

BIG DRAMAS second edition

Macbeth Inc.

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 10
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Black comedy, parody of Shakespeare
Themes	Power, corruption, madness, justice, ambition, violence
Literary and dramatic techniques	Soliloquy, aside, apostrophe, personification, chorus, visual comedy, literary allusion, intertextuality, pastiche
Cast	11 characters

Why choose this play?

Although a witty take on *Macbeth*, Sue Murray's play actually works as an intriguing demonstration of how the traditional relationship between texts and values is breaking down. The adaptations in *Macbeth Inc.* show the moral quandary that contemporary society faces as it covertly approves behaviours which its own ethics condemns. With adaptations of Shakespeare becoming more popular as teachers and viewers seek to present the same rich texts in more accessible ways, the play subtly questions the relevance of a canon of literature and whether 'great literature' still has a moral duty to guide its audience.

Practical considerations

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. If you are teaching the play in concert with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, you should factor in time to watch a film version and have at least one thorough comprehension discussion. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.



Teaching *Macbeth Inc.* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- understand that all texts convey values and examine Murray's text closely for indication of contemporary values
- learn about the genres of tragedy and comedy and how their definitions can be affected by our social lens. In textual adaptations, genre can be altered by changing the plot
- consider their reactions when their values are challenged or guided by a text and reflect in writing about the reading preferences that this reveals
- learn about and evaluate the idea of the Western canon and debate whether it remains applicable to our culture.



Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 10 content descriptions	Literacy: Interacting with others	ACELY1813	Use organisation patterns, voice and language conventions to present a point of view on a subject, speaking clearly, coherently and with effect, using logic, imagery and rhetorical devices to engage audiences
	Language: Language for interaction	ACELA1565	Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication
	Literature: Examining literature	ACELT1642	Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text
General capabilities	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.

continued ...



	Literacy		In the Australian Curriculum, students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. Literacy involves students in listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.
	Ethical understanding		In the Australian Curriculum, students develop ethical understanding as they identify and investigate the nature of ethical concepts, values and character traits, and understand how reasoning can assist ethical judgment. Ethical understanding involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.



1. Approaching the text

There are two ways to approach this lesson, depending on the class's knowledge of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. If the class is studying Murray's play with Shakespeare's, then it's more helpful to watch Shakespeare's play first and making absolutely sure that students are aware of the ending (in order to be able to rate the difference). If you're not studying *Macbeth* and don't intend to, then it's fine to read straight through Murray's play, explaining which lines come directly from Shakespeare and where the works differ. Since this lesson deals with the difference in the ending, it's important that students are aware that Murray has innovated with a new ending of her own.

2. Introducing ideas

i) Whether in condemnation or commendation, texts reflect the values of their society.

As students move towards Year 11 and 12 material, they will study the relationship between texts and contexts, particularly in terms of the social values which selected texts reflect. Although many Shakespearean characters (such as Richard III, Iago and Hamlet) attempt to seduce the audience with their ambivalent ethics, Shakespeare himself uses the five-act structure to present a pretty firm moral base line. In *Macbeth*, we are left in no doubt that the protagonist's actions are morally bad. In Shakespeare's time, the personal value of ambition was seen in relation to the social values of hierarchy order and service: a person's ambition should never over-reach their social status. Macbeth was right to be ambitious in the service of his rightful king. Any action which he took to subvert that situation was morally bad.

By contrast, modern society treats ambition differently: social status is a reflection of personal competence and in a meritocratic society, the person with the greatest daring, skill and drive can legitimately (though not always legally) rise beyond their initial status. Although movies like *Wall Street*, *Working Girl*, *Boiler Room* and *Rogue Trader* show the often unpleasant outcomes for their protagonists, they do not censure ambition but frequently praise it. If students have seen one of these movies or similar ones, ask them what values they think the film reflects, particularly with regard to money, personal ambition, limits of ethical action and social standing.





Understanding activity

Assign groups one scene from the play and ask what values are signalled and how. They should also consider what the author's attitude to these values might be and how a director could change that.

ii) If a text significantly alters an older 'original' by commenting on the values of its own society, it doesn't always remain in the same dramatic genre. Tragedy can become comedy and vice versa, because our social lens is different.

Sue Murray's single biggest change to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is her alteration to the ending. Rather than being killed in a bloody encounter after Birnam Wood 'climbs' the walls of his castle, Murray's Macbeth heads off to the sun with the witches. He explains cheerfully to the audience that they were foolish to expect a comeuppance for him, then exits, leaving us morally outraged, but still amused.

Tragedies often end with violent death because it makes the text's moral point extremely clear. The protagonist was clearly in the moral wrong and the events of the play reflect and guide society's values. Yet we can still recognise morally poor action and disapprove of it, even when events related by the text don't seem to reflect this. The question remains therefore: is Sue Murray's *Macbeth Inc.* a tragedy? Macbeth may not get his just deserts at the end, but this doesn't mean it's not tragic—in fact, the play may be *more* of a tragedy because her protagonist has so little moral understanding and is therefore pretty inhuman.

Understanding activity

Revise the structure and elements of a Shakespearean tragedy (you can use the graphic found at the first link in 'Further reading') and then plot as much as possible of Sue Murray's play onto the diagram. Do students still consider this a tragedy? Is it a Shakespearean tragedy? They should write a two-paragraph reflection explaining their answer. Good responses will require a discussion of what students think tragedy really is.

iii) Some texts are moral mirrors and some are moral guides. Which one readers prefer is a personal matter, but can reveal a great deal about personal moral and ethical development and the extent to which we enjoy engaging with the text.

Some texts, such as Al Pacino's film *Looking for Richard*, have an entirely different agenda to what a viewer may first expect. These texts require a lot of work by the audience as they question their own responses and speculate about the composer's motives. Many people do not enjoy this work and prefer to be guided towards meaning by a text which doesn't 'play games'. Many students will have had an experience where they are unclear about exactly what a text is 'saying'—these texts often mirror social values rather than adopting a clearly partisan position towards them.

Understanding activity

Ask students to write at least a couple of paragraphs reflecting on a reading or viewing experience where they were unsure what the text's point about a value was and had to work it out for themselves. Did they enjoy this work or not? Why do they think this was—and what sort of reader does this make them?

3. The learning activity

- As students move into senior English, they will hopefully begin to question why some texts are so heavily endorsed by a culture. Why, for example, does Hollywood produce a new Shakespeare film every 18 to 24 months? Why do modern composers rework and adapt the same plays (without concealing their reliance on a source text)? Introduce students to the idea of the canon and ask them to work in small groups to:
 - build a list of accepted canonical texts and explain why they are so highly valued
 - build a list of texts that they believe should be canonical and why
 - identify the purpose of a canon of literature and present an argument for its validity or





invalidity. Whose interests are ignored by the current canon? What does this tell you about power in society?

2. Using their findings about the canon and the concepts drawn from the understanding activities above, divide the class into eight small groups and allot time for four snap-debates (These are very brief debates of two speakers on each side, followed by a snap vote from the audience. Each side should speak for only four minutes and the whole debate should take ten minutes only). The motions are:
 - this play is not *Macbeth*
 - *Macbeth* should no longer be part of the canon
 - the idea of the canon is dead
 - great texts are moral guides, not just moral mirrors.

4. Rounding up

If the class knows Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, ask them what new insights Murray's play has generated into the original text. If they don't, ask them whether it has made them want to watch the original and why. If you teach this lesson towards the end of Year 10, it can be a useful way to round up on their perspectives on four years of junior English. If there have been some unenthusiastic experiences, use this as a way to sell senior English as more engaging, flexible, dealing with bigger topics and texts and more rewarding of personal opinions (maturely expressed, of course).

Assessment ideas

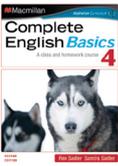
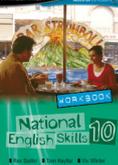
- i) The apparitions scene has been presented differently in every production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (some omit it because it's probably a later interpolation into Shakespeare's text). Most productions use it as an opportunity for a really theatrical visual spectacle which can work as a standalone piece. For assessment, students could produce a design for the apparitions scene in *either* Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Murray's *Macbeth Inc.*, describing the way it should appear, the technology used and then writing a justification in essay form of how their design speaks to the play's wider themes of fate, free will, madness and the supernatural.
- ii) The super-rich and the corporate world are the theatre of the postmodern age, where we see the timeless habits of human behaviour enacted in this historical context. Students should collect a portfolio of ten in-depth news articles about recent corporate scandals. They should annotate two articles closely, showing how the articles use language, themes and concepts to present their narrative of power, excess, justice and corruption. Using these two articles and referring briefly to others, they should write an extended answer to the question:

Our fascination with the super-rich and the corporate world is useful because it helps us to identify tragedy and comedy in their actions more easily.' Do you agree?
- iii) Ask students to choose one other adaptation of a Shakespearean play and use it with Sue Murray's *Macbeth Inc.* to show what elements of Shakespearean drama have been altered and to what effect. A list of cinematic adaptations can be found [here](#).

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.



	Complete English Basics 4 (2nd edn)	Unit 2: Context Unit 17: William Shakespeare
	National English Skills 10	Unit 13: Shakespeare



Further reading

- On this website you will find a diagram of the [stages of a Shakespearean tragedy](#) which students and teachers will find useful from Year 10 onwards. (Alternatively, go straight to the Word document [here](#).)
- A brief and accessible introduction to the idea of the [Western canon](#).

Linked texts

Macbeth Inc. could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 5 (among many others):

- *The Blue Faraway*, Janine Burke
- *Rough with the Smooth: Stories of Australian Men*, edited by BR Coffey
- *Making the Most of It*, Lisa Forrest
- *Looking for Alibrandi*, Melina Marchetta
- *Northern Lights*, Philip Pullman
- *Montana 1948*, Larry Watson
- *Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, Markus Zusak
- *Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (PG), directed by Hugh Hudson
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (PG), directed by Oliver Parker
- *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (PG), directed by Peter Weir
- *Pleasantville* (M), directed by Gary Ross

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