GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Kindertransport

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Plot

- The play moves between two times on one stage: Germany and England from 1938, and an attic in a house near London many years later.
- In 1938 Eva Schlesinger, a nine-year-old Jewish girl in Hamburg, is sent to England by her mother Helga on the **Kindertransport**, the scheme that rescued Jewish children from Nazi Germany. She is taken in by Lil Miller in Manchester.
- Eva tries hard to find a way to get her parents to England, but war breaks out. Slowly she becomes English, changes her name to Evelyn, becomes a Christian and cuts herself off from her past.
- After the war Helga, who has survived the camps, comes to find her and asks her to start a new life in America. Eva refuses.
- In the present, Evelyn's grown-up daughter Faith finds old letters and photographs in the attic and learns the truth about her mother's past for the first time.

Characters

- Eva/Evelyn: the same person as a child and as an older woman, played by two actors. Her survival came at the cost of denying who she was.
- Helga: Eva's mother, who sends her away to save her life, and is heartbroken when Eva rejects her.
- Lil: Eva's warm, practical foster mother in England, who loves her and keeps her secrets.
- Faith: Evelyn's daughter, who wants to know who she is and where she comes from.
- The Ratcatcher: a frightening figure from a German storybook, the Pied Piper who leads children away. The same actor plays the officials, guards and postmen Eva meets, so her fear follows her everywhere.

Your notes

Themes and context

- **Identity**, mother and daughter relationships, loss, guilt, memory and **trauma**, and the price of survival.
- The **Kindertransport** rescued about 10,000 mostly Jewish children from Nazi Germany and the lands it controlled between December 1938 and September 1939. Most never saw their parents again.
- Diane Samuels wrote the play in 1993, based on the stories of real **Kindertransport** children.

Form and structure

- The two time periods share the stage and sometimes overlap, so the past is always present in Evelyn's life.
- Two actors play Eva and Evelyn, showing how far she has changed, while the Ratcatcher links her childhood fears to the adult world.

Key terms

Kindertransport	The rescue of about 10,000 Jewish children from Nazi Germany to Britain in 1938–39.
Refugee	A person forced to leave their country to escape danger.
Identity	The sense of who someone is, including their family, culture and religion.
Trauma	Deep emotional harm caused by a frightening or painful experience.
Dual time frame	A structure that moves between two periods of time.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What was the Kindertransport?
2. Where does Eva live before she is sent to England?
3. Who looks after Eva in England?
4. What name does Eva take in England?
5. What does Helga ask Eva to do after the war?
6. Who finds the old letters in the attic?
7. What does the Ratcatcher stand for?
8. Why are Eva and Evelyn played by two actors?

Answers

1. The rescue of Jewish children from Nazi Germany to Britain
2. Hamburg
3. Lil Miller

Your notes

4. Evelyn
5. Start a new life with her in America
6. Faith, Evelyn's daughter
7. The fear that follows Eva, from a German storybook
8. To show how much she has changed between childhood and adulthood

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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Your notes