King Lear</i> because of their lack of gratitude to their father and the conflict between them.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'No! Look, I don't want to insult women, be unfair to women, patronise, use women, or inhibit women, but every time I open my mouth I seem to do all five! I just want to know how to behave, because someday, believe it or not, I would like to live with a woman, maybe even – gasp – marry a woman. Would you like to come to a movie or would you not? And that is not an implicit proposal of marriage or a signal of impending date rape.' (pp. 25–6) 	<p>Steve (a fellow student) to Angela</p>	<p>Steve is another male character presented very sympathetically. He feels he cannot do or say anything in case it is considered politically incorrect by women. He is also presented as authentic and honest, compared with the pretentious Swain. Steve leaves university to become an apprentice mechanic. His contemptuous rejection of Swain's course as 'bloody indoctrination' would be applauded by the audience in light of the character of Swain.</p>

It is significant that at the end of the play it is Angela who defends traditional values and takes over from Col in her attacks on her aunts:

ANGELA: [to JESSICA and MONICA] And as far as you two are concerned he thought you should stop bellyaching because you'd both done brilliantly.
 JESSICA: Brilliantly?
 ANGELA: [to JESSICA] You've been supported for by your ex-husband for twenty years while you've expressed your inner artistic core, [to MONICA] and you've avoided the oppression of marriage and still had eight or nine trips around the world with your boss, while his unsuspecting wife stayed home with the kids.⁸

Angela concludes: 'If Shakespeare was alive today I think he would say there *was* a human nature and that the natures of men and women differ.'⁹ In the romantic conclusion to the play, as she and Steve walk off holding hands, Angela tells him that she is working on her sense of humour – again alluding to the stereotype of the humourless feminist.



Col and Angela in a Sydney Theatre Company performance of *Dead White Males*.

Intervening in the text

If the meaning of a text is dependent on the relationship between the text and the context, the composers and the responders, then meaning shifts if we change one part of that relationship. This means that we can intervene in a text as part of our critical and creative response to it. One way of intervening is to recontextualise the text by providing a different kind of audience. The following review is by a Year 12 student asked to write a review of *Dead White Males* for *MS*, a fictional feminist magazine:

Surprising new play from Aussie white male

David Williamson's new play *Dead White Males* is full of revelations. The most relevant of these, however, has little to do with the purported focus of the play, namely gender relations and postmodernism. Rather, sifting through the play reveals that Williamson is, in fact, one of those dreaded 'white males'. And by the end of the production, I (and probably any intelligent, sane member of the audience) was fervently wishing he was dead too.

Point of view and satiric tone clearly established in first paragraph

Williamson has mounted one of the most offensive defences of the DWMs club – probably hoping for his own membership at some future stage. Hats off to Williamson, since I don't think that there was a single minority group that didn't come in for a good kicking at some stage. Not bad for a two-hour play.

Basis of criticism and sarcasm is the play's alleged offensiveness to minority groups

How does Williamson achieve all this? Well the 'plot' and 'characters' that he uses to disguise his **polemic** are as follows: Angela Judd is a young university student, who comes under the guidance of a sleazy 'feminist, multiculturalist' lecturer by the name of Dr Swain. Within this structure, she occasionally turns to Shakespeare (yes, physically present) for guidance. Sounds fairly harmless? All this is simply a thin veil for Williamson's propaganda.

polemic
An aggressive argument refuting an idea, doctrine or belief.

The irony is of course that Williamson obviously thinks he has created a witty and challenging play. In his own reflection on it, he laments that 'most of us have been guilty of reconstructing our own history in a way that makes us the hero and the other party the villain'. He then (ludicrously) adds that this doesn't mean 'that literature is just another source of misinformation'. It would be funny if he didn't seem to seriously believe it, despite the blatant distortions of history that occur in this play. 'Yeah, now it's fine. You've got the pill and easy abortions; but in my day it wasn't so easy to plan. And in my day, husbands didn't run out on their obligations.'

Modal nouns signal reviewer's strong criticism

modality
The degree of certainty expressed by a word; a highly modal word is emotive and persuasive, and suggests strong, absolute views or opinions.

This magazine runs a number of different promotions and competitions. I'm suggesting that any reader who willing to should take up the challenge to find out just how many offensive elements are in that one statement. Here's a hint: start with the notion of 'easy abortions' (my hand almost refuses to type that **oxymoron**).

Assumption that readers of the article will be similarly offended by the play

oxymoron
A figure of speech in which opposite terms are juxtaposed for purposes of irony, humour or criticism; e.g. the oxymoron 'wise fool' in *King Lear* may appear to be a contradiction in terms, but when applied to the Fool contains an element of truth.

Yet even ignoring the distortions of history and offensive portrayals of women (which isn't easy), Williamson's play is also incompetent and dramatically flawed. First of all, Williamson has obviously neglected the notion that good satire relies on more than just stereotypes. Take, for instance, the characterisation of Jessica, Angela's aunt. 'If I ever hear one more woman, let alone my sister, say "I fell in love", as an excuse for some life-wrecking piece of total insanity, I will vomit.' While I know some feminists may feel that men are evil, and love is worse, even they generally acknowledge it as extremism. There is a complex spectrum of 'feminisms' that are totally neglected by Williamson, making his product a simplistic piece of diatribe.

Demonstrated feminist sympathies, as well as appreciation of complex nature of feminism

Essentially, that would sum up the intrinsic flaw of Williamson's whole play – instead of creating a genuine exploration of a serious debate, he has created a lopsided piece of dramatic tosh. He may try to disguise it under witty one-liners and snappy dialogue, but Williamson is obviously terrified of any challenge to traditional power structures.

I may be a 'humourless, sexually repressed, dour young woman' that is 'constructed' by a radical ideology, but I can recognise a piece of propaganda, constructed by ideology that is thinly disguised by slick (if clichéd) repartee.

Let me be generous, though.

Maintenance of sarcasm to the end

★ – 1 star¹⁰

Navigating 5

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- ➊ adapt and synthesise a range of textual features to explore and communicate information, ideas and values for a variety of purposes, audiences and contexts
- ➋ articulate and represent your own ideas in imaginative and interpretative ways.

Choose one of the texts you have studied this year. Using the above review of *Dead White Males* as a guide, write a review for a different audience. The audience may be located in the past or future, represent a particular group (e.g. age, gender, culture) or live in a different region or country (you could review an Australian novel for an American or European audience).

5 Reading Gwen Harwood

Gwen Harwood's poem 'Alter Ego' explores the idea of 'the other self' – that part of ourselves that we can never fully know. Traditional literary criticism might focus on how the poet resolves the conflict over this longing for 'wholeness'. But a different reading might foreground the lack of resolution, the nagging awareness that we can never be unified subjects or 'whole' people – that we are always in the process of 'becoming' because we are always controlled by language, parents, the unconscious. This other-self that she 'cannot name' remains elusive, finally unknowable.

Who is this other self who knows the wholeness of my being?

The alter ego is likened to Mozart who could hear a whole symphony at once. Presumably this alter ego knows all aspects of her self or selves.

The conscious self, the ego, in contrast is unable to know herself completely. The assumption here is that there is a 'me' or 'self' that is whole and unified.

Alter Ego

Who stands beside me still,
nameless, indifferent
to any do or will?
motion of mind or will,
whose pulse is mine, who goes
sleepless and is not spent?

Mozart said he could hear
a symphony complete,
its changing harmonies clear
plain in his inward ear
in time without extent.
And this one, whom I greet

yet cannot name, or see
save as light's sidelong shift,
who will not answer me,
knows what I was, will be,
and all I am: beyond
time's desolating drift.

In half-light I rehearse
Mozart's cascading thirds.
Light's lingering tones disperse.
Music and thought reverse
their flow. Beside dark roots
dry crickets call like birds

that morning when I came
from childhood's steady air
to love, like a blown flame,
and learned: time will reclaim
all music manifest.
Wait, then, beside my chair
as time and music flow
nightward again. I trace
their questioning voices, know
little, but learn, and go
on paths of love and pain
to meet you, face to face !!

The dry crickets of the present moment sound like birdsong because of the connection between their call in the past and her first experience of love.

Inspired by the music, she 'remembers' her youthful experience of love. The metaphor of the 'blown flame' highlights love's fragility and temporary nature.

The poem concludes with a metaphor of life as a journey. It is only through temporal existence that involves both love and pain that she will come to know herself fully.

Navigating 6

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- engage with details of the text in order to respond critically and personally
- adapt and synthesise aspects of texts to communicate ideas and value.

One way of exploring your understanding is to think about how you would capture Harwood's ideas visually. For example, if you wanted to foreground the conflict between searching for the 'whole self' and the poet's inability to locate it or know it, you would emphasise this fragmentation in the images, words and layout of your representation. If, on the other hand, you read the poem as a resolution of paradox, your visual representation would need to suggest a sense of unity.

- 1 Compose a visual representation of this poem that shows your reading of the poem. This representation could be used as the front cover of an anthology.
- 2 Write a 300-word explanation of the meaning and effect of your visual representation. The values implied by the reading should be discussed.
- 3 Analyse the language features of the poem that support your reading.

The following poem, 'Father and Child' is divided into two symmetrical sections: 'Barn Owl' and 'Nightfall'. In the first part, the persona reflects on an incident from her childhood. It was daybreak and, while the rest of the family was asleep, she secretly took her father's rifle into the barn, planning to shoot an owl. However, she succeeded in only injuring the bird and, as she became aware of the suffering she had inflicted on the owl, her father found her and insisted that she end what she had

begun. In other words, he made her face the consequences of her action: she had to kill the bird in order to end the pain she had inflicted on it. This section of the poem ends with an image of her leaning her head upon her father's arm and weeping for what she had begun.

The second part of the poem is set some forty years later. Written in the present tense, it still deals with the relationship between father and daughter, but now the father is eighty years old, blind, frail and perhaps suffering from dementia. He and his daughter enjoy a walk. The father still delights in 'birds, flowers, shivery-grass', while the daughter affectionately reflects on her father's life and their relationship. The poem ends with a sad realisation of 'sorrows' that 'no words, no tears can mend'. This is what the 'child once quick/ to mischief' has 'grown to learn'.

The poem is annotated here to reveal questions or aspects that show *how* it has been constructed.

Father and Child

I Barn Owl

Daybreak: the household slept.

I rose, blessed by the sun.

A horny fiend, I crept
out with my father's gun.

Let him dream of a child
obedient, angel mild.

old No-Sayer, robbed of power
by sleep. I knew my prize

who swooped home at this hour
with daylight-riddled eyes.

to his place on a high beam
in our old stables, to dream
light's useless time away.

I stood, holding my breath,
in urine-scented hay,

master of life and death,
a wisp-haired judge whose law
would punish beak and claw.

My first shot struck. He swayed,
ruined, beating his only
wing, as I watched, afraid
by the fallen gun, a lonely
child who believed death clean
and final, not this obscene.

Devilish imagery juxtaposed with angelic figure; child's gender is not indicated; echoes of the biblical Eve in the act of disobedience.

The owl is symbolic in many cultures: is traditionally associated with wisdom, but also with death and the feminine.

Freud identified the gun as a phallic symbol; stealing the gun represents; then, a sense of rivalry with the father: the child wants the power that the gun symbolises; she is attempting to destroy the feminine, as symbolised by the owl.

Recalls Lear, robbed of power by his daughters, Gloucester, robbed of power by his son, and the figure of Samson from the Old Testament; ironically, in each case the loss of power leads to renewed spiritual strength; the relevance of the allusion is deflated by the words 'of sleep' in the next line.

Masculine gender, yet other references indicate the persona is feminine, i.e. the daughter.

bundle of stuff that dropped,
and dribbled through loose straw
tangling in bowels, and hopped
blindly closer. I saw
those eyes that did not see
mirror my cruelty

Allusion to Gloucester in
King Lear

while the wrecked thing that could
not bear the light nor hide
hobbled in its own blood.
My father reached my side,
gave me the fallen gun.
'End what you have begun.'

I fired. The blank eyes shone
once into mine, and slept.
I leaned my head upon
my father's arm, and wept,
owl-blind in early sun
for what I had begun.

The owl was the sacred bird of
the Greek goddess of wisdom,
Athena, and was an emblem of
wisdom

II Nightfall

Forty years, lived or dreamed:
what memories pack them home.
Now the season that seemed
incredible is come.

Father and child, we stand
in time's long-promised land.

Biblical reference to the promised
land

Since there's no more to taste
ripeness is plainly all.

Allusion to *Hamlet*

Capitalised 'father': a reference
to the Christian God? a sign of
patriarchy?

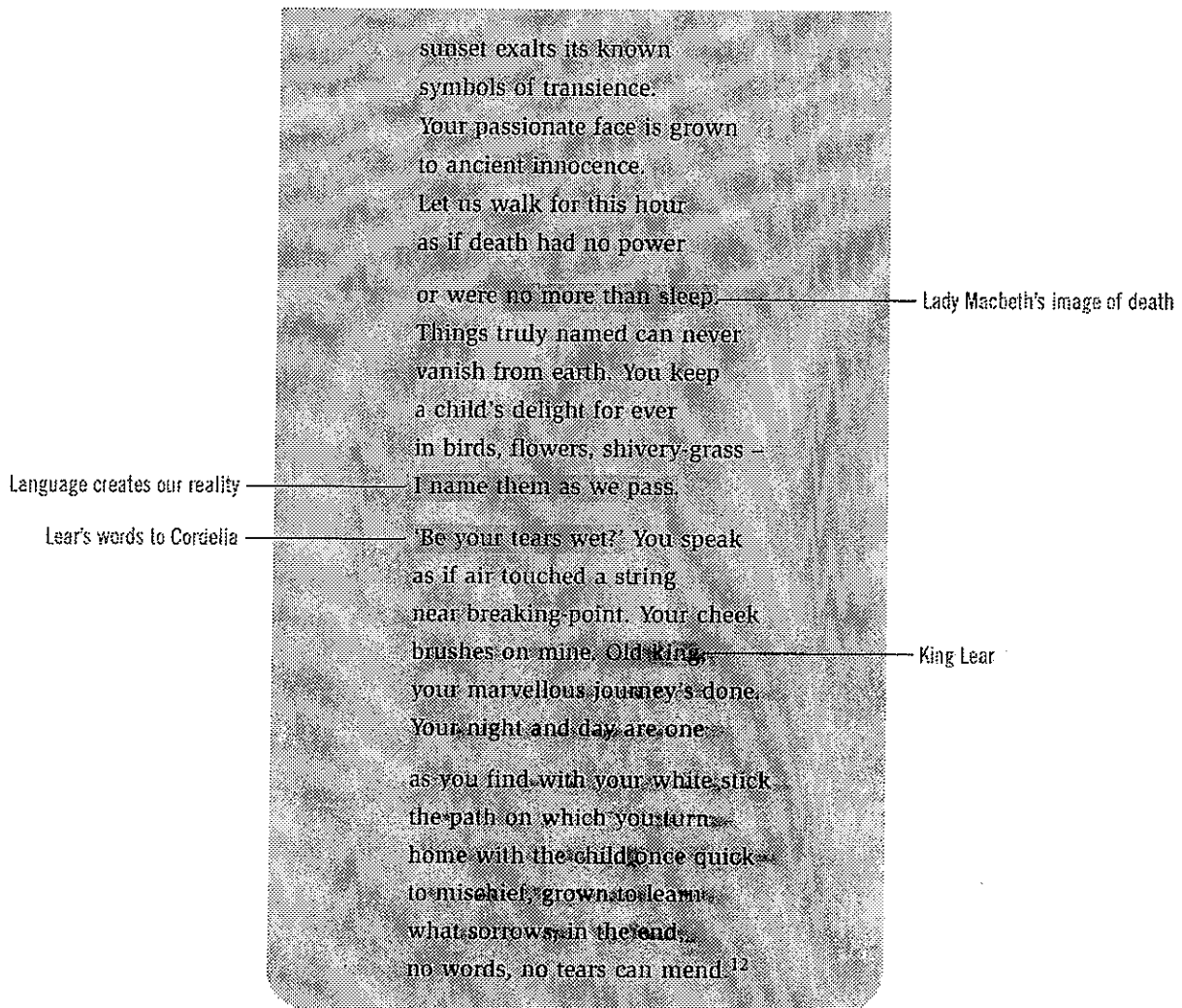
Father, we pick our last
fruits of the temporal.

Biblical reference to
forbidden fruit

Eighty years old, you take
this late walk for my sake.

King Lear's age

Who can be what you were?
Link your dry hand in mine,
my sick-thin comforter.
Far distant suburbs shine
with great simplicities.
Birds crowd in flowering trees,



Exploring the poem from a postmodernist perspective

While Harwood's poem could not be described as a postmodern text, it can be read from a postmodern perspective. Think back to the illustration of the rhizome and the idea of lateral connections between texts as opposed to deep foundations that reflect timeless values. 'Father and Child' is constructed consciously, or unconsciously, via a range of different texts.

- ⊕ Most obvious is the repeated reference to *King Lear* – through the appellation 'Old king', through reference to Lear's age (eighty years), through quoting Lear's words to Cordelia ('*Be your tears wet?*'), through allusions to blindness and seeing (Gloucester). In fact, understanding these **intertextual** connections helps the reader decide that the child is the daughter rather than the son.
- ⊕ Other Shakespearean references are brief but recognisable:
 - 'Ripeness is plainly all' is a direct allusion to *King Lear* but is also an echo of Hamlet's words to Horatio ('the readiness is all'). This acceptance of fate is the response to Horatio's warning about the dangers of the impending duel with Laertes, which he fears Hamlet is destined to lose.

intertextuality

Elements of a text that indirectly echo or directly refer to other texts, e.g. the allusions to Shakespeare's *King Lear* contained in Gwen Harwood's poem 'Father and Child'.

- The reference to death as sleep appears in many texts. Lady Macbeth equates sleep and death when she upbraids her husband for his fear on looking at the results of his bloody work ('give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures'), and Hamlet's famous soliloquy, 'To be, or not to be', suggests at first that, if death were like sleep, it would be welcomed.
- ⊕ The varied, diverse and contradictory symbolism of the owl informs the poem in interesting ways. In most cultures of the world, the owl is traditionally associated with night, darkness and death. For the ancient Greeks, the owl was the bird sacred to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. As her companion, it perched on her shoulder and revealed unseen truths to her.
- ⊕ The reference 'old No-Sayer' alludes to Milton's epic poem about Samson, who was robbed of his strength but had it subsequently returned to him, whereupon he pulled down the pillars that supported the temple of the Philistine god Dagon.
- ⊕ Echoes of biblical texts are also found: about Eve, the Prodigal Son, the stern God the Father of the Old Testament, and the loving God the Father of the New Testament.

A postmodernist reading sees the poem as an echo of aspects of different texts rather than a transparent reflection of the world of the poet or of the reader. It stresses the fractured rather than coherent nature of the poem:

- ⊕ the owl as symbol of both death and wisdom
- ⊕ the relationship between father and child as intertextually connected to other difficult parent-child relationships in literature, most notably to those in *King Lear*
- ⊕ the absence of the feminine, in terms of both the literal absence of a mother figure and the death of the owl by the gun, symbol of patriarchal power
- ⊕ the persona herself as being inherently fragmented: the concluding lines remind us of an emptiness that can never be filled.

Navigating 7

In this task you will be assessed on how well you:

- ⊕ explain relationships between texts
- ⊕ explain and evaluate different ways of responding to and composing texts.

There are many ways of creatively and critically commenting on a text other than by essay. For this activity, gather a diverse range of related materials: information about some of the allusions in 'Father and Child', relevant extracts from Shakespearean plays, visual images, critical commentary on the poem written by yourself or others, quotations from other poems by Gwen Harwood.

- 1 Once you have gathered the material, organise it in a way that highlights the intertextual connections that give the poem meaning.
- 2 Write an extended response in which you evaluate the effect of these connections on your understanding of the poem.

Further reading

- Dollimore, J & Sinfield, A (eds), *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1985. This collection of essays offers different ways of reading Shakespeare and includes a feminist critique of *King Lear*.
- Pope, R, *The English Studies Book*, Routledge, London, 1998. This is a most useful text to use throughout your study of Senior English as it provides both discussion of different theories and practical exercises.
- Warner, M, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Vintage, London, 1995. This is a very interesting exploration of how the meaning of famous fairy tales has changed in different historical and cultural contexts.

Endnotes

- 1 Angie Schiavone, 'Gold Allure: A Short Festival of Blondes', *Spectrum*, 21-22 December 2002, p. 16.
- 2 William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. A P Reimer, Challis Shakespeare series, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1992, I.i.1-13, pp. 23-4.
- 3 David Williamson, *Dead White Males*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1995, p. 96.
- 4 *ibid.*, p. xii.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. xii.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 70.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. ix.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 94.
- 10 Natalie Zerial, Year 12 essay, 2001.
- 11 Gwen Harwood, *Selected Poems*, ed. Gregory Kratzmann, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 3-4.
- 12 Gwen Harwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-13.

Answers to Navigating 3

1 B 2 G 3 C 4 F 5 D 6 A 7 E