



BIG DRAMAS second edition

Circular Breathing

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Level	Suitable for Year 10
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Realist monologue
Themes	Disillusionment, isolation, bereavement, surprise pregnancy, abandonment, family, mother–daughter relations, personal pride and resilience, ambition
Literary and dramatic techniques	Symbolism, motif, direct speech, mimicry, anapodoton, apostrophe, voice
Cast	One female character

Why choose this play?

An unplanned pregnancy is the trigger for this monologue by a young Aboriginal student, Marnie. Sue Murray depicts the young woman's perspective on life with elegance and economy, showing how we sum up the events of a life and bring them to bear on one, life-changing question. Monologues are a great way to tackle the tricky subject of identifying and analysing literary voice. Students who enjoy literature and have begun to develop their own style in both reading and writing will be engaged by this lesson, which shows them how to locate the seeds of voice in literary and language techniques and gives them a chance to use their own emerging voice in writing.

Practical considerations

This monologue takes up the difficult subject of an unplanned pregnancy and closes with the possibility that the character may be a single mother, an unready mother or may not continue with the pregnancy. If your school, students or their parents have emotional, ethical or religious sensitivities around these issues, you could introduce the play as an opportunity to think empathically about this situation and to analyse the affective basis of ethical judgment.

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 *Circular Breathing* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- learn and use the DUCATS (diction, unity, coherence, audience, tone, syntax) framework as a way of analysing voice in a literary text
- consider how literary voice affects their response to ethical issues presented in the text
- discuss whether there is a characteristic 'Indigenous voice' in Australian aboriginal literature and whether this is a useful or fair category to use in evaluating literature
- create a text which conveys their own literary voice and consider others' feedback about this before editing and refining the text to achieve their desired effect.



Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 10 content descriptions	Literature: Responding to literature	ACELT1641	Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response
	Literature: Literature and context	ACELT1639	Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts
	Literature: Examining literature	ACELT1643	Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses
	Literature: Creating literature	ACELT1814	Create literary texts that reflect an emerging sense of personal style and evaluate the effectiveness of these texts.
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.
	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.

continued ...





	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.
Cross-curricular priorities	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures	OI.5	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life are uniquely expressed through ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.



1. Approaching the text

If you have a particularly capable reader, allow one or two students to read Marnie's monologue. It's essential that the reader really makes Marnie come alive for the listeners: if a student can't convey Marnie's mood or personality, read the monologue for the class yourself.

2. Introducing ideas

i) Soliloquies foreground voice, which is one of the hardest elements of literature to define and critique, but one of the biggest points of engagement with a work. What exactly is 'voice'?

Students (and teachers) who are keen creative writers will recognise the struggle to write with a unique and authentic voice—that is, the combination of topic, stylistic devices and pace which accurately represents their (or their characters') perspective and how they sound as they articulate it. Many of the texts students will read for Year 11 and 12 English have been chosen because their literary voice is memorable, excellent and enlightening. If students can think of a book which they love because a character or narrator 'sounds' like someone they'd like to meet or someone who knows how they feel, they're responding to the literary voice of the text.

Understanding activity

Using a favourite book, choose a very short passage that you feel has a strong sense of voice. Read the passage aloud and follow it by reading aloud the opening lines of *Circular Breathing*, down to 'I got off and walked home'. (If you can't think of suitable passage, you could use the [first paragraph of Frankenstein](#)).

Draw out students' understanding of voice by asking:

- how do you know that each reading is spoken by a different character?
- how would you characterise each one? (Students should use—or learn—a variety of terms for tone.)
- if you didn't know that Marnie was an Indigenous woman, would the voice of the monologue suggest it? Justify your opinion by explaining what aspect(s) of the voice suggests her indigeneity.

Students may not be able to articulate coherently how they know that the speakers from each passage are different, but they should be able to recognise that elements of language are used in different ways by different speakers to produce a unique voice.

A helpful acronym for the elements of voice is DUCATS. This stands for diction, unity, coherence, audience, tone and syntax. Explain these elements briefly to the class, illustrating them





with examples from the play. Then ask groups of students to find one other example for one element. (This table can be downloaded.)

Element	Explanation	Aspects	Teacher example	Student example
Diction	Word choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - denotation/connotation - degree of difficulty or complexity - level of formality - tone or emotional charge a word carries 	I didn't realise for a while that Mum had dumped me there.	
Unity	The idea that all of the ideas are relevant and appropriate to the focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - each claim supports the thesis - evidence contributes to the piece of writing as a whole - violations of unity or omissions might have a specific effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (Thesis) Some people have angels watching over them. I've got Nan. - (Claim) Nan was always on my back. - (Claim) When my periods started, Nan winked and said, 'Just like that old Moon.' 	
Coherence	The organisation and logic of a piece of writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - clarity of thesis and order of arguments - the sentences and paragraphs 'flow smoothly' for the reader 	<i>Show the class how the monologue is structured around the objects which come out of the tin.</i>	
Audience	The composer's awareness of the recipient of their work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is there a sense of who the target is? Who are the targeted readers? - Do they know everything they need to know in order to understand the piece or are they being educated as they read/listen? - What's the audience's first impression and how is their attention grabbed by the voice? - How does the composer deal with the possibility of attention lapses or resistance to the argument? - What is the relationship between the composer and audience? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [Pauses, as if listening, then nods with reluctant agreement] Okay, Noosa. Yeah. - The next few years were sh—. [Skyward] Sorry. 	
Tone	The composer's attitude to a subject matter, conveyed through these elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - diction - figurative language - characterisation - plot - theme 	Then it was back to Dubbo. And Nan was diagnosed.	

continued ...



Syntax	The ordering, grouping and placement of words within a phrase, clause or sentence to create sense and pace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - type and length of sentence - abruptness of changes to length or patterns - punctuation - repetition - cadence, pace - active and/or passive voice 	<p>I promised myself my life would be different, that I'd only have kids when my life was settled ... when I'd finished uni, when I'd got married and had a house and ...</p> <p>Heads I keep it ...</p>	
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ii) Voice is designed to generate an audience response and must be so compelling that we can't not respond. So what affects our response?

The moment the coin is tossed, the audience understands that Marnie is putting us on the spot: if we are empathically engaged in her problem, we'll understand that she feels helpless, a plaything in the hands of fate. If we're sympathetically engaged, however, we'll likely hope for a specific outcome of the coin-toss. The extent of our engagement in a character's dilemma is often down to how thoroughly we've been attracted by the character's voice.

Understanding activity

Ask the class to write down whether they want Marnie to continue with the pregnancy, terminate it or simply not to leave such a big decision to the toss of a coin. When they've written their answer (which they shouldn't have to share unless they wish to), ask them to consider whether they agree with this proposition: if they wanted a specific outcome, they feel sympathetic to Marnie and if they just wanted to see her make a more informed decision, they feel empathetic towards her. Once students have agreed that their response was either empathetic or sympathetic (or apathetic, if they genuinely didn't care), ask them to go back through the monologue and underline the lines which informed that response. What elements of the voice in those lines affected them in this way?

iii) Is there a characteristic Australian Indigenous voice?

Marnie's aboriginality is only one aspect of her character and situation. We only learn about it through one line ('Getting Abstudy.') which could be removed. But this line makes us 'hear' the voice of the character differently and to place the character's situation in a different socio-cultural context. It's certainly relevant to the voice in this text, but is it fair or useful to talk about an 'Indigenous voice'? Discuss this with the class before turning to the understanding activity.

Understanding activity

Give the class a number of brief extracts from literature by Indigenous composers: Lorraine Mafi-Williams' compilation, *Spirit Song: A Collection of Aboriginal Poetry*, and the work of Sally Morgan, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Tara June Winch and Doris Pilkington Garimara are the most easily available. Ask students to analyse the extract using the DUCATS framework and decide whether there are similarities in the literary voice of the texts—or if this is a case of finding what they know is already there. What use might a distinctive literary voice have for a particular literature, whether Indigenous or not?

Finally, ask students whether it matters to them if the composer is 'genuinely' Indigenous or not. Authenticity is a category often demanded of Indigenous literature—but not of other literatures—because some readers feel that a voice can't be authentic unless the composer is physically an authentic member of that culture. Is this a legitimate part of literary voice or is an ethical idea obtruding upon an aesthetic matter?





3. The learning activity

Hemingway famously advised young writers to ‘write hard and clear about what hurts’. Everyone has something that hurts and it’s the one topic on which we tend to be most honest about ourselves—on which our voice comes through most strongly, perhaps because we’ve already lost, so there is nothing to persuade or aim for (which is what most frequently guides our writing). Marnie has, in a sense, already lost—she is either going to be a young, single and unemployed mother halfway through a degree, or a student trying to finish a degree with the grief of a terminated pregnancy behind her. She can’t afford *not* to be honest. Honesty informs her voice and makes it distinctive.

Tell students that they’re going to write a soliloquy of their own, hard and clear, beginning with ‘I’ll tell you what hurts. What hurts is ...’ and don’t stop until they’re finished.

The next part is up to the teacher’s discretion or a class vote. If students feel confident in exchanging their work, they can do so and analyse the piece using the DUCATS framework to identify the elements of voice in the student’s soliloquy. If they don’t want to share their pieces, take them in and mark them yourself using the framework. You could write a single tone-word on their piece to show what tone you felt it conveyed. If you mark them, students should review and edit the piece using your feedback until they’ve achieved the voice they want.

4. Rounding up

Ask students if they can think of a really memorable moment when a friend said something that has stuck in their heads. No matter how brief their friend’s remark, it sticks in their heads because it is characteristic of that person’s voice—their attitude to a topic, way of putting it into words and manner of expressing the words vocally. Make sure that students can see the importance of voice as a writer’s hallmark and the thing that sticks with them about a character long after the specifics of a text have been forgotten.

Assessment ideas

- i) Using the DUCATS framework above, give students an extract from a text (there are some good short extracts [here](#)) and ask them to write an analytical response evaluating the appeal and success of the literary voice. This will require them to suggest a purpose for the text in order to assess its success and to give a personal response to its appeal.
- ii) Ask students to design a backdrop for Marnie’s monologue. There could be almost anything behind her, from a screen showing historic films of Australian women to a roll of wallpaper. What would they place behind Marnie’s kitchen table and chair to contextualise her monologue? They should give a detailed description of the backdrop, then offer an analytical response of how this would achieve the audience response they want for the play.
- iii) Marnie speaks to her (absent) Nan in this monologue, but there is an opportunity for her to be alone or with a number of other silent characters on stage. Ask students to select one option for the production and explain what effect the presence or absence of other characters as audience has on Marnie’s monologue.



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 4 (2nd edn)	Unit 1: The world of texts, p. 7 Unit 10: Winning Unit 12: Humour, pp. 87–8
	National English Skills 10	Chapter 1: Related texts, pp. 10–12 Chapter 3: Cultural experiences, pp. 36–7 Chapter 7: Humour, pp. 77–8 Chapter 8: Different voices
	Senior English Skills	Chapter 4: Persuasion, pp. 59–60 Chapter 6: Making language choices Chapter 9: Speeches and presentations

Linked texts

Circular Breathing could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 5 (among many others):

- *Finding Grace*, Alyssa Brugman
- *Rough with the Smooth: Stories of Australian Men*, edited by BR Coffey
- *Eva*, Peter Dickinson
- *Borrowed Light*, Anna Fienberg
- *The Eyre Affair*, Jasper Fforde
- *Deadly, Unna?*, Phillip Gwynne
- *Came Back to Show You I Could Fly*, Robin Klein
- *Beast*, Donna Jo Napoli
- *Willow Tree and Olive*, Irini Savvides
- *Stone Cold*, Robert Swindells
- *Montana 1948*, Larry Watson
- *Water Colours*, Sarah Walker
- 'Dover beach', Arnold
- 'The tyger', Blake
- 'Because I could not stop for death', Dickinson
- 'Last lesson of the afternoon', Lawrence
- 'The raven', Poe



- ‘Does it matter?’, Sassoon
- ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’, Shakespeare
- ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’, Thomas
- *Australian Visions*, Jill Bryant
- *Spirit Song: A Collection of Aboriginal Poetry*, compiled by Lorraine Mafi-Williams
- *Play of Flowers for Algernon*, Bert Coules from the novel by Daniel Keyes
- *Plays from Black Australia*, edited by Jack Davis
- *What is the Matter with Mary Jane?*, Wendy Harmer and Sancia Robinson
- *Dags*, Debra Oswald



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