

THE DRESSMAKER

REVENGE IS BACK
IN FASHION



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY FIONA HALL



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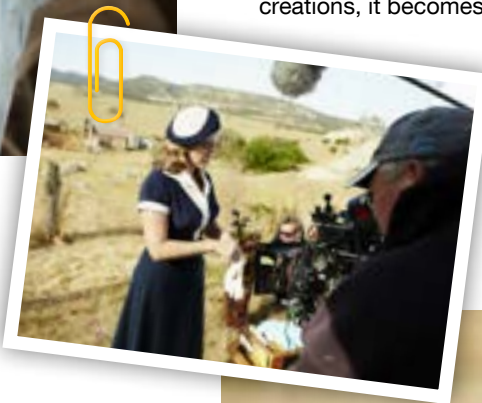


revenge against those who did her wrong. There'll be a price for looking this good.

The stakes are raised when Councillor Evan Pettyman, who virulently hates Tilly and Molly, employs the buttoned-up Una Pleasance, a rival dressmaker from Melbourne, to compete with Tilly and bring her down.

Along the way Tilly bares her heart and against her better judgement falls in love with local football hero, Teddy McSwiney. Most importantly, she forms an initially volatile but finally tender reconciliation with her mother, Molly.

In a no-holds-barred showdown between Tilly's and Una's creations, it becomes clear that the transformation of the residents has only exaggerated their many flaws, and revealed just how ugly and black their hearts are. Their obsession with Tilly's couture designs will be their ultimate unravelling, and Tilly's final triumph.



Overview

1951. Tilly Dunnage, a beautiful, talented misfit, who's been working as a dressmaker in France for the great haute couture designers, returns home to Dungatar, a one-horse town deep in the wheat belt of south-east Australia. After 20 years away, Tilly has been driven back by a recent tragedy, to do two things – look after her ailing, eccentric mother Molly, and right the wrongs of the past that continue to haunt her. Tilly Dunnage has revenge in her heart.

In Dungatar, everybody knows everybody and they all have a secret. Cabin-crazed, bitter, grasping and small-minded, the town folk maintain a precarious equilibrium as they know that their secrets are not safe. When Tilly arrives back, the balance starts to shift. Signs of trouble come in the form of the extravagant fabrics, which start arriving from France, delivered to Dungatar in tea chests.

The local constabulary, in the form of Sergeant Farrat, is the first to develop a special, breathless interest in Tilly's magical way with thread and silk. He becomes something of a buffer between Tilly and the town's people, who haven't forgotten the tragedy they believe Tilly caused as a child—an event that set the town against her and led to her exile.

Tilly feels instinctively that she was wronged, but she also feels cursed and can't clearly remember what happened. The Dungatarians are drawn in by Tilly's bewitching skills of transformation, and one by one, she extracts from them the information necessary to piece the truth together. The extraordinary gowns she creates become her means for



Content Hyperlinks

Curriculum Links

'The Dressmaker' can be linked to the following subject areas of the National Curriculum:

- Level 10 English
- Level 10 History

» SPECIFIC LINKS TO LEVEL 10 ENGLISH

Year 10 Content Descriptions: Literature

Literature and context

- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)

Responding to Literature

- Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response (ACELT1641)
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)

Examining Literature

- Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different interpretations and responses to a text (ACELT1642)

Year 10 Content Descriptions: Literacy

Text in Context

- Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, through language, structural and/or visual choices (ACELY1749)

Interpreting, analysing, evaluating

- Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)
- Use comprehension strategies to compare and contrast information within and between texts, identifying and analysing embedded perspectives, and evaluating supporting evidence (ACELY1754)

Specific Links to Level 10 History:

The Modern World and Australia: Depth Study 3 – The Globalising World

Popular Culture: 1945 – present:

- The nature of popular culture in Australia at the end of World War II, including music, film and sport (ACDSEH027)
- Continuity and change in beliefs and values that have influenced the Australian way of life (ACDSEH149)



Pre-viewing Activities

» FOCUS ON AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY IN THE 1950s

'The Dressmaker' is set in the Australian town of Dungatar in 1951. Prior to viewing the film, students should have some background knowledge about the nature of Australian society at this time.

In the 1950s, rural Australia was a conservative place. The ruling government were conservative, and fashion was plain, discreet and chaste. Divorce was a shameful thing and there were no support services for divorcees with children. Robert Menzies was the prime minister. The population as a whole looked to England as the mother country, and Queen Elizabeth II as their leader. Australia was slowly emerging from the restrictions of the Second World War. Drive-in picture theatres had just reached our shores and musicals, such as 'South Pacific' were making their way from America and England. But the Second World War had also meant that many people's lives and values had undergone some challenges, and the society was reluctant to accept the slow change the period was experiencing. Increasing numbers of post war immigrants were arriving. For the first time, women stood defiantly at the War memorial along with the men to mourn their brothers, fathers, sons and husbands. Our currency was still pounds, shillings and pence and pre-packaged food had not yet advanced beyond packet tea, custard powder or washing powder, buying flour or sugar that a shop attendant weighed and bagged for you was the norm and there was no such thing as self serve or supermarkets.

- In pairs/small groups, students are to conduct research into Life in Australia in the 1950s. They are to complete the table **Australia in the 1950s** and share/discuss answers as a class.

AUSTRALIA IN THE 1950^s

Aspect of Life	Details
<i>Homes/ creature comforts</i>	
<i>Fashion</i>	
<i>Transport (cars/air travel)</i>	
<i>Gender roles</i>	
<i>Education</i>	
<i>Working life</i>	



Post-viewing Activities

» 1. FOCUS ON THEMES IN 'THE DRESSMAKER'

The following themes are explored in *'The Dressmaker'*. Students are to work through the following activities (individually or in pairs):

Fashion:

Fashion in the 1950s in Australia was subject to post World War II restrictions. Cotton-print button-through frocks, gloves and hats; prim, practical and plain were the norm. The lack of imagination and the construct of clothes that covered most of the body at this time obviously suited the uncreative ladies of Dungatar.

- From the moment we first see Tilly, how does her fashion stand out? Give specific examples.
- What impact does her choice of dress have on the players and spectators at the football Grand Final?
- How does Tilly help transform the residents of Dungatar via fashion? Give specific examples.
- Whilst the dresses that Tilly crafts certainly make the

women of Dungatar stand out, in what ways can they be seen to create a more level playing field in terms of how the women are perceived in the town?

- What is Haute Couture?
- Research task: Find images of fashion (day wear and evening wear) in the 1950s.

Landscape:

Dungatar is a fictitious town in rural Australia, small and isolated, yet at the heart of the district because the grain silos are there and neighbouring towns transport their wheat to Dungatar to be stored and freighted. Beneath the gaze of The Hill, where Molly and Tilly live, the rest of the town is laid out. 'Mad Molly' and Tilly become the focus of the townsfolk, uniting them in hatred as they watch up at the outcasts. Like the wheat silos, The Hill dominates the landscape.

- How is the town of Dungatar presented in the film?





Give specific examples of the landscape (the main road, the train station, The Hill, the silos, the football oval, etc.)

- What filmic devices are used to present the differing locations? For example, how is Molly and Tilly's home on The Hill shot? How is the main road and the various shops/shop keepers shot? Refer specifically to framing, camera angles and lighting if possible.
- How is the position of Molly and Tilly's home at the top of The Hill important? What does it represent?
- How is Tilly's final departure from The Hill shot and why is it so significant?
- Allocate the following prompts to students (working in pairs). Students are to reflect on these in relation to 'The Dressmaker' and share answers as a class. Ensure that answers refer to a range of specific characters and scenes from the film:
- *Two people can never experience a landscape in exactly the same way.*
- *We can only be truly objective when viewing landscape from a distance.*
- *To understand someone is to understand where they*

come from.

- *Memories distort our view of the external world.*
- *Our memories of a landscape can be liberating or stifling.*
- *The memories of a landscape remain with us forever.*
- *Our understanding of our landscape is explained by our fears and desires.*

Identity and Belonging:

'The Dressmaker' explores the notions of 'Identity and Belonging'. Characters can be divided into three groups; the locals, the out of town visitors and the outcasts.

- Complete the table '**The Dressmaker': Analysis Of The Characters** overleaf. Share and discuss answers as a class.
- Do any of the characters above change their status throughout the film? Explain why.
- Allocate the following prompts to students (working in pairs). Students are to reflect on these in relation to 'The Dressmaker' and share answers as a class. Ensure that answers refer to a range of specific characters and scenes from the film:
- *It is difficult to possess a sense of belonging when we are unsure of our own identity.*
- *Our identity determines where we belong.*
- *Only upon reflection can we establish our identity.*
- *Mistakes help shape our identity.*
- *Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging.*



'THE DRESSMAKER': ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERS

Character	w'Local', 'Out-of-towner', 'Outsider'	Explanation/specific scene references to illustrate their status
<i>Filly Dunnage</i>		
<i>Molly Dunnage</i>		
<i>Sergeant Farrat</i>		
<i>Evan Pettyman</i>		
<i>Marigold Pettyman</i>		
<i>Teddy McSwiney</i>		
<i>Barney McSwiney</i>		
<i>Una Pleasance</i>		
<i>Mr Almanac</i>		
<i>Mrs Almanac</i>		
<i>Beulah Harridene</i>		
<i>Gertrude Pratt</i>		
<i>Aloin Pratt</i>		
<i>Muriel Pratt</i>		
<i>Elsbeth Beaumont</i>		
<i>William Beaumont</i>		



- Sometimes one may feel satisfaction if they do not belong.
- Discovering our identity is a challenging journey.
- Our sense of identity can be difficult for others to accept.
- Belonging to one group pushes us away from another group.
- Our relationships help strengthen our identity.
- Belonging is when people accept you for who you are.

The Human Condition:

'The Dressmaker' presents us with a cast of characters who experience and typify the full range of human emotions. These include, but are not limited to; Love, Hate, Cruelty, Compassion, Vengeance, Tolerance, Exclusion,

Grief, Guilt, Blame, Prejudice, Secrets, Suspicion, The haunting nature of the past, Fate.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?	
Name	Meaning/Symbolism
Myrtle/Tilly	Tilly changed her name to seek a new, painless identity and forget her past.
Gertrude/Trudy	Hoping to emulate Tilly with her name change.
Molly/Mad Molly	Potentially based on the colloquial term 'moll' (girlfriend or mistress of a gangster, thief, bikkie, etc.). Molly was none of these things in reality, however, the town accused her of being so.
Mr and Mrs Almanac	An almanac is usually an annual publication containing statistical, tabular and general information. In what ways are the Almanacs in this role in Dungatar?
Beulah Harridiene	Define the term 'harridan' as it relates to Beula Harridiene.
Dungatar	From the word 'dung', colloquial for excrement.
Evan Pettyman	From the word 'petty', meaning of trivial importance.
Others?	

- Divide students into pairs and allocate one of the above terms (there are 16 – you may come up with additional ones to add to the list).
- Students are to create a Padlet that presents information about their allocated concept as it is explored via characters and events in the film. Students are encouraged to source digital images, as well as direct examples from the film for their Padlet.
- Upon completion, students are to present their Padlet to the class via data projector and explain/discuss.
- www.padlet.com

ACTIVITY: 'WHAT'S IN A NAME?'

The author of the novel 'The Dressmaker', Rosalie Ham, made intentional decisions about the names of places and people. These were maintained in the film version. You will note that many of the name choices are rich in metaphor and symbolism and provide further insights into the text.

- Working in pairs, look at the table this page and allocate the names to students. They are to explain their allocated name (initial notes have been included to help them start their analysis).



ACTIVITY: EXPLORATION OF 'THE DRESSMAKER' AS GOTHIC FICTION

The gothic fiction genre incorporates tales of the macabre, fantastic and supernatural, usually set amid haunted castles, graveyards, ruins, and wild picturesque landscapes.

- Working in pairs, and using the notes below to help, students are to find examples of plot, setting, character and themes in *'The Dressmaker'* that relate to the gothic genre.

Element of film	Relationship to the gothic genre
Terrible events that occur in Dungatar	Macabre accidents, premature deaths.
The haunting qualities of the past	Actions and mistakes that impact a person's reputation and haunt individuals.
The settings	The Hill, the burning rubbish tip, the silo.
The concept of fate and curses	Tilly, Molly, the Pettymans, others?

ACTIVITY: FOCUS ON CHARACTERS IN 'THE DRESSMAKER'

Students are to work through the following focus questions. They are encouraged to refer to specific characters and scenes from the film. Answers are to be discussed as a class:

- The Dungatar community is one focussed on exclusion, gossip, hate and vengeance. Mean spirited characters such as Beulah Harridene, Evan Pettyman and Mr. Almanac are accepted - they belong in Dungatar. Others like Sergeant Farrat are tolerated. Characters such as Tilly, Molly and the McSwiney's are excluded. How do the negative forces unite the citizens of Dungatar? Why are certain characters excluded and hated; what does this say about the community?
- The residents of Dungatar are narrow minded and hypocritical. They sweep their footpaths and hose their windows to hide the indecent aspects of their own lives. Do you agree?



3. While many of the characters in the film are caricatures, we are often presented with characters who present us with a more gentle and fragile portrayal of human nature. Which characters does the audience connect with and develop sympathy for?
4. 'Mad Molly' lives in a ramshackle house above the tip. How do the townspeople view her? How does her relationship with Tilly and the townspeople develop throughout the film?

» WRITING TASKS

Select one of the following writing scenarios and compose a creative response. Ensure you refer to actual events and characters from *'The Dressmaker'* in your response:

- Write a eulogy for either Teddy or Molly to be delivered by Tilly at their funeral.
- Write a letter from Molly to Evan Pettyman following Tilly's initial return to Dungatar.
- Write a letter of gratitude from Gertrude (Trudy) Pratt to Tilly following her marriage to William.
- Write a letter from Tilly to Teddy's mother once she has returned to Paris.
- Select a character and a format (letter, diary entry) of your own devising.

» ESSAY TOPICS

Students are to select one of the following essay topics in relation to *'The Dressmaker'*. Following the TEEL structure, students are to plan and write a text response of 600 – 800 words. Essays must include quotes and evidence from the film, as well as reference to filmic techniques.

1. "I'm back you bastards". This is the first line uttered by Tilly in the film. Is Tilly motivated by love or revenge?
2. How does Tilly's transformation of the townswomen via fashion mirror her own personal transformation throughout the film?
3. "They don't like us here" Tilly says to Teddy. What does *'The Dressmaker'* say about difference and belonging?
4. Molly tells Tilly; "You can create. You can transform people. It's very powerful. Use it." How does Tilly use her power to transform the residents of Dungatar in *'The Dressmaker'* ?





References

Australian Curriculum
Reading Group and Teacher's Notes on
The Dressmaker
Padlet
The Dressmaker press kit



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