

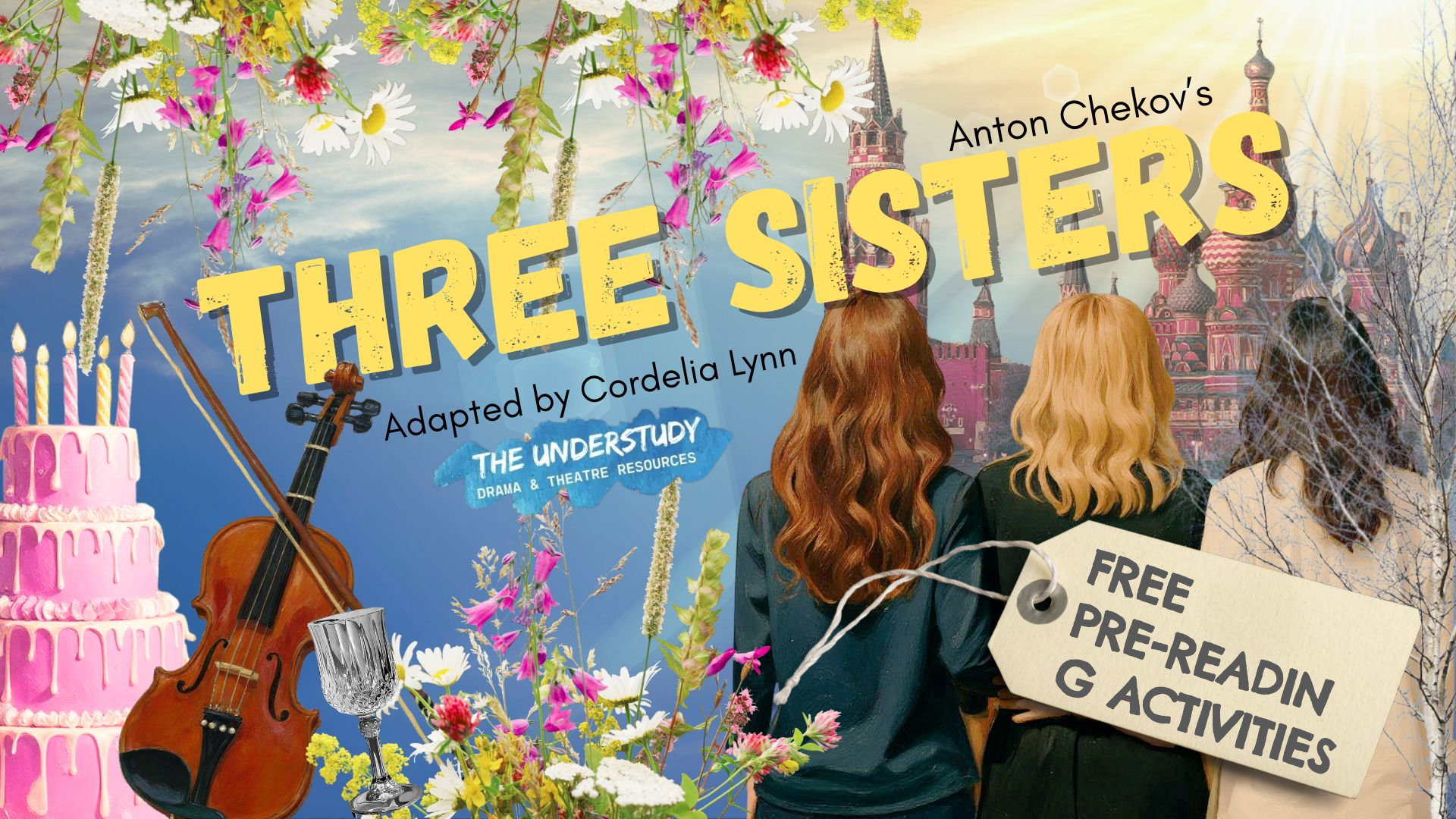
Anton Chekov's

THREE SISTERS

Adapted by Cordelia Lynn

THE UNDERSTUDY
DRAMA & THEATRE RESOURCES

FREE
PRE-READING
G ACTIVITIES



A NOTE

In case this is your first time with us...

This resource is designed in a hurry to get out fast for those who want to get started, while we work on the actual teaching resources that we design more carefully and professionally.

Just so you know...



Dear Teachers,

This is our freebie resource to introduce the first extracts of the Pre-Release Material for May/June 2026.

We like reading the extract before starting the practical exploration to get a first sense of the play. It means that students have read the extract and gives them time to 'digest' the plot and characters, before coming to their practical work and written work. It also means that when they do the practical work, they can draw on their knowledge of how the characters behave in the whole extract in order to shape their ideas.

There is some guidance on the next slide for introducing the play using these slides. Then there are slides for various activities leading up to a first read and a few simple activities to help organise information. We find that students respond very well to having this kind of help with setting up their scripts and being organised - especially those who might usually be the kind to lose scripts, keep half-hearted notes. This is a great opportunity to teach skills of analysis and organisation of ideas. The fact that the extracts are only 15 pages or so means they can keep on top of it and feel successful.

The first set of slides for practical exploration is due out on or before 14 September.

If you would like to pre-order (especially if you need to pay via a bank transfer from school) you can do so in the shop: www.the-understudy.org/shop.

Just choose 'manual payment' at check out in order to generate an invoice. Otherwise you can buy an instant download as soon as they are published.

Kind regards,
Jane



INTRODUCTORY LESSON

We love to start with a fun introductory lesson before students have any knowledge of the play. It gets them excited about the play and ignites curiosity.

1. Set up your space like a birthday party. Put out flowers, tea cups, tea?, maybe some gifts, a big pink cake if you have the budget (or any sweet treats will get them hyped!).
2. Print out the quotes at the end of these slides. Place them in individual envelopes or just fold them. (Envelopes give a nice sense of ceremony.)
3. Play some fun Russian folk music. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwsy3SpBwYE>)
4. Invite students in to the party, let them explore, enjoy the food. Maybe even play some party games as a warm up. (Musical chairs / statues / pass the parcel)
5. Tell them they will each get a gift of a quote.
6. They must then get into small groups (probably 2/3) and create a scene with all their quotes in it.
(Student instructions on next slides.)

There are 10 quotes so if your class is bigger, more than one student can have the same quote. Make sure they are in different groups. It will be interesting to see what different students do with the same quote.



DEVISE A SCENE

- Work in groups of 2 or 3.
- Share your quotes with each other and discuss what they might mean.
- Create a scene which:
 - must be set on someone's birthday
 - must be very naturalistic
 - must be set in Spring inside a house
 - must include at least one of the quotes your group has been given

Try not to play the scene for laughs. There may be some comic elements but you should not play up to it. Don't let it dominate the scene.

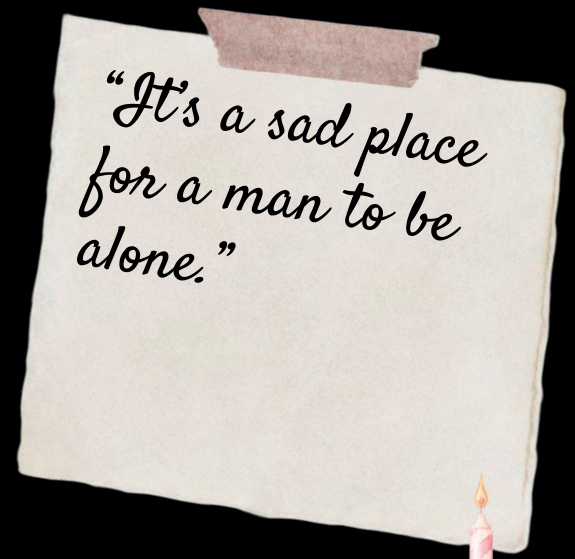
Remember that we are looking for naturalism in one single scene, not silly plots designed to get the quotes in. How can you work hard to make meaning and make sense and make us believe in your characters and their situation?



SHARE & REFLECT

Share your scenes and
discuss any emerging themes
and ideas.

What did the quotes inspire?



A NOTE FOR TEACHERS

The next exercise is fairly sophisticated so decide whether it's a good idea for your class or not. If it will lead to them writing weird answers vaguely referencing 'layers of nature' at some stage later down the line, it may not be a good idea.

If they are capable and bright and you lead them carefully through it and manage their understanding, it will be excellent preparation for studying the play.

But even then, you will need to be careful that vague remnants of it don't creep into answers in unhelpful ways later down the line.

Be clear that most written answers expect students to explain what they would do on stage, not what their preparation was - but these exercises can help us to prepare roles with creativity, sensitivity and imagination, which will hopefully lead to better written answers.



Student
Task

KATIE MITCHELL

NATURALISM EXERCISE

www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/learn-explore/schools/teacher-resources/practitioners-in-practice-katie-mitchell-film/

Discuss Mitchell's 6 layers of Naturalism.

Can you remember what they were and explain them to each other?

Watch the first eleven minutes of this video about Katie Mitchell's approach to Naturalism.

00:00 - 11:00



KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

- * Character biography
 - * Place
 - * Time
- * Immediate circumstances
 - * Events
 - * Intentions

You can decide whether to have the teacher lead and all observe one actor, or split into pairs with one actor and one director to lead them through the exercise.

Try the exercise that Katie Mitchell did exactly as she did with one actor.

KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Character biography: The incidents in a character's past which create their behaviour in the present.

AND/OR
Try the exercise
that Katie
Mitchell did
exactly as she did
with one actor
walking into a
room.

You are a 28 year old
woman. A teacher.
Unmarried.
You live at your parents'
home that you moved to 11
years ago. Your parents are



KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Place: The location where the action of the scene happens.

AND/OR
Try the exercise
that Katie
Mitchell did
exactly as she did
with one actor
walking into a
room.

You are walking into the
dining room. The table is laid.
There is a large cake.



KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Time: The year, season, day of the week and time of day the scene takes place in.

It is Spring. Midday. The sun
is shining. It is a Saturday.

AND/OR
Try the exercise
that Katie
Mitchell did
exactly as she did
with one actor
walking into a
room.



KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Immediate circumstances: The incidents that happen in the 24 hours before the scene starts that affect the character's mood and behaviour.

AND/OR
Try the exercise
that Katie
Mitchell did
exactly as she did
with one actor
walking into a
room.

You have had a headache
that you have had for days. It
is your youngest sister's 20th
birthday and the one year
anniversary of your father's
death



Student
Task

KATIE MITCHELL

PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Intentions: What the character wants the other character(s) to do, feel or say.

You want to comfort and
celebrate your sister - to
make her feel good.

AND/OR
Try the exercise
that Katie
Mitchell did
exactly as she did
with one actor
walking into a
room.



KATIE MITCHELL'S SIX LAYERS OF NATURALISM

1. **Character biography:** The incidents in a character's past which create their behaviour in the present.
2. **Place:** The location where the action of the scene happens.
3. **Time:** The year, season, day of the week and time of day the scene takes place in.
4. **Immediate circumstances:** The incidents that happen in the 24 hours before the scene starts that affect the character's mood and behaviour.
5. **Events:** The changes in the scene that affect the thoughts, feelings or actions of all the characters.
6. **Intentions:** What the character wants the other character(s) to do, feel or say.

Now see if you can go back to your scene you created and apply these six layers. If this is too challenging to do in groups, perhaps the whole class can work on one scene, making offers and suggestions while just the 2/3 people play the scene.



Student
Task

SHARE & REFLECT

How has this exercise helped develop your understanding of a naturalistic style of acting?

What are you curious about in terms of the play we are about to study based on everything you have experienced today?



PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

You will be working closely with this script for the next few months so get it organised, so you can access what you need easily, and you can easily see who is in a scene.

The script is two scenes. We've broken those down into seven units for our learning.

THE UNDERSTUDY
DRAMA & THEATRE RESOURCES

© Jane Fisher

PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

Choosing a colour for each character and highlighting your whole script allows you to see who is in each scene and makes reading in class (or to yourself) and experimenting with scenes much easier. It also allows you to see how prominent a character is.

Adding tabs to mark each section makes finding your place easy and helps organise the script in your head.



THE UNDERSTUDY
DRAMA & THEATRE RESOURCES

© Jane Fisher



PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

In drama analysis, directors and designers often break down the script into units.

This makes it easier to analyse what is going on.

Different directors/designers use different ways to decide where a unit starts and ends. Often an entrance or exit of a character is useful as it means characters' intentions change. Each play is unique as is each decision about how to do this.

We like to give each unit a name to help us remember it and to be able to talk about it with our class / company. We try to choose names that are simple and easy reminders of events.

UNIT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
PAGES	3-4	4-5	5-7	7-9	9-11	11-13	13-16
LINES	1-74	75-133	134-205	206-321	322-394	395-497	498-585
NAME	LONGING	TO WORK	CAKE & GIFT	NEW BATTERY COMMANDER	LOVESICK	A TOAST	BURNT

PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

UNIT	PAGES	LINES	UNIT TITLE	LOCATION/ PLACE	SEASON/ DATE/ TIME	PLOT	MOOD/TONE	SCENIC: SET / PROPS / COSTUME	TECHNICAL: LIGHT / SOUND	IDEAS / THOUGHTS / QUESTIONS	OLGA	MASHA	IRINA	ANDREY	NIKOLAY	ALL THREE	VASILY	ALDIMITS	PERFECT			
1	3 - 4	1 - 74	LONGING		Midday. Spring. Sun. Light.	Olga remembers Daddy's death a year ago; she is amazed a year has passed and they have survived it. It was raining. Irina cannot understand why she is doing this. Nikolay, Ivan, Vasily come into the hall. Olga continues, now remembering leaving Moscow eleven years ago. She longs to go home (to Moscow). Ivan and Nikolay dismiss something Vasily is saying - 'doesn't make sense' but we don't hear what he said, so it sounds like they are talking to Olga. Masha whistles her song. This annoys Olga. Olga goes on about her headaches and how her brain feels crippled and dead. She reveals she works at a school - has for four years. She hates it. They have bled her dry. The only thing she wants is... (Irina chimes in) to go back to Moscow. Only Masha is holding them back - but Masha can visit. Masha continues to whistle. Irina is hopeful it will work out. She is excited about her birthday. She remembers (fondly) her birthdays when she was little and Mummy was alive. Olga says she is glowing today, and Masha is beautiful too - but Andrey has put on weight; she has gotten old and thin from being angry at the girls (teaching). But she is happy she is free today - at home, no headache. She feels her age again, and wonders if she would be happier if she was married and could stay home all day. She supposes she would have loved her husband. Nikolay tells Vasily he is ridiculous and he's sick of listening to him. He announces their new battery commander will arrive today. He plays the piano as he speaks. He describes the battery commander as mid-forties at most, not stupid, but talks a lot and has a wife, mother-in-law and two daughters. Apparently the wife is mad and sort of suicidal, but mostly to 'annoy her husband' who complains to everyone.	Longing, depressing, hopeful, sad - very mixed.	Prozerov's house. A living room with large hall beyond. Table in hall being laid for lunch. OLGA in navy. MASHA in black. IRINA in white. Piano. Magazine. Notebook.	Light, midday. Clock strikes 12. Nikolay plays piano.	How to have living room and hall on stage? Time period is unclear. Frecknell's production was very sparse / minimalist - but clothes were sort of modern(ish). Set was bare - lots of chairs.												

You can complete this document as a class or as individuals. You get deeper understanding and more attention to detail if you each do your own but you share ideas (and workload) if you do it together. Or you could each do your own then share and create a central document. It helps enormously with noticing details and understanding design requirements.

Here's a blank template with just the first one done as an example



[BLANK THREE SISTERS UNITS.xlsx](#)

THE UNDERSTUDY
DRAMA & THEATRE RESOURCES

© Jane Fisher

READ THE SCRIPT TOGETHER

You can now read the script together and stop to complete your uniting document and begin a character study, so that when you come to do your second read and practical explorations, you know the characters and the plot of the whole extract and can draw on that knowledge in your activities and explorations of staging them. You can keep character notes on the second tab of the uniting sheets or you can keep notes in your script. (See next slide)

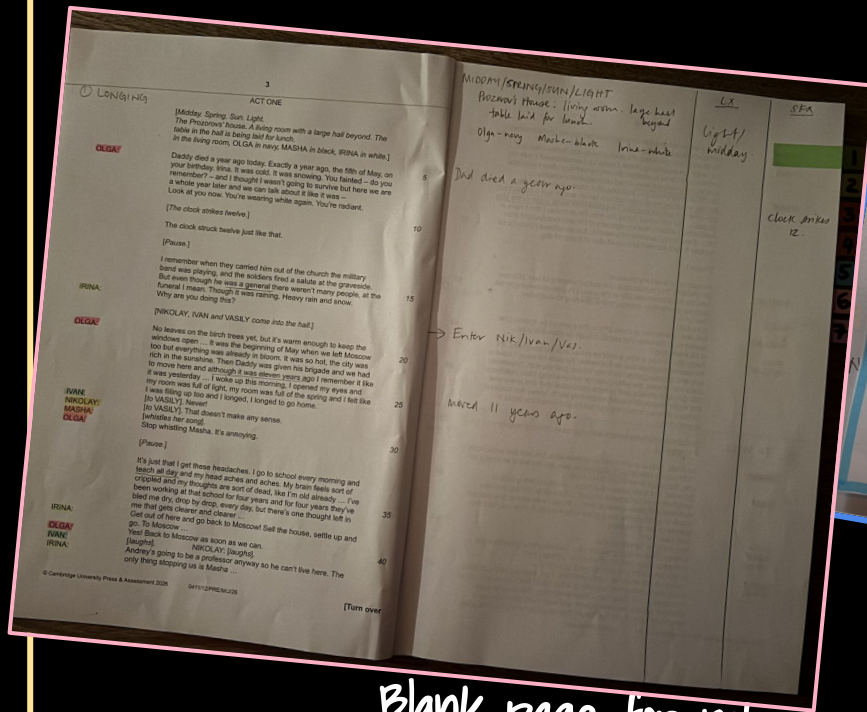
NAME	ROLE / DESCRIPTION	AGE	What else is known	Further Notes
OLGA	Oldest PROZEROV sister	28	teacher, unmarried	
MASHA	Middle PROZEROV sister	23	married to FYODOR	
IRINA	Youngest PROZEROV sister	20	birthday	
ANDREY	brother of three PROZEROV sisters, an academic		plays violin, put on weight	
FYODOR	Husband of OLGA		Classics teacher	
NATASHA	An awkward young woman who dresses poorly		dresses badly	
ALEXANDER	A Lieutenant Colonel commanding the artillery, in love with IRINA	42	Has a (suicidal) wife and two girls	
NIKOLAY	A Lieutenant in the army, not deemed handsome			
VASILY	A Captain in the army, a misfit infatuated with IRINA			
IVAN	army doctor	60		
ALEXEY	a Second lieutenant in the army			
VLADIMIR	a Second lieutenant in the army			
ANFISA	an elderly family retainer and former nurse	81		
FERAPONT	a doorkeeper at the council offices, elderly and hard of hearing	old		

PREPARING YOUR SCRIPT

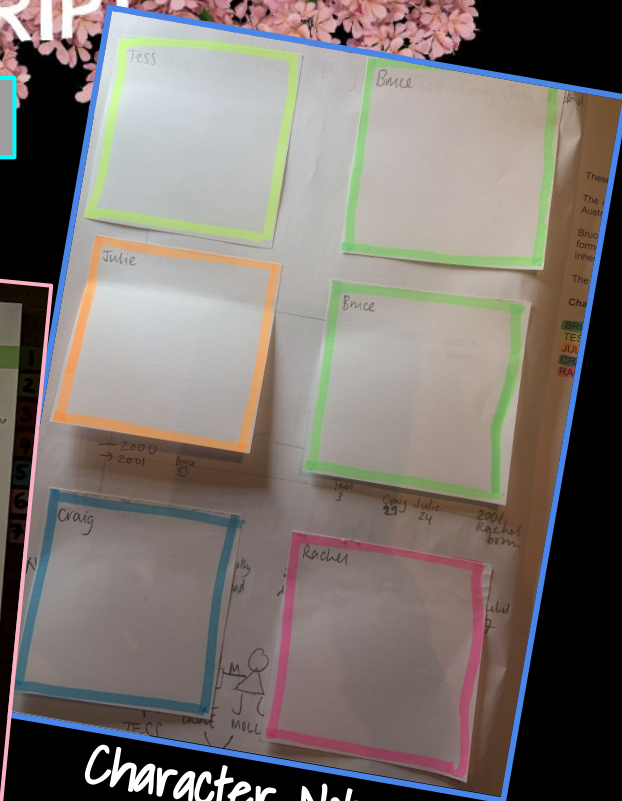
TIPS FOR SCRIPT NOTES

We print our script with a blank page next to each page for notes, diagrams for staging etc. We keep all notes in pencil so we can keep changing them as we go on.

On the front inside cover we use post-it notes to keep character notes. We can keep adding to these if needed.



Blank page for notes



Character Notes

THE UNDERSTUDY
DRAMA & THEATRE RESOURCES

© Jane Fisher

A decorative border of pink cherry blossoms is at the top of the page.

MAKE A FAMILY TREE

After (or during) your first reading, create a quick “family tree”, showing all the characters in the play and their relationships. To each other and to others mentioned.

Include spouses and others who are mentioned in the play so you can keep a tab on who is married, divorced, orphaned etc.

Find the best way to represent the web of relationships that are portrayed in the play.

Extension: pick a quote that shows something about the relationship.

These do not need to be neat and pretty diagrams: a quick pencil sketch will do the job that you need it to. It's to help you to understand the relationships and history. It's the act of doing it that is the learning. Maybe use the colours you've been using for highlighting. This is especially useful for this play with lot of characters.

"I woke up this morning,
I opened my eyes and my
room was full of light,
my room was full of the
spring and I felt like I
was filling up too, and I
longed, longed to go
home."



"It's just that I get these
headaches... My brain
feels sort of crippled and
my thoughts are sort of
dead..."



"Apparently she's sort of mad, the wife, does her hair in a long, thick plait like a little girl, talks politics and pseudo-intellectual stuff and every now and again tries to kill herself, apparently just to annoy her husband."



"Today I'm free,
I'm at home, I
don't have a
headache, I actually
feel my age again."



"The world is
changing, you can
feel the weight of
it building in the
air."



*"There's a great storm
coming, coming closer
and closer and it's going
to break over all our
laziness and indifference
and apathy, and cleanse
the rotten heart right out
of our society."*



*"In twenty-five
years you'll be dead.
If you don't have a
stroke first, I'll
crack and put a
bullet in your brain."*



“Why is he always
doing these
embarrassing
things?”



*"I was reading until
four in the morning
and when I went to
bed these thoughts
were just going round
and round in my
head."*



"The strange thing is we
can't know what will or
won't be considered
meaningful and
important in the future."



"He isn't in love, he
does have some
taste after all. He's
just trying to
annoy us."





This resource is a freebie from

www.the-understudy.org

It is designed to help you set up your scripts so that you will find working with our slides to explore this play much easier. And you will feel organised before you embark on your exploration.

The full set of resources are published over a series of dates as we write and publish as we go, due to the time constraints of receiving new material each September. For more details, go to:

<https://www.the-understudy.org/iqcsedramapre-release>

