

THEY EAT SUNSHINE, NOT ZEBRAS

A COMEDY IN ONE ACT BY
Dara Murphy



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

In *They Eat Sunshine, Not Zebras*, standing out can get you shunned by a crowd. In this case, it's a dandelion in a lawn of uniform blades of grass.

Playwright Bio

Dara Murphy loves inventing silly, fun, and unexpected stories. Ever since third grade, when she wrote about the adventures of a speck of dust, Dara has enjoyed making creative writing a part of her life. When she's not writing, Dara never misses an opportunity to try something new. She's backpacked through South America, worked as a tree planter, joined a ski team (without knowing how to ski), and learned how to swing dance. She also likes to play music at local open mics and act in community theatre productions. Dara has a diploma in film and video production and a degree in education. She currently lives in Montreal and teaches at a school for students with developmental disabilities.

Synopsis

The field believes in uniformity. Lovely rows of blades all the same height. Rows of blades exhibiting standard behaviour of green grassness. Nothing stands in the way of their orderly life. Until they wake up one morning to see a yellow dandelion in their midst. Sunny (that's the dandelion) is bright and warm and just wants to be friends. The field wants nothing to do with her nonstandard, non-green ways. A dandelion will turn their orderly way of life upside-down. A dandelion must be destroyed. Isn't that what you do when something is different?

Characters

SUNNY [A]: A dandelion

BROWN [A]: The oldest

GRASS ONE [A]: Knowing

GRASS TWO [A]: Simple

GRASS THREE [A]: Sunny's neighbour

GRASS FOUR [A]: Follower

GRASS FIVE [A]: Negative

GRASS SIX [A]: Motherly

GRASS SEVEN [A]: Ideas

GRASS EIGHT [A]: Grumpy

GRASS NINE [A]: Clueless

Themes

Individuality vs conformity, obedience, peer pressure, self-image

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes up a person's identity?
- ★ How do you identify yourself? Do you have more than one identity?
- ★ How do you see yourself?
- ★ What's unique about you?
- ★ Does anyone see you as different than how you identify yourself? How do you deal with that?
- ★ Would you rather blend in with a group or stand out? Why?
- ★ Have you ever judged a person by how they look? Have you ever been judged by how you look?
- ★ Have you ever judged an outsider? Have you ever been judged for being an outsider?
- ★ What's your experience with peer pressure?

- ★ In your opinion, what is “standard behaviour”? What is “nonstandard behaviour”? Which one do you lean more toward and why?
- ★ Do you think people fear “nonstandard behaviour”? Why or why not?
- ★ In your opinion, when should life be orderly? When should it be defiant?

Pre-Read Activities

Nonstandard Behaviour Tableaux Series

- ★ In groups, students will discuss and decide what “nonstandard behaviour” means. How would they describe it? How would they visualize it? What is standard behaviour?
- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss the following three moments:
 - » An example of standard behaviour.
 - » An example of nonstandard behaviour.
 - » The response to nonstandard behaviour — is it positive or negative?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau or frozen picture for each moment.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class.
- ★ Discuss afterward: What are the similarities and differences of the moments that the groups chose?

Nonstandard Behaviour Monologue

- ★ Discuss as a class what “nonstandard behaviour” means. How would they describe it? How would they visualize it? What is standard behaviour?

- ★ Students will write a half-page monologue from the perspective of a farm animal who is telling another animal they don't belong on the farm because of nonstandard behaviour. What is the nonstandard behaviour? Why is it so important for this character to distance themselves from the nonstandard behaviour? Why is standard behaviour so important to them? What will happen if the farm accepts nonstandard behaviour?
- ★ Put students into groups and have them share their monologues. What are the similarities and differences between the pieces?

Nonstandard Behaviour Monologue (2)

- ★ Discuss as a class what "nonstandard behaviour" means. How would they describe it? How would they visualize it? What is standard behaviour?
- ★ Students will write a half-page monologue from the perspective of a unique farm animal who enjoys being who they are. They are definitely nonstandard. In the monologue they are talking to another animal who doesn't understand the character's love of being nonstandard and thinks it's something to fear.
- ★ Put students into groups and have them share their monologues. What are the similarities and differences between the pieces?

Individuality Original Scene

- ★ Discuss what it means to express individuality. Is it scary? Is it empowering? Do students consider themselves individuals, or would they rather not stand out?
- ★ Based on the discussion, divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene that includes an example of individuality.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What are the similarities and differences?

One vs the Group Theatrical Moment

- ★ Discuss what it means to stand out in a group, especially when that group doesn't like those who stand out. Discuss situations where conformity is more important than individuality. Have students ever been in a situation where they had to make a choice to be an individual or part of the group?
- ★ Divide students into groups. Based on the discussion they are to create a one-minute theatrical moment that visualizes the individual vs the group.
- ★ Groups will choose a form for their moment: tableaux, spoken word, movement piece, original scene, song, or film.

Gibberish Activity

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Groups will create a scene in which everyone speaks gibberish except for one person. In the world of the scene, those who speak gibberish speak the common language of the area. The person who speaks English is an outsider and no one understands them. In fact, those who speak gibberish look down on the English speaker. They treat this person poorly. The English speaker in the scene is trying to find out information about a family member.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What was it like to treat someone poorly just because you don't understand them? What was it like to try to communicate when no one could understand you?

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 *They Eat Sunshine, Not Zebras* 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 happens at the beginning of the play that makes the field "fly into a frenzy"?
3. Who says "Thank the Sun that we're still living"?
4. What is Eight on the lookout for?
5. How do the blades of grass react when Sunny reveals her yellow flower?
6. What are Sunny's plans for the future?
7. What does Sunny think of the field's reaction to the beetle?
8. Who asks Sunny, "What does it feel like to be so different from everyone?"
9. How does the brown grass react to Sunny?
10. Finish this sentence: "We grass don't believe in _____."

11. How do the grass try to get rid of Sunny?
12. What happens to the grass after they try to grow?
13. Do you have any questions about the play?
14. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. How is personification used in the play?
2. The costumes for the grass characters are described as: "The blades of grass should look neat and orderly. They could even wear classy suits with green ties." After reading the play, how would you costume the grass?
3. The costume for Sunny is described as "sprawling and messy." After reading the play, why would the playwright make this suggestion? How does it fit her character?
4. In the character list, Grass Six is described as "motherly." How is this demonstrated through the character's language in the play?
5. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose to have the grass refer to the lawnmower as "Thing"?
6. Based on Brown's language, what can you infer about their personality?
7. What is the significance of the line, "Perhaps being a garden would make life more complicated, but if we were an interesting garden maybe the Thing wouldn't want to mow us all down"?
8. What is the significance of the line, "But if you changed your definition of a field of grass, I wouldn't be a weed anymore"?
9. What is the significance of the line, "Gone will be the days of orderly height and appearance"?
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. Why do you think the playwright chose to use grass and a dandelion to theatricalize the theme of this play?
2. In your opinion, why is the play called *They Eat Sunshine, Not Zebras*?
3. What is the playwright trying to say about individuality? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. What is the playwright trying to say about accepting outsiders? Cite the text to support your answer.
5. Compare and contrast your own experience with individuality with what happens in the play.
6. How does the playwright 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?
- ★ Which moment stood out to you the most? Why?
- ★ How have the characters changed by the end of the play?

Post-Read Activities

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

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

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?

Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play, such as, "What does it feel like to be so different from everyone?"
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how they will visualize this line in a tableau.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

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 a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Playwright Process

Playwright Dara Murphy talks about her process writing They Eat Sunshine, Not Zebras. 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?

This play actually started as a short story. I got the idea for the story when I was digging out dandelions with my mom. Our lawn was covered with them, and after yanking out dandelion after dandelion, I started to feel bad for them. I wondered if it was fair to call this plant a weed and kill it. Why is it so important for us to have orderly, green lawns? I began to imagine a story where the dandelion was the main character.

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

One challenge I had when writing this play was to make sure that each blade of grass had its own unique character. However, since the blades are named after numbers, sometimes I got them mixed up! I had to do a lot of editing to make sure that the dialogue from each blade was true to its character.

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

There are a few scenes that make me giggle. I like when the blades talk about accepting the beetle (when they clearly do not), and when the blades try to kill Sunny by glaring at it. I also like it when Three talks about the game of bugs and spiders (because the loser gets eaten).

4. Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?

I find first drafts more difficult because I struggle with plotting and figuring out the ending. I'm getting better at outlining and planning my work, but I still prefer to edit. Sometimes I rush through the first draft so I can start shaping the subsequent drafts.

5. What is your writing process like?

I like to write in the mornings, usually with lots of snacks. Chewing gum helps me focus. I enjoy writing without planning and surprising myself with the story, but I've also learned that it's important to outline. The finished product is usually much better (at least it makes more sense), and it saves me time. So now I try to do a mix of the two, a simple outline with room for play. For example, I'll write a scene to get the characters' voices in my head, and then I can outline with a better feel for what choices they might make.

6. What engages you about playwriting?

I love writing and editing dialogue. It's so interesting to think about what people say to each other. I enjoy hearing a character's voice in my head and trying to make that come out on paper. I also get excited about creating something that other people can use and have fun with. I hope you've enjoyed this play!