

DNA



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DENNIS KELLY

Dennis Kelly grew up in North London in a large family. At age 16 he left school to work at Sainsbury's, a British grocery chain, and discovered acting and writing after joining an amateur theater group at the Barnet Drama Centre. Kelly later graduated from Goldsmiths College at the University of London with a First Class Honours degree in Drama and Theatre Arts. Over the last two decades, Kelly has established himself as a renowned and prolific writer for theatre, film, and television. Kelly's best-known plays include *Debris*, *Love and Money*, and *DNA*, and his book for the 2010 Royal Shakespeare Production's reimagining of Roald Dahl's *Matilda* netted him recognition from the Olivier Awards and the Evening Standard Awards. The production moved from London's West End to Broadway in 2013, winning five Tony Awards—including the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical. Kelly's plays are often described as dark, violent, and introspective, usually posing large and difficult questions to the audience.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Written in the first decade of the new millennium, *DNA* reflects early-aughts anxieties about the roles of violent media, gang activity, and millennial apathy in contemporary society. The pressures of life on the city streets and the process of entering adulthood in post-industrial London are intense, and the characters' attitudes varyingly reflect a blend of serious apprehension and disconnected or even dissociated ennui. Characters like Phil and Cathy who, when faced with the need to cover up a murder, are able to come up with a plan on the fly, may be Kelly's commentary on the nature of mainstream media that focuses on procedural murder investigations and true-crime exposes—a market that has only become more saturated in the decade since the play's premiere. The characters' dangerous school environment also reflects Dennis Kelly's own working-class upbringing. City youth are not afforded access to the posh schools, the traditions of British high society, or the pastoral calm of country life—their environment, Kelly uses the play to show, demands ruthlessness, detachment from displays of emotion or weakness, and solidarity even in the worst of situations.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Several contemporary plays by both British and American playwrights channel the same anxieties about bullying, peer pressure, and teen violence that *DNA* does. Simon Stephens, a

prolific British playwright whose best-known works include theatrical adaptations of [The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time](#) and [The Seagull](#), wrote a play called *Punk Rock* which premiered in London in 2009—just months after *DNA* made its London debut. *Punk Rock* follows a group of private-school students preparing for their college entrance exams, taking a look at the social, academic, and societal pressures that slowly deteriorate the students' lives until the play reaches a devastating and violent climax. Kenneth Lonergan's *This Is Our Youth* premiered in New York City in 1996—a decade earlier and a continent away—but explores similar themes and issues. The play also focuses on social dynamics, peer pressure, and anxieties about coming of age and leaving childhood behind. Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* concerns a group of British teens who join a chatroom and find that the conversation takes a dark turn, with peer pressure and bullying bleeding through their screens and into their lives. Both *Chatroom* and *DNA* premiered as part of the National Theatre of London's "Connections" program—a yearly festival of short plays written by emerging and established playwrights. The Connections program often features plays that deal with social issues facing teenagers. The festival began in 1997 and still takes place each year. Renowned playwrights like Wole Soyinka, Bryony Lavery, and David Mamet have contributed works to the festival over the years.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *DNA*
- **When Written:** 2000s
- **Where Written:** London
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama; Youth theater
- **Setting:** London, England
- **Climax:** After painstakingly covering up their accidental murder of their schoolmate Adam, a group of London youths discover a boy who very well may be Adam living in a hedge near the spot where they left him for dead.
- **Antagonist:** John Tate, Phil

EXTRA CREDIT

Cautionary Tale. *DNA* is used frequently in GCSE coursework—students who complete the high school finishing exam in literature and drama all around the United Kingdom study the play. The course materials are meant to provide a common curriculum for students across Britain, but *DNA* serves a dual purpose by warning young people of the dangers of bullying, peer pressure, and groupthink.

A Star is Born. The original National Theatre London production of *DNA* featured a young Claire Foy at the start of her career in the role of Jan. Foy would go on to win a Golden Globe and a Primetime Emmy Award—and receive international acclaim—for her portrayal of the young Queen Elizabeth II in the Netflix series *The Crown*.



PLOT SUMMARY

In Part One of the play, several London teens—school friends whose smaller pairings and cliques often come together in one large group—learn a mysterious piece of bad news. Mark and Jan, two nervous worrywarts, warn Leah and Phil, a couple, that their group needs to get together and talk. The verbose, anxious, existential Leah and the silent, constantly **snacking** Phil follow Mark and Jan to a small woodland area where they all meet up with Lou, John Tate, and Danny. John Tate is clearly the leader of the group—confident and self-assured, he regards himself as a formidable presence at school, and the others seem terrified by his influence. Danny is a strait-laced student who worries that whatever has happened will impact his plans for his future. Lou is a pessimistic girl who's certain they're all doomed. Soon Richard, Cathy, and Brian join the group, and Richard announces that one of their schoolmates—Adam—is dead. As the story of what happened to Adam unfurls, it becomes clear that Mark, Jan, and several others tormented and tortured Adam as a kind of hazing ritual after the boy expressed interest in being their friend. The group's pranks escalated in intensity and danger until Adam fell into a mine shaft at the edge of town. The others now assume he is dead and begin devising ways to cover up their inadvertent murder of their schoolmate. Phil speaks up and rolls out an elaborate plan to make it look as if Adam has been kidnapped. The others are shocked by the specificity of Phil's plan, but he seems confident it will work. As the scene ends, however, Leah worries that their group is in big trouble.

In Part Two, Leah's existential thoughts intensify, and she wonders what the purpose of human life on Earth is. She reveals to Phil that she killed her pet rodent Jerry for reasons she can't determine, even as she admits that in the four days since Adam's disappearance, things at school have been better socially. Elsewhere, back in the woods, Danny reports that the man their group described in their false police report as Adam's kidnapper has been detained and brought into custody. Cathy reveals that she has secured DNA evidence against the man by going to a local post office and looking for a man matching the description Phil urged them to provide. Lou and Leah are outraged, and Danny insists they can't let an innocent man go to jail. Brian, who made the original police report, is terrified of having to go back to the station to identify the "suspect," but Phil warns Brian that there will be serious consequences if he doesn't do as he's told and go confirm the man's identity.

In Part Three, Mark and Jan come upon Leah and Phil picnicking in a field. Leah is reminiscing about Adam's memorial service, which was held recently, and Phil is eating a waffle. Leah expresses her worry for Brian, who has been so upset that he's been heavily medicated, and for John Tate, who hasn't been seen in weeks. Mark and Jan bring Leah and Phil to the woods—there has been more news. In the woods, Cathy, Brian, Phil, Leah, Mark, Lou, and Jan stand around a boy with a horrible head wound who is dressed like a tramp. Phil instantly recognizes the boy as Adam and greets him. Brian explains that he and Cathy found Adam living in the woods with no memory of what has happened to him. Adam explains that he's been living on leaves and raw rabbit for several weeks. He is clearly in physical and mental distress and has no idea who he is or where he comes from. Phil asks Adam if he wants to come back to society, but the boy doesn't answer. Phil orders Brian to take Adam back to the place he's been living, then orders everyone else to go home and keep quiet about what they've seen. Leah begs Phil to get Adam some help, but Phil warns her that their lives will be ruined if they expose what they've done. When Brian (who is still heavily medicated) returns, Phil instructs him to take a plastic bag and go play a "game" with Adam—he shows Brian how to effectively strangle Adam and kill him for real this time. Leah begs Phil to stop, pointing out that Adam is alive. Phil retorts that if everyone already thinks Adam is dead, it doesn't make a difference if they kill him "again."

In Part Four, Mark and Jan discuss Leah's disappearance—they haven't seen her in a long time and have heard rumors she's switched schools. Richard and Phil, meanwhile, sit together in a field and discuss how their school's social environment has changed. John Tate has apparently found God and become an evangelist while Brian has gotten so doped up on his medications that he's nearly catatonic. Their conversation seems to suggest that Phil has left school. Richard begs Phil to come back, but Phil doesn't answer his friend. Richard describes a "big wind of [dandelion] fluff" he saw earlier that day and says it made him think about life on other planets and the purpose of existence. Phil sits silently, unable to respond.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Leah – At first glance, the verbose Leah is ditzzy, easily distracted, and self-obsessed. During her many afternoons sitting in a field with her silent boyfriend Phil, Leah muses aloud about big questions (such as the nature of life on earth and the foundation of reality) and small ones (such as whether Phil thinks she's pretty, annoying, repulsive, or some combination of the three). As the play unfolds, however, Leah emerges as its moral center. When Mark and Jan bring Phil and Leah to meet with their group of friends in the woods, Phil and Leah soon learn that their schoolmate Adam is believed to be dead after a

heartless prank gone terribly wrong. While Phil immediately begins unspooling a complicated plan to cover up the supposed murder, Leah protests, begging the others to do the right thing and tell the authorities about what's happened. When Leah realizes that her voice—so often unheard by Phil—is also just noise to her friends, a change begins within her. Over the course of the play, as she watches her friends' morals disintegrate and sees their psyches crumble under pressure, she begins to change. Witnessing Phil order the increasingly unstable Brian to murder Adam for real after Brian and Cathy find him living in the woods is the final straw for Leah—she leaves Phil, quits school, and moves elsewhere. In this way, Leah's actions serve as a cautionary tale against the destabilizing and destructive effects of groupthink and peer pressure. So long as nothing affected her too directly, Leah was willing to put up with terrible treatment not just from her friends, but also from her boyfriend. The pressure to fit in, stay quiet, and maintain the status quo defined her life even as she searched desperately within herself for the answers to big, serious questions about life, love, and happiness. At the end of the play, Leah's exit from the group has a profound effect on Phil in spite of his blatant mistreatment of her, and signals how just one individual choosing to stand up against bullying, brainwashing, and cruelty can portend change in that individual's larger community.

Phil – Phil is, in many ways, the play's main antagonist. An intensely quiet and inscrutable presence for the first part of the play, Phil soon emerges as a kind of mastermind once the group of teens at the center of the action finds themselves in trouble—and, because Phil's intricate plan to cover up the murder of their schoolmate Adam saves them, the group begins looking to Phil as their leader and following his orders without question. Phil, however, doesn't let the new power he has over his so-called friends go to his head—he remains as aloof and indifferent as ever, speaking up only when he absolutely needs to. When Phil does speak, the orders he gives and the things he says are cold, calculated, and completely devoid of empathy. Phil knows what must be done to maintain the illusion of innocence and has no problem giving his friends orders to lie to the police, frame innocent individuals, and even commit cold-blooded murder—even though he himself never takes any action on behalf of the group's well-being. Phil seems to be in a relationship with Leah, though the word “relationship” is generous. Phil sits with Leah often and serves as a sounding board for her endless musings—but he often ignores her, focusing instead on preparing **snacks** for himself to eat while she talks. Phil's history, thoughts, and motivations are unknown to the audience—and, likely, to the group of classmates who are ostensibly his friends. Phil's enigmatic personality serves to underscore the random cruelty of bullying, the willingness of young and impressionable individuals to go along with peer pressure and groupthink, and the heartless callousness of social climbing.

A Boy/Adam – A teenage boy who dresses like a tramp and lives in a hedge in the woods, this character is listed as “A Boy” in the characters section at the beginning of the play, yet all his dialogue is ascribed to “Adam.” Kelly, perhaps, is trying to replicate the confusion and uncertainty the group of teens at the center of the play feel when they come across their classmate alive after having spent weeks focused on nothing but covering up his supposed death. Adam, after all, is taken for dead at the start of the play after some members of the central group of characters admit to possibly killing him while taunting him and pelting him with stones as he balanced on a grille over an abandoned mineshaft. Adam fell in, his peers assumed he was dead, and so began the cover-up. Adam is disliked and unpopular, frequently the butt of his classmates' jokes and the victim of their pranks, jeers, and abuse, the effects of which range from the harmless to the humiliating to the downright deadly. When the audience meets Adam, he is disoriented, disheveled, and suffering from a prominent head wound. Dirty and amnesiac, he has no recollection of who he is or how he lived before waking up at the bottom of the mine shaft several weeks ago. Taking advantage of his confused, suggestible state, Phil orders Brian to strangle the boy with a plastic bag, ignoring Leah's pleas to bring Adam back into society where he might receive the care he needs to live a normal life once again. Phil coldly tells Leah that if everyone in the outside world assumes Adam is already dead, it won't make a difference to kill him for real this time. Adam thus represents the subjective nature of reality and serves as a painful example of the devastating effects of bullying, peer pressure, and groupthink.

Brian – Brian is a sensitive, emotional teenage boy who crumbles under the pressure of lying to the police in the wake of Adam's “death.” Brian wants to come clean to the authorities as soon as he learns what has happened to Adam, but his voice is drowned out as the others search wildly for a way to obscure their involvement in the crime. Perhaps as a result of the trauma of his schoolmate's death compounded with the indignity of being ignored and underestimated, Brian soon finds himself strung out on several psychiatric medications which make him giddy, loopy, and childlike. Several weeks into the cover-up, Brian and Cathy find Adam living in the woods near their school—but this time, Brian doesn't suggest they do the right thing, and instead complies with Phil's orders to murder Adam for real. Brian represents the destabilizing, disorienting, and destructive effects of peer pressure, bullying, and groupthink. After such acute trauma and sustained cruelty, Brian is simply unable to stand up to his peers any longer, instead retreating into a world inside his head.

John Tate – John Tate is a powerful and intimidating teenager who initially tries to control his group of friends after Adam's apparent death. Though John Tate is, at the start of the play, ostensibly the leader of the group of teens at its center, it's clear that his leadership is already on shaky ground. He tries to

impose insane rules on the group, such as banning the use of the words “death” or “dead,” but even as he grapples for control, the others resist his rules and schemes and instead put their trust in Phil. John Tate, unable to control his peers any longer, soon leaves school and becomes a kind of evangelist, preaching at local shopping malls about the word of God. John Tate’s arc demonstrates what happens in the vacuum created by loss of control—rather than accepting that he may have been wrong, John Tate simply moves on to trying to control the beliefs of others who didn’t witness his embarrassing fall from grace.

Cathy – Cathy is a self-centered girl who is nonetheless desperate to please the other members of the group and prove her worth, going so far as to secure incriminating DNA from an innocent man which ties him to Adam’s disappearance. Cathy finds everything that begins unfolding in the wake of Adam’s supposed death exciting and seems to feel no guilt or remorse about any of it. She enjoys the attention from the police and the media she and her friends receive and wonders aloud to her friends how she can exploit this attention for cash. Cathy seems to want to keep the attention going even after it dies down. By the end of the play she has taken control not just of the group but of other students at their school, transforming herself into an intimidating and cruel leader who hurts and bullies others in order to maintain the rewards—or perhaps merely the illusion—of power.

Jan – Jan is Mark’s close friend and constant companion. Mark and Jan’s vague, gossipy conversations act as preludes during each part of the play, opening the action in a disorienting and intriguing way. Jan and Mark are morally neutral for much of the play, though Jan tries to excuse their group’s abuse of Adam by insisting he always enjoyed doing anything the others told him to. Jan’s words and beliefs suggest that she either truly thinks Adam enjoyed being bullied, showing how desensitized she is to violence, groupthink, and peer pressure—or that she is so desperate to absolve herself of any guilt or remorse that she wants to convince herself that Adam enjoyed the bullying. Either way, Jan’s attitude toward the very serious crimes and brutalities she and her friends have committed against Adam is cruelly cavalier.

Danny – Danny is a strait-laced worrywart who fears that his involvement in his friends’ actions will derail his future. Danny plans on becoming a dentist and has a very clear plan for his schooling, work experience, and higher education. Though he constantly fears that his future will be knocked off its axis, by the end of the play, he has distanced himself from the group and remained on track to accomplish his goals and fulfill his admittedly average dreams.

Richard – Richard is a member of the group of teens at the center of the play who, in spite of appearing intimidating and even potentially violent at the beginning of the play, becomes calmer and more introspective as its events unfold. Richard clearly has a good measure of clout and social status, but by the

end of the play, he’s become less interested in controlling his group of friends than in understanding the world and his place within it. Richard seems genuinely changed by the events of the play, even as he privately tells Phil that he longs for a return to the way things were before the whole mess with Adam took place.

Lou – Lou is a pessimistic girl who constantly believes that she and her friends are right on the precipice of being caught and exposed for their role in Adam’s supposed death. Lou’s main function seems to be to up the tension and anxiety within the group, and she’s often the catalyst for escalation in the group’s fears and schemes.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mark – Mark is a nervous, gossip-hungry teen whose constant companion is Jan. Mark, like Jan, enjoys creating and discussing drama and conflict—but he doesn’t want to accept his role in sowing discord and division within the group when faced with the fallout of their collective actions.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



RIGHT VS. WRONG

At the start of Dennis Kelly’s *DNA*, a group of teenagers at a school in London have already committed a heinous—albeit accidental—crime against one of their own. As the play unfolds, Kelly puts his characters in a pressure cooker, placing them at crossroads which force them, time and time again, to choose between right and wrong. The core group of teens overwhelmingly makes immoral and selfish decisions, and Kelly ultimately uses the play to argue that when faced with doing what’s right but difficult versus what’s wrong but easy, human beings will often choose to do the latter.

There are several moments throughout the play where Kelly’s characters are forced to choose between right and wrong. With few exceptions, the teen characters seek to save their own skins, advance their own interests, and preserve themselves over their peers—even though they have ample opportunity to right the courses of all their lives and face up to what they’ve done. When a group of London schoolmates—Mark, Jan, Cathy, Richard, Brian, Lou, John Tate, Leah, Phil, and Danny—begin to believe they are responsible for the death of Adam, one of their unpopular peers, they struggle with what to do. Though it’s not clear which members of the group, exactly, were present at the

time of Adam's death, what is clear is that after being pelted with stones while he balanced on a grille above a local mineshaft, Adam fell into the shaft and did not emerge. While John Tate—the group's undisputed leader—wants them all to keep calm, stay quiet, and figure out a plan amongst themselves, the sensitive Brian believes they should tell someone about Adam's supposed death. It was, after all, an accident, and Brian is deeply upset and remorseful. While Brian wants to do what's right and seek help, penance, and perhaps absolution, John Tate only wants to avoid punishment. Brian's solution would be the more difficult (and dangerous) thing, and ultimately his peers declare loyalty to John Tate instead. They put their fate in his and Phil's hands, going along with the usually quiet Phil's intricate and detailed plan to obtain clothes from Adam's house and taint them with a stranger's DNA in order to suggest that Adam has been kidnapped. Though the path the group chooses is hard in its own way, it's easier than facing up to the emotional and legal ramifications of what they've done. The teens' predicament worsens when a postman matching the description they gave the police during a false statement is apprehended and questioned in connection to the crime. Leah and Lou are devastated at the idea that an innocent man could go to prison based on fake evidence the group themselves cooked up, but Phil threatens to kill Brian if he doesn't go down to the station and positively identify the suspect. Again, the group decides to act in their own self-interest instead of doing what's morally right—they take the easy way out, refusing again to own up to what they've done even as their plot involves more and more innocent lives.

The group's second major chance for redemption arrives in the play's third part, when Cathy and Brian find a boy with a terrible head wound living in the woods. The boy is dirty and incoherent and doesn't remember his own name until the others call him Adam—it turns out that he is alive, after all. Brian—whose mental state has deteriorated markedly in the weeks since what the group believed was Adam's death—is too strung out on psychiatric medications to make a moral argument for coming clean at last. Leah, on the other hand, begs Phil to end the charade and confess to the authorities—Adam is alive, and it's only right to help him reclaim his place in society. Phil, however, ignores Leah's pleas and sends Brian into the woods with a plastic bag to strangle Adam to death. In this scene, the group is presented with a second—and final—chance to redeem themselves. Even though Adam is clearly alive, alone, and in pain, the leaders of the group decide it would be too hard to extricate themselves from the situation. Many of their lives have become easier in the wake of Adam's disappearance—there is more social cohesion at school, for example—and they are reluctant to do something difficult and potentially incriminating, even though it would be the morally right thing to do.

Dennis Kelly's *DNA* is a short, cutting, and ultimately bleak

work that paints a pessimistic, uninspiring picture of human morality. Kelly uses a group of scared, self-centered teens as a microcosm of humanity in order to suggest that even though one might like to believe that in a difficult situation they'd step up and do what's right, it's more likely that one would choose to take the easy way out—even if it results in one or several innocent individuals being harmed or wronged.



BULLYING, PEER PRESSURE, AND GROUPTHINK

Bullying, peer pressure, and the destabilizing effects of groupthink are at the core of Dennis Kelly's *DNA*. Over the course of the play, Kelly examines a group of particularly cruel, emotionally detached teens—save for a few kind, empathetic members—and puts on full display the ways in which they cajole, coerce, and threaten one another. Ultimately, Kelly shows that bullying is an epidemic—and argues that the effects of peer pressure and conformist groupthink lead to terrible instances of emotional and physical abuse amongst young people.

Dennis Kelly's play is a topical one: *DNA* wrestles with big issues and takes very seriously the effects that bullying has not just on individuals but on communities more broadly. As Kelly shows how groupthink and peer pressure fuel and perpetuate bullying—and how the more bullying happens, the more socially acceptable it becomes—he paints a portrait of a vicious cycle of abuse. Early on in the play, before the group's cruelty is even revealed in full, Kelly shows how peer pressure and groupthink in the form of coercion affect this ostensibly tight-knit group of friends. As the nervous Lou and Danny and the overconfident John Tate discuss their schoolmate Adam's supposed death in vague terms, Lou begins to get scared and declares that they're all doomed. John Tate—desperate to stop his friend from spiraling into anxiety, worried she'll turn against him—reminds her that he is one of the most frightening, influential people at school. He urges her and Danny—by vaguely threatening violence—to hush up and follow his plan. Before the audience even knows the truth of what's going on, Kelly is already at work demonstrating that the environment these teens live in is one that revolves around fear, coercion, and conformity. The individual members of the group are silenced by other members who use cruel tactics to stay in power. Kelly implies that this climate of constant fear, combined with the repeated suggestion that as long as the group sticks together they'll be all right, is what perpetuates the teens' constant bullying of and cruelty toward one another. As the play continues to unfold, he uses a tragedy that occurs at the heart of the group to show the devastating effects of this vicious cycle.

As Kelly reveals the horrific truth of the bullying Adam endured at the hands of his so-called "friends," he delves even deeper into the ways in which groupthink and conformity proliferate and even escalate bullying. As the nervous gossipmongers

Mark and Jan unspool the story of Adam's supposed death, they describe the escalation of their group's collective cruelty towards Adam over the course of an undetermined amount of time. The abuse they describe could have unfolded over weeks or months—or it could have ramped up from lighthearted dares to physical abuse over the course of one night. Mark and Jan describe fairly benign (but still humiliating) dares such as encouraging Adam to eat leaves and convincing Adam to steal liquor for the group—but their recollection of events soon intensifies as they describe putting out cigarettes on various parts of Adam's body and eventually stoning him with small rocks as he balanced precariously on a grille over a mine shaft, a torturous ordeal which ultimately led to him falling into the deep shaft. This harrowing passage represents the ways in which groupthink leads to senseless violence. Jan and Mark try to excuse their behavior by stating that Adam was laughing and joking along even as such terrible things were being done to him—and Kelly bleakly suggests that even Adam's complicity in furthering his own abuse is the product of bullying and groupthink's endless, repetitious cycle of violence.

Perhaps the most potent example of groupthink in the play is the way in which the members of the group respond to Phil's plan to distance themselves from being associated with Adam's "murder" and instead frame someone else. The teens at the heart of the play are so desperate to avoid being held accountable for Adam's death that they unthinkingly go along with Phil's elaborate—and eerily thorough—plan for framing someone else for Adam's death. Some of the kids even take Phil's suggestions further than he intended them to go, such as when Cathy actually goes to a post office and collects DNA from a man resembling the description of Adam's "murderer," which Phil came up with on a whim. The teens' willingness to submit so wholly and unthinkingly to groupthink reveals their fear of facing the kind of bullying and violence that Adam faced—but it also shows how going along with that very bullying and violence has made them more susceptible to other kinds of conformity that are just as harmful.

Kelly's play is dramatic, over-the-top, and often quite funny—but the message at its heart is deadly serious. In *DNA*, Kelly warns of the vicious cycle of cruelty and abuse that can occur when peer pressure and groupthink engender violent bullying and deception.



GUILT

At the start of *DNA*, a group of teens takes a cruel prank too far—their actions result in what they believe is the death of their classmate Adam. In the weeks following Adam's "death," as the group struggles to maintain their composure in the face of their shame and a widespread public investigation, their guilt nonetheless begins to eat away at them. As Dennis Kelly charts the deterioration of his core group of characters, he ultimately suggests that guilt is

a force capable of eroding—and even destroying—the human psyche.

There are several characters throughout the play who, oddly, experience no remorse, guilt, or shame—but the ones who do find their mental states rapidly deteriorating, leaving them just as destroyed as those whose lives they've been complicit in ruining. The first major character whose guilt over hiding the truth about Adam's death results in mental deterioration is the kind, sensitive Brian. At the start of the play, Brian stands out within the group as one of its kinder, gentler members. When the news of Adam's supposed death comes to him—along with the mechanics of how it happened—he becomes deeply upset and begins crying. John Tate calls him a "crying little piece of filth," and when Brian responds that he believes they should "tell someone" about what has happened, no one else agrees with him. Over the course of the play, Brian's guilt over keeping quiet worsens. His already fragile mental state worsens, and soon, Brian is doped up on psychiatric medication to cope with his emotions. Reduced to a childlike, disconnected state, Brian giggles maniacally, eats dirt, and suffers an inability to read social cues or understand the basic outline of what's happening to him at any given moment. Towards the end of the play, after discovering that Adam has been alive and clinging to life in the woods, Phil orders Brian to kill Adam by strangling him with a plastic bag. In the wake of actually committing murder, Brian goes truly mad with guilt and grief—and by the very end of the play, Brian's meds are upped once again and he is reduced to a drooling, catatonic mess.

The second character whose guilt eats away at her is Leah. At the beginning of the play, Leah is a shallow and self-absorbed girl concerned only with how others perceive her. She is in a very one-sided relationship with her boyfriend Phil, whom she talks to at length despite getting no response from him. She interrogates him endlessly about what he thinks of her: her voice, her appearance, and her social standing. After learning of what has happened to Adam, Leah is terrified more than she is sad. In accordance with her selfish nature, she is determined not to get caught up in the mess and goes along with what's asked of her when it comes to covering up the crime. Later on in the play, however, as Phil shuts Leah out more and more and then eventually orders Brian to murder Adam for real, Leah becomes unable to deal with the guilt she feels over having been complicit in Adam's death. Leah rejects Phil, leaves the school, and cuts off contact with the group—her guilt has eroded the person she once was and forced her out of her old life.

The third character who finds his life torn apart by guilt is the swaggering, confident John Tate. Though John Tate seems to be the de facto leader of the group—and an intimidating social presence—at the start of the play, the business with Adam's murder fundamentally changes him. After the man the teens frame for Adam's murder is arrested, John Tate—perhaps

realizing the coverup has gone too far—stops associating with the group and even avoids attending school. By the end of the play, the others have heard rumors that he’s “found God” and “joined the Jesus Army.” John Tate now evangelizes on street corners and in shopping malls—his religious conversion is, ostensibly, the result of his desire to ameliorate his guilt over his involvement in Adam’s death while feeling barred from atoning for it or claiming responsibility in any real way.

The fourth character who is slowly consumed by guilt—albeit in a strange and barely-perceptible way—is the cold, calculating, aloof Phil. Phil is the play’s central and most enigmatic character. Phil is distant, cold, and mostly silent—he is obsessed with **food**, he rarely speaks (even when spoken to or shouted at), and he opens his mouth only to direct the other members of the group as to what actions they should take in moments of crisis. Phil’s intricate plans seem to arrive fully formed, and he apparently has no guilt, qualms, or hesitations as he concocts plans to frame an innocent man for Adam’s “death” and, later, to murder Adam for real when he’s discovered alive. Phil often eats or drinks through others’ pleas for him to answer their questions or respond to him, stopping his snacking only to coolly deliver his robotic instructions at the most crucial of moments. By the end of the play, however, Kelly implies that not even Phil is free from guilt. After Adam’s murder and Leah’s departure, Phil is seen—for the first time in the play—sitting alone without any food around him. This implies that his guilt, which he is likely unable to acknowledge, has made even his one joy—eating—completely unappealing and perhaps even revolting. Guilt has eroded Phil and changed the person he used to be, even if he remains outwardly much the same.

As Dennis Kelly shows how four major characters wrestle with feelings of guilt—feelings they often aren’t even able to admit to themselves—he demonstrates how the emotion slowly festers within a person’s heart and mind, changing them and sometimes even destroying them from the inside out. Guilt, to Kelly, is a force of nature—and over the course of the play, he suggests that it’s better to come clean than to let such a powerful weight slowly crush one’s soul.



REALITY AND TRUTH

Though Dennis Kelly’s *DNA* is a fairly straightforward narrative about a group of students who accidentally commit an unspeakable crime, there is also a deeper layer to the play: one which questions the nature of reality and investigates the difference between subjective and objective truth. Throughout the play, Kelly suggests that one’s experience of reality is something individualized and totally subjective based on one’s perceptions of the truth—and that reality can be manipulated to one’s advantage under the right circumstances.

There are several instances throughout the play in which the teenage characters at the center of the action ruminate on the

nature of their shared reality—and wonder if what they perceive of the world is actually the truth of the world. Their meditations on the nature of reality and truth become ways for them to excuse horrible, heinous acts, and in this way, Kelly demonstrates how the characters are essentially able to bend the reality around them to their will. The most major instance of a character questioning the nature of reality—and thus changing the nature of their own reality—comes shortly after the group realizes that their classmate Adam isn’t dead. He’s alive but seriously injured, and due to a horrible head wound, he can’t remember who he is. He’s been living in a hedge in the woods for weeks, **eating** grass, raw rabbits, and bird carcasses to survive. As Phil—the one who came up with the plan to cover up the group’s involvement in Adam’s “death”—realizes that the boy is still alive, he decides that in order to preserve the appearance of the group’s innocence, they must murder Adam for real. Phil’s girlfriend Leah begs Phil not to order the mentally-unstable Brian to kill Adam—or what’s become of him—but Phil responds by asking Leah “what difference [...] it make[s]” to kill Adam if everyone in town already believes he’s dead. Phil’s observation in this scene is cruel and evil—but it also reveals a painful and uncomfortable question about the nature of reality. If everyone thinks Adam is dead—if a memorial service has already been held and his “captor” has already been arrested—does killing Adam for real have an impact on anyone other than those involved in the killing? Much like the old riddle of whether a tree falling in an abandoned forest makes any sound at all if that sound cannot be observed or overheard, this scene calls into question the mechanics of how perception creates reality. Phil and the others have constructed a reality in which Adam is dead—and killing him for real makes concrete their careful illusion. When, as the narrative implies, Brian does actually kill Adam, the act will only serve to confirm and cement the reality that the group of teens at the center of the play have already willfully created.

There are other moments throughout the play in which characters question the nature of their realities. Leah, a particularly introspective character, frequently wonders about whether human life is a blight upon the earth and ponders the nature of happiness in her one-sided conversations with her boyfriend Phil. In one scene, she experiences an intense moment of *déjà vu* which unmoors her briefly from reality and causes her to ask Phil whether he thinks life is a repetition of an earlier state of being, and whether human beings are trapped in a set of patterns and behaviors they cannot see or escape. As Leah questions reality more and more often, she begins to detach herself from the cruel Phil and stand up for herself more frequently. Ultimately, she leaves school and abandons the group. Leah has changed her own reality by altering her perception of it and refusing to doom herself to the idea of being stuck with no agency in an endless loop of repetition.

Ultimately, the characters in Dennis Kelly’s *DNA* are forced to

live with the crushing burden of the knowledge that the reality they live in is a reality they've created—the line between objective and subjective truths has, for their group, become forever blurred, and as such the edges of their sanity begin to blur as well. Hardly any of the characters are, at the end of the play, living in the reality in which they existed just a few weeks prior: they have manufactured for themselves new, false versions of their lives.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



FOOD AND DRINK

The central symbol in Dennis Kelly's *DNA* is food and drink, which represent the characters' isolation from each other and even from their society more generally. Food and drink are largely associated with the quiet but calculating character Phil, who is, at first glance, completely disinterested in everyone and everything around him. Phil's sole interest is snacks and junk food. Even if he's sitting silently and ignoring his girlfriend Leah, he's always seen eating something sweet. When Phil meets up with his group of friends to hatch a plan for how to cover up their collective involvement in their classmate Adam's death, he is drinking a large Coke—he only sets it down when he opens his mouth to unspool a complicated plan to pin Adam's demise on someone else. Phil later shares some candy with Leah—the first gesture of warmth or even acknowledgement he's shown her throughout the entire play. For the most part, Phil uses food to isolate himself, only rarely using it as a way to connect to other people. The individual members of the group at the center of the play feel from each other isolated from each other, but they also need to stick together in order to keep up appearances in the wake of Adam's death. That contradiction weighs on each of them and compounds their guilt—and Phil's isolating behaviors around food often symbolize that tension between isolation and connection. The other character associated with food is Adam himself. When Brian and Cathy stumble upon Adam living in the woods near school, they ask him how he's been surviving, and he admits to eating grass, raw rabbits, and even the carcass of a dead bird. While the cunning and cruel Phil snacks on candy and waffles and chugs sugary soft drinks, Adam eats garbage and roadkill. Once again, food serves as a symbol of isolation. Adam has been cut off from society and is, ultimately, barred from reentry when Phil orders Brian to kill him for real—and his lack of adequate food foreshadows this dark turn of events. What's more, after compelling Brian to murder Adam, Phil is seen sitting alone in a meadow without a snack for the first time in the play; it seems that his ruthlessness has finally stripped

him of his only coping mechanism, for better or worse.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oberon edition of *DNA* published in 2008.

Scene 1 Quotes

☝☝ Do I disgust you? I do. No, I do. No don't because, it's alright, it's fine, I'm not gonna, you know, or whatever, you know it's not the collapse of my, because I do have, I could walk out of here, there are friends, I've got, I've got friends, I mean alright, I haven't got friends, not exactly, I haven't, but I could, if I wanted, if I wanted, given the right, given the perfect, you know, circumstances.

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), Phil

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah and Phil—two teenage members of a group of friends who attend a London high school—sit alone together in a field, a place they frequently visit together. During these visits, Phil and Leah sit together while Phil eats and Leah talks incessantly about whatever's on her mind. Here, Leah, desperate to provoke a reaction—an reaction—from her boyfriend Phil, talks about her insecurity as regards her social standing and the number of friends she has in her life. This speech sets up Leah's desire to fit in at school—a need which will inform her decisions to go with the flow as her friends find themselves in increasingly serious trouble. As the play goes on, Leah will repeatedly succumb to peer pressure, bullying, and the desire to be accepted, and her words here foreshadow those later developments. Leah wants to create the “perfect [...] circumstances” she believes she needs for friendship to flourish—and for much of the play, it seems she'll do anything to do so.

☝☝ You're not scared. Nothing scares, there, I've said it; scared. Scared, Phil. I'm scared, they scare me, this place, everyone, the fear, the fear that everyone here, and I'm not the only one, I'm not the only one, Phil, I'm just the only one saying it, the fear that everyone here lives in, the brutal terror, it scares me, okay, I've said it and I am not ashamed.

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), Phil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah admits that while “nothing scares” Phil, she herself is scared all the time. As she rambles in half-sentences, tripping over her own words out of a combination of fear and uncertainty, Leah reveals the dark heart of the play. The place she and Phil live and go to school—and the social environment there—is “brutal,” and Leah knows it. Even as she lives in fear of everyone around her, Leah struggles with her desire to please everyone, keep conflict at bay, and make friends. This desire not just to avoid trouble for the time being but to escape it entirely by making the right friends and connections will motivate Leah’s actions throughout the play. Kelly uses this passage to show how susceptible Leah is to the pull of peer pressure—and to suggest more widely that her peers, too, feel the same fears and insecurities she does, which explains in part why they go to such extreme lengths later in the play.

☝☝ JOHN TATE: Alright. New rule; that word is banned.

[...]

LOU: You can’t ban a word.

JOHN TATE: and if anyone says it I’m going to have to, you know, bite their face. Or something.

DANNY: How can you ban a word?

JOHN TATE: Well just say it then.

Pause.

Say it and see what happens.

They say nothing.

Look, we have to keep together. We have to trust each other and believe in each other. I’m trying to help. I’m trying to keep things together.

Related Characters: Danny, Lou, John Tate (speaker), A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, John Tate, Lou, and Danny have just received

the news that their schoolmate Adam is dead. While Kelly has not yet revealed the cause of Adam’s death or what that cause means for the group of teenagers at the center of the play, it’s clear from the reaction of John Tate—the group’s de facto leader—that it can’t mean anything good. John Tate obviously wants his friends not to mention the word death or say Adam is dead—he hopes to control his peers by policing their language, pressuring them at alternating moments with both violent threats and the promise of peace to make them keep their mouths shut. This passage demonstrates the ways in which peer pressure and bullying function in this young, impressionable friend group, and also hints at the ways in which guilty individuals (or at least those plagued by a guilty conscience) attempt to alter their subjective experiences of reality to soften the blows of life’s harder truths. That is, John Tate seems to believe that if he can manage the world around him by forbidding everyone from talking about Adam’s death, then maybe he can avoid facing the consequences of that reality.

☝☝ JOHN TATE: Are you on my side? With Richard and Danny? Are you on our side, Cathy?

CATHY: Yes.

JOHN TATE: Good. Lou?

LOU: Yes.

JOHN TATE: You’re on our side, Lou?

LOU: Yes, John.

JOHN TATE: You sure?

LOU: Yeah, I’m –

JOHN TATE: That just leaves you, Brian. You crying little piece of filth.

Beat. BRIAN stops crying. Looks up.

BRIAN: I think we should tell someone.

JOHN TATE begins to walk towards BRIAN.

Related Characters: Brian, Lou, Cathy, John Tate (speaker), Danny, Richard

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

As John Tate attempts to get everyone in the group on his side, demanding vows of loyalty and obedience from them, one member of the group resists. Brian, a kind and sensitive

teenager whose emotional reaction to Adam's death stands in stark contrast to the unfeeling or downright gleeful reactions of his peers, resists declaring loyalty to the cruel and intimidating John Tate. The moment Brian declares that he thinks they should do the right thing and "tell someone" about what's happening, John Tate begins walking toward Brian, physically threatening him. Though the boys' fight is diffused before it even begins, John Tate's physical actions and verbal threats in this passage clarify the terrifying, destabilizing environment these teenagers live in due to the constant presence of peer pressure and bullying. Brian is forced to make a choice between settling his guilty conscience but making things harder—or even dangerous—for himself by doing what's right, or giving in to peer pressure and making things easier for himself by doing what's wrong.

☝ And you're thinking 'Will he do anything? What won't he do?'

Related Characters: Mark (speaker), A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As Mark recalls the events that led up to Adam's supposed death, he describes a regular pattern of tormenting Adam and playing increasingly dangerous pranks on him. Adam, a misfit who the other teens knew would "do anything" to fit in with them and gain their approval, was often the subject of cruel pranks and risky dares—and as Mark recalls posing these challenges and playing these jokes, he still feels a sense of awe at the realization that Adam would do literally anything the other teens demanded of him. This passage speaks to the weaponization of peer pressure and the fine line between friends and enemies. Mark doesn't necessarily feel a sense of guilt as he reflects on these memories, even as he seems to realize that what he and the others did to Adam was wrong—he's more shocked by the depths of Adam's desire for social stability and acceptance than he is troubled by the fact of Adam's death.

☝ And someone's pegged a stone at him. Not to hit him, just for the laugh.

And you shoulda seen his face, I mean the fear, the, it was so, you had to laugh, the expression, the fear...

So we're all peggin them. Laughing. And his face, it's just making you laugh harder and harder, and they're getting nearer and nearer. And one hits his head. And the shock on his face is so...funny. And we're all just...

just...

really chucking these stones into him, really hard and laughing and he slips.

And he drops.

Related Characters: Mark (speaker), A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In a continuation of his speech recalling the physical and emotional abuse leveraged against Adam in the final moments of his life, Mark remembers viscerally and vividly the moment at which the prank being played on Adam passed the point of no return. In this moment, the stones being pelted at Adam—pebbles at first meant only to surprise him, which soon became larger and larger stones that were "chuck[ed] [...] really hard" at his head—serve as a metaphor for the ways in which bullying, peer pressure, and groupthink escalate and compound as they intensify. The stones knock Adam off his axis and plunge him into darkness—just as prolonged, repeated exposure to the cruelty of bullying and the brainwashing of groupthink have the power to derail people's lives and alienate them from all they know. Mark is somewhat horrified by what he and the others have done, but he doesn't quite seem to realize how Adam's shocking supposed death fits into the broader pattern of cruelty and social hierarchies that define his and his friends' lives.

Scene 2 Quotes

☝ He's not joking, he's not going, he's said he's not going, I said you've gotta go, he said he's not going, 'I'm not going' he said.

Related Characters: Mark (speaker), Brian, Jan

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief scene, Mark and Jan cryptically discuss one of their classmates' refusal to go somewhere. Mark and Jan are clearly concerned about this refusal and what it will mean for them—and as the scene unfolds, it becomes clear that they want this individual to change his mind. Eventually, it will become clear that the person they're discussing is Brian, and the place that Brian doesn't want to go is the police station. The police have apprehended the man matching the false description Brian gave of Adam's fictitious kidnapper—and Brian must confirm the man's identity, possibly landing this innocent stranger in prison. Though none of these facts are yet known to the audience, this passage underscores the ways in which groupthink works. It is unthinkable to Mark and Jan that their classmate would stand up against an order or choose what's right (but difficult) over what's wrong (but easy), so Mark just repeats the same words over and over again, struggling to understand them. As this act unfolds, the group will face big moral questions as they continue their cover-up—and any dissent will be punished harshly.

☝ No, I'm just wondering. I mean what is happy, what's happy all about, who says you're supposed to be happy, like we're all supposed to be happy, happy is our natural, and any deviation from that state is seen as a failure, which in itself makes you more unhappy so you have to pretend to be even happier which doesn't work because people can see that you're pretending which makes them awkward and you can see that they can see that you're pretending to be happy and their awkwardness is making you even more unhappy so you have to pretend to be even happier, it's a nightmare.

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), Phil

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides another glimpse into the mechanism of groupthink and peer pressure—but from another angle. While the play mostly shows teens being bullied or pressured into lying, deceiving others, or risking their necks in cruel and dangerous pranks, Leah's speech here shows that there's another kind of pressure exerting itself daily not just on teens but on all people. The pressure to be happy, to

keep up outward appearances, and to participate in a perpetual façade of normalcy is real—and here, Leah suggests it is actively detrimental to the quality of human life, inspiring guilt and insecurity and creating a false reality in which happiness is the status quo. Leah's existential musings on the transactional or constructed nature of happiness reveal a deep tension within her about whether or not to participate in this façade simply because it's easier than admitting to life's harder, grittier, uglier truths. Indeed, her observations here can be seen as a metaphor for much of the play's action; after it seems like Adam has died, the characters become superficially much happier and are drawn to that façade, but their seeming happiness hides a very dark truth.

☝ Everything's much better, though. I mean really, it is. Everyone's working together. They're a lot happier. Remember last month, Dan threatened to kill Cathy? well yesterday I saw him showing her his phone, like they were old friends. Last week Richard invited Mark to his party, bring a friend, anyone you like, can you believe that? Richard and Mark? Yep. Everyone's happier. It's pouring into the school, grief, grief is making them happy.

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), Mark, Richard, Cathy, Danny, Phil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

As Leah sits in a field with Phil, she describes the ways in which things have gotten "better" at school for everyone since Adam's supposed death. Though the group is now embroiled in a complicated cover-up, Leah is happily surprised to find that the guilt, tension, and pressure they're all facing has actually revolutionized their social dynamics and brought them all closer together. What Leah isn't saying—but what is clear as day between the lines—is that the atmosphere of apprehension which rules the school has been compounded by these teens' distrust in and fear of one another. Everyone may seem "happier" on the outside, bound together by shared mourning or "grief"—but in reality, what Leah perhaps knows but is reluctant to admit is that the shared desire to keep up appearances, stave off suspicion, and get into one another's good graces at any cost is what's really bringing everyone together.

●● No, no, yeah, no, actually, because that man, the man who, he doesn't actually, I mean I'm not being fussy or anything, but the man who kidnapped Adam doesn't actually exist, does he. Well does he?

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), A Boy/Adam, Brian, Phil

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah learns that a man matching a false description of Adam's fake kidnapper—which was created by Phil and reported by Brian—has been apprehended and taken into custody in connection with Adam's disappearance. Leah is confused and disoriented—she insists that what's happening can't be happening, since a man who doesn't exist can't possibly have been found. This passage shows how peer pressure and lies can warp reality, transforming fiction into fact and vice versa. Though Adam's death—or supposed death—is the direct result of his peers' actions, the group has created a reality in which it is the fault of a nameless, faceless man, only to find that the reality they've constructed to save their skins is now the one they're literally living in. Leah grapples with the magnitude of what she and her peers have done, unable to comprehend the additional responsibility they've created for themselves now that an innocent man is taking the fall. It's also notable that the man matching Phil's supposedly fake description really does exist; it might be a coincidence, but it might also be a sign that Phil planned out much more of this scheme than he ever openly reveals.

●● PHIL: You're going in.

BRIAN: No.

PHIL: Yes.

BRIAN: No, Phil –

PHIL: Yes, yes, shhhh, yes. Sorry. You have to go in. Or we'll take you up the grille. [...] We'll throw you in.

RICHARD: Er, Phil.

DANNY: Is he serious?

LEAH: He's always serious.

PHIL: We'll take you up the grille now. Well get you by the arms. By the legs. And we'll swing you onto the grille. We'll throw rocks at you until you drop through. You'll drop through. You'll fall into the cold. Into the dark. You'll land on Adam's corpse and you'll rot together.

Related Characters: Richard, Brian, Leah, Danny, Phil (speaker), A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Phil pressures—and then bullies—Brian into going to the police station to confirm the identity of the random man who has been apprehended as Adam's kidnapper or murderer. Based on the false report Brian made to the police weeks ago, the authorities have brought in a man matching the description—a description that Phil made up seemingly on the spot. Now, Brian is forced to choose between doing what's right and coming clean or doing what's wrong and perpetuating Phil's lies—but here, Phil warns Brian that if he doesn't keep up the charade, there will be deadly consequences. Phil rarely speaks—but when he does, he uses language to establish control, instill fear, and consolidate power. In this passage, Phil describes the fate that Brian will meet if he doesn't stick together with the group and perpetuate their story, threatening Brian with a death as anonymous, cruel, and lonely as Adam's own demise—or supposed demise. This threat on Brian's life suggests that where bullying is concerned, no one is ever really safe; being friends with the groups does Brian no good here, and even Phil is vulnerable to the punishment he would face if Brian did tell the truth.

Scene 3 Quotes

●● LEAH: It's incredible. The change. This place. You're a miracle worker. Everyone's happy. [...] Funny thing is they're all actually behaving better as well. I saw Jan helping a first year find the gym. Mark's been doing charity work, for Christ's sake. Maybe being seen as heroes is making them behave like heroes.

PHIL considers his waffle. Decides it needs more jam.

Yeah, everyone happy. Well it's not all roses, you know. Brian's on medication. [...] John Tate hasn't been seen in weeks, and the postman's facing the rest of his life in prison, but, you know, omelettes and eggs, as long as you've your waffle, who cares.

Related Characters: Leah (speaker), John Tate, Brian, Mark, Jan, Phil

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene—the first in the third act of the play—Leah comments blithely upon the happy and miraculous changes that have taken place in their school in the weeks since Phil has taken charge of the cover-up surrounding Adam's supposed death. As Leah fawningly tells Phil about all the good he's done, Phil tunes her out and eats a waffle—a symbol of his complete emotional isolation from her. Leah, sensing Phil's remove, changes tack and begins complaining instead about all the complications Phil's plan has created. Leah is—as she always has been—desperate to get through to Phil, but now her need to connect with him is rooted in their shared guilt, their group's secrets, and the need to establish and deepen the false reality Phil has constructed for all of them. Leah is no longer terrified of alienating or upsetting Phil with her words—all she can think about is finding a way to break through to him and get his attention at any cost.

☝ BRIAN: Don't they eat earth somewhere? Shall we eat the earth? I wonder what earth tastes like, what do you think it, do you think it tastes earthy, or, or...

He bends down to eat a handful of earth. [...]

That's disgusting!

He suddenly starts giggling as he scrapes the earth from his mouth.

CATHY: I dunno how he's survived, what he's eaten.

BRIAN: *(Like it's hilarious)* He's probably been eating earth!

He bursts into laughter.

Related Characters: Cathy, Brian (speaker), A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Brian, who has recently discovered Adam living in a fort made of hedges in the woods, experiences a profound mental collapse. Brian has already been heavily medicated in the wake of his involvement in covering up Adam's supposed murder—the already sensitive young man has been pushed to the brink by a heavy cocktail of psychiatric drugs. Here, as Brian is forced to once again

confront the traumatic reality of what his actions have done to those around him—friends and strangers alike—Brian resorts to eating earth. His rash decision to sample handfuls of dirt from the ground demonstrates both his self-hatred and his profound isolation, showing how his own most basic actions—which are now predicated on lies and falsehoods—have been impacted by the accumulation of choices he and his friends have made. Kelly uses this scene to demonstrate the isolating effects of intense guilt and the dangers of constructing and living within false realities.

☝ LEAH: How've you been living?

ADAM: In the hedge.

LEAH: No, how?

What have you been eating?

ADAM: You can eat anything. I eat things.

Nothing dead, I don't

insects, grass, leaves, all good, but nothing, I caught a rabbit once and ate that, its fur was soft, warm, but nothing, I found a dead bird and ate some of that but it made me sick so nothing, nothing dead, that's the rule, nothing

Beat.

What?

Related Characters: A Boy/Adam, Leah (speaker), Phil

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Leah interrogates Adam—who has recently been found alive, living in a small patch of woods near the school—about how he's been surviving in the wild. As Adam describes what he's been eating to stay alive, a sharp contrast emerges between the kinds of food and drink the audience has witnessed the voracious Phil eating and the kinds that Adam now describes subsisting upon. While Phil snacks on waffles and candy, slurps Cokes, and devours bags of chips, Adam's every bite is a gamble for his very life as he tries to determine what will sicken him and what won't. Adam's meager, wild diet represents his profound isolation and removal from society, while Phil's junk food obsession signals his place in the mainstream world. Notably, however, Phil's eating also isolates him from

others, taking the place of speech and communication and symbolizing his emotional remove from the world around him. So while Phil and Adam's diets—and their realities more generally—might seem like polar opposites, the two boys are actually similar in their deep isolation from others, a connection that suggests mainstream society can be as isolating as a lonely wilderness.

☝ BRIAN: That was great!

PHIL: You just do what Cathy says.

BRIAN: I am brilliant at doing what people say.

LEAH: No! Stop, don't, don't, Phil, don't, what are you doing, what are you...

PHIL: He's dead, everyone thinks he's dead. What difference will it make?

She stares at him.

LEAH: But he's not dead. He's alive.

Related Characters: Leah, Phil, Brian (speaker), Cathy, A Boy/Adam

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Phil orders Brian to go with Cathy and make a “game” of killing Adam—for real this time—by strangling him with a plastic bag. Phil and the others have recently discovered that Adam isn't dead—in fact, he's been living in the woods near their school for weeks. Phil knows that if the amnesiac Adam regains his memory and returns to society, the group's plot will be exposed and there will be legal consequences—Phil is determined to keep that from happening, and so he orders Adam's death. Leah protests, insisting that Adam is alive and needs to be helped to rejoin society—but Phil makes the cruel, deeply existential suggestion that because Adam is already “dead” in the eyes of so many people, killing him for real makes no larger difference at all. Phil's logic here almost seems sensible, but of course, as Leah points out, killing Adam does make an enormous difference—to Adam, for one. This moment ties in with the play's theme of reality and truth, as the characters question the subjective nature of reality and the mutable truths by which they, their community, and indeed the entire world live.

Scene 4 Quotes

☝ Everyone's asking after you. You know that? Everyone's saying 'where's Phil?' 'what's Phil up to?' 'when's Phil going to come down from that stupid field?' 'wasn't it good when Phil was running the show?' What do you think about that? What do you think about everyone asking after you?

Related Characters: Richard (speaker), Phil

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Richard joins Phil up on the hill where Phil has been spending most of his days since dropping out of school. Richard reports that everyone back at school misses Phil and is constantly asking after him, hoping daily for his return. This passage demonstrates the ways in which young people are easily brainwashed by those who subject them to bullying and peer pressure. Though Phil was a rather cruel leader, intimidating his peers with threats of physical violence, alienating them with his silences, and disturbing them with his intricate plots, the others now miss the control he exerted over their lives and long to have him back. For all Phil's meanness and fearsomeness, he took away thought and responsibility from his classmates and did all their thinking and planning for them. They now long for a return to that simpler state of being, even though Phil's leadership threatened their individuality and brought horrible chaos, trauma, and pain into their lives.

☝ John Tate's found God. Yeah, Yeah I know. He's joined the Jesus Army, he runs round the shopping centre singing and trying to give people leaflets. Danny's doing work experience at a dentist's. He hates it. [...] Brian's on stronger and stronger medication. They caught him staring at a wall and drooling last week. [...] Cathy doesn't care. She's too busy running things. You wouldn't believe how things have got, Phil. She's insane. She cut a first year's finger off, that's what they say anyway.

Doesn't that bother you? Aren't you even bothered?

Related Characters: Richard (speaker), John Tate, Phil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Richard visits the solitary Phil, who has recently dropped out of school, on top of the hill he likes to frequent. Richard catches Phil up on all he's missed since leaving, and as he fills Phil in on the goings-on in the lives of their classmates, a portrait of an "insane," desperate, and bleak environment emerges. John Tate, once the leader of the group, has turned to evangelism to distract himself from his guilt or, perhaps, to attempt to regain a new kind of control over others. Brian has become all but catatonic, unable to deal with the fallout of the trauma Phil and the others inflicted upon him. Even the students who have gotten what they wanted all along, like Danny—who always dreamed of a normal life pursuing a career in dentistry—and Cathy—who longed for subservience and respect from her classmates—are finding that their hopes and desires are not all they once seemed to be. Richard's speech shows that he and his classmates remain mired in guilt even as they attempt to move on with their lives—some of them are even trapped in vicious cycles of cruel behavior, chronic disappointment, and desperate escapism.

●● And in that second, Phil, I knew that there was life on other planets. I knew we weren't alone in the universe, I didn't just think it or feel it, I knew it, I know it, it was as if the universe was suddenly shifting and giving me a glimpse, this vision that could see everything, just for a fraction of a heartbeat of a second. But I couldn't see who they were or what they were doing or how they were living.

How do you think they're living, Phil?

How do you think they're living?

Related Characters: Richard (speaker), Leah, Phil

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of the play, Richard—previously regarded by the other teens as one of the most dangerous and intimidating boys at school—sits with Phil in a field. After updating Phil about the goings-on at school, seemingly out of deference to the group's much-missed leader as much as a genuine desire for his friend to come back to class, Richard begins describing encountering a large cloud of dandelion fluff on his way up the hill that day. As Richard recalls the ethereal moment, his thoughts turn from the earthly to the existential and he begins wondering about life on other planets. This moment ties in with the play's theme of reality and truth—Richard's guilt over all that's transpired in the last several weeks is so intense that he has begun to wonder how people on other planets live, and whether their lives are better, purer, or worthier than the lives of those on earth. This passage palpably embodies Richard's sense of remorse and regret and hints at his desire to change his reality—or at least experience a different one than the one in which he's doomed to live. In this final scene, Richard also seems to take on the role that Leah played previously, begging Phil to respond to his existential musings. But just as he did with Leah, Phil remains completely unresponsive to Richard, showing that even though Phil succeeded in gaining control and social superiority over his friends, he's no better off than he was before, and in fact may even be more isolated than ever.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1

Mark and Jan stand on a London street. Mark has just told Jan that someone they know is dead. Jan is in disbelief. Jan asks if Mark is sure that their mutual acquaintance is dead, or if he's joking. Mark insists he's being serious. Jan asks Mark if their acquaintance could be hiding, but Mark says he's certain—the person is dead. Jan asks Mark what they are going to do. Mark does not answer her.

Elsewhere, Leah and Phil sit in a field. Phil eats an **ice cream**. Leah asks Phil what he's thinking, but he does not answer her. Leah assures Phil that he can tell her anything, but he remains silent. Leah continues to ask Phil questions, desperate to get him to talk to her. When he refuses to answer her, she tells him that she knows she talks too much but can't help it. Leah talks in circles as she tries to brag to Phil about her other friends—but it is clear from Leah's self-consciousness and nervous speech patterns that she doesn't really have anyone else to talk to.

At last, Leah admits that she is scared. "Everyone here" scares her, she says, and she knows she's not the only one living in fear. Everyone else, she knows, is scared too. Again, she asks Phil what he's thinking, but he doesn't answer her. Mark and Jan enter together and tell Phil and Leah that they all need to have a talk.

In a small wood, Lou, John Tate, and Danny stand around talking. Lou worries that the three of them are "fucked," but John Tate assures her that everything is going to be fine—even though they are, for the moment, in a "tricky [...] situation." John Tate asks Lou if she's scared of anyone at their school—Lou replies that she's scared of John Tate. John Tate asks if there's anyone other than him Lou is scared of, and Lou says she's scared of Richard. John Tate tells Lou that as long as she sticks with him and Richard, she'll be fine.

The play opens with a vague, intriguing scene which depicts two teenagers feeding into one another's anxiety, uncertainty, and desire for gossip and information. Kelly is creating an atmosphere in which anything could happen—and in which his young, impressionable characters will follow one another's leads in their search for answers and absolution.



This passage establishes the dynamic between Leah and Phil. Though the two appear to be in a relationship, Kelly gives little background as to their origins as a couple. Leah's desperation for Phil's approval will drive her actions throughout the play—but Phil, it seems, isn't driven by or toward anything at all.



This cryptic passage hints at the frightening, unstable environment Leah and Phil—and, it seems, their friends—face at school each day.



This passage furthers the idea that there is an environment of fear, pressure, and control in these teens' social group. John Tate fancies himself in control and tries to play the role of leader—even when confronted with the idea that another boy, Richard, may have more social power than he does.



Danny says he's afraid of getting "mixed up" in whatever is going on. He's got a plan for his life which ends in a career as a dentist, and he doesn't want to risk messing it up. Lou tells John Tate that someone is dead—and that that fact can't be underplayed. John Tate says the word "dead" is banned from their conversations from now on. Danny asks how John Tate can ban a word, so John Tate dares him to say the word and see what happens to him. Lou and Danny are silent. John Tate says that he's going to do everything he can to "keep things together," but he needs everyone to stay calm and stick together.

Richard enters. Cathy and Brian are with him. Cathy is grinning, but Brian is crying. "He's dead," Richard says, and John Tate informs Richard about the ban on the word. Cathy says that everything that's going on is "exciting" and "better than ordinary life," at least. Richard and John Tate argue about the use of the word "dead" while Danny urges Cathy to be quiet. John Tate speaks up, warning the others that they'll lose the social clout and stability they have if they don't stick together. Richard warns John Tate not to threaten him, and John Tate asks what Richard will do to stop him. As the two provoke one another, Cathy and Danny try to calm them down, but John Tate warns Richard not to let them gang up on him. If anyone takes sides against him, John Tate warns, there will be consequences.

After securing promises of loyalty and solidarity from Danny, Cathy, Lou, and Richard, John Tate notices that Brian is crying. He demands that Brian, whom he calls a "little piece of filth," declare that he's on their side as well. Brian meekly says he believes they should "tell someone." John Tate advances on Brian as if to hurt him, but when Mark, Jan, Leah, and Phil enter, John Tate stops moving. He declares to the group that he's feeling "under a lot of stress." Leah steps forward and says, over and over again, that she and Phil haven't done anything—and if they *have* done something, it's her fault as much as Phil's. John Tate puts his finger on her lips to silence her. He asks Mark if Mark has told them what's going on; Mark says he hasn't. Jan speaks up and tells Leah and Phil that something has happened to their classmate Adam.

As Danny and Lou's anxiety escalates, they seek comfort in one another by expressing their fears. John Tate attempts to control not just their emotions but also their speech, relying on their fear of him as a method of manipulation. John Tate hopes that he can bully his classmates into silence and preserve a version of reality which benefits him—namely, one in which he's in charge of everyone.



As the group expands and more perspectives enter the mix, Kelly continues to show how bullying, pressure, and groupthink inform the way these characters talk to and relate to one another. While some members of the group are in denial, others, like Cathy, are downright gleeful—and others still are attempting to sublimate their anxiety into violent threats and struggles for power and control.



This passage shows John Tate using verbal intimidation tactics and physical bullying to try to get everyone on his side. Though a couple characters don't even understand the full extent of what's going on, everyone is already desperate to do whatever's needed to preserve their own interests and innocence.



As Jan continues telling the two of them what transpired, it becomes clear that Adam is a boy who is always “trying to be part of” the group—a boy who will do anything the more popular kids demand of him. Mark, Jan, and some of the other kids messed around with Adam: they convinced him to eat leaves, light his own socks on fire, steal alcohol, and accept being punched repeatedly. Jan and Mark insist that Adam was laughing and joking as the others put out cigarettes on his body, forced him to get drunk, and ordered him to walk on a wobbly grille over a nearby abandoned mine shaft. While Adam was up on the grille, the others began throwing pebbles at him and laughing. One stone, however, hit Adam in the head, causing Adam to lose his balance and fall into the shaft.

John Tate asks the group what they should do. Phil sets down **the Coke** he’s been drinking and speaks up. He orders Cathy, Danny, and Mark to go to Adam’s house, wait until it’s empty, then go through a window and take a sweater and a pair of shoes from his room without touching them. He suggests they use a plastic bag to grab the items—but warns them to make sure it comes fresh from the store. A bag from someone’s home will be “a DNA nightmare.” Phil continues unspooling his plan, which is very specific even though he claims to be making it up on the spot. He orders Richard to take Brian to the head of the school and tell the man that he found Brian crying in the bathroom. He orders Brian to tell the head of school that a “fat Caucasian male [...] with thinning hair,” bad teeth, and a postman’s uniform exposed himself to Brian in the woods last week.

The others are shocked by the specificity of Phil’s plan. Phil continues. He tells Lou, Danny, and Jan to take Adam’s shoes and go to the woods. Lou should put the shoes on and go in through the south entrance while Danny, with Jan on his back, should enter from the east so that their combined weight equals the weight of the “fat postman with bad teeth.” He orders them to all meet in the middle near the bridge, move around, and exit from the south.

Phil then tells Cathy and Mark to meet the others at the entrance—but on the way, tells them they should find a quiet street, wait until they see a man walk by, step out onto the road ahead of him, and drop the sweater so that he picks it up and gives it back. He tells them to let the man drop it in the plastic bag, urging them to make up an excuse about donating clothes to charity. Afterwards, he says, Cathy and Mark should throw the bag in a hedge and leave it.

As Jan describes the abuse that she, Mark, and the others perpetrated against their classmate, it becomes clear that this group relishes the opportunity to bully other people in pursuit of elevating their own social clout and confirming their solidarity and superiority. It’s never clear who, exactly, did what to Adam and when, so Jan’s vague descriptions highlight just how common this behavior is amongst the group; any of them could have caused Adam’s apparent death.



As Phil unspools his plan, which is specific, multifaceted, and seems bizarrely premeditated, the social order of the group begins to blur. Phil is taking on a leadership role while John Tate confesses that he has no idea what to do. Phil is bossing everyone—even Richard, who many agree is even more intimidating than John Tate—around, ordering them to lie and steal rather than do the right thing and admit what’s happened.



This passage continues to suggest that Phil has had a lot of time to think about what might need to be done in the instance of a tragedy or a fatal mistake. Though Phil is quiet, he’s clearly deeply observant—and yet very disconnected from any sense of guilt, remorse, or conflict.



Phil’s plan continues to stun the others in its incredible specificity. Even though the steps that must be taken are complicated and difficult, the teens still see them as easier than simply doing the right thing and telling someone the truth of what’s happened.



Phil continues. In a day or two, once Adam is declared missing, John Tate will come forward and say he may have seen Adam with a fat, uniformed man near the park. The police will assume Adam has been abducted and begin an investigation which has nothing to do with any of them. Phil picks up his **Coke** and resumes drinking it. The others stare at Phil in shock.

Phil has been ordering all the others around—now, as he gives even once-powerful John Tate a directive, the group’s breathless, rapt attention suggests that Phil has become their new leader, simply because he’s given them the sense of purpose and direction they’re all desperate for in this chaotic situation.



Later, Leah and Phil are once again alone in a field. Leah is talking about bonobos—humans’ nearest primate relatives. While “chimps are evil,” Leah says, bonobos are intelligent, kind, and empathetic. As Phil begins snacking on some **chips**, Leah accuses Phil of always ignoring her. She asks Phil what he’d do if she killed herself. Phil doesn’t answer her. Leah begins choking herself, but gives up once she realizes Phil is paying her no attention. She continues talking about bonobos, who are, according to what she’s heard, mad for sex. After describing at length the mating habits of bonobos, Leah is silent for a moment before declaring that she, Phil, and the others are “in trouble now.”

This passage shows Leah trying to manically distract herself—and Phil—from the reality of what’s going on by talking incessantly about trivial matters completely disconnected from the problems at hand. In the end, all of Leah’s wheel-spinning fails, and she is forced to admit just how bad things really are. Her changing perspective in this short scene foreshadows her eventual realization that her entire life has to change as well.



SCENE 2

Jan and Mark are on the street. Mark tells Jan that someone’s “not going” somewhere. Jan and Mark are nervous and wonder what they’re going to do—but they don’t mention who they’re talking about or how the person’s decision affects them.

Again, Kelly begins a new section of the play with a cryptic conversation between Mark and Jan in order to show how guilt and nervousness are affecting his characters’ interactions.



Phil and Leah are alone in a field. Phil eats **candy**, and Leah holds a Tupperware container. Leah asks Phil if he’s happy. She wonders why everyone is supposed to be happy, and why “any deviation from that state is seen as a failure,” leading to a cycle which perpetuates unhappiness. This vicious cycle, Leah says, is dangerous. Phil doesn’t answer Leah or comment on her thoughts. Leah says that human life is what has upset the natural order of the world and claims to be looking forward to the end of it. She asks Phil if he can remember the happiest moment of his life. He doesn’t answer her. Leah says her happiest moment was just last week, watching a sunset beside Phil.

Leah’s guilt is clearly shaping her thoughts and her feelings. She believes humanity to be an aberration and a blight upon the earth, and sees human emotions and human success as mere illusions. At the same time, Leah clearly still wants Phil’s attention and approval.



Leah opens up the Tupperware and shows it to Phil. Inside it is “Jerry”—a hamster or gerbil. She tells Phil that she killed Jerry by hammering a screwdriver into his skull. She asks Phil how she could have done such a thing—he merely shrugs. Leah says she has no idea why she did it, either. She closes the lid of the container.

Leah reveals to Phil—perhaps in a plea for attention, or perhaps in a vulnerable admission of her mental deterioration due to her guilt—that she has done something horrible. Leah has death on the brain and has perhaps killed her pet in an attempt to reckon more directly with grief and guilt, even though she claims not to know why she did it.



Leah sunnily remarks that everything at school has been much better lately—everyone is working together and their whole friend group has put aside all their petty quarrels. People are getting along and acting happier—all except for John Tate, who, according to rumor, has “lost it” and won’t come out of his room. It’s only been four days, Leah says, but already everything is different; she wonders if all it takes for everyone to be happy is having something to work toward together. She says that Adam’s parents were on the television last night, pleading for “the fat postman with bad teeth” to come forward. Leah asks Phil what they’ve done. Mark and Jan enter, and Jan says they all need to talk.

Leah, Lou, Danny, and Phil are back in the woods near school. Danny reports that the authorities have found the man described as being last seen with Adam—they have him in custody and are questioning him. Leah is shocked—the man who kidnapped Adam, she reminds Danny, doesn’t actually exist. Lou says it doesn’t matter—the police have got him anyway. Apparently, Danny says, the man has truly awful teeth. Leah is visibly upset and agitated. Lou declares that they are all “fucked.”

Danny says the authorities are looking for Brian, the one who reported having seen Adam with a postman in the first place. Leah is upset and reminds them all that there is no kidnapper—she says the man in custody can’t go to prison just because he has bad teeth. Danny tells her, though, that “this sort of stuff sticks,” and goes on to worry whether he’ll be able to get the references he needs for dental school.

Richard and Cathy enter. They have just come from the police station and state that it’s full of reporters. Cathy, giddy, says “it was great” being down there. Richard asks if everyone else has heard that the authorities “caught him.” Leah retorts that the police can’t have caught someone who doesn’t exist. Richard taunts Leah, suggesting she go down to the station and try to exonerate the man if she’s so concerned about him. Cathy wonders aloud if she could get any of the reporters to pay her for an interview. Lou worries that the man with bad teeth will go to prison. Leah says he can’t go to prison because there’s no DNA evidence.

Even though Leah and the rest of the group are embroiled in a serious crime, Leah is determined to remain positive rather than “lose it” like some of the others. She’s trying to see the positive in the situation—even though the fact that everyone has been getting along in the last week surely stems more from their fear and distrust of one another than from true bonding or social cohesion.



As the teens realize that their plan now involves someone else—someone who could be very seriously punished for their own crimes—they begin to panic in a new way. Their guilt is compounded by the idea that they could be responsible not just for their schoolmate’s death, but for an innocent man’s fate as well. The fact that the man Phil claimed to have imagined really does exist also brings up new questions about Phil; it seems that he knew someone else might have gotten in trouble but decided to go forward with the plan anyway.



Danny knows just how difficult it can be to escape a criminal charge—and there seems to be a part of him that’s glad it’s a random man and not he himself who will have to find a way to keep such a charge from “sticking.”



This passage shows the group’s conflicting reactions to Phil’s plan’s success. While Cathy and Richard are relieved—or downright giddy—at the prospect of getting off scot-free, Leah and Lou are conflicted about sending an innocent man to prison. Their guilt is intensifying as they face down the widening reverberations of their actions.



Richard says, however, that there *is* DNA evidence—the man in custody was found when police ran the DNA on Adam’s sweater through a database and pulled up a man matching Brian’s description of the postman. Leah asks how this could have happened. Cathy says that she went to a local post office and found a man who fit the description Phil came up with—it wasn’t hard, she says, as several of them matched the description. Cathy says the others should thank her for showing “initiative.” Leah and Richard, though, are distressed—they wanted to cover up their own involvement, not frame someone else. Lou, again, states that everyone is “fucked.” Leah agrees that they are. Danny says they can’t let the police think the man they have in custody is responsible.

Jan, Mark, and Brian enter. Brian is crying and complaining that he doesn’t want to go to the police station—he’s already talked to them once and doesn’t want to do it again. He says he can’t face the police or stand the way they look at him. Lou says they’re going to have to come clean.

Leah wonders what would happen if they all did nothing. She asks Phil what to do. Phil doesn’t answer her, and instead goes over to Brian and puts a hand on the boy’s shoulder. Phil tells Brian that he has to go to the station. Brian protests, but Phil quietly threatens Brian, warning him that they’ll all take him up to the mine shaft and throw him in if he doesn’t comply—Brian and Adam will “rot together.” Phil asks Brian once again if Brian is going to help them. Brian nods in agreement. Phil orders Brian and Richard to go to the station together and positively identify the postman, then tells everyone else to stay calm and keep quiet. Phil pulls out a **muffin** and begins eating it as everyone stares at him in disbelief.

Later, Leah and Phil are in a field. They sit quietly until Leah jumps up in shock. She tells Phil that she has just had déjà vu—she feels she’s lived this moment before. She tries to predict what is coming next, but fails to do so and sits back down. She looks up at the sky and remarks upon how beautiful and strange it looks—she’s never seen a sky quite like it. She says that the times they’ve been born into, too, are strange ones. Leah asks if it’s possible to change things, or if people are just “doomed to behave like people before [them.]” Phil doesn’t answer Leah.

Cathy’s desire to steal the spotlight—and to avoid trouble—have spurred her to do something which directly alters the way the outside world perceives the reality of the situation they’ve created. The group thought they were framing an imaginary person, but thanks to Cathy’s actions, the made-up situation now has very real effects for an innocent stranger. While Lou, Leah, and Danny still think there’s time to do the right thing, Cathy and Richard are hastening things in another direction, desperate to do anything they can to protect themselves from facing the consequences of their actions.



This passage shows that Brian is being pressured to talk to the police once again and confirm the man’s identity. He doesn’t want to, but the others in the group are pressuring him to help keep up their lie, demonstrating how powerful groupthink can be.



Phil uses a threat of physical violence—even death—against Brian in this passage in an attempt to remain in control of the situation. Phil’s aloof, disaffected cruelty contrasts against John Tate’s angst and desperation in the last act. To Phil, this is all like a game—a game to see how much he and his friends can get away with. Here and in similar scenes, the fact that he starts eating instead of reacting to his friends’ disbelief symbolically shows that he’s isolated from them and disconnected from the emotional reality of their dire situation.



Leah’s guilt is perhaps causing her to question the nature of her own reality. She’s becoming more and more existential as the play goes on. Her focus is shifting from her own likability and her specific place in the world to larger, more complicated questions about the very nature of humanity, reality, and fate.



Leah repeatedly says Phil's name until he at last turns to look at her. Leah asks if Phil believes that "if you change one thing you can change the world." Phil says he doesn't and looks away again. Leah says she does. She calls Phil's name, but he does not turn to look at her again.

Phil is such an inscrutable character that it's impossible to tell whether his silence reflects guilt or total detachment from what's happening. Meanwhile, Leah is clearly wondering if her own actions can have any broader meaning—a question that intensifies but remains open as the play continues.



SCENE 3

Jan and Mark are on the street, clearly distressed about whatever they're discussing in vague terms. Jan asks Mark if he's sure about what he's telling her. He says he is. Mark says that Cathy "found him" in the woods. Jan is shocked. She asks if anyone else knows. Mark says the two of them and Cathy are, for the moment, the only ones in the loop.

Mark and Jan's discussion, yet again, serves to set up the problems the group will face in this part of the play—it seems as if there has been a major stumbling block in their plan, one which will require all of them to reorient the decisions they've made and the alliances they've formed.



Phil sits alone in a field. He has a bag with him. He takes from it a paper plate, a **waffle, butter, jam**, and a knife. Leah enters, carrying a suitcase. She tells Phil she's running away. Phil says nothing. Leah says she doesn't know where she's going, but she's determined to be "wherever the universe decides that [she] should be." Phil butters his waffle. Leah tells Phil not to try to get her to stay—she's leaving right now. Phil puts jam on his waffle. Leah is indignant that Phil isn't even considering stopping her; he's only thinking about the waffle. She drops her suitcase on the ground and sits down next to Phil.

Leah seems to have reached a breaking point in her conscience and her conduct—but as she abandons her threat and sits back down with Phil, it's clear that she's not ready to escape his influence—or that of their group of friends more broadly. She still wants to impress him and be near him, but at the same time, Phil's especially elaborate snack and the care he puts into preparing it indicates that he's even more distant from her than usual.



Leah asks Phil if he saw Jan crying "floods of tears" at Adam's memorial service. Though she admits that she, too, felt awful during the service, she knows that "everyone felt wonderful"—for once, their friend group is happy, even in their sadness. Cathy is on TV all the time "like a celebrity," and Adam has become something of a martyr figure throughout the school and the community. Everyone is behaving better lately, Leah says, being more compassionate to younger students and other members of the community. Phil continues to put jam on his **waffle** and doesn't say a thing.

Leah is perhaps desperate to find some good in the mess of a situation that's befallen her and her peers. Her own guilt is small, she wants to believe, compared to the ways in which other people's lives have improved of late. Leah is so eager to go along with the group that she sidelines her own very real emotions, giving up her dream of leaving town in order to stay tied to the friends that now feel like a source of security to her.



Not everything, Leah admits, is perfect. Brian's been put on medication, John Tate hasn't been seen in many weeks, and the postman they all framed is facing life in prison. Leah asks Phil how he's feeling. Phil turns to her and considers her question. He actually opens his mouth to answer, but at the last minute, he simply shrugs and goes back to his **waffle**. Jan and Mark enter and tell Phil and Leah that they need to come with them. Leah picks up her suitcase and follows them off. Phil, irritated, puts his waffle in the plastic bag very carefully.

As Leah discusses the problems now facing their friend group, it becomes clear that everyone—whether they want to admit it or not—is wrestling with guilt in their own ways. Everyone, that is, except perhaps Phil. Leah is perhaps trying to get Phil to feel something or say something, but he remains as disconnected as ever.



In the woods, Cathy, Brian, Phil, Leah, Mark, Lou, and Jan are standing around a boy who is dressed in torn and dirty clothes. His forehead is matted with dried blood, and he moves and acts “twitchily.” Phil greets the boy by saying “Hello, Adam.” The boy replies “Alright,” but says nothing else. Brian says he and Cathy found the boy up the hill living in a hedge—he has made an elaborate “hedge complex” that resembles a “hideout.” As Brian tells the story of finding the boy, his speech is erratic and strange. He asks the others if they ever feel like trees are watching them or if they ever long to rub their faces on the ground. No one answers him.

Brian says that when he found the boy, he didn’t seem to know his own name. The boy speaks up and says that his name is Adam. Brian bends down and begins **eating dirt**, then spits it out once he realizes how “disgusting” it is. Cathy says she has no idea how the boy has survived or what he’s been eating. Brian wonders if the boy has been eating earth. Cathy says she had a hard time coaxing the boy from his hedge and had to threaten to gouge his eyes to get him to come out. Brian asks everyone to gather around and hold hands. Cathy smacks him, and Brian giggles.

Leah addresses the boy, calling him Adam. The boy seems confused. Leah asks the boy how he is, but he doesn’t answer. Leah turns to Phil and asks if this is some kind of joke. When he doesn’t answer, she says it’s good that they’ve found Adam—Lou tells her they’re all “fucked.” Jan and Mark both ask what they’re going to do. Leah warns everyone to try not to panic. Brian starts giggling. Leah asks Phil what they’re all going to do, but Phil doesn’t answer her.

Leah goes over to the boy and asks him what happened. The boy begins a fractured recollection of regaining consciousness in the dark, finding “liquid on [his] head” and crawling through a tunnel towards the light. He thought he was dead, so terrible was the pain in his head. Outside in the open air, he found he couldn’t remember anything—and though the idea scared him, he also felt a certain relief at the idea of being “new.” He claims, though, that his name is Adam, and that he is “not coming back.” The others ask what the boy has been eating, and he tells them he’s been eating **leaves, grass, and rabbits**. He admits that once he tried to eat a dead bird, but it made him sick.

As the group confronts the fact that Adam is still alive, they react in different ways. While most of them seem shocked, Phil is calm and direct, suggesting again that he may have somehow premeditated this entire plot. Brian, meanwhile, is so traumatized by his previous experiences that this new one seems to hardly register as reality. While Phil seems to recognize the boy immediately as Adam, Kelly keeps things ambiguous by calling this character “Boy” in the play’s cast of characters. This choice suggests that there’s a small chance the boy isn’t Adam, and that the characters have become paranoid in their guilt.



Cathy and Brian’s behavior in this passage demonstrates the effects of the prolonged exposure to the pressure and guilt their situation has inspired. While Brian has lost his mind trying to escape the pain, Cathy has become a violent enforcer who emulates the controlling, threatening behavior of those socially superior to her.



Even though Phil has been the de facto leader of the group since very near the start of the play, when confronted with a version of reality that’s beyond his control, he becomes unable to think, let alone lead.



Even though the boy’s identity can’t be determined with total certainty, his story does seem to confirm that he is indeed Adam. If Adam did fall down the mineshaft but was only injured, it makes sense that he’d remember coming to in the dark and crawling out of the shaft to safety. The ways in which Adam has been trying to survive demonstrate his complete isolation from society. While in his “real” life, he was simply socially isolated from a few of his peers, in this version of his life, he is completely cut off from all of society and all of his own memories, too. Symbolically, the barely-edible things he’s been eating highlights this total isolation; while Phil isolates himself with sweets and snacks, Adam is even more deeply separated from the group.



Jan and Mark declare that the boy has “lost it.” Leah, addressing Adam, tells him that he’s supposed to be dead. She explains that there’s already been a memorial service and that the school is renaming the science building after Adam. Adam asks if he’s dead, and Lou tells him he’s not. Brian starts giggling, declaring that everything is “great.” Jan and Mark ask what they’re going to do.

Things are quickly descending into chaos and madness. Brian’s state of mind is unstable and unpredictable, and now, with the added threat of a still-living but equally unstable Adam in the mix, it seems as if things could go very wrong any minute. Reality has become blurred to a horrifying degree, as an event that should be joyful—discovering that Adam isn’t dead after all—just sows more fear and discord.



Phil turns to the boy and asks him if he wants to “come back” to society, or whether he’s happy living in the hedge. Adam thinks for a moment but doesn’t respond. Phil tells Brian to take Adam back to the hedge where he found him, then return alone. Brian, still giddy, leads Adam away. The others ask Phil what’s going on. Phil tells Mark, Jan, and Lou to go home—and warns them not to breathe a word to anyone. If they follow his instructions, no one will get in trouble. Reluctantly, they all leave—Cathy stays behind.

Phil is determined to make sure that no one exposes the truth and negates the version of reality that he has created, even though he now knows that the crime he’s been covering up was never even really committed.



Leah asks Phil what he’s thinking. She points out that Adam is injured and needs help. Phil says that Adam is “happy” living wild and doesn’t want to return. Leah says that Adam is only happy because he’s lost his mind. She tells Phil that his plan is “insane,” and that their group can’t leave Adam alone. Phil points out that since he’s been “in charge,” all their friends are happier. He asks Leah if one person’s happiness is more important than the group’s.

Phil is attempting to couch his own desire to stay “in charge” as an existential question that might appeal to Leah. He wants to control her, just as he’s been able to control everyone else. At the same time, his question gets at the core of what’s been motivating the group throughout the play: because their scheme has worked out relatively well for most of them (just like bullying Adam always worked out previously), it’s easy for them to ignore the incredible pain that their actions cause a small number of other people.



Leah begs Phil to remember all the memories they have with Adam, but Phil coldly states that if Adam comes back into society, all of their lives will be ruined. Phil says that Cathy understands him. Leah accuses Phil of ignoring her simply because he doesn’t like what she’s saying. Phil doesn’t even look at Leah, and instead asks Cathy if she understands him. Cathy says she does. Brian returns, giggling madly. Leah asks Phil what will happen if Adam returns to society in a few weeks or a few years. Phil ignores her and tells Cathy to take Brian and “make a game of it.” Brian says he’s excited to play a game.

Leah wants desperately to spare Adam’s life and at last take the opportunity to do the right thing—she knows it might be the last chance they’ll get to fix things. Phil, though, is unwilling to upset the new status quo or face up to his past actions.



As Leah tries and fails to interject, Phil tells Brian he wants to show him an experiment using a plastic bag. Brian is excited. Phil puts the bag over Brian’s head and ties the handles tight. Brian says it’s a “bit stuffy” in the bag, but continues giggling. Phil looks pointedly at Cathy, then removes the bag from Brian’s head. He tells Brian to follow Cathy and do whatever she tells him to do, and Brian eagerly agrees.

Phil essentially orders Brian to go murder Adam, taking advantage of Brian’s compromised mental state and Cathy’s ruthlessness in order to protect himself and the rest of their group from the consequences that would befall them if Adam ever came out of hiding.



Leah begs Phil to stop. Phil looks at Leah and says that if everyone already thinks Adam is dead, it won't make any "difference." Leah points out that Adam isn't really dead—he's alive. Leah tries to stop Cathy and Brian from heading off into the woods, but they ignore her. Leah turns to Phil and begs him to look at her, but he will not. He walks away.

Later, Phil and Leah are sitting together in the field again. Phil takes out some **Starburst candies** and eats one. He offers one to Leah, who takes it and begins to cry. Still crying, she puts the candy in her mouth. Phil puts his arm around Leah, who suddenly spits the candy out. She gets up and storms away. Phil calls after her, but she is gone.

SCENE 4

Mark and Jan are on the street. Jan asks if Leah is really gone. Mark says she is—she left last week, but no one knows where she's gone. He's heard rumors that she's moved schools but can't confirm anything. Jan asks if Phil knows what's happened to Leah. Mark doesn't answer her.

Richard and Phil sit in a field. Phil isn't **eating**. Richard gets up and starts doing handstands, begging Phil to watch his tricks. Phil, however, doesn't even look up. Richard sits down next to Phil and begs him to "come back." He asks if Phil gets bored sitting alone in the field all day, but Phil doesn't answer. Richard tells Phil that everyone's been asking for him—they miss when he was "running the show." He asks if Phil is interested in what's going on back at school, but Phil doesn't answer.

Richard tells Phil that John Tate has found God and become an evangelist. Danny is doing an internship at a nearby dentist's office but hates it. Brian has been dosed with an even heavier medication which has made him nearly catatonic. Cathy is "running things" at school and apparently rules with an iron fist—there's a rumor that she "cut a first year's finger off." Lou and Cathy are best friends, and Jan and Mark have started shoplifting. Richard asks if Phil is bothered by any of what he's told him, but Phil won't answer. Richard shakes Phil by the shoulders and begs to know when he's coming back. Phil is silent.

Phil's cruelty in this passage is intense, to be sure—but it's also rooted in a genuine questioning of the nature of reality. Adam is, to the rest of the world, dead—so if Brian kills him, it won't make a difference in the lives of anyone but the few of them. This twisted logic shows how subjective reality is, and how easy it can be to believe that a horrific choice is the only realistic option.



This is the first time in the play that Phil has shared food—or physical affection—with anyone. Leah is too traumatized by what she's seen Phil do and become, however, to accept his advances, and she becomes the one to reject him. In essence, Phil has isolated himself for so long that it's now impossible for him to connection with anyone else.



Mark and Jan's final scene together shows that communication even between the two of them has broken down. They used to be more or less on the same page, but now they each have questions that the other can't answer.



This passage suggests that Phil has left school, leaving the rest of the group to fend for themselves and make their own choices and connections. Phil has little interest in what's going on back at school—but his aloofness is nothing new. Whether his withdrawal from school is tied to the terrible decision he made in the last act, Leah's departure, or something else is unclear.



Richard's report of how their friend group has changed and fractured is disturbing. Most everyone is worse off than they were at the start of the play. Even the characters who have gotten what they wanted—Danny and Cathy—face bleak futures and precarious circumstances. Richard is perhaps trying to suggest that Phil is to blame for everything that's happened—but Phil won't even comment on what's happening in his so-called friends' lives.



Richard looks around. He admits that Phil has found a nice spot to sit and be. He says that as he was coming up the hill, a “big wind of fluff”—like the kind that comes off of dandelions—surrounded him out of nowhere. For a moment, he says, he thought he was in a cloud. As the fluff surrounded him, Richard had the feeling of being an “alien,” and realized that there had to be life on other planets. He asks Phil how he thinks people on other worlds live. Phil doesn’t answer him. Richard asks Phil to come back, but Phil stays silent. The two of them sit together quietly.

This passage suggests that Richard has taken on Leah’s role. He is being driven mad by his own guilt and self-loathing, and is desperate to unload his confusing existential thoughts on someone else. Richard wants validation and perhaps even absolution from Phil—but Phil reacts even less than ever, indicating that his isolation from other people is now complete.





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