



# BIG DRAMAS

second  
edition

## Home Sweet Home

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

<b>Suitable</b>	Suitable for Year 8
<b>Difficulty</b>	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
<b>Genre</b>	Sitcom, farce
<b>Themes</b>	Parent and child relationships, peer pressure, neglectful or absent caretakers, ambitions and expectations, teenage relationships, marriage
<b>Literary and dramatic techniques</b>	Farcical comedy, hyperbole, stereotyping, verbal faux pas, register and tone
<b>Cast</b>	6 characters: 3 male, 3 female, but it would be comical to have students of the opposite gender reading the parts and getting into the representation of male or female stock characters

## Why choose this play?

Many famous authors and critics have enjoyed the soap opera as a literary form. They have relished the stock characters and open-ended narrative, the eternal circularity and infinite variations of the plots which can be constructed from a handful of familiar character types. *Home Sweet Home* will be familiar territory to anyone who has watched *Neighbours*, *Home and Away*, or serial sitcoms such as *The Big Bang Theory* or *Modern Family*. A farcical situation involving six stock characters shows how our favourite dramas construct, manipulate and recycle the same human types over and over. This lesson will involve even reluctant English students by making them the 'expert viewer' and drawing on their potentially substantial TV knowledge.

## Practical considerations

Plan for 45 minutes to read through the text and around 90 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.



# Teaching *Home Sweet Home* by Sue Murray

## Learning objectives

Students will:

- understand the concept of stock characters and recognise some familiar ones, then identify the character types in the play
- analyse how a stock character is constructed through speech, plot, action and visual conventions
- consider that the stock character embodies certain values, and reflect on what those values are. They will recognise that soap operas are didactic texts, coaching viewers in acceptable values through the exploration of different topical or moral situations
- create a new drama text by drawing on their analysis of a stock character and their values.



## Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

<b>Year 8 content descriptions</b>	Language: Language for interaction	ACELA1541	Understand how conventions of speech adopted by communities influence the identities of people in those communities.
	Literature: Literature and context	ACELT1626	Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups.
	Literature: Creating literature	ACELT1768	Experiment with particular language features drawn from different types of texts, including combinations of language and visual choices to create new texts.
<b>General capabilities</b>	Personal and social capability		Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships
	Critical and creative thinking		In the Australian Curriculum, students develop capability in critical and creative thinking as they learn to generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives and solve problems. Critical and creative thinking are integral to activities that require students to think broadly and deeply using skills, behaviours and dispositions such as reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school.



## 1. Approaching the text

Ask students to recall their favourite TV soap opera or series. If they don't have one, ask them what their parents or grandparents enjoy watching. What's the attraction? Do they notice any similarities from week to week? Do they ever get fed up with it and feel that the story never seems to have an end, or that the characters aren't like 'real' people?

## 2. Introducing ideas

### i) Most soap operas and many popular texts use a selection of well-known character types called 'stock characters'.

While this sometimes makes the characters predictable and flat, the number of situations into which they can be placed is almost infinite.

#### *Understanding activity*

Ask students to list soap operas or series that they know well. Ideally three or four different ones will be put forward. Draw a table on the board with the titles down the left side and a list of stock characters along the top (as in the example below). When students have explored the appearance of these characters in their favourite soaps or series, add the names of the stock characters from *Home Sweet Home*.

Stock character	The ditzzy girl	The sensitive teen	The flighty mother	The jock / sporty kid	The manly dad
<i>Home Sweet Home</i>	Ella / Shana	Tom	Gina	Jake	Simon
<i>Neighbours</i>					
<i>Home and Away</i>					
<i>Big Bang Theory</i>					

Draw out in discussion that the characters in *Home Sweet Home* are all stock characters of one sort or another. We know how they're going to behave because they have a limited number of actions and reactions; what we don't know (and what keeps us watching) is the variety and types of situations that will result either because of their own behaviour, the behaviour of others, or an outside incident whose intrusion sparks conflict.

Point out that characters represent one type alone, and another when they're combined. For example: Tom and Jake are the 'odd couple' at the end because of their shared interest in poetry; Ella and Shana are the 'ditzzy teenage girls' together; all the kids are 'young people' versus 'the olds' (their parents); and the parents are 'neglectful' or 'absent parents'. In a further episode we might have a 'double date', composed of an 'odd/mismatched couple' and a 'happy couple'—the possibilities are endless!

### ii) Each character is created by certain speech, visual, action and plot conventions.

#### *Understanding activity*

Divide the class into groups and give one character to each group. Ask them to develop a profile of the character which would be given to the *Home Sweet Home* production team. There should be information for the wardrobe department about how to dress them, for the props and set designer about what their environment would look like, for the scriptwriter about how to have them speak, and for the actor about how to move and use props.

Students should be as specific as possible, giving examples from the text where they appear. For example, for the character of Shana, students might construct a profile like below. (A template of this table can be downloaded.)





Visual (person)	Visual (environment)	Speech	Movement	Plot
Popular teen wear, high street brands, nothing expensive. Trendy rather than stylish, with girly touches—sugary colours, lace and lots of blingy embellishments, slightly suggestive but not overtly provocative.	Her bedroom (messy, childish, evidence of undistinguished and voracious consumerism) school, leisure areas. Do not place near books, turned-off TVs, dark colours or muted patterns unless moral condemnation or emotional discomfort is to be conveyed.	High pitch, punctuated by giggles, many unfinished or shortened sentences. Lower-middle class Australian register - colloquial, not vulgar. Many interjections, dramatic physical and verbal manner.	Varied—at times teenage flamboyance and physically energetic, dramatic movements and careless disposition of limbs on surfaces, at other times (around parents, contemporary boys) restrained, even coy.	Good for sidekick roles, providing teenage volume—both aurally and in numbers of teens, potentially useful for 'teen pregnancy' storyline.
Examples:				

### iii) They also reflect certain values.

Although soap operas may lack depth in their intellectual and character profile, their use of stock characters has some advantages. Because they are so long running, the long-term results of social issues can be shown—things like unemployment, divorce, teenage pregnancy and their effects can be dealt with at length, if not always in depth or with the admission of individual differences.

They can also be highly didactic: by using character types into which many people fall, the viewer can be 'coached' in how to handle certain situations. The stock character is motivated by stock values which dictate their reactions to situations.

### Understanding activity

Ask each student in the character groups to imagine that they are the actor playing this character. In order to 'get into character', they must write a short reflection about what their character's values are. They should aim for around a page, and may use these questions as prompts:

- What would they say is important to them in life, and what's *really* important?
- What do they aspire to?
- What do they think is an acceptable way to achieve this?
- What are this character's values trying to teach the audience?
- How would they use their skills as an actor in order to make the audience react to them the way they hope?

### 3. The learning activity

Soap operas often have multiple plots going on at once, but each episode foregrounds one story and generally conveys it through the experience of one character whose values inform our perception of the situation. Tom's perspective is foremost in *Home Sweet Home*, and we therefore see the parents as flighty and useless, his intellectual environment as unsatisfying and his relationships as unstimulating. He is not, however, without some consumerist drives—he asks Jake to lie for him so that his father will give him a new phone.

Students could

- a) rewrite part of this play to foreground another character's experience
- or
- b) choose one of the situations alluded to during the play and write the next episode from the perspective of a character involved in it.

- a) If students rewrite this episode to foreground another character's experience, they should consider first how the text foregrounds Tom's experience. It does this by:
  - Opening the action with him
  - Keeping him constantly on the stage
  - Making all the dialogue relate in some way to him
  - Leading the action to a climax relevant to Tom and then a denouement which promises further action for him.

If students were going to follow Gina's experience of the drama, they might open with Gina on the phone outside the flat then coming through the door, follow her phone conversations with Simon at the beginning and Mr Lee after that, and then go into Ella's bedroom for a conversation with her daughter. All of Gina's interactions are part of parallel plots which are not featured in this episode, but which could be the subject of future ones. Students can create new characters if needed, but these must be stock characters as well. Resources for this can be found in the Further reading section below.

- b) If students wish to continue the action, they should make a list of all the potential future actions alluded to in this episode and note which character would be the logical protagonist. For example, Simon is the logical protagonist for an episode featuring his stormy relationship with his boss, Greenway, where he finally does tell the 'short-sighted, pig-headed tyrant...where to shove his job'. They should draw on the character profiles developed above to help them use their character consistently. Again, they can create new characters if needed, but these must be stock characters as well. Resources for this can be found in the Further reading section below.

### 4. Rounding up

Ask students whether they feel differently about their favourite soap or series, now that they can see the characters as simply stock characters in predictable poses. If the characters aren't particularly deep, where does the attraction of the text lie? Is it the infinite variety of situations? Is there some goal towards which they are all moving? Is it simply in the detail of presentation? Although we often think that great texts revolve around characterisation, sometimes texts with really stock characters make us realise that a text's attraction lies elsewhere.

### Assessment ideas

- i) The popular soap opera *Thespo High* needs a new character to raise viewing numbers and make it more relevant. The scriptwriter has been asked to come up with a new character who will be trialled in a short scene with three existing characters (all stock characters): Sharnelle, the cheerleading, popular Year 10 student and stock ditzzy girl; Jude, the well-meaning but inept school counsellor; and Travis, the geeky captain of the computer club.





Students should produce a character profile (see above) detailing the visual, action, plot and speech conventions of the character, then draft a two-minute scene with the four characters. The scene should demonstrate the student's understanding of the stock conventions of the three characters mentioned, and their own invented character.

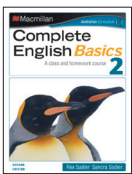

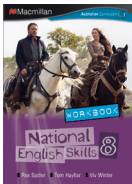
- ii) Stock characters retain their popularity because they provide people with easy models to emulate. Although flat, predictable and often despicable characters, they continue to influence viewers because it is easy to identify with them. However, really mature viewers get sick of them when they realise that they have little value either as entertainment or as guides to life.

Ask students to hold a class discussion about this, allotting one student the role of chairperson, and requiring all students to participate with at least one point and one question.

- iii) Ask students to use a site like [Quizworks](#) to design and create a quiz titled 'What stock character are you?' They should draw on a bank of at least ten characters (see the Further reading section below for resources about this) and create at least twelve questions which probe the responder's values and attitudes before telling them which stock character they're most like. The results screen should include an image and examples of the stock character and, of course, a description of them.

## Using the play with other resources

It is possible to combine this play with other Macmillan resources if you have them in your collection. The exercises in the following workbooks provide useful warm-up activities with which to differentiate the concepts in this lesson. Students could attempt one or two of the exercises at home as a preparatory exercise for this lesson.

	<b>Complete English Basics 2 (2nd edn)</b>	pp110–12
	<b>English Workbook 2 (3rd edn)</b>	Unit 1: Connections with place, pp10–16
	<b>National English Skills 8</b>	Unit 16: Drama, pp142–9

## Further reading

- Further reading
- Resources about stock characters which will help to illustrate the points, and give students more ideas for characters if they need to create them can be found on [TV Tropes](#) and [Wikipedia](#).



## Linked texts

*Home Sweet Home* could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others)

- *King of Shadows*, Susan Cooper
- *The First Book of Samuel*, Ursula Dubosarsky
- *Ariel, Zed and the Secret of Life*, Anna Fienberg
- *Cairo Jim and the Lagoon of Tidal Magnificence*, Geoffrey McSkimming
- *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie
- *The Bad Beginning*, Lemony Snicket
- *Babe* (G), directed by Chris Noonan
- *Chicken Run* (G), directed by Peter Lord and Nick Park
- *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (G), directed by Steven Spielberg
- *Ever After* (PG), directed by Andy Tennant
- *Galaxy Quest* (PG), directed by Dean Parisot
- *The Princess Bride* (PG), directed by Rob Reiner
- *Shrek* (PG), directed by Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson and Scott Marshall
- *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (PG), directed by Robert Zemeckis



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