

# DNA

by Dennis Kelly · Language: EN

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## Overview

DNA by Dennis Kelly is a darkly comic and unsettling play that explores the moral consequences of a group of teenagers' collective decision to cover up a crime. The story begins when a group of friends, led by the manipulative Phil, accidentally cause the death of a younger boy, Adam, by throwing him down a deep, disused railway tunnel. Panicked, they decide to keep the incident a secret, but when they discover that Adam may still be alive, Phil orchestrates a plan to kill him for real, framing a local man for the murder. The play follows the psychological unraveling of the group as they become trapped in a web of lies, guilt, and self-preservation, ultimately revealing how fear and the desire for control can corrupt even the most ordinary people.

The play is structured as a series of short scenes, often narrated by the character Leah, who serves as the moral conscience of the group, questioning their actions and desperately trying to make sense of the chaos. As the plot unfolds, the teenagers' initial panic gives way to a chillingly calculated cover-up, with Phil emerging as a ruthless leader who manipulates the group's fear to maintain his power. The play's climax comes when the group, having successfully framed an innocent man, is left to confront the emptiness of their victory, and Leah's final monologue suggests a profound sense of loss and moral decay. DNA matters because it is a powerful and provocative examination of contemporary youth culture, peer pressure, and the ease with which individuals can abandon their ethics when faced with fear. It is a staple of modern British drama, studied in schools and performed widely, and its themes of guilt, responsibility, and the fragility of morality remain deeply relevant.

## Key Takeaways

- The play demonstrates how a single act of cowardice can spiral into a series of increasingly immoral decisions, as the characters' initial accident turns into a deliberate murder.
- Phil's manipulation of the group shows how fear and the desire for control can be used to override individual moral judgment and create a dangerous group dynamic.
- Leah's role as the narrator and moral voice highlights the importance of speaking out against wrongdoing, even when it is easier to stay silent.
- The play critiques the tendency of individuals to prioritize self-preservation over truth and justice, as the group frames an innocent man to protect themselves.
- DNA suggests that the consequences of our actions are not always immediate, but they inevitably catch up with us, as seen in the characters' psychological unraveling.

- The play's bleak ending underscores the idea that once moral lines are crossed, it is nearly impossible to return to a state of innocence or normalcy.

## Chapter Summaries

### Act One, Scene One

The play opens with Leah and Phil in a nondescript street, with Leah talking rapidly about nothing in particular, revealing her anxiety and need to fill silence. Phil is mostly silent, and Leah's monologue establishes the tense, uneasy atmosphere. The scene introduces the two characters and hints at a deeper problem, as Leah's chatter is a way to avoid confronting something serious. This opening sets the tone for the play's exploration of communication breakdown and the difficulty of addressing uncomfortable truths.

### Act One, Scene Two

The group of teenagers is gathered in a field, and the conversation reveals that they have been involved in a traumatic event. It becomes clear that they have accidentally caused the death of a younger boy, Adam, by throwing him down a disused railway tunnel. The group is panicked and unsure what to do. Phil takes charge, suggesting they keep the incident a secret and not tell anyone. The scene establishes the central conflict: the group's collective decision to cover up a crime, driven by fear and self-preservation.

### Act One, Scene Three

The group is now in a more domestic setting, and the tension among them is palpable. Leah is increasingly distressed, while Phil remains calm and controlling. They discuss the logistics of their cover-up, with Phil insisting that they must stick to their story. The scene reveals the power dynamics within the group, with Phil emerging as the leader and Leah as the reluctant follower. The others, including Jan, Mark, and Danny, are portrayed as easily swayed, highlighting the theme of herd mentality.

### Act One, Scene Four

The group learns that Adam is not actually dead but is alive, though severely injured, at the bottom of the tunnel. This revelation throws the group into further chaos. Phil, however, sees this as a problem to be solved rather than a relief. He proposes that they must finish the job and kill Adam to ensure their secret is safe. The scene is a turning point, as the group moves from accidental harm to premeditated murder, and Leah's objections are overruled by Phil's forceful logic.

### Act One, Scene Five

The group, led by Phil, returns to the tunnel to carry out the plan to kill Adam. The scene is tense and dark, with the characters' fear and guilt palpable. Phil takes charge, instructing the others to

help him drop a heavy object onto Adam to ensure his death. Leah is horrified but feels powerless to stop it. The scene culminates in the group's collective act of murder, which they justify as a necessary evil to protect themselves. This is the moral point of no return for the group.

### **Act One, Scene Six**

After the murder, the group is in a state of shock. They discuss how to dispose of the body and cover their tracks. Phil suggests framing a local man, a stranger who has been seen in the area, for the crime. The group agrees, and they begin to construct a false narrative. Leah is increasingly isolated in her dissent, but she is unable to break free from the group's momentum. The scene highlights the escalation of their lies and the growing complicity of each member.

### **Act Two, Scene One**

Time has passed, and the group has successfully framed the innocent man, who is now in prison. The group's lives have returned to a semblance of normalcy, but the psychological toll is evident. Leah is more withdrawn and anxious, while Phil has become more confident and controlling. The scene shows the group's attempt to move on, but the guilt and fear are simmering beneath the surface. The dynamic among the characters has shifted, with Phil's power solidified.

### **Act Two, Scene Two**

The group is preparing for a party, and there is a sense of forced celebration. Leah confronts Phil about the moral implications of their actions, but he dismisses her concerns, insisting that they did what was necessary. The scene reveals the growing rift between Leah and the rest of the group, as they have accepted their new reality. The party serves as a backdrop for the group's attempt to pretend that everything is normal, but the underlying tension is undeniable.

### **Act Two, Scene Three**

The play's climax occurs as the group's carefully constructed facade begins to crumble. The innocent man's trial is approaching, and the group is called to testify. Leah, in a moment of crisis, considers telling the truth, but Phil and the others pressure her to stay silent. The scene is a powerful exploration of the conflict between individual conscience and group loyalty. Ultimately, the group sticks to their story, and the innocent man is convicted, sealing their moral corruption.

### **Act Two, Scene Four**

The final scene is a monologue by Leah, who is now completely isolated from the group. She reflects on the events that have transpired and the loss of her own innocence. She speaks of the emptiness of their victory and the impossibility of returning to who they were before. The play ends on a bleak note, with Leah's words suggesting that the group's actions have destroyed them all, even if they are not physically punished. The ending leaves the audience with a profound sense of moral unease.

## Themes

- Peer pressure
- Moral corruption
- Guilt and responsibility
- Manipulation and control
- Youth and violence
- The nature of evil

## Notable Quotes

- "We're all in this together." — Phil says this to the group to reinforce their collective responsibility and to pressure them into maintaining the cover-up.
- "I can't breathe." — Leah says this during a moment of panic, expressing her suffocating guilt and anxiety.
- "We have to be strong." — Phil uses this phrase to encourage the group to stay committed to their plan, framing their actions as a necessary act of survival.
- "It's not our fault." — One of the characters tries to rationalize the accident, showing the group's initial attempt to absolve themselves of responsibility.
- "We can't tell anyone." — Phil insists on secrecy, establishing the foundation of the group's conspiracy.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is DNA about?

DNA by Dennis Kelly is a play about a group of teenagers who accidentally cause the death of a younger boy. Panicked, they cover it up, but when they discover he is still alive, they decide to kill him to protect themselves. The play explores the moral consequences of their actions, peer pressure, and the ease with which ordinary people can commit terrible acts.

### Is DNA worth reading?

Yes, DNA is a powerful and thought-provoking play that is widely studied in schools. It offers a gripping exploration of morality, guilt, and group dynamics. Its short length and sharp dialogue make it an accessible yet impactful read, and its themes remain highly relevant to contemporary audiences.

### How does DNA end?

Spoiler: The group successfully frames an innocent man for the murder, and he is convicted. However, the psychological toll on the group is immense. Leah, the narrator, is left isolated and

broken, delivering a final monologue that reflects on the loss of innocence and the impossibility of escaping the consequences of their actions. The ending is bleak and morally unsettling.

### **Who should read DNA?**

DNA is ideal for students studying drama or English literature, as it is a set text for many GCSE and A-Level courses. It is also recommended for anyone interested in contemporary theatre, dark psychological dramas, or stories that examine moral dilemmas and the darker side of human nature.

### **How long does it take to read DNA?**

DNA is a short play, typically around 80 pages. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take about 1 to 2 hours to read, depending on how carefully you engage with the dialogue and stage directions. It can easily be read in one sitting.