



# AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE


Based on the autobiographies by Janet Frame  
Written by LAURA JONES Directed by JANE CAMPION



An Angel At My Table was produced in 1990.

This New Zealand Film Study Guide was written by Cynthia Thomas, who has 20 years' teaching experience. It has been designed as a starting point for teachers who wish to put together a unit based on An Angel At My Table.

There are currently five New Zealand Film Study Guides available - An Angel At My Table, Forgotten Silver, Goodbye Pork Pie, Ngati, Sleeping Dogs. More titles are planned for 2003.

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study guide one



HIBISCUS FILMS in association with the New Zealand Film Commission presents AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE  
KERRY FOX as JANET • Screenplay LAURA JONES • Director of Photography STUART DRYBURGH • Production Designer GRANT MAJOR  
Editor VERONIKA HAUSSLER • Casting Director DIANA ROWAN • Costume Designer GLENYS JACKSON • Sound Design JOHN DENNISON and  
TONY VACCHER • Composer DON McGLASHAN • Co-Producer JOHN MAYNARD • Producer BRIDGET IKIN • Director JANE CAMPION

**NEW ZEALAND FILM**

COMMISSION

TE TUMU WHAKAATA TAONGA



01

NEW ZEALAND FILM STUDY GUIDE

The following are activities based on the achievement objectives presented in the Ministry of Education document "English in the New Zealand Curriculum".

**WRITING poetic****POETRY**

Just as Janet did, write a poem which starts  
"When the sun goes down and the night draws nigh...."

NB Janet's poem was 8 lines long and followed an aabccdd rhyme scheme, as follows:

When the sun goes down and the night draws nigh  
And the evening shadows touch the sky;  
When the birds fly homeward to their nest  
Then we know it's time to rest.  
When rabbits to their burrows run  
And children have finished their daily fun:  
When the tiny starts come out to peep  
Then we know it is time to sleep.

**SCRIPT**

In the film, Janet and her sisters act out a scene based on a fairytale. In pairs or groups, write a script based on a Grimm fairy tale. The fairy tales can be found on many internet sites, including: <http://www.2.cs.cum.edu/~spok/grimtmp105.txt> OR <http://www.familymanagement.com/literacy/grimms/grimms101.html>. The Twelve Dancing Princesses mentioned in the film refers to the tale, The Shoes That Were Danced To Pieces.

**PROSE**

Rewrite your favourite scene from the film as a piece of prose.

**POETRY**

Brainstorm a series of words suggested by the film.  
Use those words, in that order, to build your own poem.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Imagine that you are writing your autobiography. List the events you might include. Choose one event from your list to write about in detail.

**INTERIOR MONOLOGUE**

Choose one scene from the film (for example, the scene in which the inspector visits Janet's classroom). Write an interior monologue showing what Janet might have been thinking at that time.

**GENRE CHANGE**

Change (appropriate) aspects of the film into a children's book with a moral.

**WRITING expressive****RESPONSE**

Write down your feelings in response to the following statements or questions. You may refer to both the film and your own experiences.

- > We still have prejudices about the mentally ill.
- > Peer pressure has always existed and plays a big part in how we see ourselves and our world.
- > It is important to accept and be yourself if you are to be happy.
- > People react to death in different ways.
- > Our education system often leaves us with both positive and negative experiences.
- > Travel broadens the mind.
- > An Angel At My Table is a trilogy. If you could split your life so far into a trilogy, what would you call each section?
- > Reading can take you to another world.
- > Our family relationships help to shape our view of the world.
- > To be a writer you need to have had a broad range of experiences.
- > Life in New Zealand has changed a great deal since the 1930s.
- > Madness is in the eye of the beholder.

**WRITING transactional**

Research one of the following topics (all mentioned in the film). Try using the KWL format ie

What I know	What I want to know	What I learned

**TOPICS**

The brothers Grimm • Excalibur • Keats • Fred Astaire / Ginger Rogers Karl Marx • Gone With the Wind • Hitler • World War II • Janet Frame Frank Sargeson • CK Stead • Denis Glover • Schizophrenia • 1930s New Zealand • Paris • Matthew Arnold's The Scholar Gypsy • Alan Sillitoe History of New Zealand Film • Film Reviews of An Angel at My Table

These texts may be useful :

Cairns, B. & Martin, H. Shadows on the Wall – A Study of Seven NZ Feature Films, Longman Paul, Auckland 1994. Horrocks, R. On Film II, Heinemann, Auckland 1980. Partridge, D. & Hughes, P. Flicks – Studying Film as Text, OUP, Australia 1992.

Design a leaflet for students new to your school to help them overcome feelings of isolation and shyness.

Write a review of the film for a magazine.

Write a letter to either Jane Campion in response to her film, or Janet Frame in response to what you have learned of her life from the film.

**PERSONAL reading**

Read and review one or more of the following texts, or work by these authors: Grimms Fairytales, John Keats – Ode to a Nightingale, Arthurian Legends Gone With The Wind, Matthew Arnold – The Scholar Gypsy, Janet Frame, CK Stead, Alan Sillitoe, Frank Sargeson, Denis Glover.

Close Reading - See VIEWING tasks.

**SPEAKING / LISTENING interpersonal****CONTINUUM**

As your teacher calls out the following statements, physically place yourself on a continuum, from strongly disagree, through neutral, to strongly agree. For each statement, pair up with someone who disagrees with your stand. Discuss your viewpoint with that person.

**STATEMENTS**

- The mentally ill should be locked away.
- If the medical profession thinks electric shock treatment is a good idea, it should be used.
- Kerry Fox is a convincing performer.
- Janet Frame should have pulled herself together.
- An Angel At My Table is an effective film.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

Share an event from your life with your group. Choose one of your group member's stories to tell to the class.

In groups, brainstorm events shown in the film that you think are:

- important to Janet's development as a writer
- important to Janet's development as a person

**SPEAKING / LISTENING using Text**

In pairs or small groups, go to one of the novels on which the film was based (To The Is-land, An Angel At My Table, The Envoy To The Mirror City). Based on your viewing of the film, find a section you particularly like and prepare a reading and explanation for the class.

- > Prepare a reading of one Grimm Fairytale for the class.
- > Choose one of Janet Frame's poems or short stories and prepare a response to it for presentation to the class.
- > Write another ending for the film and read it to the class.
- > Recitation - like Janet in the film, learn a favourite poem by heart for next Tuesday.

**PRESENTING**

- > Design a poster advertising the film.
- > Storyboard a promotional preview for the film.
- > Design a collage representing one of the three sections of the film.
- > Design a board game or card game based on significant events in Janet Frame's life.

**VIEWING (and Close Reading)**

Following teacher instructions, storyboard your favourite scene.

**READING FILM**

View the segment in which Janet is labeled a thief (from the scene in which she steals money from her father's pocket, to the scene in which she is called a thief by her classmates – approximately 4 m 30 sec) and answer the following questions:

- > How does the filmmaker show Janet's apprehension as she takes the money?
- > What type of shot is used to show Janet's classmates eating in class? Why?
- > What type of shot is used to show the teacher as she interrogates the class? Why?
- > What sound is there in the scene in which the teacher interrogates the class? What effect does this have?
- > When are close-ups used in this sequence? Why?
- > What type of shot is used to show the empty classroom and Janet crying at the blackboard? What is the effect of the use of this shot?
- > What sound is used as Janet walks back to her seat? Why?
- > Comment on the shot duration in this sequence.
- > What does this sequence show the viewer about Janet's character?
- > Is this an effective sequence? Why / why not?

Brainstorm important incidents in the film, then plot them on a plot graph showing the level of intensity / excitement / importance.

In groups, complete the following 3 Level Guide:

**Level 1 : Reading On The Lines**

Tick the statements which focus on what the film maker shows in this film. When you've made your decisions, discuss your reasons with your group.

- Young Janet steals to buy sweets for her classmates.
- Janet becomes a teacher.
- Frank Sargeson helps Janet.
- Janet stops writing during her European love affair.
- Janet lives and works in a caravan on her sister's property.

**Level 2 : Reading Between The Lines**

Tick statements which you think mean what the film maker meant in this film.

Discuss your choices with your group and be prepared to justify them.

- The young Janet is desperate to fit in.
- Janet was suited to teaching.
- Janet was deeply affected by the deaths of her sisters.
- Mental institutions can make people sick.
- Janet is finally comfortable with her place in the world.

**Level 3 : Reading Beyond The Lines**

Tick the statements which you think the film maker would support.

Be ready to give your reasons when you discuss your choices.

- Women shouldn't be forced into traditional roles.
- Janet Frame could have made a good living on the speaking circuit.
- Doctors shouldn't be treated as Gods.
- It is important that we monitor our education and health systems.
- Janet Frame is a talented and complex person.

**NOVEL/SCREENPLAY comparison****GROUP DISCUSSION/NOTES**

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Read the account from To the Is-land printed on the right which describes one of Janet's earliest memories her brother's first attack of epilepsy. Then read the version of it reprinted from the screenplay. Then view the sequence from the film. (All groups view the film sequence at the same time)

Discuss what you think are the central ideas and feelings described in the original passage.

- > Identify the differences between the original and the screenplay. In your opinion does the screenplay convey the original ideas and feelings adequately?
- > Identify the differences between the screenplay and the film version. In your opinion does the film version convey adequately the ideas and feelings suggested in the screenplay? In your opinion does the film version convey the ideas that are missing from the original?
- > Does the film version convey any ideas that are missing from the original?



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**TO THE IS-LAND, BY JANET FRAME**

It was not long after Grandad's death that we were awakened one night by a commotion in the house. I heard Mum crying out: 'Bruddie's having a convulsion; Bruddie's having a convulsion' I ran with the others into the dining room. We sat together on the King's sofa watching and listening while Mum and Dad went back and forth from Bruddie's room to the bathroom. 'A convulsion, a convulsion,' Mum kept saying in her earthquake-and-tidal-wave voice. She fetched the doctor's book from where it was (unsuccessfully) hidden on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom and looked up Convulsions, talking it over with Dad, who was just afraid.

In the meantime Bruddie had wakened, sobbing. 'A bath,' Mother cried. 'Put him in a bath.' Dad carried the crying Bruddie into the bathroom. We four girls were sent back to our bedroom, where we cuddled up to one another, talking in frightened whispers and shivering with the cold Oamaru night and when I woke the next morning, my eyes were stinging with sleep and I felt burdened with the weight of a new awful knowledge that something terrible had happened in the night to Bruddie.

Our lives were changed suddenly. Our brother had epilepsy, the doctor said, prescribing large doses of bromide which, combined with Bruddie's now frequent attacks, or fits, as everyone called them, only increased his confusion and fear until each day at home there were episodes of violent rage when he attacked us or threw whatever was at hand to throw.

There had usually been somewhere within the family to find a 'place' however cramped; now there seemed to be no place: a cloud of unreality and disbelief filled our home, and some of the resulting penetrating rain had the composition of real tears. Bruddie became stupefied by drugs and fits: he was either half-asleep, or recovering, crying from the last fit, or in a rage of confusion that no one could understand or help. He still went to school, where some of the bigger boys began to bully him while we girls, perhaps prompted by the same feeling of fear tried to avoid him, for although we knew what to do should he fall in a fit at school or outside at home, we could not cope with the horror of it.

**AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE**

The screenplay by Laura Jones

35. In the dark bedroom, the barely discernible shapes of the four girls are visible sleeping head-to toe in the big double bed. We hear the sound of running feet, doors opening and closing and under it all another – frightening – unidentifiable sound.

MOTHER: (off screen) Bruddie's having a convulsion! He's having a convulsion! Curly! Curly!  
The four girls wake, frightened, in a flap.

36. In the dining-room, the four girls huddle together on the King's sofa, listening to the frightening noises. It is the cold middle of the night. Mum takes down the Medical Encyclopedia from its hiding place on top of the wardrobe in her bedroom. Frantically, she looks up the word convulsion.

Dad runs, with Bruddie in his arms, down the hallway. Bruddie is now awake and crying.

Mum, in the bathroom, runs the taps, the bath fills with cold, greenish water. Dad runs in, holding crying Bruddie, and lowers him into the water. The four girls shuffle behind him in the bathroom doorway. Janet is twitching and shivering with fear. Mum barely looks at them.

MUM: You girls back to bed!

37. The four girls cuddle together in bed, four heads side by side. They shiver with the cold and with fear. Half whispers, all overlapping anxious:

ISABEL: What's a convulsion?

MYRTLE: It's like a fit.

JUNE: Will Bruddie die?

JANET: Ronnie Thorpe has fits.

ISABEL: Why did they put him in the bath?

MYRTLE: You don't die from fits.

There is silence as they all think of Ronnie Thorpe and the unanswerable questions. They cuddle together tighter. Janet's face twitching.

38. A small group of boys are gathered around Bruddie, who is sitting against a brick wall eating his lunch. One of the boys imitates someone having a fit: rolling and crossing his eyes, letting his body go uncoordinated a floppy, making gargling noises with his tongue loling out.

The other two boys with him laugh, and one jeers at Bruddie.

BOY 2: Georgie-Porgie's queer in the head! Georgie-Porgie's queer in the head!

Bruddie, head-down sits it out: stubborn, humiliated, going inward. Janet, standing against the stone wall of the playground, watches this small tableau from a distance.

39. The bell rings for end-of-lunch: children go in all directions to their classrooms. Bruddie walks down beside a school building: his head-down walk.

Janet, walking towards him, sees him coming. Before Bruddie sees her, she turns and hurries back the way she came turning a corner, to escape meeting him.

A conscious, shameful choice. Her face burns.

**BLACK SCREEN**