

# INANIMATE

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY  
*Christian Kiley*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

*Inanimate* takes a sharp look at our relationship with devices and social anxiety.

## Background

*Inanimate* was first produced by the Etiwanda High School (Etiwanda, CA) Theatre Department and premiered on April 10, 2014.

## Playwright Bio

Christian Kiley teaches Theatre Arts at Etiwanda High School (Etiwanda, CA). His play *Chemo Girl* was the winner of the 2012 Rancho Cucamonga High School One-Act Festival. He wrote the Chemo Girl collection of plays when he was undergoing treatment for Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Christian is now in remission and grateful for the opportunity to continue to write and teach. Other plays by Christian Kiley include *The Art of Rejection, Charied, Discovering Rogue, Virtual Family, Butterfly Queen, Red Rover, Waiting Room, The Other Room, Nerd Herd, Wellness Check, and Commence*. Christian addresses issues in his plays that he feels will be challenging and exciting for young actors to perform. He appreciates the help and support of his students, colleagues, and Theatrefolk for their continued support.

## Synopsis

Ani wakes up to start her day. Her alarm shakes her awake, her coffee pot delivers a fresh cup. Her laptop tells her about the Great Wall of China while her cell phone relays a text message from her best friend. It seems lighthearted and fun that the inanimate objects Ani surrounds herself with talk back and feel like friends. This feeling changes when Sarah, an actual friend shows up and tries to encourage Ani to come to school. We learn that Ani has missed a lot of school, and is in fact having issues. Ani reacts defensively and pushes Sarah away. When she changes her mind and wants to apologize to Sarah, the objects in Ani's life resist. They tell Ani she should never leave, that it's safer inside with the blinds drawn, that she doesn't need any friends. Being alone is better than being in the real world.

## Characters

**ANI:** A high school student who does not want to leave her home and talks to the parts and appliances of her house. Smart and good natured but dealing with some internal obstacles that she needs to confront.

**ALARM:** Ani's Alarm clock. Claims Ani abuses her by hitting the snooze button. Brash but not to the point of being annoying.

**COFFEE:** Jealous that Ani might be drinking designer coffee products. Self-conscious of her/his carafe.

**TOASTER:** Makes Ani's breakfast treats warm and toasty. Really wants to be put to work.

**REFRIGERATOR:** Chills Ani's juice. May not talk a lot but really wants to be a part of Ani's life.

**LAPTOP:** Loves cute kitten videos and tries to distract Ani by showing her kitten videos.

**INSPIRATIONAL POSTER:** A bright neon poster who tries to motivate Ani at all costs. Ultra-determined.

**CLOSET:** A fashion expert. Offers Ani advice and accessories. Outgoing and affable.

**DRYER:** Argues with Washer about who is more important.

**WASHER:** Claims clean wet clothes are better than dirty dry ones.

**CELL PHONE:** Controls Ani's communication and wants Ani to stay at home. Determined and stubborn.

**WALL:** Fun-loving but easily fooled. Thinks she/he is related to The Great Wall of China.

**DOOR:** Defends Ani as best she/he can from the Mongols. Eager to please.

**MONGOL #1/DINOSAUR #2:** Tries to take over Ani's world/home but in an unconventional way. Witty and clever.

**MONGOL #2/DINOSAUR #2:** Assists Mongol #1 in taking over Ani's world/home. Fashion sensible and smart.

**WINDOW:** Proud of the fact that Romeo referenced a window in Shakespeare's play. Has a friendly rivalry with Door.

**FAKE ROCK:** A method-acting rock who takes acting classes. Serious about the craft of rock acting.

**SARAH:** Ani's high school best friend. Wants to help Ani get out of her house and lead a normal life. Sarah is concerned, friendly, and compassionate.

## Themes

Mental health, relationships, friendship, self-image, anxiety, depression, technology

## Theatre forms

This play uses personification, which assigns human characteristics (such as physicality, emotion, and behaviours) to something non-human. To this end, anything can be a character. A concept can be a character (Anxiety, Failure), an animal can be a character, an object can be a character.

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What makes you anxious?
- ★ How do you deal with it?
- ★ Have you ever considered staying in your room and never leaving?
- ★ Do you know anyone who has considered this?
- ★ Do you feel technology puts you more in touch with the real world or keeps you out of touch with the real world?
- ★ Have you ever asked for help to deal with anxiety?

- ★ Do you talk to your friends about depression? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you know anyone who is trying to mask a social issue?
- ★ Have you ever helped a friend deal with anxiety?

## **Pre-Read Activities**

### **Object Personification**

- ★ Share with students the names of some of the objects in the play. For example, Coffee Pot, Inspirational Poster, Fake Rock, Laptop, Alarm Clock.
- ★ Based just on the name of the object and student pre-knowledge or inference, have students create a physicality and character for the object.
- ★ For example, ask students to think of a coffee pot. What comes to mind? If the coffee pot was a character, what physicality would it have? How would they move? How would their movement suggest personality traits?
- ★ Have students create a character for Coffee Pot and interact with them. What are the similarities and differences?
- ★ Then students will choose their own object and create a character.
- ★ Group students and have them improvise a short scene with their characters.

### **Object Personification Monologue**

- ★ Share with students the names of some of the objects in the play. For example, Coffee Pot, Inspirational Poster, Fake Rock, Laptop, Alarm Clock.
- ★ Students will choose an object and give it an emotion. What emotion fits that object?
  - » E.g., Coffee Pot is happy and energetic, since their job is to make others happy and energetic.
- ★ Based on the chosen emotion, have students decide what the object wants. What do they want? What is in the way of the object getting what they want?

- ★ Lastly, students will decide who the object is talking to. Who is listening to the object talk? Is it another object? The person who owns the object?
- ★ Students will write a half-page monologue from the perspective of their chosen object. They are to take into consideration their chosen emotion, the want, the obstacle in the way of the want, and the listener.

### **Morning in the Life Tableaux**

- ★ In groups students will discuss their morning routines. What do they do from the time they wake up, to the time they go to school? What objects, appliances, and technology do they interact with? What are the similarities and differences?
- ★ Each group will compile a list of actions involved in a typical morning routine.
- ★ Each group will create a tableau that visualizes in a frozen picture a typical morning routine.
  - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?

### **Friendship Reflection**

- ★ Write a reflection about the friends in your life. Consider the following questions:
  - » Are friends important to you? Why or why not?
  - » Who are your friends? Why are you friends?
  - » Have you ever turned away from a friend? Why?

### **Friendship Scene**

- ★ In small groups, students will create a one-minute scene on the theme of friendship. For example:
  - » How would you demonstrate what it means to be friends?

## 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 *Inanimate*, 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. Who does Ani interact with first?
3. What does Laptop show Ani?
4. What does Ani have a test on?
5. Where is the key hidden?
6. What happens to the Mongols?
7. Does Ani decide to go to school?
8. Finish this sentence: "These things you call obligations I call a \_\_\_\_\_."
9. What happens when Ani says she should text Sarah?
10. Are you surprised by the ending? Why or why not?
11. What is the key idea of the play?

## **Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. At the beginning of the play, the playwright shares the definition of the word *Inanimate*. In your opinion, why is it important to know this definition to understand the play?
2. At the beginning of the play the playwright says, "Since it is Ani's mind that really brings these inanimate objects to life there is no need for real props." Would you stage this play with real props? Why or why not?
3. Based on the way Ani speaks, how would you visualize her? What is her physicality?
4. In your opinion, is there a change in Ani's physicality when Sarah appears? Explain your answer.
5. Analyze Coffee's use of language. What kind of words do they use? What can you infer about their character based on their vocabulary and word choice?
6. After reading the play, how would you costume the Mongols?
7. When does the tone change in the play and why?
8. What is the significance of the line, "You always make me happy"?
9. What is the significance of the line, "We're your real friends"?
10. What is the main conflict in the play?

## **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Inanimate*?
2. In your opinion, why does the play end the way it does?
3. In your opinion, why does Ani talk to the inanimate objects around her?
4. What is the playwright trying to say about dealing with social anxiety? Cite the text to support your answer.

5. What is the playwright trying to say about our relationship with devices? Cite the text to support your answer.
6. In your opinion, what is going to happen next for Ani?
7. Compare and contrast your own personal experience with devices with what happens in the play.
8. 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 moment resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in Ani? Why or why not?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in Sarah? Why or why not?
- ★ Did any moment make you think about your relationship with devices?
- ★ Did any moment make you think about how you deal with social anxiety?
- ★ Would you end the play differently? Why or why not?

## **Post-Read Activities**

### **Character Costume Design**

- ★ Choose a character and design a specific 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.

## Lighting and Sound Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the lighting and sound for this play.
- ★ Based on the themes in the play, what colours would they choose for the lighting? How would they shadow? What atmosphere would they create?
- ★ Based on the themes in the play, what type of music or sound effects would they use? What atmosphere would they create?
- ★ Decide how students will share their findings:
  - » An oral presentation that demonstrates lighting and sound examples
  - » An individual written description of their lighting and sound choices

## Poster Design

- ★ Based on what you've read, design a poster for the play. How would you visualize the play 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?

## Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a moment from the play.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.

- ★ Discuss the moments afterward.
  - » How did seeing the moments acted out differ from reading them?
  - » Why is it important to act a moment as well as read it?
  - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

### Line Tableau

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a line from the play such as, “These things you call obligations I call a friendship” or “We’re your real friends.”
- ★ Each group will discuss and decide how to 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?

### Line Scene

- ★ Divide students into groups. Instead of tableau, they will write a scene using the same line as inspiration: “These things you call obligations I call a friendship” or “We’re your real friends.”
- ★ Groups will present their scenes. What are the similarities and differences of the scenes?

## Playwright Process

*Playwright Christian Kiley talks about his process writing Inanimate. 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 think many creative people can relate to talking to themselves. I do. Sometimes it's a quick pep talk and sometimes it is to air my frustrations or celebrate something that has gone well. But the idea that communication is only done in a scene (or person-to-person) is untrue. When I run and I want to go faster, I sometimes talk to my running shoes. When Zoom is faltering and not working the way I want it to, I talk to Zoom. "Come on, you're a sound effect that indicates speed. Act like it!" I have always loved personification and the way it stretches our imaginations. And I think that was the spark for the play. It really connects us to the coolest parts of our creative minds.

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

I think making sure the character voices were distinct and different was the most challenging part. Inspirational Poster has a very distinct voice/character and I wanted all the characters to have their own unique voice. I want actors to be excited to play the parts in my plays regardless of the size of the part. Creating fun lively characters that are diverse is one of my primary goals. Also, I didn't want to "be an adult" when writing this. I wanted to allow myself to make things possible that conventionally might not be. This is the magic of theatre and I hope this play.

3. What changes, if any, were made during rehearsals?

Many changes. Plays need to be produced before they are published. And there were changes in dialogue and stage direction during the process. Until you are in rehearsal and actually working with a play, most of the stage direction is speculative. Actors and creative students are the best at bringing moments to life. Often there are "happy accidents" in rehearsal that become part of the play. That happened several times during this process.

4. What was it like seeing the play performed?

This was such a lively, fun experience, and with most of the cast on stage for the entirety of the play it was great to see a group of actors all fully committed to a common goal. I really enjoyed watching this and was very proud of my students.

5. What is the most vivid moment in the play for you?

When the inanimates close in around Ani at the end of the play. This is the climax of the play and the energy and high stakes of the moment has the potential to be very powerful.

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

Oh, rewrites by far! When an idea pours out of me it is exhilarating. I then save it and revisit it (and rewrite, and edit, and rework). There are many gems and minerals in the mind. Start digging and you will find one. There is then the work involved in the cleaning and polishing.