A Children's Tragedy Study Guide

A Children's Tragedy by Frank Wedekind

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Wedekind's play is a coming-of-age story of adolescent turmoil. Melchior, a young man wrestling with philosophical questions of morality, rapes his neighbor, Wendla, in a moment of passion, impregnating her. Meanwhile, Melchior's best friend, Moritz, shoots himself because he is going to be held back at school. Melchior is held responsible for Moritz's suicide, expelled from school, and sent to a reformatory. Wendla dies after Wendla's mother gives her abortion pills. Melchior escapes from the reformatory, and finding Wendla dead, he considers suicide. A mysterious masked man appears, though, to lead Melchior on into life.

As the story begins, a group of adolescents are becoming adults. Wendla, at 14, is starting to get voluptuous, but she still wants to wear her little-girl dress. Moritz, a young boy, is starting to have sexual feelings, but he doesn't know anything about sex and asks his friend Melchior to write down an explanation of where babies come from. Moritz is concerned that he will not pass his grade level, and he considers shooting himself if he fails. Meanwhile, Melchior and Wendla are attracted to each other.

Moritz is struggling to try to pass his grade at school, and he considers killing himself if he can't pass. As it becomes clear that he's not going to pass, he writes to Melchior's mother to ask for money to flee to America, but she won't give it to him. Moritz finally shoots himself rather than face his parents' reaction to his failure.

Wendla comes across Melchior in a hayloft one day, and Melchior is overcome with passion. He begins to kiss Wendla, and over her protests, he has sex with her. Wendla, afterwards, is ecstatic, walking on air. She doesn't realize the full significance of what's happened because her mother hasn't explained to her fully about sex. She doesn't even realize that she's pregnant. Meanwhile, the headmasters of Melchior's school find the explanation of sex that Melchior wrote for Moritz and expel Melchoior.

Because of Melchior's expulsion and Wendla's pregnancy, Melchior's parents send him away to a reformatory. The other boys there play sexual games, and Melchior plans to escape. While he's at the reformatory, though, Wendla's mother gives Wendla abortion pills, which kill her. When Melchior escapes from the reformatory, he goes to the graveyard to see Wendla's tombstone.

Melchior feels responsible for Wendla's death and considers killing himself. At the graveyard, he sees the ghost of Moritz, who tries to convince Melchior to commit suicide. However, Melchior meets a mysterious masked man who convinces Melchior that life is better than death. Melchior finally leaves the graveyard, having survived adolescence and heading for his manhood.

Ten Notes: 1, Footprints in the Sands of Time through 5, Blood Brotherhood

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Wedekind's play is a coming-of-age story of adolescent turmoil. Melchior, a young man wrestling with philosophical questions of morality, rapes his neighbor, Wendla, in a moment of passion, impregnating her. Meanwhile, Melchior's best friend, Moritz, shoots himself because he is going to be held back at school. Melchior is held responsible for Moritz's suicide, expelled from school, and sent to a reformatory. Wendla dies after Wendla's mother gives her abortion pills. Melchior escapes from the reformatory, and finding Wendla dead, he considers suicide. A mysterious masked man appears, though, to lead Melchior on into life.

In Eric Bentley's introduction to the play, he gives a timeline of the play's publications and performances. The play was not produced in America until 1917, over 25 years after its publication. In Germany, it was censored during World War I and suppressed during World War II. Because of its sexual content, Wedekind had to pay for the original play to be printed, and it took years for the play to be produced. When the play was reprinted and produced, it was often modified to censor out sexual words and allusions masturbation, and to place the rape scene in the hayloft in complete darkness.

Bentley presents a Moritat, i.e., a short poem, giving the highlights of the plot much the same as a sensationalistic journalist might advertise the play. Bentley emphasizes the sexual elements of the play. Bentley mentions a double suicide that took place at Wedekind's school while he is growing up, saying that this event influenced Wedekind's plot.

Ten Notes: 1, Footprints in the Sands of Time through 5, Blood Brotherhood Analysis

By writing a sensationalistic Moritat about Wedekind's play, Bentley is synthesizing the plot by making his own creation from it. He also emphasizes for the reader the public perception of the play, which stresses the shocking sexual content of a play about suicide, rape, pregnancy, homosexuality, and sex among fourteen-year-olds. These are the same elements that caused the play to be widely censored. The event that Bentley mentioned, where Wedekind witnessed two friends who killed each other in a suicide pact, seems likely to have played a role in Wedekind's plot, but other experiences from Wedekind's childhood probably also contributed to his portrayal of adolescent life.

Ten Notes: 6, God the Father, Father the God through 10, The Question of Style

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Bentley says that during the 1890s, when Wedekind wrote his play, people were questioning the father's authority, and Wedekind also had conflicts with his own father, culminating in Wedekind leaving home. Bentley relates the portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Gabor to Wedekind's own parents. The masked man at the end of the play is a father figure, and Bentley suggests that the ambiguous figure may be Life, or Goethe, who he quotes, or the author, or God, or Melchior's father after all. Bentley's culminating suggestion is that the masked man is the voice of a father from within Melchior himself.

The female characters in the play are secondary, and the play is disliked by feminists. Bentley identifies the relationship between Moritz and Melchior as the most important in the play and marked by true fraternal love. Moritz is Melchior's opposite, choosing death over life, and the two characters represent two fundamental outlooks and drives. Though the play is widely identified only with its sexual content, it is a complex work combining tragedy and comedy within an intricate structure with a theme of the conflict of Eros (an instinct for life) and Thanatos (a drive toward death).

Bentley points out the play's allusions to Goethe and Faust. He relates the masked man's idea that morality is a combination of what people think they should do and what they want, to Goethe. The play also contains many allusions to the Bible, including references throughout the most sexual scene, when the boys in the reformatory are masturbating. Bentley's final note is about the play's mixture of realism and expressionism. Bentley sees the play as beginning realistically and becoming more expressionistic as it goes on, culminating in the final scene, which is a mix of expressionism and realism.

Ten Notes: 6, God the Father, Father the God through 10, The Question of Style Analysis

Bentley's view is that Wedekind, while using autobiographical elements in his play, created a work that is formalist, stylized to be separate from pure reality. The play is dual in many ways. It is formalist and realist; it is tragedy and comedy. It combines youth and innocence with death and sexuality. The relationship between Moritz and Melchior is also dual. The boys, who are best friends, are two very different characters, functioning as literary foils, or opposites. At the same time, Moritz and Melchior are bound by a deep affection and love. They reflect the intertwined nature of death and life.

Act I, Scene 1 through Act I, Scene 2

Act I, Scene 1 through Act I, Scene 2 Summary

In the first scene, Wendla is just turning fourteen, and Wendla's mother is sewing her a new dress. Wendla complains that the dress is too long and looks like a sack. She begs to wear her old, shorter dress for one more summer. Although Mrs. Bergmann is concerned that the dress is too short for Wendla, she finally gives in to her daughter. Wendla is a well-developed girl, and her mother wonders what she'll be like in a few years. Wendla wonders if she'll still be around then, and her mother asks how Wendla can think such things. Wendla says that they just come to her at night.

In the second scene, Melchior, his friend Moritz, and a group of boys from their school are playing outside. The boys complain about their homework, asking each other if they've finished. The other boys go home, leaving Melchior and Moritz alone together. Moritz complains that the exams are only to flunk out enough students so that next year's class is small enough to fit in the classroom, which only holds sixty students.

The boys start talking about sex, and Moritz admits to having had illicit dreams. Still, Moritz doesn't know anything about sex and barely understands what he's dreaming or what his body is doing. Moritz asks Melchior how they ended up here—how people get born. Melchior starts to explain about sex and childbirth, but Moritz doesn't want to listen. He claims he must go do his homework but asks Melchior to write it down for him so he can look at the explanation later.

Act I, Scene 1 through Act I, Scene 2 Analysis

The adolescents of Wedekind's play are just beginning to go through puberty. Their bodies are changing. Wendla is growing taller, but she is also getting a woman's body. She is stuck in childhood, though, as evidenced by her desire to wear a little girl's dress. Wendla does not realize how much she's changing, and her mother also expresses a desire to keep her as a little girl. The parents throughout the play don't want to address the changes happening to their children.

Moritz is going through similar changes. He is having wet dreams, and he doesn't know what to make of them. He's ashamed to talk about what's happening, but he asks his friend Melchior to help him understand what's happening to him. Even though Melchior agrees to help, Moritz is reluctant to learn the taboo information he can't get elsewhere.

Act I, Scene 3 through Act I, Scene 5

Act I, Scene 3 through Act I, Scene 5 Summary

In the third scene, Wendla and her friends, Thea and Martha, are walking together. They talk about how Martha's parents beat her. Her strict parents force her to wear her hair in braids, and when they discovered Martha wearing a ribbon in her nightdress, tore off her nightdress. Martha ran outside into the night, naked, but it was too cold. She came back in the house and spent the night on the floor in a sack. The other girls pity Martha for her abusive, controlling parents. The girls all want to have sons someday, and they talk about how attractive Melchior is.

The boys are gathered in front of the school in the fourth scene, and Melchior asks his friends if they've seen Moritz. The boys say that Moritz is in trouble because he sneaked into the faculty room. Moritz comes out, thrilled with the news that he's still passing. He escaped detection in the faculty room, where he looked up his name in the book to see if he is still in line to be promoted. He admits that he was planning to shoot himself if he didn't pass. However, the other boys point out that Ernst's name is also still on the list, making 61 students vying for 60 seats. Moritz is still competing with Ernst Röbel for the last seat in the next grade.

In Scene 5, Melchior encounters Wendla in the woods, gathering plants for her mother to flavor wine. Melchior questions Wendla about whether she enjoys visiting the poor, postulating that people only do good works for their own selfish benefit, and that people who enjoy doing good end up in heaven while people who find the poor distasteful are doomed through no fault of their own. Wendla has fantasies of being beaten and persuades Melchior to beat her.

Act I, Scene 3 through Act I, Scene 5 Analysis

Wendla shows a masochistic side in her fantasies about being beaten. Her friend, Martha, undergoes real abuse with her parents, and Wendla creates a fantasy world out of this real tragedy. She romanticizes the horror of physical abuse, perhaps as a way to cope with learning of what her friend, Martha, goes through at home. Moritz also romanticizes himself. Everything is overblown in the passions of adolescence, and Moritz believes that passing or failing at school is life or death. Rather than devastate his parents through his failure, he would prefer to shoot himself, never considering that this would be even more devastating to his mother and father.

Melchior is concerned with philosophical ideas of morality. He believes that all actions are done for pleasure, and that people who "do good" are merely helping others to make themselves feel good. Moritz begins asking about sex by asking, philosophically, where he comes from; for Melchior, the issues of sex, morality, and philosophy are intrinsically linked.

Act II, Scene 1 through Act II, Scene 3

Act II, Scene 1 through Act II, Scene 3 Summary

In Act II, Scene 1, Melchior and Moritz are talking. Moritz says he's been studying constantly. Ernst has failed six times, but Moritz has only failed five times and swears not to fail again. Moritz tells the story of a headless queen who meets a king with two heads. The king gives the queen one of his heads, and they live happily ever after. Moritz himself feels headless.

Melchior's mother brings tea and warns Moritz about studying too much. She's also concerned that the boys are reading Faust because of Faust's illicit relationship with Gretchen. She says that she trusts Melchior to make good decisions, though. Moritz says that he read Melchior's explanation of sex, and they wonder about girls' enjoyment of sex.

In the second scene, Mrs. Bergmann tells Wendla that her married sister, Ina, has had another boy, a son. Mrs. Bergmann kept the pregnancy a secret, telling Wendla that Ina was in bed with the flu, and she tells Wendla that the stork brought the baby. Wendla is too old to believe in the stork, and she begs her mother to tell her where babies come from. Her mother is too embarrassed, and finally tells Wendla only that babies come when you love your husband very much.

The scene changes to Hänschen Rilow going into the bathroom with a copy of Palma Vecchio's "Venus." He talks to the picture, saying how attractive and sexual the image is. He masturbates as he says that he cannot handle the attraction of the image anymore. He must destroy the picture in order to save himself from his own desires. This picture is one in a series of pictures that have been the objects of his attraction, and he has "killed" all of them. He admits that there will be another picture in the future. He ejaculates and then flushes the picture away.

Act II, Scene 1 through Act II, Scene 3 Analysis

Moritz finds out the truth about sex from Melchior, and it resonates as truth to him, but when Wendla begs her mother to tell her about sex, she gets no answers. Wendla does not learn the truth about her body and the changes she's undergoing. Her mother cannot face talking about sex with her children. Similarly, when Melchior's mother expresses concerns about him reading Faust, she does not explicitly say why she's concerned. She does not talk with her son about sex. Although Melchior knows the mechanics of sex, he only knows the conclusions he's come to on his own about women, morality, and love.

Later in the play, Hänschen will find a loving relationship with Ernst, but in this scene he reveals that he is attracted to women, as well, the naked women of paintings. He keeps a picture until he cannot stand its unreality anymore, and then he flushes it away. These

women are disposable. They are merely images of women. The love of Ernst is a real, three-dimensional love that surpasses any sexual attraction Hänschen feels toward the two-dimensional women.

Act II, Scene 4 through Act II, Scene 7

Act II, Scene 4 through Act II, Scene 7 Summary

Melchior is lying in a hayloft when Wendla comes in looking for him. At first, he is embarrassed and tries to throw her out. Then, when she refuses to go, he becomes aroused by her and begins to kiss her. Wendla objects, but Melchior does not listen to her. Melchior says that love does not exist and that all actions are selfish, and over her protests, Melchior has sex with her.

In Scene 5, Melchior's mother, Mrs. Gabor, is writing a letter to Moritz. She explains that she cannot give Moritz money to flee the country. Moritz is devastated because he has failed to pass to the next grade level, and he has threatened to kill himself unless Mrs. Gabor gives him the money to flee the country. Mrs. Gabor believes that the decision to flee to America is too hasty and would be a mistake, and she offers to talk to Moritz's parents for him. She tries to assure him that everything will be all right.

In the next scene, Wendla is walking through her garden the following morning. She has come out to pick violets and is overcome with joy and can't stop smiling. She comments on how well she slept and how happy she is, and she says that she wishes she had someone with whom to share her joy.

The final scene of the second act takes place by the river. Moritz is alone planning to kill himself. He begins to think about a woman who sang at a party. Her dress was low-cut in the front and the back, and he thinks of sex as the one thing that might be worth staying alive to experience. He thinks of his funeral and of his friend Melchior. His decision to kill himself does not waver, though.

Moritz's friend Ilsa comes upon him. She has dropped out of school to become an artist's model, and she chatters to him about her life, jumping from one artist to the next, staying at their apartments, and posing for them. She describes a fight with one of the artists, a mirror over one of the artists' beds, and being arrested and then bailed out by a group of artists, saying that she loves them all. Ilse asks Moritz to walk her home, but he parts from her before they get there. Immediately he regrets the decision, knowing that a word to Ilsa could have resulted in a sexual fling. Moritz screams his unfulfilled passions to the world. He finds himself back where he started, at the riverbank, and he is ready to kill himself.

Act II, Scene 4 through Act II, Scene 7 Analysis

The rape of Wendla is ambiguous. Melchior's reaction to Wendla's presence in the hayloft shows that she probably interrupted him masturbating, and he is overcome with passions and hormones. He uses his philosophy that every action is a selfish action to give in to one's own desires, despite what Wendla says. Wendla showed herself in her previous encounter with Melchior as masochistic, desiring to be attacked on some level,

and afterwards, she is walking on air, wandering through the garden, filled with girlish excitement. This depiction is misogynistic. Wendla invites and glories in her own rape, and Melchior justifies his actions to himself. The rape becomes a non-rape.

From the point of view of the story, though, Melchior is unable to handle his sexual awakening. He has no one to talk to and only knows the mechanics of sex. Wendla has no knowledge of what's happening to her, either, and her mother refuses to discuss sex with her. Without any reference, the two children make a mess of their situation, mishandling their own sexuality.

Moritz's story builds to its climax at the end of this act. Melchior's mother refuses to help him, and Moritz cannot see his own situation clearly. He has been obsessed with the idea of suicide, and now that he has flunked, he sees no other option. He can't see his way through the trials of growing up and out the other side. Ilse represents not only sex, but life, knowledge, and adulthood—all the things Moritz can't find.

Act III, Scene 1 through Act III, Scene 3

Act III, Scene 1 through Act III, Scene 3 Summary

The teachers and head administrator of Melchior's school meet to discuss Melchior's expulsion. After Moritz's suicide, they found the explanation of sex that Melchior wrote, titled Copulation, and they believe that the obscene work unbalanced Moritz's mind and led to his suicide. They are afraid that their school will be overcome with a rash of suicides, and they decide to expel Moritz.

At first, the teachers quibble over whether a window should be opened. The headmaster, Rektor Sunstroke, calls in Melchior to question him. He won't let Melchior say anything but "yes" or "no" to his questions. One of the teachers, a stuttering man whose name translates to "Stickytongue," tries to defend Melchior's writing as entirely natural, while another professor known as "Flykiller" brutally objects. Finally Melchior protests that what he wrote wasn't obscenities but merely true facts. The headmaster is offended and sends Melchior away.

In the second scene, at Moritz's funeral, the pastor condemns Moritz's suicide, saying that the boy has earned eternal damnation. Moritz's father, Rentier Stiefel, disowns his son, saying that he never liked the boy. Other adults also condemn Moritz, saying that he had no respect for his parents and comforting Moritz's father. The adults seem pitiless towards Moritz.

Moritz's friends come up to the grave after the adults, saying kind things and hoping that he rests in peace. They talk about the suicide, saying that no gun was found and that the body was covered, so they didn't see him. They speculate that Moritz must have hung himself. The rumor is that the body has no head. Then, the boys start talking about their homework and walk away. Martha and Ilse come to the grave with fresh flowers, promising to bring more. Ilse says that she heard the shot and took away the gun. Martha asks to have it, but Ilse wants to keep the gun as a memento. Ilse says that Moritz's brains were all shot out.

In the third scene, Mr. and Mrs. Gabor talk about sending Melchior to a reformatory because he's been expelled from school. Mr. Gabor says that his wife has coddled their son and that he needs discipline. Mrs. Gabor is against sending Melchior away, saying that Melchior is a blameless and innocent scapegoat, who doesn't know it's wrong to write about sex. She threatens to leave her husband if he sends their son away. Mr. Gabor then shows her a letter, supposedly from Melchior to Wendla, apologizing for the rape and offering to make things right. At first, they say it's a forgery, but because of the letter, Mrs. Gabor changes her mind and decides that Melchior should be sent away to a reformatory.

Act III, Scene 1 through Act III, Scene 3 Analysis

Melchior has written down the facts about sex. These are the same facts that Wendla's mother withheld from her, which caused her to get pregnant without realizing the potential results. These are the same facts that Moritz could not learn from any book or any adult. The simple facts of life are hidden from the adolescents whose bodies and minds are in turmoil because they are growing to adulthood and infused with adult hormones. Ignorance is torture to them, and yet the adults are so appalled by Melchior's blunt description of sex that he is thrown out of school, and the most hotly contested part of the discussion is whether a window should be opened.

The division between adults and adolescents becomes even more clearly defined at the funeral. The adults know the truth about Moritz's death, and all they can do is condemn him to hell, disown him, and criticize him. Moritz was afraid to hurt his parents by failing, but all his father can do is disown his son who he "never liked." Meanwhile, the adolescents are left in comparative ignorance, with wild speculations about the means of Moritz's suicide and the status of his head. They imagine him in heaven and speak of him lovingly, even though they are still taken up with the problems of school and homework.

Ilse, who takes Moritz's gun and showers him with flowers, still represents the possibilities of life. The gun is a phallic symbol, at least on one level, and Ilse takes this sexual symbol to herself in the absence of Moritz and in remembrance of what might have been. Ilse, a sexual creature, is open and loving even in Moritz's death.

Act III, Scene 4 through Act III, Scene 7

Act III, Scene 4 through Act III, Scene 7 Summary

In Scene 4, Melchior is at the reformatory. The other boys start to play a game where they stand in a circle around a coin and try to ejaculate onto it. The first boy to ejaculate onto the coin wins it as a prize. Melchior refuses to participate, but he realizes that he will have to go along with the other boys in order to survive at the reformatory. He thinks about escaping, as the other boys fight over who won the contest. The doctor who runs the reformatory comes by with a locksmith, making plans to put bars on the window through which Melchior hopes to escape.

In the next scene, Wendla is ill in bed, and Dr. Fizzpowder prescribes rest and pills. He seems positive about her prognosis. Wendla's mother sees the doctor out, and Wendla's sister Ina talks with Wendla. When Mrs. Bergmann returns, Ina leaves, and Wendla questions her mother about what the doctor really said is wrong. Wendla believes she's dying. Her mother confesses that Wendla is pregnant. Wendla is shocked. She thought she couldn't get pregnant if she wasn't married. Wendla is upset that her mother didn't tell her all about sex and getting pregnant, but Mrs. Bergmann says that she only did the same as her mother before her. Mrs. Bergman goes to the door to admit a local woman, Mother Schmidt.

In Scene 6, Ernst and Hänschen are in the grape vineyards. The two boys talk about the tantalizing grapes that hang above them. They talk about the future and decide to skim the cream off of life. The two boys begin to kiss. They have found love with each other. They take the joy that they can find together in the vineyard.

Scene 7 takes place in the graveyard. Melchior, who has escaped from the reformatory through a skylight, climbs into the graveyard to elude anyone who is following him. He trips over a cross on a gravestone. He looks for Wendla's gravestone and finds it. It says that she died of anemia. Melchior condemns himself as a murderer. Moritz's headless ghost appears to Melchior, saying that Melchior disturbed Moritz's gravestone. Moritz begs Melchior repeatedly to take his hand and join him in death. Moritz says that suicides stand back and smile at the foolishness of the world, above everyone else's passions. A masked man comes and tells Melchior to ignore Moritz. He refuses to explain who he is, but the masked man offers to guide Melchior into the future.

Moritz confesses that the masked man is right, and that he lied about being above it all as a ghost. The masked man says that he was there for Moritz, too, though Moritz chose death. Melchior fondly bids Moritz farewell, and he goes off with the man in the mask. Moritz goes back to his grave to lie back and smile.

Act III, Scene 4 through Act III, Scene 7 Analysis

Melchior and Wendla are separated, and Wendla is vulnerable because of her lack of knowledge. She does not know enough to realize that she is pregnant. Instead of the joyous event that she expects pregnancy to be, Wendla is kept in the dark by her mother and given "Mother Schmidt's" abortion pills. The man in the mask points out that these pills, given to Wendla by her mother, kill her, not childbirth or pregnancy. The real danger for Wendla is lack of knowledge and lack of control over her own body.

Melchior cannot reach Wendla in time to save her. His best friend has killed himself, and the woman he's attracted to is also dead. Melchior is full of guilt, and he is poised on the verge of suicide. The final scene of the play switches from realism to fantasy. The characters of Moritz's ghost and the man in the mask aren't realistic people, like the characters in the rest of the play. Arguably, they are figures in Melchior's imagination, or elements of his character fighting for control of his future. Melchior is poised at a crossroads, deciding between life and death. Moritz represents death, and the man in the mask represents life.

Who is the man in the mask? Bentley suggests that he may be Goethe or a father figure from within Melchior's psyche. At the end of the scene, it's significant that Melchior says he will follow the man because "he is a man." The man in the mask is an adult, and he may be the adult Melchior, the person he will become as he exits adolescence and enters manhood. The choice between "death and...life" is a choice between death and adulthood, between death and facing the future self. No one can remain a child, and so the adolescents poised on the brink must either move forward to become adults or die.

Characters

Melchior Gabor

Melchior is an adolescent boy who is going through puberty. He is intelligent and does well in school, and his mother indulges him without really engaging in dialogue with him. Melchior is smart enough to have figured out the facts of life through observation, and he tries to help his friend Moritz by explaining sex. Melchior also tries to figure out morality through thought and observation, but he is not as successful without points of reference. He over-intellectualizes his reactions, refusing to acknowledge "love," but at the same time giving in to passions.

Melchior is a philosophical boy, concerned about morality. He perceives that good works give the doer pleasure and reflects that being saved or condemned depends on whether doing good works happens to appeal to someone's character, which is out of the person's control. He believes that all actions are self-serving, and so he gives in to his desire and rapes Wendla. Afterwards, Melchior is overcome with remorse and becomes obsessed with Wendla, hoping that she will forgive him.

Melchior is surrounded by death, through his best friend's suicide and through Wendla's death by abortion pills. He is on the brink of deciding to kill himself, but ultimately Melchior chooses life over death. He finds within himself the strength to move forward out of the darkness and into the light. Melchior has no one to rely on but himself. His parents send him away; his school expels him. He is strong enough to pull himself through, though, standing up to his schoolmaster and ultimately choosing to live instead of to die.

Moritz Stiefel

Moritz is Melchior's best friend, and in many ways, Moritz functions as a literary foil. The schoolmasters note that the two friends are a mismatched pair, complete opposites. Melchior is intelligent, but Moritz is a slow learner and poor student. Moritz is a follower instead of a leader. He is weak where Melchior is strong. Both boys are distanced from their parents, but Moritz is obsessed with the idea that he will disappoint his parents and that they won't be able to survive the disappointment.

Moritz is capable of great highs and lows. When he first sees that his name is still on the register of students waiting to be promoted to the next grade, he is ecstatic. He doesn't realize at first that there are sixty-one names still on the list, and that only sixty will be promoted to the next grade. At his low moments, Moritz is suicidal. He romanticizes his parents' reactions and exaggerates his own feelings and the consequences of his failures. He makes a show of staying up all night to study and swears he'll never fail a test again. He plans to run off to America to avoid his shame and applies to Melchior's mother for help.

Ultimately, Moritz fails, and when he is faced with his failure, he succumbs to the desire for death. Ilse represents a possibility for life for Moritz, but he is paralyzed and cannot pursue her. When Moritz's ghost appears at the end of the play, he says that as a ghost, he is beyond passion and above all the turmoil of human existence. He confesses to Melchior that this is a pretense, but after Melchior leaves along his path to life, Moritz goes back to his rotting grave to smile, even now embracing death.

Wendla Bergman

Wendla is a fourteen-year-old girl, who is voluptuous and well-developed for her age. Her body is changing, but Wendla is still mentally and emotionally lagging behind her physical development. She wants to remain a little girl, wearing her little-girl dress, and she doesn't realize the implications of becoming a woman. At the same time, Wendla has feelings and thoughts she can't process. Wendla, like Moritz, has a dark side. She thinks to herself that she might not live to adulthood; one of the reasons is that she is stuck in childhood. The option to adulthood, though, is death.

Because Wendla doesn't understand what is happening to her in her adolescence, she embraces a romanticized masochism. She fantasizes about being beaten, and she coerces Melchior into beating her, egging him on even as he hits her with a switch. Wendla objects when Melchior kisses her and rapes her, but afterwards, she is ecstatic, filled with joy. She doesn't understand the significance of what's happened, and she doesn't realize that she's pregnant until her mother tells her.

Wendla has no idea that she can get pregnant when she's not married. Her lack of knowledge, her "innocence," marks her as a child, while her body is ever moving forward into adulthood. Wendla is a victim, but Melchior is not her main victimizer. He is a force pulling her into the adult world, while her mother is a force (unnaturally) keeping her as a child. Her mother even says that she would like Wendla never to change. She won't talk to Wendla about sex and gives Wendla abortion pills to remove the unpleasant reminder of Wendla's burgeoning adulthood. This enforced girlhood leads to Wendla's death.

Mr. Gabor

Mr. Gabor, Melchior's father, wants to send his son away to a reformatory after he learns that Melchior has written a description of how babies are made. He convinces his wife to agree after showing her a letter that reveals Melchior's rape of Wendla.

Mrs. Gabor

Mrs. Gabor is Melchior's mother. She loves him and tends to indulge him. She objects to sending Melchior away to a reformatory, believing that he is an innocent and didn't realize there was anything wrong with writing about sex. She changes her opinion when she learns that Melchior has had sex with Wendla.

Rentier Stiefel

Moritz commits suicide in part because he believes it will devestate his parents to find out that he's flunked his grade in school. At Moritz's funeral, his father Rentier Stiefel disowns Moritz, saying that Moritz isn't his son and that he never liked the boy.

Mrs. Bergmann

Wendla's mother wants Wendla to stay a little girl for as long as possible. She is too embarrassed to tell her daughter where babies come from. When she finds out Wendla is pregnant, Mrs. Bergmann is horrified. She gives Wendla abortion pills even before Wendla knows she is pregnant, and Wendla dies from the treatment.

Ina Müller

Ina is Wendla's married sister, who has three children, a girl and two boys.

Otto, Georg, Lämmermeier, and Robert

Otto, Georg, Lämmermeier, and Robert are school friends of Moritz and Melchior.

Ernst Röbel

Ernst is one of the low-scoring students in Moritz and Melchior's class. Moritz is competing with Ernst for the last spot in the next level, which only has room for sixty boys. Ernst is gay and is having a love affair with Hänschen Rilow.

Hänschen Rilow

Hänschen is a friend of Moritz and Melchior and is Ernst's gay lover.

Thea

Thea is a friend of Wendla's.

Martha Bessel

Martha is a friend of Wendla's. Her strict parents beat her, won't let her wear a ribbon on her nightdress, and force her to wear her hair in braids.

Ilse

Ilse is a young girl who is a friend of the other adolescents in the play. She has left school to go model for artists in the town. She leads a bohemian lifestyle as an artist's model, flitting from one artist's studio to the next.

Rektor Sonnenstich (Sunstroke)

Rektor Sonnenstich is the headmaster of Moritz and Melchior's school. His name means "sunstroke." Sonnenstich expels Melchior for writing an explanation of sex called "Copulation," and at Melchior's expulsion hearing he only allows Melchior to answer questions "yes" or "no."

Afenschmalz (Calflove), Knüppeldick (Thickstick), Hungergur

Afenschmalz, Knüppeldick, Hungergurt, and Knochenbruch are all professors at Melchior's school who are present at Melchior's expulsion hearing.

Zungenschlag (Stickytongue)

Zungenschlag, whose name translates as Stickytongue, is a stuttering professor at Melchior's school who sticks up for Melchior during his expulsion hearing, calling "Copulation" a work of natural history.

Fliegentod (Flykiller)

Fliegentod, whose name translates as Flykiller, is a professor at Melchior's school who is appalled at "Copulation" and puts down Zungenschlag when he tries to defend Melchior.

Habebald (Catchmequick)

Habebald, whose name translates as Catchmequick, is the porter at Melchior's school, whose job at Melchior's expulsion is bringing, containing, and removing Melchior bodily.

Pastor Kahlbauch (Skinnytum)

The town pastor presides over Moritz's funeral and says that the boy is condemned to eternal damnation for his suicide.

Diethelm, Reinhold, Ruprecht, Helmuth, and Gaston

Diethelm, Reinhold, Ruprecht, Helmuth, and Gaston are boys at the reformatory. To amuse themselves, the boys hold a contest to see who can be the first to ejaculate onto a coin. The first one who ejaculates onto the coin wins the coin as a prize.

Dr. Procrustes

Dr. Procrustes is the man in charge of the reformatory where Melchior's parents send him.

Dr. Von Brausepulver (Fizzpowder)

Dr. Von Brausepulver treats Wendla after her mother gives her abortion pills.

The Man in the Mask

The man in the mask is a mysterious figure who appears to Melchior at the end of the play to steer him away from death and lead him into life and adulthood. The man in the mask refuses to reveal himself, and his identity remains ambiguous. At least on one level, he appears to be a reflection of Melchior himself, and as a grown man, the masked man is a reflection of Melchior's future self. The man is an indicator of the opposite of stagnation, elongated childhood, and death. He is the future, life, growth, and adulthood, and so he may be interpreted as the future, adult Melchior emerging from puberty.

Objects/Places

Wendla's

When Wendla turns fourteen, her mother sews a new, longer dress for Wendla. Wendla objects to the length of the dress, preferring the freedom of her old, short, "little-girl" dress. Wendla calls the unwanted dress a "penitential robe."

The Faculty Room

Moritz sneaks into the faculty room at the school to find out if he's passed his grade or not. He learns that he's still passing, but he and Ernst are competing for the last space in the next grade.

Copulation

At Moritz's request, Melchior writes an explanation of sex and how babies are born, including illustrations. Melchior titles his writing "Copulation." After Moritz's suicide, the schoolmasters find Melchior's writings and expel him for being a bad moral influence.

The Mirror on the Ceiling

Ilse mentions that one of the artists she works for has a mirror on the ceiling above his bed, which makes her seem bigger, exaggerated, floating on the ceiling.

The River

Moritz kills himself by the river.

Moritz's Gun

Moritz shoots himself with a gun, which Ilse picks up and keeps as a remembrance of Moritz.

The Reformatory

When Melchior's parents find out that he has raped Wendla, they send him away to a reformatory. As Melchior's mother initially feared, the reformatory is a bad influence on Melchior. The boys play games involving masturbation, and they fight. Melchior realizes that he needs to escape from the reformatory.

Mother Schmidt's Abortion Pills

Mother Schmidt brings Wendla's mother illicit abortion pills to give Wendla, and the pills ultimately kill Wendla. The name "Mother" Schmidt is ironic, since her pills are intended to avoid motherhood.

The Vineyard

Ernst and Hänschen meet in the vineyard to make love. The grapes are a symbol of Dionysius and giving oneself over to pleasure.

The Graveyard

After Melchior escapes from the reformatory, he hides out in the graveyard, where he faces the deaths of his friend Moritz and his loved one Wendla. Melchior must overcome his own suicidal feelings in the graveyard.

Themes

Adolescent Sexuality

One of the prevailing themes of Wedekind's play is the approach and effects of puberty in a world where sexuality is taboo, especially for young teenagers. The adults do not want to talk about sex or have their children exposed to sex. Wendla's mother is afraid to answer any of Wendla's questions about where babies come from, and Wendla does not even realize that she can get pregnant from what happens in the hayloft.

With the onset of sexuality, the boys are consumed with desires they don't understand. Moritz's body is awakening, giving him dreams that he can't understand, and he is desperate for information when he asks Melchior to write down the truth about sex. Melchior's direct, factual discussion of sex is so offensive to the teachers at his school that they expel him and condemn him as an immoral influence and probably the cause of Moritz's suicide. In truth, Moritz's body is exploding with hormones that change his perspective of the world, making everything seem strange. In a world where sexuality is hidden and secretive, Moritz doesn't know how to process what's happening to him, and he finally (and unnecessarily) embraces death instead of facing life.

Wedekind depicts adolescent sexuality as a force of nature. Puberty is a change that will happen to everyone, whether the children are ready for it or not, and whether their parents are ready for it or not. When the parents don't want to face the reality of their children's sexuality, they may be headed for disaster. This sexual change does not only affect sex directly, though. With Moritz, puberty creates overwhelming emotions, showing that sexuality is intertwined with the whole experience of growing up. This makes puberty a dangerous time for children who are not prepared to cope with it.

Death and Life

In Wedekind's play, Melchior struggles between the force of life and the force of death. Life is intertwined with sexuality, growth, and ultimately adulthood. The irony is that sexuality is shrouded in mystery and taboo, while adulthood seems sinister, since adults are at best uncommunicative and patronizing and at worst, villainous. Just as Wendla wants to stay in her "little-girl" dress, the characters tend to want to revert to childhood as long as possible. This reversion is not just a desire for innocence; it also prolongs ignorance and defies nature. As the adolescents' bodies change, nature forces them forward into adulthood. The more the characters resist becoming adults, the closer they come to death.

The two characters who succumb to death are Wendla and Moritz. Wendla is kept in ignorance by her mother, and her mother is the one who forces Wendla to her death through imposing ignorance and trying to hide Wendla in a kind of eternal childhood. Wendla does not even know she is pregnant (because of the ignorance imposed on her

by her mother), and her mother has already ordered the deadly abortion pills from Mother Schmidt. Moritz, on the other hand, brings about his own death by isolating himself and wallowing in his own fears and emotions. Moritz is afraid of the knowledge of sex, and he is afraid of the future. He turns inward and allows his romantic notions of suicide to grow to overwhelming proportions.

Melchior, on the other hand, chooses life and adulthood with all its terrors. Melchior is intelligent enough to deduce the truth about sex from his observations of the world, and in the end, he is strong enough to choose life over death by relying on himself. The tragedy is that no adolescent should have to depend on his or her inner self to survive puberty. Melchior is lucky that he is strong, but his parents' mishandling of Melchior's puberty and his questions about the nature of life still brings him to the brink of death.

Coming of Age

A coming-of-age story tracks a young person's trials as he or she passes from childhood into adulthood. Wedekind's play tells the coming-of-age story of Melchior, and Melchior's decision to face life at the end of the story instead of choosing death. This choice is a passage from childhood into adulthood. Melchior becomes a man, but who he is as a man is still a mystery (symbolized by the mask of the masked man). The story does not follow Melchior into his adulthood, since that is another story.

The trials that Melchior travels through in his coming-of-age are more difficult than most. While the nuts and bolts of sexuality are clear to Melchior, he struggles with understanding the meaning of existence and morality. He approaches love as a non-believer, and instead of courting Wendla, Melchior ends up raping her. Through this mistake, Melchior learns that by robbing Wendla of choice, he ultimately robbed himself of something he wants, a relationship. Melchior begins to learn that life is more complex than mere pleasure-seeking. This realization comes too late for Wendla, who is trapped by her mother's denial of Wendla's adulthood.

After Moritz's suicide, Melchior is held responsible for the "immoral" treatise on sex that he wrote, but Melchior is adult enough to stand up for himself, denying the immorality of the straightforward truth. Melchior is persecuted, expelled, and sent to a reformatory; iIn other words, he finds himself abandoned by his school, by Moritz, and by his parents. Melchior ultimately reaches inside himself, where he finally finds someone he can rely on, the masked future-self who appears to Melchior in the graveyard. Only through his inner strength can Melchior pass into adulthood and come of age.

Style

Point of View

The play is shown to the viewer from the perspective of the adolescents. Although Melchior is the main character, many of the scenes do not contain him. On one level, the main character can be identified as the adolescents as a group, instead of Melchior as an individual, and the audience sees the children's perspective on the unfolding events. Adults are always distant, secretive, and oppressive. The world outside the company of other adolescents is confusing and obscure. The sequence of scenes, sometimes disjointed, sometimes failing to show important events, reflects the confusion of adolescence.

The characters are all experiencing turmoil, and each processes this turmoil in his or her own way. Wendla is excited by the new prospects opening up for her, but she does not understand their significance. She lets her excitement run away with her and begins having masochistic fantasies. Moritz is afraid of failure and looming disappointment, and these fears become exaggerated and overpowering, creating a fantasy of suicide. Melchior attempts to intellectualize the world around him. He becomes an atheist and believes that people only act out of selfish impulses for pleasure. All these reactions are ways to cope with a confusing and obscured world.

The audience is absorbed into this adolescent world of turmoil, created by the short and sometimes disconnected scenes of life, frustrations, and missteps. The humor comes from the same exaggerations that cause the tragedy. As the masked man says at the end of the play, looking back on this at a distance, with a full stomach, Melchior could perhaps laugh at himself. Within the world of adolescence, there is tragedy, but looking at it from a distance, the tragedy is also comic.

Setting

The play is set in the early 1890s in Germany, but many of the ideas and experiences that the play deals with are universal among adolescents. The true setting of the play is the world of adolescence, where disappointments such as failure at school can take on looming, ominous proportions, where all adults are distant and separate adversaries, even loved ones, and where the forces of hormones drive behavior. In the setting of adolescence, everything is exaggerated.

Wedekind's play is partially realistic and partially fantastic. Part of its fantastic nature, the feeling of disconnectedness from reality, comes from the state of adolescence. The exaggerated, disconnected nature of adolescent perspective is reflected in the sinister teachers and schoolmaster at the boys' school, in the demeaning conditions at the reformatory, in the dire situations the children find themselves in, and finally in the

fantastical scene where Melchior must choose between the headless ghost of his dead friend and the mysterious masked stranger.

The settings of the play sometimes have symbolic significance. The river, the woods, and the hayloft are all places where nature is prevalent, and in these natural settings, the natural instincts of the adolescents take over, leading to both sex and violence. The rape scene in the hayloft takes place in darkness, reflecting the hidden and taboo nature of sexuality. The vineyard, where Ernst and Hänschen's gay love affair takes place, is also an area of nature, and the grapes are a symbol of pleasure, a reminder of Dionysius.

Language and Meaning

The play's language is sometimes vague and halting, especially at highly-emotional moments, and the dialogue is sometimes interrupted by long lines of dashes representing the characters' emotionally (and often sexually) charged feelings. At the crucial moment before Moritz's suicide, he shouts to heaven about Ilse, and the dialogue is in all capital letters, reflecting Moritz's emotion.

he children's parents speak in roundabout language, avoiding the subjects that they don't want to talk about. Instead of plainly explaining anything to her daughter's questions about where babies come from, Wendla's mother tells her haltingly that a baby comes only when a woman loves her husband as only a husband can be loved. Melchior's mother expresses vague uncertainties about whether Faust is an appropriate book for her son to read at his age, never talking to him directly about her concerns.

The teachers at the school also mask their speech. They speak in formal language, using an extensive vocabulary. The one teacher who defends Melchior stutters (a mask of language) and speaks in riddles, saying that the atmosphere of the meeting is like a catacomb. On one level, he seems to be speaking about the lack of air in the room from the closed window, but on another level, he is speaking of the atmosphere of death and suppression. When the schoolmaster questions Melchior, he seeks to suppress completely the boy's ability to express himself, forcing Melchior to answer "yes" or "no."

Structure

The play is broken into three acts. The first act has five scenes, and the last two acts have seven scenes each. The scenes are varied in location and cast, so to some extent, the play seems episodic, broken up into small vignettes, separated from each other. These bits of story are closely intertwined, though, building up the story of adolescent sexuality.

Wedekind often ends a scene before an important event, cutting away and only later revealing what has happened. When Wendla is sick in bed from her pregnancy, the scene ends just as Mother Schmidt comes to the door. The audience has no way of knowing the significance of Mother Schmidt. Only in the final scene of the play does the

audience learn that Wendla is dead and that Mother Schmidt came to supply Wendla's mother with the deadly abortion pills that killed her daughter. Still, Wedekind does not shy away from portraying Wendla's rape in one scene and the boys at the reformatory masturbating on a coin in another.

The play builds up to the climactic scene at the graveyard. The surviving character is the main character of the play: Melchior. At the end of the play, he is surrounded by death, as shown by the graveyard setting. Wendla's gravestone is prominent, and Moritz's headless ghost is a constant reminder of death. This scene develops the conflict between death and life that is Melchior's internal struggle, and from which life emerges victorious.

Quotes

"'The little-girl dress suits me better than that old sack. —Let me wear it a little longer, Mother! Just for the summer! This penitential robe will keep. —Hold it till my next birthday. I'd only trip on the hem now.'" —Wendla, Act I, Scene 1

"'I can't. —I can't relax on a subject like reproduction. If you want to do me a favor, give me your explanations in writing. Write down what you know. Make it as brief and clear as you can and stick it among my books during gym. I'll take it home without knowing I've got it. I'll come upon it unexpectedly. I'll have no choice but to glance through it...with a weary eye...and if it's absolutely necessary, you could add a few illustrations in the margin.'" —Moritz, Act 1, Scene 2

"'I-I know how true it is: if I didn't get my promotion I was going to shoot myself!'" —Mortiz, Act 1, Scene 4

"'There's no such thing as sacrifice! No such thing as unselfishness! —I see the virtuous rejoicing and the wicket trembling and groaning—I see you, Wendla Bergmann, shaking your curls and laughing, and I can't join in because I feel like an outlaw! —What were you dreaming of just now, Wendla, in the grass by the stream?'" —Melchior, Act I, Scene 5

"'—If only I can go on like this! I mean to work and work till my eyes pop out of my head. —Ernst Röbel has already failed six times since the vacation, three times in Greek, twice with Bonebreaker, and the last time in Lit. I've only been in that unfortunate situation five times, and from now on it's not going to happen again! —Röbel won't shoot himself. Röbel hasn't got parents who are sacrificing their all for him. He can be a mercenary if he wants to, or a sailor or a cowboy. If I don't get through, Papa will have a stroke and Mama will go to the madhouse. That's more than a fellow could bear.'" —Moritz, Act II, Scene 1

"'—Here I have a sister two years married. I myself am an aunt three times over. And I haven't the slightest idea how it all comes about...Don't be angry, Mother darling! Who in the world should I ask but you? Please tell me! Tell me, Mother! Don't scold me for asking. I'm ashamed. Just answer. How does it happen? —You can't seriously expect me to believe in the stork—at fourteen.'" —Wendla, Act II, Scene 2

"'There is no such thing as love! That's a fact. —It's all just selfishness and self-seeking. —I love you as little as you love me.—-'" —Melchior, Act II, Scene 4

"'—Oh God, if only someone would come that I could embrace, that I could tell the whole story to!'" —Wendla, Act II, Scene 6

"Sunstroke: 'Was the indecent document born in your brain?'
Melchior: 'Yes. —Please point out to me one indecency, Herr Rektor.'
Sunstroke: 'You are to answer the precisely formulated questions which I put to you with

a simple and unassuming "yes" or"'no.'"
Melchior: 'What I wrote is fact, no more, no less. Facts well known to you.'
Sunstroke: 'Scoundrel!!'" —Act III, Scene 1

"'The boy was no son of mine! —The boy was no son of mine! —I never liked him—from the beginning.'" —Rentier Stiefel, Act III, Scene 2

Wendla: 'Why didn't you tell me everything, Mother?'
Mrs. Bergmann: 'Child, child, pull yourself together. Don't despair! How could I tell such things to a fourteen-year-old girl? It'd have been the end of the world. I've treated you no different than my mother treated me. —Let's place our trust in God, Wendla, let's hope for mercy, and do our part...'" —Act III, Scene 5

"'Then you don't remember me? Even at the last moment you were hesitating between death and...life.'" —The Man in the Mask, Act III, Scene 7

Topics for Discussion

Who is the man in the mask who appears to Melchior in the final scene of the play?

The subject matter of the play is very serious and realistic, but the play also is comic and fantastical. Is the comedy of the play and the final scene with Moritz's ghost and the mysterious masked man appropriate for the serious issues the play addresses? Does the blending of comedy and tragedy help or hinder the play?

To what extent are Moritz, Melchior, and Wendla's parents responsible for the tragedies in the play?

What do you think will happen to Melchior after the end of the play?

Why are the adults in the play reluctant to discuss sex?

Why does Wedekind include Ernst and Hänschen, the gay lovers, in the play?

How does the scene of Wendla gathering violets in her garden (Act II, Scene 6) change the audience's perception of the rape in Act II, Scene 4?

Is Melchior a moral character? Is he immoral?