

**ASSIGNMENT (MEG)  
AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE  
MEG-09**

**Programme: MEG/2024/2025  
Course Code: MEG 09  
Max. Marks: 100**

**Answer all questions in this assignment:**

1. Critically examine the major themes of nineteenth century Australian poetry.  
20
2. “The ideas of the Australian nation and a sense of masculinity connected with the bush, are subverted very skilfully in Baynton’s stories.” Discuss this statement with reference to the treatment of the bush in Barbara Baynton’s story “The Chosen Vessel”.  
20
3. “Voss’s journey is a quest for determining the nature of individual identity in a strange land.” Do you agree with this statement on Patrick White’s novel *Voss*?  
20
4. Explain how Kevin Gilbert’s poem ‘Mister Man’ engages with the theme of Aboriginal ownership of the Australian land.  
20
5. Explain the significance of the title *The Removalists*.  
20

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**Answer all questions in this assignment:**

## **1. Critically examine the major themes of nineteenth century Australian poetry.**

Nineteenth-century Australian poetry reflects the country's transition from colonial beginnings to a distinct national identity. The major themes of this period in poetry often revolve around the natural landscape, colonial life, national identity, and the complex interplay between settlers and Indigenous Australians. Here's a critical examination of these themes:

### **1. Nature and the Landscape**

One of the most prominent themes in nineteenth-century Australian poetry is the representation of the natural landscape. Early poets like Charles Harpur and Adam Lindsay Gordon focused heavily on the Australian environment, which was vastly different from the landscapes of their British origins. Their work often depicted the vast, rugged, and seemingly untamed beauty of the Australian bush.

**Charles Harpur**, known for his romantic and idealistic portrayal of nature, celebrated the Australian landscape as a source of inspiration and spiritual renewal. His poems, such as "The Creek of the Four Graves" and "The Death of the Bullock Driver," use the landscape to evoke themes of struggle, endurance, and the sublime. Harpur's depiction of nature is often intertwined with a sense of nationalism and pride in Australia's unique environment.

**Adam Lindsay Gordon**, on the other hand, approached the landscape with a more pragmatic and adventurous spirit. His poetry often reflects the harsh realities of colonial life, including the challenges posed by the land. In poems like "The Sick Stockrider" and "The Last Ride Together," Gordon's focus is on the human condition within the context of the unforgiving Australian bush, highlighting themes of perseverance and resilience.

### **2. Colonial Life and Society**

The depiction of colonial life is another significant theme in nineteenth-century Australian poetry. Poets of this era frequently explored the experiences and challenges faced by settlers, including issues of identity, isolation, and social dynamics.

**Henry Lawson** and **Banjo Paterson** are key figures in this regard. Lawson's poetry often conveys the struggles of the working class, reflecting his socialist leanings and empathy for the hardships of colonial life. His works, such as "The Drover's Wife" and "Up the Country," present a raw and realistic portrayal of life in the bush, emphasizing themes of social inequality and the quest for a fairer society.

Paterson, conversely, celebrated the bushman's life with a more romantic and heroic lens. His famous works, including "Waltzing Matilda" and "The Man from Snowy River," depict the Australian outback and its inhabitants with a sense of adventure and valor. Paterson's poetry contributes to the formation of the Australian legend, encapsulating the rugged individualism and spirit of the colonial settlers.

### 3. National Identity and Patriotism

The quest for a distinct Australian identity is a recurring theme in nineteenth-century poetry. As Australia moved toward federation and nationhood, poets grappled with what it meant to be Australian and how to distinguish their national identity from British colonial roots.

**Joseph Furphy**, for example, explored themes of national identity in his poetry through the lens of social and cultural commentary. His poem "Such is Life" delves into the complexities of Australian society, capturing the evolving sense of self that was emerging during this period. Furphy's work reflects a growing awareness of the need for a unique Australian voice in literature.

The poetry of this era often reflects a sense of patriotic pride and a desire to establish a cultural heritage distinct from British traditions. Poets like Paterson and Lawson played crucial roles in shaping this identity, with Paterson's glorification of the bushman's life and Lawson's focus on social justice both contributing to the evolving national consciousness.

### 4. Indigenous Australians and Colonial Encounters

The interactions between European settlers and Indigenous Australians are a more complex and less prominent theme in nineteenth-century poetry. Early poets often overlooked or misrepresented Indigenous cultures, reflecting the colonial attitudes of the time.

However, poets like **Oodgeroo Noonuccal** (formerly known as Kath Walker), although writing in the mid-twentieth century, critically revisited the colonial past and addressed the impact of colonization on Indigenous Australians. While her work falls outside the nineteenth century, it provides valuable insights into how later poets

grappled with the historical legacy of colonial encounters and the misrepresentation of Indigenous Australians.

In the nineteenth century, the depiction of Indigenous Australians was often stereotypical and lacking in depth. Poets such as **B.H. (Bronte) Bastian** and **A.B. (Arthur) Paterson** sometimes included Indigenous characters or references in their work, but these depictions were generally superficial and reflective of the colonial mindset rather than a genuine engagement with Indigenous perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Nineteenth-century Australian poetry is characterized by its exploration of the natural landscape, colonial life, national identity, and the complex interactions with Indigenous Australians. Poets of the era, including Charles Harpur, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Lawson, and Banjo Paterson, each contributed to the literary portrayal of Australia in their own ways. Their works reflect a dynamic period of transformation, marked by a growing sense of national identity and an evolving relationship with the land and its people.

Through these themes, nineteenth-century Australian poetry provides a rich tapestry of the challenges, triumphs, and aspirations of a young nation finding its place in the world.

**2. “The ideas of the Australian nation and a sense of masculinity connected with the bush, are subverted very skilfully in Baynton’s stories.” Discuss this statement with reference to the treatment of the bush in Barbara Baynton’s story “The Chosen Vessel”.**

Barbara Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel" offers a nuanced portrayal of the bush and the ideals of Australian masculinity, challenging traditional notions through its subversion of these themes. The story, set in the Australian outback, presents a stark and critical view of bush life, diverging from the romanticized vision often associated with it. This essay will discuss how Baynton subverts the ideas of the Australian nation and masculinity connected with the bush by examining the treatment of the bush in "The Chosen Vessel."

## **Romanticizing the Bush and Masculinity**

The Australian bush has historically been idealized as a symbol of ruggedness, endurance, and masculinity. The bushman, often portrayed as a heroic figure, embodies qualities such as self-reliance, strength, and dominance over nature. This portrayal aligns with nationalistic narratives that celebrate the bush as central to Australian identity and masculinity. However, Baynton's story offers a counter-narrative, subverting these conventions through its depiction of the bush and its inhabitants.

## **Subversion of Masculinity**

In "The Chosen Vessel," Baynton challenges traditional representations of masculinity by presenting a protagonist who defies the typical bushman archetype. The story's male characters are depicted as weak, ineffectual, and morally corrupt. The central figure, the bushman, is portrayed not as a heroic figure but as a brutal and selfish individual. His actions and attitudes contrast sharply with the idealized image of masculinity.

The bushman's interaction with his wife, who is depicted as a passive and victimized figure, further undermines the traditional notions of masculinity. Rather than being a protector or provider, the bushman is shown to be neglectful and abusive. His failure to fulfill the expected masculine roles of leadership and care highlights his inadequacy and subverts the idealized image of the bushman as a strong and dependable figure.

### **Critique of the Bush as a Setting**

Baynton's depiction of the bush itself contributes to the subversion of the romanticized view of Australian identity. Instead of being portrayed as a place of adventure and opportunity, the bush in "The Chosen Vessel" is depicted as harsh, unforgiving, and alienating. The story describes the bush as a place where survival is precarious and the environment is indifferent to human suffering.

This portrayal contrasts with the traditional image of the bush as a source of national pride and identity. By presenting the bush as a hostile and oppressive environment, Baynton challenges the notion that the bush is a nurturing or empowering space. The bush becomes a symbol of suffering and exploitation rather than a place of nationalistic heroism.

### **The Female Perspective**

Another significant aspect of Baynton's subversion is the treatment of female characters. In "The Chosen Vessel," women are portrayed as victims of the bushman's cruelty and the harshness of bush life. The story's focus on the wife's suffering and the lack of agency afforded to her highlights the gendered dimensions of the bush experience.

Baynton's depiction of female characters contrasts with the traditional view of the bush as a space where women are equally empowered. Instead, the bush is shown to exacerbate the vulnerability of women, reinforcing their marginalization and exploitation. The wife's plight serves as a critique of the romanticized view of bush life and its impact on women.

### **The Chosen Vessel as a Critique of Nationalism**

"The Chosen Vessel" can be read as a critique of the nationalistic narratives that idealize the bush and masculinity. By presenting a grim and unromanticized view of bush life, Baynton challenges the myth of the bush as a place of heroic masculinity and national identity. The story's portrayal of the bush as a site of suffering and moral



decay undermines the traditional narratives that celebrate the bush as a cornerstone of Australian pride.

Baynton's critique extends to the broader implications of these narratives for Australian identity. By subverting the romanticized image of the bush and masculinity, "The Chosen Vessel" prompts readers to reconsider the values and ideals associated with Australian nationalism. The story suggests that the idealization of the bush and its inhabitants may obscure the realities of exploitation and suffering that underpin these narratives.

## **Conclusion**

Barbara Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel" offers a subversive perspective on the ideas of the Australian nation and masculinity connected with the bush. Through its portrayal of the bush as a harsh and oppressive environment, its critique of traditional masculine roles, and its focus on the victimization of female characters, the story challenges the romanticized and nationalistic views of bush life. Baynton's work invites readers to reconsider the idealized narratives of the bush and to confront the realities of exploitation and suffering that lie beneath these myths. In doing so, "The Chosen Vessel" contributes to a more complex and critical understanding of Australian identity and masculinity.

### **3. "Voss's journey is a quest for determining the nature of individual identity in a strange land." Do you agree with this statement on Patrick White's novel Voss?**

Patrick White's novel *Voss* can indeed be seen as a profound exploration of individual identity, particularly in the context of a foreign and challenging environment. The novel, published in 1957, tells the story of a German explorer, Voss, who embarks on an ill-fated expedition into the Australian interior in the 19th century. His journey, both physical and psychological, is deeply intertwined with themes of identity, existential inquiry, and the struggle to understand oneself in an alien world. Here's a critical examination of the statement that Voss's journey is a quest for determining the nature of individual identity in a strange land:

#### **1. Voss's Personal Quest**

At its core, Voss's journey is a quest for personal meaning and self-discovery. The character of Voss, an enigmatic and driven explorer, embodies the archetype of the individual seeking to understand his own nature through the confrontation with the unknown. His journey into the Australian interior is not just a physical expedition but a symbolic quest for deeper self-knowledge and existential understanding.

Throughout the novel, Voss is portrayed as a man with a profound sense of purpose and a belief in his own destiny. His determination to explore uncharted territory reflects a broader search for identity and meaning. Voss's interactions with the harsh and unfamiliar Australian landscape force him to confront his own limitations, desires,

and the nature of his existence. This confrontation with the alien environment becomes a means through which he seeks to define himself.

## **2. The Alien Landscape as a Mirror**

The Australian landscape in *Voss* is more than just a backdrop; it functions as a mirror reflecting the inner turmoil and quest for identity experienced by the protagonist. The vast, unpredictable, and often hostile environment challenges Voss's perceptions of himself and his mission. The wilderness serves as both a literal and metaphorical space where Voss's character is tested and revealed.

The landscape's harshness forces Voss to grapple with his own vulnerabilities and the limits of his control. As he and his companions face numerous trials, the landscape reflects their internal struggles and serves as a catalyst for self-examination. Voss's relationship with the land underscores the idea that personal identity is not a static or fixed entity but something that evolves through engagement with the world and its challenges.

## **3. Existential Themes and Isolation**

The novel also explores existential themes, particularly through Voss's sense of isolation and his philosophical reflections on existence. Voss's journey into the unknown is marked by periods of profound solitude and introspection. This isolation amplifies his existential questions about his place in the world and the nature of his identity.

Voss's encounters with other characters, including his romantic interest Laura Trevelyan and his indigenous guide, provide additional layers to his quest. His relationships with these characters highlight the complexities of his identity and the ways in which it is influenced by others. Laura's own search for meaning and her connection with Voss reflect the broader theme of the quest for identity within a foreign and challenging context.

## **4. Symbolism and Metaphor**

White's use of symbolism and metaphor further enriches the exploration of identity in the novel. The figure of Voss himself can be seen as a symbol of the broader human quest for understanding and self-realization. His journey into the Australian interior represents a journey into the depths of his own psyche and the larger existential questions that preoccupy him.

The novel's symbolic elements, such as the desert and the elements of the Australian landscape, represent the inner wilderness of Voss's mind and the existential void he seeks to fill. The stark contrast between the European world Voss comes from and the Australian wilderness he encounters underscores the thematic tension between the known and the unknown, the self and the other.

## **5. Cultural and Historical Context**

The novel also reflects on the cultural and historical context of Australia during the time of Voss's expedition. The clash between European colonial ambitions and the Indigenous presence in the land adds another layer to the exploration of identity. Voss's journey can be seen as a microcosm of the broader colonial encounter, where questions of identity and selfhood are entangled with issues of cultural and historical displacement.

The novel critiques the colonial mindset and the idea of imposing European identity and values on the Australian landscape and its Indigenous people. This critique adds depth to the exploration of Voss's personal quest, highlighting the ways in which identity is shaped by and in conflict with cultural and historical forces.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Patrick White's *Voss* is a rich and complex exploration of individual identity, framed within the context of a journey into a strange and challenging land. Voss's quest for self-understanding is intricately tied to his experiences in the Australian wilderness, where he confronts both external challenges and internal uncertainties. The novel's portrayal of the Australian landscape, existential themes, and cultural context all contribute to a nuanced examination of identity. Voss's journey, therefore, can be seen as a profound quest for determining the nature of individual identity in an unfamiliar and transformative environment.

## **4. Explain how Kevin Gilbert's poem 'Mister Man' engages with the theme of Aboriginal ownership of the Australian land.**

Kevin Gilbert's poem "Mister Man" offers a poignant exploration of Aboriginal ownership and connection to the Australian land. Through its powerful imagery, tone, and narrative voice, the poem addresses themes of dispossession, cultural heritage, and the enduring relationship between Aboriginal people and their ancestral lands. This analysis will delve into how Gilbert's poem engages with these themes and reflects broader issues of land rights and identity.

### **The Poem's Context**

Kevin Gilbert, a prominent Aboriginal poet, playwright, and activist, often used his work to address social justice issues and advocate for the rights of Aboriginal Australians. "Mister Man" is one of his notable poems that confronts the complexities of land ownership and the historical injustices faced by Indigenous Australians.

### **The Theme of Aboriginal Ownership**

#### **1. Historical Dispossession**

In "Mister Man," Gilbert addresses the theme of Aboriginal ownership by contrasting traditional Aboriginal connections to the land with the experiences of dispossession imposed by colonization. The poem opens with a direct address to a figure who represents the colonial or non-Indigenous authority, often referred to in the poem as



“Mister Man.” This figure symbolizes the broader forces that have encroached upon and displaced Aboriginal peoples from their lands.

The poem critiques the assumption of ownership and control exercised by the colonizers. By referring to “Mister Man” as a distant and unfeeling authority, Gilbert highlights the disconnect between the colonizers’ view of land ownership and the deep, spiritual connection that Aboriginal people have with their land. The use of the term “Mister Man” also suggests a sense of alienation and condescension, emphasizing the imposition of foreign values upon Aboriginal ways of life.

## **2. Cultural and Spiritual Connection**

Gilbert’s poem underscores the profound cultural and spiritual connection that Aboriginal people have with the land. This connection is depicted through evocative imagery and references to traditional practices and beliefs. The land is portrayed not merely as a physical space but as a living entity with which Aboriginal people have a sacred relationship.

The poem speaks to the idea that the land is an integral part of Aboriginal identity and culture. For example, references to ancestral stories, ceremonial practices, and the land’s role in cultural transmission highlight the depth of this relationship. By contrasting this with the superficial and transactional view of land ownership held by the colonizers, Gilbert illustrates the inherent value and significance of Aboriginal connections to the land.

## **3. Resistance and Resilience**

“**Mister Man**” also captures the theme of resistance and resilience in the face of dispossession and marginalization. The poem reflects a defiant stance against the encroachment of non-Indigenous authorities and the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice.

Gilbert’s use of language and tone conveys a sense of frustration and anger towards the injustices faced by Aboriginal people. Yet, there is also a resilient spirit evident in the poem. The references to Aboriginal traditions and the enduring connection to the land suggest that despite the efforts to undermine and erase their heritage, Aboriginal people continue to assert their rights and maintain their cultural practices.

## **Poetic Techniques and Imagery**

### **1. Imagery**

Gilbert employs vivid imagery to convey the emotional and cultural dimensions of Aboriginal ownership of the land. Descriptions of the land as a nurturing and life-giving force contrast sharply with the sterile and exploitative portrayal of land by the colonizers. This contrast highlights the disjunction between the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous perspectives on land.

For instance, imagery of the land as a living entity that holds the memories and stories of ancestors serves to reinforce the idea that Aboriginal ownership is not merely a claim of property but a deep-rooted, spiritual bond. This imagery helps to communicate the sacredness of the land and the significance of maintaining this connection in the face of external pressures.

## **2. Tone**

The tone of the poem fluctuates between defiant and reflective. Gilbert's language conveys a sense of indignation towards the colonial powers while also expressing a profound sense of loss and yearning for justice. This tonal complexity allows the poem to address both the personal and collective dimensions of land ownership and dispossession.

The reflective tone also enables Gilbert to explore the cultural and historical implications of land ownership, providing a nuanced perspective on the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities.

## **Conclusion**

Kevin Gilbert's "Mister Man" offers a compelling exploration of Aboriginal ownership of the Australian land, engaging with themes of dispossession, cultural connection, and resistance. Through its poignant imagery, tone, and narrative voice, the poem critiques the colonial view of land ownership and underscores the deep, spiritual relationship that Aboriginal people have with their land. Gilbert's work remains a powerful testament to the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice, reflecting the resilience and enduring connection of Aboriginal Australians to their ancestral lands.

## **5. Explain the significance of the title The Removalists.**

### **The Significance of the Title "The Removalists"**

David Williamson's play "The Removalists," first performed in 1971, is a poignant and incisive commentary on the nature of violence, power, and human interaction within Australian society. The title itself, "The Removalists," plays a crucial role in encapsulating the themes and messages of the play, serving as a metaphorical reflection on the play's central issues.

### **Literal and Metaphorical Meanings**

On a literal level, "The Removalists" refers to the profession of the characters who are movers, involved in physically relocating furniture and personal belongings from one place to another. This aspect of the title is straightforward; the play begins with a scene featuring two removalists, Kenny and Ross, who are tasked with moving furniture out of the home of the character Simmonds. This literal job of moving items highlights the mundane nature of their work, juxtaposed against the far more serious and disturbing events that unfold.

However, the title's metaphorical dimensions provide a deeper insight into the play's themes. "The Removalists" can be interpreted as a commentary on the removal or displacement of people and values. The play explores how characters are displaced from their moral and ethical values due to the corrupting influence of power and violence. The removalists' profession becomes a symbol of the broader societal processes that "move" or "displace" individuals from their moral grounding and personal integrity.

### **Exploration of Power and Authority**

The play is set in a domestic environment that gradually reveals deeper conflicts, particularly around issues of power and authority. The interactions between the removalists and the police officers, especially Sergeant Simmonds, reflect a broader examination of power dynamics. Simmonds' abusive authority and his manipulation of the removalists illustrate how those in positions of power can exploit their authority to control and subjugate others. The title thus reflects the idea of authority being "removed" from its rightful place and used to further personal agendas rather than serving justice.

### **Human Nature and Violence**

A significant aspect of the play is its exploration of violence and its impact on human nature. The seemingly ordinary task of moving furniture becomes a backdrop for the revelation of violence and brutality. The removalists' interactions with Simmonds and each other bring to light the dark undercurrents of aggression and cruelty present in human relationships. The title "The Removalists" subtly suggests the idea of removing or excising elements of human decency and compassion in favor of more primal, violent instincts. The "removal" here can be seen as the stripping away of societal norms and the descent into violence.

### **Social Critique**

Williamson uses the title to critique Australian society and its values. The play was written during a time of significant social change and upheaval in Australia, and it reflects the anxieties and tensions of that era. The title can be seen as a reflection of the broader societal "removals" or shifts happening in Australia at the time, including changes in social norms, attitudes towards authority, and the nature of violence. The play's critical stance on authority and the societal structures that perpetuate violence and injustice is encapsulated in the concept of "removal" as both a literal and figurative act.

### **Character Dynamics and Symbolism**

The dynamics between the characters further enhance the significance of the title. The removalists, Kenny and Ross, are depicted as working-class individuals whose lives are intertwined with the more sinister actions of Sergeant Simmonds. Their involvement in the events that transpire serves to highlight the interplay between

ordinary individuals and the systemic violence of authority. The title symbolizes the way in which ordinary people are implicated in and affected by the broader societal issues of power and violence.

The characters themselves are subject to "removal" from their normal, everyday existence into a realm of conflict and brutality. The process of moving, which begins as a routine job, becomes a metaphor for the characters' own displacement from their comfort zones into situations that challenge their values and moral beliefs.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the title "The Removalists" is a multifaceted symbol that captures the essence of David Williamson's play. It reflects the literal act of moving furniture, while also delving into metaphorical dimensions that address themes of power, violence, and societal change. The title encapsulates the play's critique of authority and its impact on human nature, as well as the broader societal shifts occurring in Australia during the time of its writing. Through this title, Williamson effectively conveys the play's exploration of how individuals and values are "removed" or displaced in the face of systemic violence and moral corruption.