

Remember Ronald Ryan

Please Note

Remember Ronald Ryan includes occasional profanity and at least one use of the 'c' word. Discretion is advised. The language is not gratuitous in the context in which it is used.

This teaching unit is based on the Currency Text edition of *Remember Ronald Ryan* published in 2014 (originally published in 1994, the year of the play's first performance). This edition contains an Introduction by Barry Jones, AC and a Playwright's Note by Barry Dickins, both of which will feature in tasks students are asked to complete for this unit.

This edition also features the monologue *Ryan*, and while no activities in response to this have been included here, it is worth keeping in mind as a possible source of extension activities or further reading for interested students, especially those with an interest in drama.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

- Create a Value Line in the classroom (clear tables and furniture out of the way to give students room to stand along an imaginary line). One end of the line is 'Agree', the other end is 'Disagree'. Students should be directed to place themselves on the line in accordance with the strength of their opinion. (So the centre of the line represents an 'on the fence' attitude.)
- Ask students three questions.
 1. Do you believe in capital punishment?
 2. Do we make heroes of our criminals in Australia? (Think Ned Kelly, Chopper Read.)
 3. Executions are not about justice but governments proving how 'tough on crime' they can be. Agree or disagree?
- After each question, ask students to explain briefly why they are standing at their particular spot on the line – i.e. to justify their opinions.
- Use this activity to generate discussion about one of the core themes in this play: the imposition of the death penalty on a man who may have been innocent. No one has been executed in Australia since Ronald Ryan in 1967, but Australian citizens (Barlow & Chambers, Van Nguyen, Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran) have been executed overseas – most commonly for offences relating to drug trafficking.
- Circumstances aside, do students think that the death penalty is an effective deterrent? Why/why not?
- Use the information [here](#) to provide students with a national historical context for the events of the play, asking them to summarise what else was happening at the time.
- A detailed biography of Barry Dickins is included on the inside front cover of the Currency Text edition of *Remember Ronald Ryan*. Ask students to read this.
- Students may also be asked to read Barry Jones's introduction to the play, which summarises the events that led to Ronald Ryan being sentenced to death and hanged. It also provides a sobering account of the ramifications of this event for Jones personally, as an indication of the moral and emotional consequences of capital punishment.
- A brief biography of Ronald Ryan can be found. The play illustrates many of the key events in Ryan's life and so an awareness of Ryan's life story will provide good insight into the events of the play. Please note that despite the factual assertion in this biography, doubt remains

over whether Ryan was actually responsible for the death of George Hodson on December 19, 1965, the act for which he was executed.

- Having considered and discussed these issues, ask students to write a definitive statement that explains, in their opinion, why they think the play was written.

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT

As a play script, *Remember Ronald Ryan* is intended to be heard, and by exploring the play this way initially, students can get a sense of the humour, spirit and pathos of the situations that Barry Dickins explores in Ryan's story. The reading plan set out below should be used as a guide only, but it allows for a reading of the play in four to five 50 minute lessons; adjustments can and should be made allowing for particular timetable considerations or lesson duration. It would be advisable not to read too much in one sitting though, as the style of the play requires some contemplation so that the issues and characterisations can be examined in deep and insightful ways while the reading is in progress.

Possible questions while reading the text

While reading, students should note particular lines of dialogue or exchanges between characters that illustrate attitudes or character traits. The questions provided below are a guide only; this is a play that lends itself to 'teachable moments' as any good text does.

These should be recorded in a reading journal, which students maintain throughout the Unit.

ACT ONE: pp. 11–25 ('WALKER: That's not like you.')

1. Note the only comment about the setting of this play: 'An hallucinatory H Division, Pentridge Prison, Melbourne.' How does this establish the kind of action we might see in this play?
2. How is the character of Ronald Ryan established in the first few pages of the play? What words could be used to describe him?
3. How is humour used during the prison break scene? List some specific examples of some comical lines of dialogue or exchanges between characters.
4. Why does Dickins employ the device of the police radio? What effect is achieved by having Ryan and Walker perform these on old fashioned microphones? (see stage direction, p. 20)
5. There are several references to religion in this section of the play – the Salvation Army man (pp. 16–17), Ryan's probably sarcastic reference to 'perfect Irish Catholic luck' (p. 19), a mention of St Christopher (p. 21), Walker's line 'I think Jesus said that' (p. 23). What impression does this create of the two men and the situation they are in?
6. Why does Dickins have Ryan and Walker reminisce at the end of this section? How does their exchange on page 25 contrast with much of the dialogue between them leading up to that point?

ACT ONE: pp. 25–45 (end of Act One)

1. What do Dorothy's parents think of Ronald? How is this attitude present in their exchange with Dorothy on pages 27–28?
2. What do you notice about how the action of this play shifts from scene to scene? Do you think it has anything in common with the way films are edited together? Why do you think Dickins has structured the play like this?
3. Consider the dramatic role of the 'party scene' (pp. 37–41). How is tension created during this scene, which is otherwise exuberant and upbeat?
4. Note the exchange between Ryan, Walker and the two highway policemen (pp. 42–43). How would you characterise the attitude Ryan and Walker have to their situation? Are there any similarities between their demeanour here and the one exhibited during the breakout scene? What does this confirm about how the characters of Ryan and Walker (Ryan especially) have been created?

5. Contrast the scene between Dorothy and parents (pp. 43–44), with the earlier scene in this section. Some context for the later scene is provided by Dickins in the stage directions on page 43.

ACT TWO: pp. 46–60 ('...Mr Philip Opas to see you. 'Bye, Ron.')

1. Humour is used again in the opening scene of Act Two. Comment on the effect it provides here and record two or three examples.
2. Ryan and Walker exhibit considerable optimism during their 'cistern conversation' (pp. 49–50). What does this add to our understanding of the two characters?
3. What do you think is meant by Ryan's line, 'We'll escape again. You in your way, me in mine. Just keep your chin up...' Is he simply trying to keep Walker's spirits up or has he started to consider his likely fate?
4. The flashback on pages 50–51 provides an insight into Ryan's childhood. What do we learn about Ryan here? Does it help to explain any of his actions or attitudes?
5. Pages 51–59 consist of a series of flashbacks that illustrate Ryan's criminal past. What common threads appear in this sequence about his aptitude as a criminal? What does this add to your developing understanding of Ronald Ryan as a character?
6. In dramatic terms, what is achieved by the exchange between Ryan and Justice John Starke at the end of this section? How does Starke come across to the audience in this scene?

ACT TWO: pp. 60–end of the play.

1. The questioning of Ryan by Philip Opas (pp. 60–62) also takes on a comic tone; a device Dickins uses often throughout the play. Given the relatively serious subject matter, why does Dickins do this?
2. Consider the information Opas provides at the top of page 62. This is one of the central arguments used to suggest that Ryan should have been acquitted of the murder of Hodson. Why does Ryan respond to it by telling Opas 'You're a voice in the wilderness'?
3. In the last five or six pages of the play, we hear many 'character assessments' of Ryan: from former employers, his sister Gloria (p. 69), an English teacher from one of Ryan's former stints of incarceration (p. 70). What is the combined effect of these small scenes, coming as they do towards the end of the play?
4. Based on the exchange between Ryan and his father on page 71, how would you characterise their relationship?
5. Father Brosnan's delivery of the Last Rites (p. 75) provides a clear punctuation for the religious references in the play. (A translation of the Latin delivery is provided with this Unit (PDF, 91KB)). What is the dramatic effect of hearing the last rites performed almost in full?
6. Consider how Ryan is summed up after his execution – first by the Second Guard ('He was kind,' p. 77) and Governor Grindlay ('Something there was good in him,' same page). Does this align with how we've perceived Ryan throughout the play?

Personal connections with own experience

These dot points can be used to generate class discussion and conversation to inform responses to later tasks and activities in this unit.

- Ask students to consider if they have ever experienced a profound injustice – either personally or through a news article or event. They may briefly record what happened and should focus on whether this situation led them to mistrust people in positions of authority: teachers, policemen, sports' coaches (as relevant to the anecdote).
- Students who have no relevant experience to consider here may consider a time when they felt powerless – when a decision was made that they didn't agree with but couldn't change, and what avenues they used to try to affect the outcome.
- Have students ever been part of a vigil or protest, where they stood in solidarity with someone unfairly imprisoned or a group unfairly treated? What happened? Were symbolic acts, such as lighting candles, involved?

- If students have experienced grief they may be able to record some of the emotions and responses this brings to mind; however, be careful how you deal with this, understanding and respecting individuals' privacy and sensitivities.

Identification with characters and situations

Ask students to write a paragraph each on: Ronald Ryan, his wife Dorothy and Governor Ian Grindlay. This should explore the extent they can empathise with these three characters, showing understanding of:

- how the respective character changes during the play,
- how students feel about each character,
- whether the characters are worthy of empathy (in Ryan's case especially).

Task: Reflection on completion of the text

Place students in groups of four or five. Each member of the group should have responsibility for one of the following focus questions. Students will provide a response on their allotted questions to offer the group. Each group then synthesises these reports and provides a summary response to the play to the rest of the class. This task will prepare students for the Close Study section of this unit.

Possible focus questions

1. Having read the play, why does Dickins describe its setting as 'hallucinatory' in that initial note at the beginning of the play?
2. What overall effect is achieved by the use of humour throughout the play? Find some examples where it is used: during the escape scenes, for example, in the dialogue with Warden Lange or the Salvation Army chaplain.
3. What are some key words you would use to describe Ronald Ryan at the end of the play? (Anticipate and deal with the response of "Dead"). How are these qualities evident in his dialogue and/or attitude?
4. What are the most important relationships in this play? Ryan-Dorothy / Ryan-Walker / Ryan-Grindlay / Ryan-Father Brosnan. What are the important elements of each relationship?
5. What are the essential ideas or concepts at the centre of this play? Justice? Fate? Acceptance? Sacrifice? How and where are these (or others you can think of) present in the play?

(ACELT1641) (EN5-3B)

OUTLINE OF KEY ELEMENTS OF THE TEXT

Plot

Ask students to consider that Dickins' use of the word 'hallucinatory' as the only reference to the play's setting suggests that the action of this play will have a dreamlike quality. Events do not necessarily unfold in chronological order but occur perhaps as Ryan recalls them on the eve of his execution.

Task 1:

Ask students to identify in their journals whether they think the events of the play are acted or remembered – as if by Ryan, as the moment of his execution approaches. Is the play's sequence of events a case of Ryan's 'life flashing before his eyes'? What does this add to the overall dramatic impact of the play?

The dreamlike quality is created by a couple of techniques Dickins uses. One of them is the use of flashbacks, but these are inserted seamlessly into the sequence of major events that the play

depicts (the breakout, Hodson's death, being on the run, return to prison, Ryan's trial and so on).

Task 2:

Choose one of the following scenes that appear in the play as flashbacks. As if you are the play's Director, write an artistic statement that explains the importance of your chosen scene, in terms of what it adds either to our understanding of Ryan as a character or to the portrayal of his life as one of extremely poor luck.

1. Meeting Dorothy (pp. 13–14).
2. Meeting Dorothy's parents (pp. 28–32).
3. The safe-blowing incident (pp. 51–52).
4. Police visit Dorothy (pp. 53–55).
5. 'The final burglary job' (pp. 59–59).
6. Ryan is visited by his father (pp. 71).

Characters

Journal response

This is quoted on the back cover of the play text: 'Dickins portrays the man behind the legend as lovable, cheeky, wretched, despicable, and, above all, courageous.' (Currency Press edition, 2014.)

Ask students to find and record half a dozen incidents or lines of dialogue in the play that reflect these different elements of Ryan's character.

To develop a greater understanding of each character's main attributes and motivations, complete the three character charts linked below. Ryan's is completed as an example, but the quotes and explainers can be edited to reflect some of the incidents students have recorded in their journals after the task above.

[Ronald Ryan](#) (PDF, 142KB)

[Peter Walker](#) (PDF, 83KB)

[Dorothy Ryan](#) (PDF, 80KB)

[Governor Ian Grindlay](#) (PDF, 86KB)

Students can format similar charts to complete for other characters if they wish. But these four are considered to be the play's main characters.

Themes

Let's play a game called Controversy Corner!

Step 1.

Ask students to form groups of four. They must sit in pairs facing each other, two on one side of a table and two on the other. Each group will be given a statement that reflects one of the main themes of *Remember Ronald Ryan*. One pair will have five minutes to come up with two or three arguments in support of their statement and the other the same time to generate arguments against. They will then take turns sharing each of their arguments with the other pair, so that several perspectives on each statement are aired and discussed.

Possible statements might include:

1. It was wrong to hang Ronald Ryan.
2. This play is a fair depiction of the implementation of justice.

3. Ronald Ryan is an addition to the ranks of Australian criminals accorded hero status, such as **Ned Kelly**, **Chopper Read** or **Squizzy Taylor**.
4. The real victim of this play is Dorothy Ryan.
5. It no longer matters whether Ryan actually shot George Hodson.
6. It is appropriate that Australia no longer has capital punishment.
7. Ryan is a modern day Jesus-like figure, dying for all of our sins.*
8. This play paints a disturbingly affectionate picture of a man who was a petty criminal and possibly a murderer.
9. Ryan's execution was political, not judicial. (Read Barry Jones's introduction to the play text again, if necessary.)
10. We should not remember Ronald Ryan.

*Perhaps use this one with discretion!

Step 2.

Pairs change sides. They retain their statement but now have five minutes to now prepare for the opposite sides of their original claims.

Step 3.

Nominate three corners of your classroom – one is for 'Agreement', one is for 'Question', and one is 'Neutral'.

Reread each of the statements given out to the groups. Having all heard many different permutations of arguments supporting or refuting various statements, students should now decide their actual response. If they agree with the statement, go to the 'Agree' corner. If they would question the statement, go to 'Question'. If they are unsure or undecided, they may go to the 'Neutral' corner, but they cannot stay there until the end of the activity – they must listen to the following conversation and then make a choice.

Step 4.

The teacher nominates particular students to explain why they are in particular corners of the room. Hopefully two or three of the statements will be considered in this way, with students having to justify their responses. Draw up a table on the whiteboard or interactive whiteboard which charts the main responses, for and against, for each statement. Students must then reconsider their positions, either agreeing or questioning the statements.

SYNTHESISING TASK

Remember Ronald Ryan won the 1995 Victorian Premier's Literary Award. Ask students to form groups of three. Each group is to become a judging panel with students conferring over their final report on the play, which will explain why it deserves to win the award. The final report should cover those aspects of the play engaged with in this section of the teaching resource and summarise reasons for the play's lasting legacy and impact.

(ACELT1640) (ACELT1812) (EN5-5C) (EN5-7D)

THE WRITER'S CRAFT

Structure

In writing *Remember Ronald Ryan*, Dickins faced the problem of dealing with biographical material, based on the lives of real people. The play is structured in two acts with no identified scene breaks and, as previously mentioned, it relies on flashbacks and a dreamlike fluidity in some sections, with characters appearing and disappearing as they manifest themselves in Ryan's memory.

Ask students to respond in their journals to this question: 'Given that the ending of this story is well known (though still tragic), how does Dickins build suspense through his sequencing of events and building of tension?'

Some ideas to consider.

1. Many of the scenes, especially in Act One, alternate between comical and charming and confronting. Reread pages 14–18 for an example of this. Here we go from Ryan courting Dorothy to the comedic exchange with Warden Lange about opening the right door to Hodson's brutal death, all in a few pages. Why does Dickins sequence events and dialogue in this way?
2. How does Dickins vary the pace of the action towards the end of the play? Is he trying to control the audience's sense of the inevitable? (In other words, the audience knows what is coming – how and why does Dickins make them wait?)
3. Does the structure of this play seem cinematic in some ways? Dickins includes few specific directions between changes of scene: lighting and staging would be used in a production to clearly establish these. What effect does this have – especially in the last half of Act One, when Ryan and Walker are on the run?

Approach to characterisation

Ask students to revisit the work undertaken on character in the previous section of the Unit. For the most part, a playwright has only dialogue (and sometimes action) to establish and develop characterisation.

Put students in pairs and assign them to one of three choices:

- Ryan/Walker
- Ryan/Dorothy
- Ryan/Father John Brosnan

They must find and read aloud a section where these pairs of characters are in conversation, for example, the very first page of the script, Ryan and Dorothy (pp. 13–14) or their last scene together (pp. 66–67) or Ryan and Father John (pp. 63–64).

What do students learn about these characters by hearing their words and seeing them interact?

How is the significance of each of these relationships conveyed to the audience through what is said or implied? (This might especially involve the scene between Ryan and Father John).

Setting

In their journals ask students to consider the following statement, and respond to it/expand on it with evidence drawn from the play – either action, dialogue, or Dickins' stage directions:

- *This play has two settings: i) in an H Block prison cell at Pentridge Prison in Melbourne, and ii) in the memory/imagination of the character of Ronald Ryan.*

Ask students to draw a rough sketch (they can refine and perfect it later if they wish) of what the stage would look like for a production of this play as it is written. Remember that the action moves between such locations as, for example, Dorothy's parents' house, Sydney Road outside the prison where Hodson is shot, a guard tower at Pentridge, various Melbourne flats, a bank that gets robbed, and the gallows in D Division, Pentridge. How can such locations be evoked theatrically?

Use of parallels and contrasts

Ask students to reconsider **Ryan's character chart** (PDF, 142KB), completed in an earlier section of this teaching resource. His manner and demeanour tend to contrast sharply in different scenes, especially during Act One. In journals, students are asked to identify and record:

- How do these contrasts in character and tone complicate Ryan as a character? When, in the play, do you think Ryan is being 'himself'? Why?
- Ryan's working-class Carlton upbringing contrasted sharply with that of Dorothy, the woman from 'leafy Hawthorn' whom he married. Revisit the scenes where Ryan meets Mr and Mrs George (pp. 29–32), her parents, and take note of how the Georges regard Ryan, and what he thinks of them. Read also pages 43–44, where their true attitudes to Ryan are revealed. Are any of these attitudes present in the earlier scene, explicitly or implicitly?

Language and style

There are two areas of the play to discuss here.

1. On several occasions Ryan makes use of colourful but now rarely-heard Australian idioms – 'bag of fruit', 'a real toff', 'piss in his pocket', 'bodgie' for something broken or useless, and so on. He also often uses language very colourfully – such as when he is telling Dorothy he will ride his pushbike to meet her parents for the first time, and, 'I can lean it up against your old man's money' (p. 14).

Discuss with students how this use of particular language paints Ryan in a specific Australian way – as a typical knockabout bloke, a larrikin, an 'everyman'. Why is this important to the central drama of the play?

2. In stark contrast with the semi-comedic and smooth-moving pace of the rest of the play, Father Brosnan performs the Catholic last rites (or extreme unction) for Ronald, in Latin, at the end of the play (pp. 75–76), at the moment of Ronald's execution. A **translation of what he says is provided** (PDF, 90KB). What is the effect of this different voice and language at this point in the play?

Exploration of themes and ideas

Arrange students in groups of three or four, and give each group one of the issues that the play presents below. Their ensuing discussing should begin shaping their responses to the Synthesising Task below. They should nominate a spokesperson who will share the gist of small group discussions with the rest of the class.

1. Regardless of his guilt or innocence, was Ryan the victim of an entrenched political system?
2. Arguably Ryan's death delivered to us the lesson we as a society needed to learn about capital punishment. Was the moral price of this lesson too high?
3. Discuss the last sentence from **Jeff Sparrow's Reading Australia essay** on this play, accompanying this unit: "...the 'larrikin spirit', the plays suggests, couldn't survive the encounter with the hangman on 3 February 1967." What did Ryan's execution change about Australia, apart from ending capital punishment?
4. Arguably the real villain of this piece is the then Victorian Premier, Sir Henry Bolte, who desperately wanted (and politically needed, he felt) Ryan to hang. He does not appear in the play at all, not even by reference. Why do you think this is?
5. Discuss the qualities that made Ronald Ryan 'a good bloke'.
6. Discuss the notion that Ryan absolutely deserved his fate.
7. Discuss the notion that nobody deserves to die in the manner that Ryan did.

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

Prepare a two minute speech that you will present to your class. You must address one of the following topics and craft your speech so as to be persuasive and provocative.

- This play is no longer relevant in contemporary Australia, as we no longer have the death penalty.
- This play is centrally important in contemporary Australia, as it reminds us of who we were.

(ACELY1813) (EN5-3B)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

Explore with students any possible different readings of the text, incorporating:

- Different perspectives/theoretical approaches.
- Perhaps a **Marxist reading** of the text is appropriate which follows the shifts in power? Was Ryan ever in a position of power?

COMPARISON WITH OTHER TEXTS

If time permits the following parallel texts might be considered alongside Dickins' play.

- Bruce Dawe's poem, '**On the Death of Ronald Ryan**'. The referenced, *English for the Australian Curriculum sequence*, examines the issues surrounding Ryan and the death penalty in considerable detail and is well worth following up.
- Mike Richards' exhaustively detailed biography of Ronald Ryan, *The Hanged Man: the Life and Death of Ronald Ryan*. This is the most comprehensive of Ryan's criminal activity, the escape, his trial and subsequent, and a heartbreaking account of his execution.

EVALUATION OF THE TEXT AS:

Representative of Australian culture

Perhaps in the sense of representing an Australia that no longer exists; why does this make the play important as a document of social and legal history?

It also possibly raises some interesting implicit questions about Australia's class structure.

Significance to literature/the world of texts

This play is unique in being of its time and place, marking both the end of a tragic life and an era of cruel and unusual punishment. Perhaps on one reading this play marks a 'growing up' of Australia, and this is framed with wit and humour, an essential sense of the larrikin spirit and a compassionate and compelling exploration of the soul of a man locked into a lifestyle despite his good intentions and cavalier spirit. It generates a unique voice, not just for Ryan but for a society and culture now lost, as perhaps our moral imperatives have moved on.

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (PRODUCTIVE)

Ryan was father to three young girls at the time of his death.

Imagine that you are Ryan and write them a letter dated February 2, 1967. What do you want to explain to them? What would like them to understand about you? What would you like them to do and to be when they are older? You should aim to capture a sense of Ryan's voice as it is captured by Dickins in the play, making specific language and vocabulary choices to generate that laconic style and tone. Your letter should be in the vicinity of 500–600 words in length.

See rubric for assessment details of this Rich assessment task (PDF, 142KB).

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

SYNTHESISING CORE IDEAS

Students should now look back over the activities and work they have completed, especially in the Introductory activities and Close reading sections. Class and group time can be devoted to:

- addressing and justifying any revisions to initial responses;
- developing a coherent, conclusive statement of understanding regarding the text and its themes, structures and/or techniques, as applicable and based on the close study, discussion, researching and writing they have undertaken;
- reflecting on their awareness of the text's wider cultural value; and,
- reflecting via their journals on their processes of responding to and creating texts.

(ACELT1774) (EN5-6C)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE)

Using a range of online resources, including newspapers from the time, ask students to research community reactions to Ronald Ryan's death at the time, specifically to determine if there was a cross-section of sentiment in the community about the execution. Anecdotal evidence would suggest there was. Students should select from this research a range of up to four newspaper articles or interviews with key players, which demonstrate a spread of views.

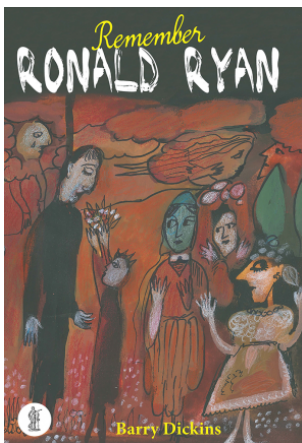
Then ask students to research media stories for different reactions to the deaths of **Andrew Chan** and **Myuran Sukumaran**. Again, their results should be a small cache of about four stories which contain a range of views and opinions.

They can use both sets of articles to create a collage or mini-scrapbook, which is accompanied by a reflection of approximately 1,000 words that discusses any change in attitudes on this issue in the 48 years that separate them. Is it fair to compare the two executions? For example, there is no doubt whatsoever of the guilt of Chan and Sukumaran, whereas arguably some doubt remains over Ryan's guilt. This is not as important, though, as identifying whether we have learned anything as a nation from Ryan's execution – and if so, what?

See the rubric for assessment details regarding this task (PDF, 148KB).

(ACELY1752) (ACELT1812) (ACELY1757) (EN5-8D) (EN5-7D) (EN5-2A)

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Unit Suitable For AC: Year 10 (NSW Stage 5)

Duration 4 weeks

Curriculum Summary

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

Themes

Australian identity, capital punishment, fate, justice, morality, redemption, social class

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Understanding, Literacy

FURTHER DETAILS

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