

## Task for *Hotel Sorrento*

### Exploring Australian cultural identity and the cultural cringe

Hannie Rayson herself states, “With *Hotel Sorrento* my central question was how far we had come in terms of our quest to articulate an Australian identity and what kinds of changes had taken place during the past decade.” However, she also says she is interested in subjects that are “bursting with contradiction”.

As you explore this theme, using the following references as a starting point, consider both the **comments** about Australian cultural identity made and the **contradictions** revealed in the characters’ attitudes. In particular, consider the character of Meg as the expatriate commenting on Australia and Dick as the nationalistic counterpoint.

Consider Meg’s role as an expatriate:

- Her leaving Australia to further her literary career.
- Her feeling of being an outsider in England, 1:11, pp. 28–29.
- Her complex response to her award nomination, 1:11, p. 28.
- Dick’s criticism of Meg’s “hypocrisy”, 1:16, pp. 33–34 and 1:19, p. 38.

Evidence of expatriate attitudes towards Australian culture:

- Her scorn of the Australian play in 1:3, p. 5.
- Her fear that her own novel might also be “obvious”, 1:3, p. 5 and whether it is a “cultural handicap” p. 6.
- Carmel, the Australian playwright’s refusal to speak for fear of having her accent recognized, 1:3, p. 8.
- The British canonical texts Meg constantly references.
- The validity of Meg’s views. Dick sees them as outdated, 1:16, p. 34.
- Meg’s criticism of Australian’s fascination with canonical writers such as Shakespeare and Chaucer, 1:7, p. 17.
- Meg’s apparent belief that staying in Australia would have limited her career, 1:11, pp. 28–29).
- Meg’s awareness that she sounds like “a pain in the arse”, 1:15, p. 32.
- Meg’s insecurity, feeling like she is a watercolour amongst oil paintings, 1:20, p. 40.
- Meg’s criticism of life in Sorrento, 2:2, p. 51.
- Meg’s criticism of the art scene in Australia, 2:11, p. 72.
- Meg’s criticism that her achievement is being ignored by her compatriots, 2:11, p. 72.
- The argument between Meg and Dick about what is celebrated as culture in Australia: sport and money as opposed to art, 2:11, pp. 72–74.
- Meg’s inability to commit to living in Australia, 2:17, p. 85.

Evidence of British characters' attitudes towards Australians:

- Edwin's teasing of Meg, but his realization that Australian's complexity is their expression (an affirmation that Meg brushes over), 1:3, p. 6.
- Edwin's family's condescension towards Australia and Australians, 1:11, pp. 27–28.
- Gareth's similar attitudes, 1:11, p. 28.
- Edwin's comments of the Australian barbecue, 2:11, p. 65.
- Edwin's characterization of the Australian vernacular as "tawdry", 2:15, p. 80.
- The British critic's accusations of Meg's work as derivative and Marge's response, 2:17, p. 80.

Evidence of changes in Australian culture

- Dick's insistence that Australian culture has changed, and no longer "honours ordinariness", 1:9, p. 22.
- Dick's criticism of Meg's interview and representation of Australian culture, 1:16, pp. 33–34.
- Dick's further criticism that Meg perpetuates an image of Australia as a "colonial outpost", 1:19, p. 38.
- Dick's concession that he has little "currency in the mainstream", 1:19, p. 38.
- The characters of Hil, Pippa and Meg as compared with their mother, 2:11, pp. 67–68.
- The argument between Meg and Dick about what is celebrated as culture in Australia: sport and money as opposed to art, 2:11, pp. 72–74.
- The revelation that Wal bought Dick's political newspaper, 2:11, p. 69.

Reflection: Is Meg's cultural cringe understandable or perhaps even appropriate?

- Compare Meg's comments about Australian life with its representation in *Hotel Sorrento*, reflected in Hil, Troy and Wal, as well as Marge and Dick.
- Can Meg's novel and *Hotel Sorrento* itself, as works of Australian literature, be considered profound and passionate? Literary? Or are they tawdry and derivative?
- With whom do you most agree in regards to their view of Australian culture: Meg or Dick?
- Is each character's relationship with their sense of Australian identity one-dimensional, or complex? Explain.
- To what extent does the Moynahan family act as a microcosm of Australia as a nation?