

2016 Lecture on Close Reading for the ATAR Literature course and external examination

Extracts and acknowledgements

Merry – Go – Round in the Sea

ACT ONE

RICK AWAY 1941-1945

SCENE ONE

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

A Murchison landscape sweeps across the stage.

The performance area is thrust-style with a cyclorama landscape across the back of the stage. The colours are earth, gold and sky. A series of ramps traverse the landscape, so figures can move across its painterly surface. In the centre of the stage is a large revolve, which is used to segue from scene to scene. On the left edge of the stage stands a corrugated tank that serves as a pool and, to the right, the musicians' area. The CHORUS takes up position on the ramps, in the landscape.

ROB lies in the middle of the revolve – in the grass – his eyes closed to the sun. He begins to count out the seconds to a minute. Music begins. The CHORUS speaks over ROB's counting.

ROB: One, two, three, four...

CHORUS: The merry-go-round...

ROB: ...five, six, seven, eight...

CHORUS: The merry-go-round had a centre post of cast iron

ROB: ...nine, ten, eleven, twelve....

CHORUS: ...reddened a little by the salt air, and a certain ornateness.

ROB: ...thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...

CHORUS: The post began as a square pillar, formed rings...

ROB: ...seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...

CHORUS: ...continued as a fluted column...

ROB: ...twenty, twenty-one, twenty – two

CHORUS: ...suddenly bulged like a diseased tree with an excrescence of iron leaves...

ROB: ...twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five...

CHORUS: ...narrowed to the peak like the top of a pepper pot...

ROB: ... twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty

CHORUS: ... ending very high in the sky with an iron ball. In the bulge where the leaves were, was an iron collar.

ROB: ... thirty-one, thirty – two, thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five...

CHORUS: From this collar eight iron stays hung down...

ROB: ...thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine, forty...

CHORUS: ...supporting the narrow, wooden octagonal seat of the merry-go-round.

ROB: ... forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five...

CHORUS: ...The planks were polished by the planks of children.

ROB: ...forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty...

CHORUS: And on every one of the stays was a small unruled section...

ROB: ... fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five...

CHORUS: ... where the hands of the adults have sent the merry-go-round spinning!

ROB:... fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty!

That is a minute. It will never be that minute again.

It will never be today again. Never.

MARGARET appears as the CHORUS forms a merry-go-round on the revolve.

MARGARET: Rob – Rob Corman!

CHORUS: [echoing] Rob – Rob Corman!

ROB: Here i am, Mummy.

MARGARET: You're a naughty boy, I told you to stay in the car!

ROB: I want to ride on the merry-go-round.

MARGARET: We haven't got time. We're going to pick up Nan from Grandma and Aunt Kay's.

ROB: I want a ride!

MARGARET: [giving in] Don't scowl at me, Rob.

ROB: Lift me up.

MARGARET: [*lifting him onto the merry-go-round*] Oof! – You're getting heavy.

ROB: Aunt Kay lets me ride on her back and she's old.

MARGARET: Aunt Kay is very naughty. You mustn't let her give you piggy-backs.

ROB: You're not as strong as Aunt Kay.

MARGARET: Do you want a ride?

ROB: Yes- push me faster!

MARGARET: Oh, Rob, it's too hot.

ROB: Why don't you run round with it like Mavis does?

MARGARET: It's too hot. That's enough, we must go now.

ROB: Mavis made it go fast. She ran with it.

MARGARET: Mavis is a young girl.

ROB: Why did Mavis go away?

MARGARET: To get married.

ROB: Why don't we have another maid?

MARGARET: People don't have maids now.

ROB: Why don't people have maids now?

MARGARET: Because of the war. People don't have maids in wartime.

ROB: Are the Japanese wicked?

MARGARET: They're the enemy.

ROB: Wickedder than the Germans?

MARGARET: They did something very wicked. They dropped bombs on Pearl Harbour.

ROB: Is Pearl Harbour like Geraldton?

MARGARET: I suppose, a bit...

ROB: It must be a place like Geraldton – everyone is always talking about it.

MARGARET: [*stops pushing*] That's enough, it's too hot. Come along, quick sticks, we're going to Grandma's house.

She goes to drag him off.

ROB: Mummy?

MARGARET: Yes, Rob?

ROB: Can't I go to the merry-go-round in the sea? Just once?

MARGARET: Oh, Rob, won't you ever believe me? There's no merry-go-round in the sea.

ROB: It looks like a merry-go-round in the sea. It must be a merry-go-round in the sea.

MARGARET: It's a big boat. It's a sort of barge that was carting rocks to build the breakwater. And one night there was a storm, and it sank. What you can see is the mast and the iron things that hold the mast up. It just happens to look like a merry-go-round.

She starts to leave. He follows, dawdling behind her.

ROB: Have you been there?

MARGARET: Yes, I've seen it.

ROB: Well, can't I go, then? Can't I go there with you?

MARGARET: No, we can't, Rob. We can't go there.

ROB: Why? Why can't we go there?

MARGARET: Oh – because of the war. Darling, you know that the end of the beach is where Daddy's camp is, and no one can go there now except for the garrison. There are barbed wire fences there to keep people out. So we can't go to the merry-go-round – I mean the wreck – not till after the war. But you'll go there someday, if you really want to see it. The war won't last forever.

ROB: [*defiantly*] When I'm big I'll swim out to the merry-go-round in the sea, I'll swim miles and miles until I get to the merry-go-round fixed in the sea and I'll bring Rick too, and Aunt Kay, and we'll stay there always, with the world turning around us, spinning, and nothing will change and it will be today forever.

MARGARET: Rob, come on.

They start to walk.

ROB: Mummy, why aren't I Japanese?

MARGARET: What?

ROB: Why aren't I Japanese? There's millions of them and only a few of us.

MARGARET: Come along, Grandma's expecting us.

ROB: Mummy, is Geraldton old?

MARGARET: Oh, very old.

ROB: Older than Australia?

MARGARET: Australia's a young country.

ROB: But it's old too, older than the Depression, older than anything... I think it was asleep like Sleeping Beauty. Mummy, if everyone left town would the sand come back?

MARGARET: I suppose so.

ROB: And bury it?

MARGARET: I suppose so?

ROB: Would it be like snow?

MARGARET: Rob!

ROB: There would be no town at all, just white sandhills.

Oxenburgh, D. and Ross, A (2012) *The Merry-Go-round in the Sea*, Strawberry Hills: Currency Press

Merry – Go – Round in the Sea

ACT ONE

RICK AWAY 1941-1945

Scenery and setting – sweeps – significance?

SCENE ONE

THE MERRY-GO-ROUND

A Murchison landscape sweeps across the stage.

Importance of colour to create landscape and introduce national and cultural identity

The performance area is thrust-style with a cyclorama landscape across the back of the stage. The colours are earth, gold and sky. A series of ramps traverse the landscape, so figures can move across its painterly surface. In the centre of the stage is a large revolve, which is used to segue from scene to scene. On the left edge of the stage stands a corrugated tank that serves as a pool and, to the right, the musicians' area. The CHORUS takes up position on the ramps, in the landscape.

Movement on stage

Establishing role of chorus in commentary

ROB lies in the middle of the revolve – in the grass – his eyes closed to the sun. He begins to count out the seconds to a minute. Music begins. The CHORUS speaks over ROB's counting.

ROB: One, two, three, four...

Sound and rhythm

Rob laying on grass establishing childhood innocence and foreshadowing child's perspective

CHORUS: The merry-go-round...

ROB: ...five, six, seven, eight...

Tradition and sense of place established by Chorus' description of merry – go – round

CHORUS: The merry-go-round had a centre post of cast iron

ROB: ...nine, ten, eleven, twelve....

Merry-go-round symbolic of innocence and predictability

CHORUS: ...reddened a little by the salt air, and a certain ornateness.

ROB: ...thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen...

Establishing notion of child's identity shaped by place and time

CHORUS: The post began as a square pillar, formed rings...

ROB: ...seventeen, eighteen, nineteen...

Rhythmic alternatives between child's voice and description of Chorus

CHORUS: ...continued as a fluted column...

Language simile – like a diseased tree – lurking danger interspersed with child's perspective

ROB: ...twenty, twenty-one, twenty – two

CHORUS: ...suddenly bulged like a diseased tree with an excrescence of iron leaves...

Some implied levels of menacing description

ROB: ...twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five...

Patterns of similes

CHORUS: ...narrowed to the peak like the top of a pepper pot...

ROB: ... twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty

CHORUS: ... ending very high in the sky with an iron ball. In the bulge where the leaves were, was an iron collar.

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CHORUS: From this collar eight iron stays hung down...

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CHORUS: ...supporting the narrow, wooden octagonal seat of the merry-go-round.

ROB: ... forty-one, forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five...

CHORUS: ...The planks were polished by the planks of children.

Timelessness – having gone before Rob representative of a potentially universal experience

'White Clay II' by Lucy Dougan

From beneath the bed

I unearth the figure

that my father made.

Headless, armless, legless,

this almost de Milo, our mother, had graced

the rooms of our growing-up.

She rests in an absurd basket

shaped like an Easter bonnet,

swathed in red tissue paper,

one shoulder gone.

The shells of cockroaches, bone

buttons and the lost links of watches

keep company with the rounds

of her breasts and belly.

I set her to rights, and, though small,

(two hands can easily hold her)

she rises monumental, bounty from the sea.

The cold of being stored so long

comes from her white pocked skin

and also the way material

can feel fugitive, unfinished,

with something of the maker's hand

still in it.

Material of creativity and construction
– basic

'White Clay II' by Lucy Dougan

Construction of experience –
malleability

Sense of the personal, possibly the
autobiographical, unknown speaker or
persona, personal perspective

From beneath the bed

Mystery, memory, the past,
childhood presences

I unearth the figure

Descriptive repetition 'less'

that my father made.

Uncertain identity – memories of the
past – lack of identity – questioning
of those things that make identities
real

Headless, armless, legless,

this almost de Milo, our mother, had graced

Nostalgia of memory

the rooms of our growing-up.

Oscillation between recognition of
statue and memory of mother –
intertwining of these

'de Milo' – allusions to the processes of
creativity – the perfection in flaws

She rests in an absurd basket

The place of art in the ordinariness
of life

shaped like an Easter bonnet,

Uncertainty of the 'she' – more than
one meaning

swathed in red tissue paper,

Simple simile and imagery giving
simple visual impression

one shoulder gone.

The ordinariness of maintaining
the past

The shells of cockroaches, bone

Memories amongst ordinariness –
ravages of neglect

buttons and the lost links of watches

Simple alliteration of – bone buttons –
lost links – breasts and belly

keep company with the rounds

Arbitrary nature of 'stuff' – beauty
amongst the 'junk' – finding
treasure

of her breasts and belly.

Some elements of personification -
Attention to detail – simple objects
helping description of scene

I set her to rights, and, though small,

Sensitivity and nostalgia – power
of the object – significance
through memory

(two hands can easily hold her)

she rises monumental, bounty from the sea.

Simple action

Transformation through
perception

The cold of being stored so long

comes from her white pocked skin

Speaker/persona perspective

and also the way material

Shaping of material – power of the
making

can feel fugitive, unfinished,

with something of the maker's hand

Process of creativity as subversive,
mysterious, the product of art
maintaining something of the
creator within it

still in it.

Descriptive words and phrases

Dashes

Pronouns – he as father – he as artist

Personification

Metaphor – body as crypt

There must have been
 a day, a time,
 a starting point – one afternoon –
 when he carried the clay
 close to his chest
 and began to coax her out.
 She was always a hider.
 Many times he had crawled
 in tight spaces to fetch her back.

The action of the artist

Potential link between grief and creativity

Now I've crawled in too,
 her body a crypt
 of both their loves
 before me.

Memory of love of parents – childhood nostalgia

Passion in the simplicity of life

She seems to say,
 if clay could speak,
 that here can be comfort
 in incompleteness.

Creation of the personas and characters of those we love – creation of the memories of those we care about

His marks are echoes.

Emotional action of letting go – memory and nostalgia as a part of that process

Like her, he wanted me to know –
 A series of breakages,
 A letting go.

Description of Venus de milo

Ideas and themes

Possible interpretations

I was hiding in the orchard, pretending to check for creepycrawlies rutting on the beginnings of the fruit when the Italian prisoners of war arrived, descending from the sergeant's green Chevy: one fella tiny, nervous, prancing sideways, shaking his glossy black mane, a racehorse of a man, sixteen if he was a day; the other bloke a walking pie safe, draped in a freakish magenta army uniform, complete with a pink blur in the buttonhole that I reckoned was an everlasting. Some prisoners. They looked more like two obscure French artists mincing along behind the curator of a museum of primitive art. The curator, my husband Toad, pointed to the house, and I imagined him saying, 'And over here is the Toady masterpiece – The Farm House – painted in a mad rush in 1935 before the wife had her first child – notice the delightfully eccentric stone chimney, the listing veranda, the sunburned children lurking under the mulberry.' And the tame cockatoo, Boss Cockie, saw them coming and raised his crest in alarm and muttered under his breath. 'Shut up,' he said. 'Go away. Bad bloody cockie.'

I turned thirty the year the Italians came to our West Australian farm, and I was afraid of them, so afraid of those oversexed men we'd read about, rapists in tight little bodies with hot Latin eyes, men who were capable of anything. Of course, we didn't know much about them, just what we'd heard on the wireless or read in the paper and if Mr Churchill had said donkeys were flying in Italy, I do think we'd have believed him. We women of the district, none of us wanted the Italians, but who were we to say? It was impossible to get help for ploughing and seeding and shearing, the young bloods gone to splatter themselves all over Europe, New Guinea, North Africa, and even the old retraits in the Volunteer Defence Corps were busy drilling on the football oval. They didn't know that their crushed paper bag faces were enough to repel any Japanese invasion. Men were rationed, like everything else,

and so when the government offered prisoners of war as farm labour, the control centres were mobbed from the first day by farmers in search of workers.

Oh, I knew those dagoes were coming all right, and that's why I hid in the orchard, crouching there in Wellington boots, the hem of my dress bunched in one hand. Over sixty trees were in bloom, and I was busy brushing petals out of the valley of fabric between my knees, trying to breathe, because the scent of orange blossom was chokingly sweet. And the rabbits – the bloody rabbits – had ringbarked all the newly planted almond slips, their buds already wilting.

I didn't want to put those men in Joan's old room. I didn't want them in my house at all. But we couldn't keep them in the shearing shed like a mob of sheep, so I was forced to scrub her tiny room – really just a closed-in part of the veranda, a sleepout – and beeswax the jarrah boards, and spread the old hospital beds with sheets white and brittle as bones. And, as a final touch, a welcoming note that I didn't feel, I stuffed some golden wattle in a canning jar and put it on a box between their beds. I'd cleaned the whole house too, so that if the prisoners killed us while we were sleeping, the neighbours wouldn't have anything to talk about, and I'd sent my children, Mudsey and Alf, to pick up the wee droppings that their poddy lamb had left all over the veranda. And lamb chops were on my mind, with mint sauce, baby potatoes and – on the side – a fricassee of brains.

I had a fairly good idea why Toad wasn't taking the Italians over to the room, and even though I knew it was wrong, even though what he was planning to do to them was possibly a breach of the Geneva Convention, I waited, gurgling with delight in the lusty orchard, attacked by platoons of bees drunk on orange blossom wine. All my senses were walking with the men, waiting for the sound of those baby-eaters howling when they were shoved into the sheep dip. They'd bellyflop into the stinking, arsenic-laden waters and they'd wonder about the greasy black pellets floating past them like mines and they'd be picking some of the sheep shit from their eyebrows right when Toady pushed them under again with his crook.