



Exploring Junior Cycle Texts

The Red Shoes by Nancy Harris

The Red Shoes by Nancy Harris is a play included as part of the Prescribed Material for Junior Cycle English (For the student cohorts commencing Junior Cycle in 2025, 2026, and 2027 and presenting for examination in 2028, 2029, and 2030).



Image courtesy of
Nick Hern Books

Please note:

- The following tasks might be completed over a series of lessons.
- You may like to adapt and adjust the tasks to suit your context.
- *The Red Shoes* covers themes which could be considered sensitive or controversial. You may wish to consult with our READY Framework to support you in your study.

Before You Read (Teacher Guidance)

1. Title Development

- Ask students to look at the **title** - “*The Red Shoes*” and consider the **images or ideas** that come to mind when they hear this title?
 - Red can symbolise many things - passion, danger, temptation, rebellion. What might the colour red represent in a story or play?
 - Prepare them to write **3 - 4 words or phrases** they associate with “red” and with “shoes.”
- Pair them up and share their ideas** to see if their partner’s associations are similar or different.

2. Discussion Circle

Teacher-led discussion questions:

- Do you think ambition is a positive or negative quality?
- Can art or creativity ever become dangerous?
- What might it mean to lose yourself in something you love?
- Possible oral strategies may include a spiderweb discussion, a fishbowl or a think, pair, share.

3. Personal Reflection

The Red Shoes explores the tension between self-expression and control. Invite students to write a **short reflective paragraph** beginning with one of these prompts:

- “Sometimes I feel most free when...”
- “If I had to give up something I loved doing, I would feel...”
- “Passion can be powerful because...”
- Encourage students to link this to art, performance, or self-identity.



Extract from Play:

Background: The Red Shoes is set in a stylised, fairy-tale version of contemporary suburban Ireland, centred on the Nugent family home and community.

ACT ONE:

Shafts of morning light fall on the sleeping KAREN.

The coffin is has become a table or is now gone.

And the PRIEST is standing over her.

PRIEST....Karen? Karen, wake up now.

KAREN wakes, disorientated, as the PRIEST pulls her up.

On your feet, there's a good girl. Were you praying all night?

KAREN nods.

Well, the Lord in his beneficence has heard you. *KAREN looks at him, confused.*

There's been a change of plan – you're not going where you thought you were going.

He starts to move around her. Vigorously brushing her clothes.

Now, stand up straight and make yourself presentable. None of this slouching. Dry those red eyes. You want to make a good impression, don't you. Course you do. And there's no time to waste – they could be here literally any-

And suddenly the door busts open and the NUGENTS – BOB and MARIELLA, wearing fur – enter the room, talking. They look around, disdainful.

MARIELLA. I don't believe it, Bob, do you believe it.

BOB. It's on the map /

MARIELLA. But it's so small and dark and –

She sniffs.

What is that smell?

BOB. I think they call it the countryside.

The PRIEST rushes towards them –

PRIEST. Mr and Mrs Nugent! Welcome. Welcome. You found us alright?

MARIELLA. Just about. We drove through the town at least twice.

BOB (gruff). If you could call it a town.

MARIELLA. Well, exactly.

BOB. No shops.

MARIELLA. No boutiques.

BOB. Not even a cashpoint.

MARIELLA. I mean what do people do here all day –

MARIELLA sees KAREN and gasps.

Oh my God is that our orphan?

(Andersen, H. C. and Harris, N. (2017) *The Red Shoes*, P.15)

Activities Based on Extract (Teacher Guidelines)

These prompts are designed to support close reading and personal response. They may be used orally or in writing, individually or in groups.

1. Close Reading & Understanding

- Draw students' attention to the **opening stage direction**. Direct them to discuss what **atmosphere** is created by the mention of the coffin, even though it has become a table or has been removed? What **dramatic tension** does this create?
- Focus on Karen's silence and body language. Ask: How does the playwright use **non-verbal communication** (nodding, hunching, red eyes) to establish Karen's emotional state?



2. Inner Voice Piece - Two Characters

Get students to write two contrasting **internal monologues** happening at the same moment:

- Karen's thoughts
- Mariella's thoughts
- These can be set out side-by-side or as alternating paragraphs to highlight contrast.

} About each other and the situation.

3. Diary Entry

Direct the students to write Karen's **diary entry** after this encounter.

- Focus on emotions, fears, and hopes.
- How did it feel to be woken suddenly by the Priest?
- What emotions ran through her when he brushed her clothes and told her to stand straight?
- What was she thinking when the Nugents burst in?
- Encourage students to explore fear, confusion, hope, shame, anger, or numbness.

Reflect and Respond (Teacher Guidance)

These activities extend engagement with the extract and invite creative and personal responses. Use individually, in pairs, or in groups.

1. Responding to the Story

Guide students to identify the most emotionally impactful scene in the play and briefly analyse how the playwright achieves this (tension, pace, contrast, silence, character behaviour).

2. Socratic / Spiderweb Discussion

Use the prompt: "Who truly holds power in Red Shoes, and how does that power shift?"

Students question, challenge, and refine each other's ideas using evidence from the text.

Teacher facilitates, not participates.

3. Freeze Frame & Thought Tracking

Groups choose three key power-shift moments in the play and create freeze frames. The Teacher "taps" characters to activate thought-tracking, revealing their internal thoughts at that exact point in the story.

Students could then reflect on how status rises, falls, or visually shifts.

4. Write a Missing Scene

Students write a short new scene including:

- at least two characters
- proper script format
- a clear dramatic purpose
- stage directions to show emotion, mood, or power

They may include symbolism or foreshadowing linked to themes (power, judgement, identity, class).