



# BIG DRAMAS second edition

## The First Australian

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

<b>Level</b>	Suitable for Year 7
<b>Difficulty</b>	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
<b>Genre</b>	Expressionistic comedy
<b>Themes</b>	Conquest and colonisation, history and memory, ownership of knowledge, social justice and intellectual fairness, pastiche, hero-worship, ignorance and truth-telling
<b>Literary and dramatic techniques</b>	Soliloquy, aside, apostrophe, caricature, visual and verbal comedy, high and low social register, motif and intertextual reference
<b>Cast</b>	10 characters

## Why choose this play?

As students move into high school English, teachers hope that they'll become aware of the many different topics and ideas English can cover. This play shows that history, geography, biography and Indigenous studies are all interesting in the English classroom—not only as dry texts, but as important, lively questions about people from our past, stories about them and the ethics of representing groups. *The First Australian* presents an intriguing character and follows his astute and diplomatic analysis of his own historical record. A clever and entertaining play, it provokes students to realise that they can and should question the materials they're presented with.

## Practical considerations

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students may find this lesson engaging or distressing as it foregrounds the ambivalent representation of their cultures and individuals within it by white Australian history.

Plan for 50 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 *The First Australian* by Sue Murray

## ***Learning objectives***

Students will:

- understand and analyse the routes through texts by which we accumulate knowledge about characters
- learn how lexis represents the world of a text and apply analysis to determine how historic or archaic words represent a world that no longer exists
- consider how well members of one culture can interrogate and represent another culture and compile questions about Indigenous history to learn about the ethics of storytelling
- create a text about an Indigenous personality from early colonial history, drawing on the themes of the text to show that their story has also been overlooked or is now difficult to retrieve.



## Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

<b>Year 7 content descriptions</b>	Language: Language variation and change	ACELA1528	Understand the way language evolves to reflect a changing world, particularly in response to the use of new technology for presenting texts and communicating.
	Literature: Literature and context	ACELT1619	Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts.
	Literacy: Creating texts	ACELY1725	Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, selecting aspects of subject matter and particular language, visual and audio features to convey information and ideas.
<b>General capabilities</b>	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.
	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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<b>Cross curriculum priorities</b>	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures	OI.6	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have lived in Australia for tens of thousands of years and experiences can be viewed through historical, social and political lenses.
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## 1. Approaching the text

Read through the text, making sure that the class understands that this is set in a museum store-room and the setting emphasises how much has been forgotten and relegated to the ‘dusty corners’ of history.

## 2. Introducing ideas

**i) We learn about characters from what other characters do and say about them in the text. Sometimes, however, characters don’t get ‘right of reply’, so our knowledge of them is imperfect or biased.**

Look at the sentence types Bungaree uses most frequently in this play; you should notice that he asks many questions. Murray uses this to point out how little we really know about Bungaree and how previous ages didn’t think to ask or seek to find the answers to these questions. Our knowledge of Bungaree, therefore, is pretty thin on the ground.

### *Understanding activity*

Draw up a three-column table to show a) what other characters say about Bungaree; b) what Bungaree says about himself; and c) what students say about him. Remind students of the difference between what the text definitely says (i.e. evidence that can be copied down) and what we can infer from this (i.e. beliefs or ‘readings’ based on the evidence).

Point out that different characters will naturally have different perspectives on events. Discuss what events might be involved in this: who ‘made’ Australia (or the nation we think of as Australia, as distinct from the different countries known to Indigenous peoples within it); who are ‘Australians’ and what that means for who Indigenous people or peoples are. Perspectives consist of both the position from which the event is viewed *and* what the person or group hopes to get out of it. Ask students how different perspectives might be generated by individuals’ agendas. For example, the prestige attached to ‘discovering’ a country or being its ‘founding father’; the element of ownership involved in being a first people or first nation and how other groups will contest this and the distribution of scarce resources based on imposed ideas of superiority.

**ii) The stock and selection of words is one important aspect involved in telling the story of a person’s life. This becomes difficult when the language becomes lost, forgotten or muddled up, because language no longer accurately reflects the world being discussed or described.**

The confusion over the spelling of Bungaree’s name reveals how small a window of time we often have to acquire new words, their correct sound and right meaning. Explain that standardised spelling is a relatively new idea—because English is a highly blended language, much of our spelling comes from convention rather than formal rules. When Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* was published in 1755, many spellings were standardised for the first time, but there are still different conventions for the different ‘Englishes’ around the world. The variety of Englishes reflects the spread of people from the British Isles, but doesn’t necessarily reflect a current or continuing dominance of the same cultural group—many more people speak English now than have ever been, or been related to, an Indigenous Briton.

### *Understanding activity*

Ask students to list all the unfamiliar words in the text and create a glossary to accompany the text. Working in pairs, they should select one of these words and create a mind map of the world that



word represents or suggests. For example: *grinkari*, which a historian (character) claims means ‘a pink corpse whose skin has been removed’ can be connected to an oral account by William Buckley of his life with the Wadda-Warrung nation, who had thought he was the ‘reincarnation of one of their deceased relatives’. It represents a world where family relations are important; an existence after death is assumed to occur; spirits return to the tribe and the country, but in another form or with a different appearance; skin colour indicates your metaphysical state; the state of being grinkari is attributed to you by observers, regardless of what you yourself think about it.

When students have completed a mind map of their word, display them as a way of showing how the lexis (word stock and choice) of a text is a good indication of how it reflects the world. You could ask students to repeat the exercise with a text from the day’s newspaper, to reinforce how contemporary writings also use lexis to create the world within the text.

**iii) Because of their greater access to the facts or the culture from which a person, event or object came, some groups have greater knowledge or understanding about those things than others. When we approach culturally specific material, writers and readers from outside that culture should first accept that their questions, terms and ways of telling might not produce the most accurate representation.**

Many things about the Indigenous peoples of the Australian continent have been inaccurately represented—or not represented at all—and so our picture of the interactions which happened in the early years of the colony is very patchy indeed. Many of the terms and language collected from Indigenous peoples are used inaccurately or without proper reference to the cultural context—a context which has now disappeared, but which has informed the current context in which Indigenous matters are represented.

### *Understanding activity*

Discuss with students how Bungaree is not the only member of the early colony who has been relegated to the shadows of history. Compile a list of questions about the early years of the colony that students would like to know the answer to and suggest reasons for why we may not have the answers.

## 3. The learning activity

In the previous understanding activity, students may have come across the names of other Aboriginal people whose lives and interactions were recorded by the early colonists. The writer Watkin Tench produced one of the earliest and liveliest accounts of life in the first four years of the colony. His account was simply called *1788* and recorded many of their names and details of their lives, although they suffered the same fate as Bungaree and were relegated to the backwaters of history. Among them are: Manly (Arabadoo), Nanbaree, Bennelong, Barangaroo and Gooreedeeana.

Re-read the last exchange between Bungaree and the historian. Bungaree mentions a few things about himself and puts good questions to the historian. Students should research one of the other Indigenous personalities listed above and imagine that this figure is also in the storeroom with Bungaree. They will add a speech by their figure to the end of the play.

Just as Bungaree finishes his speech (with ‘That stinking cat, Trim.’) and leaves the stage, the second Indigenous figure could pull off their dust sheet and say ‘Hey, not so fast! You haven’t heard *my* story! I’ve got questions too, you know! I’m ...’ and continue to write a short speech in the same vein as Bungaree’s, explaining what is known about their life and all the unasked questions which can never be answered.

## 4. Rounding up

Use the closing section of the lesson to reinforce the idea that English is about stories, representing the world as you see it and examining others’ claims about the world that they have known.



Discuss with students what stories about their country and the people who have lived here before them are of interest to them. This shared network of stories and ways of seeing the world is one way of thinking about the relationship between the people in their class. This network can be thought of in a similar way to the songlines, the network of stories and meanings which unites peoples, individuals and places. End by pointing out that the idea of songlines is one of the Indigenous peoples of Australia's greatest gifts to humanity.

## Assessment ideas

- i) Ask students to give a 3-minute talk about how 'words are a mirror to our world'. They should collect five to ten words and create a mind-map similar to the one produced for the 'Understanding activity' ii above. They may bring the mind-map with them and refer to it as they speak, illustrating how these 5 words show us particularly important or revealing things about our world.
- ii) There are several webpages devoted to Trim, Matthew Flinders' flighty cat, but very few about Bungaree, the man who helped to make Flinders famous. [Kids Website Creator](#) provides tools to make a website: ask students to design (and create, if you have access to the tools) a two-page website commemorating an aboriginal figure of their choice. They could offer a rationale for some of their choices—for example, whether or not to present the page in the voice of the figure, how strongly to foreground Indigenous designs and motifs and whether or not to include activities or downloads for site visitors.
- iii) Give students a visual stimulus from early colonial Australia: the images used on the [Barani website](#) are extremely good. Ask students to write a monologue in the voice of this Indigenous figure, revealing what they're thinking as they're being painted.



## 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.

	<b>National English Skills 7</b>	Unit 8: The Dreaming and beyond, pp. 64–70
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## Further reading

- The [Australian Dictionary of Biography](#) has entries on most of the Indigenous figures and also about Watkin Tench.
- [My Place](#) is an attractive website which supports the *My Place* TV series. It also has a great deal of information about early Indigenous relations with the colony.
- The [National Film and Sound Archive](#) provides a module about Indigenous peoples and the colony of New South Wales.

## Linked texts

'The First Australian' could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others):

- *Lousy Little Sixpence* (G), directed by Alec Morgan and Gerry Bostock
- *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, Papunya School Publishing Committee, text by Nadia Wheatley, book design by Ken Searle



- *Pilawuk: When I was Young*, Janeen Brian
- *The Honey Spot*, Jack Davis
- *The Burnt Stick*, Anthony Hill, illustrated by Mark Sofilas
- *The Binna Binna Man*, Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Pryor



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