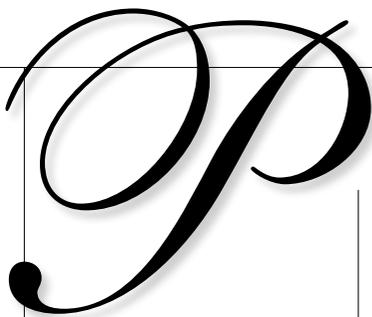


INTO THE TANGLE: PERSPECTIVES ON NARRATIVE IN

LANTANA



preface

Lantana (Ray Lawrence, 2001) is a multi-layered film that explores the nature of adult relationships and the inevitable crises faced by many adults. Marriage breakdown, coping with grief caused by the loss of a child and multiple affairs of the heart are central to *Lantana*. The main characters are immersed in existential questions on the meanings created and sometimes thwarted in adult lives and how those personal and relational crises are navigated and negotiated.

The film's concerns are the nature, dynamics and difficulties of human relationships within a certain period of adult life; after the honey-

moon period is well and truly over. The very ideas *Lantana* deals with are some of the most problematic, private and troubling emotions there can be. So a meaningful analysis of the film is made doubly challenging. There are, however, many ideas in the film that will yield interesting results in a close analysis.

Genre

Director Ray Lawrence intimates that *Lantana* is a love story, about adults in relationships trying to love and live with themselves and each other in the process of that love. As well as the existential in and out of love stories, *Lantana* also traverses multi-generic territory along the way. The film weaves its way

through an ostensible murder mystery and myriad family melodramas.

The ostensible murder mystery is the fulcrum of the film. The 'murder' shrouds the first half of the film in an unspoken way. But as the characters and the viewer get closer to knowing the circumstances of Valerie's (Barbara Hershey) disappearance, there is a sense that light has been shed, both on the suspected crime and on the lives of the troubled characters. The 'crime' has been solved and the frailties and fears of those who are circled by the 'murder' are forensically illuminated. The incipient possibility of equilibrium is foreshadowed in the lives of those caught in the concentric circles of *Lantana*.

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FOCUS ON
NARRATIVE
BY GARY
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Generically, family melodrama explores the tensions between personal needs and desires and the prevailing social order. The sanctity and expectations of marriage are pitted against the need for happiness. In *Lantana*, it seems, marriage and happiness are mutually exclusive in the lives of Leon (Anthony LaPaglia) and Sonja (Kerry Armstrong).

In conventional family melodrama, 'transgressive' behaviour is punished or an individual is redeemed through self-denial or the acknowledgement of fault or weakness in an epiphanous moment. Leon's epiphanous moment comes when he listens to the audiotape in his car in which Sonja declares her love. He sobs profoundly.

The despoiler is often removed from the social order and social equilibrium is restored, but at a price. Many of these generic features of melodrama are at play in the interpersonal dynamics of *Lantana*. Jane (Rachel Blake) enigmatically dances, alone. Leon has returned to the nest. And in another narrative strand, Patrick (Peter Phelps) is left out in the cold, as his bi-sexual lover has been re-united with his wife and child.

Women are often at the moral centre of family melodrama and are often victims and heroes simultaneously. Generally, the focus in family melodrama is duty, loyalty, love, sacrifice, and self-denial. Usually, the woman complies, keeps the peace, juggles competing demands and denies or represses her own desires.

Sonja's stoic response to Leon's infidelity eventually drives her to seek professional help in therapy with Valerie Somers, and prompts her to issue Leon the ultimatum that will save her relationship. Her heroism is in her choice not to jettison a love that she has nurtured and that she believes can be rekindled. Her patience and faith in Leon are not based on long-suffering masochism, but on her actively seeking to mend the damage that she knows is not irreparable.

Sonja throws down the gauntlet to Leon when she confronts Leon and his manifest and painful breaches of her trust. Leon is left to reflect on the deceptions of his affair and his invasion of Sonja's professional relationship with Valerie when he discovers the very private audiotapes of his wife's therapy sessions.

In conventional family melodrama, dominant familial mores and regulations dictate, if not mandate, socially acceptable behaviour. And so, 'acceptable' behaviour is affirmed at the end of the film. The genres of family melodrama and murder mystery intersect at a structural level as the lives of the characters similarly intersect after the disappearance of Valerie Somers, whose dead body the viewer partially sees in the opening of the film.

Although the disappearance of Valerie Somers is central to the film, it is not until halfway through that this plot line becomes active. Until then, the story is concerned with the melodrama of the

relationships in all their complexity and entanglement. The film delineates a gamut of possible scenarios. There is a stagnant marriage, a happy marriage, heterosexual and gay affairs, a separation, mutual grieving and unrequited or duplicitous love. *Lantana* compresses these multiple facets of adult relationships and entwines and then ultimately disentangles them.

Motifs and meanings

Thinking about the motif of the lantana is an instructive way in which to begin thinking about the film and its wider themes. Understanding how this metaphor works in the film can help develop a closer and more detailed response to the many characters.

The lantana is a tropical shrub that spreads rapidly, growing in dense thickets of thorny undergrowth while producing brightly coloured flowers. The lantana spreads rapidly and grows prolifically, and chokes light as it paradoxically reaches for the sun. The floral surface hides a tangle of decomposing undergrowth. The lantana embodies the tension between the surface and what it camouflages beneath. Throughout the film, the beautiful surface of the lantana plant conceals the sinister undergrowth. This undergrowth is a thicket that engulfs characters, literally and metaphorically. Applying these observations to other ideas in the film, we see the relationships of the characters manifested in the surface and public face of each character, while beneath the surface a tortured, self-absorbed and private emotion-

al interior world hides. The contradictions between the two layers are manifest.

Valerie Somers, the grief-stricken mother whose daughter has been murdered, exemplifies this paradox. Her very public expression of contained and controlled grief, evidenced through the launch and publication of her book on her murdered daughter is at odds with her private life. In her private life she feels out of control, as her relationship with her husband John Knox (Geoffrey Rush) slips through her fingers and she becomes consumed by insecurity and doubt. Ultimately, her behaviour is erratic and irrational.

She spars at shadows in her paranoid attack on Pete, Jane's former partner and her flight into the night after being picked up by Nik (Vince Colosimo). Although she is a psychotherapist offering advice to other adults, it is Valerie who is in need of therapy. She is a case of 'physician, heal thyself'.

The Zats are also a couple in crisis. Leon, the film's troubled detective, has inexorably grown apart from his partner Sonja. There is a yawning chasm between them that defines their very separate identities. Emotionally and physically they are islands, until the end of the film.

The Latin dance classes that Sonja encourages Leon to attend are a bandaid for her own marital wounds and ironically the original site of Jane and Leon's affair. Sonja, who feels trapped in a marriage reduced to 'going through the motions', is attracted to this exotic el-

ement of dance, leading to her abortive sexual encounter with a young stranger at a Latin dance party.

For Sonja, the Latin dance class, like the lantana, is both beautiful and treacherous at the same time. It is a site for sexual sublimation, because the classes have a sexual potency that is lacking at home. It is a site in which the characters are sexually tempted and act out desire. The site of the dance floor is a tangle of deceit and duplicity, no more in evidence than when Sonja dances with Jane, Leon's mistress. Leon's disquiet is palpable, the fear of imminent exposure etched on his face.

While Sonja copes with her joyless marriage in her own introspective and abortive way, Leon and Valerie muddle through their crises without any clear sense of what they are doing. Both characters are edgy, unnerved and taut. They are both looking for a shaft of light through the thick psychological and emotional foliage.

Leon and Valerie, more than other characters, seem to be dealing with their personal conflict in very extreme ways. Valerie is a predictably disturbed character, given the death of her daughter; a woman just holding on as her life slips through her fingers. Leon's volatile nature, both at work and at home, similarly teeters on the brink. He projects his aggression on to others, but also aims it masochistically at himself; so that he might end the numbness he feels. There is something quite disturbing in his attack on the jogger he bumps into, and his love-



making with Jane is clearly an antidote for his own pain.

Leon overshoots the mark considerably in trying to solve the case of Valerie's disappearance by projecting his own anxieties onto others. As John and Leon talk on the balcony, for example, we see how vulnerable Leon really is in his outright refusal to admit his role in the failure of his marriage.

Leon and Valerie both perversely punish themselves for their perceived failures and frailties. So their respective pain engulfs and asphyxiates them, starving them of oxygen and denying them the light needed to find their way. In their working roles, Leon (as a detective) and Valerie (as a psychiatrist) interrogate others, yet neither possesses the self-knowledge to see the causes and effects of their own human condition. The way in which both Leon and Valerie constantly project their own insecurities on to those

around them reveals their emotional fragmentation.

In Valerie's case, her terrible fate is brought about by her inability to take her own advice. At her book launch she speaks about the importance of trust, but it is trust, or lack of it, that causes her to flee from Nik's car and to her demise. As Valerie escapes into the dark bushland, the symbolism of the landscape is unavoidable and self-evident. The landscape inhabited by the characters is another important element that defines each character.

There are other subtle nuances in which ideas of place, landscape and proximity are exploited. In reading these ideas in *Lantana*, it is helpful to first look at where the characters are located within the city in which the film is set. The Zats live in the neat inner-city suburbs, Paula, Nik and Jane live in the working-class outer suburbs, and Valerie and

John inhabit an expensive bush retreat on the very outskirts of the city.

In John and Valerie's architect-designed home nestled in bushland, overlooking the river, physical location becomes very symbolic. They are a couple isolated in more than one sense of the word. They are constantly framed through the windscreen of their car, lit only by the light of the dashboard, stilted and barely engaged with one another, driving to and from the city in a well-oiled routine. This contrasts noticeably with the sense of community that surrounds other characters. Even Jane, who lives alone, orbits within easy reach of the happy chaos of the family next door.

John and Valerie are defined by their existence on the bushland margins. In a number of scenes we see John placed within the vastness of the landscape, dwarfed by its immense emptiness, conveying his

singular isolation and grief. The bush, therefore, represents some sort of private horror and unarticulated fear in parallel with the emotional states of both Valerie and John.

It is Valerie who eventually becomes consumed by the nocturnal landscape, however, and the suggestion is no more obvious than when the truth of her disappearance is re-enacted: she steps out into the dark. The transition Valerie makes from the safe, man-made environment to the raw and unmediated bush is marked with a singular sense of foreboding. Indeed, later, as she scrambles through the unruly bushland to get away from Nik, there is a sense that she has become mad, clawing her way through the dense bush to escape an imagined enemy. The bush, therefore, is presented to the viewer as a dangerous and unmarked territory. It is a site where Valerie cannot mask her fear of threat and lack of trust anymore.

Valerie's mysterious disappearance marks the beginning of the end of the film, which unexpectedly ties everything together in a neat coda that leaves no character without an 'end', no matter how ambiguous it might be.

The End

Few of these stories end happily, although it is suggested that endurance is a virtue, in the case of Leon and Sonja, and might lead to eventual repair. In fact there is much to be inferred from the way in which the filmmaker has chosen to 'tie

ends up'. There is a sense that the pitfalls of institutionalized marriage are implicated in this ending.

The two characters that dared interfere with a marriage, Patrick, the gay lover of a married man and Jane, who has an affair with Leon Zat, are excluded at the end of the film. In Patrick's case he is bitter and quite literally left out in the cold. In Jane's case, Leon has left her empty-handed, dancing and daydreaming about what might have been. Her partner drives away, defeated.

John Knox, Valerie Somers' partner, is equally defeated, having lost not only his daughter but also his wife, and is living with the guilt of not having responded when she desperately tried to contact him in the middle of her fateful night.

Few characters emerge unscathed in *Lantana*. Claudia (Leah Purcell), Leon's professional colleague, meets her 'mystery man' and is on the cusp of a potentially happy ending. In Nik and Paula's house, domestic happiness has been restored, after Leon has interrogated Nik for his role in picking up Valerie on the night of her disappearance.

The real affirmation of the film is echoed in the words of Paula (Daniella Fardinacci), Nik's partner. When asked how she knows that Nik didn't kill Valerie, she merely responds that she knows because Nik told her he didn't kill her. There are no games, no pretence, and no lies in their relationship. Hers is the uncomplicated voice of love and reason in the film.

Narrative Structure in *Lantana*

Temporally, the narrative structure of *Lantana* is essentially linear, a familiar narrative pattern where events proceed in a coherent and chronological order. Traditionally, a linear narrative will work from a starting point in time to another point in time, without any deviation.

In *Lantana*, however, the interwoven stories of the many characters in the film create the multi-strand narrative. There are rippling concentric circles that ultimately merge, as the lives of discrete individuals and families become entwined through circumstance and chance.

A multi-strand narrative coordinates the parallel narratives of many different characters at once. We see these individual narratives at different stages, and as the narrative progresses they often become increasingly interwoven and connected. There are two deviations from the linear narrative structure in *Lantana*, however: the flash-forward opening scene where we see a dead woman's body in the lantana bush, and then a flashback scene where we see what happened to Valerie during Nik's retelling at the police station. These two scenes are central in both establishing and then concluding the murder mystery storyline within the film.

The linear structure is otherwise exploited in the film, with tension and suspense building as the characters' individual stories become increasingly interconnected. There is an inexorable trajectory towards the solving of

the crime, although there are clues that tease, that point the finger at multiple characters as suspects in the 'murder' of Valerie Somers.

Similarly, the different storylines become fused as the film progresses. As indicated earlier, *Lantana* is at once a murder mystery, a love story and a melodrama of human relationships. The concentric narratives culminate in a story that has woven together more than ten characters. Although these seemingly discrete portraits are given varying degrees of exposure by the filmmaker, at a narrative level, they all have equal importance in propelling and twisting the story. For example, while the film focuses on Leon and his role as a detective, the character of Patrick, who we see relatively briefly, holds equal weight in the building of tension and the eventual resolution of the film.

It is through Leon Zat that many of the connections between characters take place. He is the magnetizing, unifying force that cues the viewer into his marriage, his chance meetings, his affair and his detective work. These ripples, which spread from Leon in ever-increasing circles, finally come to a halt in the film's moments of truth and discovery.

Strategies for teaching *Lantana*

Familiarity with key sequences in the film will enable understanding of characters and ideas. What follows is a focus on a number of key sequences and the meanings that are created. The bullet points frame the narrative and visual ingredients of each se-

quence. They can be used for discussion and writing.

1. Into the tangle

The opening scenes of *Lantana* are loaded with mysteries, clues and references to what lies ahead. Leon is introduced as flawed or at least a little reckless, which is something we suspect immediately through his connection with two different women.

Ingredients:

- The familiar tropical hum of crickets rises to become oppressive – like white noise.
- The panning of the camera over and into the lantana is suggestive of ideas of surface and depth – beautiful foliage on top, but something sinister below.
- The woman's dead body is anonymous, although she wears a wedding ring. It's not made clear that this is a flash forward
- The use of jump cuts in these opening scenes.
- The interaction between Leon and Jane about her earring: 'I'm just fond of them because my husband gave them to me.' This black humour indicates an affair and camouflages possible guilt.
- Leon wears a suit. Something about his work/lifestyle is assumed from this.
- Light, or rather, the lack of lighting. Like the rest of the film these opening scenes are dark, shrouded in a kind of chiaroscuro.
- In these opening scenes two women are introduced, but their roles are not yet altogether clear.
- The opening sequence presents three women

and one man. They are all anonymous. The viewer is left guessing, forced to sleuth, consistent with the murder mystery genre.

2. The launch

'We don't know what to feel anymore ...'

Ingredients:

- The content of Valerie's speech.
- The way her words foreshadow what is to come.
- The appearance of the two men.
- The use of music in this scene.
- The *mise-en-scène*: Valerie is flanked by enormous banners and lit from a small lectern light, surrounded by a sea of people.

3. Patrick's psychotherapy

Ingredients:

- The reasons Patrick feels the need to see a psychiatrist.
- What sort of attitude Patrick projects.
- How the two characters are placed in relation to one another and how they are lit.
- The way in which we see Valerie in shot.
- The way in which we see Patrick in shot.
- What Patrick implies about his attitude towards women.
- What Patrick implies about his attitude towards love.
- Why Valerie gets so upset by Patrick.

4. Leon and John discuss marriage

'Sometimes love isn't enough ...'

Ingredients:

- The ways in which Leon and John interact has changed by this stage.
- John's body language as he sits on the balcony.
- The landscape.
- The fact that Leon's suspicions were wrong.
- The way in which Leon seems to project his own fears and insecurities onto others.
- The fact that Leon lies to John.
- John's confessions to Leon.
- Comment on the statement: 'Sometimes love isn't enough.'

5. Jane's dreams

Ingredients:

- Paula's confidence in Nik's innocence: 'Because he told me.'
- Paula's animosity towards Jane at this point.
- The way in which Jane and Pete are placed in the doorway and the way they are lit.
- The fact that Jane felt it necessary to tidy Paula and Nik's house.
- Paula's reaction to this.
- The way in which Jane doesn't seem to understand why Paula is upset.
- What this says about Jane's character and her conduct during the film.

6. Happy ever after?

Leon's struggle is partly resolved as he eventually breaks down just prior to the real coda to the film. We can draw few conclusions about the future of Sonja and Leon's relationship from their interaction in this closing scene. Included here is a montage of the fates, happy or otherwise, of all the characters, finally returning to

Leon and Sonja, whose relationship remains problematic.

Ingredients:

- Leon sits in his car and listens to the remainder of his wife's tape.
 - He breaks down painfully.
 - Dishevelled, Leon approaches Sonja at home, who appears equally distressed.
 - Why would the filmmaker find it necessary to end all the characters' stories so conclusively and explicitly?
 - Leon lies alone in his suit, despondent.
 - Jane dances alone, with drink and cigarette in the darkness.
 - Claudia meets her 'mystery man'.
 - Patrick is rejected and stands in the rain.
 - Nik and Paula with their children in a happy domestic scene.
 - John alone in a wide landscape with his back to us.
 - Leon and Sonja: their marriage looks like it may work.
 - In these scenes, very obvious devices have been employed to indicate certain things – light, weather, landscape.
 - Finally, we see Leon and Sonja slow dancing – this is clearly a step forward from earlier in the film when Leon would not dance. Yet their future relationship is still unclear.
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