

The Drover's Wife

Introductory activities

CONTENT NOTES

The Drover's Wife by Leah Purcell is a provocative and confronting text. Take special care when introducing it to students and be mindful of your own safety.

Consider your students' needs when determining how best to read the play: individually, in small groups, or as a class. It is strongly recommended that you do NOT perform Scene Seven (pp. 37–52) as a dramatised reading in class.

The following cultural sensitivity advice is based on work by Emma Jenkins (see her [Reading Australia resource for Tara June Winch's *The Yield*](#)) and Alex Wharton (2019 Reading Australia Fellow). Additional tips and resources can be found in [Reading Australia's teaching resource for Lisa Fuller's *Ghost Bird*](#).

Approaching the text

Approaches to the text should include:

- A clear rationale for including the text in the curriculum. *The Drover's Wife* is an excellent text for increasing students' awareness and understanding of First Nations and other marginalised voices – not only for informing balanced perspectives, but also for promoting reconciliation and intercultural understanding. Pedagogical aims may include:
 - Exposure to a multiplicity of Australian voices
 - Building empathy
 - Representing First Nations peoples as complex individuals with relatable identities and aspirations
- Protocols for bringing students safely in and safely out of the text
- Drawing on multiple sources
- A scaffolded and supported understanding of:
 - Pre-contact First Nations cultures, diversity and practices (including explicit teaching of vocabulary and use of photographs, artworks, and own voice accounts)
 - The impacts of invasion
 - Contemporary First Nations cultures and the reassertion of rights to cultural identity

Content warnings

Specific content warnings for this text include:

- degradation of women
- sexual assault
- stillbirth
- violence (e.g. assault, guns, hanging)
- racism

Safely in and safely out protocols

These protocols should be used at the commencement and conclusion of this unit, as well as at the end of any lessons that included confronting content.

To bring students safely into the text:

- Facilitate a space that is culturally, emotionally and physically safe for students
- Be aware of and acknowledge students' comfort and/or discomfort
- Establish processes for students to inform the teacher if they are uncomfortable and/or wish to withdraw themselves from the discussion
- Recognise students' acts towards embracing resistance, humanity and intercultural understanding

To bring students safely out of the text:

- Debrief with students, allowing time for discussion and activities such as private journaling, exit cards and thinking routines (e.g. 'connect, extend, challenge', 'take note')
- Respond to questions thoughtfully and with accuracy
- Model an appropriate emotional response
- Address problematic attitudes with curiosity rather than criticism
- Avoid asking students to 'put themselves in the shoes' of someone who does not share their lived experience
- Provide opportunities for action

Once you have established a safe environment and protocols for approaching the text, you can proceed with any of the following initial learning activities.

LAWSON'S ORIGINAL SHORT STORY

A study of Purcell's play would be enriched by a close reading of **Henry Lawson's original short story**. A handout (**PDF, 96KB**) has been prepared to guide students through their reading of the 1892 version of 'The Drover's Wife'.

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN042) (ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN048)
(ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)

Illustrating the setting

The physical setting differs greatly between the short story and the play. We get a sense of each one from Lawson and Purcell's opening lines. Students should use evidence from the texts to create illustrations of the respective settings.

Following this, students can conduct image searches for the following terms:

Lawson's short story	Purcell's play	Both
brush	alpine country	shack
bush	Snowy Mountains	shanty
stringybark	scrubland	bullock
sheoaks	sparse	woodheap
dense		slab floor

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)
(ACEEN058)

FIRST NATIONS CULTURES, DIVERSITY AND PRACTICES

Emphasise that First Nations cultures are not homogenous, but are rich and diverse in their cultural practices. As the then-Minister for Indigenous Australians, the Honourable Ken Wyatt AM, emphasised in his **2019 Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture**, it is important for schools to engage with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to help students develop an understanding of their 'local cultural context'.

Educate yourself about the First Nations cultures and practices in your own geographical region. Many resources are available to support this:

- **Gambay – First Languages Map** (allows students to visualise the linguistic diversity of First Nations peoples, with accompanying video and audio recordings)
- **AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia** (a resource that should be in every classroom)
- **Ngarrngga** (an Indigenous-led University of Melbourne project to support educators with curriculum resources and professional development modules)
- **Narragunnawali** (a Reconciliation Australia program for schools and early learning services)
- **ABC Education – Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures**
- **SBS Learn – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols Guide for Teachers**
- **Oxfam Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Protocols** (an overview of conventions to ensure that your work is respectful)
- **AustLit – BlackWords** (has a filter function to easily find First Nations-authored resources from the students' local area)
- **Common Ground** (a website bringing together First Nations knowledge, cultures and stories)
- **SBS On Demand – *First Australians* (2008)**
- **ABC Radio National – AWAYE!**
- **ABC iview – *You Can't Ask That* (2016) S01 E08: Indigenous**
- **'I'm A Blackfella' by Steven Oliver** (performance)
- **'Hate he said' by Steven Oliver** (performance)

Published works from which excerpts may be taken include:

- *Dark Emu** and *Young Dark Emu** by Bruce Pascoe
- *The Welcome to Country Handbook** by Marcia Langton
- *Nyuntu Ninti (What You Should Know)* by Bob Randall and Melanie Hogan

* *Reading Australia* resource available

It is recommended that you invite a local Elder, artist, author, teacher, historian or poet to speak with your class. Your school's history teachers will also prove a helpful resource in providing context and content about First Nations cultures, diversity and practices; it may be worthwhile having a colleague present an introductory lesson on this topic.

(ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)

VOCABULARY

Instruct students to keep a vocabulary bank throughout their study of *The Drover's Wife*, beginning with the following terms:

- Indigenous
- First Nations
- Aboriginal
- first contact
- invasion
- drover
- stockman
- peddler

(ACEEN057)

Personal response

OPEN AND CLOSED

Students can work in pairs or small groups to formulate a series of open and closed questions about the text. This will form the basis of a discussion about their initial responses to the text. Students should aim produce three closed questions and one open-ended question. You can then collect the questions and address an appropriate selection through a whole class discussion.

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN048) (ACEEN057) (ACEEN058)
(ACEEN059)

Outline of key elements of the text

METALANGUAGE FOR DRAMA

Revise **play terminology** with the class if necessary.

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN044)

PLOT

A plot summary ([PDF, 123KB](#)) has been prepared for students' reference. This could be transformed into a classroom activity in which the events are presented out of order and students reorganise them. They can also use the plot summary template ([PDF, 97KB](#)) to produce their own summary and chart the plot of both the short story and the play.

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN057) (ACEEN058)

CHARACTER

Purcell briefly describes her characters at the beginning of the play (opposite p. 1):

- The drover's wife, Molly Johnson
- Yadaka
- Danny, Molly's son
- Thomas McNealy, a swagman
- Douglas Merchant, a peddler
- Spencer Leslie, a trooper
- Robert Parsen, a stockman
- John McPharlen, a stockman

Students will delve deeper into characterisation in the **Close Study** section of this resource.

THEMES

Students can use the themes chart ([PDF, 79KB](#)) to record evidence of the following themes:

- dispossession, colonialism and racism
- human vs nature
- gender roles
- isolation and vulnerability
- poverty, survival and desperation
- mourning and grief

(ACEEN057) (ACEEN058)

SYNTHESISING TASK

Direct students to a suitable search engine to look for open source/Creative Commons images (they can also try websites like [Unsplash](#) or [Pexels](#)). They should search for images that depict an agreed representation of:

- the dwelling in the play
- the surrounding countryside

Display these images and invite students to share the justification for their choices.

Following this, you can show students some of the [production images](#) from Belvoir St Theatre's production of *The Drover's Wife*. This page also contains short videos of Purcell and her fellow actors talking about the play.

You could even show students [the trailer or stills](#) from Purcell's 2021 film ([accessible with a ClickView subscription](#)) to compare representations of the setting and characters on stage versus screen.

(ACEEN057) (ACEEN058)

STRUCTURE, PARALLELS AND CONTRASTS

Students will gain insight from tracking references to Lawson's short story, as well as considering the dramatic structure and unfolding action, as part of their analysis of the text's structure.

They can use the textual connections table ([PDF, 62KB](#)) to record the connections with Lawson's work and consider how Purcell has reimagined the story.

(ACEEN057) (ACEEN058)

In the original short story, the drover's wife's survival is depicted through a series of battles that are thrust upon her. In addition to facing the immediate threat of the snake, Lawson refers to:

- a bushfire
- a flood
- pleuropneumonia (a lung disease that afflicts cattle and sheep)
- a mad bull
- crows and eagles that prey on her chickens

This layering of challenges allows Lawson to emphasise his protagonist's resilience, and the way her actions deviate from gender norms of the time. The changing of tenses allows for a narrative fluidity between past and present, emphasising the ongoing immediacy of the threats, as well as the protagonist's strength in overcoming others in the past.

Ask students to identify the challenges or points of conflict that the drover's wife must overcome in Purcell's play. Who or what are the antagonists? Create a list of these with the class, then discuss how the drover's wife overcomes the challenge presented to her. Finally, ask students to reflect on how the drover's wife defies gender roles in Purcell's feminist reimagining. You could also prompt them to consider this idea in relation to Yadaka, particularly in comparison to the other male characters who represent patriarchal Anglo-Australian constructions of masculinity.

Reflection question

How has Purcell manipulated dramatic structure to emphasise the empowerment that the drover's wife achieves by accepting her revealed identity?

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN048) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)
(ACEEN058)

FORM AND GENRE

Purcell has elected to transform Lawson's short story into a play (as well as a [novel](#) and a [film](#)). Having worked in theatre for decades, Purcell's knowledge of the dramatic form allows her to give voice to the previously passive and nameless protagonist of Lawson's short story. The original protagonist is subjected to things that happen to her, further emphasised by Lawson's use of the third person. In the play, Purcell renders a dynamic protagonist – afforded agency and the ability to drive the narrative action through her own choices – in an effort to refute the violence and mistreatment she endures.

Purcell explains that she has 'activated' Lawson's characters (Writer's Note, p. vii) and woven aspects of her great-grandfather's story into the characters of Yadaka, Danny, and the drover's wife's father. The presence of these connections allows the protagonist to discover and reflect upon their significance, and ultimately to take control of her own fate (and that of her children).

By transforming the point of view and voice from an omniscient narrator to a live-action drama, Purcell fuels the play's dramatic tension and challenges audiences' assumptions about Lawson's short story. The heightened energy of this 'full-throttle drama' employs **tropes from the Western genre**, such as good guys vs bad guys, the pursuit of an outlaw, and a final showdown.

Reflection question

What opportunities have Purcell's choices in form and genre afforded her in creating the story she sought to tell?

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN048) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)
(ACEEN058)

CHARACTERISATION

In a play, characterisation is achieved through both dialogue (what the characters say) and the actors' actions, expressions and body language. Often, the way a character should behave is described in the stage directions; in other instances, the director will make decisions about how the script is adapted for the stage. Work through the following activities so students can fill out the characterisation chart ([PDF, 53KB](#)) for each character.

Peel the fruit

This group activity encourages students to go beyond dialogue and stage directions to consider the underlying motivations and attitudes of an assigned character. A full description of the 'peel the fruit' thinking routine is available from [Project Zero](#). The routine has four steps:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. The skin | What details are provided at a surface level? Students will record quotes, stage directions and concrete information about the character. |
| 2. Getting under the skin | Students will record the questions or puzzles they have about this character, OR consider aspects of that character they wish to explore further. |
| 3. The substance | Students should seek to build explanations, make connections, and consider different viewpoints. |
| 4. The core | Students should capture the heart of their character in a few words. |

Assign different characters from the play to pairs or small groups of students so they can 'peel the fruit'. You can use one of the many **templates** available online, OR have students lay out their thinking on a blank sheet of butcher's paper. They **MUST** provide textual evidence for their views (this will ensure that they do not make assumptions based on harmful stereotypes).

(ACEEN041)

Once students have completed the thinking routine, they can make notes about their assigned character on the characterisation chart. Follow this with a class discussion and invite pairs/groups to share their conclusions from 'peeling the fruit'. This is an opportunity for students with different interpretations to share their thoughts, and to fill in the rest of the characterisation chart based on what they learn from others.

(ACEEN041)

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Purcell's dialogue is an example of demotic language: it is appropriate for the time period and captures the lexicon, idioms and vernacular/parlance of the characters. Crass and vulgar language is used for impact, as suits the playwright's purpose, and the characters speak in the style of realism.

Students may be interested to view the Macquarie Dictionary's [Australian Word Map](#) of regionalisms and colloquialisms. Ask the class to identify some of the slang or regional variations that they use in their own communication. You could also challenge them to transform some everyday phrases into Purcell's style.

(ACEEN041)

STORYTELLING

The centrality of family connections and storytelling in First Nations cultures is highlighted by the character of Yadaka, whose awareness of a family connection becomes his gift to the drover's wife. Ask students to reflect on the traditional stories, favourite tales, folklore or histories within their own family contexts. If they feel comfortable, they can share one such story with the rest of the class (this should be voluntary – do not insist if students are not forthcoming). You might share one of your own to model the kind of story that students can share. For example:

In my family, we often remember a walk that we took on the beach while camping for my mother-in-law's 70th birthday. My son was splashing in the breakers when a huge freak wave swept him 50 metres along the beach. We were all worried and shocked, until he stood up with a huge grin on his face and said, 'Whoa, that was fun!'

SYMBOLISM

Certain objects are imbued with significance in the play, and although the set is sparse with few props, those that are included hold great value. Have students brainstorm the significance of the following objects:

- the snake
- the chopping block/axe
- the collar
- the rifle
- the kitchen table
- the hollow woodpile
- the mad bullock
- Joe's boots
- the colour black
- the cup of tea with sugar (white gold)
- Yadaka's spear

Students may also compare the symbols in Lawson's short story with those in Purcell's play. For example, in the short story, the kitchen table is an island of safety and refuge for the drover's wife and her children; in the play, it is where she gives birth to a stillborn baby. What significance might this transformation have in Purcell's reimagining?

(ACEEN041)

SYNTHESISING TASK

SCENE ANALYSIS: COLOUR, SYMBOL, IMAGE (CSI)

Assign each of the nine scenes from the play to a different pair or group of students. They will analyse their assigned scene, giving consideration to the following aspects:

- plot
- structure

- key quotes
- characterisation
- language and devices
- symbolism

Once they have discussed these elements within their pair/group, students should complete the 'colour, symbol, image' (CSI) thinking routine to summarise their thinking. Each pair/group will attach a colour, symbol and image to their assigned scene, with a reasoned explanation for their choices supported by textual evidence. They may complete their final version using the CSI template.

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN059)

Ways of reading the text

Assuming a stance of literary criticism allows students to gain a deeper insight into the play's ideas, views and values, and to speculate on the authorial intent. Whether or not you adopt this approach is a matter of choice, but also depends on the curriculum context in which you are studying the play; the application of literary lenses is more relevant, for example, in a Senior Secondary course.

In her Director's Note to the play, Leticia Cáceres describes *The Drover's Wife* as a feminist and postcolonial reconsideration of Lawson's short story (p. xi). In this context, it should be noted that many First Nations people do not consider Australia to be a postcolonial nation. Dr Anita Heiss has written on this topic in *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight* (an excerpt is available from the teaching guide for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*).

The literary lenses handout (PDF, 72KB) allows students to create definitions for the most apparent literary perspectives that can be applied to the play. Short descriptions of the various readings, and examples from the text, are provided below.

(ACEEN049) (ACEEN058)

POSTCOLONIAL READING

A postcolonial reading considers the relationship between coloniser and colonised, including the ongoing impacts of invasion, frontier violence, and destruction of cultural memory. Postcolonial works 'speak back to Empire' by highlighting colonial biases and the ideological positioning of the colonised as 'other', in an attempt to interrogate the assumptions of the dominant discourse. A postcolonial reading is concerned with amplifying the perspectives of subjugated groups to better enable readers to identify with said groups.

The characterisation of the stockmen and the peddler in *The Drover's Wife* provides evidence for a postcolonial reading. These coloniser characters are depicted with abhorrent traits and enact brutal violence on the colonised. Through this lens, Yadaka's perspective and construction as a representation of Purcell's great-grandfather may be read as personifying the voices of innumerable dispossessed First Nations peoples. The ending, which depicts the protagonist setting out to rescue her kin and seek refuge in the cave, shows her embracing her revealed identity as a Ngambri Walgalu woman and rejecting her identity as the drover's wife.

FEMINIST READING

A feminist reading attunes readers and audiences to the experiences of women and how they are subjugated and/or liberated within a patriarchal context. Although Lawson's short story was criticised for its 'unrealistic' representation of an independent and resilient bushwoman at the time of publication, today his narration is considered paternalistic for suggesting that the absence of a male figure underlies the drover's wife's hardships. The omniscient third-person narration and unnamed protagonist are amplified in this reading.

In Purcell's play, female agency is augmented; the drover's wife speaks, acts, and directs the trajectory of the narrative. She wields a weapon and commands respect from the male characters. We also learn that she has murdered her violent drunkard of a husband, wresting back control of her situation in a powerful inversion of Lawson's absent male character. Nonetheless, the drover's wife endures pain and violence through the stillbirth of her daughter (Scene Two, pp. 8–9) and the sexual violence perpetrated against her by the stockman (Scene Seven, pp. 51–52). In this sense, Purcell encourages the audience to consider the limitations placed upon women within the play's historical and contemporary contexts.

ECOCRITICAL READING

Ecocriticism explores depictions of the relationship between nature and humanity. With its themes of existence in a foreboding, desolate and isolated landscape, both Lawson's short story and Purcell's play lend themselves to an ecocritical reading. Whereas Lawson's antagonists are the snake and the 'stray blackfellow' who stacks the woodheap hollow, Purcell reconfigures the snake as Yadaka, a character who shows benevolence and support towards the protagonist.

In Purcell's play, it is the European men who enact violence against the other characters (i.e. the drover's wife and Yadaka) and the environment, evidencing their disconnection from the land and their disregard for the natural world. This creates a juxtaposition between the European ideology of dominating the natural world and its systems, and First Nations peoples' ideology of harmony and reciprocity with the same world and systems.

HISTORICIST READING

A historicist reading considers a text within its wider historical context. As a piece of colonial literature from pre-Federation Australia, Lawson's short story reflects the dominant values of its historical context and propagates the established colonial discourse of the time, which saw Australia as an 'empty space' and sought to erase any Aboriginal presence by renaming and appropriating the land.

Emerging from a 21st century female Aboriginal perspective, Purcell's play reflects a vastly different context and aims to disrupt the dominant colonial ideology. In the intervening years between the publication of Lawson's short story and that of Purcell's play, Australia has witnessed Federation, World Wars, the advent of the contraceptive pill, the 1967 Referendum, women's liberation movements, and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. Taking a relativist approach to the vastly different contexts from which each text emerged provides insight into the views and values underpinning their respective construction.

PSYCHOANALYTIC READING

A psychoanalytic reading, derived from the work of **Sigmund Freud**, is concerned with the human psyche, the significance of dreams and the subconscious, and how these illuminate inner beliefs, desires and repressed feelings. Much meaning is attributed to symbolic objects and their interpretation.

Purcell has reconstructed figures from Lawson's short story to create new layers of meaning in her play. For example, the snake is heroically recharacterised as Yadaka, and the mad bullock is refigured as the drover, Joe Johnson. When the drover's wife sees a vision of Black Mary (Scene Seven, pp. 37–38, 46), Yadaka encourages her to connect this to her repressed identity. Further, references to Yadaka disappearing into and moving like a shadow (Scene Five, p. 27; Scene Six, p. 31; Scene Seven, p. 38) paint him as a mysterious or dreamlike figure, with the capacity to disassemble and move about undetected.

Comparison with other texts

A consideration of Purcell's play alongside Lawson's short story has underpinned this unit's approach to *The Drover's Wife*. To understand the play's deeper messages, engagement with the original is crucial. If students have not already completed the textual connections table to track the

connections between the two texts (see **Close Study > Structure, Parallels and Contrasts**), they should do so now as a means of reflecting on these links.

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN057) (ACEEN058) (ACEEN059)

In a literary context, Purcell's play may be situated within a groundswell of contemporary works by First Nations authors that 'speak back to Empire'. Arising from a cultural legacy of texts that perpetuated the settler myth and marginalised or negated non-white perspectives, the canonical works of Australian literature hitherto misrepresented, stereotyped or erased First Nations and other minority identities. This is apparent in Lawson's short story, which limits its representation of Aboriginal peoples to the overwhelmingly negative depiction of an unnamed and deceptive 'blackfellow'. By contrast, Purcell's play gives a voice to those previously excluded and draws attention to the obscene reality of our national narrative.

This is not to assert that First Nations responses to colonialism are a new phenomenon; rather, the surge of literary works represents a growing willingness to listen, and an appetite for the truth, on the part of contemporary audiences. First Nations perspectives are notable in the work of **Jack Davis***, **Ellen van Neerven***, **Alexis Wright***, **Alison Whittaker**, **Bruce Pascoe***, **Tara June Winch***, **Ali Cobby Eckerman***, **Melissa Lucashenko***, **Nakkiah Lui***, **Rachel Perkins**, **Jeanine Leane***, **Anita Heiss***, **Larissa Behrendt***, and many other writers, poets, playwrights, filmmakers and television writers.

Purcell's motives for writing the play are worth discussing with students, along with its significance as a representation of Australian culture AND as a contribution to Australian literature.

SYNTHESISING TASK

Students may reflect on the significance of *The Drover's Wife* using a thinking routine such as 'connect, extend, challenge' or **3-2-1 bridge** (typically undertaken at the beginning and end of a unit of learning).

If using 'connect, extend, challenge', ask students to reflect on the following questions:

- How does the play connect with what you already know or believe about Australian culture and literature?
- How has the play extended your ideas and assumptions about Australian culture and literature?
- What challenges remain in your thinking about Australian culture and literature after studying this play?

Encourage students to support their reasoning with textual evidence, identifying and justifying specific language or stylistic techniques that have been employed for narrative or dramatic purposes.

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN057)

SAFELY OUT

At this stage of the unit, you should employ the protocols that were outlined in the **Initial Response** section (**Introductory activities > Content notes > Safely In and Safely Out**):

- Encourage students to reflect on what they have learnt about First Nations cultures, diversity, dispossession, frontier conflict and resistance, AND to identify the role of First Nations voices in Australian literature.
- You could invite students to share their reflections through a class discussion or journalling exercise. Provide some prompts for them, such as:
 - What do you think Purcell was trying to achieve with this play?

- What is your biggest takeaway from the play?
- What moments in the play have stuck with you? Why do you think this is?
- Create an image that represents your thoughts now that you have finished studying the play.
- Discuss with students any persistent questions they might have, or any ideas they are still grappling with.
- Encourage students to participate in activities that promote reconciliation.

(ACEEN043) (ACEEN057)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASKS

There are TWO assessment tasks for this unit: one in a productive mode and one in a receptive mode. As this unit is intended for study in Senior Secondary English, students will likely be required to respond analytically and comparatively to the text. The productive mode task is intended to enrich their understanding of authorial intent and provide an opportunity to use metalanguage to reflect on structural and stylistic aspects of the play. These understandings will be of significant benefit for the receptive mode task.

1. PRODUCTIVE MODE: PODCAST RECORDING

Total Drama is a (fictional) podcast that interviews theatre industry professionals about their work. The show's tagline is 'industry insights from every angle of production'.

In pairs, students will select ONE of the following scenarios and record an interview together:

1. You are the director of a new stage production of *The Drover's Wife*. In your interview, explain your directorial vision for the play and what you hope the audience will take away from the performance.
2. You are a producer staging a new production of *The Drover's Wife*. In your interview, explain why you are funding this production and why it is an important Australian story to tell.
3. You have just been cast as an actor in a new stage production of *The Drover's Wife*. In your interview, explain your interpretation of this character and how you intend to fulfil your role.
NOTE: Non-Indigenous students should NOT assume the identities of Aboriginal actors/characters.
4. You are the set and costume designer for a new stage production of *The Drover's Wife*. In your interview, explain the design choices that you have made for the production and how these connect with the play's message.

Within their pairs, one student will act as the interviewer (i.e. the podcast host) and the other as the interviewee. Listening to excerpts from similar interview podcasts (e.g. *The Garret*, *Dumbo Feather*, *Routines and Ruts*) will provide some insight into the conventions and style of this form.

Quality equipment will produce quality recordings; the opposite is also true. Encourage students to record in an area with minimal background noise. Most devices will have a voice recorder app, though students may prefer to use other software. Remind them to edit their finished recording, removing silences and adding theme music and transitions where appropriate.

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN043) (ACEEN044) (ACEEN048) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN055)
(ACEEN057)

2. RECEPTIVE MODE: ANALYTICAL ESSAY

The analytical essay is the most common type of response required of Senior Secondary students across Australia. The following questions ask students to respond to the play either as a single text OR in comparison to Lawson's short story.

Single text analysis

1. 'Purcell shows both the beauty and brutality of life in the bush.' Do you agree?
2. 'In presenting the experience of her central protagonist, Purcell shows us the experience of many.' Discuss.
3. How does imagery of the natural and supernatural add to the audience's understanding of *The Drover's Wife*?
4. 'Molly Johnson (the drover's wife) and Yataka rely equally upon each other for survival.' To what extent do you agree?
5. 'Purcell's play shows characters whose actions are driven by desperation.' To what extent do you agree?

Comparative analysis

1. Compare the ways that Lawson and Purcell depict the level of control that their respective protagonists have over their lives.
2. Compare how Lawson and Purcell represent the dangers and trials of living in the bush.
3. 'Mother, I won't never go drovin'.' Compare the ways Lawson's short story and Purcell's play explore the notion of responsibility to family.

Assessment criteria for a task of this nature will be prescribed in the relevant syllabus documents for each state and territory.

(ACEEN041) (ACEEN042) (ACEEN043) (ACEEN046) (ACEEN049) (ACEEN053)
(ACEEN055) (ACEEN056) (ACEEN057) (ACEEN058) (ACEEN059)

[Back to Top](#)



Unit Suitable For English Unit 3 (Year 12)

Duration 5–6 weeks* (with prior reading)

Curriculum Summary

Version 8.4 content descriptions

Themes

colonialism, despair, dispossession, First Nations texts, gender roles and stereotypes, grief, human vs nature, isolation, poverty, racism, survival, vulnerability

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking, Digital Literacy, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy, Personal and Social Capability

Cross-curriculum Priorities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

FURTHER DETAILS

Publisher Currency Press

Date of Publication 2017

ISBN 9781760620974

Category Drama

SCIS number

5470882

Pages

80

Note

The resource contains optional activities. Completing everything would take longer than the duration suggested above.

Unit Writer

NIRVANA WATKINS is a teacher of English and Head of Faculty at Geelong Grammar School who relishes the vitality and variety of working with young people and their responses to texts. She is a regular presenter at the VATE State Conference and AATE National Conferences; a contributor to *Idiom*; and has completed online teaching resources for *The Garret* podcast series and Reading Australia. Nirvana is a member of the VATE Professional Learning and Research Committee and VCAA Text Advisory Panel (English), and a VCE assessor. She has taught senior secondary English and Literature in both Victoria and Tasmania, and has completed a Master's in Education at the University of Tasmania, focusing on global education, educational leadership and research.

© AATE 2020

Permissions

The Drover's Wife by Leah Purcell

Text © 2017

Reproduced by permission of Currency Press

COPYRIGHTAGENCY

© Copyright Agency and contributors 2025

ABN 53 001 228 799

