Coonardoo would be a suitable text to study in the English classroom in a consideration of themes such as love, race, the Australian Spirit, belonging, change, and loyalty, among others. The novel can be used as a means of enhancing students’ understanding of the way in which literary techniques are used to create meaning in a text, as well as developing students’ own creative style. In the History classroom, Coonardoo can be used as a way to consider experiences and perspectives in Australia during the Interwar period, as well as providing a means of understanding some aspects of the culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

- Questions for reading and discussion
- Bibliography
- About the author of the notes
Introduction

*Coonardoo* is a harrowing love story set against the harsh backdrop of North-West Australia. Wythaliba, the cattle station, is unique in both the way it is run and in the relationships that station mistress Mrs Bessie Watt and her son and heir Hugh foster with the Aboriginals tied to the land. In the heavy cultural hybrid of Wythaliba, ideas and beliefs are shared between cultural and racial groups, creating an atmosphere of understanding that is at the whim of the land itself – an omnipresent, omnipotent force throughout the novel, and throughout Aboriginal and farming communities alike. Somehow, in an environment where love is often replaced by sex, ambition, and convenience, a life-long relationship is forged, crossing cultural boundaries and social norms.

About the author/illustrator

Katherine Susannah Prichard was a renowned writer, journalist, and political activist who once stated that she was born “with ink in her veins.” She was the first Australian novelist to gain widespread international recognition for her novel *The Pioneers*, recognition which grew with her creative output of thirteen novels, five short-story collections, ten plays, and two poetry collections. As a founding member of the Communist Party of Australia, her political inclination guided her work, and Coonardoo is as much a narrative of social camaraderie as it is a tragedy.

Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

English Learning Outcomes

Students will have the opportunity to:

- Understand that Standard Australian English in its spoken and written forms has a history of evolution and change and continues to evolve
- Understand how language can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and an empower and disempower people
- Understand that evaluations of texts are influenced by value systems, context and purpose
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts
• Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices shape different interpretations and responses
• Compare and evaluate how ‘voice’ as a literary device can be used in a range of different texts to evoke emotional responses
• Create literary texts that reflect an emerging sense of personal style and evaluate the effectiveness of these texts
• Create texts with a sustained ‘voice’, selecting and adapting appropriate text structures, literary devices, language, auditory and visual structures and features for a specific purpose and audience
• Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts through language, structural and/or visual choices
• Identify and analyse implicit and explicit values, beliefs, and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purpose and audience

**Before reading Coonardoo**

As a class, discuss the title of the novel. What, or who, might Coonardoo be? What is the significance of the title?

Deconstruct the cover of the novel, paying particular attention to the techniques of visual texts.

- What ideas or themes do we associate with the colour red?
- What does the image depict? Look closely at the two hands – is there anything noticeably different about them?
- How are the hands positioned? What does the shape suggest?

Considering the cover and the title of the book, what might Coonardoo be about?

**Reception**
First published in 1928, Coonardoo was a risqué novel, challenging Australian readers to consider a concept that at the time was shocking – interracial love. As is mentioned in Coonardoo, sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women were by no means uncommon, but love and emotional attachment were seen to be impossible.

Setting

The landscape in Coonardoo figures almost as a character, a powerful force that dictates the life and choices of characters. This is unsurprising, given that the book follows the lives of farming and Aboriginal communities – people whose identities are formed by the land, whose days are measured by the sun, their seasons by the rains. It is because of this dependence that the land features so powerfully, it is the climate that dictates feast and famine, it is this desperate environment that leads to characters to extreme acts of love and cruelty.

Discuss particular moments in the text that the environment has power over the characters.

Activity: write a description of a place you feel particularly connected to. It could be your family home, a place you visit on holidays, the town your grandparents are from...Through your choice of words you should establish the emotional connection to this place, and thus establish the tone.

Culture

The lifestyle on Wytaliba is particularly unconventional in that Mrs Bessie did not insist that the Aboriginals of the land change their culture and adapt to a ‘white’ way of life.

Consider the following passage, and discuss why this was so unconventional in the period that the novel was set:

Mrs Bessie would not allow any Christianizing of the aborigines on Wytaliba. She had never seen
a native who was better for breaking with his tribal laws and beliefs, she said. And as long as she lived, aborigines on Wytaliba should remain aborigines. (p.15)

Activity: write a journal entry from the perspective of Miss Bessie on her deathbed. Consider her wishes for the property, for her son, and for Coonardoo.

Characterisation

Coonardoo is propelled by the characters Katherine Susannah Prichard has created through her use of description and dialogue, and the relationships forged between her characters.

Activity: Divide the class into groups, with each group focusing on a different character (the size and dynamics of the class may determine how many characters are considered, whether just the protagonists, or the broader circle of characters). On a piece of cardboard, each group should create a character sketch of their character (this could be visual or written) focusing on what we know about them, including aspects of their physical appearance and their personality. Find quotes from the text to support your sketch.

Activity: as a class, plot a family-tree of sorts for the characters in the novel to show the relationships between characters.

Activity: divide the class into groups and designate each group a crucial scene from the narrative (for example, Jessica’s arrival at Wytaliba, Miss Bessie’s funeral, Coonardoo and Warieda’s marriage, Hugh and Mollie’s conflict, Phyllis’ return to Wytaliba, Coonardoo and Hugh’s final encounter, etc). Have each group create a tableau of the scene, focusing on positioning of characters, posture, and facial expression. Have groups present their tableaux to the class, and see if other groups can guess which moment is being portrayed.

Activity: write a correspondence (of at least three letters) between Mollie and Hugh. Consider their strained relationship and economic hardship. This can be from any stage of the novel that they are apart.
The novel begins and ends with the title character Coonardoo. Re-read the first and final chapter, discuss the relevance of this choice, and the development of this central character throughout the novel.

*Activity:* write an obituary for Coonardoo.

**Language**

In *Coonardoo* language is used playfully, particularly in the characters’ dialogue.

*Activity:* translate the following passage into standard Australian English. As a class, discuss the differences between the text version and the translations, and the impact that the language of the novel has on our understanding of the characters and the text as a whole.

Winni gazed with wonder at his mother’s face.

“Always now Youie will take us with him,” Coonardoo said.

“But she did not want us. She said to Youie, Warieda, Coonardoo and Winni must go away, anywhere. Go from Wytaliba . . . go to Geary’s place. Youie said, ‘No . . . Warieda, Coonardoo, Winni not go away . . . not go away from Wytaliba. Coonardoo, Warieba, Winni grow here, belong here.’ Mrs Watt say she will go away if Warieda, Coonardoo, Winni not go away. She has gone. Out of the winning-arra yo came to me, but it was the spirit of Youie in the winning-arra…”

“Wiah!” Winni exclaimed, wide-eyed. (p.159).

The language itself reflects the unique nature of life on Wytaliba. The station mistress is interchangeably referred to as Mrs Bessie, Mrs Watt, or Mumae (her adopted title used by the Aboriginal population on the farm, a blend of Hugh’s childhood utterances of “Mummy” and the native word for Father, which seemed fitting, as Bessie Watt’s husband had died and she was the sole parent of Hugh) depending on who is referring to her. Similarly Hugh Watt is known as Hugh, Hughie, You, and Youie.
Activity: find examples from the text where Aboriginal terms and broken English are melded together. Are we included or excluded by the language? Do we understand what is being said?

At times, the language seems quite pejorative, but we must remember that this was quite in keeping with the period in which the novel was set, and should not necessarily be read as racist, but as a reflection of life on cattle stations in the early twentieth century.

Sound

Sound is an integral element of the novel, and works to develop the setting, characters, and plot. Select a passage and find all of the references to sound. Consider the importance of sound in your own writing.

Activity: write a short description of a place that is familiar to you, focusing on the sounds you associate with that place. It could be your classroom, a train station, the local swimming pool, a museum or gallery...Remember, sounds contribute to the mood of a place, and even silence is significant.

Perspective

Divide the class into groups, each focusing on a different theme. Consider the different perspectives of characters in the book (it could be station owners, Aboriginals, men, women, people from the city) concerning one theme:

- Birth
- Marriage
- Love
- Death
- Loyalty
- Betrayal

Be prepared to discuss your findings with the class – how do these differing perspectives come to define the characters?
Activity: write a diary entry from the point of view of Hugh after his vengeful treatment of Coonardoo. Consider the conflicting emotions he would feel.

Gender

Consider the different men and women in the novel and what they represent. Allocate each student one of the characters to write a description of, focusing on what they wear (and what that might represent), how they behave, who they interact with, how they speak. Consider how this character represents their gender – are they typical or atypical? Be prepared to share your ideas with the class.

Relationships

At the heart of Coonardoo is the decades-spanning love story of Coonardoo and Hugh. The deepness of this love, and the longevity of their relationship is a product of the cultural understanding fostered by Mrs Bessie, who had a fondness for Coonardoo and an understanding with her that she would always look after Hugh. Hugh, though, struggles with the love he has for an Aboriginal woman, based on the societal view that sex was fine between the races, but love was not.

Discuss the idea of star-crossed lovers in literature – think of other examples of love or friendship that are thwarted by race, or class, or society (e.g. Romeo and Juliet, Pocahantas and John Smith, Catherine and Heathcliff, Jack and Rose, etc). Is Coonardoo and Hugh’s love similar to these? Consider the language of the following passage, and what it suggests of this long-standing connection between the protagonists:

As a child she had suffered to see Hugh go away. And something of the old desperate anguish returned to her now. It was as if her entrails were being dragged as the distance grew between her and Hugh. When she could not bear the tension any more, a fibre snapped in her.

(Coonardoo, p.83)
Activity: write a narrative that focuses on a friendship or relationship that is restricted and constricted by external forces (such as race, class, family pressure, peer pressure). Try to employ elements of Prichard’s writing style in your own writing, particularly figurative language.

How do we as readers react to Hugh’s final treatment of Coonardoo? Focus on the language in the following passage, paying attention to the specific nouns and verbs, and the way they position us as readers:

To escape her desperate grasp he dragged her across the fire. Screaming, as the fire bit into her flesh, Coonardoo clung to him. Flames squirted up from the dry rag of the trousers wrapped round her legs. Hugh twisted her wrist back, thrusting her away from him. Coonardoo fell back into the fire. He strode off among the trees. Winni ran to Coonardoo, dragged her from the fire, and rolled her on the ground to put out the small flames, slithering up and down, and over her limp body. She lay moaning and unconscious for a while. (Coonardoo, p.224)

Activity: create a flyer for a stage adaptation of Coonardoo. Use one quote from the novel that you think encapsulates the story. Consider your use of images, colours, font, symbols, placement, and what these suggest. Write a rational of your decisions.

Symbolism

Symbolism refers to the use of a symbol to represent an idea. A recurring symbol in Coonardoo is the White Cockatoo, which Miss Bessie has convinced the Aboriginal women on Wytaliba is the exact way that she will keep an eye on things once she dies. The Cockatoo comes to signify not only Miss Bessie’s maternal concern about her land and her son, but also signifies the importance of spirituality among the Aboriginal community of the novel, and Miss Bessie’s knowledge and appreciation of this culture.
Are there other symbols in *Coonardoo*? Is the breaking and branding of horses a symbolic suggestion of something? Can we read this as an extended metaphor for the proposed assimilation of Aboriginals at the time?

**History Activities**

**Key Concepts:** Continuity and Change, Cause and Effect, Perspectives, Contestability.

**Historical Skills:** historical terms and concepts, identifying sources, analysing sources.

*Coonardoo* could be used in a History classroom to enhance understanding of differing Australian experiences and perspectives during the Interwar years.

**Activity:** plot on an Australian map the places mentioned in the novel, remembering that travel between places was usually by horse.

**Research:** the Government policies of the time in relation to Aboriginal Australians – does this novel reflect those policies, or act to subvert them? Can we assume that all experiences were similar in this period?

Discuss the reception of the novel, and the ways in which this has changed over time, keeping in mind that the novel was initially banned. Is this change in reception reflective of Government Policies?

Discuss the development of rights for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. What has changed, and what is continuing to change?

**Questions for reading and discussion**

- How does the nature of the language act to Romanticise the harsh world of Wytdaliba?
- How do beliefs figure within the novel?
- What does the blend of language achieve?
- Can love exist in this landscape?
- What does Phyllis represent?
- How are symbols used within the novel, and what do they suggest?
• Is Hugh’s ultimate cruelty a product of the environment?

• How do we react to Hugh’s punishment of Coonardoo? How do you think this reaction would have changed over time?

• How is the Australian Spirit depicted within the novel?

• Does the landscape act as a character within the novel? Consider the role it plays.

• Do morality and ethics exist on Wytaliba?

• How do the differing perspectives of the novel enhance our understanding of the complex world of Wytaliba?

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