

Mr Wrong



New Zealand Film Study Guide

The following activities are based on the achievement objectives in the New Zealand English curriculum. They may provide a starting point for teachers wishing to design a unit based on the film.

Director Gaylene Preston Producers Robin Laing, Gaylene Preston Screenplay Gaylene Preston, Geoff Murphy, Graeme Tetley From the short story by Elizabeth Jane Howard Director of Photography Thom Burstyn Music Jonathan Crayford Art Director Mike Becroft Editor Simon Reece Sound Ken Saville Production Manager Pat Murphy Preston*Laing In association with the NZ Film Commission

Poetic Writing

- 1 Choose a number of important incidents from the film. Write a series of diary entries as Meg after those incidents occur. Clearly show her reaction to events.
- 2 After watching half of the film, brainstorm a series of possible endings. Choose one and write it as prose.
- 3 Brainstorm ideas/words about fear. Use them to help you write a poem about it.
- 4 Discuss the idea of finding “Mr Right”. Write a story titled “Ms Wrong” (Is that difficult? Why?)
- 5 Look into the future at Meg in ten years time. Write her horoscope to reflect what you see.
- 6 In pairs, write the script of an interview with Meg for a section in a documentary about ghosts.
- 7 Rewrite your favourite scene as a piece of prose.
- 8 If the car could talk, what would it say? Whose voice would you use to say it?
- 9 Write an interior monologue as a major character during an incident during the film.
- 10 Imagine that Meg and Eddie meet ten years later. Write the conversation they might have.
- 11 Write your own explanation of why the car salesman doesn't ‘want that car back in here. No way. Never.’ (Where do you think the car has been in the time between Mary’s death and Meg’s encounter?)
- 12 Write another “chapter” for this film.
- 13 Write a fuller description of an event that is only briefly mentioned, for example, Eddie and Meg’s High School days.



Expressive Writing

- 1 How is “Mr Wrong” a feminist film?
- 2 If an American director had made this film how might it have been different?
- 3 If you had to choose famous actors for the roles in this film, who would you choose, and why.
- 4 Choose a major character and say what you think they would like to get in their christmas stocking, and why.
- 5 What scenes did you find suspenseful? Why?
- 6 ‘The subtext (of the self-defence scene) is that men do not want women unafraid’ (Martin & Edwards : 118). Would you agree? Why/why not?
- 7 List aspects of a film that make it part of the thriller genre. Which of those things does “Mr Wrong” share?
- 8 What comic touches can you identify in this film?
- 9 How are male/female stereotypes debunked in this film?
- 10 In detail, list the ways that Meg’s character is established at the beginning of the film.
- 11 After reading “Mr Wrong”, by Elizabeth Jane Howard, what do you see as the main differences between the story and the film?
- 12 What other short stories do you know with a twist ending? Change the ending of “Mr Wrong”.
- 13 This film has an ‘explosive climax’ (Martin & Edwards: 118). Would you agree? Why/why not?
- 14 What role does the weather play in this film?
- 15 Do you believe in ghosts? Why/why not?
- 16 Meg is timid - ‘I don’t mean to be like this. Why do I take fright at everything?’ Do you think she’ll stay that way? Why/why not?
- 17 List any sexist statements you can remember being uttered by Clive, Meg’s mother, Eddie, Bruce, Martin, Mr Wrong. Comment on them.
- 18 ‘You having nothing to fear but fear itself’, Meg tells herself. Is this true in Meg’s case? Is it ever true? Explain.

Transactional Writing

1 Essays

- ‘Mr Wrong subverts the thriller to look at sexual violence towards women and at the ‘Cinderella syndrome’ of rescue by a Mr Right’ (Martin & Edwards : 118). Discuss.
- Thrillers have to be violent to succeed. Discuss.
- Discuss “Mr Wrong” as an example of the thriller genre.
- The short story, “Mr Wrong”, has been perfectly adapted for New Zealanders. Discuss.
- ‘The excitement of vicarious terror builds through well-crafted use of thriller conventions – prowling camera, noir lighting and production design, spooky soundtrack – and a carefully managed succession of red herrings’ (Martin & Edwards : 118). Discuss how suspense is created in this film.

2 Chart

Draw up a two column chart. On the left hand side, list what you see as important themes highlighted by this movie (eg terror can result in assertiveness; independence is more important than romance; sexual stereotyping is common in our society; there are all sorts of different types of victims in our society). On the right hand side, explain each theme in terms of “Mr Wrong”.

- 3 As the censor, justify the rating you gave this film.
- 4 Write the full newspaper article about Mary Carmichael that Meg reads. Write the article that might have been written after the events of the film.
- 5 Write a leaflet promoting self-defence classes for women.
- 6 Write a psychologist’s report on one of the main characters.
- 7 Take a part of the short story that is not used in the film and script it for the screen.

8 Research

Research one of the following topics (all related to the film). Try using the KWL format.

What I Know	What I Want To Know	What I Learned

Topics

Gaylene Preston; Elizabeth Jane Howard; Jennifer Mary Baird; Mona Blades; self-defence; ghosts; capital punishment; New Zealand film; “Ghost” (film).

Personal Reading

- 1 Read the short story, “Mr Wrong”, by Elizabeth Jane Howard.
- 2 Research, read and comment on reviews of the film.
- 3 References made in this study guide, and other texts which may be useful, are listed below.

4 References

- Cairns, B & Martin, H: Shadows on the Wall – A Study of Seven New Zealand Feature Films, Longman Paul, Auckland 1994.
- Dennis, J. & Bieringa, J. (Eds): Film in Aotearoa New Zealand, Victoria University Press, Wellington 1996.
- Horrocks, R: On Film, Heinemann, Auckland 1980.
- IPL Books: Celluloid Dreams – A Century of Film in New Zealand, IPL Books, Wellington 1997.
- McDonnell, B: Fresh Approaches to Film, Addison Wesley Longman New Zealand Ltd, Auckland 1998.
- Martin, H. & Edwards, S. New Zealand Film 1912 – 1996, Oxford University Press, Auckland 1997.
- Partridge, D. & Hughes, P: Flicks – Studying Film as Text, Oxford University Press, Australia 1992.



Speaking/Listening Interpersonal/Using Text

- 1 Listen as you are read Elizabeth Jane Howard's short story, "Mr Wrong". What makes the short story particularly English? What makes the film especially "New Zealand"? Listen as you are read another English short story (eg Roald Dahl's "The Landlady"). Discuss in groups how could you alter this story so as to give it a local flavour for the big screen, and present your findings to the class.
- 2 In pairs, script an interview with Meg, then present it.
- 3 Write and present the conversation that might have taken place between Meg and Mary.
- 4 Narrative Structure: As a class, write down between five and ten important events. Change or delete one event, then discuss how the story might change because of this. Do the same with a fairytale.
- 5 **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.
 - This film is lame.
 - This film is suspenseful.
 - This film has no messages for us.
 - This film has an agenda.
 - All films have an agenda.
 - I could improve this film.
- 6 Circle Talk: Students form two circles with equal numbers. One stands inside the other, facing outward. The outer circle face the middle. Students talk to each other on various topics for a preset time, before one circle moves clockwise, so that all students experience a series of partners with whom to share their thoughts. Topics might include:
 - My favourite part of the film was...
 - My least favourite part of the film...
 - I thought the character... was...
 - I thought... was the best actor because...
 - The things I learned were...
 - I would change the ending of this film by;
 - The most colourful character was... because...
- 7 Have students write down questions they would like to ask a main character. Allocate roles and hold a press conference.



8 Character

In groups, on a large sheet of paper draw around a group member to create an outline of a major character. Inside the body, brainstorm and write down all the words you can think of to describe that character's personality. Inside and around the head area, brainstorm and write down all the words you can think of to describe that character's feelings. Outside the body, brainstorm and write down all the external influences on that character. Pin your sheet to the wall for others to read and comment on.

- 9 Prepare a reading of your favourite part of the short story, "Mr Wrong".
- 10 Listen and make notes as your teacher reads to you about the thriller genre. In pairs, discuss how closely "Mr Wrong" conforms to this genre.

'in the thriller genre the plot generally revolves around certain stock characters or stereotypes such as hero and villain, killer and victim. More often than not the victim is a woman and the killer is a man. If the victim is a woman she is traditionally pursued by the killer until rescued by the hero ... To achieve suspense the plot requires that the victim be subjected to a series of terrifying incidents, each one worse than the last, until the climax is reached... The killer often stalks his victim at night... If the terrorising takes place in the daytime the location is far from civilisation... The thriller also uses specific music codes, that is, music which creates and sustains suspense, and a voyeuristic shooting style which emphasises the point of view of the killer' (Cairns & Martin : 14-15).

Presenting

- 1 Design a poster advertising the film using a car as your focal point.
- 2 Design a collage around the idea of “Mr Right”/ “Mr Wrong”.
- 3 Storyboard a promotional preview for the film
- 4 Design a symbol for each of the major characters. Be prepared to explain it.
- 5 Design a tourist brochure promoting Wellington
- 6 Design a television advertisement for “Ponderosa Cars”.
- 7 Write two advertisements Meg might have placed in the classified section of her local newspaper to sell her car – one honest and one dishonest.
- 8 Change the sex of a major character, then dramatise a sequence from the film with appropriate changes.
- 9 Choose a shot and freeze it. Describe it. Describe how the information is conveyed.
- 10 Choose a scene from the film. Watch it. Watch it again without the soundtrack. Discuss how the soundtrack contributes to that scene’s atmosphere.

Viewing (and close reading)

1 Sequencing Activity

- 1 in groups, write each of a series of important plot incidents on cards.
- 2 Practise putting them in order. Practise putting the cards of other groups in order.
- 3 Write a series of character cards (describing aspects of a character’s personality). Swap them with someone else and practise identifying the character based on the description.
- 4 List what you learn about Meg in the opening sequence with the car salesman.
- 5 Write a list of all the things that make the man that Meg mistakenly picks up threatening.
- 6 Write down a series of quotes on cards. Swap them with someone else and practise identifying the character who said it/what was happening at the time/what happened before and after the words were uttered.
- 7 Choose and view a scene from the film. View it again with the sound off. Write alternative dialogue (which you think will change the way people interpret it) for the scene.
- 8 Stop the film at various points and predict what might happen (and explain why you think that); stop the film just before the end and predict what might happen; stop the film soon after the start and predict the entire storyline.
- 1 Re-view the scene when Meg visits her parents. Look at the design in this scene. What does it tell the viewer about Meg and her family?
- 2 Is the narrative of this film linear? After watching the film, re-view the following sequences, noting examples of foreshadowing – at the car yard; Meg’s first drive in her new car; her drive home that night; the dream.
- 3 Design a plot diagram, show points of significance in the plot. As a class, discuss what points of significance you could delete to change the outcome of the story.
- 4 It is generally agreed that this film is effective in creating suspense. How is tension built?
- 5 View scenes involving the “villain”. List ways the film maker has revealed his personality. Collect quotes to support your portrayal.
- 6 Sequencing: Jigsaw Groups - In groups, take one of the following topics then re-view the film, taking notes and discussing your findings. Re-group so that each new group member has different expertise. Teach your new group about your topic.

7 Possible Topics:

- Symbolism
- Sound (eg mood music; song choice)
- Dialogue
- Film Techniques (types of shot and their purpose)
- Dialogue
- Themes
- Setting

Reading Film

View a range of sequences, such as those suggested below then, after roughly storyboarding them, comment on the effect of sound/dialogue/shot type, angle and duration/editing/lighting any other aspects typical of the genre.

- The “drive home” sequence, from the shot of the rear of the car in darkness as Meg sleeps to the shot of Meg pulling in at her parent’s house (approximately 2 minutes).
- The “Mr Wrong and Mary” sequence, from the shot of the car from the rear pulling up to stop to the shot of the petrol attendant (approximately 6 minutes).
- The “home alone” sequence, from the shot of Meg screwing the door shut to the shot of Mr Wrong and Meg as the car horn sounds (approximately 6 minutes).
- The final sequence, from the shot of Mr Wrong appearing behind Meg in her car to the final shot (approximately 5 minutes).

8 In groups, complete the following 3 Level Guide.

Level 1: Reading on the lines

Tick the statements which focus on what the film maker says (presents directly) in this film. When you’ve made your decisions, discuss your reasons with your group.

- Meg is not used to driving.
- Meg’s mother is protective.
- Meg’s car doesn’t want to be sold.
- Meg and Bruce are attracted to each other.
- Mr Wrong stalks Meg for no reason.

Level 2 : Reading between the lines

Tick statements which you think mean what the film maker meant in this piece. Discuss your choices with your group and be prepared to justify them.

- Women should learn self-defence.
- Some men are sexist.
- Motherhood can sometimes be a form of imprisonment.
- Car salesmen are greasy.
- Edith has made poor decisions.

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.

- Too many thrillers present women as victims.
- There is ecstasy in abject terror.
- Revenge can be sweet.
- Women need to learn to be assertive.
- The idea of there being a “Mr Right” is a myth.

From the level 3 section, have students put the chosen statements in a chart, like the one below. Fill in the right hand side with evidence from the film.

Further information

Mr Wrong was produced in 1985 and is available online through Aro Street Video: www.arovideo.co.nz

This guide was written for New Zealand Film by Cynthia Thomas, who has 23 years teaching experience.

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NEW ZEALAND FILM

TE TUMU WHAKAATA TAONGA