

ART ACROSS THE CURRICULUM | ENGLISH

CREATIVE WRITING AND EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

INSPIRED BY WILLIAM QUILLER ORCHARDSON'S *THE FIRST CLOUD*, 1887

LEVELS 9–10

OVERVIEW

In this resource students will analyse William Quiller Orchardson's *The First Cloud*, 1887, and develop an understanding of its historical context. Taking inspiration from the painting, they will experiment with language choices – such as adjectives, metaphor, symbolism and dialogue – to convey meaning and create a descriptive profile and imaginary dialogue which develops the characters. Exploration of the work can also be extended by analysing a professional interview about the work and developing an interview on a related topic.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Analyse and interpret William Quiller Orchardson's *The First Cloud*, 1887.
- Examine visual clues in a painting to explore the nature and influence of gender, gender stereotyping and social class issues.
- Experiment with different vocabulary and language features to create dramatic effect and convey meaning in creative writing.
- Write and present creative texts inspired by *The First Cloud*.
- Analyse the features of a successful interview.
- Prepare and conduct an interview on a related topic or theme.

LINKS TO THE VICTORIAN ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Level 9

- Analyse how the construction and interpretation of texts, including media texts, can be influenced by cultural perspectives and other texts (VCELY441).
- Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements for aesthetic and playful purposes (VCELY456).
- Listen to spoken texts constructed for different purposes and analyse how language features in these texts position listeners to respond in particular ways, and consider the interaction skills used to present and discuss ideas, or to influence and engage audiences through persuasive language, varied voice tone, pitch and pace (VCELY455).

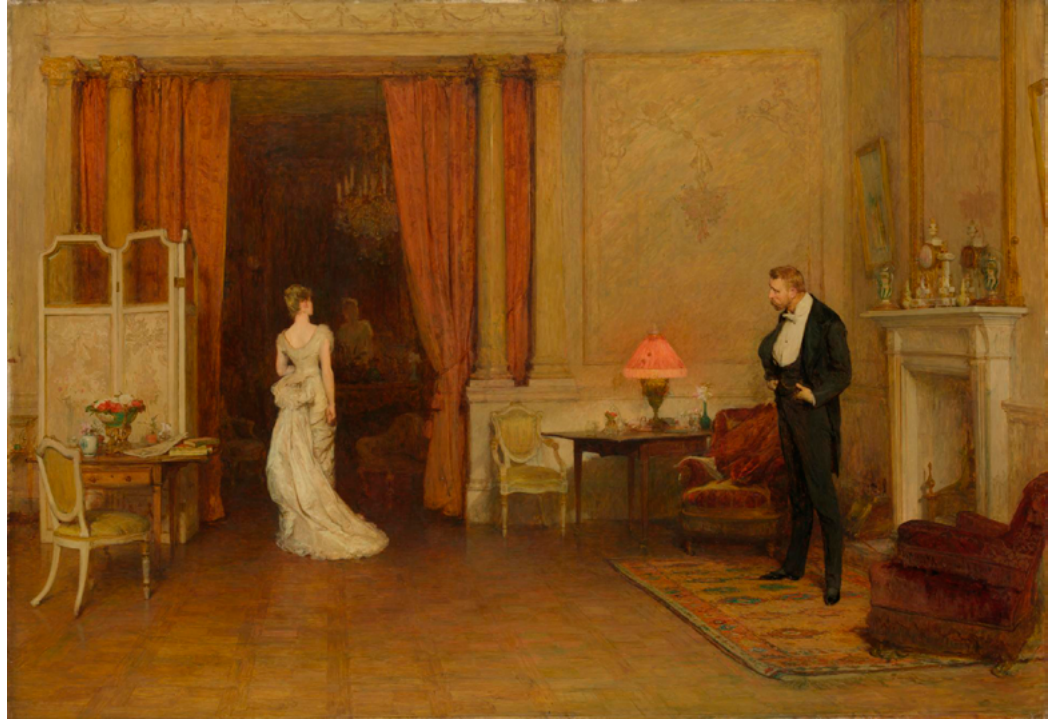
Level 10

- 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 (VCELY466).
- Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (VCELT462).
- Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (VCELT460).

ABOUT THE WORK

1. WILLIAM QUILLER ORCHARDSON, *THE FIRST CLOUD*, 1887

William Quiller Orchardson
The first cloud 1887
oil on canvas
134.8 × 193.7 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Purchased, 188



The first cloud, 1887, was painted by William Quiller Orchardson in the 1880s on the theme of troubled domesticity and strained marital relationships. The work captures a tense moment between an upper-class Victorian couple in evening dress. The man, shoulders slumped and fingers thrust into his trouser pockets, watches nonplussed as his attractive young wife sweeps from the room with a resolute swish of her flowing skirt.

The scene unfolds in an elegant drawing room; towering marble pillars and heavy curtains frame the darkness of the adjoining room. Lofty ceilings, broad walls and an expanse of parquet floor evoke a frosty atmosphere and the echo of brusque footsteps. The empty space and grand scale provide a sense of emotional estrangement. The cold hearth underscores the lack of affection between the pair and implies, along with the formality of their clothing, that they have recently returned home after their evening has taken a bad turn.

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mid-nineteenth century political and social movements prompted Victorian narrative painters, such as Orchardson, to examine domestic relations with great interest. At the start of the Victorian era, the 'ideal woman' was one who was docile, obedient, passive and powerless, self-sacrificing, graceful and – above all – virtuous. However, the Industrial Revolution brought sweeping changes to women's lives, and many moved away from their traditional domestic and child-rearing roles into the workplace.

Women increasingly campaigned for greater rights, and economic and social opportunities. Legislative reforms, such as the Divorce Act of 1857 and Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882, gave women rights that had previously been denied to them, as follows:

- The right to exist as a separate legal entity.
- The legal right to the money they earned.
- The right to inherit property and to own and control property.
- The right to draft a will without their husband's consent.
- The right to seek divorce through the law courts, rather than through a Private Act of Parliament.

A new kind of woman emerged at the end of the century, liberated from the prevailing ideologies of the Victorian era. To her detractors, the new woman was a threat to the accepted order and the ideology of the harmonious domestic space. To her supporters, she was an independent professional with a social identity, sexual freedom and a political consciousness, free from the constraints of marriage and child rearing.

The first cloud can be read in the context of these legislative, political and social changes. Swept up in the tides of reform, the woman steers herself confidently into an unknown but brighter future.

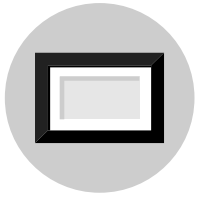
1.2 THE ARTIST

William Quiller Orchardson RA (1832–1910) was born in Edinburgh to a father (a tailor) of Highland descent and an Austrian mother. Having first gained prominence for his portraits and paintings of historical scenes, Orchardson's later work depicted the social tensions and anxieties behind the opulent façade of upper-class life in the late 1800s. Orchardson's most important portrait commission came from Queen Victoria: a painting of Her Majesty with her son, the future King Edward VII, his son George and his sister Victoria. His best-known history painting, *Napoleon on board the Bellerophon*, 1880 (Tate, London), depicted the defeated French Emperor on his way to exile.

For more information about *The first cloud*, watch the following video:¹
www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/william-quiller-orchardsons-the-first-cloud

WARM UP

2. READING THE PAINTING



IN THE GALLERY

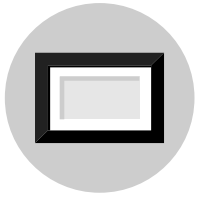


IN SCHOOL

Look closely at the *The first cloud* for several minutes noticing the details of the room, the people, their clothing and posture.

- What are your first thoughts? Consider the subject, colours, era, mood and any life experiences it calls to mind.
- What evidence can you see to suggest the social class of the people depicted?
- What does the woman's appearance suggest about notions of beauty in the late-nineteenth century?
- How does this differ from today's perceptions of female beauty and what might this suggest about the nature of beauty?
- Choose one word to describe the mood.
- Describe the body language of the man and the woman. How does it contribute to the atmosphere and the meaning of the work?
- How are gender stereotypes reinforced in the painting?
- When first exhibited at the Royal Academy, London, the painting was displayed with these lines from the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson: '*It is the little rift within the lute / That by-and-by will make the music mute*'.² What do you think the lines from the poem and the painting's title, *The first cloud*, suggest about what's going on in the painting?
- Imagine what has happened just before and just after the scene in the painting. Briefly describe your ideas.

ACTIVITY



IN THE GALLERY



IN SCHOOL

3. USING IMAGERY AND LITERARY DEVICES TO PAINT PICTURES WITH WORDS

Both artists and writers use detailed descriptions to bring objects and people to life. Through examining the details in a work, creative writers can generate vivid descriptions to evoke the painting in the written word and be inspired to develop creative pieces. The following short exercises are designed to spark inspiration and can be extended in the classroom.

3.1 WRITING WITH COLOUR

Orchardson has been meticulous in his selection of colours in *The first cloud*, using them to evoke the mood of the room. Write descriptive names for the colours in the painting, such as whites, creams and browns. Aim to evoke their qualities; for example, blush, dusky pink, antique rose, claret and pomegranate are all adjectives that describe tints and shades of red.

3.2 DESCRIBING DETAILS

Imagine you are describing the painting to someone who has never seen it and they need to be able to visualise it clearly.

1. Choose one small section of the painting that you are drawn to (with the exception of the people), such as the rug, the darkened room with the chandelier, the table with a vase of flowers, the curtains or the columns.
2. On a separate piece of paper, describe the section vividly in a sentence. Now, swap your description with a partner.
3. Rewrite your partner's description by finding synonyms for the adjectives and read the revised piece aloud.

EXAMPLE

*... a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers.**

*A taper is a slender candle.

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)³

3.3 METAPHOR

Focus your attention on the two characters in the painting. Select an animal with characteristics that match those of each character. Then find a type of weather to match each of them. Write down your suggestions. Share them with the group and explain why you made each choice.

3.4 SYNAESTHESIA IN WRITING

Synaesthesia is the production of a sensory experience by the stimulation of another sense; for example, a taste prompted by a colour or a flavour prompted by a scent. Imagine you are inside the room shown in the painting. How does it feel, smell, taste, sound? Record your sensory experiences.

3.5 CAPTURE THE MOMENT

How might we evoke or hint at the tension in the air between the couple in the painting, without referring to it directly? Write a paragraph that captures 'the frost in the air' of the painting by using the sensory descriptions you wrote in Activity 3.4. The piece should also describe any items in the room that emphasise the mood of friction.

EXAMPLE

A trail of muted perfume lingers in the wake of clicking heels and the defiant swish of a departing skirt. The hearth is cold and the incessant ticking of the clock on the marble fireplace punctuates the frosty air.

3.6 TWISTING THE PLOT

William Quiller Orchardson might have had a tale in mind when he painted *The first cloud*, but we could create a different narrative. Imagine this is a scene from a classic murder mystery. Work with a partner to devise and summarise key points of the plot: Who is the victim? Who is the killer? What is their motive? What is their method?

3.7 CHANGING THE MEANING

How might the meaning of the painting change if you were to alter an aspect of the scene or add something to it? For example, if the couple were dressed in designer tracksuits, or if the woman leaving the room was a female child, or if a third person was sitting in one of the chairs. Create a written description of the change you have made to the scene and explain how this would alter the original meaning of the painting.

PROJECT



IN SCHOOL

4. CHARACTER AND DIALOGUE

4.1 CHARACTER

Create a character and a name for the people in the painting and write a detailed description of each one. Use some of the descriptive language and sentences that you collected during the activities to inform your character development. Consider:

- personality traits, such as shy, grumpy, sociable, cynical, serious, sensitive
- family background and circumstances before marriage, such as aristocratic but poor
- interests, such as reading, embroidery, playing the piano, riding, shooting
- behaviour towards others close to them, including servants, children or other family members, such as loving, controlling, domineering
- ambitions in life, such as to be accepted in high society, to become a prime minister, to attain great wealth, to become a celebrated hostess, to write novels
- how they express themselves to others in their social class, such as stridently, diffidently, obsequiously
- feelings towards their husband or wife, such as love, passion, irritation, annoyance.

EXAMPLE

Joel was only twenty-six but there was about him the sense of something over-ripe and gone to seed. He was not tall, and not exactly fat. But one noticed, immediately, those large red lips, which hovered on that balancing point where sensuality becomes greed. His fleshy face was a trifle too smooth and the skin glistened like a suspect apple which had been waxed to give it extra sales appeal.

Peter Carey, *Bliss* (1981)⁴

4.2 DIALOGUE

Create 400 to 500 words of dialogue between the man and the woman in *The first cloud* and perform it to your class with a partner.

Use cues from your character development. How would they speak, what would they talk about and what kind of language might they use?

Decide on a topic that they are discussing and relate to a theme in the painting, such as women's rights, or class or societal expectations. The dialogue should also explain the effect of this issue on the individuals.

EXTENSION PROJECT



IN SCHOOL

5. INTERVIEWS AND INTERVIEWING

A whole world exists behind the surface of a work, including the context in which it was made and the experiences and ideas of the artist. Curators and conservators are experts who specialise in uncovering the hidden stories behind artworks. One form that you can use to access their specialist knowledge is through an interview.

5.1 LISTENING FOR CONTENT

1. Watch an interview with Dr Ted Gott, Senior Curator, International Art, at the NGV:⁵ www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/the-first-cloud
2. Answer the following questions from what you have seen:

QUESTION	SUGGESTED ANSWER
What subject matter did the artist William Quiller Orchardson enjoy painting?	Historical scenes, social tensions in upper-class marriage, 'comedy of manners' themes.
How do we know that the artist was a perfectionist?	Ted Gott explains that the artist redrew and redesigned aspects of the painting multiple times until he reached the desired effect.
Summarise how the curator interprets the meaning of the painting.	A wealthy man and woman have either just returned from an evening out, or are about to go out. They are not talking and there is an icy atmosphere of confrontation in the room, as if silence has fallen after an argument. The woman appears confident and in control as she sweeps off into the distance, while the man looks confused and unsure of himself. The title of the painting and the lines of Tennyson's poetry suggest that cracks are appearing in the couple's relationship, which may lead to the ultimate disintegration of their marriage.
Identify the 'secret' about the painting that the NGV was able to reveal using new technology.	The wooden parquetry floor has been painted over the original patterned carpet.
Explain how the curator believes the painting explores the social context of the time.	The painting reflects the start of the campaign for Women's Rights. A new legal document, the Married Women's Property Act, 1882, allowed married women to own property in their own right for the first time.
Do you consider <i>The first cloud</i> to be a great artwork?	Students to justify their response with reference to the painting.

5.2 ANALYSING THE INTERVIEW FORM

Now that we have explored the content of the interview, let's have a look at the features of the interview form itself. Think about the following questions:

QUESTION	SUGGESTED ANSWER
What did the interviewer do to provide a context for the subject of the interview?	She explained the name of the painting and artist before asking Ted Gott to describe where the painting was situated.
How you could tell that the interviewer had completed a substantial amount of research before conducting the interview.	By the range of informed questions she asked.
What type of questions did the interviewer ask to ensure that the interviewee responded at length with interesting information and/or ideas?	Open-ended questions that require a detailed response, rather than a 'yes' or 'no' answer.
How you could tell that the interviewer was listening actively?	She made eye contact with the interviewee and nodded in response to his answers.

5.3 RESEARCH AND CONDUCT AN INTERVIEW

Interviews have the power to inform viewers about issues, to inspire them and even entice them to take action. Conducting a successful interview involves preparation, including researching the subject, crafting effective questions and practising conducting the interview. In this task, you'll write and film or record your own interview about a social, class or gender issue.

1. Work with a partner to pick a topic to research that involves a social class or gender issue. For example, a news story, an artwork, a book, a film or a biography of an activist in the field of gender equality or equal rights.
2. Research the topic thoroughly together.
3. Decide on who your expert interviewee will be and prepare interview questions together.
4. Practise conducting an interview, acting as both the interviewer and the expert interviewee.
5. Write, perform and record or film your interview.
6. Use the techniques learnt in the filmed interview in this project and take note of the top tips for conducting interviews (below).
7. Show your interview to your class.
8. Create a rubric to use to evaluate your classmates' work. Your rubric could be based on the top tips for conducting interviews

TOP TIPS FOR CONDUCTING SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWS:

- Do your research.
- Introduce the topic and give context.
- Introduce the interviewee and put them at ease.
- Ask open rather than closed 'yes' or 'no' questions.
- Listen actively and be prepared to deviate from your line of questioning/script.
- Thank the interviewee and make them feel valued.

NOTES

1. National Gallery of Victoria, 'Watch William Quiller Orchardson's *The first cloud* with Senior Curator of International art, Ted Gott', NGV, Victorian Government, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/william-quiller-orchardsons-the-first-cloud, accessed 20 July 2020.
2. Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls Of The King*, 1878, C. Kegan Paul, London, . p. 141.
3. Emily Brontë, 'Wuthering Heights: Emily Brontë. Chapter VI', 1847, *Sparknotes*, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/wuthering/full-text/chapter-vi/>, accessed 6 August 2020.
4. Peter Carey, *Bliss*, Vintage Books, Pennsylvania, 1996, p. 15.
5. National Gallery of Victoria, 'Watch William Quiller Orchardson: *The first cloud*: Curator Talk', NGV, Victorian Government, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/multimedia/the-first-cloud, accessed 20 July 2020.

FURTHER RESOURCES

National Gallery of Victoria, 'British Art. *The First Cloud*: William Quiller Orchardson', NGV, Victorian Government, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-first-cloud/>, accessed 6 August 2020.

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