



Rainbow's End by Jane Harrison

Teaching notes prepared
by Ernest Price



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



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by Jane Harrison

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Introduction

Jane Harrison's *Rainbow's End* is a reverent depiction of the way that women have held together First Nations communities that have been traumatised by the racist policies of successive Australian governments. The play examines, and celebrates, the everyday battles waged by women tasked with raising families and protecting children, all while under the relentless pressure of organisations and policies intended to diminish the power of their community.

The play was originally commissioned by Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-operative, who asked Harrison to commemorate Koorie heroes from the 1950s. She responded to this brief by shining a spotlight on the contributions of three generations of fierce women, the kind of heroes often ignored by history books that focus on the acts of great men. The play has its own great man, Papa Dear, whose role in his community is unquestionable, but Harrison shows the cost of his activism. In his absence, his wife Nan and daughter Gladys must fight racism every day, work low-paying jobs and always tirelessly strive to protect Dolly from the authorities.

The play is set against the backdrop of the tumultuous 1950s. The community is captivated by the Royal Tour, an event that Harrison utilises to underscore the blatant hypocrisy of a country whose original inhabitants have not yet been afforded the courtesy of citizenship. Gladys lost her husband at war, fighting for a country that did not even recognise his humanity. The play, by its very focus on the lives of women, also highlights the shifting gender dynamics of a society finally starting to question conservative notions of what constitutes 'men's business' and 'women's business'.

Harrison's play is a celebration of knowledge and the myriad ways of knowing. Gladys is driven by the desire for her daughter to have doors open for her; she sees education as a crucial element to her advancement. Gladys works to overcome her own illiteracy, a product of her own removal from her home. By the end of the play, Gladys realises that as important as a formal education may be, there is also an importance in society reevaluating its understanding of knowledge, in order to more fully recognise the contribution of First Nations communities.

Rainbow's End is also a celebration of love. The three women are tightly connected, bound by their love for each other and their love for their community. Dolly and Errol overcome the barriers of race and racism to find a future together, signalling the capacity for individuals to change, and to find a way to reshape their world views.

Ways into the text

In preparing for the activities presented below, it is important that both teachers and students take some time initially to understand the nuances of their own relationship to the issues facing First Nations communities. Whilst *Rainbow's End* was explicitly designed to explore historical events, it is being read and studied within a contemporary context. Therefore, to do justice to Harrison's play, classes should expect to undertake a journey (at least in part) towards a better understanding of the history revealed, and the issues faced by the characters in this text.

Prior to commencing study of the play, articulate your own relationship to the work as the key educator, and encourage students to explicitly articulate theirs. For example, I am preparing these notes as a white person who is a descendant of a settler community which has benefitted (knowingly or unknowingly) from the injustices perpetrated against First Nations people and communities. I currently work on the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, and continue to develop my understanding of the ways that I need to work to ensure justice for present and future First Nations communities.

Suggested classroom activities

Vocabulary

- Unpack the vocabulary that students will need to read, understand and discuss this text. Identify the vocabulary that Harrison draws on to set the context for this play. With students, reflect on the nature of the dominant words and phrases that were commonly used at the time, words that most Australians used without consideration for their inherent racism and sexism. Discuss with students the vocabulary that is now considered more appropriate in our contemporary context, for discussing the play's key issues and themes. Help students to comprehend that 'Language' as a term itself has a particular meaning for First Nations peoples, one which is inextricably linked to culture and identity. Discuss with students that language is never neutral, and reinforce the importance of language in building cultural understanding. Some terms that are crucial to explore at the start of your text discussion include: Country, Aboriginal, First Nations, Koorie, Settler and Colonisation. Vocabulary such as 'structural racism' should be included to assist students in being able to appraise the broader implications of laws and values that adversely affected First Nations people in this text such as the Dear family and their community.

Land culture and identity

- Research and discuss the concept and role of Country in First Nations communities. Consider the way that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies defines Country (see **References**). Invite students to reflect on the relationship that they may have to the land on which they are living and learning. Have students research the history of this land, and its Traditional Owners. Extend the investigation to consider the other lands on which students have lived. Discuss how their relationship to the land is influenced by their own cultural background.

History and contemporary issues

- Invite students to investigate the historical significance of The Flats to First Nations communities. This will necessitate an understanding of both the role that Missions played in the government's policies about First Nations communities, as well as the importance of the Walk Off from Cummeragunja Mission Station in the history of First Nations' resistance to racist government policies (see **References**).
- Students should also research the ongoing importance of the area surrounding Shepparton in Yorta Yorta culture. Areas of investigation could include: the role and function of the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation; the nature of the Land Rights' claim held over the region; and programs that are in place to ensure the maintenance of language and culture.
- Ask students to research, and then reflect upon, the significance of the movements for the rights of First Nations people in the 1950s. What evidence can students find of attitudes held by the ruling government and wider community towards First Nations people in the 1950s? What was the state of the campaign for citizenship? What laws and social values shaped the everyday lives of First Nations people during the 1950s (see **References**)?
- What were some of the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who had participated in the war effort?
- Encourage research into some of the core issues associated with housing and land for First Nations people in the 1950s. Students should consider the evolution of the 'humpy', the role of Missions, and the politics of self-determination. Drawing on relevant conversations and events in the text, students could discuss the competing impulses at play for First Nations communities, including: the importance of the relationship with Country; the need for safe and secure housing; the demands of the environment; and the evolving needs of communities.
- Ask students to investigate the Queen's visit to Australia in 1954. They should consider the timing, scale and itinerary of the trip. Students could

try to locate evidence such as old news reports, women's magazine feature articles and photographic archives to help build their understanding of the significance of this visit by the (then young) Queen to different groups in Australia. Discuss the significance of this trip for Australia as a British colony, and for First Nations people in particular. It is important to remember that terms such as 'First Nations' were not employed in normal discourse in the 1950s. Ask students to locate evidence of the attitudes held by white Australians towards First Nations people in that era.

- Before embarking on a close study of the text, invite students to predict the way that the characters in the play, especially the First Nations characters, will perceive and engage with the Queen's visit.

Author's note and additional resources

- Read Jane Harrison's 'Author's Note' (p. 121). What was the commissioning brief for *Rainbow's End*? How did Harrison interrupt this brief? How might this have shaped the play? What is the relationship between historical facts and the play itself? What does Harrison mean by the 'emotional truth' (p. 121)? In what ways does Harrison's approach disrupt settler understandings of First Nations history?
- Research the Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Co-operative and the Ilbjerri Theatre Company. What is their mission? How might this differ from the mission of predominantly white theatre companies?
- Consider the supplementary resources offered by National Indigenous Television, which may augment students' understanding of the play's historical context or its themes. One such documentary that may be useful could include *Servant or Slave*, which looks at the domestic labour required of many First Nations women. This may give students an insight into the experiences alluded to in the play.
- Read Larissa Behrendt's **Introduction** to the collection of plays (p. vii). How does she situate *Rainbow's End* within the context of Indigenous performance culture? What does this reveal about the purpose and context of Harrison's play?

Structure of the text

Rainbow's End follows a two-act structure, with the first act culminating in the rape that threatens to destroy what little optimism the characters have managed to build despite the relentless adversity that they face. The construction of the dramatic arc serves to emphasise the cumulative and corrosive effect of the obstacles First Nations communities experienced in the 1950s. The audience sees the family hounded by trouble, in the form of both interpersonal and institutional traumas.

Most of the play's action takes place in short, tight scenes that serve to illustrate the relentless pressure that the family faces from racist institutions, the tyranny of the elements and generational disadvantage. Harrison controls the tension for the audience, with many of the play's most dramatic and impactful moments taking place in the space between scenes. Here the audience is invited into the secrets that the women of the family keep: the true identity of Dolly and Nan's rapists, Gladys's illiteracy, and the nature of the trauma that the family and their community have suffered in the past.

Harrison's play is designed for a small, tight-knit cast that mirrors the nucleus of Nan Dear's family. She makes use of the off-stage space, with ancillary (and often antagonistic) characters heard, but never seen. This creates much of the play's dramatic tension, as the characters are haunted by the spectre of forces that they cannot see, no matter how real their threat. This is true of the voice of Dolly's rapist, and the way the radio is used to convey the hegemonic forces that exert power in the characters' lives.

Act One

Prologue: Aftermath

Gladys and Nan repair their home after a flood. The strength of the relationship between the three central characters is on display, as is their resilience. It is clear that the characters regularly face these harsh and difficult living conditions.

Scene One (A): The Queen's Visit

The three women discuss their family history, set against news of the Queen's visit. Nan and Gladys establish their desire to shield Dolly from the most difficult aspects of their existence.

Scene One (B)

The spectre of the Queen's visit shapes the women's discussion. They consider the historical importance of Papa Dear's activism.

Scene Two (A): Oh, Errol

Gladys engages with the Pick-A-Box quiz show, and debates the extent of her aspirations with Nan.

Scene Two (B)

Gladys and Dolly encounter Errol. They are both enchanted, but for different reasons. Gladys considers buying a set of Encyclopedia Britannica books, reflecting the extent of her aspirations for her daughter.

Scene Three: Lino

Dolly searches the tip, and Nan once again seeks to protect her from the truth of her extended family's history. Dolly and Errol become closer, but are thwarted by the cultural distance between them.

Scene Four: House of Biba

The women discuss the ever-absent Papa Dear, and his contributions to the broader cultural efforts. Gladys asserts her aspirations for Dolly's future employment.

Scene Five: The Delivery

Errol delivers Volume A of the set of encyclopedias. Nan Dear reveals her resistance to the prospective relationship between Dolly and Errol.

Scene Six: The Inspector

The Inspector visits the family, once again highlighting the degree of surveillance the family is subject to. The three generations of women continue to struggle over what the future holds for Dolly, revealing the differences in their responses to structural racism.

Scene Seven: The Turn

Nan Dear's antipathy to Dolly's burgeoning relationship with Errol increases, after she discovers that his last name is Fisher. This revelation culminates in Nan Dear choosing to manipulate Dolly's concerns for her health out of a fear of, and a desire to prevent, potential incest.

Scene Eight: Washing-day Blues

Nan and Gladys again try to protect Dolly from knowledge of the hardships her community faces. Dolly seeks support and assistance to attend the upcoming Miss Shepparton-Mooroopna Ball.

Scene Nine: Home Sweet Home

Gladys reveals her ongoing contact with Errol, and encourages Dolly to pursue a relationship with him. Gladys and Nan struggle over who has final authority in Dolly's life.

Scene Ten: The Bank vs Mrs Banks

Gladys attempts to convince the Bank Manager to give Dolly a chance at a job as a teller. Her own illiteracy becomes evident in her endeavour to combat the Bank Manager's racist assumptions.

Scene Eleven: The Ball

Dolly and Errol attend the Ball, where she is subject to racist commentary from white attendees who notice that her dress is a product of material discarded at the tip. Dolly's cousin seeks to provoke her, and disrupts her date with Errol.

Scene Twelve: Storm Brewing

As Nan worries about Dolly's safety, her sense of foreboding is reflected by a developing storm.

Scene Thirteen: Waters Rising

Errol tries to convince Dolly of the possibility for them to have a future together, but the gulf between their experience of the world is undeniable. Dolly's cousin pursues her, and finds her alone and vulnerable by the river.

Scene Fourteen: The Flood

As the storm worsens, and flood waters rise, a police officer seeks to evacuate the family. The Act culminates in Dolly returning home, crying and traumatised.

Act Two**Scene One: After the Flood**

Nan and Gladys begin to clean up after the flood. Dolly is still largely incapacitated. Nan and Gladys indicate that they are aware that Dolly has been raped. They assume that Errol is the perpetrator, and send him away.

Scene Two: The Move to Rumbalara

The family is relocated to Rumbalara. Gladys is initially optimistic, but the grim reality of the new housing on offer soon does away with this. Nan sets to work attempting to make the house a home by making curtains.

Scene Three: The Broadcast

Dolly receives an offer for an interview from the Bank, but any hope she may have once had of employment has now been dashed by her pregnancy. The family hears a discussion between members of the Rodney Shire Council and community on the radio. Gladys intervenes in the meeting, asserting herself as a leader in her community.

Scene Four: The Contract

Errol approaches Gladys about the money owed on her contract to buy encyclopedias. She admits her illiteracy to him, and he undertakes to teach her to read and write.

Scene Five: Pay the Rent

Nan argues with the Rent Collector, who attempts to police the family's use of their house. Nan and Dolly discuss her pregnancy. Nan reveals that when she was young she was raped by a white man, and that Papa Dear is not Gladys's biological father. She tells Dolly that she fears that Errol is related to the man who raped her. Nan and Dolly pledge to keep each other's secrets.

Scene Six: Errol Spills the Beans

Errol continues to teach Gladys, who is making significant progress with her reading. He reveals the extent of his romantic feelings for Dolly. Gladys encourages him to share his feelings with Dolly directly.

Scene Seven: The Petition

All of the play's major characters attend a meeting in order to support the presentation of Papa Dear's petition about the state of housing for Aboriginal people. In keeping with Nan's revelation, Dolly definitively ends the chance for any relationship with Errol. When Papa Dear fails to arrive to speak to the meeting, Gladys steps in and speaks on his behalf, assuming a leadership role in the movement. Unwittingly, Errol reveals that he is not related to the man who raped Nan, and in relief, she encourages Dolly to accept his proposal.

Characters

Nan Dear

Nan is the family's matriarch; she is a resolute, practical force who seeks to steer the course for both her daughter and her granddaughter. Now in her sixties, Nan has survived multiple iterations of colonial trauma. She is wary of any promises of progress, worn down by a lifetime of racist violence. Nan is the keeper of the family's history, having lived through the experience of removal from her family's land, and several instances of forced relocation.

Nan's daughter Gladys sees her approach as pessimistic, but Nan sees it as realistic. Her worries for her family are repeatedly justified by the racist actions of the play's ancillary characters, and the institutions that shape their lives. She is acutely aware of the power that governmental institutions hold to act out of racist beliefs, having had her own daughter removed from her. She tries to manage her anger, wary that acting out can cause the state's institutions to wield their power in ways that serve to devastate families and communities.

Nan is educated, and literate, but is acutely aware that these are rights that have been denied to many in her own community. She seeks to show compassion to her community, aware that trauma has had considerable and unpredictable consequences for First Nations people. Nan discloses one of her own traumatic experiences to her granddaughter: the rape at the hands of a white man, which resulted in the birth of her daughter. This secret reflects much of what it is to be Nan—she holds the trauma of her experience close, attempting to shield her daughter and granddaughter from the worst of what the world has to offer them.

Nan has definitive ideas about what it is 'men's business' and what is 'women's business', asserting the role that her (absent) husband Papa Dear plays in the public and communal fight for the rights of First Nations people. It is clear, from the view Harrison provides, that Nan plays an equally important role in the maintenance of culture and family. She is the glue that holds the family together, despite the ongoing challenges presented by racist institutions.

Gladys Banks

Gladys is Nan's daughter, and Dolly's mother. In her forties, Gladys is the optimist of the family. She is resolute in her efforts to improve her family's life, seeking opportunities for her daughter that stretch far beyond what had been available to her. Throughout the course of the play she fights openly for the rights that have long been denied to her family, and her community.

Much of Gladys's activism hinges around education and literacy. Taken from her family and forced into service, Gladys enters the play unable to read or write. She is intelligent and driven, able to organise her thoughts; she reveals a considerable capacity to finish the sentences of the more educated characters around her. She is wary of her illiteracy, as it stands between her and the capacity to fully engage with the institutions and rules that govern her life.

The ferocity of her intelligence is on display as she regularly out-performs quiz contestants, and finishes Errol's thoughts as he tries to sell her encyclopedias. Nan points to Gladys's shame about her inability to read and write, as Nan seeks to hide her own reading from her daughter. Initially Gladys channels all of her energy into providing for her daughter's education and future employment. She spends what little money she has on encyclopedias to support Dolly's education, and advocates for her daughter to be given an opportunity to work in the local bank.

As the play progresses, Gladys steps more readily into the spotlight. She asks Errol to teach her to read, and this, in turn, empowers her to take on a leadership role in the community's fight for secure housing. When Dolly challenges her to focus on her own 'house', Gladys attends a council meeting about housing provisions for the Aboriginal community. Whilst she does not openly challenge Nan's belief that public leadership is 'men's business', she uses her developing literacy to speak publicly in Papa Dear's absence.

Dolly Banks

Dolly is the youngest of the three women, and at the beginning of the play she presents as relatively sheltered, thanks to the fierce protectiveness of her mother and grandmother. She feels the consequences of the racist institutions and interactions that she experiences, but when she probes for answers, she is told that it is not information for her.

Dolly resists the most ambitious of Gladys's aspirations for her future, conscious of the obstacles a young Aboriginal woman faces. From the opening scene of the play, she pushes back against Gladys's seemingly endless optimism. Nonetheless, she is not immune to the charms of her mother's hopes for the future. She finds herself falling for Errol, and his vision of a life that they could live together.

In many respects Dolly is pulled between the visions of the world presented by both her mother and her grandmother. Despite the allure of Errol's advances, Dolly is acutely aware of the gap between their worlds. After she is raped, she finds her scepticism confirmed. She shares her grandmother's sense of the weight of historical injustice and understands what this means for the life she lives today.

Dolly has an independent streak, resistant to simply following the plans that her mother develops for her future. She challenges Gladys to live her own life, a challenge that helps spur Gladys to take on a leadership role in her community. Pregnant as a result of sexual assault, Dolly feels initially resigned to a future without Errol; she is reluctant also to seek any other significant opportunities for change. The realisation that Errol is not related to the man who raped her grandmother, and her mother's increasing leadership role in the community, eventually provide the space for Dolly to take a chance and embrace a future with Errol.

Errol Fisher

Errol comes across the family by happy accident, a result of his hapless and bumbling personality. He is sheltered in his own way; a white man unaware of the racist restrictions that shape and limit the lives that the women lead. Errol has little understanding of what the encyclopedias contain, either literally or figuratively. Gladys, despite the challenge of her illiteracy, routinely schools him on what the books contain. He does not understand her drive to lift Dolly out of the poverty and hardship that she has endured—he merely reads from the script provided by his bosses.

Errol is driven by his own demons, which are never explicitly articulated. He has been drawn to his career as a travelling encyclopedia salesman because of problems in his own life; there is a distance between Errol and his family alluded to in his response to Gladys and Dolly's questions. This undoubtedly shapes his affinity for the family—he is drawn to the strong connection on display between the three women.

Errol is naive, and a product of the racist society that has raised him. Despite his best efforts to question his assumptions, he makes several missteps in courting Dolly, revealing the stereotypes that he holds about First Nations people. However, unlike any of the other white characters in the play, he is able to respond positively to criticism of his actions, and he is able to apologise for the way that he once treated Dolly. He learns and grows, willing to question what he has been previously taught by white society.

Other characters

To be played by the actor playing Errol

The consequence of a play with a small cast is that the actor cast as Errol also plays the other white characters. This is not without consequence, reflecting the worst of the experiences that the characters have had with the racist institutions that shape their lives. Whatever the capacity of Errol to question his own racist assumptions, he is nonetheless the product of the community and the privileges that he embodies. This is of particular significance for Nan Dear, who has lived her entire life under the most vicious racist policies that the government has to offer. The consequences for her life of the experience of rape, and having her daughter (the young Gladys) removed from her care, have been immense and influence everything about her interactions with the play's white characters. Errol may be different from the other white characters, indeed he may be better, but he is still white.

Bank Manager

The Bank Manager is an officious, patronising arm of the institutions that stand between the play's Aboriginal characters and their dreams. He speaks in weasel words, deliberately obfuscating as Gladys presses him to interview Dolly for a job as a teller. He is the polite, educated arm of the white establishment, acting as a gatekeeper to the white-collar employment that Gladys seeks for her daughter.

Inspector

The Inspector reflects the most aggressive racist policing that the family has experienced. He articulates an explicitly assimilationist agenda, patronising Gladys and Nan as he explains the policies that have governed their lives. He speaks with grandiose promises that align with Gladys's hopes for her family, but Nan is able to see straight through the words to the heart of his actual beliefs about the family. His visit inspires fear in the community, reminding them of the many organisations and policies that resulted in the forced removal of children from their families throughout generations.

Mr Coody, the Rent Collector

Mr Coody does little to hide his prejudices. Not for him the niceties and weasel words of the Bank Manager and the Inspector—he is the naked emblem of their policies. He seeks to police every move that the family makes in their own home, looking to exercise his power over the women. He antagonises Nan, willing to act from the core of his racist beliefs.

Jungi, policeman

The policeman comes to evacuate the family as the flood waters rise. He is disdainful of their home and their property, ignoring the significance of the property and possessions to a family who have had to fight for everything that they own.

Papa Dear

Papa Dear is absent throughout the play. He is brought to life by the women who speak of him often. His absence is telling—it acts as a sign of the personal sacrifices that leaders of First Nations communities make when they devote their lives to fighting against the racism that has sought to decimate their communities. He also is a constant reminder of the gendered way that Nan Dear views the world. In her mind, his fight is noble and worthy work, something that is out of reach for the women of the family. This stands in contrast to the way Dolly views the world, and she encourages Gladys to take a more active and vocal role in the movement. Papa Dear's work also requires Nan's work, of course, a lifetime of labour that has kept successive generations of the family safe and united, despite the best attempts of racist state institutions to separate them.

Various offstage voices

Cousin, crowd, councillors, radio announcers, presenters

Harrison uses the various offstage voices as mechanisms to develop the tension between the play's main characters. They represent some of what is most important to the dramatic arc of the play; the institutions of knowledge reflected in the quiz show, the cousin who rapes Dolly, and the councillors who make decisions about the characters' lives without considering their interests or input. These are the real antagonists of the play, reflecting the adversity that the characters face every day. Harrison does not afford them time on stage that would act to humanise them or perhaps minimise the very real and negative consequences of their actions. Instead, she places the spotlight on the strength and heroism of the three women.

Issues and themes

Love and belonging

At its core, *Rainbow's End* is a celebration of the breadth and depth of mother-daughter relationships. In the face of relentless adversity, Nan and Gladys create a warm, loving home for Dolly. When Errol tries to convince her to leave with him, Dolly is aghast at the way he emphasises the material home he could provide for her. She has been protected by the love of two women who have done everything they could to build Dolly a 'real home' (p. 172). As far as Dolly is concerned, it is fierce love and loyalty that makes this a home. Harrison characterises this familial bond as an almost necessary counter to the continuous racist intervention of state organisations. Nan and Gladys have experienced what is to be torn apart by the policies of their government; they have adapted everything that they can to ensure that the family remains together. They shield Dolly from the gaze of the Inspector and the Rent Collector, and avoid interacting with the medical establishment—anything that they can do to protect her from the people who once took the young Gladys from her home.

Harrison also explores the role of romantic love, and a forbidden love at that. Errol courts Dolly with the promise that 'what matters is [her] / not [her] address' (p. 149). His clumsy attempts to signal to Dolly that he loves her despite their many differences reveal the real barrier to their love: his misunderstanding of how Dolly feels about her family and her circumstances. Dolly is worried about the implications of their cross-cultural relationship, but her real concern is that Errol is unable or unwilling to see the value in the loving home that her family has created.

Dolly's reluctance to embrace a relationship with Errol is reflected in Nan's stoic approach to love and connection. Nan's belief that 'Sometimes, you have to move on. Leave things behind ... Even things you love.' (p. 187) is the hard-won result of all of the hardship that she has faced in her life. Nan has had no choice but to continue through waves of adversity; her life experiences have taught her to lower her expectations of what is possible. As the play progresses, Nan learns that circumstances may have changed, and that perhaps Dolly will have options that Nan could never have imagined.

Despite this deep and painful understanding of the way that the world can seek to undermine loving relationships, Nan believes in the overwhelmingly redemptive capacity of familial love. She has compassion for the members of her community who have been completely devastated by the traumatic policies of a racist government. She reveals another side of this to Dolly when she shares the story of her own experience of rape. She believes that 'No matter how they come into the world, you still love 'em the same.' (p. 186). For Nan, this love is almost automatic; it is the current that runs through every decision that she makes.

Errol is not forthcoming about the nature of his own relationships with his family but is clear that they are not without their difficulties. He is captivated by the love that the three women have for each other. He undertakes to move to Rainbow's End for her, understanding that it is 'where [she] belong[s]' (p. 193). This understanding is enough for Dolly, who wishes to move to Melbourne anyway; all that is important is that Errol understands the importance of the unbreakable bonds between the three women.

Leadership

Harrison's original brief was to explore the heroism of the Aboriginal community in the 1950s. She has been clear that her interpretation of this purpose was deliberately wide, with a focus on the everyday acts of bravery and leadership undertaken by all members of a First Nations community that was under near-constant attack by racist government policies. Under Harrison's gaze, the often-ignored acts of the community come to the foreground. These under-appreciated acts of sacrifice are juxtaposed with the public-facing acts of leaders like Papa Dear, who receive recognition for their service to their community. Harrison also explores the ways that these forms of leadership are gendered, especially in the context of a still-conservative 1950s Australia.

Rainbow's End spotlights the importance of community leaders who 'demand to be heard' (p. 196). Harrison's white Inspector believes that 'someone must take leadership' (p. 152)—the First Nations characters are acutely aware that this leadership must come from within their community, if it is to put their material interests at its centre. As long as the white characters in the play assume control of First Nations communities, they will do little to address what they believe is a perpetually 'vexed' issue (p. 152). The implications of this characterisation are many; it simultaneously trivialises what is a life and death issue for First Nations people and minimises the capacity of the community to deal with it on their own terms.

Harrison's decision to focus the play on the domestic sphere highlights the gendered norms that dominated life in 1950s Australia. The women continually celebrate all that Papa Dear does to 'help [their] people' (p. 190). He is even recognised by the Inspector for the 'good works' (p. 150) that he does for First Nations people. He is given a very public platform in the play's final scene, as he has worked tirelessly, at great cost to his family, to create the momentum required to set up the meeting. His work requires his absence from his family, which places a great burden on Nan and Gladys to maintain their home and provide security and love for Dolly. The weight of this responsibility is evident throughout the play, as the two older women work laborious, poorly paid jobs and maintain a distance between the racist authorities and Dolly.

Rainbow's End is set at a pivotal time for the women's movement in Australia, and Gladys is emblematic of changes in the way that women were perceived within communities. She begins the play reluctant to take a public role in debates about the rights of First Nations communities, at least partially because of her illiteracy. She is a victim of the policies that were enacted to destroy First Nations communities. She was removed from her family, denied access to a proper education, and was instead pressed into home service. Gladys is one of Harrison's heroes; a woman who has had every single odd stacked against her, but who has persevered and, as a result, is able to show the true extent of her talents.

Gladys makes her foray into the spotlight almost out of spite, intervening in the Council meeting after an argument with Dolly. This initial experience is fraught, with her community 'cranky' with her for 'drawing attention' to them (p. 189). Gladys is briefly discouraged, believing that she 'achieved nothing' (p. 189) by speaking out. She shows her inner fortitude once again, continuing to work on learning to read and developing her confidence. By the end of the play Dolly urges her mother to take charge, suggesting that she should 'be up there making the speech' (p. 191) in Papa Dear's absence. She has her moment in the spotlight, highlighting that women are Harrison's heroes not only because of the work that they do in the domestic sphere, but also because of their capacity to lead in public.

Race and racism

Harrison wrote *Rainbow's End* with the explicit purpose of exploring the heroism of Aboriginal communities in the 1950s. There is no doubt that this light shines at the centre of the play, but there is also no question that the adversity that the characters face is at its core a result of the racist policies of the Australian

state. Race and racism shape every interaction that the characters have with white characters and government institutions. It is set at a time before constitutional reform even recognised the humanity of First Nations people; there is no overstating the racist frameworks that pervade every interaction between First Nations characters and white characters throughout the play. As Errol courts Dolly, she is constantly reminded of all that he does not understand about her life experiences. She sarcastically asks him if he has 'noticed' (p. 149) that he is white, and she is Aboriginal. This is a plea for him to take her experience of racism seriously, and to understand the ways that it would impact any future romantic relationship between them. Errol responds later in the play, 'offering [her] a better life' (p. 171), revealing the ways that his own views are shaped by racist assumptions. He thoughtlessly remarks that it is as if her 'family's from another country or something' (p. 170), revealing how little he knows, or has sought to understand, about First Nations people and culture.

Dolly is acutely aware of the potential ramifications of a relationship with Errol. She interrogates him, asking him to consider what will happen if they 'step out together' (p. 171). Dolly asks Errol to consider what she knows will be the reality of a life together: at best they will be 'called names' and at worst they will be 'coshed' (p. 171).

Dolly's understanding of racism is a direct result of the impact that trauma has had on both her family and her community. Nan and Gladys have done all that they can to shield her from this trauma, whilst still taking the necessary steps to protect her from the policies of the racist government. They shield her from the Inspector, wanting to reassure themselves that the authorities 'won't take [Dolly]' (p. 154), an experience that they had previously endured when Gladys was young. They are wary of hospitals, knowing that in the past these institutions were 'where they take [First Nations] babies away' (p. 185). Nan is particularly wary of white people, having been raped at a young age by a white man. She doesn't want Dolly 'to have anything to do with' Errol specifically, but also white men more broadly (p. 187).

The women face the violence of racist policies, with the removal of family members, and exclusion in shops, but they also face the more insidious impact of assimilationist policies. These are policies that the Inspector sees as progressive, but the family knows that they are targeted at suppressing their culture. Dolly resists Gladys's attempts to have her 'fit in' (p. 163) in the way suggested by the Bank Manager. She does not want to 'Pretend to be one of them' (p. 158).

These assimilationist policies can be understood within the context of the Royal tour, which dominates Gladys's thoughts early in the play. Colonisation is, of course, the original sin of *Rainbow's End*; it is the mechanism through which the government established its province over First Nations communities. Gladys longs to be seen by the monarch, as noted early on in the text. Nan knows that this desire is futile; the community is being actively hidden from anyone on the Queen's tour by the local authorities. As the play progresses, Gladys's approach changes. She shifts from accepting the assimilationist framework being foisted upon her community by representatives of the Queen (that is, the Australian government), to demanding that her own voice is heard.

The intersection of class and race

Rainbow's End highlights the way that issues of social class can compound the experiences of racism. As the new flood threatens their home, the police officer evacuates the women, trying to reassure them when he claims that 'Property can be replaced' (p. 174). However, such a claim stings Gladys, who has had to fight for every cent to invest in the cultural capital represented by the set of Encyclopedia Britannica books. The family has suffered greatly as a result of the government's policies, which have denied them the kinds of economic opportunities afforded to their neighbours, the white people in the Greater Shepparton area.

There is division within the Aboriginal community in the area as well, with some members of the community profiting from their proximity to whiteness. These are the 'town Aboriginals' (p. 144) who Nan criticises for the decisions that they make to live apart from their community on The Flats. Dolly fears the judgement of this part of the First Nations community, asking Errol to shield her from their attacks.

Connection to land and the importance of home

Rainbow's End revolves around the search for real housing for the First Nations community in the Greater Shepparton area. The Flats was the home chosen by the people who walked off the Cummeragunja Mission Station—a choice made under duress. The area had its faults, prone to flooding and lacking long term security; the family feel that they are 'fighting nature all the time' (p. 159). Nonetheless, it gave Nan the opportunity to 'be near all the other families' (p. 147) and gave the community access to fresh water. It was the family's home, and sat upon their land.

The white authorities still saw Aboriginal housing as a problem that needed to be addressed—by their own 'vigorous attempt' (p. 178), without the input of Aboriginal families. When Gladys takes herself to the council meeting that concerns itself with the question of housing, she asserts that she is 'not an interloper' (p. 181); an assertion that should be redundant on her own land. Nan echoes this sentiment as she battles the Rent Collector's attempted intrusions, telling him that their home at Rainbow's End is 'Aboriginal Housing ... not [his] own private kingdom.' (p. 185). The family works relentlessly to protect what security they have in their own home.

Types of knowledge and ways of knowing

Rainbow's End explores the complexities of knowledge in the settler-colonial state. Much of the family's energy is expended on searching for access to the institutions of the white majority—institutions that have long denied their community access. Gladys never 'had the time for learning' (p. 184) and even as an adult, she was too busy trying to earn a living to have time to make up for the education that she was denied when she was removed from her home. Nan feels sorry for Gladys, refusing to read in front of her.

Harrison is careful to show that despite this lack of opportunity, Gladys has knowledge that far eclipses that of 'encyclops boy' (p. 146). She has worked around her illiteracy, and once she learns to read, her power is obvious to both the other characters in the play and to the audience.

Harrison addresses the spectre of the colonial model of education, and the disrespect that Aboriginal knowledge and ways of learning have faced since colonisation. When Gladys presents the petition, she outlines that white people 'need to be educated' (p. 197) about First Nations people and culture.

Rainbow's End also depicts the role that gender plays in establishing hierarchies of knowledge. The play reflects an evolving social understanding of what is 'men's business' and 'women's business', as well as what is the domain of adults, at the exclusion of children. In celebrating the domestic sphere, Harrison also asserts the right of women to enter into the public debate, as Gladys establishes herself as a leader in the movement for Aboriginal housing. Nan and Gladys work to protect Dolly from the worst of the racism that their community faces, but once she is deemed an adult, Nan is willing to share some of the most horrific parts of her life experience with her granddaughter.

Language and style

In contrast to Harrison's earlier work, *Rainbow's End* follows realistic theatrical conventions. The play has a simple setting, highlighting the inner lives of the family. Commissioned explicitly as an examination of the heroes of the Aboriginal community in 1950s Victoria, Harrison focuses on the domestic sphere. She outlines the setting for the bulk of the play as a 'Clean and homely' (p. 122) humpy, on a riverbank of The Flats. By choosing this direct rendering of the historical circumstances, Harrison spotlights the way that Aboriginal families created strong, connected homes despite being marginalised by the Australian government.

The play's title is taken from the translation of Rumbalara, the name given to the new housing estate built for the Aboriginal community. The characters' reactions to the name reflect their optimism (or lack thereof) about the government's plans for the community. Gladys thinks that the name 'Sounds beaut' (p. 155); she is seduced by the vision implicit in the government's choice of moniker. She wants to believe their promises: that there will be running water, and hope for the future. Nan's reaction is a result of her previous disappointments; she is unimpressed, aware that the community has been 'knocked down' (p. 155) many times in the past. There is a duality implicit in the title Harrison has chosen. The rainbow holds promise, but the family is positioned at its end, which is not an ideal place to be.

As discussed elsewhere in this *Inside Stories* guide, the play is structured around a series of short scenes that highlight the many challenges to the family's happiness and security. Harrison makes use of these vignettes to heighten the tension in the play, allowing the audience insight into the nature of the racist policies and acts that governed the lives of Aboriginal people in the 1950s. The audience is invited to empathise with the blows experienced by the family, in rapid succession, and develops an affinity for them as a consequence. Harrison infuses these intense experiences with moments of love and humour, which underscore the family's resilience.

The one concession that Harrison makes to non-naturalistic theatrical conventions is Gladys's 'dream sequences'. Every so often, the audience is momentarily transported into Gladys's daydreams, in order to appreciate more fully the extent of her optimism and the hopes that she has for Dolly's future. This approach works as a kind of secret exchange between Gladys

and the audience, a bond that further endears the devoted, hardworking mother to viewers. Harrison notes that Gladys is careful to conceal her dreamlike state from other characters, not wanting them to see the extent of the ambition that she has for her family.

Throughout the text, Harrison offers clear indications of the characters' emotional states in her stage directions. She is direct in her expectation of actors and directors, ensuring that the central relationships in the text are played for the explicit purpose of revealing the characters' insecurities, their traumas and their hopes for the future.

Harrison wrote the play for a small central cast, with the intention of spotlighting the actions of a family of strong women. In order to maintain this focus, she makes use of several devices that allow her to explore the play's context and frame the characters' responses. The primary device Harrison uses for this purpose is the radio. It is the wireless radio that allows Gladys to play along with her beloved quiz shows. The radio gives the family news of the Royal visit, and it is through listening to the radio that Dolly and Nan are able to share in Gladys's first tentative foray into public debates over housing for Aboriginal people.

The play uses simple, direct, English language. The three women in the play have been schooled by religious and government institutions, learning to speak, read and write in English. There are very few references to Koorie words, aside from those in the mainstream vernacular. There is a distinct awareness of the distance between the spoken and written word, as evidenced by the way that Gladys is seen to struggle with reading formal language. The need to overcome her literacy issues becomes key to Gladys's transition into political activism. Hence, Gladys is Harrison's vehicle for exploring the importance of language, as she is empowered and emboldened by her increasing literacy. Gladys is keenly aware of the importance of language, regularly pressing her daughter Dolly to study, placing particular emphasis on her study of French. Gladys wants her daughter to master as many languages as she can.

The central symbol in the play is the set of encyclopedias. It is simultaneously the embodiment of the family's aspirations, and their oppression. Gladys is captivated by the opportunities she sees in the purchase of the encyclopedias—they provide a sense of hope, particularly for the future that she hopes Dolly can attain. They are a chance at upward mobility, something that was denied to Gladys when she was removed from her family and any access to academic education. Using her hard-

earned money, the fruit of her back-breaking labour, Gladys hopes to provide Dolly with a window into a world beyond The Flats, a world that she hopes will welcome Dolly with open arms. She wants her to keep ‘expanding [her] possibilities’ (p. 161). Dolly is excited to learn about the ‘big, wide world’ (p. 161), even if she worries that they will never be able to afford the entire set of encyclopedias.

In comparison, Nan is wary of the encyclopedias, mocking what they may contain, particularly about the community that the women live in. Nan is wary of the way that governmental institutions have commodified and eroded the knowledge of Aboriginal people, and then packaged and repurposed it for their own means. She is not seduced by the colourful pictures that the encyclopedias contain—she is incredulous that Gladys has to keep paying for the subscription.

Errol, a white man from out of town, brings the encyclopedias to the women. It is telling that he has little use for the facts the books contain. He does not need them—doors open for Errol merely because he is a white man. The job is not easy, and he is not particularly good at it, but it is more than what the women can hope for. The encyclopedias are expensive, placing the knowledge within them further out of the reach of the women. It is only Errol’s kindness that releases the women from the grip of the contract after the floods.

When their home floods, Gladys wants to save the encyclopedias. She enlists the policeman to help her; the books represent not only their greatest financial asset, but also the last of their aspirations. He dismisses them, confident that the material possessions can be replaced. As the first Act of the play ends, this casual neglect and dismissal stings. He tells Gladys that he will look after the encyclopedias, after she makes it clear that she needs them for her daughter, and then leaves them in the dark. The audience knows that the women will not be able to afford to replace the set of encyclopedias, and that all the hopes that Gladys had for the future were taken away by the flood, and a dismissive policeman.

Harrison makes use of pathetic fallacy in the play. The rising tensions in the characters’ lives—as Dolly is raped and the women struggle with precarious housing—are mirrored by the arrival of the storm and the flooding of the women’s home. This dramatic technique serves to raise the stakes for both the women and the audience; at the end of Act One the audience sees what hope the women had for the future destroyed by the actions of Dolly’s cousin and the policeman. The flood, and the officer’s disinterest, destroy the set of encyclopedias, and Dolly’s sense of safety and autonomy has been violated by the cousin.

Harrison makes use of the popular 1950s song ‘Que Sera, Sera’ to open the play. The words of this song underscore the fatalism that Nan and Dolly feel, as they are forced to endure the series of difficulties that unfold across the course of the play. The song acts as a motif for Dolly, as she makes reference to its lyrics when she is at her lowest point. She invokes the idea as she pledges to avoid Errol out of respect for Nan’s wishes, despite the fact that she has strong feelings for him. Here, the song reminds the audience that the women have very little to look forward to, and very few reasons for hope. The song plays again as the first act ends, underscoring the despair that the women feel as their home is taken by the flood and Dolly suffers after her rape. Sadness engulfs the family, and they do not know ‘what lies ahead’ (p. 175).

The refrain comes full circle as the play ends. Against all odds, Harrison delivers the family a happy ending: Errol and Dolly are to be married, Gladys has taken on a new role in the movement and Papa Dear has returned to the family. At the conclusion of the play, the lyrics resonate with different connotations. The words are the same, but now the audience has reason to hope that ‘what will be’ (p. 199) for the family could be good after all.

Perspective on the text

Jane Harrison's play invites audiences to reconsider dominant narratives about the experience of First Nations people throughout history. The play is set at one of the most pivotal moments in Australian history, as conservative post-war politics began to cede ground to social movements that would reshape the lives of all Australians. The women who are the central protagonists of the text were not even considered legal citizens in the country that had been taken from them. They face structural barriers that sit at the intersection of class, race and gender. Harrison looks to illuminate the ferocity of the characters' love; it is the love that fuels their fight for acceptance and justice.

Rainbow's End looks to subvert traditional tropes about First Nations communities. Filling its design brief, the play focuses on some of the heroes of the Aboriginal community. In this case, it is the everyday heroes: the women who created rich, complex lives despite the almost unbeatable odds that they faced. There is no sense in this text that the women have been defeated by their treatment; rather they are presented as creating the lives that they want.

Studying *Rainbow's End*, a play commissioned and written by First Nations people, is an important step in the discussion of First Nations history and culture within English classrooms. Many of the texts which purport to convey First Nations perspectives (that have filled quotas on high school text lists) have been filtered through a white gaze, either written, directed or produced by non-Indigenous artists. This has not been a malicious exercise, but at times may have had the consequence of distorting conversations about the texts and the issues that they present. Even at their most empathetic, it could be argued that these texts have operated within paradigms that have not privileged First Nations knowledge and culture.

It is important to read and understand *Rainbow's End* within this context, as a text written by a First Nations playwright. Harrison enjoyed considerable success with *Stolen*, a play that has been an institution of many English text lists. *Rainbow's End* represents a departure from *Stolen*, both stylistically and thematically. Where *Stolen* made use of non-naturalistic theatrical conventions to convey the trauma at the heart of the experiences of the Stolen Generations, *Rainbow's End* fits within the realistic tradition, focusing predominantly on the domestic sphere. There is an untold story here, about the role that women played in creating safe, happy communities despite the policies of successive governments. Staff and students will develop a rich understanding of the text if they step outside of traditional classroom constructs to engage with the complex way that *Rainbow's End* challenges white notions of knowledge. This is not an easy task for educators who are not from First Nations communities, and requires careful thought so as to avoid cultural appropriation. Teachers may start by engaging with thinking around this issue from Living Knowledge (see **References**).

In discussion and analysis of this play, there is room here for a feminist reading of the text, for there is no question that in this play, Harrison elevates the domestic sphere and challenges cross-cultural notions of 'women's business'. Set in the 1950s, the text explores the ways that gendered ideas of knowledge and leadership impact Aboriginal women specifically. The intersection of these barriers limits the opportunities available to the three protagonists, who are denied opportunities for education and employment. The women push back, in their own ways, demonstrating the ways that the Aboriginal community relied on women's labour to maintain their sense of connection. The community benefits from men's activism, but they suffer from it too, as the men are absent for long periods. *Rainbow's End* explores the nuances of 'women's business', and considers the role that women played in building the strength of Aboriginal communities.

Close study

Passage 1

Act One, Scene Two (B) (p. 132)

In this scene, the audience is introduced to Errol. They see the initial spark between Errol and Dolly, foreshadowing a relationship that will be central to the development of the play's tension. Errol attempts to sell a set of encyclopedias to Gladys, introducing the central symbol of the play. Dolly is initially sceptical of Errol, and his interest in her family. She helps him nonetheless, protecting him from the mischief of her extended community.

- How does Harrison introduce the connection between Dolly and Errol? What are the initial impressions the audience has of their relationship? How does Harrison establish the barriers the young couple may face?
- What are your initial impressions of Errol? Why does Harrison describe him as a 'Brylcreemed lad'?
- How does Gladys engage with Errol's sales pitch? What indication does the audience get of Gladys's hopes for Dolly? What role does the 'dream sequence' have in this scene? How does Harrison convey Gladys's intelligence in this scene?
- What indications does Harrison give of Nan's fear of government institutions?
- Why does Nan tell Gladys to ask Errol 'what it says in that there encyclops about the Aborigines'?
- How does Harrison foreshadow Gladys's illiteracy in this scene? How does Nan shield Gladys from having to expose this fact to Errol?
- What does this scene teach audiences about the geographic and class divisions in town?
- What is Nan's approach to Errol in this scene?
- How does Nan feel about Gladys's aspirations? How do the encyclopedias symbolise this divide?
- What does Errol reveal about his own life and background in this scene?
- How do Harrison's stage directions reveal Dolly's hesitation about growing close to Errol?
- How does Harrison reveal the divide between white and black communities in this scene? What does Dolly do to protect Errol in this scene?
- What advice does Nan give Dolly? How does this foreshadow the obstacles in front of Dolly and Errol?
- What impression does the audience have of Gladys at the end of the scene? How might this shape their expectations of the way the play will develop?

Passage 2

Act One, Scene Six: The Inspector (p. 150)

The women are nervous as they receive the Inspector into their home. Their concerns are not only for their nuclear family, but also for their community. They are concerned that the Inspector's visit will result in children being removed from the community. The Inspector espouses the assimilationist policies that have shaped the women's lives. He patronises the women, expressing surprise about the clean and homely state of their living quarters. He makes a series of presumably empty promises about the future of Aboriginal housing, and does not seek the opinion of the women or their community in the development of these housing policies.

- Why is Nan worried about her neighbours when the Inspector arrives?
- How does Harrison establish tension through the use of stage directions at the opening of the scene?
- What is your initial impression of the Inspector?
- How does Harrison develop the audience's understanding of the relationship between the Inspector and the women?
- What do the women reveal about the men of the family in this scene?
- What assumptions does the Inspector make about the family? What do they reveal about him?
- How do the women challenge the Inspector's assumptions about their home?
- Why are the women anxious to keep Dolly from meeting the Inspector?
- How does Harrison reveal the differences in the visions that the women have for Dolly's future?
- How does Harrison use humour in her rendering of the interaction between the Inspector and the women? What does this suggest about the power dynamic in the household?
- How does the Inspector's speech about assimilation shape the audience's understanding of the play's themes?
- What are the connotations of the Inspector's claim that 'Knowledge is power' (p. 152)?
- How does Gladys show her nerves as the Inspector leaves?
- Why do the women refuse to answer Dolly's inquiries about the Inspector?
- Why is Nan sceptical about the Inspector's promises?
- How does Harrison refocus the audience's attention on Dolly's education?

- What do the women fear will happen to Dolly? How does Harrison reveal Gladys's backstory in this scene?
- What does the audience learn about Gladys's dreams in this scene?
- Why does Harrison end the scene with Gladys using the radio?

Passage 3

Act One, Scene Fourteen: The Flood (p. 173)

In Act One's climatic scene, the women face their greatest test so far. Whilst this is not the first time that the women's home has been flooded, this flood threatens to take what Gladys has worked so hard for: the set of Encyclopedia Britannica books. The police officer sent to evacuate the women shows little interest in what matters most to Nan and Gladys, dismissing their inquiries about Dolly's whereabouts and neglecting to help them rescue their precious books. His interactions with the women reveal the assumptions that he makes about their lives, and his lack of understanding of the extent of their poverty. The drama of the rising floodwaters and worsening storm exacerbates the audience's worry for Dolly, who returns after being raped. The Act ends with the women facing their toughest challenges to date, and the audience loses hope for their future.

- How does Harrison establish the mood for this scene in her stage directions?
- What does the conversation between Nan and Dolly indicate about the conditions First Nations people faced in the 1950s?
- Why is Nan so worried about Dolly?
- Why is Gladys so worried about the encyclopedias?
- How does the policeman indicate his opinion of the women?
- Why does Harrison include part of 'Que Sera, Sera' in this scene?
- How do the women respond to Dolly?
- Why does Dolly scream when the policeman touches her?
- Why does Harrison end Act One with this scene?

Passage 4

Act Two, Scene Seven: The Petition (p. 191)

The play's denouement provides some resolution for both the personal and the political storylines. The scene begins with the three women positioned as observers, bystanders to the decisions that are being made about their future, and that of their community. As the crowd waits for the ever-elusive Papa Dear, Errol approaches the women. Dolly is faithful to the pledge that she made to Nan, rebuffing his advances even as he apologises for not understanding the importance of her family and her culture. In the course of her interrogation of this young man, Nan discovers that Errol is not related to the man who raped her. Consequently, she expresses her approval for a union between Errol and Dolly. Gladys steps into the void created by Papa Dear's late arrival, taking to the stage in a public leadership role previously deemed 'men's business'. She is clearly confident as a result of learning to read. It is clear that change is afoot, not only for the community, but for the family as well. Dolly has decided to pursue a nursing career in Melbourne, realising at least some of the ambitions that Gladys had for her. The future is still unclear, but it is now looking far more bright.

- How does Harrison use humour to set the scene at the hall?
- What is revealed about the changing nature of 'men's business' at the opening of the scene?
- Why has Dolly kept her nursing scholarship secret?
- How does Harrison engage the audience in the evolving relationship between Errol and Dolly?
- What has changed in the way that Errol sees the world?
- How does Harrison use stage directions to convey what remains unspoken between Dolly and Errol?
- In what ways has Dolly's approach to the world come to mirror Nan's?
- What does the audience learn during Nan's conversation with Errol?
- How does Harrison convey the changes in Gladys?
- What role does Gladys's speech play in the text? How does it shape the audience's understanding of the text as a whole?
- What is the relationship between the political and personal narratives in this scene? What does this intersection reflect about Harrison's themes?
- What is the significance of Nan having a dream sequence at the play's conclusion? What changes does this reflect in Nan's character?
- Why does Harrison include 'Que Sera, Sera' at the play's conclusion?
- What is the significance of Papa Dear arriving at the play's conclusion?

Further activities

Encourage students to discuss and then compile notes using the following subheadings and questions as a springboard to help deepen their understanding of this text.

Characters

- What do you think the future holds for Errol and Dolly? Why do you make these predictions?
- Why do you think Dolly chose to apply for a nursing scholarship, and to move to Melbourne?
- What do you think the future holds for Nan and Gladys? Why do you make these predictions?
- What are the differences in the ways that the three women view the world? How does this change throughout the text?
- What perspectives or philosophies do the white characters represent? What are the similarities and differences between their approaches to the three women at the text's centre?
- How do you picture Papa Dear? Would you like him to be 'present' in the text? Why or why not?
- How do you view Dolly's cousin? Why do you think Harrison keeps him as an 'offstage' character?
- How does Errol change throughout the text? What causes these developments?
- Would you consider any of the characters to be archetypes or stereotypes? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
- Why is Gladys so intent on Dolly learning French? What does the language represent to her and the other characters?
- Why is it so important that Gladys learns to read? How does this change her life?
- Do you think Nan's understanding of 'women's business' changes during the text?
- Why is it significant that Gladys's husband died in the war? What impact might this have had on the family's political beliefs?

Themes and issues

- If you had to explain Harrison's central message in one sentence, what would you say? Compare this with the summaries of your classmates; how are they different or similar?
- Who do you consider the hero of the text? How about the villain? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
- How much historical knowledge do you think an audience needs to understand the play?
- What connections can you make between the experiences of the characters in the play and contemporary life? Consider issues facing society when the play was first performed in 2005. What were the prevailing attitudes to First Nations communities and history at the time?
- Why do you think Harrison chose to focus on three generations in *Rainbow's End*?
- Do you think the play is ultimately optimistic, or pessimistic? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
- What do you think Harrison thinks about the issue of housing for First Nations people? Justify your answer with evidence from the text.
- How would the text be different if Harrison focused on Papa Dear's life directly? How would this change the audience's perceptions of the themes and issues that she explores?
- What types of knowledge are on display in the text? How are they valued by the individual characters? How are they valued by society in the text? Do you think the modern world demonstrates different values?
- Who holds power in the text? What gives them their power? How does this change as the play develops?
- What are some examples of institutional racism in the text? What are some of the examples of interpersonal racism? How do the two types of racism interact?

Language and style

- Track the appearances of the encyclopedias in the text. What role does each reference signify in the play? How does the meaning of the symbol change?
- Listen to a recording of ‘Que Sera, Sera’. Investigate other texts that make use of the song. Why did Harrison choose to use this song as a motif in the play?
- Draw the set for each of the major scenes. Explain each feature, and how it would contribute to the audience’s understanding of the play’s themes and issues.
- Consider Harrison’s stage directions. What information do they contain that is important to how the play is understood? How would actors and directors convey this information to an audience?
- Can you imagine any alternative titles for the text? How would they change the audience’s perception of the themes and issues?
- How would lighting impact the audience’s understanding of the play? Make reference to key scenes in explaining your answer.
- Why do you think that most of the scenes in the play are so short? How does this shape the audience’s experience?
- Why does Harrison focus on the effort that Nan and Gladys put into decorating their home? How do these symbols develop the audience’s understanding of her central themes and issues?
- How does Harrison reflect the power dynamics in the text through her stage directions?
- How would you describe the pace of the text? What features of Harrison’s writing create this pace? How does it affect the central themes and issues of *Rainbow’s End*?
- Create a visual representation of the tension in the play. Where does it rise? Where does it fall? Compare this to a standard narrative arc for a play. What conventions is Harrison upholding? What conventions is she subverting?
- Why does Harrison open the text with the Prologue? What expectations does it create for the audience? Where does it fit within the narrative timeline of the text?
- Imagine that there was no second Act for the play. How would that change its message?
- Pick a scene, and delete Harrison’s stage directions. How does this change your interpretation of the scene?
- What do you think happens in the lead-up to the final scene of the play? Gladys mentions that she helped Papa Dear prepare the petition, something that the Inspector had suggested during his visit. What do you think that this looked like?

Key quotes

Dolly: ‘Get with the times, Nan, this is the fifties.’ (p. 131)

At the beginning of the text, Harrison ensures that the audience understands the historical context for the play. She establishes the generational differences between the three main characters, and introduces one of her central thematic concerns: the way attitudes to gender changed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Gladys: ‘She needs to know the world is bigger than just this.’ (p. 131)

Gladys has grand ambitions for her daughter. To some extent these dreams reflect the ways that Gladys has suffered—she wants her daughter to have access to the education and employment opportunities that were denied to her. Her framing of this question also expresses a fundamental difference between Gladys and Nan. Nan places a premium on the community of The Flats, whereas Gladys wants to be upwardly mobile. This is the same impetus that leads her to be optimistic about the family’s move to Rumbalara.

Nan: ‘They’ve had it hard, those lads.’ (p. 139)

Nan is aware of the cost of trauma to her community. She sees the impact on her daughter, and feels fortunate that her family has been able to recover from the impact of Gladys’s absence. This observation is particularly complex when read in the light of Dolly’s rape later in the text.

Dolly: ‘You’re white. I’m Aboriginal. Or haven’t you noticed?’ (p. 149)

Dolly is immediately attracted to Errol, but she is also acutely aware of the distance between herself and Errol. She is aware that his ability to look past this difference is in itself a product of his privilege—he has no real understanding of the implications of her Aboriginality. Dolly makes light of this, a pointed humour that underscores many of the tense moments in the play, but is fundamentally clear about the necessity of establishing the fact of their difference early in their relationship.

Inspector: ‘The Aborigine needs to be absorbed into the community. But how can he be absorbed until he learns to live like us? I will recommend assimilation in my report. It is a vexed issue, to be sure, but someone must take leadership.’ (p. 152)

The Inspector is the embodiment of the assimilationist politics that dominated government agencies in the 1950s. He patronises the women, assuming that he needs to explain core concepts to them, and he neglects to engage with them as humans and equals. He dehumanises the women, and speaks about their community as if they do not have the capacity to exercise leadership on their own behalf. His racist assumptions are on full display as he speaks in a monologue while the women are forced to listen and feign attention.

Gladys: ‘—“end of the rainbow”. Sounds beaut, doesn’t it, this “new deal”? They say the houses’ll have running water ...’ (p. 155)

Gladys is an eternal optimist; she believes that the government will deliver on the best of their promises to improve housing for Aboriginal communities. Her expectations are shaped by the experiences that her family has endured. In her mind, the basic necessities such as running water are to be celebrated, as they are something that has been denied to her community. Gladys believes that they are on the cusp of a new era for Aboriginal communities—a belief that is soon to be undermined by the reality of housing at Rumbalara. Here, her optimism also sits at odds with Nan’s more cynical approach to the government.

Errol: ‘It’s like your family’s from another country or something.’ (p. 170)

Errol is largely oblivious to the reality of Dolly’s life. He is not malicious, but he is a product of the racist institutions that shape his world. He speaks without thinking, and despite his good intentions, he minimises Dolly’s experience of racism. Read by a contemporary audience, this line also serves to illustrate the gap between ideas of ‘Australia’ and First Nations communities who were colonised and attacked. Within the context of its 1950s setting, there is yet another layer to this statement. Dolly and her family are not recognised as citizens of Errol’s country, a fact that shapes all elements of their existence.

Dolly: ‘Feel like getting coshed every time we step out together? Can’t walk down the street holding hands for being called names? And what would your dad say if you took me home to meet him?’ (p. 171)

Dolly continually works to puncture Errol’s naive approach to their relationship. She needs him to understand the reality of their potential relationship, in order to trust that he will be committed to her. Dolly is aware that no rose-coloured glasses will protect them from the realities of a racist world that wants to see their relationship fail. She stuns Errol with her directness, but it is an important step in their relationship, as she needs him to confront the reality of the world that they live in.

Dolly: ‘Your world. And you’re just assuming that your world is better.’ (p. 172)

Dolly also challenges Errol to consider the assumptions that he makes about her life. He looks at what she and her family lack, rather than what they have. Nan and Gladys have worked tirelessly to provide Dolly with love and security, and this is reflected in the confidence with which Dolly rejects Errol’s assumptions about her family and her community.

Gladys: ‘I’m not an interloper—I belong here—this is my land!’ (p. 181)

Gladys grows as a leader throughout the play and develops the confidence to assert herself as a leader in the movement for secure housing for Aboriginal communities. This is significant, as Nan has previously designated this kind of activism as ‘men’s business’. Gladys pushes back against the assumptions of the Inspector, who has deliberately removed Aboriginal people from the process of making decisions about their own community.

Nan: ‘And hospitals is where they take our babies away.’ (p. 185)

Nan is acutely aware of the role that government agencies have played in separating Aboriginal families and communities. She reminds Gladys and Dolly of this history and refuses to trust the individuals and organisations responsible for policing Aboriginal communities. The history is real, and raw, for Nan. She knows that she has an important role in protecting both her family and her community from these cruel and disruptive forces.

Nan: ‘Now that you’re a woman, I can tell you.’ (p. 186)

Nan has fixed ideas about what constitutes ‘men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’, informed both by cultural and gendered norms. She also places a premium on protecting Dolly from the worst of the world, as part of her effort to create a safe and loving environment for the child. Dolly’s rape is the catalyst for a change in the dynamic between the two women. Nan has experienced a similar trauma and recognises the ways that the experience will change Dolly. She seeks to acknowledge this change, and to build a new kind of connection with her granddaughter.

Nan: ‘No matter how they come into the world, you still love ‘em the same.’ (p. 186)

Nan is cynical, but she is also pragmatic. She experienced great trauma in her own childhood, but she loves Gladys fiercely. There is a sadness and misplaced guilt in the way that Nan approaches Gladys; she feels guilty about the fact that Gladys cannot read because she was removed from her home. This was not Nan’s fault, but the fear of history repeating drives her to protect Dolly and the other children in their community.

Gladys: ‘He is a dear—not just because he’s my dad, but because of all the things he does to help our people.’ (p. 190)

At the end of the play, Gladys still believes that Papa Dear is her biological father. Dolly almost reveals the truth, but Nan intervenes to protect her daughter from the potential pain associated with the revelation that her birth was a result of her mother’s rape. As discussed above, Nan feels responsible for the pain of Gladys’s removal and the effect that this had on her daughter’s life. Whilst the audience knows that none of this was Nan’s fault, it is nonetheless clear that Nan wishes to do what she can to shield Gladys from any further pain. Gladys’s statement about her father also reveals the cost of Papa Dear’s activism for his family. While he spends his life helping Aboriginal communities, he has been absent from his own family. The audience knows that this has only increased the burden on Gladys and Nan, who have had to carry the responsibility for the family.

Nan: ‘Gawd no, that’s men’s business.’ (p. 191)

Even as the play nears its conclusion, Nan maintains that public activism is ‘men’s business’. There are at least two possible interpretations of her position: it can be read as a product of her age, and conservatism about gender roles, or it can be seen as a reflection of cultural norms in her community. Either way, Dolly and Gladys think differently. Dolly urges Gladys to step up into the vacuum left by Papa Dear, and Gladys does so, to great success.

Errol: ‘Because where you belong, and your family, is important. To you, and to me.’ (p. 193)

As Errol makes another bid for a relationship with Dolly, he demonstrates how much he has reflected on his own assumptions about her family and Aboriginal culture. He recognises the strength of her family’s bond, and their relationship to their land. Here, Harrison shows the capacity for white characters to recognise their own racism, and to make meaningful changes.

Gladys: ‘We’ve been humble too long.’ (p. 196)

Gladys speaks on behalf of her people, pushing back against the racist policies that have shaped her life. She also speaks as a woman, who has been silenced and sidelined throughout her life. Gladys rewords Papa Dear’s speech to reflect her belief that it is time for the dynamic to change, and for Aboriginal people to be given the rights that they deserve.

Gladys: ‘Why do we have to prove we can live like whitefellas, before we get the same opportunities?’ (p. 197)

As she grows in confidence, Gladys demonstrates the shift in her approach to the future. She still has aspirations for herself and her daughter, but she does not believe that these opportunities should have to come with any kind of compromise. It is a clear rejection of the assimilationist policies of the Inspector and other white authority figures. She signals a new phase for the leadership of the movement for Aboriginal rights, one that incorporates women into its leadership structures, and she also feels able to articulate demands without compromising.

Analytical text response topics

1. “A real home is where the people are looking after each other.”
How does the play explore this idea?
2. ‘There is more hope than despair for the residents of The Flats.’
Do you agree?
3. ‘All of the women in *Rainbow’s End* are leaders in their own right.’
To what extent do you agree?
4. To what extent is *Rainbow’s End* about the impact of racism?
5. ‘*Rainbow’s End* demonstrates the difficulty of changing your circumstances.’
Discuss.
6. How does Harrison use symbols to explore the changing dynamics at Rainbow’s End?
7. ‘In *Rainbow’s End*, family is more important than anything.’
Do you agree?
8. Discuss the role of knowledge in the lives of the characters in *Rainbow’s End*.

Creative text response tasks

As *Rainbow's End* is a text by a First Nations playwright about First Nations history, it is important to scaffold non-First Nations students in any creative response to the text. Students will need to understand issues surrounding cultural appropriation, and tasks will need to be designed with these complexities in mind. Non-Indigenous students should be encouraged to exercise caution if they choose to write in the voice of Indigenous characters.

Similarly, students will need to be mindful of their representation of racist attitudes dominant at the time of the text. For example, caution should be exercised in asking students to adopt or adapt the perspectives offered by characters such as the Inspector and the Rent Collector. Students will need to understand the ramifications of expressing these ideas within the context of a creative response. The inclusion of a Statement of Explanation is vital here, to allow the student to articulate in detail the aims of writing in such voices.

1. Write an extra scene for the play, where Errol tells his family about his relationship with Dolly. How will they react? Explain your choices for the scene, including how you have made it consistent with Harrison's themes and stylistic decisions.
2. Write and perform a monologue, where the Inspector delivers his report about housing at The Flats. Explain how the monologue demonstrates your understanding of the themes, ideas and structures of the play.
3. Write an extra scene for the play, where the Council discusses the Inspector's report. How will they react? Explain your choices for the scene, including how you have made it consistent with Harrison's themes and stylistic decisions.
4. Create the outline for a documentary about Nan's life. Explain how this reflects the thematic and stylistic concerns of Harrison's work.
5. Script and act a speech for the Queen, presented as part of the tour that informs the play's context. Explain how the monologue demonstrates your understanding of the themes, ideas and structures of the play.
6. Write an extra scene for the play, where the Rent Collector reports news of his argument with Nan to his boss. How will they react? Explain your choices for the scene, including how you have made it consistent with Harrison's themes and stylistic decisions.

References

The following references are a useful starting point for engaging students in the context of the text.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/>

The Australia Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies provides a useful starting point for considering notions of Country, and other context matter in the study of the *Rainbow's End*.

Civil Rights

<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/indigenous-referendum>

This resource from the National Museum of Australia highlights the social and legal forces governing the rights of Aboriginal people in the 1950s in the lead up to the 1967 referendum.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities in the Greater Shepparton region

<https://greatershepparton.com.au/community/diversity/aboriginal-community-and-partnerships>

This page outlines the Greater Shepparton Council's perspective on the ongoing cultural role of First Nations people in the area.

Living Knowledge

<https://livingknowledge.anu.edu.au/html/educators/>

Run under the auspices of the Australian National University, Living Knowledge is primarily aimed at Science educators. It provides a useful framework for considering how non-Indigenous educators can engage with First Nations knowledge and ways of knowing in their classrooms.

National Indigenous Television

<https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/channels/nitv>

Hosted through the online presence of SBS, NITV consistently publishes new features that can support the teaching of *Rainbow's End* and other First Nations texts.

Servant or Slave

<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/nitv-radio/en/article/servant-or-slave-reshaping-australian-history-through-a-new-lens/1f1ebffho>

A NITV feature that explores the role that explores the real experiences of Aboriginal women removed for work in the domestic sphere in white homes. The stories reflect the experience alluded to in Gladys's back story.

The Flats

<https://visitshepparton.com.au/see-and-do/history-and-heritage/!/view/the-flats-1133>

Hosted by the official tourism site for the region, this page outlines some of the history of The Flats.

The State Library of NSW on the 1954 Royal Tour

<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/1954-royal-tour-queen-elizabeth-ii>

This page documents the 1954 Royal Tour with a range of photographs and artefacts from the visit. It provides a useful starting point for discussing the impact of the visit on the national discourse.

What was the Cummeragunja Walk-Off?

<https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2022/02/03/what-was-cummeragunja-walk>

This page documents the key events of the Cummeragunja Walk-Off, including interviews with associated parties.

Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation

<https://yynac.com.au/home/>

The Yorta Yorta people are the Traditional Custodians of the land on which *Rainbow's End* is set. This site outlines some of the contemporary issues on the land, as well as some of the history of the successful Native Title claim in the area.

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