

CUT DOWN



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROGER STITSON



AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS OF MEDIA

<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

ISBN: 978-1-74295-953-5

<http://theeducationshop.com.au>

Cut Down is suitable for classroom activities designed for secondary students from 15-16 years onward, and for students in the tertiary and allied sectors (e.g. TAFE colleges, universities, adult education institutions).

The Teachers Notes are not prescriptive, nor necessary to be tackled in the order presented; they are suggestions only, for classroom use, and teachers are invited to draw on them, add to them, and to adapt them in any way they think suitable, as stimulus and learning material.

Subject areas covered, in general, are English and Literature, Media, Art, Cultural Studies and Social History, with a cross-flow and connections linking them.

» ACTIVITIES

- Discuss whether “*Cut Down*” is an apt title for this comic book. What qualities or characteristics should a title embody?
- *Cut Down* begins with a “Splash Page”. What is a splash page, how is it different from other pages in the comic, and what is its intended purpose? Is it necessary to begin with a splash page, or is it merely a convention that has developed over time, since the early decades of the 20th century? What does this splash page tell you about the rest of the story?
- Working individually or with a partner, plan and draw a rough illustration of an alternative splash page, with relevant text – or at least describe in writing your new splash page. (An alternative activity might be to ask students to

the life and writings of Edgar Allan Poe himself. For example, what stories did he write that are today regarded as “horror” fiction (many of which have been adapted into movies)? Why is he generally referred to as the writer who invented the genre of detective fiction – and what is the title of that story?

- Poe died in mysterious circumstances, which have never been fully explained, in 1849. Find out more about this. You may even consider planning and writing a short script, perhaps designed for a three or four-page comic story, telling the story – fictionalised, using your imagination – of his demise. (There are some activities later in these Teachers Notes that examine the conventions and “language” of comic strip presentation which you may like to look at first, and incorporate into your script.)
- The “tag line” promotion for *Cut Down* is: “Black comedy, the twilight zone, and a splattering of horror”. Why choose a descriptive word such as “splattering”? What kind of story is a “black comedy”? Offer some examples of black comedies you’ve read or viewed, and discuss why you’d think they are black comedies. Where did the term, “twilight zone” originally come from, and why has it been used here, in the tag line? Put together, what does the entire tag line suggest about the type of story *Cut Down* might be? Can you invent an alternative tag line?
- You will have noticed from the opening panel on Page 2 that the story is set in the mid-1950s. First, can you find any visual cues or suggestions in *Cut Down* that further help to identify the era in which it’s set? Second, discuss why you think the writer may have chosen this time setting – or, to

“We peer into the abyss ... Our first impulse is to shrink from the danger. Unaccountably we remain.”
The Imp of the Perverse, Edgar Allan Poe.

devise a comic book splash page for a short story they’ve already written, or a story they’ve recently read.)

- The splash page for *Cut Down* contains a quotation from a story by famous 19th century author Edgar Allan Poe. The quotation is what we call an “Epigraph”. What is an epigraph and what is its purpose? Why did the creators of *Cut Down* insert this particular quotation as an epigraph? How is it relevant to the rest of the story and to the behaviour of the central character?
- If interested in looking at and discussing many examples of epigraphs, you may be able to locate a small book titled *The Art of the Epigraph*, edited by Rosemary Ahern (Atria Books, 2012.)
- You may wish to carry out some research on

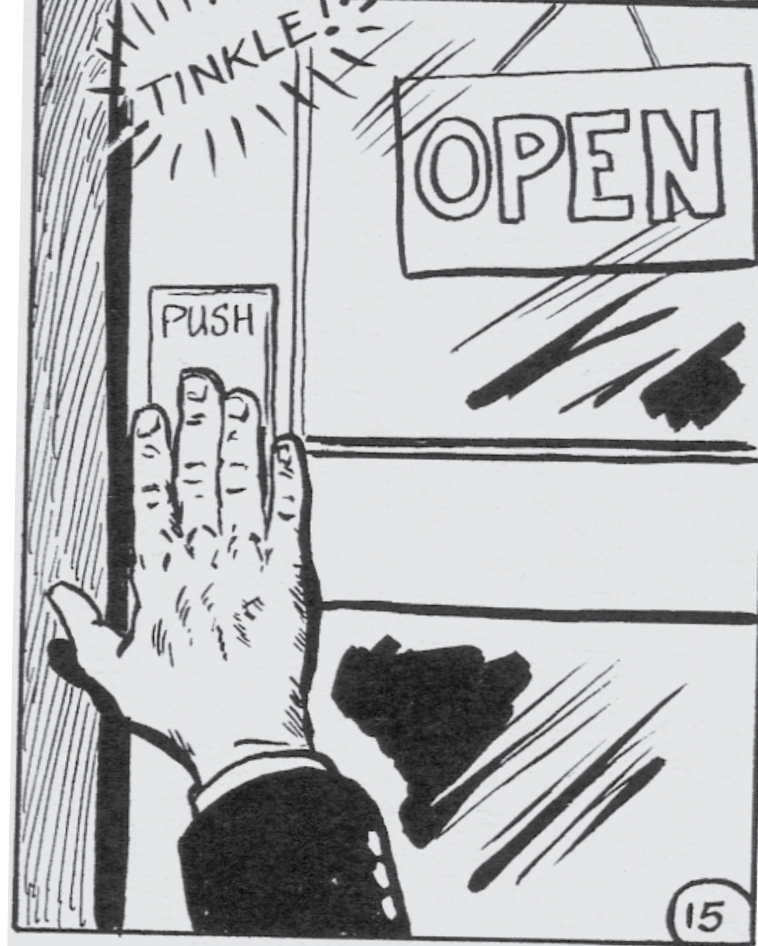


phrase it another way, why the writer chose not to give the story a more contemporary, modern, setting. This example is from Page 12:

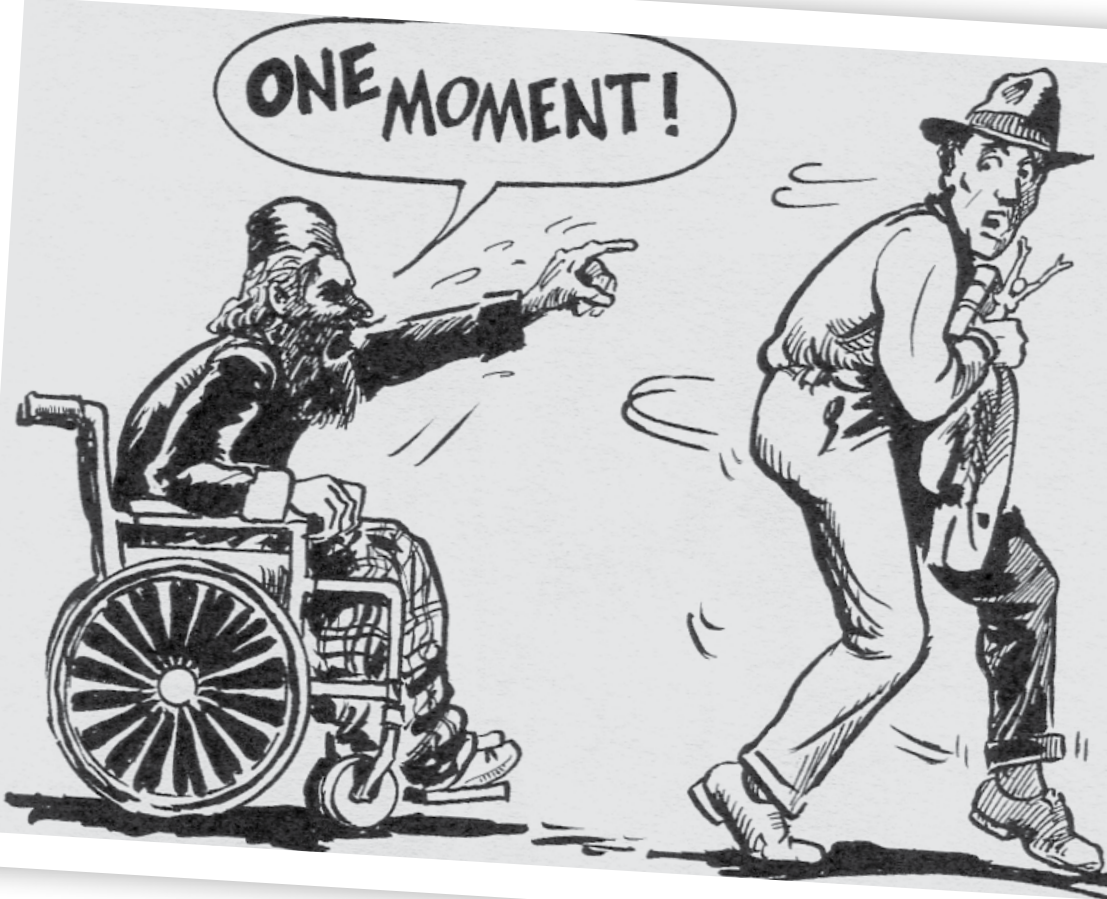
- Is it possible to tell whether the location and the characters might be Australian?
- **Comic book “language”:** Let’s look at some typical comic strip narrative tools. Find examples of how *Cut Down* visually depicts, and distinguishes between the following: a character’s thoughts, whispering, spoken dialogue, speaking with a raised voice, shouting, screaming, and bellowing.
- These differences in presentation signify a visual shorthand form of stage direction to the reader. You should be able to find and comment on more variations of spoken dialogue in the comic book. Here is one example from Page 22:



- Sound effects, like the sound effects in a film, computer game, radio or stage play, are also a feature of comic strip narration, except that as a reader you cannot literally hear them. So, how do you create a sound effect for a printed page?
- Look through *Cut Down* and comment not only on the wide range of sound effects you can “hear”, but the wide range of visual cues used by the illustrator to signify the impact and effect of those sounds.
- In some scenes of *Cut Down* a radio plays in the background. Discuss how the illustrator conveys the different kinds of sounds coming from the radio. What role does the presence of the radio play in the unfolding of the story?



- Take note of the title of the radio play being broadcast in the previous image, copied from the comic book. This was a real-life radio drama serial broadcast in Australia during the 1940s and 1950s. Find out more about its history and its popularity, and whether it was entirely an original Australian production or not. Which radio stations carried it – was it on commercial radio or the ABC? What was the serial about? How long was each episode? How many episodes were broadcast during its long radio lifetime? You may even find an episode on the internet you can listen to. You could try writing your own episode!
- The 1940s and 1950s was an era of rich, radio-produced Australian drama. First, explain why this era suddenly began to disappear in the later 1950s, and was gone by the 1960s. In *Cut Down*, the program we see character Allan Edgar listening to on his car radio is an entirely fictional, made-up radio drama. What kind of story genre do you think it is? How do you know it’s a serial? You may want to carry out research to find out the titles of other, real radio plays of a similar nature, which were broadcast on Australian radio at its peak of popularity.
- Comic books are composed of static illustrations on a (generally) flat page or screen. How does the illustrator of *Cut Down* signify physical movement, even of the slightest degree, within a fixed, visual space? Here is one example from Page 19:



- *Cut Down* is organised into a general format of six-panel pages, although this varies from page to page according to the requirements of the story. One aspect of this variation is the inclusion of small, circular insert panels. Examine some of these, especially in the context of the other panels surrounding them on the same page, and discuss their purpose and impact. Here is an example from Page 25:

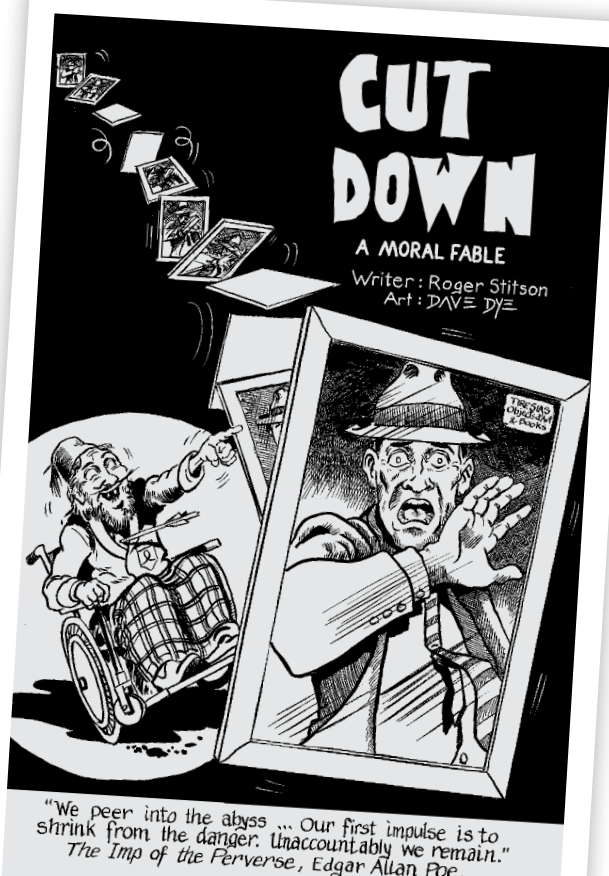
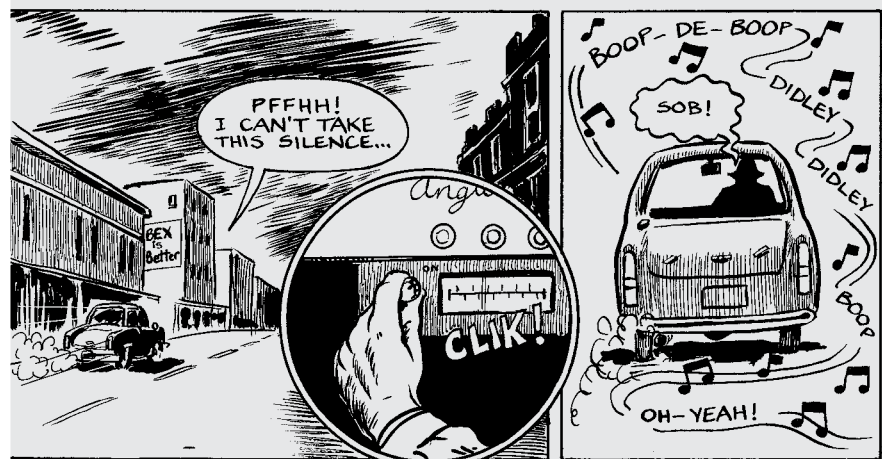
- Let us now look at some aspects of the *Cut Down* story itself. First, discuss Allan Edgar's character. What kind of person is he? Is he a typical comic book hero?
- Comment on any possible interpretation of the fog Edgar drives into, on his way home from Susie's apartment?
- Discuss Edgar's journey through the day, from morning to early evening, as being a "guilt trip".
- Carry out some research about the "Tiresias" character, from ancient Greek mythology. Who was he? To what extent has the Tiresias story been adapted (plundered?) by the writer for the purposes of the *Cut Down* story?
- Is the story resolved at the end? How would you interpret the meaning of the final panels of *Cut Down*? Why do you think Edgar is standing at the door of the Tiresias shopfront, but staring in the other direction? What are his options?



1956, A TYPICAL CITY STREET...



- Following from the previous question, you might like to discuss the possibilities of what could directly happen next in Edgar's life, then plan and write the script for an extra one or two comic book pages. Try to envisage it in a sequential, panel-by-panel way. You may even want to draw the extra material, or work with someone else in the class to illustrate it.
- The closing panel (as seen above) of *Cut Down* has some similarities to the opening panel. Comment on the possible purpose of this.
- Look at the outside of *Cut Down*'s back cover. What do you make of the illustration?



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The Imp of the Perverse, Edgar Allan Poe.



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**. (© ATOM 2016)
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