

"Stunning and memorable"
—THE AGE

Amanda
LOHREY

Vertigo

TEACHING NOTES BY ADAM SHAW

Praise for *Piano Lessons*

“A carefully crafted little gem of a book”

—*The Advertiser*

“Lohrey achieves a kind of perfection.”

—*The Sydney Morning Herald*

“Extraordinarily vivid and compelling . . .

A stunning and memorable novella.”

—*The Age*

“Vertigo will keep you up much too late
but it’s worth a one-sitting read.”

—*The West Australian*

Vertigo

By Amanda Lohrey

Summary

Vertigo is a novella about a married couple in their thirties who wish to change the way they live by moving to the country. They are glad to leave their Sydney lifestyles behind, having grown tired of their cramped apartment, the polluted city air and tedious dinner-party conversations about renovations, share portfolios and getting ahead. Surely, they feel, there is more to life than this.

They do some research and buy an old weatherboard house on a bush block in Garra Nalla, a sleepy seaside town in New South Wales with exactly the rural charm they were looking for: quiet and peaceful, no shops or tourist attractions, a scattering of neighbours, plenty of wildlife, and enough broadband access for them to work from their new home.

As Luke and Anna settle in, the reader is introduced to 'the boy' – a ghostly presence that accompanies them as they go about their daily lives. Although the boy is looked upon tenderly, his presence suggests that there is something more to this couple's wish to begin a new life than just escaping the urban rat race. Indeed, there is a deep sadness at the heart of their relationship, one they are unable to fully share; Luke and Anna experience the boy in their own ways and never discuss him together. It is only towards the end of the novella, when the boy finally leaves them, that we come to understand him as a symbol of the grief they suffered after Anna gave birth to a stillborn baby.

Before they fully come to terms with this loss, the couple are confronted with one of the great dangers of living in country Australia: bushfire. As the heat of their first summer builds and the surrounding bushland becomes increasingly dry, a fire starts in the hills, gathers momentum, and is soon racing towards Garra Nalla at incredible speed. The couple are saved at the last minute by volunteer fire-fighters and they spend the night in an evacuation centre – the local church hall – along with the other townsfolk. The fire burns itself out, but not before destroying most of the settlement; miraculously, Luke and Anna's house is spared. This terrifying ordeal leaves the couple shaken but regenerated, as though from the devastation of the fire comes healing and the strength to begin again, together. *Vertigo* ends with Luke and Anna resuming their lives in Garra Nalla, now with renewed desire to start a family.

Narrative point of view

1. Ask students to read the opening paragraph and to identify the narrative point of view / perspective from which the story is told.

Third person omniscient narrator.

2. Ask students to read the second paragraph and to identify the narrative point of view.

Again third person, but the opening sentence shifts briefly to second person.

3. What is the effect of the author's use of this point of view?

The narrator directly addresses us, the reader. The effect is that it draws our attention to the narrative voice, to the fact that we are being told a story, and to the narrator's authority.

Also, the use of second-person narration universalises the city experience described here: this is not just Luke Worley's experience of urban noise; it is an experience that everyone in his position would share.

There are no other instances of second-person narration in the book, but this example, appearing early, helps set the tone. The narrative voice is confident and all-knowing; in other words, omniscient and reliable.

Tense

1. What tense is used to tell the story?

The narrative begins shortly after Luke and Anna have left Sydney and bought a house in Garra Nalla. Past tense is used in the first 16 pages, providing the backstory of how and why the couple moved from the city to the coast. After the section break on page 18, the narrative shifts to the present tense, and remains so for the rest of the book:

Now instead of heading for a coffee-shop on Saturday mornings they **lounge** together on the wide veranda.

2. What is the effect of using the present tense to tell a story?

It is still fairly unusual for novels to be written in the present tense. The effect of the present tense is that it adds a level of immediacy to the narrative by placing the reader closer to the events as they unfold. In the case of Vertigo, it situates the reader alongside the characters as they settle into their new life in the country. Also, perhaps more importantly, it heightens the speed, intensity and dramatic force of the sudden arrival and devastating impact of the bushfire.

Using the present tense also allows mundane events to be included in the story, without the need for them to advance plot or reveal character – events are related simply because they happen. In Vertigo, this allows the author to convey a sense of daily life and the gradual adaptation the couple make to their new surroundings.

Themes

The word 'vertigo' means a sense of disorientation, a loss of balance that comes from being in a strange environment. This novella is about the changes experienced by a young couple who move from the city to the country.

A useful way to approach themes in *Vertigo* is to draw attention to the novella's subtitle; it appears on the title page but not on the cover or half-title page: **a pastoral**.

1. After reading the novella, ask students to research the basic features of the pastoral genre.

The pastoral genre expresses the desire for a simple, more authentic way of life. It offers an idealised view of life in the country and living in harmony with nature. This romanticised view of rural life serves as a critique of urban life, which is seen as materialistic and meaningless. By being detached from nature, urban life alienates us from our true selves and the possibility of an authentic life. Pastoral texts are traditionally composed for urban audiences with this criticism of urban living in mind.

Luke and Anna leave the city in search of a more satisfying way of life in the country. They do this in response to typically urban circumstances: high real-estate prices, cramped living conditions, pollution and traffic, and the pressure to succeed, acquire wealth and keep up with one's peers.

2. Ask students to pull out specific (contrasting) descriptions of city life and Garra Nalla's landscape.

*On page 6, Lohrey uses a visual image (a **simile**) to describe how the pressures of city life ("a smog haze") are draining Luke and Anna of their youthful optimism ("a bright morning"): "in the way that a smog haze settles by degrees over a bright morning."*

On page 14, Garra Nalla's landscape is idealised. It is described as being out-of-time, undeveloped (natural) and relatively empty: "Here they could live, and simply be."

3. Finally, ask students to identify themes in *Vertigo* through the pastoral lens.
 - *City life versus country life in Australia*
 - *The difficulties of living in modern, urban Australia*
 - *The idealisation / romanticisation of the Australian bush*
 - *The influence of place on personal identity. (This is particularly noticeable through Luke's development as a character: his love of birds, his friendship with Gil, and his reluctance to leave Garra Nalla and return to Sydney).*
4. The author's note in the endpapers to *Vertigo* refers to Henry Lawson's poem 'The Fire at Ross's Farm' and his short story 'Bushfire'. Get students to access and read these texts (they are available online) and identify the themes they share with *Vertigo*.
 - *Mateship and camaraderie*
 - *The realities and dangers of living in rural Australia*
5. What other themes can be identified in *Vertigo* after considering the relationship between Luke and Anna, with particular reference to 'the boy'?

- *Loss and grief*
- *Healing, renewal and regeneration*

Interview with the author

Amanda Lohrey was interviewed by Ramona Koval on ABC Radio National's *The Book Show* shortly after the novella was published. It provides an illuminating account of her inspiration for the book, its characters, rural Australia and our romanticised view of it, and the nature of 'the boy'. The audio file and a written transcript can be accessed via the ABC RN website. Here's a direct link:

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/amanda-lohreys-vertigo/3179466>

1. **Think–pair–share activity.** Listen to the interview with students. Ask them to take notes individually and to summarise the key points. Ask students to compare and combine their notes with a classmate. Then each pair presents one point of interest to the class, writing it on the board. Continue until all points have been presented and recorded on the board. Students then copy these points into their own workbooks.

Visual imagery in *Vertigo* and descriptive writing activities

Describing places

The novella opens with a brief sketch of the city, allowing the narrator to establish a contrast between it and the country. To consider how this contrast is achieved:

1. Identify the sensory language used in this opening description of city life. What is its dominant feature?

Sound / noise

2. Compare the opening two paragraphs of the book to the section on pages 18–21, where we see Luke and Anna at home in Garra Nalla. What is different about the way they live now? What contrasts are established?

Nature has a much greater presence in their lives. Whereas in the opening section birds exist on the periphery of Luke's life – almost on the level of a dream – now he and Anna are busy watching birds and identifying them. The discarded newspaper can be seen as a symbol of the marginalisation of city concerns in their new country life.

3. On pages 10–11, Lohrey uses small, precise details to conjure visual images of the towns the couple drive through on their way to Garra Nalla. To help students see how this is done, draw up two columns, one labelled 'Old towns' and the other 'New towns' (see below). Under each column, ask students to list the places Luke and Anna visit in these towns and the adjectives used to describe them, with a particular emphasis on how they are described in visual terms. The first one is done as an example.

Old towns	New towns
Main street (dusty)	<i>Art gallery (kelim rugs, carved birds)</i>
<i>War memorial (melancholy)</i>	<i>Wine bar (sleek, new)</i>
<i>Mechanics institute (faded)</i>	
<i>Cafés (chipped laminex tables)</i>	
<i>General store (headless dummies wearing drab clothing in window)</i>	

This next activity will help students to write descriptively. It encourages them to use small, precise details to create visual images in the reader's mind and bring descriptions of place to life.

4. Ask students to think of a small town they know; allow them a moment to visualise it. Once they can see it clearly in their mind, get students to identify two **features** in that town and to write them down. Then, for each feature, choose three adjectives or phrases to describe it. (For example **A pub**: *dark brick, rotating VB sign, two motorcycles out front.*) Now write a sentence that includes the name of the town followed by these features and the adjectives to describe them. (*We passed the Torquay **pub**, a dark brick building with a rotating VB sign and two motorcycles out front. Across the road was a **camping ground** with surfboards, tents and rusty caravans scattered among the tall pine trees.*)

Describing flora

On pages 11–12, Garra Nalla is described as nestled between specific types of flora: casuarinas and banksias, she-oaks, flowering gums, tea-tree and boobialla.

1. Project images of the plants in Garra Nalla to the class. Run a class discussion comparing these with other images of native and non-native plants. Draw attention to the colour, texture and other distinguishing features, particularly between indigenous and non-indigenous plants. Consider how Australian plants might appear more vulnerable or conducive to bush-fire conditions.
2. Ask students to choose two plants from your selection and to describe their choices in a few sentences as vividly as possible, without naming the plants they have chosen. Then ask each student to take turns reading their descriptions aloud and for the class to guess which plant is being described.

Describing people

One of the reasons the couple leaves the city is because of Anna's asthma. On page 6, without mentioning the word 'asthma', Lohrey describes Anna's physical appearance as she suffers from an asthma attack.

1. On the board, list the ways the author creates a visual image of Anna in this state on page 6:
 - Posture (*propped up awkwardly on pillows; later, deflated and diminished*)
 - Breathing (*wheezing and sucking in gasps of Ventolin*)
 - Hair (*stuck to her skin*)
 - Skin (*pale and yellowish*)
 - There is also the striking simile of Anna as a vampire victim. This idea or image ties these descriptions of her together: pale, gasping, deflated.

Now, in a similar fashion, ask students to write descriptions of someone who

- has a cold
- is embarrassed
- is happy to see someone enter the room
- is secretly in love with the person they are talking to

without explicitly stating why they are feeling this way. In other words, this is a **'show-not-tell' descriptive exercise**.

The author is interested in modern rural Australia and gives a very clear-eyed account of how it looks today. There are fewer farmers in the country now, and none of the squatters and selectors that appear in Lawson's stories and poems. Instead there are sea-changers and retirees, plantation farmers and resort developers.

2. On pages 25–27 the reader is introduced to the couple's new neighbours in Garra Nalla. Ask students to identify how Gilbert Reilly and Rodney Banfield are described. Do they correspond to the stock country folk of traditional Australian literature?

Gil: ginger-grey hair, beaky nose, likes a 'natter', a source of local folklore, helpful and practical.

Rodney: fair-haired, short, stocky, a plumber in his late twenties, owns an untrained Staffordshire terrier, keeps to himself, possibly grows marijuana, having an affair with a miner's wife.

Gil is likeable and perhaps fits the mould of the jovial country type; Rodney is an unromanticised tradie.

The boy

On page 24, 'the boy' accompanies the couple again, this time as they work together in the garden. Luke and Anna are referred to here as "his parents" who "do not look one another in the eye". This indicates that the boy is the result of a shared grief – they are "his parents" – but one which the couple do not live together; they suffer his loss individually, in their own ways.

As explained in the RN interview, the boy represents another dimension of reality; he is both there and not there. He can be read in several ways: as a ghost or as a figment of Luke and Anna's imagination. Either way, he is a fabulous (from a fable) or magical figure. He is at the heart of the story, and the couple never questions his existence.

Symbolically, he represents one of the things the couple are trying to leave behind. Yet he becomes an even greater presence in their lives when they move to Garra Nalla, and they are ultimately forced to confront what the boy stands for in their lives (the grief they experienced after bearing a still-born child).

Describing fauna

Page 28 has some wonderful descriptions of local birds.

1. Ask students to identify the verbs used to describe the birds on page 28. What effect do they have?

Perching, lolling, cruising, diving, congregating, swimming, paddling, rearing up, soaring.

These verbs add movement and life to the descriptions.

Page 29 features Luke's encounter with a particular bird (it will appear again later as a bushfire victim on page 125 and in Luke's dream on page 139).

2. An encounter with a bird on page 29 leaves Luke feeling "pointlessly, mindlessly happy". In a class discussion, invite students to think about what the author might mean by this description.

Luke is now living in the moment, mindful only of himself and the bird, and not concerned with a painful past or an uncertain future. It is an encounter with nature in the here-and-now, with no utility or meaning beyond itself. It is blissful, innocent, spontaneous and fleeting.

'The Fire at Ross's Farm' by Henry Lawson

On page 33, Gil tells the couple that Garra Nalla was once called Ross's Farm, an intertextual reference to the Lawson poem.

1. Read and discuss the poem 'The Fire at Ross's Farm' with students.

Intertextuality I: Sir Frederick Treves and the Promised Land

Luke finds some antique books owned by the reverend A.E. Henley, a previous occupant of their house. These books include travel writing about such exotic places as the Nile, Mesopotamia and the West Indies. Among these are a volume written by Sir Frederick Treves on his travels through Palestine in 1913. Sir Frederick gives a very critical account of 'the Promised Land'.

1. Ask students to identify how Sir Frederick's description contrasts with idyllic descriptions of Garra Nalla.

For example, Part I of Vertigo ends with a description of the beauty of the Garra Nalla coastline at night: the ocean, blowhole, stars, surf, oak trees and a happy couple (Luke and Anna) in its midst.

This contrast is later reversed (see Intertextuality II below) when Sir Frederick visits Damascus and the fire approaches Garra Nalla.

Luke and Anna

In some ways, the couple's old life in the city is still with them in Garra Nalla.

- Luke's father's visit reveals the dilemma faced by many people in their 30s today; while Luke feels he is growing old – his youthful optimism and nerve are behind him – he hasn't yet found a career for himself. His father makes this clear by not understanding this dilemma or accepting their choice to move to the country.
- Anna continues to watch the news on TV at night, bringing the outside world into her life (the war in Iraq, distressed soldiers and bloodied civilians on the screen).

The couple also begins drifting apart.

- They return to the city briefly; Luke is unsettled and promptly returns to Garra Nalla; Anna stays a while before deciding to return to the country for another year.
- Luke is changing and adapting to country life. This infuriates Anna; she feels he has lost a "sharpness" he once had.
- Anna is not adapting so smoothly to country life.

1. As a class, discuss the changes and issues Luke and Anna have experienced moving from the city to the country (the points outlined above could serve as a guide).
2. Page 85 is the only direct reference to 'vertigo' in the novella. Get students to think about the connections between the meaning of the word and the challenges the couple are facing as they adapt to their new environment.

The word 'vertigo' means a sense of disorientation, a loss of balance that comes from being in a strange environment. Anna feels disoriented and rootless, belonging to neither the city nor the country.

A Hostile Environment

The couple encounters a new problem, one that does not usually affect city dwellers: **water and drought**. The wind is blowing constantly and drying everything out. On pages 61–62 a contrast is established between life in the city, where the weather is part of the background to the plot, and the country, where the weather *is* the plot.

1. If “the weather is the plot”, how might this increasingly volatile environment shape the remainder of the story?

The hostile weather may cause a disruption in Luke and Anna’s dreams of a peaceful country life in harmony with nature.

2. Use this observation regarding the weather and plot to get students to think about how this relates the pastoral themes of the novel.

The pastoral genre idealises the countryside as peaceful, natural and unspoiled. However, the hostile realities of living in the Australian bush trouble this idealisation.

Fire

On page 91, the first signs of smoke appear in the sky and it builds as the couple go about their daily routine. The temperature continues to rise, and then one night they see the flames in the hills.

Page 94 features a vivid description of what they can see from their house, and they stare, transfixed.

1. Focussing on the passage on pages 94–95 (“First comes the plumes of black smoke ... in a steady pulse”), ask students to identify the verbs Lohrey uses to give the description of the smoke and flames movement and life.

Rising, hovering, racing, flaring, hurtling.

Intertextuality II: Sir Frederick Treves and the Promised Land

On pages 100–102, Luke is continuing to read Sir Frederick’s account of his travels through Palestine. Now, however, Sir Frederick arrives at a place he likes in the Middle East: Damascus.

1. Get students to identify the descriptive words and phrases used by Sir Frederick to describe Damascus and the gateway of the Great Khan. Compare this with how new and old towns are described in the novel.

Vineyards, orange groves, pomegranates, walnut trees and fields of corn; shady walks, reedy pools, fountains and courtyards; caravans and lamp-lit

bazaars; sun-bleached roses and perfumeries; dragomen and merchants; splendid labyrinths.

2. Sir Frederick's account so far of Palestine and The Promised Land has been embittered and disillusioned; it contrasts with the blissful tranquillity of Luke's view of life in Garra Nalla. What might be the purpose of this beautiful, exotic description of Damascus at this point in the novella?

It contrasts again with what's going on in Garra Nalla, only this time it's the other way around. Whereas before, Garra Nalla was an idealised landscape, now the town is engulfed in dust and smoke from the fire.

On pages 106–07 there is a surreal moment in which Luke and Anna play a game of tennis while waiting for the fire. This can be seen as a very human response to danger, a way to take their minds off waiting.

Effects of the Fire

The couple battle the fire and become trapped inside their house; a fire truck arrives by chance and takes them to the lagoon where they join other locals standing waist-deep in the water. The day ends in a church hall, where they spend the night. The boy appears beside Anna, sleeping happily.

1. Get students to identify how Lohrey's use of language mimics dramatic action.
 - *Like the fire itself, the writing moves very quickly. To this end the use of **the present tense** is very effective.*
 - *On pages 112–13, they see the fire heading towards them, "incandescent and alive", and they realise, terrifyingly, that "the very air is alight".*
 - *The smoke is "surging" and "billowing", the fireball "catapults" and "explodes" onto the settlement.*
 - *On page 124 (the following day), Lohrey uses **metaphors** very effectively to describe the devastation left by the fire: "the beach is a crust of glowing embers ... a carpet of ash ... the trees are black skeletons with crowns of scorched foliage". She also uses colloquialism ("bloody lucky ... bloody miracle") and repetition ("only three houses. Only three").*

On pages 125–27, upon returning to their home, the couple each focus on a single aspect of the fire. (This tendency to focus on small details when faced with an event of this magnitude is another realistic and very human response to tragedy.)

1. On what details do Luke and Anna focus when they return to their house?

Luke focuses on the dead bird, much to Anna's exasperation. Anna focuses on Luke's sweater and the embers that burned through it.

2. On page 130, Luke walks through the remains after the fire. Ask students to pull out all the descriptive words used to help the reader to visualise what he sees.

Burning bush, charred ground, blasted earth, logs leaking smoke, powdery ash, still-warm charcoal, fallen trunks.

This experience creates a correspondence in Luke's mind and awakens his memory of their stillborn child. He recalls the moment they were told the child was dead as well as casting the child's **ashes** into the water from a boat.

Symbolism of the ending

The final section of *Vertigo* uses symbolism as well as visual imagery. On page 135, Christmas (symbolic of new birth) is approaching and some of the locals throw a party – again a natural response to disaster. In this spirit, Anna considers going off the contraceptive pill (page 137). To drive the point home, she daydreams about the boy, now sailing off into the distance, with Anna waving farewell and thanking him for staying. Perhaps the boy's presence was needed until the couple were ready to begin again; now that their grief is subsiding, and after facing and overcoming a significant ordeal together (the bushfire), they are ready to move on and his presence is no longer necessary.

The novella ends with the couple returning to their daily routine. Luke is asleep and dreaming of birds; Anna is awake and preparing to watch the news on the television. However, she is hungry (appetite as a desire for life); she throws away her contraceptive pill (a desire to have another child); she notices that some of the she-oaks she planted have "miraculously" survived (a sign that her next child will live).

The visual imagery in the very last paragraph is also worth unpacking. It is one of light appearing from darkness, a metaphor for creation and birth. Furthermore, the idea of "ghostly images" coming to life indicates that the 'ghostly' boy may soon become a 'real' child. This symbolism aligns the story of Luke and Anna with the story of the Australian bush, which has always been one of regeneration after destruction by fire.

Other literary features in the text: Assonance and alliteration

Note the subtle use of assonance and alliteration in the description of the she-oaks on page 12: "soft clusters of them dotted among the houses; a subtle blur of fine filaments swaying against the sky". The **f** and **s** sounds combine to evoke the sound of wind moving among the branches.

A similar example appears on pages 12–13, where the blowhole is described as "a cloud of salty spume spray[ing] above them", with the **s** sound recalling the sound of water spurting into the air.

Dramatic irony

On page 16 we are told that Luke and Anna have upgraded their espresso machine as a result of their urban preoccupation with good coffee. This concern is set against their friends' warnings about the dangers of snakes, drought and bushfire.

Later the couple will be deeply shaken by their encounters with all of these (and there is no further mention of coffee).

* * *



AMANDA LOHREY is the author of the acclaimed novels *Camille's Bread*, *Vertigo* and *The Morality of Gentlemen*, as well as the award-winning short story collection *Reading Madame Bovary*. She has also written two Quarterly Essays: *Groundswell* and *Voting for Jesus*. In 2012 she was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award. Amanda's new novel, *A Short History of Richard Kline* will be published in March 2015.

Luke and Anna, thirty-something and restless, decide on a sea change. Worn down by city life and wounded by a loss neither can talk about, they flee to a sleepy village by the coast. There, surrounded by nature, they begin to feel rejuvenated. But when bushfire threatens their new home, they must confront what they have tried to put behind them.

Vertigo is a fable of love and awakening by one of Australia's finest writers, about the unexpected way emotions can return and life can change.

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