



Set Text Guide: Colder Than Here

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in
Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

GCE Drama 2016: Colder Than Here

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Summary

Scene 1

A woodland burial site

This scene has only two characters in it: Myra and Jenna. They are visiting a woodland burial site as Myra wants to plan where she will be buried. It is midday and they have brought a picnic. Jenna is rather reluctant about the whole thing and is bemused that they are going to eat their picnic lunch there. (This is known as black humour, when something is inappropriately amusing.) It could be said that Jenna is in denial about her mother's impending death – her speech pattern is stilted, which is shown by the unusual placing of full stops which break up sentences and slow them down. There is also an ellipse/forward slash: when this appears, the two characters speak simultaneously, which closely resembles everyday speech.

Myra seems cheerful, whereas Jenna is more contemplative and at times, irritated with her mum. This is signalled with stage directions such as 'Jenna raises her eyebrows'. The conversation shifts to Jenna when Myra mentions that she is aware that Jenna was looking for a toilet. This is known as foreshadowing and in this context, a spoiler. Jenna has suffered in the past from an eating disorder; the toilet would be somewhere for her to throw up her food soon after she'd eaten it. Clues are dropped when we are told she picks at her food. Tension is evident between these two in that they both have issues: Myra is dying and Jenna doesn't really want to eat. There are some sarcastic comments, some of which are quite amusing. There could also be moments of visual humour, such as when Myra suggests she might have a wicker coffin and Jenna looks towards the picnic basket. If this was made from wicker, the audience might see an amusing connection. Jenna doesn't live at home, and it would appear she doesn't visit them often. She regularly uses the 'F' word in front of her mum. Another awkward moment occurs when Jenna implies that her mum is closer to her older sister, Harriet, though we don't know whether this is true. Myra frequently changes the subject to break the tension and talk about what she would like when she dies. We learn that Myra and Alec don't really like Jenna's boyfriend, but Jenna also states that things aren't right between them at the moment. At the end of the scene, the mood softens: Jenna briefly apologises to Myra for being awkward and suddenly seems to come more on board with Myra's plans of wanting to plan her own funeral as positively as she can.

Scene 2

About six weeks later (end of October) in Myra and Alec's living room

This is a lengthy scene with all four characters in it. Initially, Harriet, the older daughter appears, she has just returned from a classical music concert with Alec, her dad. She questions whether Myra should be drinking wine, but it is typical of Myra's attitude to her terminal illness: she will make the most out of her remaining days. The stage direction says that she lifts the wine bottle with both hands, which suggests that she is becoming weaker. She is working on her laptop. Harriet is clutching at straws when she says that Myra should get better before returning to work; this is never going to happen.

We meet Alec for the first time. Myra is clearly pleased that he has been out with Harriet, she sees this as father–daughter time and clearly it is something she hopes will continue after she's gone. They share a few family 'in-jokes' and we hear that the boiler is not working too well. We also get a play on words when Alec says 'Is it me or is it cold in here' – an echo of the play's title.

Myra's illness is worsening. Alec seems to be avoiding Myra's upbeat ironic chat about her illness, but there are numerous jokes, mainly made by Myra herself. Jenna arrives unexpectedly. There is obviously tension as she enters and declares that she's staying for a while as she and Mark have had a tiff. Everyone seems quite awkward around Jenna. Baggins, her cat of 15 years is not there, and it transpires that they've given it to someone

else who took it for a stray. To make matters worse, Jenna discovers that they weren't feeding Baggins his favourite brand of cat food, which is probably why he's gone. Myra says that Alec is doing the shopping now she's no longer up to it. Everyone feels uncomfortable about the whole situation for a variety of reasons. Myra breaks the ice by saying that as they're unexpectedly all together she'll show them what she's been working on. It's a powerpoint for her own funeral.

(Technically, it is imperative that the audience see the powerpoint too.) As Jenna advances Myra's slides, the family react to them. Many of the things Myra would like, such as a burial, cardboard coffin etc., are a complete surprise to them. They are in turns speechless, shocked and uncomfortable with the degree of detail Myra has gone into. Only Jenna has been party to some of this, as she has visited a burial site with Myra. Alec and Harriet find it difficult to take, and Alec walks out, closely followed by Harriet.

Scene 3

Outside again at a different burial ground, roughly two weeks later – mid-November

Only Harriet and Jenna, the two sisters, appear in this scene. Myra should have been meeting Jenna there, but has engineered it so that the two sisters meet without her. There's a bit of jealousy between the two. Harriet eats her lunch and offers some to Jenna, who refuses. The flat-pack cardboard coffin has arrived at home, and everyone apart from Myra feels uncomfortable about it.

Jenna opens up about how sad she is feeling about losing Myra, revealing a different side to her character. Harriet takes the opportunity to attack Jenna, blaming her for always causing trouble and being the centre of attention. She is also angry that Jenna hasn't once visited Myra in hospital. They discuss and argue a little about things and in a strange way, it does appear to bring them closer together. They decide that this particular burial ground is not right for Myra.

Scene 4

The living room

Alec is on his own, sorting out a fan heater, putting a record on the record player – Brahms' *Hungarian Dances*. Harriet is visiting; she tells Alec off for keeping out-of-date food in the fridge. They refer to the food as 'dying'. The house is very cold as the boiler has broken, that's why Alec is trying to get a fan heater to work. Jenna is still living at home, but right now she's out with her boyfriend. Myra appears, wearing her dressing gown; she's a bit grumpy and in some pain. Harriet is tidying the kitchen. Most of the herbs and spices are out of date and need throwing out – past their sell-by-date, like Myra? Myra isn't really interested and states that she'll never cook again anyway, Harriet dismisses this truth as nonsense. There is some affection between Myra and Alec that is shown in a lighthearted banter between them.

Scene 5

Yet another cemetery in Coventry

Alec and Jenna are looking at the cemetery. It is grim, and given that Myra would like a natural type of woodland burial, this looks most unsuitable. Again, Jenna was expecting to meet Myra but she is poorly today and has sent Alec in her place. This seems more genuine than when Harriet came in Scene 3. Alec would leave, but Jenna insists that they get a 'feel' for the place. Alec busies himself by doing the crossword. It is quite an awkward father/daughter scene, especially when Jenna talks about her failing relationship with Mark and then puts her head on her dad's shoulder; he really doesn't know what to do.

Scene 6

Late January, the living room; about 5 months since the start of the play

Jenna and Harriet are staring at the cardboard coffin. This scene is almost comical as they talk about the coffin. The house is freezing and Alec enters while on the phone to the boiler people. He looks everywhere but at the coffin, which he tries to avoid. The girls are going to decorate it with stars and sky images. The conversation is a strange mixture of trivia and serious matters, and as the girls plan their decoration for the coffin, they dare each other to get inside it. Jenna does so and has to scramble out just before Alec comes back into the room. They feel even more anxious when Myra appears. She is interested to see her coffin; it isn't quite as she thought it would be. Her frankness in discussing some of the details of her death and what will happen renders the others speechless, until at last Harriet breaks the ice by giving Myra a cuddle.

Scene 7

Another burial ground, mid-March; there are daffodils and crocuses on the ground

Jenna is waiting for Myra, but as before, Harriet turns up. Jenna is annoyed that it's Harriet and not her mum, but they immediately make a joke about the crocuses (in a croaky voice) and we see that things are easier between them. Surprisingly, Harriet says how she is struggling to come to terms with Myra's impending death. She has developed eczema because she is so worried. The tension is broken by a story she tells about Myra actually sitting in her own coffin to watch TV in the living room. It is a very funny image. The girls have become closer, Jenna tells Harriet that she's finished with Mark. As they leave, Harriet laughs because Jenna, normally the less sensible one, has sat on a plastic bag and kept her bum dry from the damp grass.

Scene 8

The living room with the cardboard coffin now half-painted with stars and sky

Alec is on the phone and has a lengthy talk with a man from the boiler company. The conversation is obviously one-sided, but is amusing and sarcastic, and shows Alec in a quite different light. His complaint is valid and he ends it by telling the man on the other end of the phone about Myra's cancer and the fact that he'd at least like her to die in a warm house. At this point he is standing in the coffin as Myra enters.

In her usual forthright way, Myra forces a conversation with Alec, telling him that when she's dead, it's OK for him to meet someone else. Clearly, he is uneasy about the whole thing. For the first time we see him talk to her on an equal footing, saying that she has been so super-organised that she has left them nothing to do, when actually they would have liked a say in some of the arrangements. She sits close to him on the sofa and they cuddle tentatively; it is a significant moment and the scene ends with a smile at the suggestion of them sleeping together.

Scene 9

The same burial ground as scene 7

Myra, Jenna and Harriet are all at the burial ground they have chosen. Harriet is sitting in the car. Myra jokes that she has outlived the six months the hospital gave her to live, though she is clearly getting weaker. Jenna and Myra resume their conversation about the burial and funeral details. The talk becomes more philosophical about the lives they've had and how they might be when Myra is no longer there. Jenna is sad but accepting about all the funeral plans. There is some hope for the future: she has just started a new relationship and there is a sense of calm. Jenna goes back to the car to get Myra's tablets, leaving Myra on her own. She lies down on the ground on her side, assuming the position she said she wanted to be in when she's placed in the coffin – it is significant that she changes her mind

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and lies on her back, as you would imagine someone in a coffin to be. As it fades to the end of the play we are left thinking that everyone has given way a little to accommodate the others and that somehow, things will be OK.

Characters

Myra

The main character. She is dying of secondary bone cancer, aged 56. Secondary bone cancer can be painful and is usually controlled rather than cured. She knows she is dying and has limited time left. She is strong-willed, witty and determined to plan her own funeral, to get her family to support her wishes, and indirectly, to come to terms with her demise. The funeral she would like is quite unconventional. She is a plain speaker and her direct manner can be very funny at times.

Alex

Myra's husband, aged 57. He's comfortable at home and fits the stereotypical image of a 'pipe and slippers' sort of man. He doesn't like change, and is finding Myra's head-on approach to her illness and death most unnerving.

Harriet

Myra and Alec's elder daughter, aged 29. She is the more conventional of the two sisters, and has been the easier daughter to manage. She lives with her boyfriend, Josh.

As the elder sibling, Harriet likes to think she is more important than Jenna. There is some sibling rivalry between the two girls, and Harriet shows moments of jealousy towards Jenna.

Jenna

Myra and Alec's younger daughter, aged 27. She is surprisingly supportive of Myra's plans. She comes back to live at home during most of the play, as her relationship is floundering. She is awkward around her parents, as she knows they don't really like her boyfriend, Mark. She swears a lot, and some of her sharp comments can be quite brutal and unkind. She smokes and often gains the family's disapproval.

Jenna has caused the family some concerns; her life has been troubled and she has had an eating disorder in the past.

A word from the playwright

Lynn Gardner, theatre critic for the *Guardian*, interviews Laura Wade in February 2005.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/feb/02/theatre4>

Social, cultural and historical context

Colder Than Here was first published and performed in 2005. It was British playwright Laura Wade's debut play. The first performance was at the Soho Theatre in London on 3 February 2005. This purpose-built space seats 150 people. The production was directed by Abigail Morris. Laura Wade had another play that also premiered that year, called *Breathing Corpses*, and the two combined won her the Critic Circle's Theatre award for Most Promising Playwright.

The play was also performed in New York in 2005 and in Germany and Sweden in 2006. There have been numerous other productions since then.

The date, or at least the year, is referred to in the play when Harriet talks about the out-of-date food in the fridge. As time passes, the dates given will seem even further away.

Different cultures and faiths approach death and funerals in different ways. This play is set in the Midlands and specifically in Coventry, in a traditional British family. Myra's approach to her own demise and funeral arrangements is still quite unusual, although more people are becoming involved in organising their own funerals. Less traditional funerals, or even quite alternative funerals, are becoming more common.

Themes

Assisted dying is an interesting theme to explore particularly for younger people. It can be referred to as **euthanasia**. It is illegal in the UK and many other countries in the world. In essence, it is when an individual person does not wish to continue their life any longer because their illness is too much to bear. This may be because of physical incapacity - someone may have little or no control over their body and they feel a loss of dignity. Motor neurone disease would be a typical disease where someone's body fails even though their mind is still active. In a recent poll in 2015, 82% of people asked in the UK supported an individual's right to die if they wanted to. This case is supported by high profile people such as Sir David Attenborough who has said that he would not wish to live if his life became too wretched. Legally, this whole area is very complicated, for example assisted suicide is legal in Switzerland, euthanasia is not.

Many cancer patients know that they can no longer be treated. **Terminal illness** is a difficult and sensitive issue that is extremely well dealt with on the Macmillan website. <https://www.macmillan.org.uk>

Doctors will not tell someone how long they might live unless they specifically ask. Some people want to know while others may know that they have a terminal illness but choose not to know how long they have left. Predicting how long someone might live is very difficult and not an exact science. Typically, doctors tend to overestimate rather than underestimate how long they think a patient will live for. When you are diagnosed as having a terminal illness, such as Myra, people often have what is called a 'bucket list'. This is a list of things they wish to do or achieve before they die. Of course, some people have a 'bucket' list irrespective of whether they are ill or not. Most people have things they wish to do or places they'd like to visit however unlikely they may seem.

Almost everyone will know someone who has had cancer and who has died from cancer. **Living and dying with cancer** is another issue explored well on the Macmillan website, the Marie curie website and the NHS website. Myra is very brave in the play, it may be worth looking at how those around her cope with her situation. She is so positive about planning things. An interesting theme could be to look at **how people cope** when faced with the loss of a loved one.

Loss and loneliness are themes that Laura Wade was very aware of when she wrote the play. In different ways, all four of the characters experience loneliness. Jenna's relationship with Mark breaks up and it is possible to see how this could make her feel lonely. Myra may well feel frightened as well as lonely at moments when she feels she is having to win her family over to her way of thinking.

We can also imagine that Alec is going to feel lonely when Myra does die. He will be a widower and will have to adjust to life on his own having lived with Myra for many years.

Myra is determined to have the funeral that she wants and many of her ideas are quite unusual compared with a traditional type of funeral. Alec certainly finds some of her ideas difficult to accept. There is a growing trend towards **alternative funerals**, where they are more suited to the individual who has died. Cremation or burial are the usual choices but it is very important to Myra where she is actually buried, and woodland burial sites are found all over the country now. It is even legal to be buried in your own garden although there are some health and safety considerations to be made! Choice of music, eulogies and religious or non-religious ceremonies can all be explored. Students may wish to look at the ideal behind a humanist funeral which has no religious aspects to it at all.

The theme of **sibling rivalry** arises when looking at the relationship between Jenna and Harriet. Clearly they feel quite miffed when one of them seems to know something that the other one doesn't. Harriet feels quite strongly that as the older sister she should perhaps know things before Myra. Sibling rivalry where brother and/or sisters compete with each other is very common and can be found in many plays with perhaps the greatest example in Shakespeare's King Lear between the three sisters Regan, Goneril and Cordelia.

It is highly topical that Jenna appears to have or have had an **eating disorder**. Food is referred to a lot and she seems to pick at her food and there are numerous references to her dashing to the toilet or having to know that a toilet is nearby.

Finally, the play could be said to have many darkly comic moments, usually referred to as a **black comedy**. This is when we laugh at something that shouldn't really be funny. An example of this would be when Myra sits inside her own cardboard coffin in the front room. The image itself is very amusing but we know we shouldn't really laugh at it as one day Myra will actually be dead inside this coffin.

Resources

Recommended edition

Colder Than Here, by Laura Wade. Oberon Modern Plays ISBN 978-1-84002-471-5

Other plays by Laura Wade

Breathing Corpses, 2005

Posh, 2010

Online resources

Interview with Laura Wade:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/feb/02/theatre4>

Review of premiere performance (*British Theatre Guide*):

<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/colderthanhere-rev>

American review of the production in September 2005:

<http://variety.com/2005/legit/reviews/colder-than-here-1200521446/>

Review of premiere performance (*The Stage*):

<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2005/colder-than-here-review-at-soho-theatre/>

Review of premiere performance (*Guardian*):

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/feb/12/theatre4>

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Colder Than Here*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

- The stage directions regularly use the term 'Beat.' What do you think this means, and why has the author put it there? Choose a small section from the play that uses this term, and try it out.
- Try performing some of the script actually outdoors, to get a better feel for the scenes at the burial sites.
- Look at the scene (5) on page 59 between Alec and Jenna. It could be interpreted as either serious or funny. Rehearse this scene and see if you can capture one or both of these moods successfully.
- The actor playing Myra should become less energetic and more ill as the play progresses. There should be a difference in their voice and physicality between the opening scene and the final scene.
- Create an off-text scene where Jenna and Harriet are teenagers arguing over who gets the most attention from their parents.
- Create an off-text scene where Alec confides in a friend that he doesn't know what to say to Myra or how to best support her.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting way to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow actors to consider the voice, attitude and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered. For example, we could ask Myra how she feels about dying, or how she imagines the others will manage when she's gone.

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Jenna smokes during the production. What are your feelings about this? Is it necessary? What is the law about smoking in a theatrical production?

Even when they're talking about things unrelated to Myra's death, the characters use words associated with death, e.g. the food is 'dying', the slide rule is 'buried'. Can you find other examples where such words are used and replace them with different words? What impact does this have on the scene?

Designers

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the

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production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Colder Than Here* alternates between various burial sites and the family living room; it might be possible to have just two sets with small details to make each burial site look slightly different from the one before. Alternatively, students may choose to design a more abstract set, leaving some of the details to be represented symbolically or even in the audience's imagination.

- How might you show that one burial site is different from another as the characters visit several in the course of the play?
- Once the coffin is 'built', how would you manage the stage space around it?
- The nine scenes alternate between the living room and a different burial site. How would you manage the transition between these scenes?
- How might you show the passing of time throughout the play?
- How could you use sound and/or light to enhance the production?

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