

Literature Unit 1: *Kindertransport* by Diane Samuels (Nick Hern Books)

Skills targeted:

AO1 Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.

AO2 Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.

Why study this text?

The play deals with the individual effect of the transportation of German Jewish children in 1939 on Eva/Evelyn and her mother, Helga. The background to the transportation and the rise of Nazism leading to the systematic extermination of the Jews and other people deemed undesirable by the totalitarian state is clearly one of the most important lessons of history from the last century. The legacy of the inhuman treatment of the people is strongly grounded in our national consciousness. Film of the liberation of the concentration camps will have been seen by most pupils and they will understand the horror and the tragedy of this particular example of 'Man's inhumanity to Man'. The play looks beyond the physical death of the millions who suffered in the camps through portraying the life of a survivor, Eva/Evelyn, the girl who changed her identity and who was saved by the sacrifice of her mother. However, the new life meant the death of the old and the loss of relationship and identity with the mother who gave up her precious 'jewel'. The symbolism of the mouth organ, or childhood itself, provides rich opportunities for exploring the power of language through close reading. The play will provoke discussion and thinking about family and self-identity, how the present is affected by the past, and learning to live with our demons and insecurities (here embodied in the role of the Ratcatcher).

Background and context

Kindertransport was the term used for the removal of Jewish children from Germany during the late 1930s. Anti-Semitism had swept Germany after the election of the National Socialists and the persecution of the Jewish community had become state policy and actively encouraged in all levels of society. New laws prohibited the ownership and management of businesses by Jewish people and severe restrictions were placed on their movements and ability to live as citizens. The Nazi propaganda and state machine forced millions of people to become portrayed as sub-human and to blame them for the economic and social problems that had blighted the country through the 1920s and 30s. The transportation of the children was one of the last 'humane' aspects of the solution to the 'Jewish Problem'. After the vicious pogrom of *Kristallnacht*, when the anti-Semitic attacks became more frequent and widespread, a small number of families were given the opportunity to send their children to other countries under the auspices of 'The Movement for the Care of Children from Germany'. The heartbreaking decision to send away your child in order that they survive while knowing that you may never see them again, and the long-term effects of that decision on the next generations, forms the core of this drama. We certainly learn that the victims of the anti-Semitism in Germany did not all die in the concentration camps.

Discussion points

Self-identity

How do we know 'who' we are? The inevitable angst-ridden teenager question is taken to a wholly different level by the dilemma of Eva, the young girl transported from Germany to England. Who is

she when she decides to call herself Evelyn? Does a change of name change the core of who she is – or was? Can we deny our roots and culture? Can we hide our past and hope it never resurfaces? How do we live with the fear that the past will resurface and change the present? Do we ever stop being the person we were as a child?

Family relationships

How deep is the bond between parent and child? Is a daughter closer to her mother? The play allows us to question relationships as the deep love that allowed Helga to give up her daughter in order to save her life, has been rejected when she returns later to find 'Evelyn' in the place of Eva. Why does Evelyn refuse to go to New York? The separation of the two and the new 'mother' in England has created new loyalties. How far are the problems between the older Evelyn and her own daughter, Faith, rooted in the past that she tried to erase (and yet kept through the letters and mementoes in the box?).

Childhood fears and anxieties

The Ratcatcher embodies the fears of the young Eva/Evelyn. The German children's story of the Pied Piper foregrounds the character who returns throughout the play. His warning and 'cruel promise' to the people of Hamlyn that he will 'take the heart of your happiness away' represents the pain suffered by Helga at the loss of her child and the continuing nightmare for Eva/Evelyn. The actor playing the Ratcatcher also plays the border official on the train and the postman in England – this dramatic device serves to emphasise the overriding fear of intense insecurity in the child and the adult as she makes her new life in England. What makes us fear for the future? How do we develop insecurities? How can we try to overcome their hold over us?

Example task

The Ratcatcher – role and significance of 'his' appearances

Students should work in pairs or larger groups to discuss the role of the Ratcatcher in the play. Depending on their ability and level of confidence in dealing with the text, they can be left to interrogate it themselves, or they could be given clear guidance on sections of the text where 'he' appears in his various guises. Guided questions could be used to develop understanding of the dramatic importance of the character and promote speculative thinking, e.g.:

- Why do you think Helga asked Eva to pick another story on her last night (pp 14–15)?
- What is the dramatic value of Faith discovering the book in the present as Eva is asking for it to be read in the past (pp 14–15)?
- Why do you think the writer makes Helga read such powerful lines from the story on pp 16–17?

Students can create their own questions, based on their discussion and ideas and then ask other groups to offer their thoughts – gradually building an array of responses, reflecting personal interpretations and impressions. Students can also be guided to look at the scenes with the border official (pp 18–20) and the postman (pp 48–50) to consider the dramatic effect of the same actor playing these and the role of the Ratcatcher. They could investigate any common traits in attitude and level of threat in the different but similar characters. Pupils achieving at the lower levels will be able to recognise the basic significance of the role of the character in the drama/narrative and perhaps begin to think speculatively. Pupils demonstrating the highest level of performance will extensively explore the dramatic significance and complexity of the 'Ratcatcher' character-construct leading to a confident and convincing personal analysis with close reference to the text and perhaps to dramatic structure and devices.

Analytical/creative approaches

Analysis of the use of German

If students are guided to the use of the German language in the play, they can start to make some decisions about the significance of its use at particular points. For instance, in the early scenes we are presented with the final night shared with Helga and Eva where there is no use of German at all – why? The song on page 16 is entirely in German as Eva leaves on the train – why? Is there an element of comfort in the song, even though it has a sinister message? Further scenes will develop the students' thinking, e.g.

- The problems and misunderstandings between Eva and the Organiser from p 23.
- The continuation of the scene when she meets Lil on p 27.

Clearly, there are other points in the play where language creates barriers and links. Students can learn how the past and the present are divided by the German Eva and the 'English' Evelyn and how this hidden character, though visible and audible on stage for the audience, is unknown to Faith. Pupils' range of responses to this task will move from the basic recognition of the language difference on a contextual and narrative level to a confident and thorough investigation of the dramatic significance of the use of language and its possible intended effect on an audience. The most confident and able pupils will speculate more confidently and use the text carefully to justify their ideas and perspectives.

Staging

Much of the power of the play derives from the shift between the past and present, often co-existent on the stage in the same space at the same time. This can be approached in a variety of ways, not least in looking at the staging of the scenes where most of the characters are on stage at once. For instance:

- The opening scenes where Faith and Evelyn are preparing for her to go to new student lodgings while Eva and Helga are preparing for the *Kindertransport*.
- Where Helga and Eva discuss the watch and jewellery in the shoes while the 'older' Lil talks with Faith after the argument with Evelyn.

Students can discuss how the scenes can be staged, in particular how the characters from the past and present can co-exist and/or whether they ever should show any recognition of the 'other' characters – are there any moments where this would be dramatically effective – why?

Key issues for improving grades

The specification states that answers should:

- be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- be sufficiently detailed – it is better to give a lot of detail about a small part of the text than trying to cover lots of different points
- be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- use effective vocabulary – including literary terms where relevant
- use well-chosen evidence/quotations to support points.

To gain a top grade, candidates should show an enthusiastic and critical personal response. The best candidates write about the author's methods and achievements, and will concentrate on comment, not content.

Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit

Interactive resources to support a selection of the set texts will be available via Nelson Thornes' online learning space, *kerboodle!*. The resources will support text comprehension, exam practice and revision. The texts covered are:

Mister Pip

Romeo and Juliet

Martyn Pig

Of Mice and Men

An Inspector Calls

Lord of the Flies

Author: Adrian Cropper