



Course: English

Scottish Texts: *The Slab Boys*
by John Byrne

Level: Higher

January 2014



This advice and guidance has been produced for teachers and other staff who provide learning, teaching and support as learners work towards qualifications. These materials have been designed to assist teachers and others with the delivery of programmes of learning within the new qualifications framework.

These support materials, which are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, provide suggestions on approaches to teaching and learning which will promote development of the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills. Staff are encouraged to draw on these materials, and existing materials, to develop their own programmes of learning which are appropriate to the needs of learners within their own context. Staff should also refer to the course and unit specifications and support notes which have been issued by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

<http://www.sqa.org.uk>

The edition referred to here is the Penguin edition, *The Slab Boys Trilogy* (ISBN 0 14 048.211 3).

This edition contains *The Slab Boys* and its sequels *Cutting a Rug* and *Still Life*.

The BBC production of the play is available to purchase online. This production stars Gerard Kelly, Janette Foggo and Bob Hird. This production has been described as 'entertaining' as well as 'authentic, gritty and honest'. Using the DVD in tandem with dramatised reading activities may help learners to gain a better understanding of the text and the conventions of the genre.

YouTube

This resource includes web links (ie urls) to specific YouTube clips.

Please note the following:

1. When you click on these web links you are moving away from the Education Scotland website. Education Scotland is not responsible for content on external websites.
2. As YouTube provides an open forum for users to post comments it is recommended that staff check the clips and any appended comments in advance to assess suitability before directing learners to them.

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Background and context

John Byrne: a brief biography

John Byrne is a critically acclaimed writer and artist. He was born on 6 January 1940 in Paisley and grew up in Ferguslie Park, a housing scheme which has suffered from high levels of unemployment and social deprivation. After leaving St Mirin's Academy, he worked as a slab boy for F. Stoddard, carpet manufacturers. He then studied at Glasgow School of Art (1958–1963) and became a full-time artist in 1968. The influence of certain aspects of his work at Stoddard's and his studies at Glasgow School of Art can be observed in *The Slab Boys*.

Byrne has been described as a 'renaissance man'. In addition to his success as an artist – his paintings are held in major collections across the world – he has written many plays and several TV series. He has also received praise for his work as a set designer and for his adaptations of several plays by Chekhov. In recognition of his talents and his immense contribution to the arts, Byrne has been presented with several honorary doctorates.

Background information

The Slab Boys has been described as semi-autobiographical. In order to gain a better understanding of the play and its characters, learners may find it helpful to listen to what John Byrne has said about his life and its influence on the play.

Listening activity

There are several TV programmes that give useful information on John Byrne's life and work. In addition to providing useful background information, these programmes could be used to develop learners' listening skills as well as providing an opportunity for learners to practise note-taking and summarising skills.

Web links – with programme information and suggested tasks – are given below:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KauLY8wc2p8

BBC programme in which Byrne converses with actor Peter Capaldi. Both men discuss how their work has been influenced by their lives. 28 minutes.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUPKic-MN7A

BBC programme which gives the public an insight into the lives of famous artists. 15 minutes – this is part 1 of 2. Part 2 is also available on YouTube.

Task: Learners should watch these programmes, making notes under the following headings: biographical details, influences, writing, artistic works, views on society/life.

Use the information in the notes to write a short report (400 words) on the main influences on John Byrne's life and work.

Getting the play in context

It is important that learners understand the social context and the setting of the play. A sound understanding of these features is vital to the audience's appreciation of the characters and themes of the play. It will therefore be useful for learners to complete some research before reading the play.

Research and presentation activity

Staff should divide the class into groups of four, with each group given a topic from the following list:

- working life in the 1950s
- Stoddard's carpet factory in Elderslie and the work of a slab boy
- Paisley in the 1950s
- housing schemes in the 1950s – special focus on Ferguslie Park in Paisley
- 1950s fashion and music
- class distinctions in 1950s Scotland
- the treatment of mental illness in 1950s Scotland.

Using the internet or library, each group should research the topic and put their key points into a short PowerPoint presentation. The group may appoint a spokesperson, or individual members could present different aspects of the topic.

The internet and most libraries contain a wealth of information on social history but staff may wish to demonstrate the ease of access to such materials on an interactive whiteboard (IWB). For example, Stoddard's archive is available on

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Glasgow University Library's online archive and the BBC's website has a wealth of social history resources.

Members of the class should be making notes as each presentation is delivered.

In completing this activity, learners will be:

- developing their reading and summarising skills
- developing their presentation skills
- strengthening their team-working skills
- strengthening their awareness of the play's setting and context.

Note: This activity could be modified to provide a homework activity.

Learning and teaching approaches

Strategies for reading

Initial reading strategies: gaining an overall impression of the text

If the DVD has been purchased by the school, staff may wish to show this before reading the play. This strategy has the merit of allowing the class to gain a basic knowledge of plot and characters before embarking on a detailed analysis of the play.

OR

If no DVD is available, the class could be given the following synopsis before reading through the play. At this stage, the class could work on reading sections of the play in groups, with staff allocating key scenes to be performed in class.

OR

Staff could ask the class to complete an initial reading of the play as homework. Progress could be enhanced (and monitored) by asking learners to compose a short synopsis of the play before detailed reading commences.

The Slab Boys: synopsis

The play focuses on the events of a morning and afternoon in the slab room of A.F. Stobo & Co. There are two acts in the play: Act 1 is set in the morning and Act 2 in the afternoon. In the slab room, the colours which are used in the carpet manufacturing design process are ground and mixed by slab boys – Phil, Spanky and Hector. The work is fairly boring, and Phil and Spanky occupy themselves by cracking jokes, bullying Hector, avoiding work and annoying several more senior employees.

Act 1 opens with Spanky being slightly cruel to Hector. Mr Curry, their boss, grumbles about the lack of actual work being done in the slab room. When Mr. Curry leaves the room, Phil's late arrival almost coincides with the arrival of Jack Hogg, who is accompanied by Alan Downie. Jack tells the slab boys that Alan will be working for the company during the holidays. It is quite clear that Alan is wealthier and from a different social background. Alan reveals that he will be going to university after the summer. Phil and Spanky tease Alan and their resentment of Alan's privileged position is made clear.

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

When the joking has settled, Jack leaves Alan in the slab room. We learn that Phil's home circumstances are very difficult. His mother has a history of mental illness and has been committed to the local psychiatric hospital. She has been admitted to this hospital on several occasions. Phil also reveals that he was late because he was submitting his art portfolio to Glasgow School of Art. He will receive a phone call informing him of success or failure later that day. Phil's aggressive reaction to the discovery of his folio suggests that he is passionate about his art and is desperate to go to art school.

In Act 1 we also meet Sadie, the tea lady, and Lucille, who works in the design room. Sadie is selling tickets for the staff dance. There is more bullying of Hector but this stops when Hector tells Phil and Spanky that he is taking the beautiful Lucille to the staff dance. Unfortunately, this is only in Hector's imagination. When Phil and Spanky find out the truth from Lucille, they decide to 'help' Hector by remodelling his image.

Act 2 begins after lunch. We are back in the slab room and Phil is attempting to persuade Lucille to go to the dance with Hector. However, Hector's appearance at the window frightens Lucille and she runs off. She has not recognised Hector as he has a cut ear and is in his undergarments – his drastically altered appearance is a result of Phil and Spanky's 'help'.

A great deal of slapstick ensues as the slab boys hide Hector's condition while various other members of staff come and go. Phil's attempts to get Lucille to go to the dance with Hector fail. While Phil is out of the room, the pay packets arrive but there is no envelope for Hector or Phil. It transpires that Phil has been sacked. Phil and Spanky assume that Hector is also being sacked and they have a 'whip round', presenting him with a pound note. They are shocked to learn that there was no pay packet for Hector because he has been promoted to the design room.

Things do not improve for Phil. When Alan returns to the slab room, he is bearing bad news: Phil's application to study at art school has been rejected. Jack Hogg arrives with a note informing Phil that the ambulance crew have recaptured Mrs McCann, who is now safely back inside the psychiatric ward. The play ends on a bleak note for Phil who, after an exchange of harsh words with Curry, leaves for his home while contemplating the injustice of life and the fickle nature of fate.

Staging the play

Setting

The play has one setting – the slab room of A.F. Stobo & Co. In the initial instructions on scene, the dramatist gives us a detailed description of the slab room.

Activity

Staff should remind learners that setting/set design can be used to reveal important ideas and themes in the play. Setting can also reveal aspects of character.

Ask learners to read over the opening description of the set. In pairs, they should answer the following questions:

1. What facts would be immediately clear to the audience when they first see the setting?
2. The description of the slab room gives us an impression of the slab boys before we meet them. What impression are we given?

This should be followed by a short class discussion on possible answers.

The dramatist does not tell us exactly where certain objects should be positioned on the stage. This offers an opportunity for learners to familiarise themselves with basic stage layout. Referring again to John Byrne's description of the scene, each pair should complete their own set design on the attached stage plan.

This activity should raise learners' awareness of set design and its impact on dramatic production.

Set construction: *The Slab Boys at the Traverse Theatre*

Learners should now have a clear impression of the setting of the play. It may be useful for them to see how a set is created. The web link below shows a finish-to-start record of the set construction for the 2002/4 production of *The Slab Boys* at the Traverse Theatre.

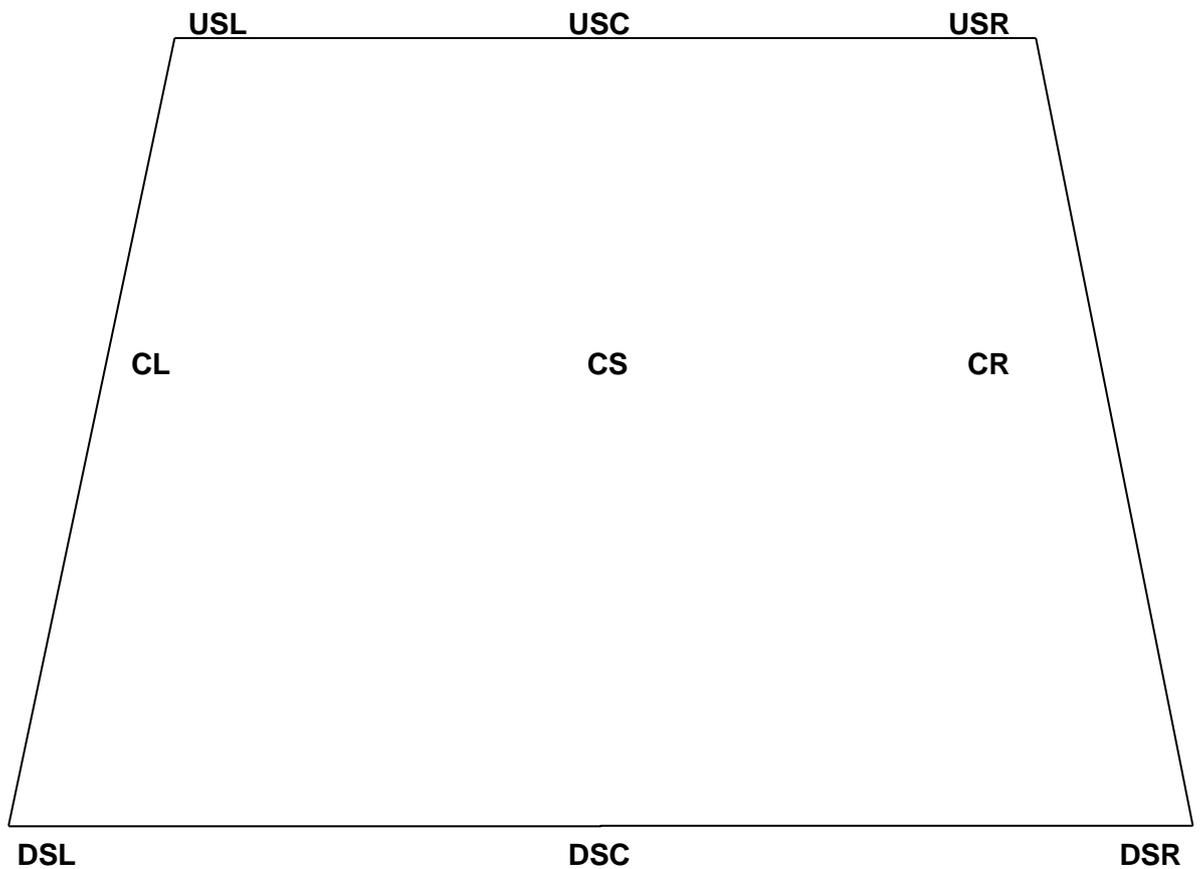
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hLAI0q0DQpY>

A significant proportion of the humour in this play is dependent on fast-paced action and the characters enter and leave the stage at frequent intervals. This short activity should help learners to consider how effective set design can enhance dramatic timing and pace.

Task

Read over the description of the slab room. With a partner, discuss the most suitable locations for the various items listed in the description. Remember to consider entry and exit points for characters. Sketch the items and entrances on the stage plan provided below.

The Slab Boys: set design



Abbreviations

- USL – upstage left
- USC – upstage centre
- USR – upstage right
- CL – centre left
- CS – centre stage
- CR – centre right
- DSL – downstage left
- DSC – downstage centre
- DSR – downstage right

Detailed reading: analysing the text

Act 1

First impressions of characters

Context: We are introduced to most of the play's characters in the first few pages. Dialogue is a key technique in drama. In dialogue, two or more characters are conversing with each other. In the opening scenes of *The Slab Boys*, dialogue is used not only to establish certain aspects of the setting but also to establish aspects of characterisation.

Extract: Read the opening section of the play from the first stage direction on page 5 (*The Slab Room ... carries a portable radio.*) to Jack and Alan's departure on page 9 (Spanky: And don't imagine that we're going to stand here and bandy legs with the likes of you, Torn Face!).

Activity

- The class should be divided into small groups – maximum four learners in each group.
- The groups will be given number 1 or number 2.
- Number 1 groups should discuss their first impressions of Spanky, Hector and Phil.
- Number 2 groups should discuss their first impressions of Curry, Jack and Alan.
- Each group should note their impressions of each character on a flipchart sheet.* They should provide evidence to support their impressions – quotations, stage directions, actions and reactions.

*Flipchart sheets with impressions can be displayed on classroom walls. Learners could add to these as they learn more about each character.

It is important that each group is given the opportunity to report their impressions and to provide supporting evidence to the whole class. This feedback could be led by staff, with a chairperson from each group adding to the store of knowledge.

During the feedback, learners will have the opportunity to make notes on each character. These notes should be made on character notes worksheets – a blank worksheet is provided on the following page. Learners will need separate worksheets for each character in the play.

Learners should add to these notes as they work their way through the play and complete activities. The completed notes will be a valuable revision aid to assist with critical reading tasks and critical essay writing.

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

Character name: _____

Aspect of character/comment	Evidence (quotation/stage direction/actions)	Page

Act 1***Phil's character***

Context: Phil is the most important character in the play and much of the action is centred around Phil's frustration at his situation and his determination to break free from the monotony of life in the slab room. It is quite clear that Phil has dreams of living a different life, and his plans to go to art school are his escape route.

The characterisation of Phil is used to enhance our understanding of several central concerns of the play: dreams and escape, social inequality, rebellion. It is important that learners have a sound understanding of what lies behind Phil's rebellious attitude as well as understanding Phil's ambitions for the future.

Extract: read, perform or watch the extract from Curry's exit on page 6 (Phil: Bless my boater confiscated the blighter.) to Jack and Alan's exit on page 9 (Phil: You'll be okay with Jacky boy though ... all the lassies dive under the looms.).

Note: This section of dialogue is rich in spoof and parody, with reference to music hall, radio, film and advertising. Staff may wish to explain/discuss some of these features with learners. Alternatively, learners could be asked to choose a reference or feature and, after research, explain why this reference/feature is effective.

Activity

- Using DVD or class performance, learners should consider Phil's contributions to this section of the play.
- Staff should draw attention to the fact that much of the humour in this section is created by Phil and Spanky's use of personal humiliation and class derision. Some discussion of the possible reasons for Phil and Spanky's 'quick-fire' banter may also support learners when they are thinking 'in role' to complete the activity below.
- Working in pairs, one learner should be in the role of Phil with the other learner asking 'Phil' questions about his treatment of the other characters and his attitude to his work.
- The questioner should note down the question and 'Phil' should jot down his response.*
- At the close of this dialogue, staff could ask pairs to act out these question and answer sessions. The responses to these questions will provide material that can be added to the learners' character note sheets – time should be allocated for this updating of notes at the end of the activity.

*The questioner may also wish to carry out questioning ‘in role’ – Alan, Hector, Spanky, Jack or a combination of these characters. This approach is likely to yield promising questions and responses, with both learners gaining new insight into characters’ feelings.

Act 1

Social inequality

Context. The theme of social inequality is introduced when Jack Hogg leaves Alan Downie with the slab boys. In the conversation which takes place between the four boys it is clear that Alan comes from a very different social background: he belongs to a higher social class than the slab boys. The audience can see that Alan is from a middle class background whilst Phil, Spanky and Hector are from working class families. The conversation reveals the inequalities in wealth and opportunities that are a result of divisions in social class and we are left in no doubt of the injustice of such divisions.

Extract. Read from Jack’s arrival in the slab room on page 6 (Jack: Morning you chaps ... This is our last stop.) until Jack and Alan’s departure on page 9 (Jack: Don’t imagine I’m going to stand here and bandy words with the likes of you.).

Activity

- The class should be divided into groups. A number of these groups will consider Alan’s social background; remaining groups will consider the social backgrounds of the slab boys. Staff should designate the character/social background to be dealt with in each group.
- In these groups, learners should look closely at this extract from Act 1 and discuss what we can infer about the characters’ backgrounds.
- Each group should display their findings in the form of a poster: the poster should have several extracts of dialogue and a brief comment on what the audience can infer from the dialogue, eg Jack’s comment ‘Just showing the new lad round the design room’ suggests Alan has important connections (inference). Hector’s comment ‘How come if everybody’s a mason you and Phil’s working here ...?’ suggests that he is from a protestant background whereas Phil and Spanky are from a catholic background (inference).

Each group should aim to have at least seven comments and inferences on their poster. Illustrations and colour could be used to make a character display, which will be a useful classroom resource.

Additional comments and inferences could be added to this display as the class continue reading the play.

Act 1

Phil's mother/treatment of mental illness in the 1950s

Context: In the next section of dialogue, Phil and Spanky are alone in the slab room. Phil reveals that his mother has been taken to the psychiatric hospital again. It is quite clear that he is concerned about his mother. He also expresses his anger and frustration at how mentally ill people are treated in care. This section of dialogue gives the audience a strong sense of Phil's frustration and his desire to overthrow the limiting factors in his life.

Extract: Read from Jack and Alan's exit on page 9 (Phil: Hey, Spanks.) to Curry's entrance on page 10 (Phil: So they could sign her in as a 'Voluntary Patient').

Activity

In groups, learners should discuss possible answers to the following questions:

1. What do you think Phil is worried about when he asks Spanky if 'going off your head's catching'?
2. Do you think Phil is exaggerating about what his mother has done on the previous evening? Give a reason to support your answer.
3. Spanky tells Phil that he thought that Phil's mother's actions were 'normal down your way'. What does Spanky's comment and Phil's reply suggest about life in Ferguslie Park, the area in which Phil lives?
4. Phil reveals the 'usual' treatment which his mum receives at the hospital.
 - (a) What do his comments about the hospital and the convalescent home reveal about the treatment of mentally ill patients during the 1950s?
 - (b) What does this speech reveal about his feelings regarding his mother's treatment?

When the groups have finished this task, staff should set aside some time for whole class feedback on the answers. The feedback will allow learners to add additional points to their answers and to their character sheets on Phil and Spanky.

Further discussion: black humour

Byrne has used humour to establish the audience's view of Phil and Spanky as rebellious but rather loveable rogues. However, in the conversation about Phil's mum, black humour is used to create a far darker tone and to raise the audience's awareness of another central concern – the unsatisfactory and ineffective nature of treatments for mental illness.

Activity

- Staff should lead a class discussion on what makes this section of dialogue different to the conversations they have looked at so far.
- The term 'black humour' may have been mentioned by learners. If not, this term should be introduced and defined by staff – this can be done on an IWB or learners could use the internet to complete a quick search for definition.
- Learners' awareness of black humour could be strengthened by asking them to find examples of black humour being used in the literature or media.
- When the class are fully aware of the definition of black humour, learners could be asked to reconsider Phil and Spanky's dialogue, commenting on particularly effective examples of black humour.
- Finally, staff could lead discussion on possible reasons for Byrne's use of black humour at this point in the play.

Act 1

The older generation

Mr Curry

Context: In the next section of Act 1, the audience has their second encounter with Mr Curry and meets Sadie, the tea lady. These two characters are from an older generation and their interactions with the slab boys give a different view of the slab room banter.

Extract: Read from Curry's entrance on page 10 (Curry: Who is responsible for this?) to his departure on page 11 (Curry: Yes McKenzie ... I'll see you later...in my office.).

Activity A

- Volunteers should perform the short extract.
- When the dramatised reading has finished, learners should write the heading 'Complaints about slab room' on the board. Beside each complaint, learners should comment on what each complaint suggests about the slab boys' attitudes to their work.
- Learners should use these comments to add information to their note sheet for Curry's character.

Activity B

- Staff could ask learners to consider the contrast between Curry's need for order and the slab boys' rejection of order and discipline.
- Learners should identify comments where Curry's need for discipline and order is made clear to the audience.
- In groups, they should then discuss what the contrast between Curry, who is almost a stereotype of an authority figure, and the rebellion shown by the slab boys suggests about social order at that time.

Sadie

Context. Sadie's dialogue with the slab boys and Alan lets us see these characters in a more individual way. She has a maternal air about her and her protective attitude towards Hector helps to develop the audience's awareness of Hector's isolation from his colleagues. Sadie's also makes several observations on Alan's good manners when compared to those of Phil and Spanky, and this reinforces the audience's awareness of the theme of social inequality.

Extract. Read from Sadie's entrance on page 12 (Sadie: Tea's up.) to her departure on page 13 (Sadie: ... Aw, thanks son...you're a gent.).

Activity

In pairs, learners should discuss and answer the following questions:

1. What possible reasons could there be for Sadie's protective attitude to Hector?
2. Make a note of Sadie's negative comments to Phil and Spanky. What do these comments suggest about Sadie's view of Phil and Spanky?
3. Why do you think Sadie is kind to Alan?

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

4. Phil and Spanky are seen stealing in this scene. What effect does this have on the audience's view of these characters?
5. Sadie seems surprised when Hector buys a double ticket for the 'staffie'. What does this surprise reveal about her view of Hector?

A wide variety of answers to these questions should be expected and it is important that time is set aside for whole-class feedback on pairs' answers.

Act 1

Hector: character analysis

(This activity could be used as a homework assignment as it provides learners with an opportunity for individual revision of plot and character within Act 1. Learners who have access to the internet/IT may wish to complete this activity using mind-mapping software.)

Context: After Sadie's departure, the action is centred on the characters' plans for the staff dance – 'the staffie'. Hector's characterisation as a victim is developed in this section of Act 1.

Extract: Read from Sadie's departure on page 13 (Phil: Aw Hector ... you didn't need to go that far) to Phil's 'kidnapping' of Hector on page 18 (Phil: To the lавvies!).

Activity

- Learners should consider what they have already learned about Hector and then read over the extract.
- They should then create a mind map or spider diagram to record what they have learned about Hector. This analysis/evaluation of dramatic characterisation requires learners to refer to the actions/feelings/influence of other characters, and these references should be set out clearly in the final diagram.
- Although most learners will be familiar with the concept of mind maps, some support could be given by staff and class developing the opening stages of this mind map on the whiteboard or IWB.

Act 1**Key scene: the discovery of Phil's folio**

Context: After Phil has carried Hector out of the slab room, Jack and Alan return to the slab room. It is quite obvious that Jack cannot really be bothered with his responsibility for Alan. Jack asks Spanky to explain the slab room process to Alan. Although Alan is initially reluctant to do this, the boys start working together as they talk about the process, the factory and Phil. This conversation allows the audience to compare Spanky and Phil. It becomes clear that Spanky is less rebellious than Phil. Spanky's gentle teasing of Alan and Curry suggests that he is far more accepting of his situation than Phil. When Curry arrives with the intention of teaching Alan some design skills, Phil's folio is discovered. Phil's artistic talent is revealed to the audience through Alan, Spanky and Curry's admiration of the drawings. However, Curry is annoyed at the fact that Phil has not informed the company of his intention to study at art school. The ensuing confrontation between Phil and Curry, along with Phil's anger at Spanky, Jack and Alan allows the audience to see Phil's frustration and his determination to pursue his dream.

Extract: Read from page 20 (Lucille: Telephone, Mr Curry.) to page 24, the end of Act 1 (Phil: Last one down the canteen's a Designer!).

Activity

Staff should explain that key scenes are used for several purposes:

- to establish or consolidate aspects of characterisation
- to raise the audience's awareness of thematic concerns
- to generate an emotional response from the audience
- to create a particular atmosphere or mood.

Learners should write these purposes as headings in their notes. This activity requires a detailed response so learners will need to leave a page for comments to be inserted under each heading.

Working in pairs, learners should then consider this extract in terms of these headings. Underneath each heading, learners should make notes on the ways in which the extract fulfils (or fails to fulfil) these purposes.

Some examples of likely comments are provided on the next page and these could be put on the board as a starting point:

Key scene purposes

To raise awareness of thematic concerns

Curry's sycophantic comments about Alan and his father ('Chief Designer at Templars ... I'd have been as proud as punch ... a chip off the old block ... a right talented pair of buggers) suggests his awareness of class divisions and that Alan will receive privileges because of his family background.

To establish or consolidate aspects of characterisation

Spanky's warnings to Alan (If he catches you going through his stuff he'll break your jaw ... shut the folder or I'll get the blame ... I'm not telling you again) reinforces Phil's domination of the slab room and Spanky's loyalty to his colleague. Spanky's repeated warnings also suggest Alan's self-confident manner and genuine interest in Phil's work.

Phil's retort that Spanky made up the latecoming excuse reveals a selfishness as well as a lack of respect for Curry's position.

To generate an emotional response from the audience

Phil's comment about Curry being 'devious' seems unfair as Curry has actually told him that he is not 'accusing [him] of being underhand' – the audience are likely to have sympathy for Curry and feel annoyed at Phil's unfair accusation.

The revelation that Phil has injured Hector's ear and has left him in his underclothes is likely to create further sympathy for Hector as well as shock that Phil could be so callous.

Act 1

Structure and key events

The play has a very straightforward structure: two acts with no scene divisions. This structure is effective as it emphasises the short time-span during which the events of the play take place. Act 1 ends at a natural break in the day – lunchtime – and Act 2 commences when the slab boys return from lunch.

Before learners complete this activity, it would be useful to hold a short whole-class discussion on reasons why the dramatist has not used separate scenes within the play.

This activity could be given as a homework assignment, with learners assessing the completed flow charts of peers. Peer assessment of other learners' flow charts gives learners a means to check their own understanding

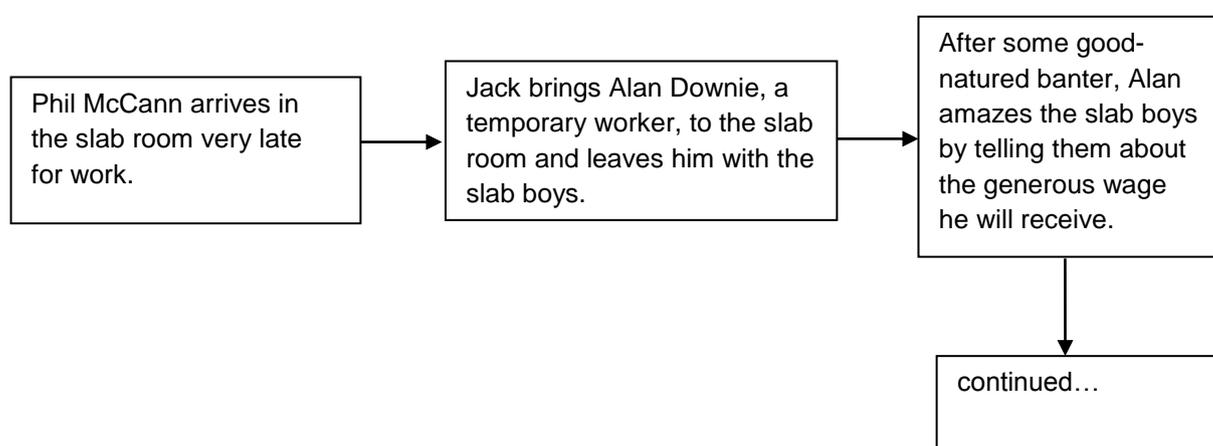
of characterisation and structure in the play. In this way, knowledge and understanding of the text as a whole will be strengthened in preparation for critical reading and critical essay tasks.

Activity

- Learners should look over Act 1 and select events which they believe are important to the plot or structure of the play.
- They should summarise each event in a single sentence.
- Each event should be entered into a flow chart* which reflects the action/plot of the play.

*An example of a flow chart opening is given below:

Act 1 – Key events



Note: This activity should be repeated when learners have finished reading Act 2.

Act 2

Farce

Context: The boys have returned from lunch. Alan is enthusiastic about mixing colours so Phil and Spanky use this as an opportunity to escape work. Curry enters and catches them 'lounging back having a puff'. He reprimands them, giving them an example of hard work in war-time Burma, but they pay little attention to him. Curry takes Alan to look at carpet patterns just before Jack Hogg comes in looking for Alan. Jack criticises Phil and Spanky's poor work ethic and their bullying of Hector, and then leaves. Lucille enters and Phil attempts to ask her to go to the staff dance with him. However, his efforts are thwarted by the appearance of Hector at the window. Hector is in a terrible state as a result of Phil's efforts to make him presentable for the dance.

In the next section of the play, much of the comic action relies on elements of farce – physical humour, ridiculous situations, rapid developments/twists in the plot. Phil and Spanky attempt to hide a bloodied and partially clothed Hector from a several characters visiting the slab room. When the coast is clear, Phil and Spanky send a rather confused Hector to see Willie Curry, who wishes to see Hector.

Extract: Read from opening of Act 2, page 25 (*The afternoon ... Enter Spanky*) to Hector's departure to see Curry, page 33 (*They hold on to each other laughing.*)

Activity

- Using the internet or library, learners should complete some basic research to:
 - find a definition of farce
 - explain how it is used to comic effect
 - find several examples of drama or media texts in which farcical elements are present.

This should be followed by whole-class discussion/feedback with staff ensuring that learners are aware of how physical humour, ridiculous situations and rapid plot developments can be combined to create farce.

- Staff should then ensure that pages 27–33 (from Hector's appearance at the window to his exit) are seen in performance. If the DVD is available, learners could watch this. However, performance by members of the class is preferable. This approach will allow learners to consider key moments in 'replay' and to gain an understanding of the use of farce in drama.

- This section should be performed in its entirety and the audience should be asked to take notes on where farce is used to comic effect.
- On completion of the notes, three volunteers should assume the role of 'director' – each volunteer should ask the performers to 'replay' at a point where farce is used effectively.*
- Each 'director' should then be prepared to give a short 'director's commentary' explaining the ways in which the action is enhanced by the dramatist's use of farce.
- In addition to developing learners' awareness of dramatic comedy, these commentaries, along with class/staff discussion, will provide useful material to add to character note sheets and key events flowcharts.

*Some prompting by staff may be required here – possible 'replay moments' include:

- Hector's entry through the window
- Hector being bundled into the cupboard
- Phil's attempts to keep Hector in the cupboard
- Hector's second appearance to Lucille – cupboard door this time.

Act 2

Conflict and theme

Context: Hector has gone to see Willie Curry, leaving Phil and Spanky in a state of hilarity over Hector's comical appearance. Alan has been a witness to their manipulation of Hector and he expresses his outrage at their callous disregard for Hector's vulnerability. Phil admits that he and Spanky enjoy a laugh at Hector's expense but tells Alan that, far from making Hector's life a misery, they have helped him to cope with isolation and the hardships of life. This conflict between Phil and Alan has been building from the start of the play.

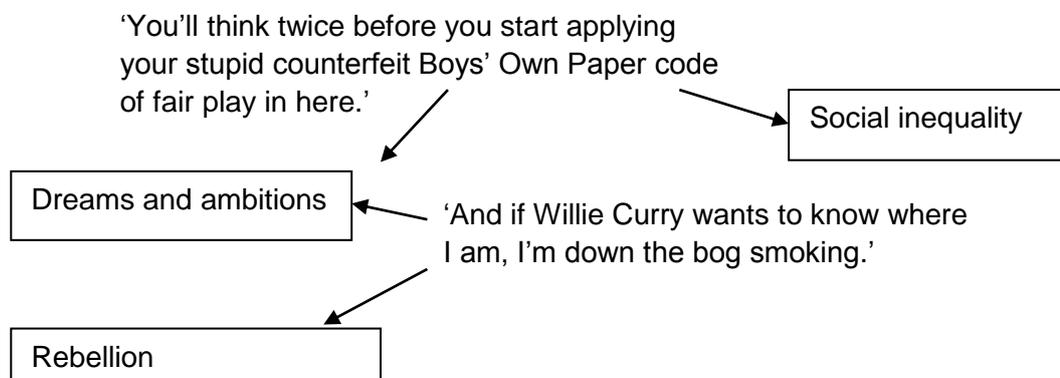
Conflict is evident at various points in *The Slab Boys* and this extract can be used to illustrate how conflict plays an important role within the text as a whole. Learners will certainly see the conflict between Alan and Phil but the aim of this activity is to show that there are other elements of conflict present within Alan and Phil's dialogue. In recognising this, learners should have a greater appreciation of how dramatic conflict drives plot and characterisation, and how conflict is used to highlight the central concerns of the text.

Extract: Read from Hector's exit on page 33 (Alan: Well I hope you're proud of yourselves ...) to Spanky's exit on page 34 (Spanky: Yeah ... I'm away mending a fuse in Miss Walkinshaw's glass eye ... OK?).

Activity

- Staff should lead class discussion on what the term 'conflict' means. This discussion is likely to generate a wide range of answers but the outcome of the discussion should be a definition of dramatic conflict. Learners should note this definition.
- Staff should then discuss the themes of the play with the class. This should be a whole-class exercise and the themes identified in discussion should be noted on the board, for example:
 - dreams and ambitions
 - escape
 - social inequality/class divisions
 - responsibility
 - the poor treatment of mental illness in the 1950setc.
- Working in groups, learners should then read over the extract and select excerpts of dialogue or stage directions which show or suggest any of the themes that have been noted on the board.
- While learners are selecting suitable excerpts, staff should distribute a sheet of flipchart paper to each group. A member of the group should choose three or four of the themes noted on the board and write these on the flipchart paper – the headings should be in boxes and placed randomly on the sheet.
- The remaining group members should then write their selected pieces of dialogue or stage directions on to the flipchart paper and connect these to the themes.

A starting point could be:



- The conflict/theme web that is created should reveal the important role dramatic conflict plays in highlighting the thematic concerns of texts.

Note: This activity could be used whenever conflict arises in the text. It could also be repeated as extension work or a homework exercise with a different section of text.

Act 2

Sadie's character

Context: The pay packets are delivered to the slab room by Jack. Only Alan and Spanky are in the room and they are surprised to learn that Hector and Phil's pay packets are missing. Phil returns to the slab room at the same time as Sadie arrives with the afternoon tea. When Spanky tells Phil about the missing pay packets, Phil assumes that he will be sacked. His frustration is seen in the disrespectful way he treats Sadie and in his rudeness to Alan. Phil calls Sadie 'an old trollop'. She is outraged and slaps him, warning him that his behaviour will not be tolerated in the factory.

Soon after, Sadie returns to the slab room to collect money for the staff dance. She is alone with Lucille and their conversation reveals details of Sadie's life which help to emphasise the difficulties she has faced in life.

Extract: Read from Sadie's entrance on page 36 (Sadie: Too bloody soft, that's my trouble ...) to her departure on page 37 (Spanky: Eh? Hey Sadie ...).

Activity

- Learners should consider how the dramatist manages to evoke both admiration and sympathy for Sadie in this extract and in the text as a whole.
- They should then write a mini-essay in response to the following question:

Choose a play in which there is a character whose presentation arouses both sympathy and admiration from the audience.

Discuss how the dramatist's presentation of this character arouses these feelings and show how this presentation adds to your appreciation of the text as a whole.

Learners should be reminded that this question requires them to consider Sadie's presentation **and** how this highlights thematic elements of the text.

Act 2

Critical reading practice

This critical reading activity could be completed when learners have reached this point in the play as the final question requires a knowledge and understanding of the text as a whole. However, learners may gain more from completing this activity when they have finished their detailed reading of the text.

Scottish text (drama)

This question is worth 20 marks.

***The Slab Boys* by John Byrne**

In this extract, which is taken from Act 2 of the play, Phil is told that his mother has escaped from the psychiatric hospital. His anxiety and frustration lead to a confrontation with Alan and Spanky.

Read the extract from Phil learning of his mum's escape on page 37 (Phil: Well?) to Jack Hogg's arrival on page 38 (Jack: That's McCann's wages ...) and then answer the following questions.

Questions

1. With close reference to Phil's comments in this extract, discuss how the dramatist reveals Phil's frustration and/or anxiety on learning of his mother's escape. 3
2. Discuss how language and/or ideas are used in this extract to arouse sympathy for Phil and for his mother. 4
3. (a) Identify the tone used by Phil following Alan and Spanky's attempts to calm him down. 1
(b) Referring closely to the text, discuss how this tone is created. 2
4. Phil's description of his family circumstances and his hostility to Alan are used to highlight the theme of social inequality. Discuss how this theme is explored in the text as a whole. 10

Total = 20 marks

Scottish text: Critical reading practice

Marking instructions

Question	Expected response	Max. mark	Additional guidance
1	<p>Reference to three appropriate contributions from Phil, with sensible comment on how each of these contributions shows anxiety/frustration.</p> <p><i>Note:</i> This question requires learners to show how Phil's frustration and anxiety are revealed. The vivid descriptions of home life/visits to hospital given in Phil's lengthy speech ('I bet ... dirt??) show the difficulties of Phil's life and upbringing. Learners who focus on the descriptions/word choice/imagery/ideas of this speech are unlikely to score marks.</p>	3	<p>Possible answers:</p> <p>'You mean it really was the hospital?' – question suggests his disbelief/he is unwilling to accept the problem.</p> <p>'Christ.' – blasphemy suggests his frustration/anger.</p> <p>'Not to be alarmed?? What if she turns up here?' – questions in quick succession suggest his mind is in turmoil.</p> <p>'She'll probably put a hatchet ... showing up' – use of exaggeration/black humour suggests his anxiety at potentially serious consequence or his dread at what could happen.</p> <p>'Jesus Christ, how come I couldn't have a sensible maw like you guys ... eh?' repeated blasphemy and regretful nature of question show his frustration, his self-pity and anger at his mother's illness.</p> <p>Repeated use of 'stupid' to describe his mother suggests he feels anguish when reflecting on his upbringing with his mother.</p> <p>'I bet you his isn't!'/I bet you he doesn't.' – parallel sentencing/exclamation and outburst reveals Phil's sense of injustice at his situation.</p>

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

		<p>Repetition of question/climactic nature of questions in a long list of worries, 'What do you know...What do you know ...?' to Alan suggests that Phil believes he is isolated/others can have no understanding of his terrible predicament.</p> <p>Identification of the bitter/mocking/ironic tone Phil uses with Alan and Spanky suggests he feels isolated/victimised/angry and wishes to lash out in frustration.</p> <p>Use of Alan's correct name for the first time/stage direction 'with derisive emphasis' suggests Phil's need for a scapegoat.</p>
<p>2</p>	<p>Reference to four appropriate sections of dialogue/or ideas with sensible comment on how this arouses sympathy for Phil and for his mother.</p> <p>1 mark for each appropriate reference with comment.*</p> <p>Reference only = 0 marks</p> <p>*The question asks learners to discuss how sympathy is created for Phil and his mother. There must be a discussion of both characters but there is no requirement for an even treatment of the characters.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>Possible answers:</p> <p>Dramatic device of the phone call – audience see Phil's eagerness to learn of art school but Spanky's announcement allows us to see a deflated Phil.</p> <p>The descriptions of his mother's violent nature – 'hatchet' 'open wrists', 'bopped', razor blades' etc. – are shocking and suggest Phil has direct experience of violence, creating sympathy for him.</p> <p>The wide range of things which 'worry' Phil's mother suggests she has experienced great anxiety/has been confused and helpless when raising her family.</p> <p>Phil's long speech about his upbringing – 'What do you know ... dirt.' – provides numerous opportunities for comment on the harrowing descriptions provided by Phil. Reward appropriate references</p>

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

			with comments which link to the question's directive of 'arouse sympathy'.
3(a)	Answers must identify any one of several tones which are evident in Phil's speeches: 'Well, it certainly isn't the 'Tradesman's Entrance ... you!' or 'That's right, Spanky ... buttered!' or 'I'm away to join the Hunt ... Alan!'	1	<p>Possible answers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> bitter resentful mocking/ironic derisive/scathing vitriolic. <p><i>Note:</i> Accept answers that identify tones that are consistent with those noted above.</p>
3(b)	<p>Answers should refer to aspects of Phil's speeches: 'Well, it certainly isn't the 'Tradesman's Entrance ... you!' or 'That's right, Spanky ... buttered!' or 'I'm away to join the Hunt ... Alan!'</p> <p>Marks will depend on the quality of comment on the chosen piece of dialogue. A well-developed answer will score 2 marks; less developed comments will be worth 1 mark.</p>	2	<p>Possible answers include reference and comment on:</p> <p>Addressing Alan as 'petal' – a term of endearment being used in a hostile context creates insulting tone.</p> <p>'This way sir ... shoulder.' – Phil adopts the persona of a servant to ridicule Alan's background, creating a mocking/ironic tone.</p> <p>References to upper class way of life – 'Tradesman's Entrance', 'the Hunt', 'Trophy Room' etc – are in conflict with our perception of Alan as helpful and caring, suggesting Phil's bitter/resentful tone.</p> <p>'his lot' – use of derogatory and unspecific noun to describe Alan's peers suggests Phil's derisive tone.</p>
4.	<p>Learners should show an awareness of how this theme is explored throughout the text and should refer to appropriate textual evidence to support their argument.</p> <p>Staff may wish to consult the marking instructions that accompany the SQA Specimen Paper Scottish Text Higher</p>	10	<p>There are many sections of the play which explore this theme. Reference could be made to:</p> <p>Jack/Curry's differing attitudes to Alan and the slab boys.</p> <p>Phil's frequent use of upper class images to belittle Alan.</p>

LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES

	<p>Assessments for further guidance and marking strategies.</p>	<p>The contrast between the work in the slab room and the boys' perceptions of the more privileged world of university and art school.</p> <p>Phil's mother as an example of how poverty and hardship can ruin lives.</p> <p>The fact that Spanky and Phil see the slab room as a dead end.</p> <p>The precarious financial situation of the slab boys in contrast to Alan (Parker pen, different dress code, wallet, dad's MG).</p> <p>Hector's failed attempts to take Lucille to the staff dance contrast with Lucille's pursuit of Alan as a dance partner.</p> <p>The length of time that slab boys have to wait before getting a desk/Alan's rapid appointment to the slab room.</p> <p>Sadie exemplifies the negative consequences of working class life.</p> <p>The final scene shows a rejected Phil and a 'winner takes all' Alan.</p>
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Act 2

Summary exercise/resolution and denouement

Context: After Phil's outburst, Jack Hogg arrives with Hector and Phil's wages. Jack comments on the weighty nature of their pay packets. Phil returns to the slab room and is not surprised to learn that he has been sacked. Spanky is working with Alan and Phil seems to resent their alliance. They are almost ready to exchange blows when Curry enters.

Completing a summary of the events in these pages will give learners a greater knowledge and understanding of the text and will enhance their awareness of the play's resolution and denouement.

Extract: Read from Jack's arrival with the wages on page 38 (That's McCann's wages ... overtime) to the end of the play on page 46 (Phil: I wonder what ... Giotto used to be a Slab Boy, Spanks!).

Summary

Before learners read/perform these pages, staff should explain that John Byrne brings many elements of the plot together in the final pages of the play: several questions are answered and conflicts are resolved. These questions have created tension and this quickens the pace of the drama. The dramatic tension is only released at the resolution.

This activity should be carried out on an individual basis.

- Learners should read the final extract of the play and complete a summary of the many events that take place. It is important that they include characters' entrances/exits as well as the main events.
- The opening paragraph of the context for this activity could be written on the board as a starting point for learners.
- When learners have completed their summary, they should use this to complete the key events flowchart that they started in an earlier activity. Flowcharts that have been skilfully executed could be enlarged and used for display if learners are willing to allow their work to be used in this way.
- Learners should use the internet or library to find a definition of these dramatic terms.
- In a whole-class discussion, staff should clarify the meaning of these aspects of dramatic structure. This discussion could also be used to introduce various dramatic structures – learners could discuss why Byrne has used this structure rather than the tradition structures advocated by Aristotle or Horace. It may also be helpful for learners to apply Gustav Freytag's analysis of dramatic structure to *The Slab Boys* – extension work or a homework exercise!

- In groups, learners should discuss the conflicts and questions that are resolved in these final pages.
- They should note each conflict/question at one side of an A4 sheet. When finished, this sheet should be passed to another group. Beside each entry, this group should write an explanation of how these questions/conflicts are resolved in the play.
- Each group should choose a spokesperson who will identify one question/conflict and explain how it is resolved. This should be carried out during class feedback on the activity.

Act 2

Final observations on character

Activity

- Learners should read over Act 2 of the play and use their key events flowchart for Act 2 as an aid when developing/adding to their character note sheets. Staff should remind learners that flowcharts and character note sheets will be very useful when completing critical essays or revision work.
- When all character notes are completed, the class should be divided into groups. Each group will be allocated a character for detailed scrutiny. The group's task is to prepare a short presentation in which they give a report on different aspects of this character's role in the play: personality, relationships with other characters, aspirations, difficulties, thematic links, etc. Textual evidence should be used to support points.
- Each group should be given responsibility for allocating roles to members. Groups could use a PowerPoint or flipchart for the presentation.

Note: This task could be adapted to provide an opportunity for learners to develop the skills required for successful completion of Outcome 2 of the Creation and Production unit of English Higher.

Appreciating the text as a whole

Critical essay practice

Activity

These questions provide learners with an opportunity to consolidate their knowledge and understanding of the text and to develop their critical essay writing skills. Learners could complete any or all of these questions.

1. Choose a play in which the views and/or attitude of a central character are in conflict with the views of those around him.
Discuss how the dramatist's presentation of this conflict enhances your understanding of character and theme in the play as a whole.
2. Choose a play in which the dramatist explores one of the following central concerns: dreams and escape, duty and rebellion, social inequality.
Show how the dramatist explores this theme in a way which deepened your understanding of it.
3. Choose from a play an incident in which a character's behaviour shocks or surprises the audience.
Briefly describe what is shocking or surprising about the character's behaviour in this incident and discuss how the character's behaviour in this incident influences your understanding of character and/or theme in the play as a whole.
4. Choose a play in which there is a striking contrast between characters.
Discuss how the dramatist uses this contrast to strengthen your understanding of the central concerns of the play.