Article by Virginia Lee

TIRRA LIRRA BY THE RIVER

Jessica Anderson

INTRODUCTION

_Tirra Lirra by the River_ is the story of one woman’s quest for fulfilment. Australian writer Jessica Anderson was born in Brisbane in 1916, and some of her own life experiences are reflected in the journey of her protagonist, Nora Porteous. Anderson moved to Sydney as a young woman and subsequently spent a period of time living in London. _Tirra Lirra by the River_ explores literal and emotional journeys, and the landscape’s impact on an individual’s development. The evocations of Brisbane and Sydney owe a great deal to Anderson’s own experience, though they also echo the author’s prejudices: ‘Bohemian’ Sydney is preferable to parochial (insular) Brisbane, while London exerts a fascination that Australia could never hope to emulate. Australians in the 1930s and 1940s were intensely aware of their geographical and cultural isolation, and travelling to Europe – particularly England – was how a generation reconciled itself to being Australian. Central to Nora’s experience as an expatriate is the search for a true sense of place. In this respect, she represents the perspective of many Australians of her generation.

The Imaginative Landscape in _Tirra Lirra by the River_

How does _Tirra Lirra by the River_ explore the interaction between landscape and imagination? Nora Porteous returns to Australia in the 1970s after forty years of
living in London as an expatriate. Her journey has taken her from suburban Brisbane to Sydney to London and, finally, back to Brisbane. Anderson explores the relationship between her protagonist and the landscape she inhabits, suggesting that emotional wellbeing is bound to physical context. In this sense, *Tirra Lirra by the River’s* urban landscapes provide more than simply a backdrop to Nora’s story. The influence of place is profound – sometimes complementing Nora’s internal life, sometimes clashing with it. In her mind’s eye, Nora has always envisaged how, if not exactly where, she wants to live. Throughout the text, she inventively adapts her surroundings, however uninspiring, to fit the landscape of her imagination.

Nora’s last crucial journey takes place retrospectively in her memory, as she revisits places of significance and change in her life. She views her past as a globe of memory suspended in her head, with a light side and a nether (lower, darker) side, which she can generally spin at will. This has enabled her to control unpleasant associations, especially regarding her marriage. However, Nora’s homecoming compels her to address long-avoided memories and honestly evaluate her life. Thus the novel itself becomes an imaginative landscape where the conflicting tensions of Nora’s life are reconciled.

**IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT**

*Tirra Lirra by the River* can be used to explore a number of key ideas relevant to the Context *The Imaginative Landscape*. These are outlined below and will be developed further in the following section.
Overview of key ideas and arguments

The imaginative landscape as an expression of creativity and escape

Nora’s intuitive, artistic perspective is at odds with suburban Brisbane and she takes refuge in an inner world of fantasy that is prompted and sustained by her reading of romantic literature. This, in turn, inspires her creativity and encourages her to aspire to a different kind of life.

Alienation from the physical and social landscape

Nora feels alienated from the landscape in which she grows up and, later, from the landscape of suburban Sydney. This sense of alienation heightens her feelings of difference from others, including her own family, and leads her to reject the values and limited outlook of her social class. It also motivates her search for beauty in literature and design, and her search for a more fulfilling place in which to belong.

The ideal landscape versus suburban reality

Nora’s ‘Camelot’ – a place where individuality and beauty are treasured – remains an elusive ideal. She initially views Sydney as a ‘proxy Camelot’ (p.25), but discovers that there are many versions of Sydney. She recognises, for example, an enormous difference between the vibrant, artistic life of Potts Point and the potential-destroying landscape of suburban Sydney. London eventually becomes her home, though she never quite recaptures the deep attachment to her idealised Sydney.

Remembered versus actual landscapes

The disjunction between how Nora remembers the Brisbane of her youth and the reality she discovers when she returns after a long absence is explored in the final stage of Nora’s journey. The contradictions between the two experiences need to be resolved for Nora’s peace of mind and understanding of self.
Analysis of key ideas and arguments

The imaginative landscape as an expression of creativity and escape

As a young girl, Nora is ‘in love with beauty’ (p.16). She has a sensitive, romantic nature and yearns for something beyond the repressive confines of her hometown and the provincial lifestyle it offers. Her reading, particularly of poetry, has encouraged her imagination and she is sustained by an inner world of fantasy that provides an alternative to her mundane surroundings. Identification with the Arthurian legend is stimulated early with her discovery of a miniature Camelot visible through the distorting glass of the living room window. There she has her ‘first intimation of a country as beautiful as those in my childhood books … I was deeply engrossed by those miniature landscapes, green, wet, romantic, with silver serpentine rivulets, and flashing lakes, and castles moulded out of any old stick or stone. I believe they enchanted me’ (p.12). She is inspired by this imaginary landscape and refers to it as a region of her mind, which fuels her romantic daydreams and creativity. Here, in her internalised Camelot, ‘infinite expansion’ becomes ‘possible’ (p.12). Nora’s reading of romantic literature is voracious yet selective, ‘fastening on what fed’ her ‘obsessions and skimming over what didn’t’ (pp.21–2). Her relationship with the books she reads is a significant one. In literature, she discovers imaginative landscapes that are the antitheses (exact opposites) of the world in which she lives. Reading provides an escape, as well as validating her faith in a larger world and a different set of possibilities.

Nora’s reading leads her to Lord Alfred Tennyson’s poem The Lady of Shalott, and there are deliberate parallels established between the Lady’s tragic story and Nora’s own. The Lady lives in isolation, in an island tower, and experiences the world vicariously through a magic mirror. She is relatively content until she views the magnificent figure of Sir Lancelot riding to Camelot and she ventures into the outside, unprotected world in order to seek him. This precipitates her death. Similarly, Nora lives in an enclosed world and dreams of freeing herself from its
constraints. And like Tennyson's doomed heroine, Nora is also an artist. Just as the Lady weaves her 'magic web with colours gay', Nora translates what she sees around her into creations of originality and beauty. Though she persistently underestimates the extent of her considerable talent, she is forced to acknowledge it much later as an elderly woman when presented with one of her own wall hangings: 'I raise my eyebrows and stare, so astonished by the excellence of the design and the beauty of the colour that I cannot speak' (p.92). When she is shown another piece, its distinction 'disturbs as well as amazes' and she admits she has 'never done anything of this quality since' (p.184). Ironically, Nora wonders what might have happened had she not left Brisbane.

Nora's designing and embroidery have been a way of alleviating her discontent – at the time of creating them, she is unable to see them objectively as works of art in their own right. They are, in her mind, not separate from her, but physical extensions of the world of beauty in which she 'lives' imaginatively. In this way, the novel suggests that creativity and art do not only provide an imaginative escape from an unsatisfactory physical reality, but can also transform that reality by making it more beautiful, or at least by making the experience of beauty more possible. This is true not only for the creator, but for all those who appreciate the work of art, too.

Rather than being warned by Lancelot's inadvertent role in the Lady of Shalott's destruction, Nora’s immersion in romantic literature also encourages her to seek an erotic ideal. She longs for a Sir Lancelot who will provide deliverance from the stifling ennui (boredom, tedium) that seems to dominate her life. One evening she imagines that she finds him down by the river, the 'real river' (p.13) that up until this point has not suggested itself as a location for her dreams. As she lies in abandoned contemplation of the landscape, she is startled by an anonymous figure on a horse. Remembering the incident as an old woman, she acknowledges its sexual element, but also something more ephemeral and spiritual in nature: 'I believe I was also trying to match that region of my mind, Camelot' (p.15).
The transformative power of Nora’s creative imagination and her capacity to make something from very little sustain her throughout her long life. When she returns to Brisbane as an old woman, despite her initial disorientation, she draws on familiar reserves of courage and optimism:

Somewhere in this house, I say to myself, I shall make my domain. In whatever circumstances I have found myself, I have always managed to devise a little area … that was not too ugly … and no doubt I shall do it again. (pp.27–8)

Discussion questions

• Does the perfection of Nora’s imagined and created world of beauty make her view of the ‘real’ world unnecessarily harsh?

• How important is the link between creativity and isolation from one’s environment (physical as well as social), as presented in the novel?

Alienation from the physical and social landscape

Nora’s imagination may have the power to transform elements of the landscape in which she lives, but it is not sufficient to mitigate (lessen) the sense of profound alienation she feels from her hometown. Her aesthetic sensibilities are violated by the rough roads and paddocks, the vacant lots and the ‘ugly sprawling’ suburbs (p.16). Oppressed by the climate, Nora feels physically dislocated and suffers greatly from the heat: ‘I had a pinkish skin that always looked damp and often was. In the swampy summers I sweated dreadfully’. By contrast, most of her friends are ‘dry-skinned girls with sun-tanned hands and electrical energy’ (p.16). This sense of estrangement from her environment extends to her relationships with the people around her. Her mother is ‘antipathetic’ (p.21), her sister antagonistic – ‘We don’t all think we’re too good for this place, Lady Muck’ (p.20). The local boys’ crude harassment makes a mockery of her courteous knightly fantasy. From adolescence, Nora is divorced from the concerns of her peers and her only friend is Olive Partridge, who shares her passion for reading and understands the urge to
escape. In spite of her own acknowledged naivety, Nora intuitively mistrusts the conventional aspirations of those around her and is perceptive about the contradictions underpinning Brisbane society, with ‘its rawness and weak gentility, its innocence and deep deceptions’ (p.118).

The fact that Nora feels out of place both physically and socially emphasises the close connection between place and people. Those who ‘fit in’ to the Brisbane landscape possess certain physical qualities, and particular mental qualities too, suggesting that the ‘landscape’ or environment experienced by any individual is a mixture of both the physical and the mental. Those who – like Nora – don’t ‘fit in’ have neither the right physical qualities nor the right mental or imaginative qualities. This emphasises a strong interaction between an ‘imaginative’ and a physical landscape, each one influencing and fashioning the other.

Nora is initially able to endure her surroundings in relative patience because she has ‘an underlying conviction’ (p.20) that she will leave Brisbane. Clearly her disconnection from the landscape is not shared by her immediate family or the majority in the community and, for the first time, the ‘ominous’ question hovers in the air: ‘Who does she think she is?’ (p.18). It is a question that continues to resurface as Nora struggles to find her place in the world. Her restlessness manifests itself in random, lonely walking. This first passive waiting period in her life is ironically exemplified by motion and an unconstrained release of energy. Even as she emotionally withdraws from her surroundings, physically she is an identifiable presence within it:

> Indeed if all the marks of my walking feet had been left inscribed on the paddocks and roads and playing fields of that suburb, you would have seen lines, arcs, ovals, rectangles, figures-of-eight, and any other shape you might care to name, all imposed and impinging on one another so thickly that it would have been impossible to trace a single journey. (p.19)

In this way, Nora makes her mark upon the landscape despite her resistance to it.
Nora’s desire to leave, to experience change, suggests that an alienation from landscape can actually trigger some very positive desires and actions. Travelling, seeking other places and people and broadening one’s horizons are positive and life-enhancing experiences. In *Tirra Lirra by the River*, the desire to do these things also comes from a rich imaginative life, suggesting once again that it is the *interaction* between imagination and landscape that leads to creativity and individual development.

Nora’s dissatisfaction with small-town parochialism is not unique and, although most people seem content to stay, an imaginative few search for something beyond the conventional boundaries. Nora’s friend Olive Partridge is determined to leave as soon as her inheritance permits. Her subsequent literary achievements are noted, but not necessarily understood or valued, by those who have remained in Brisbane. The rejection of provincial values is also reiterated later in the novel by Nora’s friend Lewie. His hostility towards the country town in which he grew up – Wagga Wagga – is expressed through reference to his unhappy childhood. For Lewie, an artist and a homosexual, the memories of this oppressive social and cultural setting continue to resonate in a negative way.

Anderson suggests that the artistic temperament is particularly undermined by insularity and narrow-mindedness. While these three characters all experience a feeling of isolation and emotional displacement from their respective landscapes, they are also able to draw on a creative impulse as a means of escape.

**Discussion questions**

- Why is Nora’s ‘attitude’ so resented by her mother and sister Grace?
- Compare Nora’s situation with that of her friend Olive Partridge. What do the girls have in common? In what ways are they different?
- What, if anything, does Nora gain by leaving Brisbane?
Nora’s life journey can be seen as a search or quest for a true sense of place – an ‘ideal’ location, a ‘Camelot’, that remains unreachable. This imagined destination remains just that: an imagined, idealised world that is always at odds with the reality Nora inhabits.

As Nora grows older, Sydney becomes a viable proxy for Camelot, ‘a substitution forced on me by what little common sense I had’ (p.25), and a Sir Lancelot figure materialises in the unlikely person of Colin Porteous. However, Nora’s romantic aspirations and desperate need to escape have made her vulnerable. They have compromised her ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality and she is incapable of assessing her future husband’s true character. Having lost all confidence in her own desirability, she finds the mere fact of being wanted irresistible. The courtship is a ‘whirlwind ro-mance’ (p.50) and Colin is pronounced ‘Prince Charming’, even by the disgruntled Grace (p.50). Nora’s relationship with Colin Porteous actually postpones her true liberation, which is ultimately effected only when the marriage fails.

Nora quickly discovers that there are two Sydneys. The first is ‘her’ Sydney, the inner city that celebrates the harbour, and Nora is thoroughly absorbed by its pace and cosmopolitan energy. For the first time in her life, she experiences an affinity with the landscape and a true sense of belonging. The Porteous’ flat is in an old Victorian house on Potts Point with a waterfront garden, and it exemplifies her idealised Sydney. The Porteous’ one big room, with its high ceiling, north aspect, pleasant innocuous furniture, and long double windows remains, in Nora’s heart, ‘a pattern of what a room should be’ (p.52). Nora gravitates naturally to the members of Bomera’s artistic community who, with their creativity and ‘simpathico’ (like-minded) perspective (p.56), appreciate her love of beauty and thirst for cultural expression. In Ida Mayo’s workroom, surrounded by opulent fabrics and glossy magazines, she recaptures the magic of her childhood fantasies. She is ‘under enchantment again’ (p.55). This little portion of Sydney gratifies Nora’s aesthetic
sense and complements her private world. She no longer has to imaginatively transform an environment for which she feels little empathy. She has found a tangible counterpart for her imaginative ideals. Indeed, as the deficiencies in her marriage become apparent, there are times when she concludes that ‘all I wanted in the world was to be left alone in my beautiful room, close to people who never asked, audibly or otherwise, who I thought I was, but who nevertheless were interested in the answer to that question’ (pp.61–2).

Nevertheless, while an ideal world of elegance and glamour is promised by the lush pages of Ida’s magazines, the riches they depict are beyond the reach of a population struggling through the Depression. Nora’s friend Lewie understands the elusive nature of the attraction: ‘I bet it’s a chimera … all that style. In real life, when you got close to it, it would just melt away’ (p.55). Inevitably, real life does intrude into Nora’s ‘Camelot’. When she is forced by the deteriorating economic climate and her husband’s parsimony (extreme thriftiness) to move in with Una Porteous, the barren ugliness of that ‘other’ Sydney is brought home to her. Anderson’s evocation of the ‘feuding territory’ (p.61) of suburban Sydney reveals her own distaste for this landscape, Nora’s second Sydney. Nora’s mother-in-law lives in a:

red-brick house in a big flat chequerboard suburb, predominantly iron-grey and terracotta in colour, and treeless except for an occasional row of tristianias, clipped to roundness and stuck like toffee apples into the pavement. (p.51)

The parallels with Brisbane are disturbing, while the contrast between Una’s house and Bomera is so marked as to suggest that they are in completely separate cities. The difference, of course, lies as much in the values and attitudes of the people who live there as it does in the geographical location. Anderson’s description not only highlights the almost comic austerity of Una Porteous’ suburb, it also mirrors the conservatism and pettiness of those who live there.
As an artist, Nora’s responses will always be dictated by her aesthetic instincts. She reacts intuitively in terms of colour and design. For example, she describes communism to Olive as ‘Grey and flat. Wool, probably, with no weave showing, and a bit bunchy where the sleeves are set in’ (p.115). In other words: worthy, practical, but badly tailored and lacking panache (flair). Equally, Nora’s psychological and emotional state is influenced by the physical landscape in which she finds herself. Her reaction to the visual bleakness of the suburbs, although dismissed as histrionic (exaggerated, melodramatic) by Colin Porteous, underscores her genuine distress: ‘If I had to live here I would die’ (p.51). Forty years later, the ‘iron-grey and terracotta’ terrain of outer London (p.174) still generates in her a similar feeling of dismay. The time that Nora spends in Una Porteous’ house is distinguished by waste, and ‘worse than waste’ (p.73). Her intelligence and energy are suppressed, her ‘little talents’ blighted by ‘panic and despair’ (p.93). Once more, this waiting period in her life is characterised by restless, routine walking. She paces the suburb and hopes for rescue ‘in fantastic ways’ (p.82).

Ironically, after several years in Una Porteous’ house, she becomes agoraphobic (afraid of open or public spaces). The landscape around her contracts to such an extent that she is terrified to leave the house. She is literally, as well as metaphorically, imprisoned by the marriage. In the meantime though, Nora has still been able to salvage a modest space that she can call her own. Taking her inspiration from the lemon and green of the lemon tree in the garden outside, she decorates the room she shares with Colin. Here she expresses her own taste and, when it is finished, she is delighted to have created something from so little. Conversely, her mother-in-law considers it ‘hard and unfemin-ine’ (p.75). The importance of a personal domain to Nora is vital, and a lasting legacy of her marriage is the passionate loathing she feels at living in other people’s houses. This is one of the reasons she eventually chooses to return to her old Brisbane home.
Nora retains the affection she feels for ‘her’ Sydney. Had circumstances been different, she might have been content to stay in Australia. As it is, her spontaneous decision to go abroad is prompted by the exhilarating realisation that she is finally able to assert her independence after years in an unhappy marriage. She sees herself as an explorer: certainly not an expatriate. She is initially repelled by London, its ‘stony look’ and ‘chilly regularity’ (p.109), but this early distaste for the city changes. Again, Nora’s response is determined by an aesthetic appreciation and her contentment is measured, in part, by her surroundings. She comes to view the Georgian terraces as ‘formal and peaceful’ and derives considerable satisfaction from the fact that she ‘never once lived in an ill-proportioned room’ (p.123). As she did with Sydney, she appropriates a part of London that she can think of as ‘hers’. By the time she goes to live in a Victorian house in Holland Park, she has effectively made the city her home.

Nora still asserts her ‘deeper attachment’ to Sydney; memories of ‘the harbour, the sun, and the cicadas in the plane trees in Macleay Street’ are vivid and enduring (p.120). She talks of returning home when it is financially viable. Nevertheless, it is in London, in a landscape very different from her Australian birthplace, that the gap between where she is and who she is finally begins to narrow. It is here that she is able to realise a life of professional fulfilment. As she observes to the ‘most lasting of [her] Lewies’ (p.122), David Snow, ‘I have come a long roundabout way … to find out who I am’ (p.124). She sets up her own business as a dressmaker and later, virtually by default, finds herself working as a theatrical costumer. This period becomes the most creatively rewarding in her life. She never consciously or definitively renounces the intention to return to Australia, but with time, memories of her home country become ‘blurred and misshapen’ (p.160). Her friend David Snow argues that ‘some people are homeless wherever they live’ (p.125) and that Nora is one of these. Despite her loyalty to Sydney, the affinity she develops for London is undeniable. Her own professional workrooms become a genuine substitute for the ‘rich rippling colour’ of Ida Mayo’s rooms at Bomera (p.158). It is this workspace, in particular, that persists as the cherished landscape in her mind’s
eye: ‘I grew to love those big cluttered low-ceilinged rooms, and the memory of winter afternoons there – the light, the smell, the visitors and the voices – can still fill me with nostalgia’ (p.160). In the final analysis, it is suggested that Nora’s true home is the place where her artistry can find expression.

Discussion questions

• Compare Olive’s rationale for living in Europe – ‘I like to live in a country of importance’ (p.114) – with Nora’s assertion: ‘I don’t want to live in a climate where they can’t grow oranges’ (p.126). What do these varying opinions suggest about the notion of being an expatriate?

• Is Nora capable of feeling truly at home anywhere?

Remembered versus actual landscapes

Nora’s journey towards a lifestyle which allows her autonomy and satisfaction is a long, and perhaps unnecessarily difficult, one. One problem that she faces throughout her life is that what she sees is determined by how she sees. Of course, this is true for everyone to some degree, but for Nora it becomes a problem because her idealistic vision inevitably leads her to regard her environment as depressingly inadequate. On the one hand Nora’s inner vision, informed by her artistry and nourished by her imagination, has promoted expectation and the accompanying desire to be different. However, it has also led to unhappiness and thus clouded her ability to ‘see’ or appraise the world around her with objectivity. Just as the Lady of Shalott’s mirror presents a distorted view of the world – reducing reality to ‘shadows’ and ill-preparing her for the certainty of the ‘curse’ that awaits her outside her tower – Nora’s imaginative landscape also has a dangerous edge. The ‘region of [the] mind’ (p.15) can distort and obfuscate (confuse or obscure) reality.

Further, Nora’s sense of self is continually undermined by the societal limitations imposed on women of her generation. She has never had the opportunity to fully
develop her particular talents; nor has she lived in an environment that values or nurtures her creativity. These factors make it harder for Nora to appreciate the extent of her own abilities, or have a conscious notion of herself as an artist. However, unlike the Lady, Nora’s independent foray into the outside world – as symbolised by the journey to London – does not result in death, either literal or creative. Her artistic talents do find some expression, albeit of a conventional and limited nature.

Nora’s journey is completed when she comes home to Brisbane and, through memory, resolves the tension that has existed between reality and the world of the imagination. Nora’s recall has always been selective. She freely acknowledges that with her friends in London, she has presented an edited version of her life. The text explores the different ways in which memory can operate. Liza imagines her past life as ‘a string of roughly graded beads’; Hilda has a similarly linear concept of memory, likening it to ‘a track with detours’ (p.36). Though both are constructs, it is Nora’s ‘globe’ that allows for the greatest degree of selectivity and control. Indeed, she has become so ‘watchful and quick’ that she can expertly manipulate the globe’s spin, thus regulating the degree of creative license (p.36). However, the inevitable dismay she feels when she first arrives back at the family home renders her defenceless, triggering long-suppressed memories and highlighting a relationship between remembered and actual landscapes.

During the serious illness that follows, Nora concedes, grudgingly, that it might be a worthwhile time to explore the nether side of her globe of memory. The house and the early years of frustration are turned to the light. An examination of her marriage and other significant relationships follows. Nora is also confronted with the tangible proof of her originality as an artist and a disconcerting reassessment of the creative opportunities presented by the Brisbane of her youth. When she is shown the stunning tapestry she created as a girl, she thinks ‘Who knows what else I may have drawn … out of the compression of a secret life?’ (p.184). At the conclusion of her journey in memory, her globe is in ‘free spin’ (p.201). Her fear of its ‘dark’ side has dissipated and her early resistance to the homecoming has
mutated into acceptance and a new awareness of self. She comes to understand
the correlation that has always existed between the imaginative landscape and
memory – that ‘imagination is only memory at one, or two, or twenty, removes’ –
and to see that truth is about ‘repudiating … those removes’ (p.201). In this sense,
Nora’s reshaping of her past means the entire narrative may be viewed as an
imaginative landscape in which the tension due to the conflicting elements that
have caused a lifetime’s restlessness is finally resolved.

Reconciliation with the literal landscape follows. Nora rediscovers a sensual delight
in Queensland’s ‘sensuous tropical fruits, and the plentiful vegetable products of
the warm earth’. She decides that ‘There are compensations in coming back, after
all’ (p.130). At the conclusion of the novel, she finds a contentment that has eluded
her for much of her adult life. Initially, Brisbane seems as oppressive as ever: ‘I
admit flatly at last that if I had remembered the house better I would have found
some other solution’ (pp.3–4). Even so, as well as suffering the old familiar
aversion, she is teased by the memory of something important: ‘An obscure
sensation, it touched me lightly, the ghost, perhaps, of some former bliss’ (p.5). By
the time she is well enough to explore Grace’s garden and the landscape beyond,
she finds the river – the ‘real river I disregarded on my first walks and failed to find
on my last’ (p.201). Nora is able to ‘see’ differently and appreciate the genuine
beauty surrounding her in a way that was previously impossible. She embraces the
authentic experience, as opposed to the romantic escapism of her girlhood.

The reference to Tennyson’s poem in the novel’s title reinforces Nora’s
connections with the Lady of Shalott. ‘Tirra Lirra’ is the song that Lancelot sings as
he rides by the river to Camelot. Oblivious to the role he will play in the Lady’s
destiny, Lancelot’s dazzling image flashes into her crystal mirror, and entices her
from the safety of the tower. For Nora the distinction between the mythical river
flowing to Camelot and the ‘real’ river becomes clear. The first leads to possible
destruction – and throughout her lifetime Nora has come very close on occasions
to sharing the Lady’s fate. However, walking by the lavender shadows of
Brisbane’s real river, Nora is at peace with the landscape and herself. The ‘curse’
of wanting to be elsewhere has been lifted; the ‘chimera’ is exposed. A final memory is crystallised and fuses the images dormant in her imagination with the reality of her past. It is this cathartic memory (of her father’s funeral) that consoles her spirit and offers further understanding of the bitter, buried grief she experienced at his death.

Discussion question

• Nora’s return to Australia is prompted not by choice, but by Fred’s illness and the rise in London rents. To what extent have all of her decisions been reactive? How has this affected where she will live?

Sample passage analysis

This section shows you how to identify and discuss key Context ideas in a short passage from Tirra Lirra by the River.

First, carefully read through the following section (pp.163–4), from:

Was that the house where Peter visited you…?

to

It was one of those pleasant houses.

Summary

The London house on Lansdowne Rise, affectionately known as number six, becomes a sanctuary for Nora and her friends Hilda and Liza. The house belongs to Fred, who stipulates that he wanted to lease the two top floors to ‘three thin old women’ (p.163). Nora lives here very comfortably for a number of years and often thinks of it when she returns to Brisbane.
Questions for exploring ideas

• What is appealing about this landscape?

• What is Nora looking for in a home?

• Why does Nora say ‘It wasn’t a house from the best period’?

• Later Nora admits ‘we realised that all those villages were now meshed by the flow of traffic into one huge hard city’ (p.170). Consider the images of London presented in the text. Are there significant differences with the Australian landscape?

Focus on text features

As well as drawing on ideas from Tirra Lirra by the River in your writing about The Imaginative Landscape, remember that the language and style of your writing may also be inspired by the structures and features of the text. For example, the following aspects of Tirra Lirra by the River may influence how you choose to use language in the text you create:

• First-person narration – the novel is written entirely from the protagonist’s perspective.

• Retrospective narrative viewpoint – starts with Nora’s return to Brisbane and then takes us back in time to her girlhood, married life in Sydney, subsequent time in London, finally returning full circle to the present and effectively exploring a whole life.

• Reflective tone – as well as tracing Nora’s literal journey, much of the narrative explores her inner world and the psychological journey she undertakes.

• Non-linear structure – while Nora’s memories follow a basic chronological trajectory, they also digress and revert back to the present. Some of the most important information regarding her early life only emerges at the end.
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- Strong sense of voice – sardonic, detached, self-deprecating, ironic.
- Powerful use of symbolism and imagery – the globe of memory, the links with Camelot, the river and the motif of the Lady of Shalott are the most significant.
- Lyrical descriptive passages that delineate Nora’s relationship to the landscape – contrast sharply with the economy Anderson deploys when presenting the ‘bones’ of Nora’s story.

**Points of view on the Context**

These discussion questions, activities and sample writing prompts are designed to encourage you to consider some of the questions raised by the Context *The Imaginative Landscape* in *Tirra Lirra by the River* and to develop your own points of view on the key ideas.

**Discussion/writing questions**

- Jessica Anderson has said this about her protagonist:

  I was writing about a woman … who was actually a born artist, but was in a place where artists, although they were known to exist, were supposed to exist elsewhere. She was born among that kind of people, and she herself doesn’t know that she’s an artist. She struggles through, trying to arrive at her art and never succeeding … She had a kind of buried talent … the sewing, the tapestries, had to be something acceptable to her society. (Ellison 1986, p.37)

  Has Nora’s artistry enriched her life or made it much more difficult than it needed to be? Does the imaginative landscape it provides her with have mostly positive or mostly negative effects?

- *Tirra Lirra by the River* is one of a number of Australian novels that explore the issue of travelling to Europe in the twentieth century. What does the novel suggest about the Australian landscape in relation to
England and the wider world? What does it reveal about our sense of national identity? Are these concerns still relevant today?

**Activities**

- The arc of Nora’s life covers a great deal of territory. Devise a flow chart, detailing her physical progress, and identifying the positive and negative responses each landscape elicits.

- Creatively explore the perspectives of Olive Partridge and Lewie. This could be done through a monologue, journal entries or, in the case of Olive, letters home to Brisbane. What might each one say about the relationships they have to their respective landscapes?

**Sample prompts**

1. Whether the landscape around us is alienating or comforting, it still influences and determines the people we become.

2. The landscape we remember is often more important than the reality that has been left behind.

3. The imagination has the power to creatively transform the landscape.

4. The same landscape can be experienced in many different ways.

5. The most important element in shaping our sense of place is memory.

6. Truth can be distorted by our imagination.

7. A strong connection to the landscape is important in terms of emotional wellbeing.

**THE TEXT**

OTHER RESOURCES


*This novel makes an interesting contrast to Tirra Lirra by the River.*