BIG DRAMAS second edition

The Princess and the Nag-Hag

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 8
Difficulty	Text language ●●●○○ Lesson concepts ●●●○○
Genre	Social realist drama
Themes	Family, displacement, disillusionment, resentment, fractured fairytale, new life, compromise
Literary and dramatic techniques	Stock characters, overheard conversations and dramatic irony, inversion and character symmetry
Cast	7 female characters

Why choose this play?

Blended families are a reality in almost every classroom in the modern world and students often comment on how the traditional fairytale narrative seems less and less relevant as their own home lives become more complex. This play takes the stock fairytale problem of the stepmother, step daughter, new baby and feelings of rejection on all sides and shows that the optimism and moral baseline of the traditional fairytale—even when it's complicated by modernity—is just as relevant, heartening and useful as ever. Sue Murray performs a neat about-face with the character of Nikki, the self-centred, vulnerable 'princess' of this suburban fractured fairytale and suggests that the stepmother isn't always wicked and the heroine doesn't always make things better for those around her.

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 *The Princess and the Nag-Hag* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- understand that a 'fractured fairytale' is a narrative adaptation of a traditional story
- give personal opinions about the satisfaction found in a narrative
- identify fairytale stock characters and how they depart from traditional characterisation
- assess how the dramatic mode creates opportunities to fracture and rectify the tale
- learn about open and closed texts
- compose a modern didactic tale for stock characters
- draw on their own experience to write a non-fiction text describing their own perspective on relevant social issues.

Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 8 content descriptions	Literature: Responding to literature	ACELT1627	Share, reflect on, clarify and evaluate opinions and arguments about aspects of literary texts.
	Literature: Examining literature	ACELT1629	Recognise, explain and analyse the ways literary texts draw on readers' knowledge of other texts and enable new understanding and appreciation of aesthetic qualities.
	Literacy: Creating texts	ACELY1736	Create imaginative, informative and persuasive texts that raise issues, report events and advance opinions, using deliberate language and textual choices, and including digital elements as appropriate.

General capabilities	Personal and social capability		In the Australian Curriculum, 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, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills.
	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.
	Intercultural understanding		In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. The capability involves students in learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognise commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect.

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1. Approaching the text

Read the text through with the class, making sure that students can visualise the stage, such as when Nikki overhears her stepmother on the phone in the last scene.

2. Introducing ideas

i) This play is like a fractured fairytale, which takes the traditional elements of a fairytale and alters them in some way, often by placing them in the real world to show the difference between 'real life' and the ideals of fairytales.

If students aren't familiar with the idea of a fractured fairytale, give them some examples—Jane Gardam's short story 'The pangs of love' is a very funny rendition of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The little mermaid.' Discuss why fairytales become less satisfying as readers mature or experience greater autonomy. For example, their simplistic storylines and polarised morality isn't what we find as we negotiate the challenges of life and other people. Although we may still idealise some aspects of life, such as marriage and parenthood, the daily realities of life often show that fairytales lack dimension and practical use in life.

Understanding activity

Ask students to select a fairytale that they know well and to write a short synopsis of it—no more than a paragraph. They should list all the things that seem unconvincing, irksome or simply strange about the story and give their reasons. For example, in Sleeping Beauty, it seems hardly likely that a man, coming upon an ostensibly dead girl in a castle full of equally dead people, would kiss her. We may find that she's a dull character because, like a puppet, she is simply put in various positions—child, sleeping maiden, married woman—according to the desires of others.

When they have done this, they should consider ways of reshaping the story so that the basic sense of the narrative is kept, while these irksome details are resolved in terms of our own values, lifestyles and attitudes to probability. For example, Sleeping Beauty might have joined a cult or had very strict parents who kept her shut away from the world for a long time (so she was figuratively asleep). She may have insisted on a long time to get to know the Prince before she married him.

When students have completed this, ask them to reflect in writing for around a paragraph on how far a fairytale can be 'fractured' before it actually breaks.

ii) This play deals with a world (of divorce and blended families) which is, arguably, already fractured, with fractured people. But it maintains an optimistic attitude to the possibility of people's inner goodness and their capacity to unite in happier (if not fairytale) ways.

The characters in the play are all familiar from fairytales—the teenage child/princess, the stepmother and natural mother, the father, the friend-cum-fairy godmother. None of them, however, entirely fulfil their fairytale roles.

Understanding activity

Ask students to choose one character from the play and decide to which fairytale stock character they seem to correspond. In what ways do they cohere to type and in what ways do they depart? For example, Kathryn is a stepmother, but she's hardly wicked (even if she seems to have nagged Nikki in the past). Students should find textual evidence to support their statements.

When they have completed this, they should consider how the way the story is told, using the dramatic medium, departs from the traditional fairytale format. For example, we see events from the stepmother's perspective in scene 3 when Kathryn complains about her pregnancy to a colleague. By dramatising a number of problems the narrative suggests that there is no overarching 'evil plan' (i.e. for the stepmother to place her own child on the throne), rather there are ordinary people negotiating difficult situations so that the greatest number will be happy.

iii) The traditional fairytale feels satisfying because it's a closed text, with a very definite ending. The play overturns this and leaves the ending open. Although this is a lot less satisfying, it is more realistic.

Make sure that students are aware of the traditional verbal markers which indicate narrative stages in traditional tales—'once upon a time', 'many years passed' and 'and they all lived happily ever after'. Explain the difference between a closed text and an open one: closed texts resolve all the problems involved in the action and make clear that the protagonist's character arc is complete. Often, closed texts will clarify the meaning which readers are expected to take away and adopt a fairly definite, even controlling, attitude to the reader's reception of the tale.

Open texts (*opera aperta*, in the metalanguage of modern theory), by contrast, often just 'end'. They leave some sense of ongoing action and don't promote a certain meaning which the author wants the reader to take away.

Understanding activity

The word 'text' comes from the Latin verb *textere*, to weave. A text is a lot like a piece of woven cloth, with some stable elements (the warp) and others which appear and disappear like the weft, creating a distinct pattern which is characteristic of that text. Open texts aren't 'finished' with a kind of selvage (the tightly woven edge of a bolt of fabric); they have loose threads hanging out. Ask students in what way an open text is like a woolly jumper with a thread hanging out. What does it

allow us to do? They might say: add our own ending onto the existing edge; unravel it back to a point where we can rework the plot; reject it as an inherently unsatisfactory work; or 'mend' it by adding some kind of communally authorised patch (15th-century publisher William Caxton did this to a *lot* of texts, which made them more commercially attractive to people who didn't want to read unfinished Chaucer or Malory).

Next, ask them to consider the ways in which this play is an open text and why. What relation does the open ending have to the traditional fairytale?

3. The learning activity

Hopefully students will have concluded that the play rejects the traditional 'closed' ending because it seeks to be truer to contemporary life. Blended families don't, by nature, have a closed ending—they represent new beginnings and the work still to be done. There are two parts to this learning exercise; allow students to choose.

1. Take the stock characters from fairytales and write a new tale that would appeal to modern audiences. Remember that fairytales are both instructive and optimistic and maintain a stern moral baseline. Use the aspects of modern families such as step- or half-families, joint custody, institutional care, overseas relocations and legal wrangling, to write a new tale.

2. Create a new text called *The Blended Family Cookbook: Getting your family out of the soup*. It should correct ideas from fairytales, tell modern family life like it is and provide useful suggestions for what teenagers in blended families can do to improve their lot—or capitalise on it. Each student could write a chapter; have a look at some modern 'self-help' guides to work up a template which students can write around.

4. Rounding up

Discuss the idea that texts fall out of favour with readers at different parts of their life. It certainly affirms the idea that all texts have a purpose and if they don't meet that purpose, there's no attraction in them. Fairytales cease to hold attention and credibility when readers notice the disparity between the fairytale world and the real world. However, quite often readers go back to fairytales later in life and find new attractions in them. Ask students when they think this might be and why.

Assessment ideas

i) After exploring a number of fractured fairytales (the reading list below shows appropriate texts from the NSW Board of Studies support document for Stage 4) ask students to select two with which to answer the essay question, 'Fractured fairytales aren't as satisfying as traditional ones.' Do you agree? Make reference to two fractured fairytales studied in class.

ii) A lot of the problems faced by fairytale protagonists wouldn't happen nowadays thanks to modern technology. Technology has become so much part of our world that students have been known to ask 'why doesn't Red Riding Hood just call her granny on her mobile?' or 'why don't Hansel and Gretel use a GPS app to find their way out of the forest?' and even 'if Sleeping Beauty's family had better security, the evil fairy wouldn't have found her way into the castle. Also, nobody spins because we buy all our wool pre-spun and dyed, so there's no room for a poisoned spindle'. Although comical, these are good questions because they indicate the things which get in the way of children accepting the story as a didactic medium warning about strangers, cruelty, wild animals and so on.

Ask students to take a fairytale and retell it with modern technology in mind. They must maintain the point of the story, which is to tell the adventures of the protagonist and warn about e.g. stranger danger.
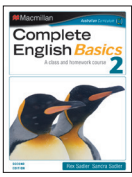
iii) One of the appealing elements of published fairytales has always been the illustrations, which show the unique perspective of that edition. Assessing students as a pair, ask them to present their own edition of a classic fairytale. The text should be no more than 1500 words and there

should be at least ten illustrations, sourced from anywhere they wish but altered in at least one way to represent their own view of the story.

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 2 (2nd edn)	Unit 8: All about people Unit 16: Health, p. 100
	National English Skills 8	Unit 8: Exploring stories pp. 64–5 (read only) Unit 12: The power of words
	English Workbook 2 (3rd edn)	Unit 4: Investigating literature, pp. 114–25

Further reading

• A fairly long list of fractured fairytales for both children and adults.
• A great resource for fairytales, many of which are fully annotated.

Linked texts

The Princess and the Nag-Hag could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others):

• *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, Eleanor Coerr
• *Sadako*, Eleanor Coerr and Ed Young
• *Changing Stories*, Bronwyn Mellor, Judith Hemming and Jane Leggett
• *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Salman Rushdie
• *Ever After* (PG), directed by Andy Tennant
• *The Never-ending Story* (G), directed by Wolfgang Petersen
• *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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