

Comparative study of texts

Parts of the World, Australia



The module comparative study of texts should remain in the Board of Studies syllabus as it can provide a powerful insight into the human condition and social values of an era. The play “ Away” by Michael Gow and poems published in “ Sometimes Gladness” written by Bruce Dawe are both texts which reflect similar conditions that the typical person living in suburban Australia between the 1950’s and 1960’s experienced. There were many significant events that took place during these two decades such as the aftermath of the Great Depression and the country’s military involvement in the Vietnam War.

These incidents led to an outbreak in excessive consumerism and rising conflict amongst the Australian population on the subject of conscription. Through the analysis of the above mentioned texts, comparisons can be established. The 1950’s and 1960’s saw the beginning of a very consumerist Australian society where by treasured values were replaced with superficiality. In the play “ Away”, Gwen’s obsessive longing for all things materialistic began to take over her life and affect the relationships she had with her family.

The diminishing ideals of the pre-boomer generation are the resultant of the Great Depression which occurred in the late 1920’s and early 1930’s. Many Australians were left unemployed which gave them the inability to support themselves with a home or even a decent meal. On the left hand side, you can see two men walking down the streets with signs hung around their neck on the lookout for a job so they are able to efficiently provide for their family. In Gwen’s confrontation with daughter Meg whilst being accused of

purposely leaving Jim's cardboard carton behind containing Christmas presents, she explains how she has "Sacrificed!"

Gone without. Gone through hardship so what happened to us will never happen to you. So you'll never know what we saw – never, never, never. " The short sentences followed by the repetition of the word 'never' give emphasis to Gwen's devastating situation as she recalls the difficult stage in her life that unless you were in the same circumstances, will never be able to understand. On the right hand side of the slide shows a house formed by Australian currency. This represents both Gwen and Jim's desire to live the Australian Dream of home ownership.

Gwen's money-oriented nature often causes her to look down on others who she believes are not entitled to the privileges she is as they have not worked for it. While in discussion with Meg about Tom's family and their upcoming holiday she says " They both work don't they? In a factory, isn't it? I'm sure that's what I heard. A lean-to. They shouldn't be going on a holiday if they can't afford one. " Gwen generalizes their family in contrast to the hardships she financially struggled with in her adolescence that she persisted through to earn what she has today.

These past experiences have made her appreciate the value of money to which she vows to never have to live so miserably ever again. Likewise, similar concepts regarding increased consumerism in this particular time period can be seen in Dawe's " Enter Without So Much as Knocking". This poem follows stages of a man whose life since birth is built on consumerism. The 1950's were a time where social values regarding consumerism were

substantially changing, especially as a result of the new advances in technology.

The television, being one of the major developments only started to become mainstream in Australia a few years before this poem was published. The poem opens with a new born baby being introduced into a hectic fast city paced lifestyle. The first words heard when carried into the front door were Bobby Dazzler on Channel 7, “ Hello, hello, hello all you lucky people. ” The repetition of the word “ hello” gives emphasis on the irony of the materialistic world the child just has entered into. Although Bobby Dazzler refers to the viewers as lucky, the immoral ethics and lack of human emotion that the child is exposed to would suggest otherwise.

The photo on the left shows a person who is surrounded by materialistic objects along with the word consume to show how the persona in the play’s whole life revolves around consumerism. Consumerist attitudes are also seen later in to the poem, when the family are defined as a “ Well-equipped smoothly-run household”, using labels that would typically be given to commercial products when advertising. The hyphenated words create an extended listing effect that would appear when reading product descriptions before considering buying.

This dehumanizes the family as if they have been purchased as objects and have not been described based on personal characteristics thus demonstrating how consumerism has completely ruined our lives. This idea is represented in the deceptive picture on the right, with the phrase “ Consumerism is killing us all”, however with few letters blurred out leaves the words “ Consumerism is in us all”. The Vietnam War was another prime

concern which had a massive impact on both the veterans and their loved ones during the 1960's. Specifically, the introduction of conscription laws within Australia were very controversial as the public felt that they should not be forcefully sent overseas, but instead used for home defence only. In "Away", it is learnt that Roy and Coral have lost their son at war after he was randomly selected through the conscription method of recruiting troops. Both Coral and Roy have different approaches to coping with the loss of their son which begins to threaten their relationship. Roy sees his son's involvement in the war as a contribution to a "country with one of the highest living standards on earth." leaving his wife Coral who is still clearly distraught from the outcome, without any emotional support.

After the school play, Coral awaits her husband alone outside where through monologue, is able to address her exact thoughts out loud to the audience. Coral has been moved by "A Midsummer Night's Dream", in particular Tom's role who she cannot help but think of her young and innocent son who was taken away far too early. She makes a direct reference to her son "Is it better for them to die like that?" Through the soliloquy it is evident that Coral is incapable of dealing with the pain and despair the world has to offer, leaving her in an unstable state.

The image on the left is of a young Australian veteran who was called up in the first intake of national servicemen under the conscription scheme, who would have been placed in the exact situation as Roy and Corals son. Later on in the play, Roy confronts Coral about her inability to control her low-spirited behaviour around people when she is at school functions and that Roy is also still suffering but doesn't feel included in the mourning of their

son. Roy attempts to reassure Coral that there are other families out there who have been victimised by the repercussions of the war with the lines “ But.

But. We are not the only ones”. The uses of short sentences are far more powerful in meaning as they are straight to the point in his efforts to comfort Coral from the tragedy. Coral is only one of a few mothers who were outraged due to conscription. On the right, you can see an anti-conscription protest by a group of women called Save Our Sons who formed to counter conscription and in general the war. Identical themes with regards to the nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War and the negative response from the Australian public can be seen in Bruce Dawe’s “ Homecoming”.

The poem is about the process of bringing home deceased bodies from the war who were originally conscripted to fight on behalf of their country. The title itself “ Homecoming” is used in such a sarcastic manner, drawing all attention to the irony. The concept of a ‘ homecoming’ would generally call for a celebration and overall give us a warm sensation, however that is not the case for the return of the dead soldiers stripped of their dignity. In the first opening lines of the poem, the procedure of how the bodies are collected for their arrival home are described using graphic terms.

Through the use of visual imagery, the mistreatment of the corpses is shown in lines “ they’re zipping them up in green plastic bags” which dehumanize the veterans by their absence of individuality. On the left shows luggage on the tarmac at Vung Tau, a few days before the Vietnam veterans returned home. The enormity of the war is represented towards the end of the poem through the metaphorical “ the spider grief swings in his bitter geometry. ”

Dawe refers to a spider's web to portray the widespread affect the war had on the family and friends within the community who are still grieving.

The image on the right shows a soldier being greeted by his young children, who was fortunate enough to arrive home unscathed, unlike many of his fellow war mates. As you can see, exploring related themes of consumerism and conscription in Bruce Dawe's poems "Enter Without So Much as Knocking" and "Homecoming" along with Michael Gow's play "Away" allow us to gain an insight into the human condition and social values of an era that we would otherwise not be able to understand on such scale through a study of one of them individually. In saying so, the Board of Studies should reconsider removing the module from the syllabus.