



BIG DRAMAS second edition

Selected Scenes from *Mirror, Mirror*

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 8
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Expressionistic
Themes	Eating disorder, family breakdown, self-hatred, sibling loyalty, anxiety, desire, illusion and deception, fairytales and personal growth
Literary and dramatic techniques	Visual literacy, clowning, soliloquies, ballet and belly dancing, asides and out-of-view voices, slapstick and visual comedy, metaphor (visual metaphor) and allusion, fable, pastiche, rhyme
Cast	19 characters

Why choose this play?

Eating disorders are an ongoing problem for both men and women, as ideas of attractiveness and acceptability become ever more rigidly defined. In this play, the strange games we play with ourselves to shore up fundamentally unhelpful processes of reasoning mould an inner climate which skew, slow and eventually stop the growth of a teenage girl. Sue Murray's pastiche of styles captures both the inner and outer world of the girl at the centre of this, showing how ideas of beauty are conflated with attractiveness, difference, acceptability, interest and virtue. This is a great play to teach to Year 8 as they become more aware of the relentless and subtle messages conveyed by the world around them. It is not only an interesting and meaningful piece of theatre, but a lesson that introduces elements of media literacy.

Practical considerations

This play could be considered triggering for students who have or are experiencing problems with eating and body-image or social adaptation. Although the content of the lesson aims to provide tools which help students to critique the medium and concepts at the root of this response to social pressures, it may prove difficult for students who are currently struggling with this issue.

It would be helpful to have access to the internet for this lesson.

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 ‘Selected scenes from *Mirror, Mirror*’ by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

- identify the concepts that society often pairs with beauty, and understand that this conflation makes beauty’s nature and role in society very ambiguous
- identify the source of complex cultural messages and consider how these sources possess an authority which makes them powerful value-shapers
- learn about and analyse persuasive techniques in both visual and literary texts which enculturate our attitudes to beauty, attractiveness, virtue, value and self-worth
- create a mixed-media text that communicates a personal perspective on one concept studied in the lesson and provide an analysis of the values, methods and composition of the text.



Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 8 content descriptions	Language: Text structure and organisation	ACELA1543	Analyse how the text structures and language features of persuasive texts, including media texts, vary according to the medium and mode of communication.
	Literacy: Interpreting, analysing, evaluating	ACELY1734	Use comprehension strategies to interpret and evaluate texts by reflecting on the validity of content and the credibility of sources, including finding evidence in the text for the author’s point of view.
	Literature: Creating literature	ACELT1632	Create literary texts that draw upon text structures and language features of other texts for particular purposes and effects.
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.
	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 all three scenes, identifying the different moods of each scene and pointing out that the entire drama conveys the world as it appears to the Girl. The stage is neither purely representative of her inner world, nor the external world, but shows how she perceives the world around her through the lens of fairytales, mental voices and idealised abstractions.

2. Introducing ideas

i) This play shows how we are inculcated with our culture's ideas of beauty from an early age. Many of our ideas about beauty are really about attractiveness, sex appeal, virtue, interest and worth. How and why have these ideas become all tangled up?

Ask each student to write a sentence explaining what they think is meant by the term 'beauty'. If they struggle to define it, that's great! It shows that, looked at very closely, beauty is extremely difficult to define and can't be isolated from context, form, medium and purpose. Explain that the study of beauty as a concept is called *aesthetics* and that much of aesthetics involves sorting out what beauty is from what it's not.

Understanding activity

Look at the first scene in the play and identify the number of times the words 'beauty' or 'beautiful' are used. Look at the context of the word, writing down what connotations beauty carries with it in the line. Students should identify things like:

- *Sleeping Beauty*—the name of a famous story involving a princess, a curse, a handsome prince and an awakening to true love and marriage
- *You are beautiful, on the inside*—a mother's reassurance of her child, drawing the distinction between outer appearance and inner character and asserting her love based on the inner character
- *What...a beautiful...*—what the Ugly Duckling sees, rendering her speechless and awed by how new and different the beautiful (swan?) is.
- *What ... a beautiful ...*—the Girl echoes the Ugly Duckling's speech, putting herself in the place of the Ugly Duckling and sharing its envy, sense of difference and inadequacy.
- *Beauty, will you marry me?*—Another reference to a fairytale, where this time Beauty is eponymous and the object of an ugly creature's desire. She 'retrieves' his ugliness by marrying him in the end, having won his love with her beauty and virtue.

Now ask students to identify which concepts have been paired or blurred into beauty each time the word is used. They should understand that beauty (which is, strictly speaking, a purely subjective response to a set of physical arrangements) becomes tangled up with ideas of envy; passiveness; romantic love; reproductive value; maternal love; the difference between outer and inner self; something apart from oneself, which is viewed from outside; comparison; inadequacy; virtue; and moral power. Point out that the very fact that we can give these other concepts names of their own shows that beauty is separate to these things and that the process of tangling them up begins very early indeed.

You can repeat this exercise with the term 'ugly' or 'ugliness'.

ii) These complex blends of concepts are presented in the most attractive ways, often by the most attractive and authoritative sources.

Our parents, the primary source of our physical and emotional well-being, often hand on the same cultural content and routines with which they were inculcated. In fact, often it's a source of great joy to read your own children the fairytales which were read to you and it's not until some extraneous or exaggerated element is added to the child's enculturation, that the process of shaping their values is skewed.





Understanding activity

Ask students to look at all three scenes again and identify all the sources through which the Girl learns about the concepts identified in Understanding Activity i. There are very evident ones, such as her father and the storybook, but there are also many subtle ones, such as ‘the dietician’ mentioned in scene 3 and the different ways in which the home environment is presented (i.e. as a place of conflict, a place of relaxation, a model of traditional family dynamics). What exactly does each source tell the Girl about the concepts and in what way are the sources authoritative?

Now allow students some computer time where they should look at some advertisements which use fairytales to persuade viewers of their product. [This website](#) is a good source, but not all images are suitable for Year 8, so you may have to select a few for viewing. Ask students to choose an image and work in pairs to nominate what concepts are communicated (trying to be as clear as possible about the different concepts), who is the ‘teller’ or authority in the ad and why the viewer is likely to be susceptible to this source’s authority.

iii) To communicate the complex messages about self, beauty and value, cultural authority figures use many and subtle techniques.

Students will likely have come across some persuasive techniques in the context of argumentative essays, speeches or letters. Realistically, however, the most persuasive material is rarely clear about its intentions or methods.

Understanding activity

Revise the persuasive techniques which students know (these might include similes, rhetorical questions, repetition of word or idea, emotive language, hyperbole, generalisation and connotation or association) and discuss how each scene features persuasion to accept an idea of beauty. The three scenes are very different and use quite different strategies to pressure the Girl to accept this idea. For example, in scene 1, sequence and comparison is used to show how different Ducklings 1, 2 and 3 are from the Ugly Duckling. This is immediately confirmed by the Stork’s comment, ‘That’s one UGLY duckling!’ which labels the baby with a loaded epithet and bias is shown by the mother’s attempt at positive discrimination with her remark, ‘You are beautiful, on the inside.’ The swift pace with which one element follows another further impresses the Duckling’s ugliness.

From the visual advertisements examined before, ask students to choose a different image and consider some of the persuasive techniques which are used to persuade viewers to accept the advertisement’s definition of beauty. For example, this [advertisement for Gap Jeans](#) seems very simple—a white background with a young woman in the product and a blue singlet top. Some techniques, however, that Year 8 might be expected to notice include:

- The simplicity of the image deceives viewers because it seems to lack persuasive techniques—the ‘vibe’ of the ad is honest/transparent, foregrounding the apparent excellence of the product. In fact, the simplicity means that the ad’s other messages or assumptions are conveyed without notice.
- The woman is conventionally beautiful—she is white, young, regular-featured and without glasses, tattoos, scars or other visible blemishes or adornment. She has ‘invisible’ or ‘effortless’ make-up, suggesting that her glossy, highly groomed appearance is natural and her physical measurements are clearly small (although it’s likely that her body has been photo-shopped, since the lines around her chest and underarms are extremely smooth).
- The model is placed in a position which makes her slimness and youth prominent and which treads an ambivalent line between being casual and provocative.
- The tagline ‘Born to Fit’ conveys the associations between the product, the model’s appearance and social acceptability.

Gap displays one idea of beauty by giving it visual prominence in this advertisement, but more subtly, it blends an idea of beauty with consumerism and social acceptability.

3. The learning activity

There are two parts to this learning activity:

1. The Girl's brother makes it clear that the Mother knows that the Girl is ill and that she avoids dealing with the real issue. Ask pairs of students to discuss why she may be doing this. Is it because she doesn't know how to help her daughter untangle herself from the mesh of social messages to which the Mother was also exposed? Is it because she feels guilty for exposing her daughter to them? Is it because the next stage of the social conditioning process now seems to involve an eating disorder, the involvement of an 'expert' and a period of familial trauma?

After discussing this in their pairs, students should write a three-minute speech for the Mother to perform, as though she was in the circus ring, explaining why she avoids tackling the heart of the issue.

2. Ask students to take one of the lines from the end of scene 1 and create an image, using this line as a tagline or title, which communicates their idea of beauty and how it differs from attractiveness, virtue or social acceptability. This is not an advertisement for a product, but for an idea (in fact, several products have used a 'teaser' campaign of releasing images only for several weeks, before revealing the product or company associated with it).

Students should also write an analysis of their image, explaining what concept they wanted to convey, how it used the line from the play and what their personal beliefs are about the concept.



4. Rounding up

Social conditioning affects all of us—men and boys are also increasingly pressured to look and behave in specific, unattainable ways. Sociologists and evolutionary biologists speculate that these unreachably high standards of appearance and personality are ways of differentiating desirable or potentially successful breeding members of our species from others. Ask students how it would make them feel if they understood the pressure to be beautiful as a test of evolution. Would it make this pressure easier or harder to manage—and why? The message that 'it's OK to be yourself and we're all beautiful, even if it's on the inside' doesn't really convince many adolescents, who regard such attempts to support them as ignorant of the fundamental nature of the concern. If students could be absolutely frank about the 'problem' of body dysmorphia, what would they say?

Assessment ideas

- i) Give students a number of advertisements from either print or digital media and ask them for each one what ideal of beauty is being conveyed and what techniques are being used. Try to ensure that a variety of ideas of beauty are included, including male beauty and beauty in objects. Students should select one image and write a longer response explaining why this idea of beauty appeals to them.
- ii) Fairytales are highly persuasive as social conditioning media. Ask students to bring in an image which conveys their idea of *either* beauty, social acceptability, virtue or attractiveness and, under timed conditions, write a fairytale which conveys this idea in narrative form.
- iii) Parents are usually the earliest and most influential shapers of a child's ideas of beauty and related concepts. The configuration of the family is very different now to the families for whom the Grimm brothers wrote. Ask students to write an argumentative essay, agreeing or disagreeing with the proposition '*It doesn't matter what family arrangements you have, kids will still learn the same ideas about beauty and fitting in.*'

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
	English Workbook 2 (3rd edn)	Unit 3: Language, purpose and audience, pp. 73–87
	National English Skills 8	Unit 2: Visual texts Unit 5: Advertising



Further reading

- [This article](#), published in *Health Education Research* 2006, is titled ‘How adolescent girls interpret weight-loss advertising’ and the abstract alone reveals how poorly developed most adolescent girls’ abilities are to identify the persuasive techniques involved in most weight-loss product advertising.
- A good, brief example of a [student analysis](#) of a Cover Girl advertisement featuring Taylor Swift.
- A fascinating [series of images](#) of one girl who sent her image to different countries, asking the recipient to photoshop it according to what that culture thought was beautiful. The differences are pretty significant!

Linked texts

‘Selected scenes from *Mirror, Mirror*’ could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 4 (among many others)

- *Wringer*, Jerry Spinelli
- *The Power of Poetry*, J Eshuys and V Guest
- *Ever After* (PG), directed by Andy Tennant
- *The Princess Bride* (PG), directed by Rob Reiner
- *Shrek* (PG), directed by Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jenson and Scott Marshall
- *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, Geraldine McCaughrean
- *The Great Deeds of Heroic Women*, retold by Maurice Saxby, illustrated by Robert Ingpen

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