

# *Bold Girls*

*by Rona Munro*

Teaching notes and discussion questions  
for National 5 English

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## SYNOPSIS

The play documents one extraordinary day in the life of four extraordinarily bold women, living – existing – at the centre of the brutal territorial conflict which ravaged Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 80s. With the introduction to the action of the mysterious Deirdre, cracks begin to show in the seemingly stable relationship between friends Marie Donnelly and Cassie Ryan. The already tempestuous relationship between Cassie and her mother Nora is further tested as tempers fray in the play's dramatic climax.

Marie Donnelly is a mother trying to care and provide for her children in the wake of her husband's death. This task is made more difficult given her proximity to the chaos of civil war and in light of the revelation of multiple deceits by those closest to her. To confront the truth would destroy everything that Marie holds dear – her beliefs about marriage, the memories she has of her husband, the family unit that she has worked tirelessly to hold together, and her friendships. For this reason, Marie spends much of the play evading what we suspect she already knows about her husband Michael – that he was morally corrupt, a philanderer, and anything but honest. When the shocking revelations about Michael inevitably are delivered (he has conducted an affair with her best friend Cassie, and fathered a daughter – Deirdre – to another woman), they do not sit well with Marie.

Cassie Ryan's husband has been imprisoned for his involvement in the Troubles. With his release day impending, Cassie clings desperately to her dreams of escaping her loveless marriage to a man she abhorrently detests. Having saved tirelessly for the duration of Joe's imprisonment, Cassie feels that she now has enough money to allow her to flee Andersonstown and to make a new life for herself. Despite spending the majority of the play stifling the truth of her indiscretions with her best friend's husband, when the truth finally comes toppling out Cassie's dreams of escape are devastated. Her friendship with Marie is likewise destroyed.

The fractious relationship between mother and daughter – Cassie and Nora – sets the tone of the play from the outset. Nora's husband, Sean, is dead; unlike Marie, who still mourns the loss of the man she regarded as her best friend, Nora finds a release in widowhood, having suffered the brutality of Sean's domestic abuse throughout the entirety of her marriage. Her house – specifically her bids at home improvements and interior design – are her means of escaping the drudgery of life in West Belfast, and her attempt to establish her home as her own. Nora is fully possessed of the truth about her husband; but her daughter, Cassie, refuses to accept her mother's description of her abusive relationship. Throughout the play, Nora

**RANGE:**

- National 5 English / Drama

**KEY TEXTS:**

- *Bold Girls* (Nick Hern Books, 2018)



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attempts to make her daughter cognisant of her father's violent tendencies, and to reclaim her truth buried deep under Cassie's delusions. Yet, like both Cassie and Marie, there are truths that Nora is unwilling to address. Most notably, it is Nora's unwavering support for and favouritism of her son Martin, which leaves mother and daughter at an impasse at the play's end.

Deirdre is the youngest character, but arguably she is the most enfranchised. She knows of Cassie's infidelities, and she knows the identity of her father. Importantly, she is not afraid to reveal these truths to the others. As soon as she infiltrates their space, cracks begin to form in the relationship between Marie, Cassie and Nora. Deirdre is entirely of the place, shaped and battered by conflict, abandoned by her father, neglected by her mother. In the play's denouement Deirdre not only delivers her devastating news – she is the illegitimate daughter of Michael – but she has found (somewhat unexpectedly) an ally in her father's widow, Marie. For Cassie and Nora, issues remain unresolved by the play's conclusion; however, we recognise something hopeful in the embryonic relationship between Deirdre and Marie.

### DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Each of the four female characters are complex. Despite their ostensible flaws, every one of the bold girls evokes our pathos.

#### Cassie

- Flawed
- Bolshie
- Assertive
- Critical
- Forthright
- Unfaithful
- Wracked with guilt
- Negatively affected by previous relationships with men (both familial and romantic)
- Desperate
- Longs to escape
- Deserving of sympathy

#### Marie

- Dutiful
- Resilient
- Wilfully ignorant of husband's misdemeanours
- A good friend
- Guarded
- Led by maternal instincts
- Faithful
- Haunted by the past
- Deserving of sympathy

#### Nora

- Stoic
- Argumentative
- House-proud
- Materialistic
- Resilient
- Protective
- Biased
- Wilfully ignorant
- Deserving of sympathy
- Humorous

#### Deirdre

- Hostile
- Violent
- Potentially malignant force in the lives of the other women
- Disconcerting
- Shaped by the Troubles
- Strange
- An outsider
- Michael's daughter
- Vulnerable
- Neglected
- Deserving of sympathy

## THEMES

**Conflict** – present in the setting of Northern Ireland during The Troubles; encroaches on the lives of the bold girls owing to their partners'/family members' involvement in violent/political activity; present within the relationships of the four women with each other; exacerbated by characters withholding/revealing long-concealed truths; apparent in the inner conflict experienced by each character.

**Relationships** – of people to place; between mother and daughter; between the three friends and the outsider/stranger; between husband and wife; between reality and fiction.

**Truth versus delusions** – present in the delusions each woman has about their own situations; apparent in the delusional stories they construct to protect themselves and others from the truth; evident in some characters' inability to confront/process the truth.

**Escape** – present in the dreams of each of the women, some more benign than others. Deirdre longs to escape a miserable home-life, and hopes that finding out the truth about her father might lead her to some form of escape from an abusive and neglectful home-life. Marie cannot escape her past. Cassie cannot escape her loveless marriage. Nora never makes her escapist fantasies of an interior design haven come to fruition.

## ACTIVITY ONE: CAROUSEL

Working in groups of six:

- You will be given a theme to explore
- You have three minutes; come up with an important point about this theme, and provide a quotation and detailed analysis. Write your response on poster paper.
- Leave your poster paper on the table, and carousel on to the next theme at the end of the three minutes
- Continue activity for four carousel revolutions
- On the fifth revolution, your group should state who the most important character is with respect to the theme you are currently looking at. Offer valid justification for your answer.
- Take a photograph of each Theme poster.
- Type up as part of your revision of Theme in *Bold Girls*.

## ACTIVITY TWO:

Working with a partner, compare and contrast the marriages of Nora and Sean; Cassie and Joe; and Marie and Michael. How does the examination of marriage/marital love in this play contribute to the theme of conflict?

For every point you make, provide a supporting quotation and comment in detail on how it links to the theme of conflict.

## ACTIVITY THREE:

Think about Scene Two in the Club. With free-flowing alcohol lowering the women's inhibitions, they become more truthful, more honest, and reflective. Make a list of as many truths as you can find in this scene.

## SETTING

**Andersonstown, West Belfast, 1980s**, territorial conflict rages between republican groups and British Army.

**Marie's House**, austere living conditions, place of concealment and revelation.

**The Club**, offers momentary escape, alcohol encourages women to become reflective, introspective, club is infiltrated by British troops.

**Outside the Club**, derelict waste-ground represents dereliction of duty/waste of lives/end of dreams.

## QUESTIONS ON SETTING

1. Look at the stage directions with which the play opens. With reference to features of language show how Munro establishes Marie's living conditions as relatively modest.
2. Look at Deirdre's first words in the play. What exactly do we learn about the setting?
3. Look at the opening to Scene Two.
  - a. The club seems to be tired, rundown. How does Munro convey this through her use of language?
  - b. How does this description of the club link to the theme of conflict?
4. "British troops are presented as the real villains in the play." Find three key quotations to prove this assertion.
5. Why do you think Munro decides to locate scene three outside the club? Make two points.
6. The play begins and ends in Marie's house. What, if anything, has changed about this space?
7. How does each setting affect the four characters? Make a detailed note outlining the ways in which character behaviours are shaped by the spaces the characters inhabit.

## BOLD BOYS

A phalanx of voiceless men ghost this story of four women who have been left mired in the Troubles. For a play in which men's presences are conspicuously absent from the stage, it is striking that so much of the narrative centres around their actions and the consequential impact. With men missing, it is left to the women to take responsibility for (re)constructing their narratives, and there is a real sense in the acerbic rendering of each male-centric anecdote that the women are seizing the opportunity to tell things as they truly were, to articulate their own reality for the first time, in all its technicolour misery. If the voices of these four women are the epitome of boldness, then by contrast the lives of the men they narrate are presented to us as the very epitome of weakness. Men are portrayed as villainous, barbaric, and grotesque.

### ACTIVITY:

Undertake a group discussion based on the following question:

**To what extent have men influenced the lives of the bold girls?**

## FEATURES OF DRAMA

When we write about drama we have to take into consideration the relevant features of drama present in the play.

### ACTIVITY ONE:

Match the following definitions to the appropriate feature of language. (This works well as a quick-fire revision activity or a starter task.)

1. The construction and development of characters' personalities and identities
2. The point at which a crisis occurs, the most important part of the action, the highest point of conflict
3. The division of the action into acts and scenes, the ordering of the play
4. Where/when the play is set

5. The storyline, the narrative
6. An issue between two characters based on opposing values and beliefs – what drives the action forward

- a. Climax
- b. Structure
- c. Plot
- d. Conflict
- e. Characterisation
- f. Setting

#### ACTIVITY TWO: GROUP TASK

- Class divided into six groups.
- Each group given a dramatic feature to examine within *Bold Girls*.
- Groups asked to produce an attractive revision guide on their designated dramatic feature
- “Guides” should be no longer than 500 words, and should contain
  - a. some key quotations
  - b. detailed analysis
- Individual guides could be collated into a more substantial booklet, and distributed to class prior to the Prelim/Final Exam.

#### STRUCTURE

- Four scenes
- Action contained within a period of approximately twelve hours
- Scene One: Marie’s house, late afternoon
- Scene Two: West Belfast social club later that evening
- Scene Three: Marie and Cassie outside the club awaiting their taxi home
- Scene Four: Marie’s house

The cyclical nature of the play’s structure (beginning and ending in Marie’s living room) effectively enhances our appreciation of the claustrophobic nature of Andersonstown for the four characters. Try as they might – and Cassie in particular tries hard – the women are entirely unable to escape the socioeconomic or geopolitical issues which plague them. By the

end of the play it is patently obvious that these resolute women are suffocating in Belfast.

#### EFFECTIVE OPENINGS AND ENDINGS

##### ACTIVITY ONE:

- Look again at the first set of stage directions. What atmosphere does the writer create through her use of language?
- What do we learn about the social status of Marie from the description of her house in the opening stage directions?
- What do the stage directions, beginning: ‘There is a small picture ...’ and ending ‘... and moustache’ (p. 1), tell us about Michael’s status in the household?
- Re-read the final set of stage directions in Scene One. What questions do they leave the reader with?
- The audience is left to piece together the women’s situation through their dialogue. This is called indirect exposition. List three things we learn through this technique.
- As we are introduced to the three characters of Nora, Marie, and Cassie, it is clear that two conversations are going on. Explain clearly what both conversations are about and who is involved in each.
- What function does cross-conversation serve in this instance? What does it tell us about each character?
- What themes are established in the opening five pages?

##### ACTIVITY TWO: WHAT MAKES THE ENDING EFFECTIVE?

When we consider the effectiveness of the ending we have to consider:

1. Themes explored throughout the play and how these themes are resolved/brought to a head at the end.
2. The characters’ situations at the beginning and their situations at the end.
3. The way in which the play has built to this point.

How effective is the ending of *Bold Girls*?

Working in groups of four build a case arguing in favour of the idea that the play's ending is highly effective in dramatic terms.

**ACTIVITY THREE: DEIRDRE'S REVELATION**

Munro utilises a range of dramatic devices to ensure that this episode is explosive. Working with partner, fully analyse the climactic point in scene four. You might want to find examples of the techniques (below) and consider how they contribute to the dramatic revelation.

- Visual humour
- Emotive vocabulary
- Irony
- Symbolism
- Contrast
- Exaggeration
- Anti-climax

**ACTIVITY FOUR: ROLE REVERSAL**

Working with a partner, design three set-text style questions (one 'In your own words' question; two 'How does the writer's use of ...', one 8-marker) for your teacher to try out.

Questions should be based on the final encounter between Deirdre and Marie.

**Extension:** Make an answer scheme of acceptable responses. Remember to allocate each question a fair number of marks.

**STYLE**

**Naturalism vs non-naturalism:** Most of this play is written in a naturalistic style. The story is a realistic sketch of the lives of four women living austere in the middle of a civil war zone. However, Munro deviates from naturalism on several occasions.

Working with a partner, identify page references for the following non-naturalistic features of drama within *Bold Girls*:

- Tableau
- Soliloquy
- Utilisation of Deirdre as choric figure
- Cross-conversations

**Extension:** Choose one of these techniques.

Write a detailed paragraph explaining why Munro chooses to use this technique at the point that she does. What is its dramatic effect?

**SYMBOLISM**

There are five recurring symbols in this play:

- The knife
- The ghost
- Birds
- Peach fabric
- The Portrait of Michael

**ACTIVITY ONE:**

What does each symbol represent? Find textual evidence to support your points.

**ACTIVITY TWO:**

Make a detailed infographic on symbolism. This is an excellent pre-exam revision tool.



SET TEXT PRACTICE 1

Read from ‘Oh you’re going to meet a dark stranger [...]’ (p. 52) to ‘*Black-out*’ (p. 54).

1. Explain fully why Cassie calls Deirdre a ‘bastarding wee hoor’. . . . . 2
2. Show how any two features of language used by the writer convey the extent of Marie’s concern for her friend, Cassie. . . 4
3. Explain how the stage directions effectively convey Cassie’s feelings of guilt. . . . . 4
4. Explain the irony in Marie’s dialogue. . . 2
5. With reference to this extract and to elsewhere in the play, show how the relationship between Marie and Cassie develops. . . . . 8

SET TEXT PRACTICE 2

Read Marie’s monologue at the end of Scene One.

1. Summarise *using your own words* what happens in this extract. You should make three clear points. . . . . 2
2. The extract begins with Marie feeding the birds. Explain fully what the pigeon symbolically represents in this play. . . . 2
3. *In your own words* explain what Marie means by the phrase “he wasn’t even the man they wanted, but they shot him; that made him the man they wanted”. . . . . 2
4. How does the *language* used by the playwright effectively convey Martin’s threatening and aggressive character? . . 4
5. With reference to either Davie or Joe, show how the writer’s *use of language* in this extract successfully reveals an aspect of their personality. . . . . 2
6. **‘Davie’s in the Kesh. Martin’s in the Kesh. Joe’s in the Kesh – and Michael is dead.’** Although men are completely absent, they do serve an important role. By reference to this extract and to elsewhere in this play show how the playwright’s use of dramatic techniques reveals the importance of these men in the Bold Girls’ lives. . . . . 8

CRITICAL ESSAY QUESTIONS

- Choose a play which you feel has a turning point. Describe briefly what happens at this turning point and then, by referring to appropriate techniques, go on to explain how it makes an impact on the play as a whole. **[FOCUS: Outside the Club]**
- Choose a play in which the playwright presents a flawed character whom you feel is more worthy of our sympathy than our criticism. By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the character’s flawed nature is revealed, then explain how, despite this, we are led to feel sympathy for her/him. **[FOCUS: Cassie]**
- Choose a play in which there is a conflict between two characters in a family or a group. Show how the conflict occurs and then, by referring to appropriate techniques, explain how it affects the characters and the events of the play. **[FOCUS: conflicted relationship between the women]**
- Choose a play which you feel has a dramatic final scene. Describe briefly what happens in the final scene and then, by referring to appropriate techniques, explain how effective the ending is in bringing to a conclusion the central concerns of the text. **[FOCUS: how scene four brings examination of conflict to a suitable resolution]**
- Choose a play in which there is a character who is important in relation to the theme of the play. Referring to appropriate techniques, explain how this character affects our understanding of this theme. **[FOCUS: Cassie OR Deirdre and Theme of Conflict]**
- Choose a play in which there is a key scene. Briefly describe what happens in this scene then, by referring to appropriate techniques, show how this incident is important to the text as a whole. **[FOCUS: Cassie admits the truth]**



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**FOLIO OF WRITING**

How might *Bold Girls* serve as a stimulus for the Folio of Writing at National 5?

**BROADLY CREATIVE**

- Write a short story set in a conflict zone/an interesting period in British/Irish history.
- Write a short story in which a delusional character does not want to confront the truth.
- Write a story in which the theme of family relationships is explored.

**BROADLY PERSUASIVE**

Candidates might write persuasively or discursively on the following:

- Brexit will/will not have a catastrophic impact on the peace process in Northern Ireland.
- Ireland should/should not be reunified.
- The Scottish Government should/should not prohibit sectarian marches through Glasgow.