

## Disappearing Act

James Moloney

### Book Summary

Intriguing, deeply romantic and suspenseful, *Disappearing Act* is perfect for young fans of *The Illusionist* and *The Prestige*

### Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes

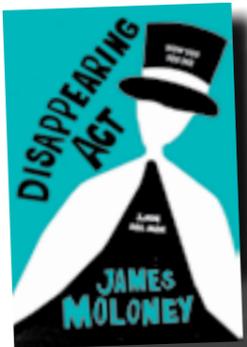
*Disappearing Act* is an excellent resource for Years 5, 6 and 7 **English, Literacy and Language** and could be used to achieve the following National Curriculum aims:

- |             |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| •ACELA 1797 | •ACELY 1704 | •ACELA 1536 |
| •ACELA 1512 | •ACELY 1707 | •ACELT 1620 |
| •ACELT 1609 | •ACELA 1518 | •ACELT 1803 |
| •ACELT 1610 | •ACELT 1516 | •ACELT 1622 |
| •ACELT 1612 | •ACELT 1618 | •ACELT 1625 |
| •ACELT 1798 | •ACELT 1800 | •ACELY 1721 |
| •ACELY 1699 | •ACELY 1714 | •ACELY 1725 |
| •ACELY 1702 | •ACELY 1717 | •ACELY 1728 |

### Appropriate Ages:

12+

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Notes By Rachel Ford



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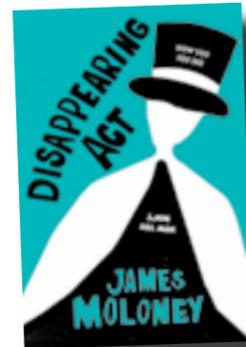
### Study Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

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- Persecution

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### Introduction

Matt Cooper is twelve, and spends quite a bit of his time honing his magic skills and tricks. He doesn't realise that his great-grandfather, Mattheus Coperneau, was a professional magician whose career came to a disastrous end when a trick he performed backfired spectacularly.

What neither Matt nor Mattheus realise is that there's an even older story behind the failure of Mattheus's 'disappearing trick' and a tragic romance is at the bottom of it all.

In 1889, Joachim Tannislaus is a young scientist with a stellar career in front of him and half the girls in the small principality of Montilagus pursuing him. But Joachim loves Princess Agneta, who is also studying at the university.

When he and Agneta are caught in an embrace, he is thrown into prison to perish, but Agneta gives him a dose of the potion they have been working on in secret, little knowing that the elixir has given him the possibility of eternal life.

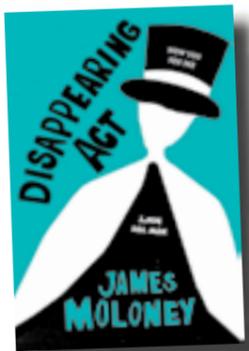
When Matt and his family return to Montilagus to clear his great-grandfather's name, Matt discovers that there's more to magic than meets the eye.

### About the Author

**James Moloney** is one of Australia's most respected and awarded children's book authors. All but two of his books have been shortlisted for or won CBC awards, and he's also been awarded Family Awards for Children's Literature, Children's Peace Literature Awards, Multicultural Children's Literature Awards and had titles selected for inclusion in the International Youth Library in Munich. He lives in Brisbane.

For more insights into his life and work you can check out his website:

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



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## Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

### Pre-Reading Strategies

The following strategies use **prediction** and **confirmation** to help students connect the text with their prior ideas as well as engage with the new knowledge and information they will gain from the work. Prediction and confirmation strategies encourage students to become stronger self-guided readers and to seek help as they need.

**Activities:** The novel is called *Disappearing Act* and the cover features the outline of a magician on the cover with the words

#### NOW YOU SEE ME ... NOW YOU DON'T

Interestingly, the words **NOW YOU DON'T** are upside down. What happens to the cover when you turn it around?

What do you think this tells the reader about the novel before they begin? Give reasons for your explanation. After completing the first read of the novel confirm the accuracy of the predictions using a **compare and contrast chart** (see **black line masters one**).

As students read the novel use a **prediction chart** to predict what is in each chapter (see **black line masters two**) based on the headings, confirm what was in the chapter and summarise each chapter's contents.

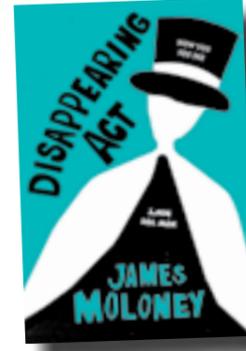
After completing the summary in the predictions chart, students create an annotated timeline of the text.

## Literacy and Language

### Third Person Narrative

The use of **third person narrative** is to allow the reader to see and understand more of the context of the story than the protagonist. The third-person narrative provides the author with the greatest flexibility when building the story as they can incorporate ideas, information and back story that the protagonist may not have access to. One of the challenges of third person narration is to get the reader to identify with and feel as connected to the protagonist as they would if the story was being told in first person narration.

**Activity:** Choose one section of the narrative and rewrite it in the first person from the point of view of Matt Cooper. Using a **think, pair, share** strategy, identify the ways the story has changed.



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**Activity:** Choose one section of the narrative and rewrite it in the first person from the point of view where another character is telling the story for the protagonist. For example have Catine tell the story in her voice, but Matt is still the protagonist of the story. Using a **think, pair, share** strategy, identify the ways the narrative has now changed.

### Third Person Narrative – Alternate

*Disappearing Act* covers several time periods in order to tell the whole story. The most efficient way of doing this is to **change the perspective of the narrator**.

**Activity:** In small groups discuss other ways that James Moloney could have given the reader the necessary backstory without changing the narrative point of view. For example, the story of Mattheus Cooperneau could have been told as a diary entry that Matt and his family had translated.

This would have changed the narrative perspective to **first person**, which can be more intimate for the reader and have allowed them to engage with Mattheus more fully. First person narrative would also create biased social and political context which can influence the reader's opinions of the current rulers of Montilagus. If the reader was biased against the rulers then

they may not have accepted Catine and her friendship with Matt as easily as they do in the current version of the story.

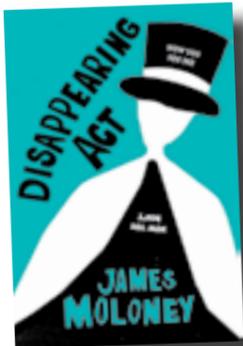
### Archetype

**Archetype** refers to a character or concept that represents an idea that has been used repeatedly. By using archetypal characters in the novel, Moloney has connected the reader to existing ideas and conventions enabling the reader to draw deeper conclusion about the characters and to predict what may happen in the novel.

The character of Mattheus Cooperneau is the archetype of the **beleaguered hero** who was foiled before completing his quest must hand it over to another, in this case, Matt. The Maestro is the archetype of the **villain**, an evil character who will use threats, mayhem and bribery to achieve their goals.

**Activity:** Choose two characters from the novel and describe the archetype they represent. Analyse how this archetype adds additional meaning and clues for a reader. Traditional archetypes that are found in the novel include:

- The hero** (often the protagonist, battles the villain, rights wrongs and protects society)
- The villain** (evil character who battles against the hero and causes chaos)
- The trickster** (cons, cheats or thieves from other characters)



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**The faithful companion** (offers support to the protagonist/hero)

**The shrew** (female character who does not confirm to the social norms)

### Climax

**Climax** is the turning point in the story. Once a story reaches the climax the ending is inevitable, that is no alternative endings can be considered as an acceptable outcome. A **dramatic high point** usually precedes the climax. The climax of *Disappearing Act* occurs once Matt 'finds' the Royal Sceptre. At this point it is evident to the reader that Mattheus Cooperneau's reputation will be restored and that the royal family will be safe and secure in their position in Montilagus.

**Activity:** Working in small groups, imagine an alternative climax for the story. Brainstorm possible changes and identify what the new climax and dramatic high point would be.

After completing the brainstorming activity, students organise their ideas into a series of narrative steps (see below). Using the steps, students create, edit and publish their alternate ending for the text.

### For example:

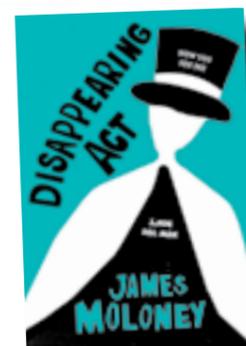
- Olivar Delano storms the castle before Matt and Catine complete their experiment to find the sceptre
- Helvar creates a diversion while Matt and Catine secretly complete the search for the sceptre
- Olivar Delano eventually thwarts Helvar's diversion and enters the great hall, ready to claim the throne and oust the Mahling family,
- As Olivar Delano enters the great hall, Matt reveals the sceptre
- Catine stands in front of Olivar with the sceptre in her hand and saves the Mahling family.

### Exposition

**Exposition** is the disruption of the flow story by the author. This disruption usually occurs when the author wants to provide the reader with additional information and/or explanation.

'Matt had been mucking around with Hayden since they were wearing nappies, which was hardly surprising when they lived on the same street. They had been to the beach with each other's families, and still went for there for a bit of boogie boarding. Although Hayden was fourteen and Matty was still a few months short, they were in the same year at school. But friends or not, Matt didn't want to give Hayden the book.' (p 2)

The exposition above enables Moloney to provide the reader with an insight into Matt and Hayden's friendship without having to write an entire chapter.



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'Matt never did find out whether the Maestro was arrested, as Helvar suggested, The Coopers heard nothing from GenardiKallinar ever again. But that is jumping ahead too quickly, for the days after the sceptre returned to Montilagus were very exciting.' (p 175)

In the example above, the exposition allows Moloney to close a thread in the story, the relationship between Matt (Hero) and the Maestro (Villian) that is outside the timeframe of the story.

**Activity:** Identify 2 – 4 other examples of exposition in the text and evaluate why Moloney chose to use exposition in that instance and how it helps to support the readers understanding of the text.

### Imagery and Precise Language

**Imagery** allows the reader to visualise what the author has written in the text. Imagery and precise language work together to create a more in-depth image for the reader. This use of language is more engaging and sophisticated than using generalised language.

'He stood with one hand clutching his chest an, the other stretched out towards them. On his face was a look of utter despair.' (p 8)

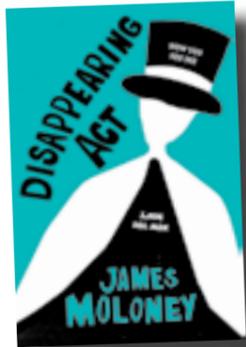
'Matt watched as the arguments were lobbed back and forth like a ball at a tennis match, all the time thinking, There hasn't been one word about whether I should go, just about who should pay. He hoped it would stay that way.'  
(p. 89)

The imagery used in the two examples above create strong visual images for the reader. The old man's hand is **clutched** to his chest rather than **held** or **on** The arguments are **lobbed back and forth** like a **ball at a tennis match** rather than **they argued**. The way language is used in these two examples also create a sense of movement.

**Activity:** Choose three examples of imagery and precise language. Evaluate the language used and how it helps to create a detailed image for the reader

Choose another three examples of imagery and precise language. Rewrite the examples so they are more general. Compare and contrast the differences in the two examples. Evaluate which language is more appealing to you as a reader and give reasons why.

Working individually, students list all the images in the book that have been most powerful for them. Students analyse the sentences and choose the words that have the strongest visual impact for them. Once the student has identified heir words they write down all of the possible meanings and use of the words.



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## Themes

### Family Legacy

As the story progresses, the legacy of family and preserving a positive family legacy becomes a strong theme. Matt Cooper and his grandfather want to restore the reputation of Mattheus Cooperneau, Catine wants to protect the legacy of her family by stopping Olivar Delano from taking over the throne of Montilagus:

‘The crisis is getting worse. Olivar Delano arrives in Montilagus tomorrow and if the people all gather at the station to welcome him, he might be proclaimed the new Prince by tomorrow afternoon. He has powerful men behind him. All they care about are the riches they can squeeze out of the country. It will be awful for Montilagus.’ (pp 148 – 149)

**Activity:** Identify the main examples of family legacy that are mentioned in the text, then describe how each of these legacies is preserved in the text

**Activity:** Describe the importance of one family legacy in the text as a tool for keeping the narrative moving

**Activity:** Write a short response to the statement

**The family legacy I would like to leave behind is...**

### Identity

An important theme in *Disappearing Act* is the exploration of identity. Matt and Catine are discovering a true sense of self as they move from youth into young adulthood.

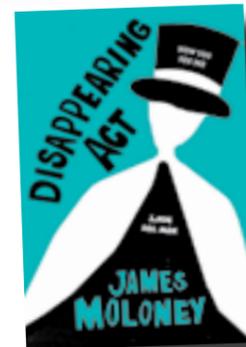
Matt began to look forward to Saturdays in the way he had when they meant a game of footy or long hours challenging himself in the surf with Hayden. What got him edgy with excitement now though was magic. (p. 58)

The example above shows Matt's values and attitudes changing as he develops a strong sense of self. When Matt was younger, he enjoyed sport and activities with his peers. As Matt becomes older he is enjoying an activity that he has chosen for himself and that he is excelling in personally. Magic is starting to become a potential vocation for Matt.

**Activity:** Find and identify quotes that show the characters searching for and developing their sense of identity and sense of self

**Activity:** Write a short response to the following statement:

**I have noticed the following values and attitudes are changing as I've gotten older**



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### Persecution

Persecution and the fear that results from persecution, are powerful tools for controlling and manipulating people and communities. Mattheus Cooperneau is the character who is most obviously persecuted in the novel, losing his liberty, his reputation and ultimately his family. Joachim is persecuted for his belief in science over alchemy as is Princess Agneta, both of whom are eventually persecuted for their love for each other (Joachim in jail and Agneta forced into marriage). Catine and her family face persecution due to the loss of power associated with the sceptre. Even the people of Montilagus suffer from persecution through the banning of magic in their country.

#### Activity:

- As a whole class brainstorm the different kinds of persecution that each of the characters faces in the text:

- Annotate each of these examples with a quote from the text

- Divide the class into small groups and provide each group with one or two of the examples of persecution identified in the brainstorming task
- In the small groups, identify other examples of the same kind of persecution, in fact or fiction, for example:

### Joachim is persecuted for his scientific beliefs

- o Galileo was sentenced to house arrest for publishing a paper that stated the earth revolved around the sun

- o Rhazes was beaten with his own manuscript, causing him to go blind, for translating and introducing the medical works of Hippocrates and Galen, amongst others, to the Arabic world

- o Servetus discovered pulmonary circulation, he was arrested, tortured and he and his public research was burnt at the stake

### Magic is banned in Montilagus

- o Dancing banned in the movie *Footloose*

### Joachim and Princess Agneta are persecuted because they fell in love with each other

- o *Romeo and Juliet*

- o St Valentine married non-Christian couples in secret as they were persecuted by the church

**Activity:** Create a multi-media presentation about the persecution that has been investigated and how this persecution has been represented over time

## Compare and Contrast for Reading Strategies

### Predictions about the text


### Summary of the text


### How are the predictions and summary similar?


### How are the predictions and summary different?


## Prediction Chart

Chapter title	Prediction	Post-reading	Summary

## Structured Overview

Chapter Title	Chapter Title	Chapter Title
Key events	Key events	Key events
Key quotes	Key quotes	Key quotes
New Characters	New Characters	New Characters

## Compare and Contrast Chart

Topic One \_\_\_\_\_

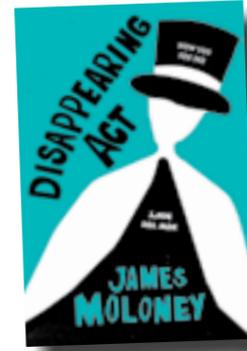
Topic Two \_\_\_\_\_

How are they alike?


How are they different?


## Character Trait Chart

Trait	Evidence



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## About the Author of the Notes

Rachel Ford began her professional career as teacher after completing a double degree in Arts and Teaching. Rachel also has a Master of Education and is currently studying a Master of Business Administration. Rachel has worked as a publisher in Melbourne and Sydney. She currently lives in Sydney where she works as a freelance writer and publisher.