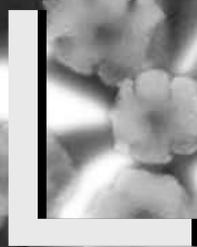




In the Thick of It: Trust and Suspicion in 'Lantana'



Lantana at a Glance

Concerns:

- Relationships and love
- Honesty and trust
- Appearance and reality
- Betrayals
- Loyalty
- Loss
- Self-awareness
- Self-need/ego
- Desires

Main Characters:

- Leon Zat
- Sonja Zat
- Valerie Somers
- John Knox
- Jane O'May

- Peter O'May
- Nik D'Amato
- Paula D'Amato
- Claudia Weis
- Patrick Phelan
- 'Mystery Man' Michael

2005 Exam Questions on *Lantana*:

Part One:

'This is a study of choices – poor choices made by people in crisis.' Discuss.

Part Two:

'*Lantana* shows that to communicate honestly is difficult, even for people

who love each other.' Discuss.

The sound is intense, all-encompassing. It is easily recognizable as a flurry of crickets on a sticky, summer evening. It becomes ever-increasing, deafening. The stillness of a plant littered sporadically with pretty flowers is a curious contrast to the apparent activity below, the only indication of which is that all-pervasive sound that we recognize, but which is not instantly connected to an image. It is shrouded in mystery as we delve, intrigued,

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into the thick of it all. Welcome to the lantana.

It is the mystery of the opening scene of Ray Lawrence's Australian hit *Lantana* (2001), adapted from Andrew Bovell's play *Speaking in Tongues*, which hooks the audience. The careful and almost sensual panning shot

driven narrative.

Lantana offers a postmodern critique of relationships, trust and the importance of honesty and self-awareness in our interaction with others. It follows four couples and the various characters that surround them in everyday life. The relationships portrayed

rative film, it is somewhat difficult to view Leon as the protagonist, however central he may be to bringing together the characters around him.

The importance of honesty and trust is central to this film, and indeed it questions whether a relationship can

dead woman in the lantana plant – that Leon's betrayal in having an affair would not lie only in the act itself but in the lack of honesty and openness about such an act. Similarly, and ironically given her situation with her husband John, Valerie is heard at her book launch speaking of the importance of relinquishing power in order to have trust in a relationship. It is easy to see *Lantana's* comment on the importance of these ingredients when we are presented with the contrasting relationship of Nik and Paula. This is the only positive relationship in the film, founded mostly on honesty and trust, and one which can almost be seen as the 'binary opposite' of the relationship between Valerie and John.

... the film builds a narrative that is more complex than a classical Hollywood mystery, and soon the lonely body which starts the journey becomes a distant memory against the complexity of the character-driven narrative

of the body of a woman hidden in a thick, thorny bush is instantly recognizable as the possible causal effect of whatever narrative intrigue will follow. However, the film builds a narrative that is more complex than a classical Hollywood mystery, and soon the lonely body which starts the journey becomes a distant memory against the complexity of the character-

vary from marital and love relationships to community relationships such as those between friends, professionals and patients, neighbours and strangers. Leon Zat, a middle-aged man looking for something more than the routine which he sees as plaguing his marriage, is the man who links the characters together in various ways. In such a multi-nar-

function without these key ingredients. Both Leon and his wife, Sonja, who is also looking for a little more excitement in her life, represent the struggle for honesty and trust in a marital relationship and highlight the reoccurring theme of appearance versus reality. In a poignant moment, Sonja reveals to her psychologist, Valerie – later established to be the lonely

Climbing Up the Walls

Somewhere in the middle lies the marriage of Leon and Sonia. On the surface

of things, their relationship seems a model one. They have a family, a house in an affluent suburb of Sydney with a skip out the front (which speaks mountains of the current status of their relationship), good jobs, and they even attend Latin dancing classes together. However, it is precisely this notion of appearance versus reality that permeates the film and is highlighted by what has come to be known as the 'lantana metaphor', which is established at the very beginning of the film. The plant, with its green and flowery exterior hides a dark underbelly. It is thorny, harsh and all-encapsulating. The lantana hides myriad secrets, including children playing, Valerie's shoe and Jane in her search for it, and most importantly, the dead body.

Leon's affair with Jane follows quickly from the opening presentation of the dead woman in the lantana plant. The juxtaposition of sex and death is not lost on the viewer, and neither is the mechanical aspect of the sex in the absence of an emotional connection between the two. Leon, adept at internalizing his emotions, seems to be at a crossroads in his life, and the dissatisfaction he feels is manifested in an affair with Jane; he is unable to pinpoint exactly what is wrong with his marriage, apart from a professed feeling of numbness. Although he later claims to John that loyalty is a key element of marital relationships, it is debateable whether Leon has actually considered the consequences of his behaviour, even though he understands his choices to be disloyal and unethical.

Partly due to such behaviour

from Leon, it is the character of Sonja with whom the audience tends to sympathize. First presented in radiant light, sporting a warm smile and an air of sophistication, Sonja states that at such an age in a marriage, it is easy to 'go out and find somebody' – and, indeed, it is hard not to. Sonja Zat embodies the importance of self-awareness and emotional maturity. Her embrace of the 'lines' around her eyes attests to a greater acceptance and understanding of self. In a moment of clarity during an encounter with a younger man in a car park, she realizes that she cannot carry through with infidelity. Her demoralization and humiliation on discovering Leon's affair is understandable, given that she chose not to take the same path. Leon's inability to do the same thing reflects his self-centredness and lack of and self-awareness.

Sonja seems to hold the family together in a display of emotional maturity, and the welfare of her two teenage boys is of utmost importance. The boys are fiercely loyal to her and the contrast between her and Leon is highlighted in their different reactions to their son's smoking marijuana in the house. Leon's aggressive outbursts, connected with the stress of his job, are an attempt to keep certain emotions at bay. Sonja's maturity and ability to feel are highlighted, amongst other things, by her reaction to her son's drug use, her visits to Valerie and her ability to accept the truth of her status and stage in life.

However, Sonja does represent a woman in search of more, highlighted in her strong desire for Latin dancing

classes, which Leon attends begrudgingly. This style of dancing is representative of passion and fantasies, though, contrastingly, it can be argued that Leon and Sonja are on their way to reconnecting through the dance by the end of the narrative, while Jane is still dancing alone, searching for that fantasy world after her let-down by Leon.

The Latin dancing and female-dominated 'fantasy' world portrayed in the movie is contrasted with the harsh reality of a 'macho' Australian culture, and *Lantana* explores what it means to be a male in contemporary society. Leon and Peter's conversation in the pub toilets points to Leon's perceptions of masculinity and how a man should handle emotion. Leon is baffled by the emotional outburst from a man with whom he collides whilst jogging, and cannot understand what it would take to make a man cry like that. Later, the audience experiences a sense of pity for Leon, as he sobs uncontrollably at the discovery that his wife still loves him.

However, awareness of one's feelings, problems and situation is also portrayed as insufficient at times. This is emphasized through the character of Valerie: in her job, being aware of others' feelings raises the question of what to do with that knowledge once one has acquired it, and the next steps needed for saving a relationship are weighted with the same difficulty. This is presented both in the struggle for reconnection between Valerie and John, and in the clear links between Valerie and Sonja.

Actions and Intentions

Both Valerie and Sonja have husbands who have not been honest about their actions and intentions. However, *Lantana's* comment on the importance of honesty is clear through the different attitudes that the two women adopt towards their current circumstances. We see Sonja make a fragile but perhaps successful attempt at recovering her relationship with Leon, contrasted clearly with the gradual downfall of Valerie. The two are also connected by the 'shoe' metaphor. The 'shoe', a recurring symbol in the film, can be seen as representing femininity. After coming to her senses in the garage and deciding not to have an affair with a younger man, Sonja is only wearing one shoe but manages to put the other back on. Contrastingly, Valerie loses her shoe, which later becomes an important piece of evidence in a forensic investigation. Whilst the two characters live rather parallel lives, their paths veer off as we see Sonja's road to recovery juxtaposed with the tragic ending of Valerie.

The intricacy of Valerie and John's marriage is another comment on the complex steps needed in resurrecting a relationship. The setting for their relationship is somewhat pointed. A large house in the country, sparsely but elegantly furnished, and wide open spaces which they have used to distance themselves from each other, leading to an internalization of emotions which would have been better off out in the open. It is no wonder that, in a moment of emotional honesty, Valerie opens up to her answering machine, and communicates



her love for John as he is listening, apparently unmoved.

In keeping with the lantana metaphor, Valerie holds a seemingly high-powered job as a published writer, a point which her husband resents, as it is the murder of their

However, Valerie's methods of coping, lead to her destruction. An almost primordial fear consumes Valerie and eventually leads to her being swallowed by the lantana plant. The theme of the natural world and its links with human instincts is clear. For

can transcend the ego and our own selfish needs that we can properly relate to others.

'Lantana' in the Classroom

A fantastic way to delve into the film is to watch it in a dark, auditorium-style room

of which is given opposite); a running sheet on segmentation in the film; some notes on characters, setting, style, so on; and perhaps some sample essay questions and answers.

After the viewing, a great activity to start with requires the promotional poster or even the front cover of the DVD. Class discussion could revolve around how the poster or cover signposts to us what the movie is about – for example, the Australian edition features a picture of Leon and Sonja hugging with the thorny lantana plant in the background. After this activity, it would be well worth discussing the importance of the 'cause-effect' relationship, which aspects of this we see in this text and how it shapes the narrative structure.

Following on from this, I believe the film to be deserving of a scene-by-scene analysis rather simply adopting a thematic approach. Virtually every scene in the film has a story to tell, and a chronologi-

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daughter Eleanor which has led to a bestselling book by Valerie. The two highlight the difference in individual ways of dealing with trauma and hardship, but have not allowed themselves to share what might have been crucial to the survival of their relationship – their common feelings and grief about the loss of Eleanor.

example, Valerie's unfounded assumptions about her husband's supposed affair with her patient Patrick are indicative of her consumption by illogical, primal emotion. Characters like Valerie, John, Leon and Jane are driven by their own selfish needs and desires. Given the outcome of the various relationships, it is fair to say that *Lantana* comments that it is not until we

with surround sound. If you have these facilities, they are ideal for a film that requires intense involvement from its audience. For an even better first viewing, screen the movie uninterrupted. An after-school viewing session could be a great way to do this. If you have the time or inclination, organize a unit booklet including things such as: a character map (an example

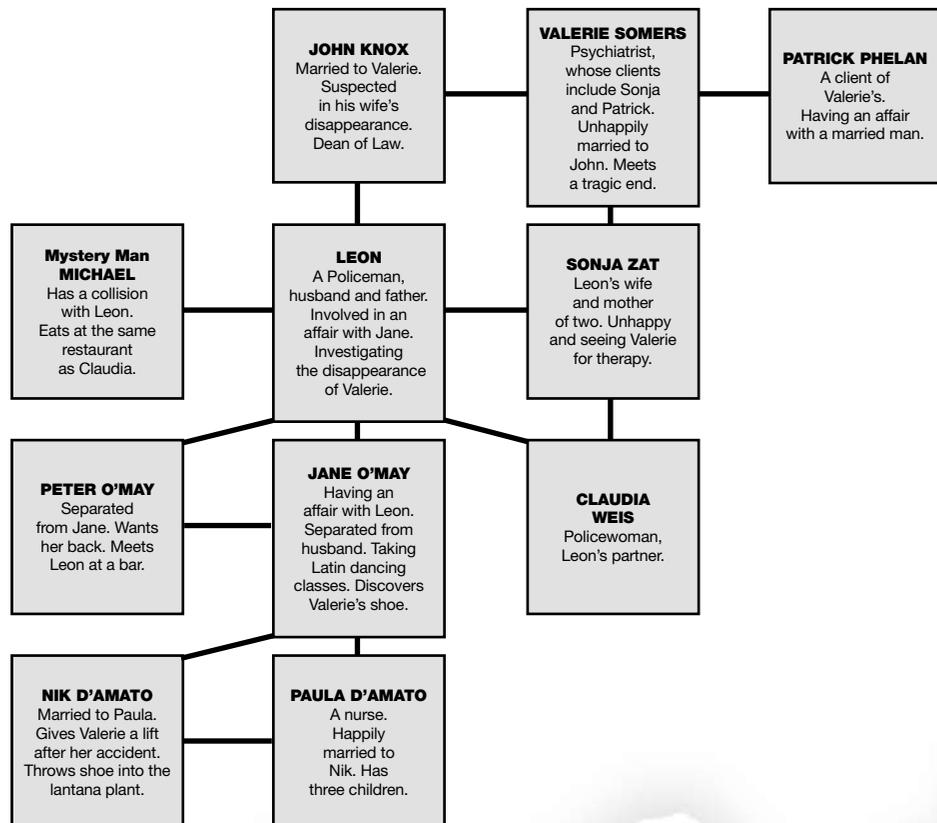


cal look at each scene or key scenes is less confusing for a movie with such a dense narrative.

As a Year 12 English text, *Lantana* requires a fair few weeks of study in order for it to be given the attention it deserves. Be sure to devote much time to discussion during the study of this movie, as the themes and issues it delves into lend themselves nicely to in-depth discussions of a wide variety of related concerns.

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CHARACTER MAP OF *LANTANA*



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Big

STUPID FILMS

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ART of WAR

O...

YOU COULD DO WORSE

You and Your Stupid Mate

W...

UP FOR GRABS

T...

Animated Worlds

Hayao Miyazaki

MAJIC CREATOR OF Ghibli

J...

BROTHERLY LOVE AND LOVE'S BROTHER

A...

HIGHS AND LOWS

UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE OF ONE PERFECT DAY

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T...

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