



# BIG DRAMAS second edition

## Selected Scenes from *The Formal*

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

<b>Level</b>	Suitable for Year 9
<b>Difficulty</b>	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
<b>Genre</b>	Satirical comedy with elements of fantasy
<b>Themes</b>	Rites of passage, growing up, narcissism, vicariousness, parenting
<b>Literary and dramatic techniques</b>	<i>Deus ex machina</i> , parody, stereotype, situational irony, juxtaposition, antithesis
<b>Cast</b>	5 female characters

## Why choose this play?

Big school events can bring out the best and worst in participants and can often be times at which people show their truest selves. As well as a celebration which marks the end of formal schooling, the school Formal is often very stressful. Teachers, parents and children struggle to cope with the many imposed values that the event can entail (particularly for girls). This selection of three brief scenes from Sue Murray's longer play, *The Formal*, uses gentle satire to show the collision of values which the Formal can bring: the primacy of physical beauty, the expectation of maturity, the ambivalent attitude to displays of wealth and social patronage and the problematic relationship between mothers and daughters.

## Practical considerations

Plan for 40 minutes to read through the text and around 100 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 selected scenes from *The Formal* by Sue Murray

## Learning objectives

- understand that satire is a culturally specific type of intellectual humour which has two purposes: to entertain and to persuade
- identify some of the literary techniques of satire
- consider how the aspects of school life satirised by the play apply to their own lives and suggest constructive ways of responding to satire
- create a satirical play text, drawing on the techniques learned, and write an accompanying analysis of their own work, justifying its satirical content and aims.



## Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

<b>Year 9 content descriptions</b>	Language: Text structure and organisation	ACELA1770	Compare and contrast the use of cohesive devices in texts, focusing on how they serve to signpost ideas, to make connections and to build semantic associations between ideas
	Literature: Responding to literature	ACELT1635	Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts
	Literacy: Texts in context	ACELY1739	Analyse how the construction and interpretation of texts, including media texts, can be influenced by cultural perspectives and other texts
<b>General capabilities</b>	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.



### 1. Approaching the text

Read through the text, paying attention to Sue Murray's production notes at the end of the three scenes. It's important that Tatiana and Dee subtly convey their mutual dislike of each other—this informs their slightly frigid politeness.

### 2. Introducing ideas

i) The three scenes offer a gentle satire on certain social groups brought together for a common event. To understand the satire, audiences must understand the cultural significance and social mores surrounding a school Formal.



Satire is highly culturally specific. It presents an event or person in a manner accurate enough to be realistic, but includes an element of the absurd in order to reveal contradictory or less admirable traits. Satire uses acute observation to persuade the audience that the satirist has a point. Although it can seem cynical, satire's basis is optimistic: it presupposes that if the truth is presented accurately enough, the targets will recognise their failings and change.

Satire, however, requires that the audience understand a) the wit used to present the event or person and b) the undertone of criticism which informs it. If the audience doesn't belong to the culture from which the satire comes, it might be difficult for them to understand that, in fact, the text presents dual views of a situation—as it really is and the implied ideal, from which the reality departs.

### *Understanding activity*

Ask students to read through Scene A 'Dress stress'. They should identify:

- What social situation is being satirised?  
*A conversation between two teenage girls who are utterly different but striving to keep up a show of politeness.*
- What is the implied ideal version of this event?  
*Genuine interest by both participants in each other's views and values.*
- How does this depart from the ideal?  
*Dee is oblivious to the signals that her conversation partner is busy and disinterested in her description of a dress. Her replies to Dee's brief answers suggest disdain for Dee's aesthetic tastes, financial wherewithal and a high value on physical appearance.*
- What techniques inform these departures from the ideal?  
*Stereotypes—Tatiana is a parody of the self-interested, spiritually shallow, socially vapid and non-academic 'It' girl at an Australian school. Dee exemplifies the opposite: a bookish, academic (possibly over-) achiever.*  
*Hyperbole—the exaggerated descriptions of Tatiana's dress convey the extent to which her mind is taken up with it.*

**ii) Since its dual purpose is to persuade and to entertain, satire needs both witty humour and a target. This pairing informs the types of techniques we find in literary satire.**

Scene B 'Fruit salad' is an example of 'everyday' satire, which portrays the mode of life of normal people and the comical extremes to which they can go. The scene is a parody of three utterly different mothers: Carla, a career woman who schedules her parenting time; Dee's mother, Skye, who is 'alternative'; and Roz, Tatiana's mother. Glam (who acts as a kind of *deus ex machina* or plot fulcrum in human form) engineers a collision in the supermarket. This interaction presents an opportunity for comedy as each woman's character traits are exaggerated and the misunderstandings multiplied.

### *Understanding activity*

If students don't already have a list of techniques of satire, there's a good one [here](#). (The quiz in the link can also be taken separately, as a way of ensuring that students understand the satirical techniques.) Ask them to check the list and then identify satirical techniques in Scene B, giving textual evidence and a short explanation of why they think this is part of the play's satire.

**iii) If we feel that a satire is applicable to us, how should we respond to it?**

Many students will have watched the ABC's topical satire *Ja'mie: Private School Girl* and been reminded of someone at school. Very few people, however, are willing to admit that the behaviours being criticised are ones which they themselves display. The great Irish satirist Jonathan Swift said of satire that 'It is a kind of glass wherein the beholder sees everyone but himself.' Satire is often used politically, for one group to 'show the truth to those in power'. The Australian comedian and writer, John Clarke (who wrote *The Games*) said that satire was an antidote to being lied to. If we



think that a satire applies to us, one way to approach it would be to consider the vested interests of the satirist and whether they are justified in their observations and then to change ourselves or our way of relating to those with a grievance.

### *Understanding activity*

Ask students whether they think that any aspect of the play's satire applies to them or if they have ever been the subject of a satire. (If they claim they haven't, show this now-famous satire of [First World Problems](#)). What's their gut reaction to being satirised like this? Anger? Humour? Shame? Do they intend to change or will they remain as they are because they can justify this behaviour with some form of sophistry? Do they believe that, with so many interest groups and ways to share specific values (such as on Facebook or Twitter), there is a way to avoid seeing how we appear to others? What will be the future of satire as the 'democratic means of smirking at pretension and power'?



## 3. The learning activity

Using the techniques of satire identified above, students should work in groups of four or five to script a scene which satirises *one* of the following school events: sports day; Year 12 graduation; first day back after the holidays. They should record the scene (if possible) and allow other groups to watch it, so that their use of satirical techniques can be identified and constructively criticised.

As well as scripting the scene as a group, each student should write an individual response to this question: *What was your intention in writing this satire?* Student responses should consider the concept of shame which motivates satire, the aims of entertainment and persuasion, and the ways in which they conveyed the difference between the ideal and the real versions of an event.

## 4. Rounding up

Strong students recognise that satire can be very broad or very subtle and that it is far more than raw sarcasm, which isn't funny in itself. Weaker students confuse satire and sarcasm or are unaware of the criticisms being made wittily but more kindly through the former. Ask students if they have watched parents or family members laughing at something they didn't understand and why an intellectual quality is important in many types of humour. What do they think is the relationship between recognising the truth and laughing at things?

## Assessment ideas

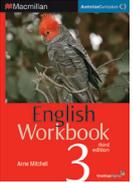
- i) Give students time (perhaps at home) to watch and make notes about a witty cartoon called '[What Facebook is for](#)'. They should use this short piece as the basis for an essay response to the question:

*Satire recognises the audience's intelligence and reminds them that more is expected of them because of it. How is this true of the short clip 'What Facebook is for'?*

- ii) Ask students to select an event, group or person which is the subject of satire (for example, politicians or 'helicopter' parents) and to compile an anthology of around ten satirical texts from a variety of contexts directed towards that group. They should write a brief introductory essay to this anthology, explaining why this group seems such a rich subject for satire, what techniques are commonly used and why and whether it is a historically specific satire or one which will continue throughout history.
- iii) When the target of satire writes back, the satire becomes a debate. Ask students to select a satirical text which they felt was directed towards them (such as the 'First World Problems' video) and to compose a satire in the same form which replies to the text.

## 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 workbook 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><b>English Workbook 3</b> (3rd edn)</p>	<p>Unit 2: Persuasion, pp. 62–4 Unit 3: Short stories, pp. 110–11 Unit 4: Comedy and tragedy, pp. 126–36</p>
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## Further reading

- There are two episodes of *The Simpsons* which satirise elements common to those of Sue Murray's play: 'The way we was', which is about Homer and Marge's school prom and 'Moms I'd like to forget', which is about a mothers' group.
- 'Saki' (Hector Hugh Monroe) was an English writer of satirical short stories popular around the turn of the twentieth century. As well as being extremely comical and clever, Saki was a master of the short story form. Many of his stories can be read [here](#) and should prove accessible to most able Year 9 readers.

## Linked texts

Selected scenes from *The Formal* could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 5 (among many others).

- *48 Shades of Brown*, Nick Earls
- *48 Shades of Brown*, adapted by Philip Dean from the novel by Nick Earls
- *Borrowed Light*, Anna Fienberg
- *The Eyre Affair*, Jasper Fforde
- *The Sterkarm Handshake*, Susan Price
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* (PG), directed by Oliver Parker
- *Pleasantville* (M), directed by Gary Ross
- *Fossils*, Manuel Aston
- *Dags*, Debra Oswald
- *Burger Brain, the Fast Food Musical*, Dennis Watkins, music by Chris Harriott

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