

Accredited

GCSE (9–1)

Delivery Guide

J352

ENGLISH LITERATURE

DNA – Dennis Kelly

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Introduction

Approaching the text

One of the challenges - and opportunities - of choosing a modern drama rather than a modern prose set text, is how to make, in the context of English lessons, the text come alive in performance; at the same time teaching close analysis and evaluation skills in preparation for the demands of the GCSE English Literature exams.

Right from the start of studying the play it can be helpful to think about how a play works – in other words what makes a play a play? Students often need to be reminded that plays work by a combination of what we [the audience] see and what we hear.

What we see [Visual effects]

SET – at its most basic, the set indicates where a play is happening but it can also convey atmosphere, create dramatic tension and reveal character.

PROPS – these can work similarly to the set.

LIGHTING – essential for atmosphere but can also enhance drama and reveal character.

CHARACTERS – their appearance, clothing, facial and bodily expressions, mannerisms, gestures, movements and interactions will all be revealing.

What we hear [Aural effects]

SOUND EFFECTS

MUSIC

SPEECH – a major element of meaning in drama. As important as *what* characters say is *how* they say it. Here are a few features that might be significant:

Dialogue – Duologue – Monologue – Question [and Answer] - Hesitation – Stress - Interruption – Self-correction – Repetition - Pause – Silence – Suggestion - Prompting - Irony – Sarcasm.

Activities in the classroom which stress the visual and aural aspects of drama will help students understand how drama is unique – and that we respond to it differently to the ways in which we respond to, say, a story or a novel. Encouraging your students to view a play as something that exists in three realms can be useful: the text of the play; a production of it that includes all the decisions made by the director and actors; and a performance of it in front of an audience. Some drama theorists believe that plays can *only* properly be understood in performance and reacted to in the theatre. Bertolt Brecht said 'Proper plays can only be understood when performed' (*Brecht on Theatre*, 1964) and Constantin Stanislavski says that 'it is only on the stage that drama can be revealed in all its fullness and significance' (1966). Getting your students to perform scenes from the play and to deliver an



Introduction

interpretation of a scene through the visual and aural effects in their performance can really help their understanding of how drama works. Particularly, they start to learn that interpretations of what a play *means* are not fixed but reside in these performance decisions and the responses of the audience. And that a play comes alive when it is performed.

This is not to detract from the great value to be had from close reading, sharing and expressing ideas on the text of a play, and whilst thinking about performance is likely to enhance understanding, your students will ultimately be assessed for GCSE English Literature on their *written* response to a *written* text. If students are encouraged to think about performance, and indeed perform it themselves, it is likely that when reading and studying the text itself that they will start to infer how the play would be performed on stage. Through their reading of what is *said* in the dialogue and stage directions of the text, students can begin to *infer* what is *meant* and from that move on to think about how the ways things are said, the action and what we can see on stage might enhance or change that understanding.

DNA moves between the mundane and the horrific. It is also a black comedy. The dialogue between the characters is sometimes banal and repetitive and sometimes brutal and savage. Students can work in their performances at

foregrounding a particular quality. What happens to our understanding of a scene if we change some of the aural effects? We could change the tempo? Introduce pauses and silences? Stress some lines and have others as throwaway? Invert the expected reading so that banal lines are made to sound savage, and savage ones banal? What happens to our understanding if we make the speech as naturalistic as possible? Or make it stilted and non-naturalistic?

In terms of visual effects it can be very interesting for students to work on stage proxemics. Proxemics refers to the positioning of people in relation to each other and the use of interpersonal space. How students position themselves in relation to one another when performing roles reinforces the significance of the relationships between characters. Students will need to be able to discuss characters and their relationships with each other, so to have them explore these relationships physically and through manipulating the proximity of one character to another is an excellent way of helping them develop an understanding of this. The positioning of actors in relation to an audience can be revealing, too. How does the audience respond to having these events acted out directly in front of them, or amidst them, as opposed to being at some remove?



Structure

The action takes place over a few weeks. It starts with Jan and Mark in a street discussing a mysterious death and ends with Phil and Richard in a field after the circumstances of that death have been revealed and the characters lives have changed forever. The play is divided into four sections, labelled in the text One to Four and these sections are in turn divided into different scenes. There is a great deal of symmetry between the sections as One, Two and Three each has four scenes and Four has two. Furthermore, in each section the scenes are set in a street, a field, a wood and a field in that order. The third scene in each section is an ensemble whereas much of the rest of the play is conducted through duologues. *Students might like to think about why Dennis Kelly might have structured it in this way. This degree of structural repetition seems to mirror the repetition in the dialogue. What is the effect of this?*

Setting and construct

Dennis Kelly does not prescribe a specific place and time in which these events occur. We are told at the beginning of the play that the events take place in a street, a field and a wood. These spaces are generic and move from public space, a street, to a more hidden and secret space, a wood with the symbolic connotations of both threat and enchantment that this conveys. When these events might have occurred is not prescribed but the dialogue of the play, with its use of contemporary idioms, make it seem of our times.

Dennis Kelly stresses that 'names and genders are suggestions only, and can be changed to suit performers'. *The idea that the gender of the characters is arbitrary is interesting; you could get your students to invert the given genders in the play. How would our response to the characters and their behaviours change if, for example Leah were male and Phil female? Or Adam was a girl?*

The events depicted in the play take on a symbolic force through this lack of specificity. Character types and the moral and ethical choices they face are more important than the depiction of fully realised human beings. The play demonstrates the hierarchies and power struggles within the group. There are dominant leaders in the group, John Tate and Phil, victims such as Adam and Brian, followers such as the seemingly indivisible Jan and Mark and the terrified Danny and Lou, enigmatic outsiders such as Leah and Richard and changeable and corrupted characters such as Cathy.



Themes and characters

The main themes of the play revolve around ideas of bullying and cruelty, the value of the individual within a group and survival in an amoral world. The depiction of gang culture in the play is interesting. Gangs are hierarchical in structure and roles of leader and follower are essential to that structure.

Students could work together to think about:

- a) What makes a leader? What personality traits and qualities does a leader have to have?
- b) Who are the leaders in this play?
- c) What causes them to lose their role as leader?

It is a function of being a leader in any organisation to face challenge to your position. In this play the roles of leader are not fixed. Initially it seems John Tate is the leader – his banning of the word ‘death’, for example, being an attempt to control the escalating emotions in the group. Richard appears a likely leader for a while but doesn’t manage to challenge John.

Phil’s silent menace and control certainly qualifies him for the role, especially in his ruthless handling of the reappearance of Adam and finally Cathy emerges from the role of follower to become a leader at the end of the play.

Students could create a timeline of the key events in Cathy’s ‘journey’ in the play from follower to leader. How and why is she transformed from excitable onlooker to ruthless and violent leader at the end of the play? Gathering key quotations by, and about, Cathy could chart this

transformation. It is interesting in gender terms that the leader in place at the end of the play is female. Perhaps Cathy’s ‘success’ in the group over her main rival, Leah, is to do with her willingness to adopt male behaviours in a way Leah is not?

Gangs also, of course, require followers. The followers in the play include Brian, Danny, Jan, Lou, Mark and Adam.

What makes these characters followers rather than potential leaders? What qualities do they *lack*? Or what qualities do they *have*?

Which leaves us with Richard and Leah. These characters sit between the leaders and the followers. Do you think Richard and Leah have things in common?

Phil and Leah are arguably the most intriguing characters in the play. We assume they are in some kind of relationship and for much of the play Leah seeks to break through Phil’s silence and seeming indifference toward her. Phil’s silence is his power. He is also decisive in terms of arriving at the plot to implicate an innocent person in the killing of Adam and in Adam’s killing itself. His lack of emotional connection with the other characters seems to suggest some kind of psychopathic tendency. His complete lack of compassion throughout the play, towards Leah, towards Brian and Adam, make his final appearance in the play – seemingly bereft and removed from the group – surprising.

Students could consider why Phil is like this at the end of the play? Guilt? The departure of Leah?



Themes

Danny, the would-be dentist, and Brian are both used by Phil in the cover-up. They have no choice as they are threatened with the same fate as Adam. Danny wants desperately to distance himself from the attack on Adam and he disappears from the action by Section Three. We hear at the end that Danny has work experience at a dentist's but Richard tells us that the patients' mouths are, for Danny, like holes he could fall into. He is clearly traumatised, as is Brian who is on strong medication and John Tate who 'lost it' and found God. This is a play as much about the aftermath and consequences of violence as it is about violence itself.

What are the consequences of being involved in this violence for each character in the play? Students could work in groups to describe the effect of the events on a given character and find one quotation by or about them that shows this.

The language of the play

Much of the language of the play is highly naturalistic, the language of everyday communication. While students fully understand the conventions of the 'real talk' they use in their everyday lives they often expect the texts they study in 'Literature' courses to be constructed of a special kind of 'literary talk'. These expectations are that literary talk will be in some way heightened and that it has a specific job to do, such as progressing the plot, developing character, developing relationships, and revealing attitudes and values. In this play it is not always the case that the dialogue carries such a burden. Much of the language of the play replicates the meandering, repetitive, digressive forms of real conversation.

Working on just the opening duologue of the play between Mark and Jan, students could think about the ways Dennis Kelly makes this seem like a 'real' conversation between two young people and why he might have chosen to open the play in this way.

'Real' conversations happen in a specific social and situational context. 'Literary' conversations might seek to replicate some of the features of real conversation in order to create the illusion that there is a *real* social and situational context in the play. This can help the audience suspend their disbelief that *this is only a play* and respond to the action fully. Some of the features linguists study in transcriptions of real conversation can be interesting to consider in relation to a literary dialogue such as this.

Students could consider who is setting the **agenda** in this conversation and who seems to be in **control**? What can we infer about Jan and Mark's relationship as a result of this? What is the effect of the dialogue being constructed in the form of **question and answers**? Is what is said here the same as what is *meant*? **Incomplete utterances, overlapping talk, repetition, exclamations** are all features of real talk. What is the effect on you, the viewer/audience, of the characters in the play employing such features?

Leah's monologues

As well as much of the play being conducted through quick-fire dialogue between the characters, we also have a series of set-piece monologues from Leah. In each case Leah develops a stream of consciousness monologue as a way of coping with the increasing horror of the situation and Phil's refusal to engage with her. The creativity of Leah's



Themes

thoughts and language and the poignancy and humour of her talkativeness in front of the pathologically silent Phil make these monologues a very powerful aspect of the play. *What do we learn about Leah and about the values of the world she lives in from these monologues? And what is the effect in the play of Leah eventually falling silent after being so voluble previously?*

Contextual factors

The play draws on some early 21st century media preoccupations with the idea of lawless or feral children. The belief that young people no longer adhere to a guiding moral compass and are likely to behave in reckless and dangerous ways became common in public discourse. The 'ASBO generation' who were 'plaguing our streets', who needed to be controlled with super high-pitched 'mosquito' sirens, who would form themselves into amoral gangs and use weapons and violence, and were immune to the blandishments of adults seeking to control them, was a popular motif in tabloid journalism at this time. The demonised figure of the young person in a 'hoodie' played into many of these negative stereotypes. The then future Prime Minister David Cameron was widely mocked in 2006 for suggesting that we should 'hug a hoodie', as if to show care and compassion toward young people was absurd in its naivety. The play reacts to this context not by modelling the behaviour of young people behaving in contrary ways to this stereotype but by satirising such fears through the presentation of these behaviours in such an extreme, and at times blackly comic way that it serves to expose those fears for what they are – a media construct.

There is, of course, also a literary tradition of the unsupervised child regressing to some kind of barbaric state, most famously in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Recent novels (and their film versions) such as *The Hunger Games* continue that tradition. In many of these depictions the clear moral purpose of the text is demonstrated by the return to normalcy at the end of the text with the re-assertion of adult control. Dennis Kelly offers no such reassurance at the end of *DNA*.



Assessment preparation

Assessment Objectives:	
AO1	Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response• use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.
AO2	Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.
AO3	Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.
AO4	Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.

Required skills

Learners will develop **comprehension skills** and learn to express their ideas about aspects of plot, characterisation, events and settings and to distinguish between literal and implied meanings. They will also develop **critical reading skills** and engage personally with texts and be confident in sustaining and supporting an individual response to their studied text in comparison with a thematically linked, same genre unseen text.

Learners will be exploring, responding to and interpreting the following areas in their chosen text:

- the significance of key themes, ideas and issues
- characters and their relationships
- choices of language, form and structure made by the author
- how social, cultural and contextual factors are significant in terms of understanding the text.

Responding to examination questions

In the new OCR GCSE English Literature (9-1) J352 specification there will be a two-part question on the modern text (prose or drama):

- a) a comparison of an extract from the set text with an unseen modern, same-genre extract
- b) a related question on the set text as a whole.

The new comparison requirement in part a) allows candidates to explore a key theme or idea in their studied text by comparing it with a thematically linked unseen text. The unseen text chosen for this section of the exam will always have a direct link with the extract from the relevant studied text and is intended to be accessible and engaging for candidates. This part of the task aims for candidates to be creative and exploratory in relation to the two extracts (one from the set text, one unseen). For this part of the task candidates will not need to bring to bear their whole-text knowledge of their studied text, this will be assessed in part b), but focus more on the treatment of the particular theme or idea in the two printed extracts.



Useful links/resources

	Resources
A detailed revision guide http://revisionworld.com/gcse-revision/english-literature/dna-dennis-kelly/summary	
Review of the play in performance in The Guardian http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/feb/14/dna-review	
Review in The Daily Telegraph of Dennis Kelly's work http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-features/9052744/Dennis-Kelly-Rioters-thought-there-were-no-rules-but-my-characters-know-right-from-wrong.html	
Slide on the structure of the play http://www.slideshare.net/MrTheo/dna-structure-scenes?redirected_from=save_on_embed	





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