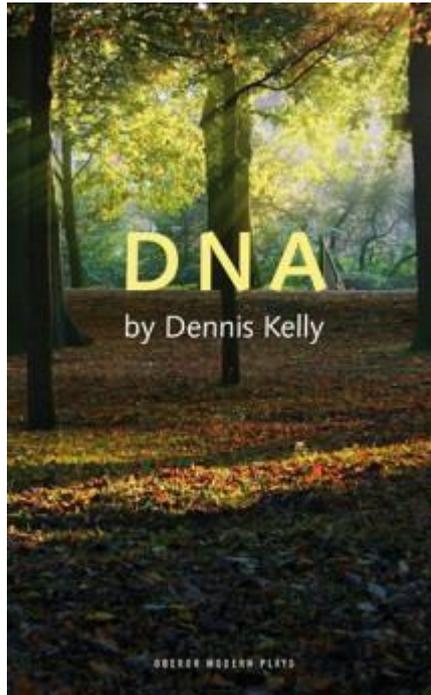


DNA (DeoxyriboNucleic Acid) by Dennis Kelly

Exam Board: AQA



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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.

Introduction

DNA deals with a whole host of contemporary issues through its portrayal of a particularly disaffected and alienated teenage-orientated view of the 'modern' world. The characters are loosely drawn and not often given space to comment on anything other than their immediate world and the complications of the relationships through which it is structured. The scenes are full of confrontational situations, often framed around a character addressing another with no response and at times this creates scenes constructed of a series of monologues. This lack of communication builds powerful dramatic tension and often explodes into furious argument between characters and within characters.

DNA, as a drama, takes the negativity and nihilism of a group of teenagers to a wholly different level to that which has been seen in literature before, eg) *Catcher in the Rye*. There is virtually no communication with the world outside the friendship group portrayed in the opening scenes. The world of the characters takes very little notice of the rest of society until faced with the consequences of an act of wilful and 'mindless' aggression. The aftermath of this act brings the characters closer together and pulls them apart.

When studying this play the reader should enjoy the power of the arguments and (hopefully) will be shocked by the immorality that underpins the choices made by some of the characters. This play has provoked intense discussion about right and wrong and our responsibility for each other.

Background and Context

The play is set in an indeterminate place and time, though clearly contemporary in speech and reference. The spirit of place is less important than the intensity of the characters. The power struggles within the group of teenagers and the volatility of certain characters create plenty of dramatic tension. The core themes of self and group identity, bullying, cruelty and responsibility should allow all young people to develop opinions about the consequences faced by the characters in this play. The writer has named the characters but left performers able to change names to suit their own preference. The character-constructs and the moral choices that they make are more important than a name.

Summary:

A group of teenagers do something bad, really bad, then panic and cover the whole thing up. But when they find that their cover-up unites them and brings harmony to their once fractious lives, where is the incentive to put things right.

Act 1

Scene 1: Mark and Jan discuss that someone is *'dead'* and this throws the audience into the middle of the action.

Scene 2: Leah talks and Phil eats. Leah wants answers to know what Phil is thinking.

Scene 3: John Tate is clearly stressed and tries to ban others using the word *'dead'*. He tries to keep control over the group by using fear and threats. Richard threatens his leadership but this is suppressed. When Mark and Jan arrive they explain to the group their version of events leading up to Adam falling into the grille. They try to justify their vicious attack on him by saying he was laughing. Phil finally speaks and devises a plan to frame a non-existent person.

Scene 4: Leah speaks about bonobos being our nearest relatives. *'Chimps are evil. They murder each other...they kill and sometimes torture each other to find a better position within the social structure'* (p26). This could be seen as the author's voice coming through about how he feels about the nature of bullies.

Act 2

Scene 1: The audience learn that someone is *'not going'*...this is a reference to Brian not going to the police station

Scene 2: Leah is still trying to gain Phil's attention. This time she talks about the nature of happiness. She shows him a Tupperware container and says it is Jerry. She describes how she has killed him.

Scene 3: The police have found a man that fits the description of the man that Phil concocted because Cathy used her *'initiative'* to find a man that matched the description. The plan has gone wrong. Brian is refusing to go into the police station to identify the man who is being framed. Phil threatens him with being taken up to the grille if he doesn't go. Brian goes.

Scene 4: Leah tries to get Phil's attention again. This time she has déjà vu.

Act 3

Scene 1: Jan and Mark reveal Cathy has *'found someone'* in the woods. It turns out to be Adam

Scene 2: Leah arrives in the scene with a packed suitcase. She is trying to gain Phil's attention by threatening to leave and telling him not to try and stop her...he doesn't. She tells him about Adam's memorial and that she has seen Cathy on the TV. She tells him that everyone is happier *'funny this is they're all actually behaving better as well....'* (p47).

Scene 3: Adam is alive and has been living in a hedge. He has survived by living off dead animals. He has clearly sustained a head injury. Phil instructs Jan, Mark and Lou to leave

and not say anything. He shows Cathy how to kill Adam by tying a plastic bag around Brian's head (who is by not on medication and is clearly losing his mind). Leah begs him not to do this.

Scene 4: Leah does not speak. Phil offers her a sweet and as he puts his arm round her to show affection, she spits out the sweet and leaves in disgust. Phil shouts after her.

Act 4

Scene 1: Jan and Mark reveal someone has '*gone*'. This turns out to be Leah.

Scene 2: Richard tries to convince Phil to re-join the group. He tries to gain his attention in similar ways to Leah. Phil does not speak. He also does not eat. Leah's departure has clearly affected him. Richard tells him what has happened to the rest of the group.

Key Themes and Discussion Points within the Play

Gangs:

Perhaps the strongest influence of the opening scenes on an audience will be the apparently close-knit nature of the group. Seen in disparate groups at first, the nature of what they have done is gradually revealed through their shocked reaction to the death of Adam. However, power struggles within the group are evident through the attempts of John Tate to ban the word 'death' and then to suppress what he sees as an overthrow of his leadership by Richard. Most sinister of all, is the contribution of Phil, who has not spoken throughout a tirade by Lea (his long-suffering girlfriend) where he details a well-constructed plan to absolve the group from any blame for the death of Adam – with DNA as part of the cover.

The role of the female characters is interesting in that Cathy ultimately takes on the role of gang leader by the end of the play, while Lea leaves, unable to cope with Phil's solution to the problem of the reappearance of Adam.

Bullying:

Psychological bullying as well as the physical abuse of Adam is a predominant theme in the play and echoes the treatment of the subject in *Lord of the Flies* and *I'm the King of the Castle*. Phil is perhaps the most interesting character of all as he does not respond to his girlfriend Lea in a number of scenes where she is quite obviously looking for assurance and security. She speaks almost in monologue were it not for the fact he is on stage, at times even speaking for him. His seemingly callous disregard for her feelings is tantamount to bullying and his reaction to her leaving at the end of the play is a surprise.

Jan and Mark recount with relish what they did to Adam when they believed he died falling through the grille.

John Tate, who bullies mercilessly to keep power, disappears from the action early but is referenced as having 'lost it' and 'found God' as the play progresses. There are clearly consequences for their actions.

The weaker members of the group, Danny, the aspiring dentist, and Brian are used cynically by Phil to help in the cover-up (after being threatened with the same fate as Adam) and are damaged, as is everyone else in the process. Everyone is changed by what happens but not always in the way that we might expect.

Responsibility:

The play makes the audience question *who* is ultimately responsible for the callous behaviour of the group towards Adam in the initial attack – and later when he makes his surprise reappearance as a feral child. The characters fight to save themselves from blame; Jan and Mark consistently refer to 'laughing' and being in 'stitches' as they recount Adam's desperately sad attempts to be accepted by the group as he ate leaves, stole vodka, had

cigarettes stubbed out on him and ultimately fell to his 'death'. The shock and the guilt is seen in the smaller conversations such as when Lea accuses Phil – 'you're not human'.

As a collective, the responsibility is taken as a shared 'burden' but this is actually a device designed to keep all the gang members quiet. When Phil states, 'I'm in charge. Everyone is happier. What's more important: one person or everyone?', he is starting to make them all feel that they cannot step back from the solution that he himself has decided will be the result of the resurrection of Adam. This time the group will be responsible for cold-blooded murder and not accidental manslaughter. This seems a small step for Phil who has insisted that Mark positively identify the completely innocent postman, who's DNA was found on Adam's jumper.

Characters

Mark and Jan

These characters act as the 'chorus' or narrators. They throw the audience directly into the action at the beginning of each Act and are useful as they fill in any blanks for us.

Mark and Jan are responsible for the events surrounding the bullying of Adam that lead to him falling into the grille. From p20 – 23 we are given a detailed description of the events that take place. Mark and Jan appear to be trying to justify their actions in this scene, Mark: *We were having a laugh, weren't we...* (p20).

This phrase is repeated several times.

They also convince themselves that Adam is actually enjoying the bullying.

Mark: *Oh yeah, Adam he was laughing harder than anyone.* (p21).

Again, this word laughing is repeated throughout the scene. However, it is also punctuated with other words such as, '*terrified*', '*crying*', '*stuffed out cigarettes*', '*punch him*', '*pegged a stone*'.

We get the impression that Mark and Jan might also be younger members of the group/ less able to assert themselves. They look to Phil for reassurance and take instructions from him. (p57)

Jan: *Are we going to be in trouble*

Phil: *If you go now and say nothing to no one about this, you won't be in trouble.*

Leah

In a number of scenes, (pages 10–12, 26–28, 30–32, 41–43, and 46–48) we are presented with a one-sided relationship between Leah and Phil. She is clearly concerned about their relationship – '*You need me as much as ...*' shows her insecurity and desire for some response from Phil and this sears through the text.

Her speeches are virtually monologues as there is no response from Phil. She is constantly striving for Phil's attention and tries a variety of techniques to gain his attention. These range from putting herself down (showing her insecurities), talking about intellectual topics (bonobos, science, nature) that seem not to relate to the events of the play, doing something physical (at times harming herself or a pet), putting Phil down or repeating his name. These do not get his attention. Finally she brings her speech back to the Adam situation in the hope of shocking him into a reaction.

Leah is a moral character and tries to reason with many of the characters. She is sensible and able to think for herself and speak her mind. However, she still falls under the leadership of Phil as she is not strong enough to alter the opinions and actions of anyone in the group.

We are given no back ground information to any of the characters and much of what we understand is due to inference. However, Leah reveals that her and Phil have actually known Adam a very long time and pleads with him to help Adam, not harm him.

Leah: *It's Adam, Phil, Adam! We used to go to his birthday parties, he used to have that cheap ice cream and we used to take the piss, remember?* (p58)

Phil

Although on stage in many scenes, Phil rarely speaks. Usually his action involves eating (ice-cream/Starburst/waffles, etc.).

In the scenes with Leah he only actually directly responds to her when she has left him on page 61. Look closely at these scenes and the way Leah directly addresses Phil. He sometimes uses facial expressions and body language in response to what she has to say: such as the talk on the beauty of life on page 31 where she hopes that he sees the world from the same perspective as herself. This includes the shocking revelation that she killed her pet with a screwdriver – at which '*Phil shrugs!*' (p32) Why is there so little response to what she says? How might his later actions be foreshadowed by his lack of response and concern to what Leah is saying?

Although quiet for a long time, Phil clearly considers everyone's words and actions before he speaks. He gives calm and considered instructions to each member of the group as he assigns roles and tasks for them to complete. This makes him appear callous and nihilistic. A key quote that justifies his actions:

Phil: *I'm in charge. Everyone is happier. What's more important; one person or everyone?*

Phil has controlling/ reassuring body language. When addressing Lou on p57, the stage directions state that he, 'Places a hand on her shoulder, smiles, warm, reassuring'

Phil: *Everything is going to be fine*

It is not until Act 3 Scene 4 that Phil realises he needs Leah as he calls after her when she walks off. Ironically, this is the first time he shows her any affection or acknowledges her but she is clearly disgusted by what he has turned into (p61).

Act 4 Scene 2 Phil is sat with Richard in the field. The stage directions clearly state, 'Phil is not eating.' Although Richard takes Leah's role, something is missing/ wrong as Phil is not eating. This is significant. Does he realise he needs Leah?

John Tate

John Tate only appears in Act 1 Scene 3. He leads through using fear to control others. However, he is visibly falling apart during Act 1 Scene 3 as he panics and is unable to control those around him or the situation. He tries to ban the word, '*dead,*' he says he *will 'bite their face. Or something.*' if anyone uses the word again. However, the use of 'Or something' shows he has clearly not in control of his thoughts, words or the situation.

The challenge to his leadership by Richard causes him further insecurity and the only way he knows how to lead is through fear, which he employs by threatening Lou, Danny and Richard. His words are very patronising as he talks down to each character –

John Tate to Danny: *'you're on you're own side, which is, well, to be honest, very silly and dangerous'*

John Tate to Brian: *'you crying piece of filth'*

Cathy

From very early on in the play, Cathy is shown to have no remorse about the groups' actions. She finds the situation *'exciting'* and *'better than ordinary life'* (p16). Her excitement grows when she is asked by the TV for an interview. She shows no concern for Adam and the real reason why the cameras are at the TV station and instead focuses on her own gain: *'They might even give me money for it, do you think I should ask for money?'* (p36).

Cathy appears to have a callous side when she obtains DNA evidence from an actual postman who fits the description Phil made up. Did she do this because she is a social climber who is trying to impress the leader, or did she genuinely not realise what she has done? (p38)

Cathy: *We showed...initiative. We-*

Leah: *Who told you to do that?*

Cathy: *Richard, we showed initiative.*

She looks up to the leader and she is always supported by the leader – whoever they may be. For example, John Tate backs her up on p7 *'Don't tell Cathy to shut up'* (John Tate to Danny). Phil also trusts her with the important jobs (acquiring the DNA evidence, killing Adam). Her position within the group rises throughout the play as she becomes closer/ more relied on by the leader.

By Act 3 Scene 3 Cathy is 'second in command' as she is charged with killing Adam. A conversation takes place between her and Phil and despite Leah's attempts to be heard, she is ignored by them both (p58)

Phil: (to Cathy) *Do you understand?*

Leah: *Understand what?*

Cathy: *Yeah, I do.*

By the end of the play we learn that Cathy is now in charge and appears to have a sadistic nature. Phil has left the group so she assumes the leader role she seems to have been craving.

Richard gives the final words on Cathy:

Richard: *Cathy doesn't care. She's too busy running things...She's insane. She cut off a first year's finger, that's what they say anyway'.*

Richard

Richard first appears to be a strong character and potentially someone who is able to be a leader of the group. Lou is scared of him and he presents a challenge to John Tate's leadership. Although he stands up to John Tate (*You shouldn't threaten me John'* p17), he is eventually put in his place when John Tate turns the entire group against Richard by telling them to choose sides. (Act 1 Scene 3).

Richard is in need of guidance from a leader. Richard's way of dealing with the situations that arise is to become sarcastic and to put others down.

Act 2 Scene 3:

Putting other down (p36)–

Cathy: *It was great*

Richard: *It was shit*

(p39)

Cathy: *Richard, we showed initiative*

Richard: *That is the most stupid-*

Sarcasm (p36) - Leah can't believe they have found a man that fits their fake description.

Richard: *Why don't you pop down the station and say, 'excuse me, but the fat postman with the bad teeth doesn't actually exist, so why don't you let him go.'*

Richard can be very negative and grumbles when given instructions by the leader. It could be argued that this is why he does not progress in the social hierarchy and Cathy does. Phil instructs Richard to take Brian to the police station but has to repeat his instructions to him (p41)

Phil: *Richard'll take you*

Richard: *Not me again*

Phil: *Richard'll take you*

By Act 4 Scene 2 Richard appears to have taken the place of Leah as he sits in the field with Phil. His speech/ monologue takes the same structure as Leah's. He seemingly talks about something unrelated to the group, attempts something physical to gain Phil's attention (walking on his hands), then brings his thoughts back to the actual situation they are in by discussing what has happened to the group.

Brian

Brian is the weakest link. There must be a reason why he is chosen as the one the 'fake man' shows his 'willy' to. The other characters must see him as weak and vulnerable and someone the police believe could be a victim. In order for their story to stick, the police must believe this.

Brian is bullied and pushed around by all of the characters. Richard hates him and protests when told by Phil he should look after him. Cathy slaps him. Phil threatens him with the same fate as Adam if he does not follow orders (p40).

He cannot deal with his guilt and is prescribed medication to help him cope. He is seen to revert to a childlike state of 'play' by Act 3 Scene 3 as his way of dealing with the events.

Danny

Danny is presented as a sensible character and appears as an opposite to the rest of the characters. He has plans to become a dentist. He has plotted his course through education to achieve this and nothing can interfere with this plan...until the death of Adam. None of the other characters refer to their plans and the consequences of their actions on their lives or the lives of others. Look at Act 1 Scene 3 (his plans ruined) and Act 2 Scene 3 where Cathy is revealed to have found someone matching the description of the fake postman. Danny's concern is how he will get into dental college '*You need three references...*' (p36) and also that they are framing a man for something he didn't do. 'We can't let them think it's him.' (p39). Finally in this scene, he reacts with shock to Phil's suggestion at taking Brian up to the grille if he doesn't follow orders, '*Is he serious?*' (p40).

Lou

Lou will follow whoever the leader is at the time. She is a 'yes' woman and will do as she is told. She is controlled by fear (see Act 1 Scene 3). She is afraid of John Tate but also of '*Richard, maybe*' (p13). This causes John Tate to panic and ultimately results in John Tate and Richard's confrontation. Lou (possibly inadvertently) has planted the seed in John Tate's mind that he is not seen as a leader which results in the struggle for power between him and Richard. Ultimately, their conflict ends with John Tate re-gaining power through threats and fear.

Lou has no complicated speeches but instead speaks using simple sentences or short phrases. Phrases such as '*We're screwed*' (p34) make her appear young/ not assertive and relies on being given instruction. She also appears to believe the lies the group have created (p35)

Lou: *Because he saw him in the woods*

Leah: *He didn't*

Lou: *He did he-*

She is cut off by Leah making it appear as if her words are not important.

In Richard's final commentary to Phil on what the members of the group are now up to, we find out that Lou is best friends with Cathy.

Richard: Dangerous game. I feel sorry for her.

Adam

Adam is our victim. We learn a lot about him through the words of Jan and Mark between pages 20-23 where they recount the horrific events that led up to him falling into the grille. However, we must bear in mind that we are being told their version of events where they are trying to convince themselves and the rest of the group that he is in fact laughing/ enjoying the things being done to him. Mark says, '*he was laughing harder than anyone*' (p21).

Adam wants to be part of the group and Mark and Jan see exactly what he will do to be part of their gang:

Mark: *...so we were sort of, well, alright, taking the piss, sort of. You know what he's like he was, sort of hanging around*

Jan: *Trying to be part of*

Mark: *Yeah, trying to be part of, yeah, yeah...He'll do anything to be part of the group.*

When Adam actually appears in Act 3 Scene 3 (p49) we find out he has been living in a hedge. He has suffered a head injury and this is evidently still affecting him as his memory is weak and his speech is confused and staggered (p53)

Structure and Setting

The play follows a repeated structure with regards to the setting and who appears within each setting.

Act 1

Scene 1 (A street) Jan and Mark

Scene 2 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Scene 3 (A wood) Whole Group

Scene 4 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Act2

Scene 1 (A street) Jan and Mark

Scene 2 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Scene 3 (A Wood) Whole Group (minus John Tate)

Scene 4 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Act 3

Scene 1 (A street) Jan and Mark

Scene 2 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Scene 3 (A Wood) Whole Group (minus John Tate and Danny) Adam appears

Scene 4 (A Field) Phil and Leah

Act 4

Scene 1 (A street) Jan and Mark

Scene 2 (A field) Phil and Richard

The Street:

Jan and Marks scenes in The Street introduce the audience to what has been happening to the characters and then prepare us for the action that is to come in the group scenes (Scene 3 in each act).

The Field:

Leah and Phil's scenes take place in a field. This could have a 'romantic' notion as the field is open and spacious and away from the distraction of the other characters.

These scenes also have a notable structure created through Leah's monologues. Her speeches seemingly discuss irrelevant topic that are completely unrelated to the situation the groups are in. Deeper analysis will reveal that each speech could be metaphorical and applied to the group completely (the Bonobos and Chimps for example). It could be read that these speeches are used as a way to remove her/ distract her from the reality and the horror of the situation she finds herself in. Ultimately she is trying to get Phil's attention. When she can't gain his attention through thoughtful words, she tries something more

physical or shocking (strangling herself, showing her 'Jerry'). With no reaction from Phil, she then brings her monologue to a close by referring directly to the situation they are in ('Adam's parents were on TV...') which may gain a reaction of some sort from Phil.

The Wood:

The Wood is a suitable setting for the whole group scenes because of the connotations a wood has. They tend to be on the outskirts of a settlement and could be described as dark, mysterious, isolated etc. The discussions that the group have when they are in the woods are about things that should be kept hidden from normal society. The setting actually *allows* the events to take place without anyone finding out.

In the scenes where the wider group gather you should be carefully considering the physical dynamics of what is seen on stage – who stands where and what can this represent to the audience? The group scenes – (Act 1 Scene 3) John Tate's leadership threat, revelation of what has happened to Adam and Phil's plan; (Act 2 Scene 3) they've got DNA evidence; (Act 3 Scene 3) Adam returns.

Language and Style

Some characters say very little while some say a lot.

Lou, Mark and Jan often speak using one word, short phrases and simple sentences. Mark and Jan repeat each other's words sometimes to clarify their understanding of events. From p9 -

Jan: *Like dead, dead*

Mark: *Yes*

Jan: *proper dead, not living dead?*

Mark: *Not living dead, yes*

Other times their repetition is used to convince each other that their actions are justified.

Jan: *Trying to be part of*

Mark: *Yeah, trying to be part of, yeah, yeah, so we're having a laugh*

Jan: *With him*

Mark: *Yeah, with him....*

Throughout the scene where Jan and Mark tell the group about what has happened to Adam (20- 23), Kelly chooses to contrast the ideas that Adam is having a laugh with Jan and Mark and other language that shows how scared he is. Some of the language used is slang (pegging=throwing)

Having a laugh: *Hanging around, laughing, complete nutter, laughing his head off, joking*

Acts of bullying: *Eat some leaves, burnt his own socks, nick some vodka, punch, stubbed out cigarettes on him terrified, pegging stones, walking on the grille, chucking stones....really hard.*

Leah and Phil

Leah's speeches are virtual monologues. She appears to be talking a lot about very little that makes sense. She often starts sentences and topics but does not finish them and this makes her seem erratic. Her speeches do not flow and are interrupted by continual use of fillers 'you know,' and repeating words and phrases. Punctuation is limited which shows that she is speaking continually and without pause (unless indicated by stage directions). She often asks questions (directed to Phil) which she then answers herself, possibly knowing she will not get an answer anyway.

Her speech is in direct contrast to Phil's speech (when he does speak), which is well structured and punctuated. He speaks in full sentences and his speeches have clear direction, unlike Leah's speeches that lack focus. The fact he is silent when the other characters are panicking or explaining their actions shows that he is carefully considering his responses before issuing the instructions to the group. See Act 1 Scene 3 and Act 2 Scene 3.

John Tate

Kelly chooses his language and his speech structure carefully to show that John Tate is not in control of the situation:

John Tate: *Alright. New rule; that word is banned* (p15)

John Tate: *and if anyone says it I'm going to have to, you know, bite their face. Or something* (p15)

John Tate: *I'm finding this all quite stressful* (p19)

As with Leah, John Tate's speech is erratic and jumps between topics as he is thinking about many things at one time:

John Tate: *exactly, exactly, that's what I'm saying – Richard, you're scared of, are you...? I mean you walk down the corridor in this p I don't think Richard's – any corridor....* (p13)

AQA Guide to Achieving the Best Grades

Written responses at the lower levels of achievement will range from the merely descriptive and largely narrative to the emergence of some analysis with justification from the text.

Higher level answers will explore the thorough and complex juxtaposition of the different perspectives of the character-constructs, leading to a confident and convincing personal analysis, with close reference to the text and perhaps to dramatic structure and devices.

The specification states that answers should:

- 1) be relevant – you don't need to write everything you know about the text, only the things that relate to the question
- 2) 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
- 3) be well structured – with a clear introduction which addresses the question and a clear conclusion that returns to the question
- 4) 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**.

AQA Practice Questions

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on the question you choose.

(H = Higher paper questions, F = Foundation paper questions)

- 1) How does Kelly present ideas about bullies and victims in the play DNA? **(H)**
- 2) How effective is the last scene between Richard and Phil, as a conclusion to DNA? **(H)**
- 3) *'In many ways it is the absent Adam who is the central character of the play DNA.'*

How far do you agree with this opinion about the play and how does Kelly make you respond by the way he writes? **(H)**

- 4) What do you think is the significance of the title of the play, DNA? How does Kelly present his ideas in his play through the choice of title? **(H)**
- 5) How does Kelly present the character of Phil in the Play DNA? **(F)**
- 6) How does Kelly make the start of DNA interesting and exciting? **(F)**