

## VCE English: Unit 4, Outcome 1: Reading and Comparing Texts

### **Comparison of textual features: VATE**

Every experience is said to constitute part of a 'journey' if the testimonials of reality TV contestants can be considered a reliable source. The language of the individual journey has become a handy currency for the idea that our lives are defined by progress from one place or experience to another—but with the stress on progress rather than repetition, on change rather than the sameness of everyday life. The metaphor of the journey, a central feature of how we understand contemporary experience, is universally disseminated via personalised social media—everyone's Facebook account represents the myriad facets of their life, lovingly and carefully documented. We have become the curators of our life's itinerary, generously shared and presented as evidence of a life 'progressing' through significant moments and experiences. *Tracks* could be considered a progenitor of this contemporary tendency to view life as a journey, to see the journey as the fundamental unit of meaning for a life. However, while clearly sharing the idea of 'the journey' in common, each text is markedly different both in how this feature is represented and in the lessons that are ultimately derived from the experience. For one, *Charlie's Country* is conceived less as a record of a physical journey than Davidson's memoir, but rather the journey of a man seeking to redeem himself.

The linear narrative of *Tracks* begins with Davidson's arrival and experiences in Alice Springs, her reversals and struggles to gain some measure of expertise with camels before she commences her journey. The narrative is also largely concerned with describing her personal adjustments to the alien social manners of the citizens of the town, who exhibit customs and attitudes that are frequently repellent to her, as in their response to the Aboriginal people who camp on the sandy beaches of the river. Once her 'real' journey begins Davidson's writing seems to intensify in its clarity and directness. She describes her experience with honesty and a vivid sense of what makes this particular journey so exceptional. As Davidson ventures further into the remote stretches of the Western desert her writing also reflects the distance she has travelled from the naïve young woman who arrived in Alice Springs hoping to learn something about camels. She has shot and killed numerous marauding bull camels, shared part of the journey with an Aboriginal man local to the region, and almost lost her sanity in the silence and solitude of the vastness of the desert. Her writing describes these experiences in an unsparing style that is both confessional and almost ethnographic, a detailed recording of her own emotional and physical responses in situations of duress and uncertainty. This combination of highly personal confession and acutely observed detail of the physical landscape is a unique stylistic achievement of the writing.

As she gains in knowledge, skill, stamina and self-awareness, so too does she gain greater acceptance of her own unruly personality and antisocial manner. This particular feature of the writing should not be mistaken for the complacent 'insights' associated with the New Age sense of self that emerged roughly at the same time as Davidson's book. *Tracks* is a self-portrait, and one that does include its share of mystical revelations of the self, but these generally avoid being reducible to notions of a oneness of being, spiritual integration with nature and the founding myth of an awakening of the self to its essential truth. Davidson remains easily angered and contemptuous of the tourist notion of travel and connection to place. The journey's destination is never presented as a grand revelation of self-knowledge or acceptance; instead the end of the journey is recounted with restraint and an absence of any sense of triumphal arrival and valorised achievement.

Although the past drives much of the narrative, *Charlie's Country* unfolds chronologically, with de Heer favouring reflection and introspection over flashbacks. Much of the narrative is driven by Charlie's interactions with police or other symbols of white power. For instance, Charlie's turn to the bush is motivated, at least in part, by Luke's confiscation of his tools for hunting, items that Luke considers to be dangerous weapons.

Considering *Charlie's Country* as a fictionalised tale based on Gulpilil's life creates interesting comparisons with *Tracks*. *Tracks* is a first person written account that purports to be truthful and de Heer's is a putatively fictional feature film. Davidson remains the author of her literary self, while Gulpilil is a co-writer (with de Heer) whose input no doubt shaped the narrative. It is not simply a fictional story, but nor is it a memoir in the style of Davidson's. While *Tracks* is an artistic statement as much as it is a nonfiction account of an actual journey, it is also the result of Davidson's choice as a writer to recreate her experiences in the desert and she exercises authorial control over how these experiences are seen or understood by the reader. De Heer's film has more narrative flexibility in the telling of the tale.

It is Davidson's voice that the reader hears in *Tracks*. She explains her motivations, her doubts, her arrogance, her confused emotions and her search for self-understanding. The journey mirrors this self-examination. In this sense, *Tracks* is an internal monologue that explains what drove Robyn across forbidding terrain, across the vast distances of both the desert and her self. But internal (even if verbalised) monologue also dominates *Charlie's Country*. The eponymous character constantly mutters, sings and laughs to himself. At times, he verges on 'breaking the fourth wall'. In the cave, as he sits by the fire, Charlie offers a quasi-lecture that could be for anyone, if not just a grounding reminder to himself of what existed in this place before him. 'Gone. No one left,' he offers, through persistent coughs. In this way, though the text has been established as fictional, it is also editorialising throughout on real events, with 'real' characters. Similarly, *Tracks*, though a memoir, moves away from the personal and takes on wider social issues such as the treatment of Indigenous Australians.