

LOOK ME IN THE EYE

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Lindsay Price



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

In the future teenagers are obedient and polite. But this behaviour comes at a price. *Look Me in the Eye* is a thought-provoking and harrowing tale.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator, and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Synopsis

Teenagers in the future are obedient, polite, and respectful. This is due in large part to the government-required “observation sessions” which teenagers must attend in groups. Rea’s group has been together for ten years. But this utopia has a dark underside.

After learning her brother is scheduled to be “observed,” Rea starts to question the system. She must decide whether to remain obedient or speak out and face the consequences. If she speaks out will the rest of her group suffer?

Characters

VIO: Late teens. Hyper and brash, full of testosterone.

FEA: Early teens. Mousy, always nervous, never comfortable.

REA: Mid teens. Introspective and quiet.

RUL: Mid teens. Overbearing.

TOR: Late teens. Fearless and sarcastic.

OFFENCE OFFICER FLINT: Indeterminate age. Grey hair. A full believer in the system.

OFFENCE OFFICER ASH: Indeterminate age. Grey hair. A full believer in the system.

Themes

Individuality, Obedience, Morality, Right vs Wrong, Authority

Vocabulary

There are a number of words either “created” or used specifically for this future society. Share the words first with students and see if they can identify their definitions before they encounter them in context in the play.

- ★ Complicit = a criminal
- ★ Infraction = violation of law
- ★ Commission = the act of committing a crime
- ★ Mayhem = violent, damaging disorder
- ★ Indictment = formal charge
- ★ Deterrence = the prevention of something, especially crime, with the threat of punishment
- ★ Deterrent = A person who discourages someone from committing crime. In the world of the play, they’re part of the firing squad that takes part in mass executions.
- ★ Malfeasance = wrongdoing or misconduct
- ★ Scofflaw = someone who openly disregards the law

Name Meanings

The five main characters have unique names. They're all derived from a word that is at the centre of their personality. Have students try to guess the name meanings. If they come up with a definition that fits, but isn't exactly the meaning identified below, don't tell them they're wrong! Over the years I've heard many different interpretations and so long as they fit with the world of the play and with the character, they are right by me.

Vio = violence

Rea = reality, reason

Fea = Fear

Rul = Rules

Tor = History (as in, don't erase the past)

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Do you see yourself as an individual?
- ★ Would you rather stand out as an individual or follow the crowd?
- ★ Would you consider yourself a rule follower? How do you feel when others break the rules?
- ★ What rules do you follow on a daily basis?
- ★ Are there rules you're expected to follow that you don't agree with?
- ★ Do you believe that right and wrong are black and white?
- ★ What does it mean to be obedient?
- ★ Do you feel that you're expected to be more obedient than necessary?
- ★ What does it mean to be safe?
- ★ Do you feel safe on a daily basis?

Pre-Read Activities

Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will make up a one-minute scene based on the statement, "The observation is a necessary element of my education."
- ★ What do they think is the background of the statement? What is "the observation"? What situation would lead to this statement being said?
- ★ Have groups present. What are the similarities and differences in the scenes?
- ★ You can add a second part to this activity by having groups create a one-minute scene based on the statement, "The observation will aid in my development as a stable non-violent human being."
- ★ Ask students to discuss what this statement means. How could an "observation" make someone non-violent? What does a non-violent human being act like?

Courts and Trial System Discussion

- ★ Either as a class or in small groups, ask students to discuss the following: *Do the courts and trial system work? Are trials fair? Are trials necessary? Why or why not? What change would you make to the judicial system? What would happen if trials didn't exist?*

Safe Discussion

- ★ Either as a class or in small groups, ask students to discuss the following: *Do you feel safe on a daily basis? Why or why not? Is society safe? Why or why not? Should society change to increase safety?*

Black/White/Grey Discussion

- ★ Either as a class or in small groups ask students to discuss the following: *Which societal rules do you feel are black and white? Which societal rules have more grey areas?*

Drastically Safe Original Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Have them come up with a drastic decision that a government could make to make society “safe.” Do one version of the scene where everyone is happy about the decision and fully on board with it. Do another version where one person is sceptical. How do the other people in the scene deal with the sceptic?

Reflection

- ★ Have students reflect and write a response to the following questions: *What makes an obedient person? Is obedience important in society? Why do people value obedience?*

Future Prayer Tableau

- ★ The following “prayer” is said in the play:
 - » We live in the present for the future. We regret the past that is lost. We realize the mistakes of our ancestors. We correct them for our children.
- ★ Divide students into groups and have them discuss the prayer. What mistakes is it referring to? How have they been corrected? How has the past been lost?
- ★ Based on their conversation, groups will create a tableau that visualizes the prayer and the decisions the characters make based on the backstory of the prayer.
- ★ Remind students that the prayer is being said in the future. How far in the future do they think the play takes place?
- ★ Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Groups will present their tableau to the class. Discuss afterward. How did each group choose to visualize the prayer?

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Look Me in the Eye*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions.

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. What is the number of the Assembly in session?
3. Who does Rul say are scofflaws?
4. How long has the group been doing their observations?
5. What is an observation?
6. What happens when Vio says, "Hoah! Look at that!"
7. What is Vio going to do on the last day of his observation?
8. What does Rea tell Tor about Rul?
9. Where did Rul see the black van?
10. What secret has Rea been keeping throughout the play?

11. What does Tor tell Rul to do about Rea?
12. Which characters believe in the observations? Cite the text to support your answer.
13. Which characters do not believe in the observations? Cite the text to support your answer.
14. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. Identify moments in which characters obey the rules. What is significant about these moments? Which characters obey the rules?
2. Identify moments in which characters break the rules. What is significant about these moments? Which characters break the rules?
3. In your opinion, why did the playwright choose to set the play in the future?
4. There are a number of vocabulary words specific to the world of the play. Analyze those words and why they're important to the world of the play.
5. In your opinion, why has the playwright included these words? How do they impact the dialogue?
6. In your opinion, why does the playwright never explicitly say what an observation is?
7. The main characters have unique names. In your opinion, what do the names mean? Why do you think the playwright has chosen to avoid traditional names?
8. Analyze Vio's use of language. What kind of words does he use? What can you infer about his character based on his vocabulary and word choice?
9. Based on the way Rul speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?

10. In your opinion, why has the playwright chosen to use a bare stage with a few chairs and a platform for the set? How would the lack of set impact the staging?
11. What is the significance of the line, "The world is supposed to be safe. Why don't I feel safe"?
12. What is the significance of the line, "You sound more and more like a scofflaw every year"?
13. How would you costume Fea? Use the text to support your answer.
14. In your opinion, what is the conflict of the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Look Me in the Eye*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about societal rules and safety? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the playwright trying to say about obedience? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is going to happen next for Tor?
5. What is going to happen next for Rea?
6. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with following rules with what happens in the play.
7. How does the author want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?

- ★ Did any moment make you think about how you deal with rules and following rules?
- ★ How do you think being forced to watch executions would change you?
- ★ Do you think being forced to watch executions would curb criminal behaviour? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you think our society could ever end up like the one in the play? Why or why not?
- ★ Would you end the play differently? Why or why not?

Post-Read Activities

What Comes Next?

- ★ The play ends without any closure for the characters. We don't know what's going to happen to them.
- ★ Divide the class into groups and have each group decide what happens next. It could be a scene that focuses on one character (e.g., what happens when they go home that night after their observation), or it could be the next scene in the play.
- ★ Groups must stay true to character and consistent with the world of the play.

Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize it in a single image that would attract an audience? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ There is no specific set design for this play. Have students write a description of their set vision or draw a colour rendering. How would you visualize the themes of the play?

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act out a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Playwright Process

Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process writing Look Me in the Eye. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.

1. What was the originating idea for the play? Where did you start?

I have always been interested in the insistence of some adults that teenagers must “behave” in a certain way. Or that they feel teenagers aren’t obedient enough, without any acknowledgement of what they themselves were like as teenagers. To that end, I thought, “What if I took this obedience idea to the extreme? What would that look like?” Writing “what if” plays that take place in a different reality — sort of the future but more really a side step to our reality.

2. What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?

Whenever you’re writing a new world, you have to find the balance between populating enough detail so that the audience understands the world of the play, but not so much detail that you lose the story and characters. I also like knowing the world but perhaps not including each and every detail so that the audience can make their own decisions about the world of the play.

3. As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play?

Because of the topic and the situation, I don’t really have a “favourite” moment or character. I do love how the characters feel real and present, even though they exist in a world that isn’t real. I hope it never becomes real!

4. What is harder: coming up with ideas or rewrites?

Rewrites always! Ideas are fun because it’s the brainstorming phase where everything can change. I don’t feel that ideas are precious; they are just a starting point. Rewrites are specific and need to relate directly to moving the play forward. Sometimes, I can rewrite all day and hardly have anything to show for it because I’m trying to work on a moment or a character. But, while the idea stage is more fun, rewrites are more rewarding. Plays become the best they can be in the rewrites; they are never fully written or realized in a first draft.

5. What was it like to see the play performed?

Look Me in the Eye, I think, is the play I've seen performed the most. I've seen it done with a bare stage and present day clothing, I've seen it done with a clearly futuristic vision, I've seen it done with an all female cast, I've seen it done with detailed light and sound design and I've seen it as a virtual production. I love seeing different interpretations of my work and it always amazes me how the same script can be presented in different ways. The play is almost 20 years old (as of 2021) and it's one that I feel connects to students as much now as it did when it was first produced.