Children of a Lesser God Study Guide

Children of a Lesser God by Mark Medoff

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Introduction

Mark Medoff wrote *Children of a Lesser God* specifically for the actress Phyllis Frehch. The play is important historically because it includes a lead role for a deaf performer in a drama designed for the hearing theater audience. Unlike some of Medoff s earlier plays, such as *The Wager* and *When You CominBack, Red Ryder?, Children of a Lesser God* examines communication problems, psychological stress, and emotional abuse, but does so without the threat of physical violence or guns. The play earned Medoff a Tony award in 1980. In 1986, a film version of the play, written by Medoff, was released; the film starred William Hurt as James and Marlee Matlin, who earned an Academy Award for her performance as Sarah.

Sign language is integral to the play. Sarah signs but does not speak aloud until the climactic scene toward the end of the play. When conversing with Sarah, James will often echo her part of the conversation and sign and speak his own responses.

Author Biography

Mark Howard Medoff was born in Mount Carmel, Illinois, on March 18, 1940. His father, Lawrence, was a physician, and his mother, Thelma, a psychologist. He earned a B.A. in 1962 from the University of Miami, and an M.A. in English from Stanford in 1966. Medoff has held a number of academic appointments at New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, including the position of drama-tist-in-residence and chair of the theater arts department. He and his wife, Stephanie, have three daughters.

Medoff has received several awards and honors for his work. In 1974, he won a Guggenheim fellowship in playwriting. He received the Outer Critics Circle Award in 1974 for *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?* and again in 1980 for *Children of a Lesser God.* Also in 1980 Medoff won the Tony Award for *Children of a Lesser God;* in 1987 he earned an Academy Award nomination for his screenplay based on the stage play. Gallaudet College, the only liberal arts college for the deaf in the world, recognized Medoff s achievement for *Child-ren of a Lesser God* with an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree in 1981.

Plot Summary

Act I

The primary action of *Children of a Lesser God* takes place inside the mind of James Leeds. Time is not linear during the play, and characters "step from his memory for anything from a full scene to several lines," and place changes rapidly on a bare stage that holds "only a few benches and a blackboard." James is a speech teacher at a State School for the Deaf. He meets Sarah Norman, a cleaning woman who has been deaf from birth and has resided at the school since the age of five.

Two other students meet with James for speech therapy on a regular basis: Orin, a contemporary of Sarah who has become an apprentice teacher at the school, and Lydia, a girl in her late teens who develops a crush on James. As the relationship between Sarah and James grows, Orin distances himself from James, while Lydia becomes more infatuated with her teacher.

Sarah's mother, known only as Mrs. Norman in the play, appears at first to be a bitter woman, one whose husband left at the same time her daughter was sent away to the State School for the Deaf. Later, James brings Sarah to her mother's house and forces a reunion. The two women reconcile and Mrs. Norman attends James and Sarah's wedding.

Act II

The second act begins with a bridge party at the newly weds' home attended by Franklin, James's supervising teacher, and Mrs. Norman. Sarah delivers a splendid performance, suggesting that she has become integrated into the middle-class hearing world, but later tells James "1 feel split down the middle, caught between two worlds." James also experiences this struggle to feel comfortable in both worlds because he becomes exhausted serving as Sarah's translator and finds it impossible to enjoy music because Sarah cannot share it with him.

When Onn enlists Sarah's help in a campaign to charge the State School for the Deaf with discrimination for not hiring enough deaf teachers, the personal differences between James and Sarah become part of a larger political issue. Edna Klein, a lawyer brought in by Orin to help with the case against the school, illustrates the misconceptions and mistakes made by well-meaning people from the hearing community. Sarah begins to realize that Edna wants to speak before the commission "for all deaf people," and that James wants to speak for her. Sarah explains that everyone has always assumed that because she cannot hear, she is unable to understand and is incapable of speaking for herself. Her own identity as a separate individual has been ignored by the hearing world in general, by Edna, and by her husband. Sarah declares:"Unless you let me be an individual, and, just as you are, you

will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me, And until you do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship."

After a climactic argument in which James holds her arms at her side and forces her to speak, Sarah leaves James. James experiences remorse and begins to realize more clearly her position, but Sarah refuses to return. In order for them to be able to reconcile their differences, Sarah maintains that she and James "would have to meet in another place; not in silence or in sound but somewhere else. I don't know where that is now." The play ends with the hope that James and Sarah will be joined once again.

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

"Children of a Lesser God" begins out of sequence, with a break-up that will happen later on in the work. Sarah Norman, the lead actress, who is deaf, is signing to James Leeds, a speech therapist. They have reached the climax of a heated argument, and she signs to him that she has nothing except for him, but that she doesn't need him, as she still has herself. She makes the sign for "Join, Unjoin," a sign that we'll learn more about later on in the play. James is obviously upset, and after she runs off the stage, he addresses the audience (with words). He asks himself whether she left of her own accord, or if he drove her away. If he did, he says with some difficulty, it was because "In the beginning there was silence and out of that silence there could come only one thing: Speech. That's right. Human speech. So, speak!"

One of James' students enters at this moment, and is trying to read a sentence. James is suddenly together and energetic, and encourages his student, a hearing-impaired youth named Orin. Orin is frustrated by his inability to make the "S" sound, but keeps trying and finally gets it right. Mr. Franklin enters towards the end of class, followed by Sarah Norman. He introduces her to James, saying that he'd like James to be her speech therapy teacher. James tries to protest, as her beauty intimidates him, but at that moment, Mr. Franklin exits, leaving them alone. James assumes she can lip read, and starts talking to her. She stares back blankly at him, but it takes him a few minutes to realize that she is not following what he's saying. He's obviously nervous, and makes some jokes, until she takes the upper hand in the situation and tells him that if he doesn't sign a little faster their session will be over before he finishes with the small talk. After a few more words, she exits.

The next scene is James talking to Sarah's mother, Mrs. Norman, at her home. This scene reveals that Sarah hasn't been home since she was 18, and that she is not close to her mother. Her mother does not know, for example, that Sarah works at the school as a maid, although she is not upset or surprised by it, and challenges James to find her an alternative. He tells Mrs. Norman that Sarah is intelligent, and that with more communication skills she could go to college and find a better job. Mrs. Norman mocks him, accusing him of trying to "force her to speak and lip read so she can pass for hearing." He counters that he is simply trying to help her to function in the world of the hearing. She responds cynically, and then escorts him to the door.

Sarah returns to the stage, and she and James begin to sign, although he finds it difficult to follow her rapid hand movements, and she doesn't understand his "hearing" sense of humor. He continues to make bad jokes, and she tells him that his timing is terrible and that his signing is boring. He mentions his visit with Sarah's mother, and she flies into a rage. He tries to calm her down, and then asks her out on a date. She is somewhat surprised, but accepts his invitation.

James finishes up his day with a session with Lydia, another one of his students. The end of the lesson overlaps with Sarah, on the other end of the stage, "at the restaurant." Lydia leaves the stage and James goes to join Sarah. It is in this scene that we are acquainted with how helpless Sarah is when she ventures out of the deaf bubble she has created for herself at the school. When she points to a desert item on the menu, James realizes that she either can't read, or has no idea what anything on the menu means. She asks him to help her, and he does.

During dinner, Sarah makes fun of the way deaf people try to speak. She mockingly does a grotesque imitation of Orin and Lydia trying to form words, and James reprimands her by asking her if she likes being a maid. She says that she does, because it allows her to be alone with her silence.

Sarah asks James to dance, saying that she can hear the vibrations of the music through her nose. Through dancing they are able to connect on a physical level, although Sarah maintains her distance by trying to sign and dance at the same time.

The next scene is James having a conversation with Orin in Orin's dorm room. He has found out about James' date with Sarah, and is upset by it. He tells James, "You don't fool us. You think learning to sign means you can communicate with us, that because you want to change us we want to be changed." He accuses speech therapists of working with deaf people simply to glorify themselves, and asks James to leave his room.

The next time Sarah and James see each other is days later. She tells him that she's been avoiding him on purpose. She says that Lydia is falling in love with James, and that he's trying to con everyone. He kisses her, and she runs away. As James tries to chase her, he runs into Mr. Franklin, who reprimands him for his romantic involvement with Sarah.

James goes to see Mrs. Norman again, and she reveals to him that Sarah used to try to talk, but because she spoke poorly, everyone thought she was mentally handicapped, so she stopped. She also hints to James that her attempts to try to get Sarah's sister's male friends to pay attention to her backfired in a tragic way.

James asks Sarah about it, and Sarah tells him that she used to have sex with boys when she was younger to prove there was something she could do better than hearing girls could. She tells him that although she's had sex with many men, no one has ever penetrated her inner silence.

Orin confronts James about his relationship with Sarah again, telling him that he needs Sarah for the deaf "cause." It is here that we learn that Orin has plans to become an activist for deaf rights. James accuses him of being in love with Sarah, but Orin denies it. Mr. Franklin also confronts James again, and tells him that Sarah had a relationship with the speech therapist that worked at the school before James.

Far from being upset, James asks Sarah to marry him and leave the school. She says that she wants to continue to go to school, but agrees that they should marry and live together so that James can continue to teach.

Act 1 Analysis

"Children of a Lesser God" is a significant work of literature because it is the first play to give deaf actors lead roles in a work designed for a hearing audience. The challenge Mark Medoff faced when creating this work was to communicate everything the lead actress was signing to a non-signing audience. He does this by making the hearing actors read the sign language as the deaf actors are signing it, almost as if they are reading a book out loud. Medoff decided to write the play on a whim, when he met and was impressed by a deaf actress named Phyllis French, who goes on to play Sarah when the play is performed. He was so impressed by her that when she pointed out to him that no play has ever been created with a lead role for a deaf actor, he took the challenge and wrote Children of a Lesser God. It was widely popular among hearing audiences, and won a Tony Award in 1980. It was also made into a movie with William Hurt and Marlee Matlin, a deaf actress.

The start of Act 1 is ambivalent in its meaning. It's difficult to understand what "beginning" James is referring to, whether it was the beginning of his relationship with Sarah, or the beginning of mankind.

James' introduction to Sarah reveals much about her personality and about her relationship with Mr. Franklin. When he tells her to "stay" as she is about to leave the room, she sarcastically acts like a dog, revealing that she feels belittled in the presence of other hearing people. Mr. Franklin also makes a comment about her working hard for James' predecessor, foreshadowing an issue that will arise later in the play when James finds out that he had been her lover as well.

The first signs that Sarah makes to James are sarcastic. She is critical of his signing, and tells him that if he doesn't learn to sign faster, their session will be over before he finishes his introduction. This is indicative of Sarah's view of the hearing world. She feels that it is the hearing person's responsibility to communicate on her level, not hers to communicate on theirs. She feels no obligation to read lips, but feels that if anyone wants to communicate with her, they should learn to sign, and do it well.

In the next scene, we see James talking to Mrs. Norman, which gives us a glimpse of Sarah's history. Sarah's mother is almost as cynical and sarcastic as Sarah, and in her accusation that James is trying to pass her off as a hearing person, she raises a key issue in the play. James Leeds' goal as a speech therapist for deaf people is to teach the deaf to function in the hearing world. Mrs. Norman's cynical response to this is that a place in the hearing world is perhaps not such a great goal to aspire to. She raises the issue that perhaps Sarah does not want or need to function in the hearing world, and that she has created her own world that is as good if not better for her. This obviously

conflicts dramatically with James' viewpoint, as he has dedicated his life to an opposing point of view, that the deaf can and should learn to do everything that the hearing can.

However, neither Mrs. Norman nor James Leeds must make the decision about Sarah being integrated into the hearing world, but Sarah herself. It is a decision that meeting James has made her rethink, and one that the entire play is based around.

During James' next session with Sarah the following day, James asks Sarah out on a date. When she accepts, he jokingly says that he'll whisper her name in the trees behind the duck pond, where they've agreed to meet. She tells him he's not funny, and he responds by telling her that he thinks maybe she does find him funny, but is afraid to show it. This is significant and sets the tone of their future relationship, where Sarah's defenses always seem to construct a barrier between them.

Despite these barriers, we are given hope and a look at what their relationship has the potential to become on their first date. When she can't understand the menu, she signs to him, "Help me." It is with this first instance of her defenses coming down, and acknowledgement that James can help her, that we see foreshadowing of the relationship that is to come. Only moments later however, her impenetrable barrier is back up, and she tells him, "I don't need what you want to give me. I have a language that's just as good as yours!"

She further reveals this sentiment when she tells James about her active sex life as a teenager. She tells him that she's not interested in doing things she can't do well, which is why she doesn't speak, and why she had sex with so many boys when she was growing up. She felt like it proved that there were things she could do as well as or better than a hearing person.

When James and Sarah decide to get married, Mr. Franklin accuses James of taking Sarah away from the only home she's ever know, including the school and the deaf community. While physically it's only a move across the street to faculty housing, emotionally the significance is huge for Sarah. It would appear that for now she has made her decision to join the "hearing world," although she still refuses to fully integrate herself by making an effort to learn to speak or read lips.

Act 2

Act 2 Summary

Act 2 begins with a bridge party that includes Mr. Franklin, Mrs. Norman, Sarah and James. James has taught Sarah to play bridge so that she can be included in his weekly bridge game with other members of the faculty. She wins her first game and James is amazed by her abilities and obviously proud of her.

The scene changes, and Sarah and James are back home. On the other side of the stage however, is Orin, taunting Sarah that she has turned her back on the deaf community. The stage is shared by James and Sarah taking a walk on one side, and Orin telling Sarah about the lawyer he has contacted to file a claim against the deaf school on the other. Sarah is upset, and tells James that she feels caught in between the hearing and the deaf world. The subject of her learning to speak comes up again, and she is further upset.

In the next scene Lydia is over at James and Sarah's house watching television with the volume turned way up, as she is not completely deaf, but hearing-impaired. The telephone rings, but he is the only one to answer it because no one else hears it. The oven buzzer is sounding, and Sarah doesn't know because she can't hear it. The phone call is for Sarah, and amidst the noise and chaos, James has to translate a phone conversation with Orin. He feels overwhelmed by the noise in his house full of deaf people, and after Lydia leaves, he decides to listen to some music to help him calm down. He realizes however, that he can't enjoy music anymore because he can't share the pleasure he gets from it with Sarah. She reminds him that she can hear musical vibrations through her nose, but she doesn't like this music because it reminds her of the organ music she and Orin were forced to listen to at church when they were younger.

Orin enters, and they reminisce about their childhood together. He tells Sarah that he needs her help to fight for deaf rights in the school system, but she tells him she's happy where she is. He says that her marriage won't last as long as the lasting impact she could have on the well being deaf community.

Sarah agrees to a meeting with the lawyer Orin has found to make a case against the school for discrimination against the very deaf people they are trying to help. The meeting is a disaster. Everyone tries to talk for Sarah, and the lawyer assumes that she is unhappy with her handicap, but blatantly tells her it could be useful in a lawsuit. James and Sarah argue because Sarah says that everyone treats her like an idiot, including James.

At the next meeting with the lawyer, Sarah rejects the speech the lawyer has written about her, and threatens to leave the case if she can't write her own speech and sign it herself to the hearing court. James leaves Sarah to write her speech, and goes to speak

to Mr. Franklin about the impending lawsuit. He urges Franklin to settle, but Franklin rejects the idea, saying that nothing will ever be enough for them, so there would be no point in trying to settle.

When Sarah has finished writing her speech she shows it to James, but tells him that she wants Orin to translate it for her. James is hurt and angered by her refusal to let him into her silence. He accuses her of being jealous of hearing people, and so angry at her disability that she tries to cover her anger with pride. He forces her to speak, and she erupts in a jumble of words that are barely intelligible.

She runs away, and what follows is a jumble of short scenes played out rapidly. We are taken back to the scene at the beginning of the play for an instant, and then to the court, where Sarah fails to make an appearance. We learn that she has gone back to her mother's house, a scene that is quickly replaced by Lydia trying to seduce James. Orin and the lawyer then enter, jubilant that they've won the case without the help of Sarah or James. James ends up at Mrs. Norman's house, where Sarah finally agrees to see him. They conclude that they have both been trying to change each other, and that this has been harming their relationship. Sarah admits that she does not want deaf children, and that although she is trying to find her own path in life, she loves James. The final words of the play are both of them saying or signing together, "I'll help you if you'll help me," followed by the sign that we saw at the beginning of the play that symbolizes two people joined as one.

Act 2 Analysis

For Sarah, this simple success at bridge and at making a quiche is a huge victory. She has succeeded in a night of "hearing" activities despite the fact that she still does not speak or read lips.

In her moment of triumph however, Orin's voice reaches her, mockingly telling her that she has all the makings of a regular American housewife. This appearance of Orin on stage and his mocking words serve to remind us of how angry and cynical Sarah was at the beginning of the play towards the hearing world that she has now become a part of. She feels caught between two worlds, and is trying to cut ties with her old deaf world, which we can see through her attitude towards Lydia and Orin, but still tells James that he can't be let in to her private silent world. We begin to realize that Sarah's attitude is both the cause of and the result of her deafness. Although initially we believe that Sarah is angry and refuses to speak because of her deafness, in Act 2 we begin to realize that perhaps she clings so tightly to her handicap, refusing to learn to lip read or attempt to speak, to protect herself from the hearing world.

In her fight with Orin, Sarah realizes that she has to make a choice, that she can't be split between the hearing and the deaf world the way she is. She doesn't make the choice immediately, but the scene foreshadows the decision that she will make in the near future.

It is interesting to speculate what it is that Orin and Sarah are fighting for in their case against the school. On the one hand, they feel as though they should be treated as equals to their hearing counterparts. James makes the counter argument that if they want to be treated as equals, then they need the same communication skills as hearing people. It is possible that they themselves don't know what it is they're fighting for, or if they do, it's a battle that's impossible to convey to the hearing world.

Through the events that follow with the legal case and her difficult marriage to James, Sarah does make the choice to separate from James. It would seem that the separation is more symbolic than anything, and can be interpreted as Sarah realizing that as much as she needs James, she needs her independence just as much. When they are reunited at the end of the play, they both agree that she must continue to look for the independence she is seeking, but can do so while still being joined by the bonds of love.

The title, Children of a Lesser God, is cynical in the same way that Sarah herself is cynical about her handicap. The argument of the play is that Sarah and Orin do not find their deafness to be a handicap at all, as Sarah explains in her speech. She claims to be able to communicate her thoughts more accurately and more clearly than a hearing person. This is contrary to what a hearing person naturally would think, that deaf people simply want to be as similar to hearing people as possible, an assumption James himself makes. It is this question that Sarah grapples with throughout the play, and comes to some resolution at the end through her realization that she can be both independent and united with James at the same time.

Characters

Orin Dennis

Orin is two years younger than Sarah and has been a student with her at the State School for the Deaf since he was a young child. Orin, however, has some residual hearing and practices both his lip-reading and his speech. He is described as "the guardian of all... deaf children because he [is] an apprentice teacher and speaks." He is also described as someone who "wants to lead a revolution against the hearing world and thinks [the deaf] can hardly wait to follow him."

Onn is angry that Sarah appears to have abandoned him and the deaf world in favor of James and the hearing world. But he enlists both of them to join him in a complaint against the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that alleges discriminatory hiring practices against teachers who are deaf. He is single-minded in pursuit of his goal, convincing a lawyer, Ms. Klein, to advise them about the case. He wants Sarah to leave her "little romance" and fight with him for deaf rights. Because of his lip-reading and speaking skills, Onn acts as a bridge between the two worlds, although it is apparent from his thoughts and actions that he feels more comfortable in *the* deaf community.

Mr. Franklin

Mr. Franklin is the Supervising Teacher at the State School for the Deaf. He is one of the "Great White Fathers" of deaf education. He takes a condescending attitude toward everyone. He views all the deaf, even the adults like Onn and Sarah, as needy children who need his protection and guidance. However, his compassionate, benevolent pretense is weakened when he says to James: "Mr. Leeds ... we don't fornicate with the students. We just screw them over. If you ever get the two confused.. .you're gone." Later, when James goes to him to attempt to broker a settlement in the discrimination case, Mr. Franklin refers to the deaf as his "subjects," and promises that no matter what the commission might decide, he will make Onn and Sarah take him to court, and if they are successful there, he will appeal the ruling, tying them up in litigation for years.

Edna Klein

Ms. Klein is a lawyer who helps Orin with his claim of discrimination against the State School for the Deaf. She does not know how to sign or how to communicate with Orin or Sarah. She plans to read a speech that she has wntten before the commission but is accused by Sarah of writing "the same old shit"—that deaf people are helpless and need hearing people to get along in the world. Ms. Klein is well-intentioned, but recognizes neither Sarah or Orin as human beings who can speak for themselves.

James Leeds

The play takes place in the mind of James Leeds. As happens to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman,* characters step from James's memory "for anything from a full scene to several lines." James Leeds is a speech teacher at a State School for the Deaf. He is bright and articulate, but struggles throughout the play to understand the "other language" of Sarah and her deaf counterparts. A former Peace Corps volunteer, James is attracted to support occupations "because it feels good to help people." For the whole length of the play, James tries to "help" Sarah, to make her value speech. James wrestles with his motives, struggling to determine whether they stem from a desire to help or a desire to control.

Lydia

Lydia is a State School for the Deaf student in her late teens. She, like Orin, has some residual hearing, and she faithfully practices her speech and lip-reading skills. However, she is not as mature as Orin and throws herself at James throughout the play. As one of James's students, Lydia has frequent contact with him, but that contact turns into a schoolgirl crush. After James and Sarah marry, Lydia is given Sarah's former job as "maid." Lydia often appears at the Leeds's residence to "watch TV" and be closer to James. She wants to appear "heanng," and even chides James after Sarah has left: "You need a girl that doesn't go away. You need a girl that talks."

Mrs. Norman

Mrs Norman is Sarah's mother, a hearing woman whose husband left her not long after Sarah was sent to the State School for the Deaf. Mrs. Norman appears to be a bitter woman at the beginning of the play. She has been frustrated and challenged in trying to parent a deaf child, and seems disinterested in what James has to say to her about Sarah and her intellectual capabilities. She complains of "feeling like another mandatory stop in some training program for new teachers at the school." Mrs. Norman does reconcile with Sarah after James forces a visit between the two women. She attends their wedding and joins James and Sarah as Mr. Franklin's partner for the bridge game at the beginning of Act EL She welcomes Sarah with open arms after she leaves James.

Sarah Norman

Sarah is a woman in her mid-twenties who has been deaf from birth; she works as a cleaning woman at the State School for the Deaf. She refuses to speak and rejects James's attempts at therapy because "I don't do things I don't do well." Sarah signs throughout the play, speaking only in the final climactic scene. She uses American Sign Language (ASL; a conceptual, pictorial expression) rather than me Signed English (a word-by-word, grammatical rendition) technique favored by James.

The physicality of the language itself provides a certain eloquence to the dialogue that speech alone cannot deliver. Even though Sarah turns in a splendid performance at the card party at the beginning of Act H that tests her integration into the hearing world, she confesses to James: "I feel split down the middle, caught between two worlds." This is the central problem for Sarah. Like Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House,* she declares her own identity as a separate person, telling James: "Until you let me be an individual, and, just as you are, you will never be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship."

Themes

Language and Meaning

Children of a Lesser God forces its audience to struggle with the problem of language, specifically resulting from the differences between spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL) and those who employ these languages. James becomes exhausted trying to act as bridge between the two. Mrs. Norman lost her daughter for eight years because of the misunderstandings and lack of communication between herself as a hearing person and her deaf daughter. Mr. Franklin is skilled at ASL but refuses to use it, especially m social situations. Orin and Lydia seem to abandon ASL for speech. Sarah refuses to speak and converses only in ASL. And Ms. Klein is confused when people seem less than enthusiastic about her having learned three signs.

English has its own grammatical structure, its own rules, its own way of putting thoughts into communication. ASL has a different grammatical structure, one that linguists say is more like Chinese than English. ASL follows a different set of rules, rules more often made by the speakers themselves than by teachers and writers. ASL uses the entire body to bring the thoughts of its user to the world at large.

Much of the conflict in this play comes from an unwillingness to accept the language system of "the other." James signs, but he is always trying to get Sarah to speak, to use *his* language. At the end of the play, he forces Sarah not to use her hands. Sarah then realizes that even though she loves James and he loves her, James at some level refuses to accept her as she is. "Am I what you want me to be?" Sarah speaks in her own barely intelligible voice. There is a hope for reconciliation at the conclusion of the play, but for the moment the chasm separating the spoken and the signed word is too wide to be bridged.

Search for Self

Sarah's mother demanded that her other daugh-ter's boyfriends' friends act as companions to Sarah when the girls were younger. She enthusiastically recalls: "These boys really liked Sarah, treated her the same way they treated Ruth, with respect, and ... and if you didn't know there was a problem, you'd have thought she was perfectly normal." Mrs. Norman did not realize that none of these boys were interested in Sarah herself, but only in how she could meet their needs; their sole reason for going out with her was to engage in sexual intercourse, which she was willing to provide.

Sarah says that she has always been seen as less than valuable, that, because she cannot hear, she is somehow defective, "and that's bad." Whenevery-one tries to speak for her at the hearing before the commission, Sarah realizes that the integrity of her own identity as a distinct, separate individual human being has been ignored. She expresses this when she says:"Unless you let me be an individual, and, just as you are, you will

never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me. And until you do that, I will never let myself know you. Until that time, we cannot be joined. We cannot share a relationship." When Sarah leaves James, she does so with the knowledge that she can say that she hurts and "won't shrivel up and blow away." She will have to "go it alone."

Manipulation and Control

James is a speech therapist. He works with Orin and Lydia to improve their speaking skills. (He even corrects Orin's pronunciation of "sushi" when Orin expresses his anger that he too has eaten "hearing food.") James's job becomes convincing Sarah to speak. But Sarah has an agenda of her own, and does not place any value on learning to speak in order to appear "normal."

Mrs. Norman would go to great lengths for Sarah to appear normal: demanding her other daughter's male friends become companions to Sarah, forcing Sarah to attend lip-reading and speech classes, even signing Ricky Nelson's name to a pinup photo she put in Sarah's room. James's mother used a religion "heretofore unknown to mankind" to control her son.

Ms. Klein, the lawyer, assumes that she will speak for the deaf at the commission hearing and has already drafted her remarks. Orin attempts to learn the tools of the hearing world so that he can "change this system that sticks us with teachers who pretend to help but really want to glorify themselves."

James pins Sarah's arms to her sides and demands that she speak. In the same manner that others might have used violence or sex to control a partner in a relationship, James makes language a weapon of control. Sarah rebels against this blatant attempt at control and leaves to "go it alone."

Style

Setting

Children of a Lesser God is a drama set "m the mind of James Leeds." Characters in the play step from his memory for a few lines or an entire scene. There are two "places" where the action occurs: the State School for the Deaf and James Leeds's house across the road. In Act I, time is "fluid." Scenes from past and present blend together often without the audience realizing what has happened. In Act II, the sense of time is more linear, although not completely so; there is more of a sense that one scene comes to a conclusion before another scene begins The audience is better able to follow plot movement as the action progresses from the card party to James's frustration of serving as Sarah's constant interpreter to the complaint before the Commission to the climactic scene in which James forces Sarah to speak. The lack of a set and the use of few props beyond a chalkboard and some benches allow characters to come and go easily.

Flashback

Because the action of the play takes place "in the mind of James Leeds," time does not always move forward. Scenes from the past, like the visit to Mrs. Norman's house in Act I, weave themselves into the fabric of the action. The entire play can be seen as a flashback: the actions and words of the beginning of the play come back again near the end.

Imagery

"Deafness isn't the opposite of hearing.....It is a silence full of sounds.' * This is the central image of the play. Sarah tries to show James that the relationship between the deaf and hearing worlds is not an "either-or" situation, but rather one with its own distinct and unique possibilities and components.

Much of the imagery of this play is not contained in the words of the characters but rather m the sign language they employ. Sign language in this play provides both visual and verbal imagery for the same idea. "Join, unjoined" is the principal sign image, used at both the beginning and end of the action (and also graphically represented on the cover of some print editions of the text of the play).

Language

The story that takes place in *Children of a Lesser God* is told primarily using two languages, spoken English and American Sign Language (ASL), although a third variety, Signed English, is present as well. ASL is a conceptual and pictorial language,

and Signed English is more grammatical and dependent on word order—one sign equals one word— for meaning.

When Sarah "speaks" her lines in this play during conversations with James, James provides a simultaneous translation from ASL to spoken English. However, when James speaks to Sarah, he signs what he says (unless he is purposely excluding her from the conversation) using Signed English. When James speaks to Orin and Lydia who can both lip-read, James does not sign; he enunciates carefully. Mr. Franklin, who as the supervising teacher at the State School for the Deaf is a competent signer, refuses to sign for Sarah's benefit, forcing James into the role of continual interpreter. Mrs. Norman has struggled to learn sign language but has not been successful.

Edna Klein knows no sign language and is quite proud that she has learned to sign "How. Are. You?" and "I. Am. Fine"; Sarah, Orin, and James are unimpressed by her efforts. James points out that Edna must be precise in her hand placement or she will say the opposite of what she intended. This illustrates that hearing people often view ASL as "cute," a diversion along the lines of a party game. Sarah's reaction to this particular scene ("More cuteness?") underscores the feeling deaf people have that their language is not taken seriously.

Historical Context

Deafness is a unique condition; its effects are not immediately visible. Individuals whose bodies bear an outward sign of impairment or disability are recognizable in the world at large. And the community recognizes, more or less, what should be done to assist these people to fuller participation in the larger society. How does society as a whole include the deaf in its activities and discussions? That question has had a variety of answers since the 19th century.

In the mid-1800s, two camps argued over how to include the deaf in the wider community: the oralists, who opposed sign language and forbade children in their schools and programs from using it, advocated teaching deaf individuals the skills needed for success in the hearing and speaking world; conversely, manualists held that communication was paramount, and fostered the use of sign language in both instructional and social settings. "Culture wars" erupted between the two factions, the remnants of which exist to the present day.

In all of the battles concerning the deaf, one constant remained—hearing people were the ones who made the decisions. Deaf people were viewed as incapable of speaking their own minds or making their own decisions. Most states established residential schools for deaf children, most of whom attended from the age of five to the age of 18, leaving only for Christmas breaks and summer vacations. These schools were run by hearing men (like Mr. Franklin), many of whom had attended teacher-training programs together. These autocratic educators, referred to in some circles as the "Great White Fathers," ruled every aspect of the lives of the students in their charge. Most teachers were hearing and had little knowledge or expertise in sign language. Deaf people were not considered capable of teaching children because they would not be able to teach speech. Occasionally those deaf people who were able to speak well—like Orin— were allowed to become teachers, but those—like Sarah—who did not speak or lip-read were relegated to jobs as kitchen helpers, laundry workers, and maids at these schools. A series of scandals in the 1970s rocked several of these residential schools; as a result, new people from outside the closed circle of selected hearing people who worked with the deaf were brought in to manage these schools. More deaf students were encouraged to pursue post-secondary educational courses of study, including teacher preparation programs.

Critical Overview

Robert Brustein, writing in *The New Republic,* called *Children of a Lesser God* a "supreme example of a new Broadway genre—the Disability Play," in which, regardless of our defects, the audience learns that we all share a common humanity. He further noted that speech in this drama "operates not to inform and reveal but rather to manipulate emotions and reinforce conventional wisdom." Paul Sagona declared in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that Medoff "exploits a stark, absolute communication problem," but does so "without the threat of physical violence" or guns. Sagona identified Medoff s plays, especially *Children of a Lesser God,* as addressing the problem of "self-isolated personalities making themselves felt without disintegrating."

Other critical commentary centers on how the characters' inability to communicate with one another works as an effective means of illustrating the both the problems caused by prejudice and those caused by language. Some critics have expressed reservations about Medoff's dramatic work, citing his tendency toward gratuitous use of violence or overly sentimental plot devices and dialogue. *Children of a Lesser God* has been singled out as an example of Medoff s best work, in large part because of Medoff s ability to present the demoralization of the deaf population by a generally ignorant society that assumes that those who cannot hear are somehow mentally or otherwise inferior. The stark reality and emotional intensity of the play have been praised by critics who affirm that *Children of a Lesser God* is evidence of Medoff s exceptional talent as a playwright.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Wiles is a teacher with over twenty years of experience in secondary education. In the following essay, he explores the characters' individual attitudes toward hearing, speech, and deafness in Children of a Lesser God.

"In the beginning, there was only silence," James Leeds says at the very beginning of *Children of a Lesser God,* "and out of that silence there could come only one thing: Speech. That's right. Human speech. So, *speak!'"* he could not have been more wrong.

In this opening speech, James appears to establish silence, and by extension deafness, as "bad," and speech and sound (and hearing) as "good." This is the distinction which most deaf people learn at a young age. Sarah learned this distinction from her mother and her teachers, but chose as an adult to reject this explanation and establish a definition of her own: "Deafness [is] a silence full of sounds ... the sound of spring breaking up through the death of winter." The words that make this phrase are beautiful; the signs that give this phrase life are deeply moving.

The struggle, then, throughout the play becomes one of making those who have ears, however residual their hearing might be, able to hear. Orin and Lydia have some hearing—not enough to allow them to function in the hearing world without assistance but some hearing nonetheless. Lydia has a crush on James and refuses to listen to anything but her own heart strings. She is oblivious to how her behavior affects Sarah and she will not listen to James's voice or Sarah's signs when they not so indirectly talk to her about watching television.

Orin is deaf to anything that does not fit his vision of protecting the deaf. As a deaf man who speaks relatively clearly and reads lips, Orin is a good candidate for one to bridge the deaf and hearing worlds. But, he is entirely wrapped up in his "cause": deaf teachers for deaf children. When James takes Sarah out to dinner for the first time, Orin becomes jealous and begins to refuse to listen to James. What had once been a vibrant student-teacher relationship disintegrates into posturing and jockeying for position. Orin is so consumed with his "cause" that he turns a deaf ear (pun intended) to Sarah as she tries to explain what it is that she wants to say.

Mr. Franklin, the supervising teacher, is one of the hearing people whose job it should be to hear what his charges have to say about issues that affect them, but none of the deaf people in this play have any respect for the man. Franklin does nothing to earn that respect, either. He is a skilled signer; he reads Sarah's signing at the bridge parry. But throughout the play he refuses to sign in the presence of any of the deaf people, particularly Sarah, always forcing someone else to sign for Mm. His patronizing attitude will not allow him to hear what Sarah or anyone else (including the Commission) has to say.

Poor Ms. Klein walks into what she thinks is a routine appearance before the Equal Opportunity Commission and finds herself in the middle of a four-way argument about

who doesn't listen to whom and who will do the talking for whom. She means well and has none of the mean-spiritedness that seems to come from Franklin, but for all practical purposes in this situation, she is utterly clueless.

She fails to hear Orin and Sarah as they try to assert their position. Granted, Klein has limited experience with the deaf population compared to the rest of the characters, but it takes Sarah calling her speech the "same old shit" and threatening to walk away from the Commission hearing to get Klein to hear what she and Orin have to say.

Mrs. Norman has struggled for 26 years with Sarah and her deafness. Her early attempts at "normalcy" for Sarah were pathetic. She wrote on apin-up photo of singer Ricky Nelson m her own handwriting: "To Sarah. Good Luck. From Ricky." She demanded that Sarah's sister, Ruth, ask her boyfriends to find companions for Sarah. To Mrs. Norman, the steady stream of male companions meant that Sarah appeared "normal." In reality, the boys came for sex, which Sarah was willing to provide. When Sarah and James decide to marry, Mrs. Norman and Sarah attempt a reconciliation. Each appears to accept the other at face value, and at the end of the play when Sarah leaves James, she goes to her mother's house. Mrs. Norman has stopped trying to make Sarah into something she is not and reJates to her on a more human level.

James is the most complex character of the drama. He is the detached intellectual who falls in love. He cannot shape this woman into an image that suits him. He cannot make her accept speech and sound. As a speech teacher, James's professional responsibility is to work diligently with the population of the State School for the Deaf. He has achieved outstanding success with both Orin and Lydia; even Mr. Franklin recognizes that Orin never worked that hard for him. But with Sarah. James faces a challenge that he cannot overcome. That is because Sarah is a human being with dignity and integrity and individuality who refuses to play the "dearie" game.

James falls in love with Sarah, in some part because of her feisty nature. In a kind of role reversal, it is the man who thinks he can change the woman into the prize, the perfect middle-class housewife. Sarah's success at the bridge party appears to prove James right. It is when Sarah decides that she will "speak" for herself at the Commission hearing that James's vision of the perfect housewife begins to crumble. In frustration, he clamps her arms to her side and demands that she speak: "Shut up! You want to talk to me, then you learn *my* language!.. . Now come on! I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak!"

James's call for speech from Sarah's silence destroys the relationship he had built with Sarah. The insistence that she speak creates a rift so deep that not even love can mend it. Sarah realizes that even though she loves him, she cannot stay with him. Maybe, she muses, they will be able to meet somewhere "not in silence or in sound but somewhere else. I don't know where that is now."

Out of that silence came speech but it was forced and pained. Out of that silence also came love, strength, self-knowledge, and beauty. James's demand that Sarah be

"normal" refuses to acknowledge the idea that normalcy is in the mind and eye of the beholder.

Source: William P. WiJes, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

O'Brien reviews the film adaptation of Children of a Lesser God, which Medojf cowrote. While he praises the performances, the critic was less pleased with the translation from stage to screen, feeling that certain elements of Medoff's original text were misused for the screenplay.

Children of a Lesser God both moves and disappoints. Directed by Randa Haines, whose television experience includes *Hill Street Blues* and the film about incest, *Something about Amelia, Children* provides a bare-bones story about an angry young deaf woman (Marlee Martin) and a teacher (William Hurt) determined to get her to speak. Their romance is compelling, especially because of the verve and pain of their "dialogue" through sign language. But Haines makes their love stand too much alone, leaving a thin **feel.** The movie never delivers what it promises.

Partly this results from changes made in Mark Medoff's play—changes which he presumably approved as co-screenwriter. Of course, what works as a play doesn't always work as film. A play has to be opened up, dialogue simplified, scenes added, etc. Nevertheless, both stage play and screenplay require a strong, rich story, and it is unfortunate that Medoff succumbed to pressures to simplify his, which has been adapted, not into a film, but into *television* film, with a lowest-cornmon-denomina-tor plot, reduced list of characters, and pro forma happy end. As a result, it lacks the ambition, rawness, and hard-earned optimism not just of its source, but its prototype, *The Miracle Worker.*

Hurt and Martin make the film worth seeing. As with his Oscar-winning role in *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* Hurt took a pay cut to make this film. He is at his best in classroom scenes with deaf students, when he tries to coax them from negativism via an idealism that Hurt, both by age and look, seems to have memorized from the 1960s. He also has a hard task to master: since Marlee Martin won't speak, he has to interpret her rapid (often tempestuous) sign language in a deadpan fashion to avoid stealing any of her thunder. Martin has remarkably severe black and white coloring, and taut, expressive cheekbones. She also uses her thick black boots for punctuation and to embody frustration. Between her and Hurt some real heat gets generated, especially in one scene of angry lovemaking where she vehemently overwhelms him.

But they are limited by the thinness of the plot. Hurt's egoism is introduced, but never explored, so that he comes across as too pure a hero. Martin can rely on no more than petulant perfectionism (or as she explains in sign language,"I won't do anything I don't do well") to explain her refusal to vocalize. Some strong minor characters, like the school principal (Phillip Bosco) and Martin's mother (Piper Laurie), are also left undeveloped, as though Haines had to hold the story to a strict diet of characterization.

Moreover, Haines uses landscape symbolism unevenly. At first her touch is light, with mood scenes showing Hurt's tap by ferry to the pemnsula where the school is located. The water imagery is deepened, poetically, with some beautiful scenes of Martin's nude

swimming; the suggestion is even made that she has developed other, extraordinarily sensuous capacities as compensation for deafness. But the water imagery is overdone, especially in a stupid scene where Hurt "descends" into her pool. Save us.

Also uneven is Haines's use of music. Hurt's love of Bach and his attempt to teach some of his students rock music through rhythmic vibrations are deftly exploited. But the script is over-heavy with rock songs and teenage behavior. There is a line between appealing to adolescents and pandering to them. There is also a line between adaptation and dilution. Unfortunately, *Children of a Lesser God* often crosses both lines.

Source: Tom O'Brien, "Adaptation Loss: Minor Miracle Worker" in *Commonweal,* Volume CXIII, no 16, September 26,1986, pp. 500-01

Critical Essay #3

In the following review of Children of a Lesser God's original Broadway run, Brustein offers a positive review of Medoff'splay. The critic categorizes the work as part of a dramatic subgenre that he terms the "disability play"—a drama whose intentions are so well-placed and politically correct that a viewer feels morally compelled to speak positively of it.

Mark Medoff s *Children of a Lesser God* (Longacre) is a supreme example of a new Broadway genre—¦ the Disability Play. The origin of the species, I suppose, was William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker,* written 20 years ago—but only following the success of such recent extensions of the formula as *The Elephant Man* and *Whose Life Is It Anyway?,* has the Disability Play taken Broadway by storm as its dominant "serious" drama. It's not hard to understand the success of the genre, since it has everything going for it: 1) Unforgettable Characters, including spastics, paraplegics, the deaf, and the blind; 2) Intriguing Conflict, between the handicapped protagonist and the "normal" person who invites contempt by trying to help; 3) Love Reversal, the moment the conflict between these two characters ends in an embrace; 4) Terrific Breakthrough, when the protagonist reveals that he/she can speak/feel/read lips/walk; and 5) Inspirational Theme, after we learn we all share a common humanity, regardless of our defects. The impact of this on the tear ducts is dynamite. I haven't seen audiences leaving a theater with such glistening faces since the last revival of Bette Davis in *Dark Victory,* or perhaps since Peter Sellers rose from his wheelchair in *Doctor Strangelove* (after a ferocious struggle with his mechanical hand) to announce to the American president,"Mein Fiihrer, I can walk."

The other built-in success factor is that the species is really a subgenre of a time-tested Broadway artifact—The Play You Are Not Allowed to Dislike. In the past, this used to be a political drama—people resisting a corrupt political system, or fighting for the loyalist cause during the Spanish Civil War. More recently, it has featured almost exclusively ethnic and sexual minorities, thus increasing the quota of moral extortion. To fail to respond to plays about blacks or women or homosexuals, for example, is to be vulnerable to charges of racism, sexism, homophobia, or getting up on the wrong side of the bed. Now that the handicapped have organized themselves into another minority pressure group, they have access to the same kind of blackmail. Meanwhile, the theater becomes another agency for consciousness raising, with audiences being alternately tutored and entertained for considerably less than a healthy contribution to an effective rehabilitation program.

Medoff s version of this formula is partly successful because it combines the features of two current offerings you are forbidden to dislike: the disability play and the feminist play. Its male hero is James Leeds, a speech therapist who works in a clinic for the "non-hearing" (the word *deaf* having been consigned to the same dusty lexicon of archaic English as *Negro* and Mrs.). One of his charges is a feisty woman named Sarah Norman, deaf and dumb since birth, who absolutely refuses to learn to speak or read lips (they communicate entirely through signing). Not only this, she dislikes everybody

who does, including the baffled Leeds, who can't understand why the recalcitrant Sarah continues to refuse his help. Nevertheless, he continues to offer it, and, endlessly, to discuss it *(help* is the most frequently uttered word of the play). A former Peace Corps officer, he is attracted to support occupations "because it feels good to help people." When he goes to bed with Sarah, it feels even better, and his efforts at helping enter a new phase.

Eventually, they get married. Leeds, who leans toward pop psychoanalysis, concludes that Sarah's hatred of "hearing" people is related to her hatred of herself, while she confesses that she has refused his therapy because "I don't do things I don't do well." Although sex is not among these (she has had an active history before she married him), the two soon fall to quarreling. He hasn't turned on his stereo in months, and she seems more interested in righting for the rights of "non-hearing" people than in the marriage. These personal battles lead to two dramatic revelations. His is an admission that he feels guilty over the suicide of his mother, not surprisingly since it occurred right after he announced to the unfortunate woman that if he lived with her for one more day, he would put a gun to one of their heads. Hers arrives when he forces her to utter sounds, and she confesses that she has been reading lips for years In a scene you may recognize from about 50 other plays (beginning with A *Doll's House),* she then tells her husband that until she becomes an "individual," "we cannot be joined, we cannot share a relationship." The payoff comes when Leeds, after trying to help Sarah for the whole length of the play, is forced to admit his own dependency ("Help me—teach me ... be brave, but not so brave that you don't need me anymore"). She leaves anyway. Will she return? Tune in tomorrow. In the ambiguous conclusion, Sarah reaches out to James in a half-light, signing, "I'll help you if you help me," following which the spectators helped themselves to their handkerchiefs and I helped myself to ray coat.

Obviously, only a stony heart could remain cold to such a story, especially when it is delivered with such conviction by the two principal actors, John Rubenstein and Phyllis Frelich. Rubenstein, who has the sharp angular features of a young Fred Astaire, carries the burden of virtually the entire play on his talented shoulders, since he not only speaks his own lines but translates Miss Frelich's signs as well. This double task he discharges with such wit and passion that he almost succeeds in forcing some suppleness into the cardboard goody two shoes he is forced to impersonate. As for Miss Frelich, she is an accomplished mime, with a mischievous smile and an instinct for deviltry that remind one of Harpo Marx, and she demonstrates how well spiritual beauty and intelligence can be manifested without the aid of speech. Indeed, the whole play is a good argument for the return of the silent film. Expertly crafted, and directed with considerable skill (by Gordon Davidson), it successfully disguises its soap-opera origins by being a chic compendium of every extant cliche about women and minority groups, where speech operates not to inform and reveal but rather to manipulate emotions and reinforce conventional wisdom....

Adaptations

Children of a Lesser God was adapted as a film in 1986. The screenplay was written by Medoff and Hesper Anderson. Randa Haines directed, and the film starred William Hurt as James Leeds, Marlee Matlin in an Oscar-winning performance as Sarah Norman, and Piper Laurie as Mrs. Norman. It is available through Facets Home Video in both VHS and Laser-Disc formats.

Topics for Further Study

Research the following and discuss the contribution of each to the world of theater: The National Theater of the Deaf, Louie Fant, Bernard Bragg, and Phyllis Frelich.

Alexander Graham Bell was a teacher of the deaf long before he invented the telephone. He is well known for devising "Bell's Visible Speech." Find out more information on this topic and pay particular attention to the chart, if available.

Through the years there has been an ongoing argument between the oralists (those who favor speech and lip-reading only) and the manualists (those who support the learning of sign language). The Clarke School for the Deaf in Massachusetts and the John Tracy Clinic in California are good sources of information for the oral point of view. Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, is an excellent resource for the sign language camp. Consult these resources and use the information you obtain to show how Sarah's character has been influenced by the two opposing factions.

Just as there are dialects in spoken language (the southern drawl, the New England twang), there are dialects and differing ways to say the same thing in sign language. Research American Sign Language (ASL) and the varying forms of signed English. Show how these signing dialects play an important role in the play.

Compare the characters of James and Anne Sullivan (from William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker).* How does each approach the role of teacher? How do their teaching strategies compare?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1980s: Deaf schools are run by hearing administrators, many of whom know no sign language.

Today: Many schools for the deaf, including Gallaudet University, now have deaf leaders.

Early 1980s: People with hearing handicaps are routinely discriminated against for jobs, in housing, and in access to services.

Today: With the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, hearing impaired individuals have the necessary leverage to find success in the job market, obtain decent housing, and utilize a wide range of services to assist them in pursuit of their goals.

What Do I Read Next?

The Miracle Worker, a play by William Gibson, explores the early education of Helen Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan The play confronts the issues of the link between language and communication, and the struggles of both student and teacher to make that link.

Brian Clark's play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?* examines the idea of allowing individuals who are impaired to make decisions for themselves through the story of Ken Harrison, a sculptor. After he is involved in a car accident and is paralyzed from his neck down, all Harrison can do is talk. He says he wants to die; in the hospital, he makes friends with some of the staff, and they support him when he goes to trial to be allowed to make his own decisions, even if those decisions include ending his life.

In This Sign, a novel by Joanne Greenberg, is the story of a deaf couple and their hearing daughter and their struggle through life. The characters are neither heroic or extraordinary, but they are very real and very human.

Based on the true story of John Merrick, a 19th-century Englishman afflicted with a disfiguring congenital disease, Bernard Pommerance's *The Elephant Man* explores the issue of the integrity of one's identity. With the help of kindly Dr. Frederick Treves, Merrick attempts to regain the dignity he lost after years spent as a side-show freak.

In the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, Nora Helmer committed a forgery in order to save the life of her authoritarian husband Torvald. She is blackmailed, and rives in fear of her husband discovering her crime and of the shame such a revelation would bring to his career. But when the truth comes out, Nora is shocked to learn where she really stands in her husband's esteem. Nora's confrontational scene with her husband is echoed in *Children of a Lesser God.*

Further Study

Gallaudet University Home Page, http.//www gallaudet.edu. This home page to the largest and best-known school of higher learning for the deaf provides information on deafness and links to a variety of sites associated with deaf culture.

DeafNation Links Page, http://www.deafhation.com/Deaflmks html.

An extensive compilation of links related to deafness and deaf culture.

Deaf World Web & ASL Dictionary Online, http://www.deafworldweb.org/asl/.

Among other things, contains a dictionary of signs grouped alphabetically and categorically.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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