



SEQUAMUR — STUDY GUIDE

Author: Donald S. Murray

First performed: 2014 (Gaelic), later translated into English

Genre: Historical Drama / Memory Play

Setting: Stornoway, Isle of Lewis — early 20th century, during and after WWI

Why it's studied: A powerful exploration of war, guilt, memory, teaching, and responsibility within a real Scottish community. Now an SQA Higher and National 5 Scottish text.

[\[donaldsmurray.co.uk\]](http://donaldsmurray.co.uk)

1. Introduction

Sequamar (Latin: “**Let us follow**”) is a deeply reflective play centred on **William J. Gibson**, real-life former rector of the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway. It examines the grief and guilt he carries after encouraging many of his pupils to enlist in World War I — 148 of whom did not return.

The play blends present-day reflection with flashbacks and supernatural encounters as Gibson prepares to unveil the war memorial. [\[welovestornoway.com\]](http://welovestornoway.com)

2. Plot Summary

Overview

The drama opens with Gibson preparing a speech for the unveiling of the school's WWI memorial plaque, listing the names of former pupils who died. He discovers that he cannot remember the faces of two boys — Duncan Finlayson and Alex MacIver — and becomes increasingly troubled by this gap in memory.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](http://asls.org.uk)

Plot Structure

Present Day (Memorial Ceremony)

- Retired rector Gibson struggles to write his speech.
- Haunted by gaps in memory, especially the forgotten pupils.
- His guilt surfaces as he realises the role he played in encouraging boys to enlist.

Flashbacks to His Teaching Days

- Gibson is shown as a confident, charismatic teacher.
- He strongly supports the war, viewing it as a character-building opportunity for boys — especially poorer pupils.
[\[quizlet.com\]](https://quizlet.com)
- He mentors pupils using classical education (Latin, Greek), imagining great futures for them.

Encounters with Spirits of Former Pupils

- Gibson speaks with ghosts of students, especially Duncan Finlayson.
- These encounters confront him with the truth of the war's brutality, the boys' suffering, and his misguided idealism.
[\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)

Final Scene

- During the memorial unveiling, the names of the dead are projected.
 - Gibson reaches a moment of painful self-realisation and partial redemption as he publicly honours the pupils he once encouraged into danger.
[\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)
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3. Setting & Context

Historical Context

- Based on real events at the Nicolson Institute, Stornoway.
- WWI saw heavy losses across Lewis — one of the highest per-capita casualty rates in Britain.
- The play highlights recruitment pressures, patriotism, and class-based ideas of "duty."
[\[welovestornoway.com\]](https://welovestornoway.com)

Cultural Context

- Gaelic heritage and island identity underpin the story.
- Murray's own background in Lewis and Gaelic theatre influences the work's authenticity.
[\[donaldsmurray.co.uk\]](https://donaldsmurray.co.uk)

School Motto

- *Sequamur* — “Let us follow.” A central motif representing leadership, responsibility, and tragedy.
[\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)
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4. Characters

William J. Gibson (Protagonist)

- Rector of Nicolson Institute.
- In flashbacks: confident, idealistic, charismatic, academically elitist.
- In present: guilt-ridden, reflective, struggling to justify his wartime choices.
[\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)

Duncan Finlayson

- Former pupil; key symbolic figure.
- Appears as a ghost guiding Gibson toward truth.
- Represents the young soldiers Gibson encouraged.

Other Pupils (MacIver, Paterson, Campbell, etc.)

- Show range of class backgrounds.
- Illustrate pressures and expectations placed on young men.
[\[foghlamgaidhlig.com\]](https://foghlamgaidhlig.com)

Mary Gibson

- Gibson’s wife — voice of emotional grounding.

Unknown Soldier

- Represents the countless unnamed or forgotten war dead.
[\[foghlamgaidhlig.com\]](https://foghlamgaidhlig.com)
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5. Themes

1. War and Its Consequences

Central theme — the devastation of WWI on small communities.

- The play shows the psychological aftershocks for teachers and families left behind.
[\[quizlet.com\]](#)

2. Guilt and Responsibility

Gibson believed he was helping pupils “follow” honour and opportunity, but ultimately regrets encouraging them into death.

[\[welovestornoway.com\]](#)

3. Memory and Forgetting

Gibson’s inability to remember certain boys symbolises collective forgetting and trauma.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](#)

4. Education and Leadership

Gibson embodied the “lad o’ pairs” ideal — rising through education — yet used his authority to promote war ideals.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](#)

5. Class and Opportunity

Gibson sees war as a way for working-class boys to “rise,” reflecting problematic class attitudes of the Edwardian era.

[\[quizlet.com\]](#)

6. Ghosts and the Past

Supernatural encounters emphasise unresolved guilt and the lingering presence of history.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](#)

6. Form, Structure & Language

Form

- Memory play with non-linear structure.
- Mix of realism and supernatural confrontation.
- Based on real historical figures.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](#)

Structure

- Alternates between present-day ceremony preparation and flashbacks.

- Repetition of names emphasises loss.
- Climaxes with memorial unveiling.

Language

- Classical quotations (Homer, Virgil, Aeschylus) show Gibson's intellectual world.
 - Elevated language contrasts with stark war realities.
[\[foghlamgaidhlig.com\]](http://foghlamgaidhlig.com)
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7. Key Quotations

(Representative quotes — wording may vary by edition.)

- "Sequamur — let us follow."
→ Motto and tragic motif. [\[welovestornoway.com\]](http://welovestornoway.com)
 - "I cannot remember them... why can I not remember?"
→ Memory and guilt. [\[asls.org.uk\]](http://asls.org.uk)
 - "War will make men of you."
→ Gibson's early belief; later shown as misguided.
 - "Their names... their names must not be forgotten."
→ Memorial significance.
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8. Symbolism & Motifs

War Memorial Plaque

- Focus of the plot; symbol of remembrance and loss.
[\[asls.org.uk\]](http://asls.org.uk)

Ghosts

- Embody the past confronting the present.
- Act as moral conscience.

Latin Quotations

- Symbolise traditional education and Gibson's intellectual pride.
[\[foghlamgaidhlig.com\]](http://foghlamgaidhlig.com)

The School

- Represents influence, leadership, and responsibility.
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9. Important Scenes

- Gibson struggling to remember the pupils' names.
- Flashbacks showing him urging boys to enlist.
- Letters from soldiers revealing war's grim reality.
- Ghost encounters — especially with Duncan Finlayson.
- Final memorial speech and projection of names.

[\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)

10. Writer's Purpose

Donald S. Murray aims to:

- Confront how communities remember war.
- Expose moral responsibility behind leadership and influence.
- Challenge romanticised depictions of WWI.
- Honour Stornoway's real wartime losses.

[\[welovestornoway.com\]](https://welovestornoway.com)

11. Sample Essay Questions

- **Theme:** How does Murray show the psychological cost of war?
 - **Character:** Analyse Gibson's journey from confidence to regret.
 - **Symbolism:** What is the significance of the memorial plaque?
 - **Structure:** How do flashbacks and ghosts develop the play's themes?
 - **Turning Point:** Why is the scene with Duncan's ghost crucial?
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12. Model PEA Paragraph

Point: Murray uses Gibson's forgotten pupils to symbolise the moral consequences of leadership during wartime.

Evidence: Gibson cannot recall Duncan Finlayson or Alex MacIver as he prepares the memorial

speech.

Analysis: These gaps in memory reflect how leaders often forget the individual human cost of the decisions they encourage. By forcing Gibson to confront the ghosts of his pupils, Murray shows that responsibility cannot be escaped, and remembrance becomes both burden and redemption. [\[asls.org.uk\]](https://asls.org.uk)

13. Quick-Revision Checklist

- **Themes:** war, guilt, memory, leadership, class, education
- **Characters:** Gibson, Duncan, Mary Gibson, pupils
- **Symbols:** memorial, ghosts, school motto
- **Key quotes:** forgetting names, "Sequamur," war-idealism
- **Turning points:** ghost encounters, letter scenes, memorial ceremony



DRAMA — SQA-style Model Mini-Essay

Sequamur (Donald S. Murray) — Theme: Responsibility and remembrance

Sequamur confronts the moral cost of leadership through Rector William J. Gibson as he prepares to unveil a WWI memorial. Murray's structure—present-day ceremony intercut with memories and spectral encounters—turns the school into a **haunted archive** where names demand more than platitudes. Gibson once urged boys to enlist, believing war a route to progress; now he cannot recall some of their faces. That forgetting is not a failing of memory but a wound to conscience. Ghostly pupils (especially Duncan Finlayson) force the Rector to hear the unromantic truth of mud, fear, and waste, peeling back elegant Latin to reveal real blood. Murray resists easy condemnation: Gibson is no villain, but a moderniser seduced by the rhetoric of "just war" and class uplift. The unveiling scene, as names are projected, becomes ritual and reckoning; speech-making yields to witness-bearing. "Sequamur—let us follow" is turned on its head: whom, and to what end, do we follow? The play answers by honouring the fallen without sanctifying the call that sent them. Remembrance, Murray argues, must include the courage to change our minds.
