

Radiance

Please Note

This unit of work is based on the Currency edition of the play, published in 2000 and featuring an introduction by Louis Nowra. This edition also includes the screenplay of the 1997 film based on this play. Any page numbers cited in this Unit refer to this edition. This teaching resource relates mostly to the stage play although some reference is also made to the film, the study of which is encouraged.

Nowra's introduction in this edition is well worth reading and will be focused on later in the unit, but it does contain a major plot revelation (spoiler alert!) and so it is advised to have students read the play or see the film first, before asking them to read Nowra's account of the development of both scripts.

Be advised that *Radiance* contains swearing and adult themes, namely the rape of a young girl (recalled by Cressy, not shown). Use the text with discretion and consider whether parental contact is desirable.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to brainstorm possibilities or associations suggested by the title of the play. What does radiance mean? How could this relate to the story or its characters?
- Ask students to discuss how a play differs as a narrative to a novel or film. How are elements of character or plot revealed in a play? What storytelling tools does a playwright have at his or her disposal?
- Ask students to research the life and work of Louis Nowra. They should compile a biography for him of about 200 words, synthesised from several websites. Students may also be directed to the Additional Resources page of this Unit, which provides a range of online material relating to *Radiance*, Nowra and his work.
- Ask students to establish and maintain a journal in which these and other topics throughout the unit can be explored and responses articulated.

Tapping into prior knowledge (e.g. content, expectations)

- Ask students to examine the **cover image** (PDF, 236KB) of the Currency Press edition of the play and film script. A copy is attached for your reference. This image presents the play's three characters: Cressy, Nona and Mae (portrayed by Rachel Maza, Deborah Mailman and Trisha Morton-Thomas respectively). Students should brainstorm a list of words that illustrate how character appears in this image: for example Cressy seems aloof, Nona cheeky and Mae serious/grumpy. This task will be revisited after the initial reading of the play.
- Show students the YouTube clip of Christine Anu singing **My Island Home**. What is the main idea or theme of this song? Invite students to suggest/anticipate possible links between this song and the themes of *Radiance*.

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT

As a play script, *Radiance* is intended to be heard and it is suggested that students read the script aloud in class, in sections as set out below; students might take turns reading each of the three characters. The reading guide below is based on getting through the entire play in approximately four lessons. A viewing of the 1997 film of the play can follow this reading. As there are only three female characters, it is a matter for teacher discretion whether male students are asked to read some of the parts.

Possible questions while reading the text

These questions are offered as a guide only. Students might explore them in their journals or in five minute small group discussions. Responses should be shared with the class.

Students should also construct profiles of each of the characters as they read. These might include responses to the images of actors in the roles throughout the text; highlighting/making note of dialogue that reveal motives or attitudes; and summaries of how each character evolves during the play. A [chart](#) (PDF, 63KB) is provided to help students map out some of these responses as they read the play.

Act One: pp. 5–24 ('Cressy: I could never, ever be ashamed of you.')

- What does Mae's opening speech reveal about her relationship to her mother?
- What are the reader's first impressions of Nona?
- In the opening pages (pp. 5 – 9 for example) how is the relationship between Mae and Nona established? What do they think of each other?
- Briefly explain the different attitudes Mae and Nona have to their mother's death; Nona's vaguely romantic one ('I bet you she was looking at the island', p. 10) and Mae's far more pragmatic one ('There's no art to dying...', same page).
- Why does Cressy 'seems uneasy to be back in the house' (p. 10)?
- Why do Nona and Mae react differently to her arrival?
- Who is the Black Prince? Why is Nona apparently obsessed with him?
- What kind of experiences has Nona had with men? What evidence does she reveal of this?
- Explain the significance of the island at the end of this section and the importance to Nona of taking her mother's ashes there to be scattered.

Act One: pp. 24–42 (End of Act One)

- Explain Mae's reasoning for why no-one came to their mother's funeral (p. 27).
- Consider Cressy's monologues on pages 31 – 32 and 33. What do these reveal about her?
- How does the tone of this scene change immediately after Cressy slaps Nona?
- Based on the dialogue on p. 34 and earlier in Act One, summarise Mae's attitude to Harry Wells.
- Explain the significance, theatrically and narratively, of the mother's ashes being spilled (p. 37).
- What revelation occurs at the end of Act One? How does Nona's mood alter between finding the Radiance tin and hearing Cressy's story? Why is important to Nona that Cressy is lying?
- What is the significance of the last line of Act One (Nona, 'Lost the smell of liquorice.' p. 42)?

Act Two: pp. 42–55 (to the end of Mae's monologue: '...I love you, Mae.')

- Act Two begins on the mudflats between the coast and Nora Island. How does this contrast with the setting of Act One?
- Explain why Nona is always varying her appearance through wearing wigs and so on. What might this symbolise?
- Consider Cressy and Mae's conversation about stars on p. 46. What does this reveal about their relationship?
- What does Nona's ambition regarding Shorty (p. 47) reveal about her?
- We learn more about Mae's past on p. 48; how does her experience with men contrast with Nona's? What does the line, 'I did my time here—with Mum,' reveal about her attitude towards caring for her mother?

- Mae says of Nona on page 53, 'Because I don't know you, I know you.' What does this mean in the context of their relationship?
- Explain the different reaction of the two sisters to Mae's monologue at the end of this section.

Act Two: page 55 until the end.

- Explain Mae's resolution to burn down the house.
- The balance shifts again at the end of Act Two Scene One; Nona seems to become the responsible one. How is this reflected in the dialogue she is given?
- Consider the impact of the three characters singing, 'I'll Tell me Ma' on the mudflats while the house burns down. Why does this song unite them? Is this the first time in the play all three have been happy at the same time? If so why is this significant?
- Cressy's speech on pp. 61 – 62 is very confronting and provides the dramatic denouement of the play. Why does Nona react by running off?
- Explain the significance of ending the play with another refrain of 'I'll Tell me Ma'.

Ask students to complete the following tasks in their journals, commenced for the Introductory activities.

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS WITH OWN EXPERIENCE

Did you enjoy reading this play? Why/Why not?

Identification with characters and situations

Do any of the three characters in this play remind you of anyone you know?

Has anyone in your family ever had to care for an ailing elderly relative?

Reflection on completion of the text

Freewriting (write for three minutes without stopping). What do you think the central message or idea of *Radiance* might be? Discuss your responses with two to three other students. Share with the class and generate a list/mindmap of responses for the whiteboard or interactive whiteboard.

After completing their reading of the play, students should view the 1997 film of the play, directed by Rachel Perkins and adapted by Louis Nowra (the film script is provided in the Currency Press edition, as mentioned).

OUTLINE OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT

Plot

Radiance is interesting in having very little actual plot; the play focuses instead on the relationship between the three sisters and their shifting attitudes to one another and their collective and individual memories.

However, there are some points of action in the play (although some of them happen 'offstage') and it's useful to explore these in their context. These include:

- The funeral
- Spilling Mum's ashes
- The boys throwing stones on the roof
- Nona fetching the Radiance tin and the Black Prince's hat
- singing 'I'll Tell me Ma' on the mudflats
- Cressy's revelation that she is Nona's mother

- Burning down the house

Ask students to choose any three of these and explain their importance to the story of the play in one paragraph. Students might consider how the characters react to this incident, or what it reveals about them. It's also worth considering whether the chosen action reveals anything about the nature of the relationship between the sisters, the sisters and their mother, their mother and the town, and so on.

Character

Ask students to revisit the previous task based on the cover image of the Currency Press edition of the play and film script. Descriptions of the three women can now be extended and enriched. Develop statements for each character that explain how they are different by the end of the play.

One reading suggests that the three characters are 'family members who are strangers' (Introduction to Currency Press edition, p. ix). Why are the characters described this way? What makes them strange to each other? Responses here can be used to inform and develop responses to the Rich Assessment Task (Productive) for this Unit.

Themes

According to Louis Nowra, *Radiance* charts efforts by the three women to 'come to terms with each other and with the devastating consequences of family secrets'. (Introduction to Currency Press Edition, p.ix). Several such secrets are revealed during the play, including Cressy's explosive revelation that she is Nona's mother.

Ask students to use this information to shape and refine a paragraph which begins: 'Radiance is a play about...because...' This paragraph can be developed or refined to form the introduction of the Receptive Rich Assessment Task for this Unit.

Other themes at work in the play include (but are not limited to) loss, grief, accepting responsibility and coming of age, which Nona arguably shows some evidence of during the play.

Ask students to find a line of dialogue from any of the three characters that reflect, refer to or illustrate these ideas.

For example:

- NONA: You're always hiding things from me... (p. 9)
- NONA: I love getting wet. Makes me brand new. (p. 30)
- MAE: I think it was the home, more than Mum, that made me stay... (p. 19)
- CRESSY: That selfish woman. We're strangers because of her... (p. 32)
- MAE: (to Nona) I know you don't want to because you want to avoid anything remotely resembling responsibility... (p. 53)

Students might record their responses/lines of dialogue in a [chart like this one](#) (PDF, 114KB). (Blank spaces are provided for students to locate and explain additional lines of dialogue.)

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

Graffiti response

Resources required: large sheets of butcher's paper, black textas or permanent markers.

Arrange six different stations around the classroom by grouping desks together etc. Divide class into six groups and start one group at each station. Each station has a sheet of butcher's paper headed with a question in response to the play (possible questions listed below, as a guide only). Depending on time allocation within the lesson, students should have at least ten minutes at each

station. They should discuss each question and brainstorm some dot points in response to it. They may quote relevant lines from the play or refer to specific incidents, as necessary.

Groups rotate through each station so each sheet of paper has responses from each group. These can be displayed around the classroom to form the basis of discussion and argument.

Possible questions

- What does each of the three women learn about themselves by the end of the play?
- Why is it so important for Nona to scatter her mother's ashes on the island?
- Are there any hints leading up to the end of the play that Cressy is Nona's mother?
- What is symbolic about the house being burned down at the end?
- Identify/explain an episode in the play which unites the women rather than divides them.
- What do the three women learn about each other by the end of the play?

Suggested assessment focus: (ACELA1565) (EN5-7D)

THE WRITER'S CRAFT

Structure

Radiance is structured in two acts and five scenes. It's possible that the two-act structure establishes a dichotomy that resonates with other aspects of the play. Broadly speaking the two halves of the play are inside/outside and light/dark.

Reread Cressy's monologues at the end of each act. The first is shown to be a lie by the admissions of the second. Ask students to reflect on why Nowra ends both acts in this way, establishing a fiction and then replacing this with a bitter truth.

Select students to read aloud Cressy's monologues at the end of each act. Ask students to consider the significance of these two monologues—the admissions of the second giving lie to the first. Discuss why Nowra has ended each act in this way. What has happened between the two that allows Cressy to finally tell the truth? Ask students to record their responses to this discussion in their journals.

Chronologically the play unfolds in real time, with some leaps of an hour or so between scenes. The action occurs across the period of about a day, finishing late at night. The only flashbacks provided are by the characters in their monologues.

Ask students to compare in their journals the ending of the play and the film. What does each ending suggest for the characters? Refer to Nowra's comments on the ending of the film (Introduction to Currency Press edition, p. xiv).

Suggested assessment focuses: (ACELA1566) (ACELT1812) (EN5-6C) (EN5-7D)

Approach to characterisation

Ask students to revisit each of the following incidents in the play to examine how Nowra uses them to establish character:

- The arrival of Cressy (p. 10)
- Mae's outburst at the end of Act One Scene Two ('She spat at people...' p. 27).
- Spilling Mum's ashes (p. 37)

There are clear currents of emotion at the core of each character: Mae's resentment, Cressy's guilt and shame, Nona's immaturity. Some additional issues regarding the characters can be explored and discussed:

- Nona's use of wigs and different dresses—suggestive of playing 'dressups', or adopting different personas as preferable to her real one.
- Cressy's opera singing—she enjoys a stellar career in stark contrast to her humble childhood.
- Mae's attitude to Harry Wells and her desire for vengeance on him. This is intimated in her opening lines in the play and is revisited throughout (culminating in burning down the house at the end).

Setting

As suggested earlier, the setting of the play in two locations helps establish a core dichotomy. (The film abandons this somewhat, owing to the ability of cinema to 'open out' and encompass more locations, but there are still strong elements of night/day and light/dark that are evident in the film.)

The setting of Act Two especially might be considered in metaphorical terms, especially for Nona—the journey to the island to scatter the ashes represents her journey towards adulthood and 'great inner resolve' (Nowra, Introduction to Currency Press edition, p. xi).

Invite students to explore the two settings of the play, the house and the mudflats, in symbolic terms. For Mae especially, the chair in which her mother sat (and died) has a specific resonance, which arguably is later adopted by the entire house.

Use of parallels and contrasts

What are some dichotomies explored by the setting of the play? For example

- Inside/outside
- Safe/dangerous
- Closed up/open—or claustrophobic/exposed
- Light/dark
- Present/past
- Adolescence/adulthood

Ask students to explore in their Journals the role of fire as a symbol—the play begins and ends with fire, with Mae flicking matches at the chair and the destruction of the house respectively. Does this provide further evidence for the significance of the play's title, *Radiance*?

Another parallel throughout the script is the referencing to ghosts—either playfully (as in the scene where Nona is under the house) or more seriously ('Ghosts can't live in a place that doesn't exist anymore', Mae p. 5).

Language and style

The language of the play is contemporary in line with its setting in 'the here and now'. There are several uses of humour and these provide a uniting force that often brings the characters together. In some instances this humour is fairly dark, such as when the mother's ashes are spilled on the floor and furniture in Act One.

Another example is to establish character. Nona's line 'Did you send out any RSPCAs?' (p. 13) suggests her lack of worldliness at the beginning of the play. In some ways this reinforces Nona's development towards maturity throughout the play—she develops inner strength through her mission to scatter her mother's ashes properly.

Mae and Nona in particular are fairly insular and somewhat 'earthy' characters. Cressy seems a little more refined, at least initially, perhaps because of her career in opera. Dialogue given to Mae and Nona reflects this: examples such as, 'All opera singers are fat, so you should put on more weight,' (Nona, p. 14); or this exchange on the following page:

CRESSY: I haven't had Bollinger since I was singing *La Traviata* in Milan.

MAE: What's that? A suburb in Brisbane?

Exploration of themes and ideas

The following journal responses/class discussion ideas, feed into the Synthesising task below. Ask students to choose three of the following dot points and agree/disagree, using evidence from the text to support their arguments.

- *Radiance* presents a somewhat fractured view of contemporary family life.
- Of the three women, Nona is most affected by the death of her mother.
- Nora Island symbolises something for each of the three women.
- *Radiance* is about having to deal with the past in order to fully embrace the future.
- Cressy is the character the audience is expected to sympathise with the most.
- Mae is justified in burning down the house at the end of the play.
- The ending of the film is more effective and rewarding than the end of the play.

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

Ask students to create an **interactive poster** that reflects their understanding of *Radiance*, its characters and issues. They can draw on the play's symbolism, its conflicts and existing media content relating to the play on YouTube and so on. Refer to the digital resources (below: 'More Resources') selected for this unit for further possibilities that might enrich this task.

Assessment focus (if needed): (ACELY1756) (EN5-1A)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

Different perspectives/theoretical approaches

Radiance is interesting in that, despite being a play featuring Aboriginal characters, it is not specifically about Indigenous issues. There are some references to Indigenous practices and ideas in the script, for example, with regard to food gathering and references to constellations. A reading of the play as addressing Indigenous issues is problematic, mostly with regard to the fact that this was specifically not the intention of the playwright or actresses involved in the early development of the script (Introduction to Currency Press edition, p. ix).

As a feminist text the play takes on some very interesting resonances. It is arguable that another journey the three women take in the play is a journey away from dependence on men, again symbolised by the destruction of the house at the end of the play.

COMPARISONS WITH OTHER TEXTS

Versions of the text in other modes, media and contexts

Students should have already viewed the 1997 film version of the play and it is worth noting some of the differences in the story specifically for the film (some of which are explained in Nowra's introduction to the Currency Press edition). Among these are:

- Nona's pregnancy
- Cressy's attempts to leave after the funeral
- Capturing the turtle
- The ending, as previously discussed.

Aspects of genre

Radiance emerges from a naturalistic genre of theatre in which realistic situations and characters are portrayed to explore universal themes and concepts. It belongs to a rich tradition of Australian theatre born in the 1970s and Louis Nowra is one of the school of Australian playwrights working in the 1980s and 90s exploring our past, our identity and our nationhood on stage. Others from this group include **David Williamson**, **Michael Gow**, **Stephen Sewell**, **John Romeril**, **Dorothy Hewett** and **Jack Davis**. (*Reading Australia* teaching resources are also available for plays by **David Williamson**, **Jack Davis** and **Michael Gow** and more.)

Evaluation of the text as representative of Australian culture

Radiance merges several Australian tropes in synthesising a story of loss, identity and acceptance. It takes place on the coast, an important place in our culture for purposes of leisure and relaxation but symbolically providing a border between past and future for the three characters. It deals with family, and to a certain extent with childhood, and how we are defined as adults in our formative years. There is also a healthy measure of small-town phobia, born perhaps of insularity, where 'the outsider' is often victimised and isolated. For different reasons, the mother is that outsider.

Significance to literature/the world of texts

There is an argument to make that, apart from the coastal setting and references to sugar cane fields, *Radiance* could be set anywhere in the world. As a writer, Nowra has never been concerned with specifically Australian themes or issues, in the way that David Williamson has been at times in his career. This also identifies its emotional narrative, its revelations and insights, as universal and all the more compelling as a result. It is a resilient and revealing work of literature for this reason, getting to the core of what it means to be human and to deal with the vagaries of one's past in order to find fulfilment.

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (PRODUCTIVE)

Students should choose to be one of Nona, Mae or Cressy.

Carefully and thoroughly revisit, and where necessary revise, work on this character completed during the unit thus far.

From this character's point of view, students should write a one-page obituary of their mother. They can combine creative licence with facts, ideas or anecdotes drawn from the play. (For example, she is never named in the play, so this may be the first necessary invention.)

The tone, style and structure of the obituary should vary distinctly and directly according to the character writing it; for example, Mae's will be very different to Nona's.

Refer to the **attached rubric** (PDF, 147KB) for detailed requirements and expectations relating to this task.

(ACELA1564) (ACELT1643) (ACELT1644) (ACELY1757) (EN5-5C) (EN5-3B) (EN5-6C) (EN5-2A)

Consider these insights, offered by Louis Nowra in an interview over ten years before *Radiance* was written.

- "If anything, my plays are operatic rather than filmic..."
- "I could never get over the disjunction between the dream of our lives that we are taught we should have, and the terrible and brilliant harshness of reality..."
- "Empathy rather than identification is my aim...I don't want people to identify; as a matter of fact I want to shake up their concepts, their viewpoints of the world. If you have a mirror image of the world you merely confirm those viewpoints."

(from Davidson, Jim. *Sideways from the Page: The Meanjin Interviews*. Fontana Books, Melbourne, 1983.)

Ask students to develop and refine their final journal entry which addresses at least two of these comments in relation to *Radiance*. Nona's 'dream father' is undermined by Cressy's shocking revelation; the arson scene in the film especially is referred to by Cressy as operatic (and earlier references to *Madam Butterfly* may be relevant here); to what extent do we empathise with Mae, as opposed to merely identifying with her situation as her mother's carer?

Assessment focus: (ACELT1774) (EN5-6C)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE)

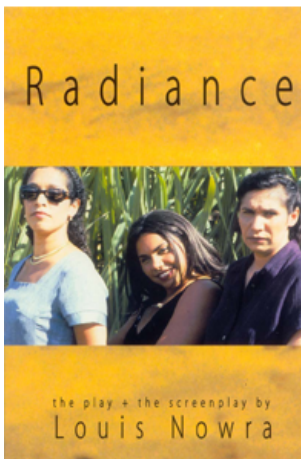
Ask students to choose one of the following and then develop an extended, informed and polished written response. In both cases, evidence from the text must be used to support any contentions.

- Compare and contrast the play and the film. Examine and explain differences between the two versions of the story.
- Explore the role of fire as a symbol in *Radiance*, with reference to at least two scenes from either the play or the film.

The core essence of this written response must be distilled and prepared as a three-minute oral presentation to be made to the class.

Refer to the [attached rubric](#) (PDF, 91KB) for detailed expectations and requirements relating to this task.

(ACELY1752) (ACELT1812) (ACELY1757) (EN5-8D) (EN5-7D) (EN5-2A)
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Unit Suitable For AC: Year 10 (NSW Stage 5). It could be used for possible extension work in Year 9 but be aware of mature themes and references: use with discretion.

Duration Up to 4 weeks

Curriculum Summary

Find a [summary table](#) for Australian Curriculum: English content descriptions and NSW Syllabus outcomes for this unit.

Themes

[acceptance](#), [family](#), [grief](#), [identity](#), [loss](#), [memory](#)

General Capabilities

[Critical and Creative Thinking](#), [Ethical Understanding](#), [Literacy](#), [Personal and Social Capability](#)

FURTHER DETAILS

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