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Women and Distorted Realities: Remembering and Reinventing "The Lady of Shalott"

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the treatment of three different aspects of interest in the novel *Tirra Lirra by the River*, by the Australian novelist Jessica Anderson. Firstly, this paper will aim to carry out a comprehensive study of the impact that the use of intertextuality has on the novel, as well as to provide an explanation for the different uses that the novel makes of it. Secondly, it will examine the novel's representation of women's difficult condition and female artists' problems during the first decades of the twentieth century; and thirdly, it will tackle the importance of trauma, mainly as reflected in the figure of the protagonist, Nora Porteous. Jessica Anderson, like her novel's main female character, was strongly marked and influenced by the past, and strove to bring to the fore in her works her own conceptions of art, life and reality, as well as her own personal frights and concerns about the society she had to live in.

In order to carry out this analysis, support my arguments and strengthen my conclusions I have relied on a number of papers and book chapters written on this novel by well-known Australian critics. All in all, I conclude that *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a most interesting and complex novel, as regards both its modernist formal features and its treatment of contemporary polemical themes and their societal implications.

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Women and Distorted Realities: Remembering and Reinventing “The Lady of Shalott”

América Detraux Ramírez

As he rode down to Camelot
From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
‘Tirra lirra,’ by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot.

Alfred Tennyson

Nora Porteous has spent most of her life waiting to escape. Fleeing from her small-town family and then from her stifling marriage to a mean spirited husband, Nora arrives finally in London where she creates a new life for herself as a dressmaker.

Now in her seventies Nora returns to Queensland to settle into her childhood home. But Nora has been away a long time, and the people and events are not all like she remembered them.

Back cover blurb (Pan Macmillan Edition)

Introduction

Tirra Lirra by the River is Jessica's Anderson fourth novel. It has become one of Australia's 'must read books,' and is now considered to be a twentieth-century classic. In the same year it was published (1978), it was awarded one of the most well known national literary prizes in Australia, and stands out as one of the most acclaimed contemporary Australian novels (Goldsworthy, 2015). *Tirra Lirra by the River* is a good example of postcolonial literature, but can also be regarded as a postmodernist novel, since it partakes of some of the main postmodernist tenets.

In this essay on *Tirra Lirra by the River*, I will discuss and consider three different aspects that play important roles in building up the narrative, in an attempt to throw some light on the impact they have on the text. Moreover, in order to strengthen my arguments I will support my conclusions by drawing parallels with other critics' opinions. The main issues I will discuss in the novel are: the function of intertextuality, the portrait and treatment of womanhood, and the importance of traumatic memories.

Firstly, a brief summary of the plot will be provided so that the main themes tackled in the novel are brought to the fore. The entire action revolves around the figure of the protagonist, Nora Porteous. She is a seventy-year-old woman, born in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century in a small suburb of the city of Brisbane. This society was still very much influenced by its colonial past. Nora was raised within a traditionally-minded, middle-class family, and the novel starts with her arrival and return to her childhood home, after having lived forty five years as an expatriate in London.

Upon arrival at the house that used to be her home and where she lived with her family, many memories --some of them repressed for decades-- begin to emerge on her consciousness. Shortly after her homecoming, Nora contracts pneumonia, and is therefore

forced to stay in bed for a while. Much to her discomfort, she finds herself increasingly in need of care, which will be provided by a kind local couple and a doctor who visits her periodically. During her convalescence, Nora continues to remember different episodes in her life more and more intensely and clearly: memories which, in many cases, she had tried to silence and forget due to their traumatic and painful nature. Throughout this process, Nora recalls important moments in her life, upon which she reflects with the purpose of finally facing and accepting her past, being quite aware of the fact that she is approaching death. Nora relives her entire experience; she tries to come to terms with reality by recollecting all kinds of memories, placing special emphasis on the harsh and difficult moments. For instance, she recalls and remembers her father's death, which remained locked up and hidden on her consciousness for decades, as it deeply traumatized her. This remembrance constitutes the climax of the novel. It is only right at the end of it that Nora finds a photograph of her father:

And one day, rising on stairs, fourteen broad planks, I see from above the two discs of a straw boater, a man's shoulders, trousered legs. Coming closer, knees rising, left-right, left right. At arms' length now, has tilts back, face is raised, arms fly out, gather me in. And out of that flurry, a child's shriek, rising. 'Hold me tight!' (140)

There are also plenty of recollections of Nora's childhood and adolescence in Australia --a place she never really felt part of-- that come back to her memory. These memories are also brought to the fore and prompted by other objects and parts of the house, and, in other cases, emerge as the result of conversations with other characters.

Furthermore, Nora is an art lover; she loves poetry and fashion design. On the one hand, her dedication to the arts helps her to escape reality, but on the other it isolates her -- psychologically and socially speaking-- from her surroundings. At one point in the novel Nora affirms: "At times I am detached from the scene about me, and yet perceive it with a greatly heightened lucidity." (30). Nora is characterized, among other things, by neither following nor obeying social rules and conventions. Conversely, despite her doubts about

marriage, she ends up marrying a man with a truly archaic mind who humiliates and represses her. Her marriage will not last for long, though. Her husband eventually asks her for a divorce, and Nora, sad but relieved at the same time, decides to leave Australia and start from scratch in Europe. As she recalls towards the end of the novel: “Many years before I had come to London because I was entranced by the knowledge that *nobody could stop me*” (122).

During her long voyage to Europe, Nora meets and has a love affair with one of the ship’s passengers. However, this is an impossible relationship because the man is married, and Nora consequently decides to put an end to it before leaving the ship. Some time later, Nora finds out that she is pregnant; she cannot cope with the prospect of being a single mother, so she decides to have an abortion in London, following one of her friends’ advice. Nora finds a doctor who performs a really sloppy operation on her, which almost takes her life away. This sordid experience will traumatize her to the extent that she decides never to have any kind of sexual relationship with men again: “I was prepared to die. But the bleeding stopped at last, and never again did I have any sexual contact, of any kind, with anyone” (82).

This abortion will leave perennial marks on Nora, but will not prevent her from clinging to her main goals and dreams. She finally moves to and settles in London. After having spent some years there, and having had several jobs, Nora is finally able to open and run her own business as a dressmaker. During this time, Nora corresponds with some friends and relatives from Australia, who usually keep her informed of any events and developments of interest to her. While being in Europe, though, the idea of returning to Australia prowls around her mind several times, but she keeps on postponing it for different reasons, such as the outbreak of war, her health conditions and depression, and her excess of work.

In her last years in London, Nora presents clear symptoms of menopause; she experiences a ‘comedown’ that brings about her lack of self-confidence and depression. She tries to fight against these symptoms; she even undergoes a face-lift to appear younger.

However, the situation finally gets so bad that she attempts to commit suicide, but fails and decides to continue living ‘provisionally’: “I decided to hang on, provisionally, from day to day. ‘Provisionally’ was the word always in my mind” (110). After the surgery Nora meets and makes great friends with two other ladies, one of them being a former actress with whom she finally decides to share a flat. The three of them are single female adults and their years of cohabitation turn out to be quite pleasant, but Nora eventually decides to go back to Australia in search of her memories and answers for her questions. Once there, she manages to go through this painful process of recalling, with the outcome that Nora overcomes her former feeling of uprootedness and confusion, and is now able to take a walk by the river and fully appreciate its importance and beauty: “I believe I have found the river –the real river I disregarded on my first walks and failed to find on my last” (140).

Jessica Anderson makes it clear from the very beginning that this is fiction, since none of the narrated facts nor the characters portrayed are real. The characters in the story are imaginative constructions and only the houses described are taken from real life, as she stated in the introduction of the novel. However, the novel was inspired by real environments and periods, which provided the starting point from which to shape a particular atmosphere in the narrative. As was argued before, the novel explores the author’s personal and cultural background. Jessica Anderson was raised in a postcolonial society, and was closely linked to modernism in cultural terms. This novel is set in the Australia and Europe of the 1940s and the following decades. On the one hand, it expresses a non-conformist attitude towards the ideas put forward by the colonial enterprise and, on the other, deals with other popular issues in postmodernist writing, namely, resistance against any kind of colonial and central power, and the questioning and reshaping of dominant ideas and stereotypes, in particular the authority that emerges out of the official endorsement of binaries, such as oppressors vs. oppressed, colonizers vs. colonized, civilized vs. non-civilized. Memory turns out to be yet

another recurrent theme in the novel, whose characters are in constant search for their cultural and personal identity, very often represented by means of journeys that lead into isolation and self-reflection. Women's difficult situation at the time is often also brought to the fore and tackled.

As is well known, memory and cultural heritage, especially of the recent past, have always played an important role when it comes to understanding the artistic manifestations and trends emerging in a given period. Literature is no exception: the study of the historical heritage and background of specific literary texts has always been a vital feature in order to understand their meanings and implications. In particular, many novels written during the second half of the twentieth century relied on a whole set of new literary conventions that encapsulated their authors' feelings of despair, alienation and entrapment, together with their fears and concerns with society's problems and changes, as well as their disturbing memories of the recent past. The traumatic marks of the past were present in many artworks of the period, such as Picasso's internationally acclaimed *Guernica*, which clearly captures and represents the artist's personal view of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. Literary works were, on the whole, imbued with a thoroughly pessimistic outlook on human existence and intentions; more concretely, modernist writings often displayed a pessimistic conception of life and the future, and were frequently full of feelings of despair and distress. No wonder since the late 1890s memory has played a crucial role in literature; most of the time it has been used as a tool to represent and denounce past history conditions, immoral societal practices and traumatic memories, as can be clearly seen in *Tirra Lirra by the River*.

The Function of Intertextuality

Before analysing the impact of memory and trauma in the novel, and the novel's treatment of womanhood as reflected in the protagonist, I will start by pointing out the use of intertextuality and how it operates in the novel. The clear intertext in *Tirra Lirra by the River* is, without doubt, Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott*. As Helen Tiffin argues in her article "The Body in the Library: Identity, Opposition and the Settler-Invader Woman," intertextuality makes its appearance in the novel through the strategy that she labels as 'dispersive citation,' which consists of a series of linked metaphors that draw parallels between different works (1997: 217). In *Tirra Lirra by the River*, the romantic tradition that informs Anderson's literary background is very often hinted.

At first sight, Jessica Anderson and Alfred Lord Tennyson have little in common as regards their respective themes and literary styles: they addressed different audiences and had completely different world views as a consequence of the periods they lived in (twentieth-century Australia and nineteenth-century England). However, it is undeniable that Tennyson's poem *The Lady of Shalott* exerted great influence upon *Tirra Lirra by the River*, in terms of themes, style, meanings and the images evoked. Among other things, the novel's title is a direct allusion to the song sang by Sir Lancelot in the poem. Tennyson's poem therefore constitutes one of the main elements around which the narrative revolves.

I will first try to explain the relationship between both texts in order to better understand the impact and implications that the poem had on the novel. There are two different worlds here, connected by continuous intertextual allusions to Tennyson's poem, both in the form of explicit references and metaphorical inferences. These two worlds are that of the Lady trapped in her tower and that of the novel's convalescent protagonist. Both stories deal with the idea of distorted realities, although in different ways. In any case, it is clear that

the poem written by this well-known Victorian poet was one of the main sources of inspiration for the writing of this novel, especially as regards the main themes tackled. The Lady of Shalott is isolated and is said to live under a curse, which impels her to see reality indirectly: she must contemplate reality through a mirror's reflections of a window just opposite to it. There she sits and weaves a web from the reflections she sees, and it is when she finally manages to look at reality directly that she dies.

There are several allusions to *The Lady of Shalott* in *Tirra Lirra by the River*, but the key instance of intertextuality is the excerpt which inspired the title of the novel; it is taken from the third and last part of the poem, more exactly from the fourth stanza, lines 32 to 36. These lines clearly connect with the main issues dealt with by Anderson's work and can be said to perfectly summarize it as a whole. These five lines are indeed crucial, since they contain the elements and images that are going to preside over and shape all the action in the narrative, namely: Camelot, the river, and the Lady's mirror. This intertextual connection makes it possible to evoke in both texts the same idea of a woman's distorted and self-created reality and memories, which somehow protects her from facing up to her sad life, sufferings and traumatic memories. By importing some visual images from the poem and adapting them to Nora's story, Jessica Anderson sets a dramatic tone for her novel, at the same time as she reinvents the figure of the Lady by portraying a female character in a new and changing society that clearly resembles her Tennysonian predecessor. Both female figures problematize the notions of reality, home and belonging, while they strive to search for their 'true' identities by digging up into their distorted and traumatized memories.

The use of Romantic myth and imagery as conveyed by the inclusion of intertextual references also deserves some mention. Post-Romantic Victorian poetry, apparently so different from modernist fiction, is often used by Anderson to bring to the fore some recurrent modernist tenets. For instance, the comparison that the novel establishes between the chivalric

and romanticized realm of Camelot and “the region of her mind where everything was possible” (9) draws significant thematic parallels between the Romantic nostalgia of the past and the modernist search for meaning in the labyrinths of the human mind. Thanks to all of these intertextual connections, a second reality as conveyed by traumatized and fragmented memories is also possible. As was mentioned in the introduction of this work, the protagonist comes back to Australia after having spent forty years in Europe, and this ‘coming back’ gives the story the opportunity to deal with a wide variety of topics, such as identity, locality, memory, and the continuous human quest for an ideal home and life.

Right at the beginning of the novel, Nora finds Tennyson’s *The Lady of Shalott* in one of her dead father’s books, and suddenly one of her repressed memories comes back to her mind: she remembers her idealized childhood view of a home and landscape as those portrayed in medieval poetry, “little Camelots” (8). Moreover, these two texts, in spite of their generic differences, also share a particular stylistic feature: there is no external voice in Tennyson’s poem *The Lady of Shalott*, and neither is any external narrator in *Tirra Lirra by the River*. They both use first-person lyrical subject/ narrator that endow each of the protagonists with strong voices and selves. Furthermore, both female characters are women artists, and hold very romantic ideals of life. The image of the Lady’s isolation in the tower is translated into Nora’s isolation as a consequence of her non-conformist attitude and the geographical and psychological distance that prevent her from having a proper home and being comforted by feelings of confidence and belonging.

A powerful image in the novel that echoes the Lady’s feelings of alienation in the poem is the ‘spinning globe’ of Nora’s memory. As this image suggests, Nora’s memories and perceptions of reality are fragmented and distorted; some parts in her spinning globe of memory have been kept in the shadow to avoid pain, but these memories will be brought to the surface again during her process of remembering her real life and self, until she eventually

abandons what according to Hecq is her “psychological exile” (174). Another important and revealing image is, in my opinion, that of the river, which serves as a link between fantasy and reality. The river, such a recurrent element in Romantic poetry, so obsessed with enhancing and worshipping the beauties of Nature, has a similar function in Anderson’s novel. *Tirra Lirra by the River* pays special attention to the discovery of the river that runs near Nora’s house. It is towards the end of the novel, when Nora is approaching death, that she sees the real river, the river as it actually is, and appreciates it for the first time, because she is now in control of her mind, and can see reality without any filters.

The way in which these two female characters see and perceive reality also allows readers to establish a very clear connection between them. Both of them are artists alienated from their respective societies, who have their own idiosyncratic notion of reality. Reality is in both cases perceived through some kind of filter: the imagination in the case of Nora, and the mirror in the case of the Lady. It could be argued that, just as the mirror allows the Lady to see while at the same time preventing her from seeing, the river initially allows Nora to suppress her memories to finally prompt her to retrieve them, thus making it possible for her to confront her true traumatized self in the end. Besides, the mirror through which the Lady perceives reality could also be related to the window in Nora’s house. No matter how strongly they both apparently connect these women with external reality, these two female characters choose to ignore the images provided by them in order to cling to their own fabricated versions of reality. The poem also contains other symbols that might be said to have their analogical or metaphorical equivalents in the novel. For instance, the Lady’s tower could be compared with the rooms in all of Nora’s houses, in terms of what they represent to each of these women’s lives. Finally, the tapestries woven by Nora clearly bring to mind the web woven by the Lady in the poem. As Dominique Hecq and R. D. Haynes argue, Nora and the Lady weave things in an unrealistic way and, by so doing, they escape reality through art.

Both women experience some emotional alienation that at the same time frees and destroys them. As is well known, these are recurrent themes in many modernist and postmodernist texts. However, there is one important difference in the denouement of these two women's stories: whereas the Lady of Shalott faces real death when the mirror breaks, Nora doesn't die but, in a sense, comes back to life again, however briefly, as she allows her true self to emerge and take over. Another similarity between both female figures is, according to Hecq, their passivity which, although conveyed in different ways, actually represents the same idea of submission. Nora is dominated and driven by the will of other people: her mother, her sister, her husband, even her friends. As she explains at the beginning of the novel: "I feel again the utter passivity, the relinquishment of the will to fate" (2). This attitude clearly finds an echo in the curse that has befallen the Lady in the poem. Hecq and Haynes also agree on the connection between deformed realities in both works. They explain that Nora weaves her own mental tapestry in a desperate attempt to elude her unpleasant and tragic memories, and replace them by either emptiness or misinterpreted and disconnected images, such as a plume and a horse, which also appear in the poem. Instead of bringing death to her mind, they bring a 'redecorated' memory, an illusion of life and beauty, which ironically covers up quite the opposite (it was at her father's funeral that Nora saw the horse with the plume).

Tennyson was, without doubt, one of Anderson's favourite poets, and this shows in her works. Similarly, Anderson's life experiences and hardships as a woman in postcolonial Australia, and more particularly in a cultural realm which, as a result of its peculiar colonial past (as is well known, Australia was a penal colony, and the great majority of convicts who were transported to the Antipodes happened to be men), has been often described as predominantly male, even misogynist, also helped the author to engender the main character in her novel, Nora Porteous. The extent to which Anderson's own experiences, opinions and

memories might have influenced the novel is still open to discussion but, in any case, there is no doubt that they played a prominent role in its conception. Some key facts about the author should be taken into account, because they may come in handy when it comes to understanding some parallels and aspects tackled in the novel. Firstly, it is worth highlighting, as was mentioned before, the condition of Jessica Anderson as an Australian woman of her time, and more particularly as an artist. The choice of this protagonist helps to understand and make sense of the difficult position of women at the time; the novel's reliance on the woman's point of view is of utter importance to achieve this: everything is told and seen through the eyes of a woman in her seventies.

Moreover, in this novel Anderson describes the different realities of two postwar societies, first the Australian and then the English, while also exploring the ways in which womanhood was thought of, built up and constrained, mainly as reflected in the character of Nora. As Goldsworthy states in his article (2015), Nora undergoes an evolution thanks to which the different stages in a woman's life are portrayed, at the same time as several other important women's concerns are brought into light. At the beginning of the novel, Nora is externally shaped and constrained by the behaviour, attitude and expectations of her family, friends, husband etc. It is not until she reaches middle age that she decides to be independent and to live according to her own wishes. Nora's plight sounds by no means unfamiliar; the way in which the novel narrates this process made it easy for many contemporary female readers to identify with Nora's situation. In spite of its specific cultural and temporal context, the novel deals with womanhood in the widest sense possible, which means that it manages to engage a wide audience by encouraging self-identification with the events. This is one of the factors that make the novel so readable. Although *Tirra Lirra by the River* sometimes propitiates some detachment from Nora by depicting her as an eccentric woman, it is also

clear that this character encapsulates a sense of ‘anyoneness’ which allows her to represent many women of her time.

As Jessica Anderson said during an interview carried out for an Australian publication, the story is essentially a constant process of recalling, which summarizes almost an entire life in a narrative time span of seven days. This process is interrupted at some points by short isolated moments in the present time of the novel. Last but not least, there are some important key events that take place at the right time for Nora to be able to jog her memory and retrieve some repressed memories that hold the key to unravel her past. It can be said that almost the entire action of the novel occurs within the framework of Nora’s memory. As Candida Baker claims (1987: 14-27), the very act of allowing a female character to revisit and retrieve suppressed memories became a wonderful means to deal with recurrent women’s issues in shifting time perspectives, while putting the emphasis on some female issues that gathered prominence during those decades. Many critics who have carried out a thorough analysis of *Tirra Lirra by the River* agree that the protagonist was carefully chosen to accomplish this task. Although most of the time everything is seen through Nora’s eyes, the novel contains shifting narrative voices that contribute to highlighting Nora’s ordeal. Nora Porteous is a seventy-year-old woman who embodies many traits and characteristics that resemble those of the author, such as her condition of artist, Australian woman and expatriate.

The whole novel could be roughly summarized as a tale of seven days of physical confinement but of total mental and spiritual freedom. This freedom results in a journey that, as Dominique Hecq asserts in her article “Tirra Lirra! Tales of Purloined Letters and Edited Destinies,” becomes “an attempt to come to terms with the past” (1997: 178). Nora belongs to the Australian middle-upper classes but, much to her discomfort, is a divorced and childless woman. She has always felt oppressed by the domestic sphere within which her life was confined, and her expectations are very different from those of the great majority of women

around her. The novel often relies on stream of consciousness techniques to narrate the life of its central character through her continuous recalling of past memories, some of which have been suppressed for decades.

Womanhood as Portrayed in the Novel

I would like to continue my analysis by discussing the way in which womanhood is tackled in the novel. As is well known, the first decades of the twentieth century were years of great social upheaval: societies started to change in many ways, and different circumstances all over the world led women to emerge from the background and start adopting innovative and, most of the time, polemical attitudes. During the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, conditions for women changed in ways never seen before, and those changes had a strong cultural impact on society. Women's issues became recurrent topics in the literature of the period. Women gradually stopped being portrayed mainly as flat and simple female characters living in a male universe to be given more protagonism and complexity. Anderson's novel tackles many polemical issues of the time concerning women, such as abortion and suicide, which were often used to tarnish women's reputation and compel the other members of society to isolate and reject them altogether.

Anderson leaves her own personal mark by representing her notion of 'local womanhood' through the figure of Nora Porteous, a compatriot with whom some parallels could be drawn as regards their rebellious identities. It is important to bear in mind that this female character, like the author herself, is strongly defined by her culture, age, and social class. Jessica Anderson, a much respected and singular Australian novelist, was raised in postcolonial Brisbane, where people were, on the whole, quite conservative. In clear opposition to all of those conservative ideas which her family tried to instill in her, Anderson used fiction, in particular her modernist writing style and interests, to speak in favour of women's freedom and advocate her feminist beliefs. In *Tirra Lirra by the River* Jessica Anderson warns against the extent to which fixed and reactionary values can be destructive in

relation to the development of female identity. This novel depicts a society in which women's role was almost non-existent, since women lacked importance and power. In short, *Tirra Lirra by the River* could be seen as the denunciation and critique of patriarchal societies like the Australian one in which she was born. Nora has always been surrounded by uncertainty, insecurities and complicated personal situations, first as a married woman who feels oppressed, trapped and finally abandoned, and then as a lonely and despised woman dealing with her unwanted pregnancy and subsequent abortion. It could be argued that the character of Nora is full of dualism; she is obliged to inhabit two selves, her real self and her own created reality, which she fabricates in order to escape suffering.

In the society depicted in the novel, passivity and subordination were still valuable feminine traits. Accordingly, none of the girls or women in this community were entitled to have a real voice in terms of sexuality, power and equality. The fact that some actions that would nowadays be regarded as completely legitimate and normal are in the novel presented as immoral and non-desirable for a woman, clearly points to this. The way in which womanhood is tackled in *Tirra Lirra by the River*, even when not bringing certain (especially sexual) issues to the fore in an explicit way, clearly contributes to denouncing the socio-political conditions of the Australia and Europe of the 1950s, especially as regards women. Nora's reaction is utterly human; she simply tries to protect herself and preserve her female dignity by refusing to take part in society's patriarchal masquerade. As Corbett affirms (2012), the novel examines femininity from a feminine perspective –as was stated before, the focalizer is always a woman– and explores the theme of women's emancipation and selfhood in modern societies. More specifically, through the main female character, it explores the problems and dilemmas of female artists, who did not usually comply with established social rules and conventions. I also agree with Arlene Sykes on her view of Nora as a sensitive, passionate, vulnerable and romantic woman. Women's vulnerability and strength are once

and again emphasized in the novel by means of making the protagonist undergo some adverse situations in which she first feels vulnerable, to become eventually able to acquire enough strength to overcome all of these obstacles. Similarly, Hecq argues that Nora fits within the canon of female artists who usually rebelled against suffocating conditions and impositions. These women usually lived isolated, but at the same time wished to participate in the national cultural life and belong into a group. The novel portrays a harsh reality that was pretty frequent among female artists in the past; they usually had to cope with living within the confines of a male tradition of passivity and objectification of women, in a society where 'female' always was the subordinated sex.

It must also be noted that, in spite of all of these adversities, Anderson allows for a touch of irony in the protagonist's voice which, in my opinion, strengthens its denouncing tone and condemns female submission. To give but one example, at one point in the novel Nora describes herself in this ironic way: "Nora Porteous' n e Roche, thirty-five, domestic worker, amateur dressmaker, detested concubine, and student of the French subjunctive tense" (60). Critics as well-known as Helen Tiffin (1997) and Ray Willbanks (1988) have also insisted upon the idea that this novel re-states and highlights the situation of women living within narrow-minded patriarchal societies like that of Australia at that time.

Memory and Trauma

Nora feels alienated from society and the one and only reality that seems to prevail is that of her consciousness and ‘globe of memory.’ She undergoes a quest aimed at finding her real self, and this quest results in a journey into memory, which takes the protagonist’s consciousness by surprise. Arlene Sykes (1986: 57) pointed out that this novel, like other novels by Anderson, starts with a visit or arrival, which in this particular case means ‘return.’ In spite of being a short novel, *Tirra Lirra by the River* is extraordinarily rich in content and meaning, as can be seen in terms of action, sense of place, cultural and historical references, and symbolisms. Memory plays a vital role in this novel; it is the central issue that acts as a link between all of the other aspects dealt with within the narrative. The whole plot of the novel revolves around ‘remembering,’ and this is, according to Haynes (1986: 322), a work of art in itself. Moreover, the fact that Nora does not recall her past life events in chronological order, clearly contributes to creating an impression of disorder that increases suspense and invites readers to make all sorts of speculations as to the origin of her trauma.

As was stated before, the action of the novel takes place in seven days of the protagonist’s physical convalescence, in which the artist finally retrieves all of her suppressed painful memories. This recollection of suppressed memories is prompted by the protagonist’s return to her childhood home. Local history, heritage and memory articulate the whole narrative, since Australia, her mother country, becomes a source of hidden memories and a whole problematic cultural past. As Delys Bird suggests in his review of *Tirra Lirra by the River* (1980: 79-80), this is a narrative which explores and deals with the nature and mystery of women’s lives. Facts are ordered according to their emotional intensity. Furthermore, as Willbanks argues (1988: 60), all the different stages of her life come to the fore in this act of

remembering, and this fragmented process of recollection is amplified by her interaction with those who look after her during her illness.

Anderson's novel can be seen as yet another example of how increasingly important memory, and by extension trauma issues, have become from the mid-twentieth century onwards, mainly as a result of the outbreak of the two World Wars and the negative consequences of the different decolonization processes. Themes such as 'locality' or 'memory' became common topics in the literature of the period. Nora Porteous, and some of her close relatives and friends, can undoubtedly be regarded as traumatized characters. As Helen Tiffin went as far as to argue (1997: 222), Dorothy's crime might be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the horrors that imperialist societies and wars brought to people's life. Although the novel hardly alludes to specific historical events nor gives any explicit historical references, it nonetheless contains some vague allusions to war and its lethal effects on individuals and full communities. The novel reflects this 'mark of the past' in its inclusion of some characters' traumatic life events, such as Dorothy's crime –Dorothy was Nora's childhood best friend; she murdered her family and then committed suicide– and the loss and death of Nora's loved ones during the war.

I no longer thought of Sir Lancelot. The war, and the boys under the camphor laurels, had obliterated him. But perhaps not quite. At intervals all through my life, sometimes at very long intervals, there has flashed on my inner vision the step of a horse, the nod of a plume, and at those times I have been filled for a moment with a strange chaotic grief. (16)

Once again, some autobiographical echoes can be heard here. Born in the middle of World War I, Anderson lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Like Anderson herself, Nora has also undergone many difficult and tough moments during her life. As Goldsworthy explained in her essay on *Tirra Lirra by the River*, published on the *Australian Book Review's* website (2015), it is only when she comes back to her childhood house that she is rewarded with the return of a long-suppressed family memory that supplies both Nora and the reader with the key to several mysteries. The novel is structured around her

problematic interplay of past and present: Nora's re-discovery of the past finally allows her to come to terms with her traumatized national and personal identity. Goldsworthy also points out that the novel has been well documented, since it perfectly addresses many dilemmas of the protagonist's time and place. The story perfectly captures Nora's sense of being an expatriate everywhere, together with her feelings of homelessness and unbelonging; the more she looks for a real home and self, the more difficult she finds it to reach them.

Willbanks also states (1988: 61-62) that Nora has always spun her globe of memory cautiously so as not to illuminate painful memories because, as Haynes has also argued (1986: 317-318), the outside world was marked and surrounded by death. There are some memories that, although playing a crucial role in the narrative, have been repressed for years because of their painful nature. For instance, the sudden memory of Nora's father's legs prompts the climax and brings about some reconciliation with memory and life in general. The protagonist's impossibility to mourn her father's death had been repressed on her mind during all of her life, and this led her to live a dual life split into two selves: her created self and her real self. She undergoes a transformation from alienation to self-awareness. This metaphorically awakening actually takes place at the end of the novel, when Nora appreciates the river for the first time in her life and becomes aware of its beauty. As Donat Gallagher explained in his article "Tirra Lirra by the Brisbane River" (1981: 103), it is only when Nora faces possible death as a result of her pneumonia that she finally allows her globe of memory to turn and bring to light some forgotten memories. As Nora says at the very end of the novel: "My globe of memory is in free spin, with no obscure side" (140).

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it could be said that the parallels that Anderson's novel draws with Tennyson's poem make it possible to conclude that both characters are cursed souls. As regards Nora, she is cursed due to the puritan and oppressed life that she has had to live, both as a result of the oppressive society she has been born into and of her own past traumatic memories and experiences. At the end of the novel Nora's frights and concerns disappear; she now accepts what she has been and become and reconciles herself with her past. A transition has therefore taken place in the narrative, from Nora's former romantic ideals and escapism to a rather more realistic attitude and self-awareness. This novel thus becomes a fabulous instance of reflective writing, since the entire plot explores Nora's inner world and consciousness in order to eventually reveal the true origin of her traumas and suppressed memories, as well as the key to retrieve and overcome them.

Anderson examines in her work the extent to which individuals and the environment are connected; as the novel closes, it increasingly transmits the impression that the feeling of belonging to a place can only be felt by those who can face, adapt and adjust to the circumstances, no matter how painful they may be. *Tirra Lirra by the River* is yet another example of Australian women writers' interest in notions of identity and rebellion against patriarchal structures. No wonder this novel was so polemical at the time it was written. *Tirra Lirra by the River* denounces gender biases in the Australian and European societies of the time, while exploring the complex and unreliable nature of memory, all the more so when it comes to considering women's minds. Once again, fiction manages to disclose truths that reality cannot possibly acknowledge.

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