



READING GROUP AND
TEACHER'S NOTES ON

THE
DRESSMAKER

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OUTLINE

The Dressmaker is a novel engaged with the ideas of tolerance and acceptance. It's also about communities: how they function and the less nice aspects, like exclusion, gossip, hate and, in this case, vengeance. In the community of Dungatar, a fictitious township in rural Australia, acceptance is also a strong element, but only if you belong. It doesn't matter what sort of person you are, what your morals are or what you do within that society, as long as you are within it. If you are not accepted, you are merely tolerated, or excluded. Yet excluded people in some communities remain at the centre of the community, a focus. The 'accepted' people deem who will attend what, and they bond closer together to exclude outcasts.

So much of communities are unreal, yet accepted as the real. Dungatar seems gothic with its host of weird characters, it's hill, the burning rubbish tip, the endless rain, visitations from things of 'the past', (reputations and mistakes) the macabre and premature death of two of it's main characters.

BACKGROUND

1950s in rural Australia was a conservative place. The ruling Government were conservative, and fashion was plain, discreet and chaste. An exotic Sunday meal consisted of roast chicken and trifle. Waitresses earned about £5/- a week including meals. A gallon of petrol cost three shillings. The Pressure Cooker had just been invented. Macdonalds did not exist. Television was something only heard about through news on the radio and it was only introduced towards the end of the decade in September 1956, broadcasting a mere 3 hours a day. During the decade, Australia's greatest comedian, Roy "Mo" Rene had passed away (1954), a month later the radio play by Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* hit the airways Radio hits were *I've got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts*, *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend* and *I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus*. Until late in the decade Bill Hayley and the Comets - billed as "The Nations Rockingest Rhythm Group," - rocketed up the US charts with *Rock Around The Clock*. Kingsley Amis novel *Lucky Jim* introduced the new comic hero to the readers of Australia, a comic hero who detested high culture.

Divorce was a shameful thing and there were no support services for divorcees with children. Robert Menzies was the prime minister. The population as a whole looked to England as the mother country, and Queen Elizabeth II as their leader. Australia was slowly emerging from the restrictions of war. Drive-in picture theatres had just reached our shores and musicals, such as *South Pacific* and *Kiss me Kate* were making their way from America and England. But the second world war had also meant that many people's lives and values had undergone some challenges, and the society was reluctant to accept the slow change the period was experiencing. Increasing numbers of post war immigrants were arriving For the first time, women stood defiantly at the War memorial along with the men to mourn their brothers, fathers, sons and husbands. Our currency was still pounds, shillings and pence and pre-packaged food had not yet advanced beyond packet tea, custard powder or washing powder, buying flour or sugar that a shop attendant weighed and bagged for you was the norm and there was no such thing as self serve or supermarkets.

THEMES

Fashion

Fashion in the 1950s was subject to post World War II restrictions. Cotton print button-through frocks, gloves and hats –prim, pretty, practical and plain – were the norm. The lack of imagination and the construct of clothes that covered most of the body suited the uncreative ladies of Dungatar.

Tilly's introduction of style, quality, variety and fashion to their lives transforms them. Initially a "level playing field" is created through Tilly's skills - every one can be equally well dressed and feel for the first time, an association with art through well crafted fashion. Until then, Sergeant Farrat was the only person in Dungatar attempting creativity. Vanity, ambition, competition and jealousy escalate with the rising quality of lush fabrics that arrive in tea chests for Tilly; Rich brocades, daring broderie anglaise, exquisite French muslin, diaphanous organzas trimmed with lace from Brussels, and bold jacquards in colours never seen before. Tilly brought from Europe her draping and cutting skills which she employed on her adventurous creations – paletots, mitred edges and shifts. The competition these advanced ideas and designs caused helped undermine the fragile relationships within the town while amplifying the world outside Dungatar, a sophisticated world the women of Dungatar feared. They tried to match the real world by forming a social club, but all it did was emphasise their bigotry and snobbery which hastened their self destruction. Competition reached the other towns, until Tilly suggests staging a play - *Macbeth*, the cursed Scottish play about ambition and revenge - where people's true skills can be laid bare in the envelope of their own narcissism and exhibitionism.

Landscape

Dungatar - is a fictitious town in rural Australia, small and isolated, yet at the heart of the district because the grain silos are there and neighbouring towns transport their wheat to Dungatar to be stored and freighted.

Beneath the gaze of The Hill, where Molly and Tilly live, the rest of the town is laid out, with the houses gathered into the bend of the creek, 'like freckles against a nose.' Mad Molly and Tilly become the focus of the townsfolk, uniting them in hatred as they watch up at the outcasts. Like the wheat silos, The Hill dominates the landscape. Both are the backdrop to turning points in the book, and both provide a vantage point to look down upon the township of Dungatar. Paradoxically, the community is joined together by its competitiveness in the form of the football competition, and much of the group activity in the town is centred around the team, either at the pub, which is a hub for the community, or at the oval where the battles for the cup are waged, which is seen in the book ringed by cars, an eye looking up at the Hill.

In this small community, a particular perception of what is normal and acceptable evolves and is unconsciously adhered to. Change is threatening, yet within the community of Dungatar, the eccentricities and odd behaviours that have become extreme are accepted. Although everybody knows what everybody else is doing in Dungatar, they turn a blind eye to other people's foibles (adultery, wife-bashing, embezzlement), except in the case of Tilly and her mother, 'Mad Molly'. The town and Tilly watch each other.

Dungatar itself is the focus for neighbouring towns, Winyerp and Itheca, rivals in football, and life.

Naming

Myrtle - *Myrtus communis*,

MYRTLE, Myrtaceae. Common shrub with dark shiny evergreen leaves, white scented flowers, black berries.

In Greek legend, Myrrha was a favourite priestess of Venus, who transformed her into this fragrant evergreen to preserve her from too ardent a suitor. Venus wore a myrtle wreath when Paris awarded her the Golden Apple for beauty, and this herb was planted around all temples dedicated to her. Representing Venus and love, myrtle is often woven into bridal wreaths, and the Romans displayed it lavishly at feasts, weddings and celebrations. An Arabian story tells of Irmam, banished from paradise, bringing a sprig of myrtle from the bower where he declared his love to Eve, and Shakespeare planned that Venus and Adonis should meet under myrtle shade. In 1640, the apothecary John Parkinson wrote, "we nourish Myrtles with great care for their beautiful aspect, sweet scent and rarity."

The Complete Book of Herbs, by Lesley Bremness.

R.D. Press, Surry Hills, 2010.

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* Tilly changed her name seek a new, painless identity and forget her past. Gertrude copied her and changed her to Trudy, thinking it was more in keeping with her new (married) status and would [perhaps erase her own past as a grocer's daughter

Molly – based on the colloquial term, moll. Girlfriend or mistress of a gangster, thief, surfie, bikie etc Prostitute (Molly was none of these things, just accused of being so)

Dunnage - mats, brushwood, grating, etc stowed under or among cargo to prevent wetting and chafing; (*colloq.*) miscellaneous baggage

Bundle – Mr Bundle was named so because he dropped his – it took a fall into his cellar to make him realise he had to abstain from alcohol. Also he and Purl are closely "bound together".

Ruth and Prudence Dimm are called Dimm, only because they hold two potentially influential and learned positions in Dungatar – teacher and post mistress/bank manager/telephone exchange

Mr Almanac is called Mr Almanac because he is keeper of the towns medical events and histories, he reads the way people live their lives and what they do to themselves

Lois Pickett picks her scabs and blackheads. Big gentle Bobby Pickett used to be picked on at school so his sister Nancy, the strong masculine type, picked on the kids who did it

Beula Harridene – is a harridan

Septimus Crescant because he is in all ways flatly orientated – flat head, flat earther.

McSwineys – reference to swine, reputedly smelly dirty farm animal but in fact cleanest of all animals (if pig farmers keep their pens clean), carefree creatures who love food and a mud baths, have large litters and are highly intelligent.

Scotty Pullet – a Pullet is a small chicken and Scotty his behind his Watermelon firewater

Sergeant Horatio Farrat – play on the word faggot, (meaning homosexual, which he wasn't) but also a faggot is an effect gained by fancy stitching cloth, also a bundle of sticks tied together and used for fuel for fires (especially for burning witches at the stake in medieval times)

Hearts was a hero of Roman legend who defended the bridge over the Tiger against the Etruscans

Dungatar – from the word dung, colloquial for excrement

Winyerp – threat to win

Ithica – Ithaca, Greek island where soldiers built the Trojan Horse to use to infiltrate and conquer Troy during the Trojan War

Love

The nature of love and its pragmatic harshness ...

Characterisation

Dungatar hosts a set of familiar archetypal characters - a barmaid, gossip, sexual deviant, crippled old lady, 'mad woman' - whose idiosyncrasies are accentuated in the isolation of a rural landscape. The people of Dungatar are parochial, and in their isolation, boundaries of normal behaviour are altered, but accepted (eg, the flat-earther, Septimus). Hypocrisy, bigotry, prejudice, vanity and malice are amplified, as is their loyalty to their own. They hose their footpaths and polish their windows to hide a murky undertone and live with the threat of the asylum in Winyerp - if you are too different or threaten the towns 'normalcy' (eg Barney), the Doctor from Winyerp and his friend councillor Pettyman will see to it that you go to the asylum. Otherwise, you can join the McSwineys and Molly on the fringe.

When Tilly returns to Dungatar 20 years after her expulsion as a child, the worst aspects of the people of Dungatar surface. Molly and Tilly act as outcasts, ("everyone needs someone to hate"), yet are the focus of the community, the one thing that unites the townspeople, and brings out their loyalty to each other. They stick together against the two women on The Hill.

Sergeant Farrat is mediator, fence-sitter and peace keeper, included yet apart from the town in his role of law keeper. This suits him, as it provides him with the privacy he needs to pursue his own interests behind closed doors.

The people of the town - Prudence and Ruth Dimm, and Nancy, Bobby and Lois Pickett, Reginald, Faith and Hamish O'Brien, Beula, Purl and Fred etc - represent hypocrisy, bigotry, envy, lust and jealousy which diminishes their ability to stand on their own. They follow fears and trends and do not think for themselves. They both look up to and follow Elsbeth Beaumont, yet at the same time criticise her for her snobbery. They are reluctant to let go of things from the past (eg steam trains) and embrace change. They strive to win - football, the drama eisteddfod, striving to confirm their imagined self importance. People keep silent about Purl's 'past'

even thought they resent that she has 'kept her figure' when most others have not: to expose other peoples sins is to risk those people exposing your own.

The only citizen of Dungatar who demonstrates kindness and empathy is the character Bobby Pickett, who loves animals. At the start of the story the footballers mention Bobby has lost his Jack Russell – 'died in the line of duty (snake bite) - so his sister Nancy has one sent by train, and at the end, during one clash in reversals, Bobby becomes concerned, inquiring, 'where's Spot?'

Elsbeth and William, the upper class rural folk, are suffering the indignity of bad management and a fall from their elevated position as wool and grain growers. Australia no longer rides "on the sheep's back," and primary producers are no longer the backbone of the economy. The Beaumonts are snobs and sadly try to maintain 'appearances.' William represents a certain kind of decency but is weak , oppressed by the ambition of his mother and wife. He never gets his new tractor, but he never fights for it, choosing to conspire with Mona in punishing his mother by bringing the residents of Dungatar home to her when their town is razed. Mona, outwardly a slightly hen-pecked idiot, rose above the towns people emerging stronger when she found a true and equally needy friend in Lesley. Pretension and snobbery lie at the heart of Lesley's acceptance into the Beaumont fold as equine expert and driver, but his claims to past talents and noteworthiness are only ever recognised as false by Mona.

Gertrude sees a 'better' future for herself in William, so seduces him, manipulating him to marry her. Power and ambition play havoc with her inherent ambition and Gertrude becomes a casualty of herself.

The McSwineys are a true family, Mum, Dad and innumerable kids, all close, all united in their love and protection of Barney. They are named after generations of Kings, Queens, Prince and Princesses, and are useful, dignified people, the good souls that life doesn't treat fairly. Tilly finds solace with Barney and Teddy.

Councillor Pettyman is a corrupt predator and sexual deviant living behind an image of good Councillor, pillar of Dungatar society. Aptly, it crumbles. His wife, Marigold is a neurotic, nervy woman who obsessively cleans the house and employs emotional blackmail to get her own way, at the same time ignoring the nature of her relationship with her philandering husband. Fate (and guidance from Tilly) eventually sees Marigold ruin Evan then Marigold gets to indulge her madness in the sanatorium with Beula.

Together, the entire town become victims of their own greed, vanity, and Tilly's expert prompting of fate. They are left homeless and bankrupt in all ways, as was Tilly. They must seek refuge in the home of the town snob, Elsbeth Beaumont.

Revenge Tragedy

Everything is in place for tragic events to occur. A small almost forgotten town floating in a sea of golden wheat, flat, except for The Hill where a mad woman lives. Bizarre and nasty characters inhabit Dungatar, small minded, petty people. The decent, hard working battlers – the McSwineys and the Dunnages – are few and live as fringe dwellers. The local policeman, Sergeant Farrat, gently treads a middle line as he has secrets that must not be used as ammunition against him. A corrupt and cruel Councillor who happens to be a sexual deviant as well, heads the community. The townsfolk all muddle along in the insular and isolated town until Tilly returns, uniting them even more, throwing them closer in fearful, paranoid isolation. Their loyalty to each other sees them emerge as a team representing hate and jealousy. It is these qualities, combined with ambition and vanity that causes the funny and macabre events that prompt the town to fall victim to themselves. Tilly is given her just revenge.

Like *Macbeth*, vanity, ambition, corruption, fear and malice bring those who practice it undone, and Like Lady Macbeth, Gertrude Beaumont, who contrived to marry into wealth and an upper class, goes mad.

Discussion points

- The ongoing feud between Septimus and Hamish, yet Septimus never mentions Hamish's wife's affair with the local butcher, who "pays" the locals for their silence via donations of sausages for football fund raisers
- The relationship between Nancy and Ruth that is completely ignored.
- What is acceptable? What do people have to be and do to be considered "one of us."
- Teddy's death. Who caused it – Tilly? The townspeople? why?
- Gossip and how it can ruin people's lives if you let it bother you.
- Secrets, which ones are kept, -The identity of Tilly's father, Ruth and Nancy's relationship, Sergeant Farrat's cross dressing, Purl's 'past', and which secrets are shared - Molly Dunnages out-of-wedlock pregnancy, Tilly's overseas mail.
- Manipulation – Gertrude's manipulation of William, Elsbeth's attempt to oppress Mona
- Cruelty, morals
- Watching – the town watching UP to the women on The Hill, who look DOWN on the town
- How in extreme locations, 'normalcy' is peculiar to the common denominator. The socially acceptable universal boundaries of what is acceptable are skewed, stretched and shrunk depending on the situation or people involved
- How the town lacks compassion, (for Irma Almanac, Molly, Barney) and reasons why this could be? (fear?)