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# VCE LITERATURE: LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

USING WORKS OF ART IN THE NGV COLLECTION TO UNDERSTAND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

**VATE**

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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# RATIONALE

The revised 2017–20 VCE Literature Study Design requires students to actively engage with literary perspectives. While the study design does not prescribe particular literary theories, it does insist that students analyse literary criticism reflecting different perspectives of the text studied. The objective is to broaden understanding of the numerous ways that a text can be read, thereby providing an opportunity for students to acquire more original, complex and sophisticated readings of literature. Studying literary criticism unravels a history of ideas that will make students conscious of the ways in which gender, race, sexuality and social class intersect with both texts and their own lives. Considering literary perspectives does not diminish the merit of an aesthetic reading but rather adds new layers of understanding, revealing that our interpretation of a text is always dependent on the lens through which we view it, and that truth is a construction.

Analysing literary criticism or reading a text through a different lens can be a challenging and daunting way to begin; students often find it useful to do this visually. Art invites the sorts of analytical and critical thinking skills crucial to close reading. We are immersed in visual language, and as such it is imperative that we teach our students to become critically aware of what they see. Through the process of visual literacies, students can learn to read carefully and consider what is *seen* and what is *not seen*. In doing so, they can begin to verbalise their thoughts and formulate meaningful questions. They can develop transferable skills that will help them analyse, scrutinise and interrogate their observations. Engaging with the NGV Collection is an ideal way to teach these skills to students. Works of art at the National Gallery of Victoria can provide students with the opportunity to cultivate an understanding of literary perspectives using a visual approach. Applying theories to deconstruct works of art can challenge initial perceptions and broaden understandings and interpretations. If students can use this knowledge to read visual works of art, they will acquire the confidence to identify use of theory when reading literary criticism and learn to evaluate these ideas when developing their own responses. The NGV in partnership with VATE has developed an indispensable program for both teachers and students that provides an introduction to literary perspectives and demonstrates practical ways to negotiate theory in the classroom.

# LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

It would be helpful to familiarise students with literary perspectives prior to visiting the NGV. Once students acquire knowledge of these theories, they will be able to recognise how writers use these lenses to deconstruct texts. Some of the literary perspectives that will be introduced in the NGV program include:

**Feminist criticism**

**Marxist criticism**

**Postcolonial criticism**

**Postmodern criticism**

**New Historicist criticism**

**Psychoanalytic criticism**

# HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE WITH VCE LITERATURE TEXTS

Engaging with original works of art in the Gallery adds another dimension to exploring the literary perspectives. NGV educators regularly offer programs for VCE Literature students and teachers, and are also delighted to negotiate programs specifically tailored to an individual school's curriculum. For details, please contact our booking office on 8620 2340, or [edu.bookings@ngv.vic.gov.au](mailto:edu.bookings@ngv.vic.gov.au)

This resource is designed to be used in the VCE Literature classroom after visiting NGV. It specifically supports the following VCE areas of study:

**Unit 1 – Area of Study 1: Reading Practices**

**Unit 2 – Area of Study 2: Exploring Connections between Texts**

**Unit 3 – Area of Study 1: Adaptations and Transformations**

**Unit 4 – Area of Study 1: Literary Perspectives**

In addition to being a tool for use in classroom discussions and group activities, the process of analysing works of art that is explicitly outlined in this resource will help students develop versatile skills that can be applied when interpreting VCE Literature texts and literary criticism. Beginning with initial readings and annotation, students proceed to identifying key concerns and relevant literary perspectives. This process will dissuade students from superficial readings of a text and instead promote the importance of close reading and analysis prior to applying theory to deconstruct texts. Encouraging students to consider literary perspectives in a meaningful and authentic way will expand their experience of text rather than limit the perimeters of their readings.

**Below is a detailed explanation of each stage with suggestions for use with VCE Literature texts:**

## **INITIAL READINGS**

After students have read the selected VCE Literature text, support them to explore their initial thoughts. Students should consider how their own ideas and contexts influence their reading of the text.

## **CONTEXT**

Provide students with background information about the text. Explore historical, social, and political contexts and the writer's own background. Consider the writer's views and values and the time and place in which the work was created.

## **ANNOTATION**

Provide students with passages of text and ask them to consider the language and features of the text. Students should engage in close textual analysis and consider key concerns and ideas that emerge from this close analysis.

## **KEY CONCERNS**

Students should then identify key concerns and ideas in the text. Try to encourage them to develop complex ideas rather than simply identifying 'themes'; e. g. 'Human impermanence and fragility' rather than 'Time'.

## **LITERARY PERSPECTIVES AND LITERARY CRITICISM:**

Introduce students to relevant literary criticism and consider the perspectives/theories adopted. Teachers should provide some context around how the theory/theories emerged and the key theorists involved in its conception. For Unit 4 – Area of Study 1: Literary Perspectives, students are required to 'compare and analyse two pieces of literary criticism reflecting different perspectives, assumptions and ideas about the views and values of the text studied'. The table in this booklet can be easily adapted to any text prescribed on the VCE Literature Text list. This table will enable students to consolidate and evaluate their understandings and develop their own responses to the text.

	LITERARY CRITICISM #1	LITERARY CRITICISM #2
<p><b>IDEAS</b> What are the key ideas/ perspectives offered by the writer?</p>		
<p><b>VIEWS</b> What views does the writer have about culture and society?</p>		
<p><b>VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b> What are the values and assumptions underlying these viewpoints/perspectives?</p>		
<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Critique and evaluate these perspectives. Are there limitations? What questions are raised?</p>		
<p><b>INTERPRETATION</b> Use these perspectives to help construct your own interpretation. Consider your initial thoughts, the context and your close reading to support your views.</p>		

# DAVID HOCKNEY



David Hockney  
*The second marriage* 1963  
oil, gouache and collage of torn wallpaper on canvas  
197.8 x 228.7 cm irreg.  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Presented by the Contemporary Art Society of London, 1965  
1525-5  
© David Hockney

## INITIAL READINGS

- Describe the scene that Hockney depicts
- What can you tell about the figures? What might their relationship be?
- How would you describe the mood? How has the artist evoked this?
- How might the title, *The second marriage*, provide the viewer with a deeper understanding of the work?

## CONTEXT

The early 1960s was a period of rapid development in David Hockney's work when he introduced narrative, text and the figure into his compositions at a time when figuration was considered particularly 'anti-modern'. After leaving the Royal College of Art, London, in 1962, Hockney travelled through Europe. An experience in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin, was the catalyst for *The first marriage*, 1962 (Tate Gallery, London), the precursor to the National Gallery of Victoria's picture. Hockney had been amused by seeing a friend standing in profile beside a sculpture of an Egyptian female figure, and used this unlikely, coincidental coupling of figures to explore the theme of marriage. For Hockney, *The second marriage* was a more 'complex' version of the first picture. It evolved in the studio in early 1963 after a series of preparatory drawings that focus in particular on the bridegroom, who bears a striking resemblance to the main protagonist of Hockney's 1961–63 series of etchings, *A rake's progress*. Given the increasingly overt references in Hockney's work around this period to sexuality and domestic intimacy, the bridegroom in *The second marriage* could be seen as a tongue-in-cheek self-portrait. The figure of the bride derives from a photograph of an Egyptian princess of the Armana period. Hockney was drawn to both the quality of the reproduction and beauty of the head.

## KEY CONCERNS

- The institution of marriage
- Male and female domestic relationships
- Identity and the idea of 'selfhood'
- Intimacy and sexuality

## ANNOTATION (Possible interpretations)



- The male figure being in monochrome and the female figure in polychrome perhaps alludes to the different perceptions of males and females.
- Mediums of oils/gouache and collage create an irregular and patchy surface that may suggest disharmony in the couple's relationship.

- The painting is comprised of three separate canvases pieced together, and this serves to fragment the overall piece.
- It seems ironic that this is an image of a marriage – a contract that is supposed to signify love and intimacy. The stiffness of the figures suggests frigidity and disaffection.



## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES AND THEORISTS

### FEMINIST CRITICISM

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)

Betty Friedan (1921–2006)

Elaine Showalter (1941–)

#### Simone de Beauvoir

'Marriages ... are not generally founded upon love ... the very nature of the institution ... is to make economic and sexual union of man and woman serve the interest of society, not assure their personal happiness.' (*The Second Sex*:<sup>1975</sup>)

'The wedding night transforms the erotic act into a test that both parties fear their inability to meet, each being too worried by his or her own problems to be able to think generously of the other. This gives the occasion a formidable air of solemnity, and it is not surprising if it dooms the woman to lasting frigidity.' (*The Second Sex*:<sup>1975</sup>)

#### Questions a feminist critic would ask:

- How is the domestic relationship between men and women portrayed in this piece?
- What might the painting reveal about the operations of power between the man and woman?
- How do the figures embody masculine and feminine traits? Explain how they challenge or endorse gender stereotypes
- How might the painting comment on patriarchy and the institution of marriage?
- Does the painting challenge patriarchy in any way? Explain why or why not.

### PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961)

Jacques Lacan (1901–1981)

#### Carl Gustav Jung

'The practice of art is a psychological activity and, as such, can be approached from a psychological angle ... a work of art arises from much the same psychological conditions as neurosis ... The school of medical psychology inaugurated by Freud has undoubtedly encouraged the literary historian to bring certain peculiarities of a work of art into relation with the intimate, personal life of the poet. But this is nothing new in principle, for it has long been known that the scientific treatment of art will reveal the personal threads that the artist, intentionally or unintentionally, has woven into his work. The Freudian approach may, however, make possible a more exhaustive demonstration of the influences that reach back into earliest childhood and play their part in the artistic creation. To this extent the psychoanalysis of art differs in no essential way from the subtle psychological nuances of a penetrating literary analysis.' ('On the relation of analytical psychology to poetry', 2001).

#### Questions a psychoanalytical critic would ask:

- What elements of the artist's personal life and interior world might be revealed in this work?
- What elements in this piece could contain hidden meanings?
- What evidence is there to suggest that the figures in the painting are psychologically complex beings?
- How could the figures' body language and stance be explained using psychoanalytical terms; for example, fear, .. alienation, sexuality, identity? Is there evidence of the figures being repressed? Discuss.

	FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE	PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVE
<p><b>IDEAS</b> What are the key ideas/ perspectives offered by the writer?</p>		
<p><b>VIEWS</b> What views does the writer have about culture and society?</p>		
<p><b>VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b> What are the values and assumptions underlying these viewpoints/perspectives?</p>		
<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Critique and evaluate these perspectives. Are there limitations? What questions are raised?</p>		
<p><b>INTERPRETATION</b> Use these perspectives to help construct your own interpretation. Consider your initial thoughts, the context and your close reading to support your views.</p>		

# JOHN GLOVER



John Glover  
*The River Nile, Van Diemen's Land, from Mr Glover's farm 1837*  
oil on canvas  
76.4 x 114.6 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1956  
3359-4

## INITIAL READINGS

- Describe what you see in this painting; consider forms, colours and composition
- How would you describe the atmosphere?
- What clues might suggest when and where this picture was painted?
- What other aspects of the painting might contribute to our understanding of the landscape and its context?

## CONTEXT

John Glover has depicted a landscape, based on the view from his farm, where Tasmanian Aboriginal people are seen enjoying an idyllic life in harmony with nature. His aim may have been to record a vanishing way of life, as the reality for Tasmanian Aboriginal people at that time was in stark contrast to the scene portrayed in the painting. Encounters between early colonisers and the original inhabitants of Tasmania were often characterised by violent conflict. As Ian McLean has stated, 'The colony was divided between a few influential liberals who advocated conciliation, and the "extirpationists" – the majority of colonists who considered the Aboriginal people dangerous pests, advocating their swift extermination'. When Glover arrived in Tasmania in 1831 it is estimated that only a few hundred Tasmanian Aboriginal people were still living in their homelands in accord with customary tradition. By 1835, as a result of the 1831 'Black Line' program – military operations against the natives of Van Diemen's Land – many of the original inhabitants had been captured; removed from their Country and dispersed to Flinders Island; or suffered death by introduced diseases.

Through his acquaintance with George Augustus Robinson, the Protector of Aborigines, Glover possibly met Aboriginal people from western Tasmania who are known to have camped with Robinson near Glover's farm in 1834. Many details in the painting are accurate, particularly the crystalline clarity of the River Nile and the local flora, including eucalypts, blackwoods and Tasmanian waratahs. Interestingly, however, the Aboriginal figures are painted in a generic manner. This may be explained by Glover's comments in a letter, describing a similar painting he presented to Robinson, where 'The Figures are too small to give much likeness – my object was to give an idea of the gay happy life the Natives led before the White people came here and also to give an idea of the scenery of the Country'. Although he probably felt some empathy for Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their maltreatment by European settlers, Glover ultimately accepted rather than challenged their systematic dispossession. Like many artists of his time, Glover was interested in cultures different from his own and was clearly curious about Tasmanian Aboriginal people and their lives. His painting reminds us of their presence in Aboriginal Van Diemen's Land.

### **KEY CONCERNS**

- Connections with Country/Human perceptions of landscape and the natural world
- Truth and reliability of historical sources – whose history?
- Time and continuity of human existence
- Cultural perceptions/misconceptions

## ANNOTATION (Possible interpretations)

Mountains in the background give a sense of a safe and protected enclosure (could be perceived as ironic by contemporary viewers).

Contained fire may suggest sense of control over the environment.



The curvature of the trees' limbs are unusual for native Australian eucalypts and may reflect the artist's personal style; however, Glover was fascinated by plants indigenous to Tasmania and he recorded some with great accuracy.

Generic depiction of Aboriginal people may suggest the colonial view that they were part of Australian fauna.

- Contemporary historian Bill Gammage has examined how the Indigenous people's complex system of land management, and understanding of native plants and fire cycles, resulted in a land that was contained, resilient and protected from the damaging bushfires that we now experience. Early colonial descriptions of the Australian landscape as a 'gentleman's park' may make Glover's depiction of a 'manicured' landscape more accurate than we initially believed it to be.

- The quiet and serene atmosphere may suggest Glover's sense of the pre-contact lives of Tasmanian Aboriginal people living on Country, undisturbed by colonisers.

## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES AND THEORISTS

### *Postcolonial criticism*

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961)

Edward Said (1935–2003)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942–)

### **Edward Said**

'Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.' ('Blind imperial arrogance', 2003)

### **Questions a postcolonial critic would ask:**

- From what perspective does the artist view the land?
- Who is depicted as the 'Other'? How is the 'Other' illustrated in the painting?
- What does the painting reveal about operations of power and cultural difference, and how?
- How does cultural difference influence our perceptions of the self, the 'Other' and the world?
- How might the painting represent colonialism and oppression? Does it critique or reinforce colonialist ideologies?

### *New Historicist criticism*

Stephen Greenblatt (1943–)

Michel Foucault (1926–1984)

### **Stephen Greenblatt**

'[New historicism is] set apart from both the dominant historical scholarship of the past and the formalist criticism that partially displaced this scholarship in the decades after World War Two. The earlier historicism tends to be monological; that is, it is concerned with discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population ... The new historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others'. ('The power of forms in the English Renaissance', 2001)

### **Questions a new historicist critic would ask:**

- What was happening in Tasmania in the 1830s? What elements of the work could help us understand the social reality of this era?
- How is this 'event' presented by the artist? How is it influenced by the artist's culture and the views and values of the time?
- How do you think the artist viewed Aboriginal people?
- How does this painting relate to ideas about national identity? How does it provide a sense of Australia's history?

	POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE	NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE
<p><b>IDEAS</b> What are the key ideas/ perspectives offered by the writer?</p>		
<p><b>VIEWS</b> What views does the writer have about culture and society?</p>		
<p><b>VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b> What are the values and assumptions underlying these viewpoints/perspectives?</p>		
<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Critique and evaluate these perspectives. Are there limitations? What questions are raised?</p>		
<p><b>INTERPRETATION</b> Use these perspectives to help construct your own interpretation. Consider your initial thoughts, the context and your close reading to support your views.</p>		

# GEORGE W. LAMBERT



George W. Lambert  
*Lotty and a lady* 1906  
oil on canvas  
102.8 x 127.7 cm  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Felton Bequest, 1910  
492-2

## INITIAL READINGS

- Describe what you see in this painting; consider forms, colours and composition
- How would you describe the mood of the scene? What features in the painting suggest this mood?
- What does the title *Lotty and the Lady* suggest about the relationship between the two women?
- Why might the lady be sitting with a servant?
- How would you describe Lotty's temperament?
- What might Lotty be feeling and thinking?



## CONTEXT

George Lambert (1873–1930) established considerable fame as a portrait artist in England after studying art in Sydney and later in Paris. He was appointed an Australian official war artist in 1917. Lambert's colourful and theatrical character, flamboyance and keen wit concealed a sensitive nature, mirrored in his evocative and perceptive sketches and paintings of war.

In *Lotty and a lady* Lambert has used a restrained palette of predominantly silvery greys and soft creams to portray an elegant, upper-class lady in the kitchen with her housemaid. Considering the strict social roles of the time, Lambert's choice of subject was unusual. Lotty's defiant pose, confident gaze and exuberant earrings, not normally worn by servant girls, may suggest that the artist was challenging the rigid and inequitable nature of the British class system, where servants remained 'below stairs' and refrained from engaging in casual conversation with their masters or mistresses. The stiff and decorous pose of the 'lady' haughtily looking down on her more relaxed maid could also symbolise the contrast between the formal public face and private domestic self of a woman from the higher echelons of society.

The carefully arranged gleaming pair of fish, central to the still life on the table, are reminiscent of those in *Kitchen scene with Christ in the house of Martha and Mary*, 1618, by renowned Spanish artist Diego Velázquez, whom Lambert greatly admired. Velázquez's painting invites viewers to consider the meditative versus the active life, and Lambert may have intended 'Lotty' to represent the world of work and the 'Lady' to symbolise a leisurely, contemplative life.

Lottie Stafford, a Cockney washerwoman, was the model for 'Lotty'. She was also popular with other artists who appreciated her confident manner and appealing sensuality. The Australian artist Thea Proctor, celebrated for her beauty and sense of style, and a close friend of the artist throughout his adult life, took on the role of the 'Lady'.

## KEY CONCERNS

- Social class
- The oppressive nature of social roles
- The power of privilege
- Monotony of daily life

## ANNOTATION (Possible interpretations)

The Lady's dominance is asserted through composition. She appears at the top of the painting, suggesting a higher rank in society compared to Lotty, who is placed at the bottom.

Unusually for a servant, Lotty is wearing earrings and adopting a defiant pose that may suggest a rebellious decision to assert her individuality.



Big fish and little fish could emphasise different social classes of the mistress and maid. The fish lying on the dampened paper evoke unpleasant smells, making the viewer question why the two women have chosen to sit around two dead fish.

- The costumes worn by Lotty and the Lady denote the distinction between work and leisure.
- Still-life objects may represent the tools of Lotty's mundane existence.
- The nineteenth-century kitchen was very much considered the domain of women. It is interesting that Lambert chose to position the women in this small space. Perhaps this confinement is suggestive of the limited roles for women within a patriarchal society.
- It has been suggested that these two figures represent the dual nature of upper-class female identity: the elegant public face and the domestic private self. By contrasting the body language and clothes of the two women, Lambert may be critiquing the rigidity of the British class system at this time, whereby people were defined by labels, such as 'lower' and 'upper' class.
- The restricted palette of browns, greys and neutral tones may give the impression of monotony and dreariness of daily routines.

## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES AND THEORISTS

### **Marxist criticism**

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Friedrich Engels (1820–1895)

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940)

Louis Althusser (1918–1990)

### **Karl Marx**

‘Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.’ (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1888)

### **Questions a Marxist critic would ask**

- How might social class be represented in the painting?
- How might we describe the nature of the relationship between the two figures? How might we view their different social positions as a barrier between them?
- How might Lambert suggest that there is conflict or discordance between Lotty and the Lady?
- What might be some of the benefits and difficulties experienced by individuals in a society confined by class?
- How might Lambert be critiquing the social system in which he lived?

### **Feminist criticism**

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935)

Emma Goldman (1869–1940)

### **Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

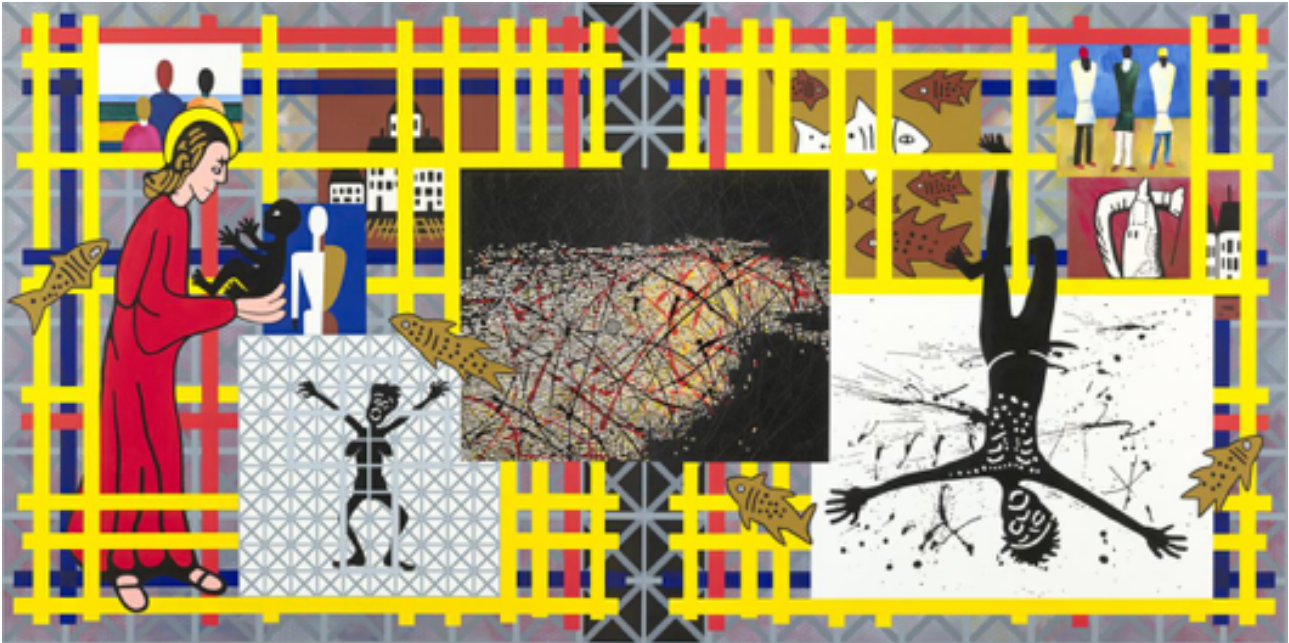
‘The labor of women in the house, certainly, enables men to produce more wealth than they otherwise could; and in this way women are economic factors in society. But so are horses.’ (*Women and Economics*, 1898)

### **Questions a feminist critic would ask?**

- How might both figures in the painting embody or subvert feminine or masculine traits?
- What are the similarities between the two female figures? How might Lambert imply a comradeship between them?
- What does the painting suggest about patriarchal social structures and their effects on all women?
- How might the struggles that the women face be both similar and different?

	MARXIST PERSPECTIVE	FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE
<p><b>IDEAS</b> What are the key ideas/ perspectives offered by the writer?</p>		
<p><b>VIEWS</b> What views does the writer have about culture and society?</p>		
<p><b>VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b> What are the values and assumptions underlying these viewpoints/perspectives?</p>		
<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Critique and evaluate these perspectives. Are there limitations? What questions are raised?</p>		
<p><b>INTERPRETATION</b> Use these perspectives to help construct your own interpretation. Consider your initial thoughts, the context and your close reading to support your views.</p>		

# GORDON BENNETT



Gordon Bennett  
*Home décor (Preston + de Stijl = Citizen) Panorama* 1997  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
(a-b) 182.7 x 365.3 cm (overall)  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Presented by the National Gallery Society of Victoria as the winner of The John McCaughey Memorial Prize, 1998  
1998.27.a-b  
© The Estate of Gordon Bennett

## INITIAL READINGS

- On first glance, how does this painting make you feel? What is it about the painting that evokes this feeling?
- Describe what you see in this painting; consider forms, colours and composition
- How might these elements create meaning?
- Are there elements that shock or disturb you? Why?
- What do you associate with the colours of the grid?
- What issues might the artist be raising in this work?

## CONTEXT

Gordon Bennett was born in Queensland in 1955 and as a child remained unaware of his Aboriginal heritage. At the age of thirty he resigned from his work as a Telecom linesman and enrolled to study at Queensland College of Art, by which time he was increasingly concerned by the racial injustices in postcolonial Australia.

Since 1989, when he held his first major solo exhibition, Bennett has gained international acclaim for his multidisciplinary work that includes painting, printmaking, photography, video, performance and installation. Bennett's art draws on his Indigenous Australian and Anglo-Celtic background to interrogate Australia's colonial history and, in particular, how the social and cultural identity of this nation has been largely determined by Western culture. In addition to local issues, his work also seeks to examine a broad range of universal philosophical questions, such as how language, including visual representations, can play a powerful role in limiting knowledge and perception.

Bennett's art practice is deeply influenced by the critical and aesthetic strategies of postmodernism. His multi-layered and complex works deconstruct conventional histories, politics and notions of identity, challenging personal beliefs and viewpoints to provoke new ways of thinking and perceiving. The act of appropriating and re-contextualising text and images from different periods and cultures is critical to the way in which the artist creates meaning. *Home décor (Preston + de Stijl = Citizen) Panorama*, 1997, is a visual montage of artistic styles such as motifs in Aboriginal art, the modernist grid created by the Dutch De Stijl artist Mondrian, and Christian iconography appropriated to interrogate themes and issues.

The modernist Australian artist Margaret Preston (1875–1963) is referenced in the painting as a means of questioning racial stereotypes. In her attempt to establish a unifying visual language that recognised the importance of Aboriginal culture within Australian society, Preston freely incorporated motifs from Aboriginal art without seeking permission or understanding their cultural significance. Her images of Aboriginal figures lacked authenticity and were reminiscent of grotesque stereotypes prevalent in colonial art. Bennett's re-contextualisation of Preston's caricatured Aboriginal figures in the painting draw attention to misrepresentation and trivialisation of Aboriginal culture.

In the mid 1990s Bennett became frustrated by the way in which he was pigeonholed as an Aboriginal artist and not considered a contemporary artist whose concerns resonated with a global audience. The 'Citizen' featured in the title *Home décor (Preston + de Stijl = Citizen) Panorama* refers to Bennett's alter ego, John Citizen, whom the artist created to both question the construct of identity and free himself from the preconceptions associated with his Aboriginal heritage and personal reputation as an artist. John Citizen, in Bennett's own words 'can be anything the viewer wants him to be: white, black or any shade in between, as is true of Australian citizens in general in our multicultural country.'

## KEY CONCERNS

- Imperialism and colonisation
- Entrapment and imprisonment
- Complexity of postcolonial identity
- Global violence and cruelty
- Cultural hegemony and oppression
- Cultural loss and dislocation

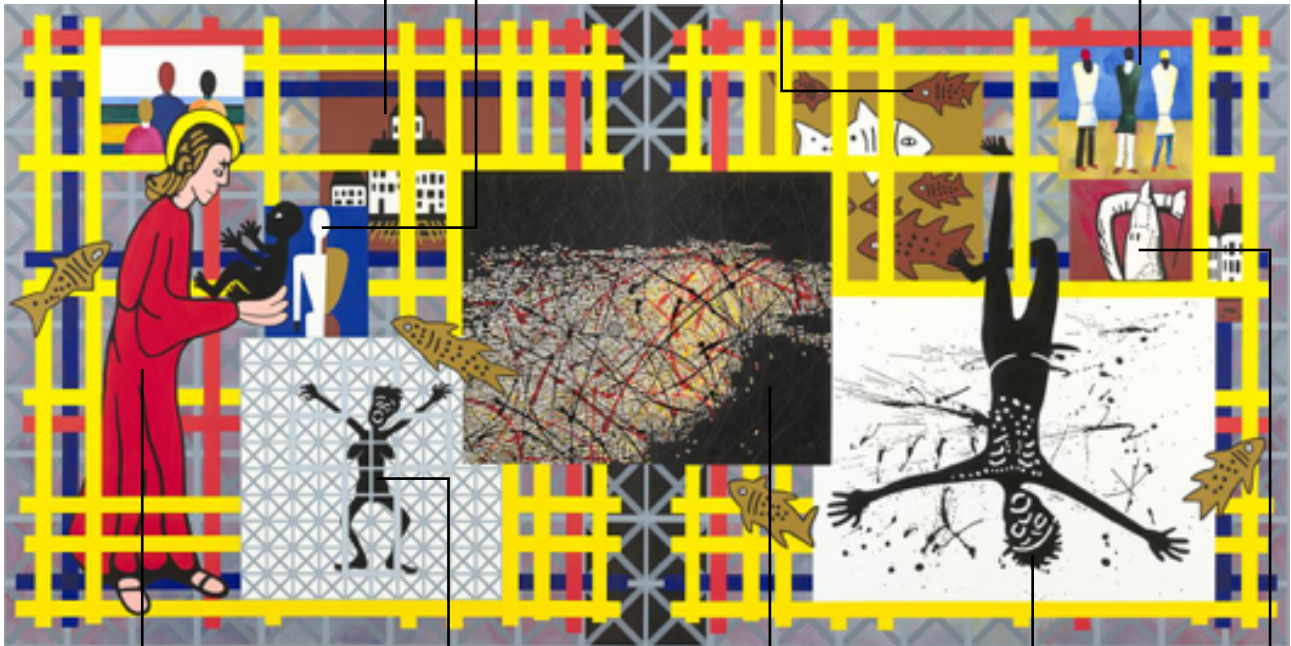
## ANNOTATION (Possible interpretations)

The building could represent a church. In this case it may symbolise the role the Christian religion played in altering the lives and belief systems of Aboriginal people.

The faceless torso is reminiscent of the Cubist style of art, which offers multiple views of one subject. The fact that the body is half white and half shades of brown but the head is entirely white may allude to the White Australia Policy that had devastating consequences on Aboriginal knowledge, traditions and language. Aboriginal people have been forced to assimilate into 'white' culture.

The fish is an important icon of many religions. Some fish are imprisoned in the Mondrian grid and some break through it swimming freely across the painting. The fish trapped inside the grid are brown and white but the ones outside are a lighter shade of brown this is perhaps suggestive of the freedom that can come from hybrid identity.

The three figures here may reference clothing worn by African/Eastern/Middle-Eastern cultures. Bennett may be suggesting that the complexity of a postcolonial identity is not only an Australian issue but also a global concern.



The figure's halo evokes medieval religious motifs, and the long hair and robe may allude to representations of Jesus Christ. His robe is red not white, and because red often symbolises anger and violence, Bennett may be challenging the idea of purity and innocence associated with Christian teachings. The figure is holding an Aboriginal baby with arms outstretched who may be the child of the distraught mother imprisoned behind bars below. In this case, Bennett may be referencing the horrors experienced by members of the Stolen Generations.

The Aboriginal figure is appropriated from Australian artist Margaret Preston, whose representation of Indigenous people was often viewed as stereotypical. The figure is trapped in over-locking grids that resemble bars. Closer inspection reveals she is confined within the shape of a cross. This could be symbolic of the ways Aboriginal people have been oppressed by Christian practices and ideologies. The female appears distressed and frantic; her arms and hands are outstretched as if trying to reach for something.

This area alludes to traditional Aboriginal painting through appropriation of Papunya Tula dots and concentric circles (often wrongly perceived as the only style of Aboriginal art). Bennett could be commenting on non-Aboriginal people's inability to distinguish between different Aboriginal groups. The dots may also evoke city lights from a planar perspective, favoured by many Western Desert artists. The irregular lines could refer to the Songlines in Aboriginal cultures that mark the paths followed by 'Creator-beings' in Dreaming. Colours of Aboriginal flag may suggest original owners of the land. Expressionistic lines allude to American artist Jackson Pollock whose exuberant style broke the rules of the conventional Western art canon. Pollock like Preston appropriated native American ground paintings without regard to the original artists or their culture.

This figure hanging upside-down, outside the grid, with hands outstretched, mirrors the female figure on the left. This relationship may suggest the total disorientation experienced by Aboriginal people within the colonial world.

This figure appropriated from American Neo-Expressionist artist Philip Guston resembles a Klu Klux Klan costume, and may be referencing the global horrors of racism.

- As a Postmodernist, Bennett favours multiple truths; however, Mondrian used the grid and blocks of pure colour to confer universal truth. The appropriation of Mondrian's grid in this painting may be symbolic of the categorisation of people in society that Bennett rails against.
- The Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, who believed that art should render spiritual feeling, was a big influence in two of the images within the work: the one with the three clothed figures on the top right hand side as well as the faceless half figure adjacent to the black baby.

## LITERARY PERSPECTIVES AND THEORISTS

### **Postcolonial criticism**

Frantz Fanon (1925–1961)  
Edward Said (1935–2003)  
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942–)  
Trinh T. Minh-ha (1952–)

#### **Trinh T. Minh-ha**

'You may keep your traditional law and tribal customs among yourselves, as long as you and your kind are careful not to step beyond the assigned limits.' (*Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, 1989)

#### **Questions a postcolonialist would ask:**

- How might the painting exemplify aspects of colonial oppression?
- What might the painting suggest about operations of power and cultural hegemony?
- How does Bennett show the complexities of a postcolonial identity? What is the relationship between the historical, cultural and personal self?
- How might race, religion, class, gender and culture form a hybrid or multifaceted sense of self?
- What are the psychological and political effects of colonisation?

### **Postmodern criticism**

Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998)  
Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)

#### **Jean-François Lyotard**

'A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining Judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.' (*The Postmodern Condition*, 1984)

#### **Questions a postmodernist would ask:**

- How might the painting show scepticism towards grand narratives? How might the work challenge widespread notions of 'truth'?
- How does Bennett convey a series of mini-narratives? How might these defy traditional structures and patterns?
- How might these mini-narratives be provisional, temporary or contingent rather than permanent and universal?
- In what ways might Bennett's pastiche suggest a sense of liberation or exhilaration? How might he embrace a departure from fixed structures and systems of belief?
- How does the painting combine aspects of 'high' and 'popular' art?
- How might the artist deconstruct traditional notions of identity?



	POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVE	POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE
<p><b>IDEAS</b> What are the key ideas/ perspectives offered by the writer?</p>		
<p><b>VIEWS</b> What views does the writer have about culture and society?</p>		
<p><b>VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS</b> What are the values and assumptions underlying these viewpoints/perspectives?</p>		
<p><b>EVALUATION</b> Critique and evaluate these perspectives. Are there limitations? What questions are raised?</p>		
<p><b>INTERPRETATION</b> Use these perspectives to help construct your own interpretation. Consider your initial thoughts, the context and your close reading to support your views.</p>		

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