



BIG DRAMAS second edition

Why Are You Here?

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 11
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Theatre of the absurd
Themes	Mental health, assumed identities, confounded expectations, fantasy, female nurturing, personal narratives, propriety and place, the spectacle of mental illness
Literary and dramatic techniques	Slapstick, farce, rhythmic and nonsense language, association and allusion, indirect and framed narrative, non sequitur, defamiliarisation
Cast	19 characters

Why choose this play?

Absurdist literature fascinates many senior students. It engages with the notion that life is meaningless and conventional ways of representing life simply use cultural norms without interrogating them.

Socially critical students, students who are highly creative or those who simply struggle with conveying their unique perception of the world will enjoy Sue Murray's absurdist drama about a psychiatrist who's crazier than her patients. This short play works well as an introduction to the theatre of the absurd and its associated concepts. It allows students who may read more complex absurdist drama such as Beckett, Pinter, Ionescu or Genet in Year 12 to familiarise themselves with its terms and practice engaging with them.

Practical considerations

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 120 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play



Teaching *Why Are You Here?* by Sue Murray

Senior studies in English require teachers to select imaginative texts across a range of mediums, including plays and including texts by Australian writers. This lesson plan suggests ways that *Why Are You Here?* might be used to support both these requirements and be a basis for Year 11 study for the VCE, the NSW Preliminary or the Senior Australian Curriculum.

	VCE Units 1 & 2	NSW Preliminary English	Australian Curriculum Senior Secondary Units 1 & 2
Meeting Y11 text selection requirements	Play	Play	Play
	Australian writer	Australian writer	Human experience, aesthetic appeal, written & spoken modes, literary text (personal/social appeal), abstract form

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Meeting study design requirements			
<p>Learning objectives of this lesson plan:</p> <p>Understand that literature uses different styles of representation to show the composer's unique way of seeing.</p> <p>Many of these styles adhere to certain norms, but sometimes some composers fracture or ignore these norms in order to communicate their attitude to the world and to remind us that our own viewing and reading habits are culturally informed.</p> <p>Analyse a short piece of literature in the stream of consciousness mode which foregrounds how different styles of representation are influenced by the composer's subjectivity.</p> <p>Learn about and identify the features of absurdist theatre and apply them to a variety of short texts.</p> <p>Compose a persuasive response which argues for or against the playtext as an absurdist work.</p>	<p>AoS1—Outcome 1</p> <p>Key knowledge:</p> <p>Students will consider the conventions of absurdist drama used to construct meaning in the play.</p> <p>They will learn and use higher-order metalanguage to analyse possibilities of character development; the dubious reliability of a governing philosophy; and the deliberate undermining of conventional plot structures.</p> <p>The research and analysis will involve conventions of group and class discussion to inform personal responses and test their ability to articulate these responses in evidence-based writing.</p>	<p>Outcome 4— students will describe their understanding of the play's meaning and explain how the language and dramatic form shapes their response.</p> <p>Outcome 7— Students will learn and select appropriate metalanguage to apply to their analysis and discussion of the playtext.</p> <p>Outcome 8— students will create a critical and interpretive text to defend their understanding of absurdism.</p>	<p>Unit 2—</p> <p>Compare texts in a variety of contexts, mediums and modes by: analysing the style and structure of texts including digital texts. (ACEEN022)</p> <p>Investigate the representation of ideas, attitudes and voices in texts including: analysing the ways language features, text structures and stylistic choices shape points of view and influence audiences. (ACEEN024)</p> <p>Analyse and evaluate how and why responses to texts vary through: the impact of language and structural choices on shaping own and others' perspectives. (ACEEN028)</p> <p>Create a range of texts: selecting and applying appropriate textual evidence to support arguments. (ACEEN035)</p> <p>Create a range of texts: using strategies for planning, drafting, editing and proofreading. (ACEEN036)</p> <p>Reflect on their own and others' texts by: evaluating the effectiveness of texts in representing ideas, attitudes and voices. (ACEEN039)</p> 

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Links to Y12 prescribed texts	<p><i>Whose reality?</i> Coetzee, JM, <i>Foe</i> (A) (1) Leunig, Michael, <i>The Lot: In words</i> (A) (4) Levinson, Barry (director), <i>Wag the Dog</i> (2) Miller, Arthur, <i>Death of a Salesman</i> (3)</p>	<p>Samuel Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> (Extension 1, Module B: Texts and Ways of Thinking, Elective 1: After the Bomb) Michael Gow, <i>Away</i> (AoS: Discovery) Mark Haddon, <i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time</i> (Standard, Module B: Close Study of Text) Ron Howard (director), <i>A Beautiful Mind</i> (2001) (Standard, Module B: Close Study of a Text) James Joyce, <i>Dubliners</i> (Advanced, Module A: Elective 2: Intertextual Perspectives) Virginia Woolf, <i>Mrs Dalloway</i> (Advanced, Module A: Elective 1: Intertextual Connections)</p>	
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1. Approaching the text

Perform a complete read-through of the play; it might be helpful to give this to nominated readers for homework and ask them to practice a reading to achieve the ‘ripple’ effect of the word associations. Readers could sit at the front of the class in a semicircle to maintain cohesion while reading.

2. Introducing ideas

i) We all experience the world in different ways and generate different styles of representation which convey our unique way of seeing. Sometimes, however, people may see the world so differently that they require a totally new style of representation.

Ask students to think of movies or literary texts which simply got rid of a normal element of representation: *Inception*, *The Matrix*, *A Beautiful Mind* or *Memento* are all good examples. These film texts show how stripping away or altering some of the norms of representation produces a very different textual experience. (If students have read *Tristram Shandy*, *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* or any other literary text in the stream-of-consciousness mode, point out that these works foreground a unique subjectivity and perception of the world.)

Continue the discussion by asking if students have ever wondered how the world looks through the eyes of people who are very different to themselves. Tragedies such as the various US high school and college shootings generate speculation about how the world appears to the mentally ill or those who maintain very unorthodox philosophical positions. Some texts have even taken this up

(e.g. *Donnie Darko* and *Ben X*), challenging styles and norms of representation to show the world as it might be from their unique protagonists' eyes.

Understanding activity

The following out-of-copyright passage uses the stream-of-consciousness mode. Ask students to read the extract (which you can download and print easily from the [embedded Word document](#) we prepared for you) and then answer the questions that follow.

She remembered once throwing a shilling into the Serpentine. But every one remembered; what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab. Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.

from *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

1. In one word, describe how the protagonist perceives the world around her.
(For example, *fluidly* may suggest that the protagonist is focussing on the process of her own perception—she is only interested in the world as it strikes her, and that there is little sense of boundary between herself and the world.)
2. Select one sentence and name one technique used in the sentence construction. What does this construction suggest about how reality is being represented?
(For example, the last sentence, which is very long indeed—26 clauses! One technique used here is sheer volume of words and ideas (the name for the device where volume or copiousness is created is *copia*). Woolf uses *copia* to show how Mrs Dalloway's consciousness is not overwhelmed by the sheer multitude of things going on around her, but in fact is created by the world around her. Mrs Dalloway, in other words, is only alive for the reader because she has a world to process and present to us and to herself. The technique of *anapodoton* (that is, fragmentary sentences which have no main clause) reflects ideas of transience, incompleteness, fluidity and diffusion which characterise our thought patterns when we're musing on something without thinking really hard about it. Mrs Dalloway registers the place around her at the same time as she thinks about the end of her life and people's survival in places.)
3. What do you think the protagonist believes about language?
(For example, Mrs Dalloway doesn't seem to think anything about language; she uses it unconsciously as a medium for reflection and representation, and is as little aware of it as a swimmer is of the water. Woolf, on the other hand, uses this complex, fluent, participatory language to suggest that Mrs Dalloway—and in fact all of our intellectual processes and our sense of ourselves—is constructed by the language she thinks in.)

ii) By dispatching conventional ideas of meaning, unity, style and modality, we end up with a very disorienting play. The audience's experience of this play can lead them to wonder whether we really control or even fully comprehend the world in which we live. Without the comforting boundary of these norms, life in the world is exposed as threatening, chaotic, ridiculous or absurd.

Traditional drama uses familiar pace, values, acting style and attitude to narrative. These are the 'norms of representation' and include ideas such as: time really does flow forwards; what we see on the stage is genuinely occurring to one or all the characters and is not an illusion or fantasy



(unless explicitly marked as such); the events and relationships portrayed have been sectioned off from the greater continuum of events because they are meaningful; the pace of actions on stage matches the pace of those actions in real life; symbols and motifs have a fixed meaning and (again, unless we explicitly understand that they are helping a character to convey a lie) tell the audience something true about that character. Most importantly, the actions which we watch on stage are informed by the context we're supposed to imagine around it (in *Why Are You Here?* it's a mental ward). These actions generate reactions which seem logical and plausible and the characters understand the logic of consequence in which they participate.

Understanding activity

Take another short play text (another text from *Big Dramas 2e* would do well) or an extract from a play (for example a scene from a Shakespearean drama) and ignore one of the norms of representation mentioned above. If we examine act 5, scene 3 (45–120) of *Romeo and Juliet* (where Romeo fights Paris, drinks poison and dies) and alter it by ignoring one or more of the norms, it changes radically. For example:



Norm	How the norms of representation in this scene might be fractured or ignored	Effect
Time really does flow forwards and at the same rate for all actions and characters across the stage.	Juliet might zoom backwards from the grave, going past Romeo as he drinks the poison at a slowed-down rate.	Disrupts the idea of causality and the source of the tragedy, which is in the sequential misunderstandings of the lovers.
What we see on the stage is genuinely occurring to one or all the characters.	Romeo continues to fight Paris even after Paris is dead, believing that he's still alive	Reduces our sympathy for Romeo, which is based on our connection to his state of mind.
The events and relationships portrayed have been sectioned off from the greater continuum of events because they are meaningful.	This scene is played upstage and partially blocked from the audience's view by a busy market scene downstage, with a fruit and veg seller calling to the audience.	Suggests that there is no clear scene or discrete sequence of events which we can think of as a whole and from which we can draw meaning.
Symbols and motifs have a fixed meaning and tell the audience something true about that character.	Romeo wears a clown suit.	Romeo's character identification becomes less securely identified as the tragic lover and our analysis of his character and the rationale for his actions is hindered by a mix of symbols and visual cues.

iii) So what's left when we dispense with the norms of representation and the values of conventional dramatic texts?

Absurdist theatre ignores one or more of the elements tabulated above. It represents characters trapped in an incomprehensible world, performing actions which seem absurd to themselves, the other characters and/or the audience. It breaks the norms on which we all agree as part of living together. It does this to convey how arbitrary most of our social norms are and how ridiculous or absurd the world can seem when you realise this. *Why Are You Here?* is not, in the end, totally absurdist, because the chaos is resolved in the closing moments when we discover that the 'psychiatrist' is a patient in a mental illness ward and the other characters are also patients, presumably in a kind of dayroom—the paradigm of a hospital and shared drama between several

confused patients offers a plausible explanation which accords with the norms of the 'real' world. Despite this, we view much of the play as though it is absurdist.

Understanding activity

Take a play which you've studied before with students (another short play from *Big Dramas 2e* is ideal for this activity) and ask students (in small groups) to draw up a table showing how elements of the two plays compare. You could, for instance, compare *Why Are You Here?* with *Home Sweet Home*. (The following table can be downloaded.)

Element	Conventional representation	Example (Home Sweet Home)	Absurdist representation	Example (Why Are You Here?)
Handling of time and actions which happen within time.	Clear and logical—even oppressively important. Causality is the key to the plot; the final act or scene ties up all aspects of plot and philosophy.		Ambiguous or illogical. Causality frequently breaks down. This leads to meaningless or nonsensical plots. Frequently there is little resolution at the end.	
Handling of place and conventions of behaviour in certain places.	Clear place or sense of place. Even if it's simply a monologue, there's a sense of grounded and stable place in the speaker's interiority.		Often farcical or nonsensical—if the place can be identified. Sometimes there is a sense of no-place or complete dislocation.	
Character identity	Characters are who they say they are; they have fixed identities and, even in disguising or masking, have a basal identity signified in some way.		Characters shift identities and relate to one another in confused or chaotic ways.	

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Language	<p>We can mostly rely on a shared understanding of language as a set of communally agreed meanings attached to words or other signs. Misunderstandings are comical because we understand the 'expected' meaning and can divide characters into those who can decode successfully and those who can't.</p> <p>We can branch off from these denotative functions to add connotative functions which enrich the symbolic character of the playtext.</p>		<p>The script suggests the inadequacy of language to communicate a character's representation of the world.</p> <p>Loss of denotative function is apparent through multiple misunderstandings or non sequiturs.</p> <p>Language might be reduced to its phonetic qualities, which help characters to use it playfully rather than purposefully.</p>	
Audience attitude	<p>Comfort and confidence in recognising the markers of plot development and pacing. The audience is, for example, alert to meta-dramatic elements which support this, such as foreshadowing and dramatic irony.</p>		<p>Bewilderment and a feeling of being disoriented. The well-paced reactions to a familiar plot-structure are thrown into disarray as the audience cannot second-guess turns of events.</p>	
Point	<p>To represent a sequence of events as informed by an overarching assumption and the idea that this philosophy can be seen as strongly present in these events more than others.</p>		<p>To represent how life and events appear when the assumption of an overarching meaning or direction is removed. By disorienting the audience, the playwright forces them to question their assumptions about meaning, relationships and expectations.</p>	

3. The learning activity

There are two parts to this learning activity.

1. Divide students into pairs or threes and allot one topic from the list to each group. They should research the element (all of them are on Wikipedia) and a) explain it to the class; b) explain how it contributes to the absurdist character of the play and c) present two examples of the element in the play. Elements marked with an asterisk are more complex and could be tackled by more able students:
 - chronotope*
 - carnivalesque
 - différance*
 - theatrical realism
 - absurdism (and how it differs from existentialism)
 - pastiche (literary)
 - tragicomedy
 - distancing effect (or defamiliarisation)*
 - the Situationist theory of the spectacle*
 - subjectivity*
 - dadaist wordplay
 - nihilism

Groups should present their findings about the element to the rest of the class, using a three-page presentation (using PowerPoint, Prezi or another presentation tool) to assist their peers' note-taking.

2. Drawing on three or more of the elements presented by the groups, each student should compose an analytic response arguing that *Why Are You Here?* either is or is not, an absurdist play.

4. Rounding up

Congratulate the class on tackling a very challenging set of ideas! Confirm that students understand the point: texts represent ways of seeing the world and when an 'extreme' philosophy such as absurdism, nihilism or existentialism informs the act of seeing, the resulting text will challenge conventional assumptions and methods of representing. Although modes of writing like stream of consciousness and absurdist fiction are confusing and chaotic at first, they offer unique and effective ways of conveying certain philosophies.

Assessment ideas

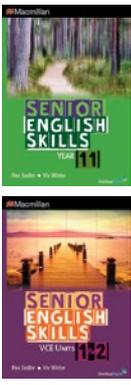
- i) A four-minute oral presentation comparing the use of two elements of absurdist drama in *Why Are You Here?* and one other absurdist play. Students could be asked to evaluate which play is more successful drama (this would require clear definition of successful drama and an engagement with the tricky problem of defining the 'success' of absurdist drama—which, by nature, resists this definition).
- ii) Adaptation of a scene from a nominated text (Shakespeare works well for this) to subvert its use of conventional modes of representation and replace them with absurdist elements. As a second assessable exercise, students could be asked to give an analysis of their own adapted text or to exchange scenes with another student and give an analysis of the text, evaluating it as absurdist drama.
- iii) Absurdism has been used to produce texts in most modes and media—the digital medium, however, seems to resist absurdism's illogicality because the very medium is anchored in the bivalent (two-value) logic which governs computing. Able students might enjoy the challenge of a more abstract proposition: *Digital media cannot, by nature, be used to convey absurdist*



ideas. Students could respond to this either critically or with a creative piece which disproves the proposition.

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.

	<p>Senior English Skills</p>	<p>Unit 6: Making language choices Unit 11: Drama techniques</p>
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Further reading

- Although aimed at Drama teachers, [Drama Teacher's Network](#) has good, clear explanations and activities which don't require being acted out.
- Bookforum contains a list and short discussion of [texts](#) which describe and deal with schizophrenia. If you have any of these in your library, you could choose some extracts and, after students have read them, consider how you would represent in drama the world as schizophrenics see it.

Acknowledgements

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