J. B. Study Guide

J. B. by Archibald MacLeish

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

J. B. , published in 1958, is a play in verse based on the biblical story of Job. It represents Archibald MacLeish's responses to the horrors he saw during two world wars, including the Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The author explains in the foreword to the acting edition of his play that turning to the Bible for a framework seems sensible "when you are dealing with questions too large for you which, nevertheless, will not leave you alone." *J. B.* tells the story of a twentieth-century American banker-millionaire whom God commands be stripped of his family and his wealth but who refuses to turn his back on God. MacLeish wondered how modern people could retain hope and keep on living with all the suffering in the world and offered this play as an answer. J. B. learns that there is no justice in the world, that happiness and suffering are not deserved, and that people can still choose to love each other and live.

MacLeish had been earning his living as a poet for fifty years before this, his third verse play, was published. Shortly after the publication of the book, the play was produced on Broadway and underwent substantial revisions. There are, therefore, two versions of the play available for readers: the original book published by Houghton Mifflin and the acting script available from Samuel French. Both were published in 1958, and neither has ever gone out of print. *J. B.* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1959 (MacLeish's third Pulitzer), as well as the Tony Award for best play. More important, the play sparked a national conversation about the nature of God, the nature of hope, and the role of the artist in society.

Author Biography

Archibald MacLeish was born in Glencoe, Illinois, on May 7, 1892. His father was a successful businessman, and his mother had been a college instructor; they saw to it that MacLeish was well educated. He attended public schools in Glencoe, and at the age of fifteen he was sent to a college preparatory academy in Connecticut. He began college studies at Yale in 1911.

Before college, MacLeish had been only an average student. At Yale, however, he began writing poetry and fiction for the literary magazine, excelled in water polo and football, earned high grades, and was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa honorary society. After graduation in 1915, he entered Harvard Law School, hoping that a career in law would give him a way to bring order out of chaos, just as poetry did. He married Ada Hitchcock in 1916; served briefly in the army; published his first book of poetry, *Tower of Ivory*, in 1917; and graduated first in his law school class in 1919. He taught government at Harvard for a short time and then worked as an attorney in Boston, but never lost his devotion to writing poetry.

In 1923, MacLeish moved with his family to Paris, determined to become a serious poet. During this period, many important American and European writers were living in Paris, and MacLeish became friendly with them, determined to learn from them. He taught himself Italian, so he could study the work of the fourteenth-century poet Dante Alighieri, and he studied the history of English poetry as well. These five years transformed his work, giving him a mature style that pleased both him and the critics. When he returned home, he was able to earn a living as a writer and to buy a small farm in Massachusetts where he and Ada lived together until his death.

His will to bring order and harmony to human existence informed MacLeish's career for the next sixty years. He published more than fifty books of poetry, drama, and essays, but he also accepted positions as the Librarian of Congress, Assistant Secretary of State, and part of the U.S. Delegation to the United Nations that established the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He believed that the poet's duty was to address contemporary social concerns and to ask important questions. His distress at the bombings of Dresden, London, and Hiroshima led him to wonder how humans could respond with hope to such suffering. He posed this question in the 1958 play, *J. B.*, a retelling of the biblical story of Job, which brought MacLeish several awards and his largest financial success.

Over his career, MacLeish won three Pulitzer Prizes, the National Book Award, a Tony Award, an Academy Award for best screenplay, and nearly two dozen honorary degrees. In 1977, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died on April 20, 1982, just three weeks before a national symposium honoring his life and work.

Plot Summary

Prologue

The first characters to appear on stage in *J. B.* are Mr. Zuss and Nickles, a balloon seller and a popcorn seller in a run-down circus. They approach and then mount a sideshow stage in the corner of a circus tent to play out the story of Job from the Bible, with the stage as Heaven, the ground as Earth, and the lights as the stars. Zuss (whose name sounds like "Zeus," the god of Greek mythology) will play God. From the beginning, he is as arrogant as one might expect a man who believes he is right for the role to be, and he is indignant at the idea that Job would dare to demand justice.

Nickles, on the other hand, understands Job's suffering and does not accept that God would cause that suffering just to prove his authority and power. Nickles sings a song that includes the play's central paradox: "If God is God He is not good, / If God is good, He is not God." Nickles, whose name is a variation of "Old Nick," a slang term for the devil, will play Satan. As the two men point out, there is always someone to play Job.

Zuss and Nickles don masks that they find in a pile of costumes. The Godmask is white, with closed eyes, showing his indifference. The Satanmask is dark, with open eyes, because "Satan sees." They review their lines, which will come from the King James Bible. When the lights go down for the play to begin, a Distant Voice speaks the first line: "Whence comest thou?" It is not Zuss who speaks but, apparently, God. Zuss and Nickles take over, and the lights dim.

Scene 1

As scene 1 begins, the raised stage where Zuss and Nickels stand is in darkness, while gathered around a table in the light are the wealthy banker J. B., his wife Sarah, and their five children. They are a wealthy New England family, celebrating Thanksgiving. Sarah would like the children to be more thankful for the bounty they enjoy. She believes that there is a kind of bargain with God: "If we do our part He does His." Our "part" is to thank God; if we forget God, He will punish. J. B. believes that God has chosen him for success and that his duty is to appreciate the gift, to enjoy his life.

Scene 2

The focus shifts again to Zuss and Nickles, whose first impulse is to belittle J. B.'s acting ability. Still, he is their "pigeon," the man who will play Job. Nickles believes that once J. B. is stripped of his wealth, as Job was, he will lose his piety, but Zuss insists that J. B. will praise God no matter how much he suffers. Why then, asks Nickles, must Job be made to suffer at all? If God knows Job will pass the test, then why administer the test? Because, Zuss answers, Job needs to see God clearly. The two actors put their masks on and speak lines from the Bible. Satan challenges God to a bet: he will take

everything away from Job, to demonstrate that even an upright man will curse God if pushed hard enough. God accepts.

Scene 3

Six or seven years have passed. Two drunken soldiers come to J. B.'s house, comrades in arms of David, J. B.'s oldest son. In a bumbling fashion, they reveal that David has been killed—not heroically in the war but accidentally and stupidly by his own men after the hostilities. As Sarah tries to understand that God has really taken her son, J. B. denies that David is really dead. Nickles encourages them to challenge God, but they do not hear him.

Scene 4

On the sidewalk, two reporters talk to a "Girl," a young woman perhaps in her twenties. They persuade her to approach a couple who will come by soon and to catch their attention so they will be facing the camera when the reporters tell them that two of their children have died in a car accident. The couple, of course, are J. B. and Sarah. The dead teenagers are their children, Mary and Jonathan, killed by a drunk driver when their car crashed into a viaduct. Sarah despairs and asks why God would do this. Nickles, who is visible, grins appreciatively. But J. B. insists that they cannot "Take the good and not the evil." He tries to embrace Sarah, but she flinches.

Scene 5

J. B. and Sarah talk to two men. The biblical story includes two messengers, and here they are played by police officers. Rebecca, the youngest child, is missing. J. B. did not call the police right away because he imagined that he could find her by himself. Sarah explains bitterly, "We believe in our luck in this house!" The luck again is bad, however. Rebecca has been raped and murdered by a teenaged drug user. "The Lord giveth," J. B. says, "The Lord taketh away." But he does not say the end of the line, which Nickels, Zuss, and the audience are expecting: "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Scene 6

Two messengers enter carrying Sarah. She has been rescued from a collapsed building after a bombing destroyed a whole city block. J. B.'s bank is destroyed, and his last remaining child, Ruth, is dead. J. B. urges Sarah not to despair, urges her to say with him, "The Lord giveth. The Lord taketh away." While Sarah shouts, "Kills! Kills! Kills! Kills! Kills!" J. B. completes the famous line, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Scene 7

Zuss and Nickles discuss J. B. Zuss is pleased with J. B.'s responses so far, but Nickles is disgusted. Although they are playing out a story that both know well, Nickles believes that this time the story will end differently, that J. B. will stop praising God once he experiences physical pain himself. When their argument delays the progress of the story, the Distant Voice begins to speak God's lines. Zuss and Nickles understand that they are to continue.

Scene 8

J. B. lies on a table, clothed only in rags, with Sarah, also in rags, by his side weeping. An atomic blast has killed thousands, and J. B. is wounded. Women standing nearby comment on the sores covering J. B.'s body and on how far the two have fallen. Sarah is bitter and angry, but J. B. is puzzled. He knows there must be a reason for God's punishment, but he cannot fathom what the reason is. Nickles observes that if J. B. knew the reason—if he knew that God was making the innocent J. B. suffer simply to demonstrate His own power—J. B. would despair. Sarah cannot accept J. B.'s theory that the family has deserved this suffering. She turns her back on J. B., urging him to "curse God and die," and she runs out to kill herself. Now completely alone, J. B. begs God to "Show me my guilt." Nickles sneers at Zuss.

Scene 9

In the biblical story, three comforters come to Job to scold him for questioning God and to "justify the ways of God to man." Here, the three comforters are Zophar, a Catholic priest, Eliphaz, a psychiatrist, and Bildad, a Marxist. The three spout empty rhetoric and jargon to explain J. B.'s suffering, and they only add to J. B.'s despair. Finally, J. B. cries out, "God, my God, my God, answer me!" In response, the Distant Voice speaks God's words from the Bible, asserting his power and authority, demanding that J. B./Job repent for daring to ask questions of God. J. B. does, also speaking a line from the Bible, "I abhor myself and repent."

Scene 10

Nickles acknowledges that Zuss has won the bet, but Zuss is uneasy with his victory. He sees that for Job to forgive God is a sign of Job's goodness and strength, not God's. He loses all enthusiasm for playing his role and starts to climb down from the stage, but Nickles reminds him that there is one more scene to play. In the biblical story, God restores everything Job has lost. Nickles is sure that this time J. B./Job will refuse God's offering, that he will not risk losing everything again. To make sure, he goes to J. B., tells him God's plan, and begs him to kill himself instead. But J. B. hears someone at the door and goes to meet his future.

Scene 11

Typically, in a play-within-a-play, the outer play "frames" the other, taking the first and last words. But J. B. and Sarah have the last scene to themselves, without the commentary of Nickles and Zuss. Sarah sits on the doorstep, holding a forsythia branch in bloom. She discovered it on her way to drown herself in the river, found hope in it, and came back to J. B. She explains to her husband, "You wanted justice and there was none—/ Only love." People will not find illumination or love from God, but in their own hearts. Sarah and J. B. embrace and then set to work tidying up the stage.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

The setting is a circus tent. Two elderly men appear, dressed in the white uniforms of concession vendors. One, Mr. Zuss, is a balloon seller. The other, Nickles, is a popcorn seller. They arrive at the foot of the stage and describe the setting; the stage is heaven, and the audience is earth, they say. They then step onto the stage.

As the two men bicker about who's selling the most merchandise, they prepare to give a performance, removing the belts and trays on which they have their merchandise and looking at the masks they are to wear. We learn that Mr. Zuss is to play God, and Nickles makes a joke about God laughing. Mr. Zuss is shocked, saying God never laughs. Nickles suggests that Job must have laughed behind the back of his hand; he couldn't help it, Nickles insists. His situation was ridiculous; God killed his family, destroyed his livelihood, and abandoned him on a dung-heap without a hope of learning why. Mr. Zuss becomes angry, suggesting that Job was only a man and had no right to question God, who created the whole world. Nickles complains that the world isn't that great a place, and when Mr. Zuss suggests that it *is* great, Nickles suggests that he try to create one on a dung-heap. Mr. Zuss says that Nickles makes him sick, and Nickles replies that if that's the case, then maybe somebody else should play Job. Mr. Zuss says that he never even considered having Nickles play Job, saying there's always somebody playing that part. Nickles then realizes that he is supposed to play Satan. Mr. Zuss apologizes for offending him, but Nickles replies that he wasn't offended at all and demands to see the mask he's to wear.

Nickles and Mr. Zuss bicker over whether Nickles should wear a mask at all, and they argue over where the masks actually are. Mr. Zuss climbs a ladder and discovers a beautiful, peaceful mask which Nickles recognizes as portraying God. He refers to God as the creator of animals and suggests that Man is just an animal like every other, comparing him to a wingless sightless insect banging itself against a window pane. He says Job behaves the same way, banging himself against faith in God's justice. Mr. Zuss looks for the other mask, finds it, warns Nickles that he won't find it beautiful, and shows him a mask depicting a strange mixture of laughter and disgust.

Nickles is silent, but even though Mr. Zuss says that evil is never pretty, Nickles climbs the ladder and takes the mask. The lights become dimmer, and in the shadows, Nickles and Zuss put on their masks and quote lines from the Bible. There is laughter from behind the Satan-mask, which causes Zuss to rip off his own mask; the lights brighten again. Zuss angrily tells Nickles that it's indecent to laugh at God. Nickles replies that it wasn't him laughing, but the mask, because the eyes of the mask see everything about the world and can't help but laugh. Zuss suggests they start again from the beginning.

The lights dim again, and Nickles and Zuss again don their masks. Before they can speak, a Distant Voice says God's first line. Zuss and Nickles bicker about who said it

and bicker again about the laughing before going onstage and reciting their Biblical lines. They start to tell the Biblical story of Job, a so-called perfect man who loved and feared God while shunning evil. As they speak, we see a modern Job, JB, sitting down to Thanksgiving dinner with his family.

Prologue Analysis

This play is an allegory, which means it tells a story about a specific human being or situation in order to make a point about a larger and more general truth, usually spiritual. This particular allegory is based on the Old Testament story of Job, a man of faith who God tested by a series of misfortunes; through them all, Job still praised God and trusted that all of his suffering was for a reason. The story of Job is itself allegorical, in that it's actually teaching a lesson about the necessity and rewards of faith. In other words, *JB* is an allegory based on an allegory.

Several aspects of ***JB*** are similar to the Biblical story of Job. The central character's name is similar, and the way in which Zuss and Nickles discuss Job parallels the way in which God and Satan discuss him in the Bible. God's testing and eventual rewarding of Job is also very like the way JB is tested and rewarded. The differences come in the specifics, such as in the particular way the children die. These changes are made to suggest that Job's situation can be, and is, played out in contemporary life.

Certain elements add a layer of irony to the allegorical context of this play. With the setting of a circus tent and with two concession vendors as narrator characters, we get the first impression that what we're about to see is little more than entertainment. This is ironic because the issues of faith that the play explores would be considered by many to be basic issues of humanity. This combination of ironic setting and serious story challenges us to decide how important and how relevant the story is to us and our individual lives.

Another important fact to note relates to the use of masks. Masks have been used in theatre since its earliest days in Greece and were probably used as primitive story-telling tools long before that. Over the centuries, they have been used to portray gods, clowns, character archetypes, and animals. In other words, they are generally used to represent characters that are something other than normally human. This is why they're used in this play as part of the portrayals of God and Satan. A tradition associated with mask work is that the masks have independent personality and character that come to life only when they're worn by an actor that can give them voice and physical presence. This explains why in this play, we have characters called "Satanmask" and "Godmask" that are independent of the characters wearing them, and why we have references to the mask speaking and seeing instead of the person wearing the mask.

The names of Zuss and Nickles are also suggestive. The name Zuss resembles "Zeus," who was the king of the gods and lord of creation in classical Greek mythology. He parallels "God" in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Zuss plays God in this play. Nickles is a version of the name "Old Nick," which has been a nickname of the devil for

centuries. The word "nickels" also suggests money, which is a key aspect of the story. It's interesting to note that money in this case is associated with Satan. The resonances of the two names suggest that the conflict between God and Satan is on some level playing out before the characters even put on the masks.

The text of this play is blank verse, or poetry without rhyme. The language is rich in the use of poetic techniques like alliteration (the sound of a letter used repeatedly at the beginnings of words), onomatopoeia (words that sound like the sounds they describe), metaphor, simile, and imagery. Interestingly, there are also occasions when Zuss and Nickles speak to each other in near-contemporary language and vernacular. This creates a vivid contrast in which each style of language becomes more powerful when juxtaposed with the other.

We are meant to understand that the "Distant Voice" is the voice of God.

Scene 1

Scene 1 Summary

JB, his wife Sarah, and their five children prepare to sit down for Thanksgiving dinner. Two maids wait nearby. JB says a very brief grace, and as the maids hurry off the family sits down. The maids return with a turkey and the rest of the food. The children comment that God heard their gratitude, and JB agrees, saying that God sent them the turkey and asking the children what day it is. They respond playfully, but Sarah becomes serious, asking them whether they truly have given thanks to God and reminding them that if they forget God, God will forget them.

JB carves and hands out turkey, as Sarah asks each of the children individually whether they thanked God. JB tells her there's no need for her to ask those kinds of questions, since children know the grace of God more readily than adults. He talks of how he used to hide behind the windows as a child, waiting for the light of day, which he saw as the light of God, to dawn. Sarah comments that he still does it, that he enjoys everything as a gift from God, including food and people, and is hungry for such gifts. JB says she sees the world in the same way, saying "You think you choose among your flowers: well you don't, you love the lot of them." Sarah says she can't just take them as a gift; she feels that God is owed something in return. JB tries to argue with her, but she insists that she wants the children to understand the importance of the day.

JB becomes very serious and tells Sarah that ever since he was a child he never doubted that God was with him and was blessing him. He says people called it luck but he knew it wasn't, saying it was some kind of sense, some kind of certainty that God was with him and guiding him. He says he's always tried to show God that he knows that and is grateful. Sarah says she knows he does, and adds that if anybody deserves God's blessing it's him. JB suggests that nobody "deserves" the gift of God's world, the world of blessings. He then says that he simply trusts it. Sarah becomes angry, telling him it's not that simple and saying God rewards, God can punish, and God is just. JB agrees, saying that God can be counted upon. He refers to the regularity of morning, spring - Sarah interrupts him, insisting that the family could just as easily be punished as rewarded in the way they have been.

Their argument over whether God's blessing is earned or simply given is interrupted by one of the children asking for the wishbone to wish for more wishes. Sarah compares her to JB, saying that they both show gratitude the way a woman wears a nice dress, putting it on and taking it off again. JB says that God understands. Sarah sings a playful song to the children that wonders where the days go when they're over. When he's asked to sing the same song, JB says "To be, become, and end are beautiful." Sarah and the children comment that that's not what Sarah sang at all.

The lights fade, leaving the shadows of the God-mask and the Satan-mask on the ceiling of the tent.

Scene 1 Analysis

Much of the Biblical story of Job is made up of debate with Three Comforters, but this takes up only one scene in this play. Instead, most of *JB* is made up of scenes like this one between JB and his family. These family scenes are built around tensions between JB and Sarah which dramatize and externalize the internal conflict JB faces between faith (represented by JB) and fear (represented by Sarah). These two emotional states themselves represent the principal aspects of man's traditional relationship with God as portrayed in the Bible: faith in God's love but fear of his vengeance. Placing these spiritual conflicts in the context of a relationship between husband and wife suggests that since male and female balance each other in marriage, faith and fear balance each other in relationship to God.

The setting of this first scene at Thanksgiving places this conflict in a powerful and evocative context. The content of the scene and the debate over whether the children have thanked God and are truly aware of where the blessings come from suggest that the extensive attention paid to Thanksgiving in contemporary culture is little more than superficial or perfunctory, and that gratitude for bounty and blessing must be deeply and profoundly felt in order to be genuine.

JB's reference to flowers is actually a reference to his and Sarah's children, suggesting that she loves them all equally. The irony of this reference, of course, is that over the next few scenes Sarah's children will all be taken from her. This reference also foreshadows the beginning of the next scene and the final scene of the play.

JB's final song puts his experience of faith and God's blessing into clear and specific terms. The lyrics suggest that no matter what happens in life or at its end, God's mercy and love are eternally present and bountiful. This is essentially the play's theme.

Scene 2

Scene 2 Summary

Zuss and Nickles remove their masks. They comment negatively on JB's acting ability, and Zuss wonders whether JB actually knows he is an actor playing a part in a story. He admits that JB has certainly taken on the role of Job, which Nickles says he'd play differently if he was poor. Zuss says it wouldn't make any difference, suggesting that JB is a man of faith who loves his life even though he knows that everything in it will die, that he (JB) would feel the same way even if he was poor, and that it's all because JB has faith in God. As Zuss is starting to shout out his faith in JB's faith, Nickles asks him quietly why JB has to suffer. This catches Zuss off guard, and he answers that JB has to suffer in order to praise. Nickles counters by saying that JB praises anyway, and suggests that the real reason for suffering is to learn that it all ends in death and emptiness. Zuss says that suffering will enable JB to see God more clearly.

Zuss and Nickles put their masks back on, and the lights change. They quote the Biblical book of Job in which Satan bets that if God were to curse Job, Job would end up cursing God.

The lights change again, and we're back at the dining room table.

Scene 2 Analysis

The debate over whether JB knows he's an actor suggests that to Zuss and Nickles he's merely playing a role in deciding the argument between God and Satan. The truth is that he actually is playing a role, just as Job plays the same role in the Biblical story; this in turn reinforces the idea that this play and the Biblical story are allegories for the human experience of life in relationship with God. In other words, each human life is lived out according to God's will, and the lesson of the allegory is that we can face whatever happens with acceptance and grace (as JB does) or indulge in either blaming rage or fearful gratitude (as Sarah does and as she urges JB to do).

The debate over suffering takes on aspects of existentialism, a philosophical movement of the mid-twentieth century. Existentialism had several aspects, but primarily it argued that life is essentially suffering, there is no God, and the sum total of existence is what we as human beings experience, not what we believe in. There are similarities between this philosophy and Buddhism, which also argues that existence consists mainly of suffering- though Buddhism suggests that suffering can be transcended through the practice of not becoming attached, emotionally or spiritually, to any one aspect of existence. The argument of this play, however, is that the only way to live with and transcend suffering is through having faith and trust in God and in his divine plan.

The next four scenes recount the deaths of JB and Sarah's children.

Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6

Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Sarah stands at the table, arranging flowers. JB watches. They notice two drunken soldiers across the street, and Sarah suggests that they must have a message for them from their son David who's off at war. One of the servants lets the soldiers in, and it soon becomes clear that they are indeed quite drunk.

As the Soldiers testily talk over each other in their drunken enthusiasm, Sarah invites them to sit by the fire. They say that they've come to tell Sarah and JB that they knew their son and to drink to him. JB pours drinks as the Soldiers make themselves comfortable. Sarah tells them to put their feet up, saying their feet aren't too dirty and that David's are probably much dirtier after so much marching. One of the Soldiers agrees that David's feet are a lot dirtier. The other Soldier comments that they'd done the best they could but hadn't had the right length of lumber.

Suddenly JB and Sarah realize what the Soldiers are referring to. The Soldiers try to leave, but Sarah and JB make them stay. Light appears on an upper platform where we see Zuss and Nickles watching with their masks in their hands as Sarah and JB realize that David is dead. Sarah cries out, and Nickles encourages her to cry louder and deny that God would do that to them. JB tries to convince Sarah that David is still alive. The Second Messenger, in a drunken daze, speaks a poetic verse. Sarah and JB realize that David is dead.

Zuss and Nickles continue to watch from above as Two Messengers appear, played by the same actors who played the Soldiers. This time they're dressed as newspaper reporters, one of them carrying a camera and the other carrying a notepad. They speak encouragingly to a Girl, who tells them she's nervous and doesn't like the idea of keeping "them" talking until the Messenger with the camera has a chance to take a picture. The First Messenger tries to smooth talk her into it, but the Second Messenger tells her that she doesn't actually have to tell them what happened. He does, because he saw it - a car carrying four kids hit by a drunk driver. All of the kids were killed, including two of JB's.

Zuss, Nickles, the Messengers and the Girl all see JB and Sarah coming. The Girl goes to them, followed by the Messengers. The Girl tries to engage JB and Sarah in casual conversation. The Second Messenger starts to tell them what he saw, but the First Messenger has to finish. The Girl tries to warn JB and Sarah about the camera, but she's too late. The First Messenger snaps his pictures as again the Second Messenger speaks a poetic verse. JB lunges angrily after them, but they get away.

JB then goes to Sarah, who asks him why God did this to them, what they've done to deserve this. JB tries to convince her that she has to accept both the good and the evil in life, and that such evil happening to them doesn't mean there is no good at all. Zuss,

not wearing his mask, encourages JB to continue, but Sarah counters JB's argument by saying that when things were good JB accepted that it was God blessing him. She implies that when things are bad, he has to accept that it is God's doing as well. JB falls to his knees beside her, but she tells him not to touch her.

Nickles and Zuss get ready to move into the next scene. Nickles comments on the process JB is going through, first disbelief that such things can happen, then the belief that they happen by chance, and finally learning that such things are as much a part of God's plan as the good things. He climbs down the ladder, but Zuss tells him to stop. Nickles says he's just going down to help JB understand what's going on. Zuss hurries to join him.

The scene shifts to JB's home, where the two Messengers now appear as police officers investigating the disappearance of JB and Sarah's youngest daughter. She's been missing since seven o'clock the evening before, but JB admits that they hadn't called the police until six hours later, since they'd believed they would be able to find her themselves. Sarah shouts that they believe in luck in their house. Nickles cheers her on from the sidelines.

The First Messenger asks questions about what the child was wearing. When the Second Messenger hears the answers, he turns his face away. As more details emerge and he sees the reactions of the Messengers, JB begins to assume that they've found at least his daughter's toys. The Second Messenger speaks a poetic verse while the First Messenger tells JB and Sarah that a young boy found the body of a little girl, nude except for her shoes and a toy umbrella in her fist. JB demands to see the umbrella; the First Messenger shows it to him, and he and the Second Messenger leave.

Nickles urges JB to give voice to his rage, but instead JB, encouraged by Zuss, says "The Lord Giveth and the Lord Taketh Away." Zuss asks why JB won't go on, why he won't play the part he's supposed to be playing. Nickles tells him that JB isn't playing, he's living it the way we all are, living the suffering. Zuss looks up into the sky, seeing that the canvas is disappearing and leaving only stars. He suggests that they go back to where they belong. They go up to the platform, arm in arm.

Nickles and Zuss are back on their platform as the Two Messengers, now dressed as firefighters, carry a bruised and dirty Sarah into her home. They tell JB that she was trapped under the wall of a collapsing building, but that they had heard her calling out for her last remaining child and had been able to rescue her. The First Messenger comments that with the collapse of the building, JB has nothing left of all his millions.

JB asks whether there was anyone beside Sarah, and the Second Messenger once again quotes a poetic verse that leads JB to understand that his last child is dead. He turns to Sarah and desperately tries to convince her that even now God is still with them. Sarah joins him when he says "The Lord Giveth," but when he starts to complete the phrase with "The Lord ..." she shouts out that the Lord kills! JB blesses the Lord.

Scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

In the Biblical story, Job's children are all killed at the same time, by a wind that blew down their house. This suggests that God is a force of nature. There are several differences associated with the deaths of JB's children, however.

Firstly, they are killed separately. Secondly, they're killed in more contemporary ways; they are victims of war, drunk drivers, collapsing buildings, and sexual violence. This is another way in which the allegory is given relevance to our modern world and our modern society. Thirdly, with the exception of the death under the collapsed building, the suggestion is that the deaths were caused by the deliberate actions of other human beings. This suggests that in the *JB* version of the story, God is purposefully more violent and is therefore testing JB even harder than he tested Job. It also suggests that God's power manifests not only in acts of nature but through the relationships between people as well.

This idea is supported by the fact that Nickles and Zuss leave their lofty perches above the action and observe from a closer position. They don't participate directly in the scenes, but comment and encourage from the sidelines, unmasked, in a way they don't do before and won't do again in the play. The suggestion is that God is much more immediately present, much closer in people's lives, than perhaps JB, and we, have experienced previously. In other words, God and Satan are not remote, but are right beside us. This is another aspect of the play's theme, which in this scene is played out in the continued reappearances of the Two Messengers in different disguises, representing the different ways in which God's presence shows up beside us in our lives.

The fact that Sarah is arranging flowers at the beginning of this sequence of scenes refers back to the comment that JB had made about flowers earlier. The image suggests that Sarah's focus in her life is her children. We see in this sequence of scenes that as they die, her life falls further and further apart. The fact that her last child dies under a collapsed building suggests that the life Sarah lived and loved before has collapsed, and she, like JB, has nothing left.

The references to JB being an actor and Nickles' insistence that he isn't an actor at all represent another thematic statement. By refusing to see JB as merely playing a part, Nickles (who represents Satan) is telling Zuss (God) that human beings are living their lives, not just playing at what God wants them to play. In other words, Satan is arguing that God needs to see people as people. The irony of this argument is that if traditional beliefs about Satan are taken into account, it is the fact that people are people and *not* toys that make them easy prey for his temptations. It is just these temptations, in this case to rage and anger and despair, that he offers JB and Sarah. Sarah gives in. JB doesn't. Thus, Satan simultaneously proves both his own point and God's point about faith.

Finally, the fact that the canvas of the tent disappears, leaving Zuss and Nickles to see only stars, represents the idea that God's presence is something that goes beyond

intellectual debate. To quote from an Episcopalian prayer, it "passes all understanding." Therefore, Zuss' and Nickles' return to their platform is a dramatization of the theme of the play, the story and the allegory - that debating God's will is useless.

Scene 7

Scene 7 Summary

Back up on their platform, Zuss proudly declares that JB has done exactly as he had hoped he would and has affirmed his faith in God. Nickles angrily tells him that he thinks the whole experience is disgusting, indecent and immoral, referring to Sarah on her knees in despair and JB beside her praising God. Zuss tells Nickles he's just a bad loser, but Nickles tells him this isn't the end of it. Zuss quotes Dante's famous line "His will, our peace," but Nickles equates will not with peace, but with being ruled and submitting to another's will with surrender.

Zuss and Nickles argue again about the value of suffering, and argue whether suffering will or will not lead Job to praise God. Nickles challenges Zuss to put on his mask again. Nickles can't find his own mask, and the Distant Voice (heard first in the Prologue) quotes God's lines from the Bible, where He asks the Devil to consider the perfection of Job's devotion.

Once Nickles finds his mask, he and Zuss discover that they're unable to put their masks on right away. Eventually Zuss says that they started the story and they have to finish. They put on their masks. The God-mask speaks of how Job preserved his integrity in spite of Satan convincing Him to act against him. The Satan-mask urges God to go even further and destroy his body. The God-mask turns away and tells the Satan-mask to go ahead and plague Job's body, but spare his life.

Scene 7 Analysis

This scene echoes the scene in the Biblical story of Job, in which God points out that Job has done exactly as he had predicted, but Satan challenges him to go even further. In the Bible, however, God does not quote Dante in the way that Zuss does. The quote comes from a famous work by the poet/writer Dante Alighieri called "The Inferno," in which the reader is taken on a tour of the various levels of Hell. The book is an allegory, just like the Book of Job on which this play is based. In the case of Dante, however, the allegory is about several aspects of human existence, as opposed to this play which is focused on only one aspect of existence.

The fact that Nickles can't find his mask represents the helplessness and vulnerability that we as human beings experience when we're not able to use either God or as excuses for our behavior and beliefs. The final argument between Nickles and Zuss about whether and how to go on echoes the moment at which they return to their platform at the end of Scene 5. At the end of that scene they became afraid of the expanse of God and the depth of His unknowable wisdom. At the end of this scene, as they put on their masks, they become instruments of that wisdom and again experience that fear.

Scene 8

Scene 8 Summary

JB lies on the now broken down table, wearing nothing but a few rags. Sarah looks at him sadly, then drops her head into her hands. Four women and a young girl appear, look at Sarah and JB, then move onto the platform and sit together. As they come in, we hear Nickles, complaining about how God has gone over the top again, "tumble[ing] a whole city down to blister one man's skin with agony."

The women circle JB and Sarah, looking down at them curiously and remembering them from the old days when they were rich and successful. They comment on the sores covering JB's body and seat themselves on newspapers in a circle around the couple.

JB prays to God for death, and Sarah wonders whether God will help him even with that; she calls God "the enemy," but JB insists that God has a mysterious reason for doing what He has done. Nickles comments from the sidelines that the sores are reason enough. Sarah and JB both pray for the peace of sleep.

The women recall the deaths of JB and Sarah's children, and discuss whether Sarah will leave JB now that the children are dead and he is physically repulsive.

JB and Sarah speak of how even when they sleep, they feel eyes upon them, watching and waiting and judging. JB cries out that he only wishes he knew why, saying that the meaninglessness of the situation is what he finds most difficult to live with and that he knows God does not punish without cause. Sarah protests angrily that if that's the case, the children must have been rotten with sin; she demands to know whether they must take on the weight of the world's evil on behalf of "Him who made the world?" JB argues that there must be guilt somewhere and that only God knows where and what it is. Sarah calls her children innocent victims and tells him that if he continues to believe and act as though his actions played some role in the destruction of their children, she will cease to love him and leave. JB tells her he has no choice but to accept his guilt, saying that God is God and God's will is God's will or we are nothing. Sarah leaves.

The women wonder whether it was JB's heart or his skin that made her leave, saying that the heart is always the mystery while the skin is always what we know. JB calls out for Sarah, and the women tell us that he now realizes she's gone. JB cries out for God to show him his guilt.

Nickles climbs up the ladder, calling out to God to show JB his guilt and using God's Hebrew name of Jahveh. When God (Zuss?) doesn't respond, Nickles suggests that it's time for the Three Comforters from the original book of Job to appear in this version of the story. He disappears, the light changes, and we're into the next scene.

Scene 8 Analysis

The four women and one young girl, who is the daughter of one of the women, make up a kind of Greek chorus. This is a theatrical technique that goes back to the earliest days of theatre in Ancient Greece, in which a group of actors speak with the voice of a single character. The chorus here is used in a slightly different way, in that each of the women is given an individual name, and they all speak as individuals. They still perform the same function as a classical chorus, though, in that they observe and comment on the action. Later in the scene, as JB and Sarah comment on the eyes they feel watching them, it becomes clear that these women represent the eyes of God, watching and judging. They also represent the eyes and judgments of society, and the eyes of their dead children, haunting them.

JB's plea for death is similar to a plea voiced by Job in the Biblical version of the story. In that version, Job cries out to God in agony and bewilderment, but in this version, it is Sarah who cries out in that way. This again dramatizes and externalizes the two sides of JB's internal conflict, faith and fear. It also represents a way in which JB's faith has a purity that Job's doesn't.

Sarah's questioning of JB's faith and her suggestion that she and JB are taking on the weight of evil has hints of Christ imagery about it, specifically the belief in Christian theology that Christ died on the Cross to take the sins of the world onto himself. Sarah's departure represents both the departure of Job's wife in the original and the way in which those who lose their faith in God turn their backs on those who maintain theirs.

JB's response to Sarah has hints of Christ's faith and resignation to God's will about it. This suggests that not only is JB's story an allegory for the story of Job, but that it is also to a certain degree an allegory for the story of Christ. The difference is that JB and Job both felt that their misfortunes were the result of God's anger, whereas Christ on the Cross felt that God had abandoned him.

Nickles' reference to the Three Comforters is another reference to the Biblical story, which is mostly composed of dialogue between them and Job. This version's Comforters appear in the next scene.

Scene 9

Scene 9 Summary

The women and child are huddled to one side, JB sits in "an enormous loneliness," and three figures come forward. Zophar wears a clerical collar, Eliphaz wears an intern's jacket, and Bildad wears a businessman's leather wind-breaker. All of the clothing is worn out. The young girl wakes up and screams for her mother, waking the other women. They describe the newcomers, by their apparent professions and their appearance, as the sort of people who feed on the misfortunes of others. One of the women recalls a dream about "some queen of Scotland" as JB pulls himself to a sitting position, moans to himself that even death wouldn't heal his misery, and again cries out asking what he has done. Each of the Three Comforters offers an enigmatic answer, but JB doesn't hear them clearly. He can't see them clearly either, and apologizes for how he looks; then he asks why the people he can't see have come. The Comforters laugh as they tell him they're there to offer him comfort, saying he called them. When JB says he called God, they mock him by asking who he is that God should have time for him? JB protests that the hand of God has touched him and begins to suggest that if he's innocent ...

... before he can complete the thought, Bildad jeers at JB's claim to innocence, saying that millions of people far more innocent than he have suffered worse fates. JB says that God is just and wouldn't have treated him in this way without a reason, but Bildad jeers at this as well, saying that true justice will come at the end of time, not in the lifetime of one man. He says that until that ending, nothing matters. JB argues that guilt matters. Unless there is guilt, he says, the world has no meaning. Bildad suggests that guilt has no meaning, but then Eliphaz joins the debate with the comment that guilt is an illusion. His argument is that contemporary science has explained human action by saying every choice emerges from the subconscious rather than the conscious. Therefore, if actions aren't conscious choices, there's nothing to be guilty about.

JB shouts that he will not accept that idea and covers his ears, but Zophar continues to speak, telling him that he's got the right idea. There has to be guilt, because without guilt, there can be no hope. JB begs Zophar to show him what he's guilty of so he can understand why he's been punished. Zophar says it's not necessary, and JB begs even harder, saying that his integrity forces him to. Zophar laughs at that, saying that mankind has no integrity, because they were born in sin. He says the entire human race is guilty just because they are human beings, and shouts that JB's sin is humanity's sin: THAT is what he is guilty of. JB collapses, realizing that if what Zophar says is true, then God has created him already guilty, making God a co-creator of the crimes He punishes.

The Distant Voice speaks, accompanied by the sound of rushing wind. In direct quotes from the Bible, the Voice asks why JB thinks he is worthy to confront and question the creator of the universe.

The Three Comforters sense that it's time for them to leave and go out. The Distant Voice and wind return for a moment, this time even louder than the time previously. The noise awakens the little girl, who screams for her mother. The mother tells her that what woke her was only the wind, and the thunder in the wind. The women all pick up the newspapers they've been sitting on and leave.

For the third time, the Distant Voice is heard, challenging JB to challenge him again. JB bows his head, repents, and accepts God's judgment.

Scene 9 Analysis

The Three Comforters in this scene have the same names as the Comforters in the Bible, but there the similarity between these characters and the originals ends. Structurally, the Biblical story gives a great deal of time and space to the Comforters and their debates with Job. Here, each aspect of the debate with JB is dealt with quickly and succinctly. Also, where the Comforters in the Bible are firm, the Comforters here are mocking and malicious, which suggests that the use of the title "Comforters" is highly ironic. Finally, the use of shabby costumes to define the Comforters gives them identities and contexts, as opposed to the Comforters in the Bible, who are described as Job's neighbors but are no further defined than that. These costumes also suggest that the professions they represent, doctor/priest/lawyer, offer as little comfort in the world outside the play as these characters do within the play.

The appearance of the Distant Voice in a gust of wind is, on the other hand, completely consistent with the voice of God that appears in the original. It's also consistent with the way that God usually makes his presence known in the Bible, through acts of nature. Moses sees God in a burning bush, Job hears God speaking in the wind, and John the Baptist experiences God in light from the heavens and the presence of a dove.

The first and third of the Comforters' arguments, Bildad's and Zophar's, are firmly grounded in Christian theology. For centuries, Christian teaching has professed a doctrine called Original Sin, which states that guilt is innate from birth. This is Zophar's argument. Bildad's is an Old Testament argument carried through into the New Testament, which basically boils down to the promise of a Judgment Day, on which no-one will be able to hide their sins from God. By contrast, Eliphaz's argument is pure Freudian psychology, which suggests that man's actions all spring from subconscious desires, usually sexual in nature. None of these arguments makes any sense to JB, who just wants to know specifically what he did. The challenge of the Distant Voice - the challenge of God in the original story and the challenge in life that the allegory asks us to accept - is that we won't ever know, but we have to go on anyway. At the end of this scene, JB comes to this realization, and bows his head in acceptance of his fate.

The woman's reference to a queen of Scotland likely refers to Mary Queen of Scots, who lost her life to England's Queen Elizabeth I as the result of the political and military maneuverings of other people. Her situation resembles JB's, in that they both suffering because of the manipulations of others.

Scene 10

Scene 10 Summary

Nickles and Zuss turn away from the scene taking place below them, tearing off their masks and saying that's that. Nickles suggests that Zuss doesn't look pleased, even though he should, since he's been proved right. He calls Zuss "magnificent," but Zuss doesn't take that compliment well. After a bit of bickering about how reluctant Zuss seems to be about accepting that he was both magnificent and right, Zuss's temper finally explodes. He sharply condemns JB, saying that he wasn't giving in to God at all.

Nickles' temper also explodes, as he comments that magnificence and the show of power like the Distant Voice in the wind actually mean nothing to a man who's lost everything. Then he calms, concedes that Zuss / God has won the way he always wins, and searches for his popcorn.

Zuss, however, is still angry. He can't believe what he heard, that after being shown all God's glory, JB simply repented, calmed God down ... and forgave Him "as though Job's suffering were justified / not by the Will of God but Job's / Acceptance of God's Will." He says that he's sick to death of the whole business and starts looking for the belt with the balloons on it. He calls for lights, saying that the story's not over. When Nickles complains that there couldn't possibly be more, Zuss tells him he knows perfectly well there is: God restores Job's life, just as it was in the beginning, including money, wife and children.

Nickles argues that JB would never take his life back, that he'd never be willing to face the whole mess of suffering and losing everything all over again. He goes to JB, describes himself as professional counsel, and asks if JB knows what happens at the end. JB tries to argue that there is no end, while Nickles argues that there is. JB says he's tired of games, and Nickles tells him that God gives him everything back.

At first JB doesn't believe it but then notices that the sores on his arms are completely healed. Nickles urges JB not to take the new life that's offered, but JB hears someone at the door. Nickles hears it as well and leaves.

Scene 10 Analysis

To sum up the content of this scene in basic language, Zuss/God can't believe it worked. He can't believe that after everything "He" put JB through, JB still reacts in exactly the way it was predicted he would act. This, combined with the promise of JB getting everything back, makes the play's thematic statement - that no matter what God causes to happen to an individual, that individual will be rewarded. While JB's reward consists of the return of his earthly blessings, the suggestion of the allegory is that the reward comes through union with God in heaven after death.

This means that Nickles' appeal to JB to reject the offer of everything returning to the way it was isn't just a rejection of God, but a metaphorical invitation to reject Heaven - or, in other words, to accept hell. What we're watching in this exchange is a little allegory of temptation by Satan, pursuing his age old goal of winning souls for himself and away from God. JB, man of faith that he is, rejects this temptation in favor of his reward from God, which is what the allegory suggests that all of us do.

Scene 11

Scene 11 Summary

Light increases on the other side of the door. JB opens it and finds Sarah there, sitting with a blossoming twig in her hand. She tells JB that the twig is the only life left in the city; everything else is ashes.

JB asks her why she left. Sarah replies that it was because she couldn't help him any more. She didn't have justice to offer, which was what JB wanted; she had only love. JB says that God doesn't love; He just is. Sarah says that human beings love, and that this is the wonder of existence.

They look into the darkness on the side of the door that JB came from. JB says it's too dark to see, but Sarah suggests that they "blow on the coal of the heart" to create more light. She says the lights have gone out in the church and the stars, but the light from the heart will be enough. They'll see what they need to see and know what they need to know.

The light from the bright side of the door increases as they set about putting the dining room table and chairs back in order.

Scene 11 Analysis

The blossoms of Sarah's twig represent hope for the future, suggesting hope rising literally from the ashes of death and destruction. Also, because flowers have always been associated with children in this play, the blossoms represent hope for the future in the form of children. They also represent joy, part of the thematic statement discussed below.

The beautiful phrase "blow on the coal of the heart" refers to the process of lighting a wood fire without the aid of matches or a lighter. A spark from flint striking steel or from some other source of friction can ignite into a flame if the person building the fire blows gently and carefully on it. Sarah is suggesting that if they treat the love between them with tenderness and patience, it will provide enough light to see by, and therefore live and understand by.

This image adds an extra thematic layer to the play that doesn't exist in the original story of Job. The Biblical story states that having faith that God has a reason is reassurance enough that life in all its tribulations and blessings is worth living. The theme of the play, however, as indicated by the image of the heart as a coal, adds that while reassurance may be enough, love is what makes life into something that is a source of joy.

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Characters

Bildad

Bildad is one of the three comforters who come to reassure J. B. in scene 9, after J. B. has lost everything. Spouting jargon-filled clichés, Bildad explains J. B.'s suffering from a Marxist viewpoint, posing an economic answer to J. B.'s problems. J. B. should not wallow in guilt, he claims, because "Guilt is a sociological accident."

David

Thirteen years old at the start of the play, David is the oldest son of J. B. and Sarah. As a young man, David becomes a soldier. He survives the war only to be accidentally killed by his own comrades before he can return home.

Distant Voice

At two points in the play, while Zuss and Nickles are arguing in their roles as God and Satan, another voice from offstage is heard speaking lines attributed to God in the King James Bible. In the list of characters, the voice is named The Distant Voice. As MacLeish himself explained several times, the voice belongs to God himself, another character in the play.

Eliphaz

Eliphaz is one of the three comforters who come to reassure J. B. in scene 9, after J. B. has lost everything. Wearing a white doctor's coat and lecturing like a pompous professor, he speaks for psychiatry, claiming that "Guilt is a / Psychophenomenal situation." His words offer no comfort.

J. B.

J. B. is a perfect and upright man, a successful New England banker, a millionaire, blessed with a loving wife, five children, and a comfortable life. There is no question about his standing for the biblical character Job; his wife Sarah calls him "Job" when she addresses him directly. J. B. is grateful for all he has, but unlike Sarah he does not see the need to express his thanks directly to God; he believes that it is enough to fully appreciate what he has been given. He feels that he is essentially lucky and that all will turn out well in the end. As he suffers each subsequent loss, J. B. insistently thanks God, as Sarah grows increasingly angry. Even after he has lost his family, his wealth, and his physical well-being, J. B. refuses to turn away from God. It is his refusal to "curse God" that finally pushes Sarah to leave him. But J. B.'s optimism is rewarded:

God restores everything J. B. has lost and more. The central question of the play comes down to this: knowing he could run the risk of losing them again, how can J. B. accept the new gifts? How can he choose life in a world with no justice?

Jonathan

Jonathan, the younger son of J. B. and Sarah, is three years younger than David. He and his sister Mary are killed by a teenage drunk driver in scene 4.

Mary

Mary is the oldest daughter of J. B. and Sarah. When the play opens, she is twelve years old, a year younger than David. She and her brother Jonathan are killed by a teenage drunk driver in scene 4.

Nickles

Nickles is an old, has been actor, now reduced to selling popcorn in a derelict circus. As the play begins, he and Mr. Zuss enter the circus tent, find some old masks in a pile of costumes, and take on the roles of God and Satan from the biblical story of Job. Nickles will play Satan (his name is a play on the name "old Nick," a seventeenth-century slang term for the devil) in the play-within-the-play. Nickles's mask is dark, with wide eyes. Unlike Zuss, who plays God, Nickles has some sympathy for Job and bitterness about man's willingness to accept suffering for God's sake. He challenges Zuss to a bet, wagering that if Job were stripped of everything he values, he would curse God. They select J. B. to play Job, and the play-within-the-play begins.

As J. B. loses his children one by one, Nickles/ Satan sneers at Zuss/God and his cruel way of showing J. B. his power. Nickles is witty and intelligent, and some critics have said he represents MacLeish in finding humans more worthy of admiration than God. Whereas Zuss is indifferent to J. B.'s suffering, Nickles feels pity. Challenging God and his majesty, Nickles speaks the most frequently quoted lines from the play: "If God is God He is not good, / If God is good He is not God." But when Ruth and twenty thousand others are killed in a bombing and J. B. still praises God, Nickles's feelings turn to disgust. Knowing that at the end of the story God will restore all of J. B.'s treasures, Nickles speaks to J. B. and suggests he kill himself instead. In his last speech, Nickles proclaims violently, "Job won't take it! Job won't touch it!" But he does.

Rebecca

Rebecca, the youngest child of J. B. and Sarah, is only six years old at the beginning of the play. In scene 5 she is raped and murdered by a nineteen-year-old drug user and left in an alley clutching her toy parasol.

Ruth

Ruth, the middle daughter of J. B. and Sarah, is eight years old when the play begins. The last of the children to die, she is killed in the bombing in scene 6 that kills thousands.

Sarah

Sarah is J. B.'s wife of many years and the mother of his five children. Her name is an invention of MacLeish's; Job's wife is not named in the Bible. She is, according to the stage directions, "a fine woman with a laughing, pretty face but a firm mouth and careful eyes, all New England." When the family first appears, sharing a Thanksgiving feast, Sarah insists that they all stop and thank God for all they have. But when her innocent children are killed one by one, it is she who demands that Job "curse God and die." When he will not, she leaves him, heading to the river to drown herself. She returns in the last scene, having found hope and comfort in a forsythia branch blooming at the river's edge. She has learned that there is no justice but there is love.

Zophar

Zophar is one of the three comforters who come to reassure J. B. in scene 9, after J. B. has lost everything. Wearing a tattered clerical collar, Zophar claims that "Guilt is a deceptive secret," that man is inherently evil, and that J. B.'s suffering is more than deserved. He represents the empty comfort of religion, specifically of the Catholic Church.

Mr. Zuss

Mr. Zuss, like Nickles, is an old man, an actor who has fallen on hard times and now sells balloons at the circus. He and Nickles are the first characters on stage. They enter the circus tent, find a sideshow stage, and agree to take on the characters of God and Satan in a play-within-a-play, the biblical story of Job. Mr. Zuss, whose name carries echoes of "Zeus" or "Deus," will play the role of God, wearing a white mask whose closed eyes betray no expression. He accepts a wager from Nickles/Satan: he will allow Satan to destroy everything J. B. values, and J. B. will continue to praise God. Zuss and Nickles agree that J. B. is a "perfect and upright man," that he has done nothing to deserve his destruction. Zuss believes that this relationship between God and man is proper and that for man to challenge God or seek justice from him is inappropriate.

Throughout the story of J. B./Job, Zuss and Nickles argue about J. B.'s responses. To the pompous and arrogant Zuss, it is merely fitting that J. B. should continually praise and thank him, even as J. B.'s suffering increases. When thousands are killed in an explosion and J. B. is still grateful to God, Zuss is pleased whereas Nickles is disgusted.

Both men know how the story will turn out, but Nickles continually rails against what he knows will happen, whereas Zuss placidly watches the story unfold.

Themes

Hopelessness and Despair

The world of *J. B.* is a frightening world. In the beginning of the play, J. B. and his family are healthy and wealthy, happy and loving. J. B.'s children have never known suffering or deprivation; as J. B. tells Sarah, the world seems to them "New and born and fresh and wonderful." J. B. himself trusts his "luck" because it comes from God. He is safe in his knowledge that God is "just. He'll never change."

But without warning—and without cause—J. B.'s luck does change. His children are killed in particularly senseless ways: David by accident, by his own men when the war is over; Mary and Jonathan by a drunken teenaged driver; Rebecca by a teenager on drugs; Ruth in a bombing. J. B. himself is injured in an atomic blast, and his body is covered with radiation burns. There is no sense to it all, and that is the point. The world is so violent and frightening that even blameless people will be driven to despair. The surprising thing is not that Sarah eventually loses all hope, but that J. B. does not.

The hopelessness and senselessness of the world is first decried by Nickles, who speaks bitterly to Zuss, comparing the world to a "dung heap" and a "cesspool." Remembering the bombed-out cities of World War II, he says, "There never could have been so many / Suffered more for less." Throughout the play, Nickles badgers Zuss about suffering in the world and mocks humans like J. B. for thinking God cares about their suffering. The masks that Nickles and Zuss wear emphasize their relationship to human pain: Zuss's Godmask has blind eyes, but Nickles's Satanmask has open eyes, and, as Nickles says, "Those eyes *see.*" In the end, J. B. is not driven to despair, but Nickles is. Nickles comes to believe that the best thing for J. B. to do would be to commit suicide, to refuse to live in the world God has given him. For many readers, this hopelessness is the central theme of the play. It is not until the last scene that the reader has any reason to see anything more promising in the play.

Justice versus Love

MacLeish himself spoke publicly and wrote about *J. B.* several times, and he was always clear as to what he believed his play was "about" (although, as the poet who created the famous lines "A poem should not mean / But be," he discussed themes with some reluctance). When he addressed the cast of a college production of the play in 1976, he stated, "The play is not a struggle between God and J. B." The central question of the play, according to the author, is "the question of the justification of the injustice of the Universe."

This theme is played out in the characters of J. B. and Sarah. From the beginning, J. B. believes that he is lucky and blessed because he has earned God's favor—that his bounty is a form of justice. When his children are taken away from him violently, one by

one, he looks for reasons for his suffering. Although Nickles and Zuss (Satan and God) agree that J. B. is an innocent man who has done nothing to deserve his punishment, J. B. can think only in terms of justice, and so he concludes that he and the children must have sinned. Sarah rejects justice as the reason for their trials. In scene 8, she begs J. B. not to "betray" the children by calling them sinners: "I will not / Let you sacrifice their deaths / To make injustice justice and God good!" When J. B. refuses to listen, she leaves him.

When Sarah returns in scene 11, it is because she has learned that the world, and the humans who love in it, are reason enough to live. She explains to J. B., "You wanted justice, didn't you? / There isn't any. There's the world." She left him, she says, because "I loved you. / I couldn't help you any more. / You wanted justice and there was none—/ Only love."

When MacLeish took *J. B.* to Broadway, he and the director Elia Kazan agreed that for the play to work on stage, J. B. should be the one to settle the conflict between justice and love in the end. In the acting edition, therefore, the last scene was rewritten to give J. B. most of Sarah's final lines and to expand on them. In both versions, it is clear that God does not love humans, and He does not act out of justice or injustice. He simply is. It is humans who have the capacity for love. In a world where blessings and sufferings can not be earned or deserved, people must love each other, or despair.

Style

Allusion

When a writer refers to a well-known character or story from the past, either from fiction or nonfiction, that writer is said to be using an allusion. This device works as a kind of shorthand, enabling a writer to convey a lot of information quickly and without explanation, because the reader can be assumed to bring knowledge about and responses to the things alluded to. Clearly, MacLeish's play is at least in part a retelling of the biblical story of Job. There are several parallels between the two stories. The name "J. B." echoes the name "Job." What is more, Sarah, Nickles, and Zuss all sometimes call him by the name Job. The names of J. B.'s comforters in scene 9, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, are the names of the three comforters in the Biblical story. Although Sarah and the children are not named in the Bible, MacLeish has chosen Biblical names for each of them. The overall story, with the wager between God and Satan and the systematic destruction of all of J. B.'s possessions, echoes the story of Job. Some of the lines are direct quotations from the King James Version of the Bible.

MacLeish—and his characters Zuss and Nickles—expects that the audience is already familiar with the biblical story. When the two circus vendors arrive on the scene, Zuss indicates the stage area and comments, "That's where Job sits—at the table. / God and Satan lean above." Nickles does not ask Zuss who or what he is talking about; he knows the story and knows that the audience knows. In fact, a bit later in scene 1, Nickles summarizes the torments that Job suffered and that J. B. is about to suffer: "God has killed his sons, his daughters, / Stolen his camels, oxen, sheep, / Everything he has." Apparently, MacLeish not only does not mind that his audience knows what is going to happen to J. B.; he insists upon it.

Throughout the play, Zuss and Nickles refer to what is about to happen and occasionally speak directly to the characters to urge them to play—or not to play—their roles as written. When Rebecca's body is found, J. B. tries to utter one of the most well-known lines from the Job story. He is able to get most of the words out ("The Lord giveth . . . the Lord taketh away!"), but even with Zuss's urging he cannot overcome his grief and finish the line ("Blessed be the name of the Lord"). This scene works only if the audience knows the words and knows how the line is supposed to end. The point is not to tell the story, but to retell it and to comment on it, to point out that this story is reenacted over and over again.

Verse

Although he wrote plays and essays and even a screenplay, MacLeish is primarily known as a poet, and he devoted much of his life to studying poetry. *J. B.* is written entirely in verse, which was a common form for English drama in earlier centuries (many of Shakespeare's play, for example, are written in iambic pentameter verse) but

extremely rare in the 1950s. When the play did well on Broadway, critics marveled that a play in verse could find an audience. *J. B.* is written in unrhymed four-stress lines without strict meter. In a conversation with college students cast for a production of the play, published as "MacLeish Speaks to the Players," the author explains that "those four syllables are accented . . . by the sense of the words; if you read the words to *mean,* they will take their right emphasis."

The effect of the four stresses is subtle at best; it is possible to read the dialogue without paying attention to the sound, and many readers of the text will not hear the rhythm. But when the play is performed, the four-stress line creates an undercurrent that works emotionally on the audience. For MacLeish, this undercurrent was grounded in an essential difference between poetry and prose and between myth and history. In an interview in *Horizon* magazine, he explained that while history is true at a particular place and time, stories like the story of Job are mythical, "true at any place and time: true then and therefore true forever; true forever and therefore true then." Chronological time, therefore, is less important than "always" in a drama based on myth, and "'always' exists in poetry rather than prose."

For secular readers and audiences of the early twenty-first century, drama in verse may seem as exotic as the language of the King James Bible. The language and the four-stress line serve to elevate the drama, to place it in a not-quite-familiar place and time. While the trials J. B. and his family suffer are brutally recognizable even today, the poetry of the lines achieves MacLeish's purpose: it prevents the audience from sinking into familiarity, from seeing J. B.'s story as the story of one individual man.

Historical Context

World War II

With the development of new technologies, World War II saw more civilian casualties than any previous war. Bombs from the air could deliver more destructive power than single bullets from a rifle, but they did not kill only soldiers, nor were they intended to. Nickles comments in scene 1 that "Millions and millions of mankind" have been "Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated," and he particularly mentions those who died because they were "Sleeping the wrong night wrong city—/ London, Dresden, Hiroshima." These three cities stand for the thousands of innocent civilians who died on both sides of the war.

London, the capital city of England, was bombed by the Nazis for fifty-eight consecutive days in 1940 and less frequently for the following six months, in the series of raids known as the Blitz. Nearly a third of the city was brought to ruins, and nearly 30,000 Londoners were killed. Dresden was one of the most beautiful cities in Germany, a center for art and culture. In February 1945, six square miles of its downtown were destroyed by Allied bombing, resulting in the deaths of between 35,000 and 135,000 people in two days. Six months later, on August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, Japan, killing almost 150,000 people.

When World War II ended in 1945, the misery did not end for people who had lived through it, particularly for people who lived in the areas that had been hardest hit by the bombing. MacLeish got the idea for *J. B.* in the late 1940s, when he visited a London suburb that had been nearly flattened by Nazi bombing. There, he met families who had been bombed in one town, moved away, and had been bombed in the new place. Many had lost relatives and friends. The senselessness of their suffering and the increasing human capacity to inflict more suffering troubled him and eventually led to *J. B.*

Cold War

Contrary to the common, nostalgic view that the 1950s was a time of unbroken happiness and prosperity, many people suffered greatly, both inside and outside the United States. World War II had just ended, and many people had lost loved ones and property. The extent of the horrors of the Holocaust was gradually becoming known. In short, the world seemed to many people like a place where suffering and evil were not only possible but present, and without measure.

The Cold War, with the threat of nuclear annihilation, was constantly in the back of many Americans' minds. The term "Cold War" referred to the idea that the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) were waging a political and economic battle (not a "hot" war with weapons) for influence in the world. As the two "superpowers" gained political strength, each also increased its capacity to engage in

an armed conflict if necessary. The resulting arms race, in which each side eventually created enough nuclear weapons to destroy the entire planet, left people on both sides of the Cold War feeling not safer but more anxious. Even young people were exposed to the climate of fear. School children were trained to "duck and cover" in the event of an atomic bomb threat. As horrible as the destruction caused by World War II had been, the next major war threatened to leave even more misery in its wake.

Renaissance of the Verse Play

Most students are aware that Shakespeare wrote plays in iambic pentameter lines but have come to expect modern drama to be written in simple, conversational language. Some writers have felt, as the poet T. S. Eliot did in the 1930s, that the conventional language of everyday speech is not grand enough to raise important questions. Eliot decided to try to revive the verse play, producing a half dozen dramas in verse including *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), an historical play about the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the twelfth century; and *The Cocktail Party* (1950), a combination of drawing room conversation and incantation. Audiences and critics were curious but not enamored of the form. Eliot's plays were profound and thoughtful, but often they were not good drama. *Murder in the Cathedral,* his first verse play, is generally considered his best.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, other playwrights attempted verse drama. The British playwright Christopher Fry wrote and directed eight plays in verse. Some, including *A Sleep of Prisoners* (1951), were serious, based on religious themes; the verse supported a mystical, ponderous tone. These plays were well regarded by the critics and compared favorably with the earlier work of Eliot. Audiences much preferred Fry's comedies, including *The Lady's Not for Burning* (1948), in which the verse was a vehicle for wit, wordplay, and surprising rhythm. Fry's comedies were the first modern verse plays to be both critical and popular successes. Significantly, Fry was a playwright and director, not a poet, when he turned to this form.

MacLeish was taking a chance when he wrote *J. B.* in verse. He had written two minor radio plays in verse, and he had written hundreds of poems, but he did not have much experience as a playwright. Still, he felt as Eliot and Fry and others before him that the question he was addressing was too large and important to be expressed in prose. When he took the play to Broadway, his director Elia Kazan supervised months of revision because the play as written did not work dramatically. Everyone was surprised that the new version of the play turned out so well; it was assumed that a play based on the Bible and written in verse would draw only a small intellectual audience. Instead, *J. B.* enjoyed a long run on Broadway, won two major awards, and made a lot of money.

It was not the beginning of a trend. Verse plays continue to appear occasionally, but none has matched the success of *J. B.* Even this play, which was a staple of college theatre companies through the 1960s and 1970s, has rarely been performed since.

Critical Overview

J. B. was something of a sensation in its time, especially because of MacLeish's audacity and deftness in attempting to write verse drama for a modern audience. The play was published as a book months before it was ever performed, and so its first reviewers were readers, not members of an audience. Because MacLeish was well known as a poet, his play in verse received more critical attention in the major newspapers and magazines than it might have otherwise. The poet John Ciardi, in a review titled "Birth of a Classic," written for the *Saturday Review of Literature,* called the play "great poetry, great drama, and . . . great stagecraft." Other critics were more modest in their praise but were largely favorable. After its first production, at Yale University in 1958, the play was selected for the World's Fair at Brussels.

The substantially revised Broadway version of *J. B.* was widely reviewed and much discussed in bars and coffeehouses. The morning after the opening, MacLeish appeared on the *Today* show to talk about the play, and open forums were held after some of the early performances so that religious scholars could debate theology with the playwright. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1959 (MacLeish's third Pulitzer), as well as the Tony Award for best play. It had a long run on the British stage and was translated and performed in other European countries as well. Until the early 1980s, the play was frequently performed at colleges and universities, and the book form of the play became MacLeish's best-selling work.

Criticism of the play can be divided roughly into two types: criticism (often negative) that speaks to MacLeish's religious views, reflecting on his treatment and understanding of the biblical story, and criticism (often positive) that speaks to the play as art and reflects on the author's handling of character or language or on the differences between the book and the acting edition of the play. Typical of the first type is "J. B., Wrong Answer to the Problem of Evil," written by Martin D'Arcy for *Catholic World.* D'Arcy acknowledges that *J. B.* is "good theater," but he concludes that it is bad theology because "In the solution which MacLeish offers, no reference is made to immortality nor to the Christian Cross." The conflict is summed up neatly in the title of Preston R. Gledhill's analysis in *Brigham Young University Studies:* "*J. B.:* Successful Theatre versus 'Godless' Theology." Several of these critics have quarreled with MacLeish's interpretation of the Job story, believing that in his retelling he has a duty to be completely faithful to his original source. But in a 1974 article in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses,* Elizabeth Bieman bemoans "the chasm which separates the humane vision of MacLeish's play from the conservative theology" and describes several ways in which "MacLeish opens the door to profound mystery."

Another body of criticism is willing to meet MacLeish on his own terms. They approach the play with the expectation that the author has used the story of Job as a framework for his own work and accept that any variations he may create in his version are conscious choices, not failings to understand. As explained by Thomas E. Porter in *Myth and Modern America Drama,* MacLeish "cannot simply retell the Job story in modern terms. He has to reshape his source so that the message he finds there is

translated into dramatic terms for the audience." Shannon O. Campbell, who admires MacLeish's adaptation, explicates the differences between the two versions of the story, attributing the variations to the different cultural settings, in *English Journal.* Marion Montgomery, in the journal *Modern Drama,* closely examines the four-stress line and how MacLeish varies the lines to demonstrate character and emotional states. She concludes that much of the verse is effective but that the play overall is not.

The character of J. B. is a subject for discussion. Early audiences surprised MacLeish by finding J. B. unlikable. Daniel Berrigan, in a review for *America,* comments that J. B. is not "marked by depth of character, skill and command in giving point to thought"; rather, he is "a rather simple overdrawn Main Street Type, so pale as to be invisible at noon." To Porter, however, J. B. is "the humanist hero, a responsible free agent."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bily is an instructor of writing and literature at Adrian College. In this essay, Bily asks whether the United States in the beginning of the twenty-first century is sadly ripe for a revival of J. B.

Although some pieces of literature feel timeless, like Homer's *Odyssey* or some of the plays of Shakespeare, other perfectly fine works are products of a specific time and place and belong so strongly to that setting that they languish when their time is past. A cursory look at lists of winners of the Pulitzer Prizes or the National Book Awards reveals many works that have stood the test of time: novels and poetry that are still in print, plays that are still performed. Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth,* which won the 1932 Pulitzer Prize for fiction; Edward Arlington Robinson's *Collected Poems,* winner of the 1922 Pulitzer Prize for poetry; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* winner of the 1953 National Book Award for fiction; *A Streetcar Named Desire,* by Tennessee Williams, the 1948 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Other names have disappeared from our collective awareness, known to scholars but not frequently sought out by readers and directors: the poets Alan Dugan and Leonora Speyer, the novelists J. F. Powers and Julia Peterkin, the plays

Miss Lulu Bett and *Craig's Wife.*

Archibald MacLeish's play *J. B.* has seemed, for at least two decades, like one of the forgotten works, destined to be read occasionally in English classes but overlooked by serious scholars and producers. A search of the *Modern Language Association Bibliography* database turns up only two articles about the play in the 1980s and none since. Although the play enjoyed a long run on Broadway in 1958 and 1959 and twenty years as a staple of college theatre companies, it has been infrequently performed since MacLeish's death in 1982.

Ten years after the Broadway opening, when the reviewers were done with the play and the literary critics took over, *J. B.* was hailed as a play of its own time. Murray Roston included *J. B.* in his discussion of *Biblical Drama in England* and explained why the Bible was a sensible source for MacLeish: "In the mid-twentieth century, the obliteration of Hiroshima provided the most glaring modern instance of such indiscriminate slaughter, the Bible had reached the nadir of its sanctity, and the time was ripe for a new surge of interest in its themes, and particularly in the Jobian quest translated into modern terms." In 1970, Sy Kahn located the play squarely in the 1950s, when "writers reverberated to the impact of the events of World War II and especially to the accumulating evidence of Nazi persecution and extermination programs, and these events sharpened the points of the old, excruciating questions." He concluded that *J. B.* was "a play right for MacLeish, right for a post-war and war-fearing world, right for America in mid-century." More recently, in 1982, Richard Calhoun looked back on the play and its reception, commenting that "In my view MacLeish intended to give his audience an American version of *Job* appropriate for the 1950s, a decade not as blandly idyllic as that popular TV series *Happy Days* made it appear. This was a time of a cold

war that became a small but fierce hot war in Korea. It was a decade of suspicion and of communist witch-hunting.... *J. B.* was written at a time for serious questions about the human costs of mid-twentieth-century destruction and whether under such conditions it was possible to have a belief in life."

Calhoun's use of the past tense is telling. Over the next twenty years, the world underwent drastic changes, socially and politically. The Berlin Wall came down, and the Cold War came to an end. Wars were fought far away, "cleanly," with precision missiles that in theory hit only their targets. Americans enjoyed a strong economy and peace at home. Although membership in Bible-based organized churches was growing, the United States was determined to maintain a separation of church and state and was growing increasingly uneasy with professions of faith and references to the Bible in public.

How could one best approach *J. B.* in the new century, when things seemed to be going so well. What would North American students understand about J. B.'s suffering and his need to make sense of it? What would they know of World War II or of living in a climate of fear and suspicion? What would they make of Nickles's bitterness and anger or of J. B.'s search for justice? The answers to these questions came when the events of September 11, 2001, made *J. B.* horribly relevant again.

The play centers on the character of J. B., a good, decent, upright man. He is wealthy and part of a loving family; he has been blessed by God, and he is grateful to God. He is also largely unaware of the lives of other less fortunate people, although neither Zuss nor Nickles blames him for this. J. B. appreciates what he has been given and enjoys it fully, but there is no sense that he is aware that on a chilly Thanksgiving Day there are people outside sleeping on a grate. MacLeish was said to have been taken aback when some critics pointed out that they found the man J. B. unlikable, self-satisfied. Nickles cannot stop thinking about:

Millions and millions of mankind /
Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated, /
Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking! /
' For walking around the world in the wrong /
Skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids: /
Sleeping the wrong night wrong city— /
London, Dresden, Hiroshima. /
There never could have been so many /
Suffered more for less.

Why is J. B. oblivious?

One reason *J. B.* languished for several years is that it has not seemed urgent. Like J. B., Americans (at least that portion of the population that attends plays) have been largely protected from catastrophe. London, Dresden, and Hiroshima were long ago. More recent suffering in Cambodia and Rwanda and Bangladesh was far away. MacLeish's originalaudiences were afraid, but audiences in the 1990s were not.

Of course, suffering does reach J. B. He loses his children one by one, the last in a bombing. This is the event that pushes Sarah over the brink into despair. She was one of those who were pulled from the wreckage. Someone "heard her underneath a wall / Calling" the name of her last daughter, Ruth, who died in the explosion. When he wrote the images, MacLeish was remembering what he had heard of the Blitz, but today's readers will picture the countless scenes, played over and over on TV, of people pulled from the wreckage, living or dead, in Oklahoma City, in New York City, in Washington, D.C. Nickles predicts that when J. B. suffers as Sarah has, not just seeing her children killed but herself physically injured, when J. B.'s body "hurts him—once / Pain has penned him in," he will despair and reject God.

Sarah rejects J. B. when he will not curse God. She leaves him and goes "Among the ashes. / All there is now of the town is ashes. / Mountains of ashes. / Shattered glass. / Glittering cliffs of glass all shattered." Nickles is disgusted by J. B. when he actually *thanks* God for his punishment. In the end, J. B. chooses life, though he does not know how he will live it, and it is Sarah who shows him how.

The tensions in the United States today make Americans ready, in a way that they have not been for twenty years, to contemplate the questions so large that MacLeish could not stop asking them. When people suffer, when they die, when they are afraid, how can they go on? When the forces that act on them are beyond their comprehension, how can they support each other? If the answers to these essential questions are not found in psychiatry or politics or religion, where are they? Why don't we all follow Nickles's advice and take a rope, or take "a window for a door?" Is MacLeish's answer, that there is no justice but there is love, sufficient?

These questions had people talking all night in 1958, arguing in the newspapers, shouting out comments in the theatre. Complacency put the questions to bed for awhile, but many of them are being voiced again, on talk shows, on the twenty-four-hour news channels, in church services and coffee shops. The *Doonesbury* cartoon by Gary Trudeau that ran in newspapers on October 5, 2001, had Boopsie asking, "What kind of God allows such terrible suffering and death?" When *J. B.* was new, critics and reviewers argued over MacLeish's answers to big questions. With the North American corner of the world in turmoil, the old questions seem new again.

It will remain the work of historians, sociologists, political scientists, and religious scholars to sort out who was innocent and who was guilty on the day of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., and all the days leading up to it, and all the days after. As J. B. does, a person or a country might cry out for justice, but there is none. Sarah learns about justice and explains to J. B., "Cry for justice and the stars / Will stare until your eyes sting. Weep, / Enormous winds will thrash the water." In a way that the Americans have recently been reminded, the world is a big place full of ungovernable forces, security is fragile, and innocent people do suffer. As Zuss says at the beginning of *J. B.*, "there's always / Someone playing Job."

Source: Cynthia Bily, Critical Essay on *J. B.,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay excerpt, McWilliams discusses MacLeish's play and its resemblance to the Book of Job.*Commercially and critically, MacLeish earned the great bulk of his reputation as playwright with *J. B.* Originally staged by the Yale School of Drama in April 1958, *J. B.* played at the Brussels World's Fair in September and opened at the ANTA Theatre in New York on 11 December 1958. After a run of 364 performances, the play closed on 24 October 1959. In published form, *J. B.* was a best-seller and translated into many foreign languages. Later productions were mounted in many nations including England, France, Egypt, Israel, and Mexico.

Essentially the Book of Job transplanted into the twentieth century, *J. B.* asks how man, with dignity and hope, can love and serve a god who allows so much evil to exist in the world. The action unfolds under a giant circus tent, recreating the universe-as-big-top analogy earlier seen in MacLeish's own poem "The End of the World." As a play-within-a-play, *J. B.* begins with the entrance of two ragtag gentlemen named Mr. Zuss and Nickles. The pair discover and don masks of God and Satan, thus setting the inner play into motion. For the rest of the play Zuss and Nickles each fulfill a dual role, one deified and one human. Together they act as a Greek chorus, both taking part in and commenting upon the action of the play, Zuss as orthodox believer and Nickles as rebellious cynic.

When we first see Job's modern counterpart, J. B., he is celebrating Thanksgiving with his wife and children. Prosperous and happy, J. B. is over-flowing with love of God. Then, the senseless misfortunes begin. One son is killed overseas in an absurd accident following the Armistice. One daughter is brutally raped and murdered by a sexual psychopath. Two other children die in a gruesome automobile accident. The last child perishes when J. B.'s bank is bombed. In each case, the news is borne to J. B. by callous messengers—drunken soldiers, photographers with glaring flashbulbs, rain coated policemen, and steel-helmeted civil defense officers. J. B. himself is stricken with boils and, with his wife Sarah, left the pitiful survivor of an atomic blast. Sarah, however, soon leaves, urging J. B. to denounce God and surrender life. As the first half of the play comes to a close, J. B., wounded and bewildered, cries out: "Show me my guilt, O God!" God responds with agonizing silence.

In the second half comes the parade of comforters, giving no comfort at all. Bildad expounds Marxist jargon about collective humanity. Eliphaz, a Freudian psychiatrist, talks about guilt as an illusion. Finally, Zophar, a theologian, argues that guilt is an inevitable part of being human. J. B. rejects panaceas of all the comforters but finds the words of Zophar most cruel because they imply a gamester-God who creates sin to punish sin. With nothing left to do, J. B. simply restates his faith and trust in God. This time God answers, in the form of a distant, disembodied voice over the public address system. But to J. B.'s surprise, God speaks only to question him and rebuke him for his presumptuousness in trying to instruct the Lord. In MacLeish's words, J. B. "has not been answered at all—he has merely been silenced." Humbled by God's chiding, J. B.

repents. Not long after, Sarah returns to him out of love and together they resolve to begin a new world.

This was the version of *J. B.* staged at Yale University. Before the play reached New York, however, it underwent a significant metamorphosis, mostly at the behest of director Elia Kazan. The multiscene structure of the original gave way to a more conventional two-act form. Zuss and Nickles, segregated from the J. B. scenes in the Yale version, were more fully incorporated into the total action of the play. Most significant, especially in terms of later critical opinion, was the addition of what Kazan called a recognition scene, in which J. B. rejects both complacent ignorance and cynicism in facing the ills of the world. Instead, he finds hope and salvation inside himself, inside the human heart, saying to his wife: "The candles in the church are out. / The lights have gone out in the sky! / Blow on the coal of the heart / And we'll see by and by...." From a solid majority of the critics, *J. B.* harvested high praise. John Gassner called it an "exalted work of the dramatic and poetic imagination in a generally commonplace theatre." John Ciardi of the *Saturday Review* called it "great poetry, great drama, and . . . great stagecraft" and added, "the poetry and the drama are organically one." Dudley Fitts, mixing prophecy with praise, wrote: "A passionate work, composed with great art . . . a signal contribution to the small body of modern poetic drama, and it may very well turn out to be an enduring one." Citing the emotional power of the play, Samuel Terrien of the *Christian Century* observed that even "the most blase audience submits to the spell in an almost unbearable experience of empathy." Finally, Brooks Atkinson, writing for the *New York Times,* said: "It portrays in vibrant verse the spiritual dilemma of the twentieth century."

Transforming a familiar story, however, invites comparison with the original, and here the critics butted heads. In the view of Henry Hewes, *J. B.* "adds precious little to what has already been said more beautifully in the Bible." In a more orthodox vein, another spokesman for *Christian Century* concluded: "While Mr. MacLeish's drama is a brilliant recreation of the story of Job, the character of J. B. is completely foreign to that of the hero who speaks in the biblical poem." Joseph Wood Krutch disagreed with both of these critics, saying: "MacLeish's interpretation is strong and interesting, neither merely repeating what the biblical drama says nor perverting it into something else."

Without doubt, the religious implications of the recognition scene in *J. B.* stirred the greatest controversy and inspired the most biting detractions. Scores of critics, religious and secular, agreed with Martin D'Arcy of *Catholic World* that "evil cannot be solved within us; help and grace must come from outside, from a God." As Brooks Atkinson added, "a declaration of individual independence from God differs from cursing God only in degree, and it weakens the force of the purity of J. B.'s character." Henry Van Dusen alone came to MacLeish's defense in the matter of religious doctrine, arguing in Christian Century after the detractors had spoken: "If MacLeish has recourse to human integrity and human love for the answer to J. B.'s need, it is, again, because the biblical Job offers him nothing beyond obeisance before an arbitrary and heartless Cosmic Power." All critics concurred on one final point: *J. B.* was a genuine rarity—a commercially successful religious verse play.

Source: James L. McWilliams III, "Archibald MacLeish," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Vol. 7: *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists, Part 2: K-Z,* Gale Research, 1981, pp. 58-61.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Falk examines J. B. *within the context of the morality play, focusing on similarities between it and the story of Job in the Bible.*

Writing in 1955, MacLeish rejected T. S. Eliot's statement that no play should be written in verse if prose were "dramatically adequate." He answered Eliot by saying that prose is adequate for an illusion of the actual; but, if the dramatist is concerned with the "illusion of the real," then he is concerned with "the illusion which dramatic poetry can pursue." He gave as examples "the illusion of Oedipus apart from the plot," or "the metaphor of Prospero's island," or "Yeats' Purgatory," or *Hamlet* which offers "a perception of the nature of the human heart." Only poetry creates an illusion which can foster an understanding by the mind, by the emotions, and by the senses—that is, by the whole being.

In the undergraduate verse in *Tower of Ivory* (1917) MacLeish was concerned with man's interpretation of God and with the meaning of human experience. In the early poetic drama *Nobodaddy* (1925), he reflected an interest in Blake's attitudes toward conventional religion and morality. In that early play the serpent tempted Adam to raise questions and to use his power of reason. This same voice, more fully developed in Cain, made him ask what kind of God demands sacrifice of the trusting and destroys the innocent. The sonnet "End of the World" as well as parts of *Einstein* (1926) and *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish* (1928), also questioned the place of man in an indifferent universe. Another kind of callousness—a human kind of indifference—was reflected by the Announcer to the suffering of the village inhabitants in *Air Raid* (1939). The pattern of thought to be found in these earlier poems and plays is more fully developed in the play about the modern Job.

MacLeish compounded problems for himself when he set out to recast the Old Testament poem into a modern drama. The Book of Job is one of the most controversial in the Bible. The text itself raises innumerable problems. Because of the nature of the contestants, man against God and Satan, there can be no real dramatic conflict. The extended arguments between Job and the three comforters, which consume the major part of the Bible story, are not material for drama. After the terrible sufferings of Job, his restoration at the end negates any possibility of the poem as tragedy in the usual sense of the term.

MacLeish turned to the Book of Job to raise questions about the nature of a God who would consent without cause to the destruction of a good man, the killing of all his children, and the infliction of physical suffering upon him. MacLeish seems to be raising questions whether this concept of God—the God of the Old Testament, the God of Vengeance—belongs to a world in which Germans murdered millions of Jews in gas chambers and Americans destroyed Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. "Good" Germans and "good" Americans, indifferent about their own guilt, obviously need to find another image of God, and of goodness, one that incorporates love with a sense of responsibility, one that can unite a compassion for others with a concern for the

individual spirit. MacLeish, as he has asked other poets to do, seems to be casting off a metaphor that belongs to the past and to be seeking a new metaphor for our own time.

As the framework for *J. B.* MacLeish returned to the image he used in the early sonnet, "The End of the World", in which man's life is likened to a circus performance, his universe indifferent and meaningless. *J. B.* is very much like a morality play. It also a play within a play: two broken-down, ham-actors—one wearing the God mask, the other the Satan mask—observe and comment upon the lives and misfortunes of an American family. The stage is bare except for a low platform on which J. B.'s family act out their story; the stage level represents the earth upon which Satan walks to and fro, and an elevation to the right suggests heaven. During the first part of the play, a huge circus tent covers the acting area. It is like the protection of a friendly universe, or perhaps the inherited beliefs about a friendly universe. During the last part of the play, this tent disappears; its absence gives the effect of exposing J. B. completely to indifference and meaninglessness. Scattered around the stage are what seem to be vestments of several times and churches. Even the God mask and the Satan mask, Mr. Zuss and Mr. Nickles, seem to be relics of the past, to be parodies of man's sometime religious experience.

Mr. Zuss is an imposing, deep-voiced man of "magnificent deliberation" suitable to play a God who never laughs, who sees nothing wrong with the arrangement of the world. Nickles says that the "blank, beautiful, expressionless mask with eyes lidded like the eyes of the mask in Michelangelo's Night" belongs to God and the Creator of animals. He says God fumbled Job when He gave him a mind, made him grateful, and made him think "there should be justice somewhere." When Mr. Zuss answers that "Demanding justice of God" is rank irreverence, Nickles retorts that God's reasons are for animals, not for men.

Nickles, who plays "the opposite," traditionally called Father of Lies, but whom Zuss sneeringly describes as "the honest, disillusioned man," feels sympathy for J. B., a man given the light of reason but deprived of the answers. When Mr. Zuss indifferently observes that there is always someone playing Job, Nickles agrees; but he is appalled by the frequency:

There must be
Thousands! What's that got to do with it?
Thousands—not with camels either:
Millions and millions of mankind
Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated,
Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking!
For walking round the world in the wrong
Skin, the wrong-shaped noses, eyelids:
Sleeping the wrong night wrong city—
London, Dresden, Hiroshima.
There never could have been so many
Suffered more for less.

In answer to Mr. Zuss's indifference, Nickles reiterates that Job is everywhere.

Nickles' mask is dark in contrast to Zuss's white one, and it is open-eyed: *"The eyes, though wrinkled with laughter, seem to stare and the mouth is drawn down in agonized disgust."* According to Zuss, it is the traditional image of evil, or of spitefulness, an echo from "some subterranean memory probably." Nickles answers that it is not an expression of evil, but of disgust: "Look at those lips: they've tasted something / Bitter as a broth of blood." Zuss's mask has a look of "cold complacence"; Nickles', one of pity. When Zuss rebukes Nickles for laughing, for being irreverent to God, Nickles retorts that, having seen, he cannot laugh. Having seen the world, he says, "I know what Hell is now—to *see.* / Consciousness of consciousness." Nickles repeats that it is not the little Freudian insights but the sickening rape of innocence that

Satan sees. He sees the parked car by the plane tree.
He sees behind the fusty door,
Beneath the rug, those almost children
Struggling on the awkward seat—
Every impossible delighted dream
She's ever had of loveliness, of wonder,
Spilled with her garters to the filthy floor.
Absurd despair! Ridiculous agony!
What has any man to laugh at!

For Zuss, the Job story is a simple scene; and, unaware of Nickles' perception of the suffering involved, he directs him to play his part. These two old actors, modifications of Good and Evil, are not only rivals for supremacy but for domination over this rich American banker, the current Job.

J. B., the twentieth-century Job, is a New England millionaire who with his attractive wife Sarah and their five children—David, thirteen; Mary, twelve; Jonathon, ten; Ruth, eight; Rebecca, six—celebrate an abundant, happy Thanksgiving. The euphoric J. B. has ridden the crest of good luck; his business, his family, and his friends seem never to have created any problems. Sarah, nagged by a conscience that demands verbalized thanks and humility before God, expresses the simple, conventional faith that, if man does his part, God will not forget. J. B., intuitive like his children, glories in the grace of God. He never doubted that God was on his side. Sarah's God, who punishes and rewards, is just; but she fears her "happiness impending like a danger." The spirit of this opening scene is one of innocence, goodness, and optimism; no chastening experience has ever made this banker question the meaning of his life.

Zuss and Nickles recognize this J. B. as their pigeon, the good man to be tested to prove a point—"the victim of a spinning joke," as Nickles calls it. From their point of view, he is a lousy actor. They spar over concepts of piety among the poor and among the rich. When Zuss asserts that "God will show him what God *is* . . . Infinite mind in midge of matter!" Nickles caustically asks why J. B. must suffer. "To praise!" answers Zuss. Nickles deplores man's credulity, his certainty that he "Is born into the bright delusion / Beauty and loving-kindness care for him." When he rejects the concept that

suffering teaches, Zuss asserts that man can best see God from the ash heap. Nickles answers that "A human / Face would shame the mouth that said that!"

They put on their masks and in "magnified and hollow voices" repeat the Biblical wager over *"A perfect and upright man, one / That fearest God and escheweth evil!"* Satan mask taunts his rival with the proposition that this good man, deprived of all his good fortune, would rise and curse him. The God mask, furious, "his arm thrown out in a gesture of contemptuous commitment," gives his man over to the Satan mask: *"All that he hath is in thy power!"* Suddenly the Distant Voice prompts the faltering actor to finish his lines: *"Only / Upon himself / Put not forth thy hand!"* Messengers appropriate to each tragedy report to the parents what has happened, and both the ham-actors and the audience watch their reactions. These several tragedies are reported without emotion; the repeatedly senseless destruction of innocence makes the bargain between the God and the Satan masks increasingly horrible. Sarah rebels, as she does in the Biblical story, against this ruthlessness; but J. B. does not question God's plan. The vividly described deaths of the children make the yea-saying of J. B. difficult to accept and account for some of the questions about the characterization.

In the first of these scenes two drunken, foulmouthed soldiers, welcomed by J. B. and Sarah as David's friends, bumble words about the war's end, an unaccountable order given, the absence of "the right length of lumber." Nickles, watching the stunned parents and hearing J. B. assuring himself that it couldn't happen to him and his wife, jeers at this "pigeon's" credulity: "Couldn't it? Suppose it did though: / What would the world be made of then?"

In the next scene the two messengers are newsmen with camera and notebook, and with them is a girl, the society editor, who protests, "I wish I was home in bed with a good / Boy or something. I don't like it." Her part is to keep the parents talking until "a flash bulb / Smacks them naked in the face— / It's horrible!" The newsman, indifferent to the suffering of the parents, only thinks of his chance for a prize story:

How do I get the Look a mother's face has may be
Once in a lifetime: just before
Her mouth knows, when her eyes are knowing?

The second newsman makes the report: four kids in a car—two of them J. B.'s son and daughter, Jonathon and Mary—the drunk kid was driving seventy or seventy-five. Sarah, moving like a sleepwalker, asks, "Why did He do it to them? / What had they done to Him—those children . . . What had *we* done?" J. B. answers that they have to take the evil with the good: "It doesn't mean there / *Is* no good!" Nickles prompts, "Doesn't it?" Sarah rejects J. B.'s certainty.

Nickles taunts Zuss about the way "a perfect and upright man" learns God's purpose for him. Zuss indifferently observes, "He can't act and you know it." Nickles, the Satan mask, which wears a look of pity, answers the God mask: "He doesn't have to act. He

suffers. / It's an old role—played like a mouth-organ." Cynically, he remarks that what Job needs to see is "That bloody drum-stick striking; / See Who lets it strike the drum!"

In the scene that follows, the messengers are two policemen making their early morning report. They identify the youngest of the four children, Rebecca, as the little girl dressed in white, with red shoes and a red toy umbrella; they puzzle over the enigma of why the potter worked equally in worthies and monsters. One policeman finally blurts out the story to the parents: just past midnight they stumbled upon a big nineteen-year-old, "Hopped to the eyes and scared." They ordered him to take them to "it." Their suspicions were justified when they found the little girl's body. As J. B., holding the child's red parasol, speaks brokenly, "The Lord giveth . . . the Lord taketh away," the two masks argue over their "pigeon." Zuss asks why he won't act; Nickles answers that he isn't playing, "He's where we all are—in our suffering. / Only . . . (*Nickles turns savagely on Mr. Zuss.*) Now he knows its Name!"

In the next catastrophe the messengers in steel helmets and brassards return with Sarah, who had been looking for her lost child, Ruth, in the bombed ruins. J. B.'s millions, the bank, the whole block are gone; only a floor remains. Still believing that he shares desperation with God, he tries to make Sarah repeat after him, his certainty, "The Lord giveth—" She rebels and shrieks, "Takes! / Kills! Kills! Kills! Kills!" J. B. answers, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Mr. Zuss preens over the yea-saying of J. B., but Nickles is disgusted over man's insensitivity to others' suffering; to Nickles it is indecent to be thankful when twenty thousand have been suffocated in a bombed-out town. He resents the hideous, senseless deaths of the children: "And all with God's consent!—foreknowledge!— / And he blesses God!" God, not content with this victory—according to Nickles—overreaches himself to demand "the proof of pain." When Mr. Zuss chants the equation that man's will is God's peace, Nickles retorts, "Will is rule: surrender is surrender. / You *make* your peace; you don't give in to it." Nickles seems to cling to the belief that, when man is himself trapped in pain, he will learn to "Spit the dirty world out—spit." Nickles insists that, "when his suffering is *him,*" he will not praise. As they put on their masks for the next test, the old Biblical words flood over them. The Distant Voice repeats the lines, concluding

And still he holdeth fast his integrity . . .
Although thou movedst me against him
To destroy him . . .
without cause . . .

The God-shadow raises its arm again *"in the formal gesture of contemptuous commitment"* and intones the words: "Behold he is in thine hand . . . but . . . Save his life!" When the modern J. B. is revealed as the one pitiful survivor of an atomic blast, Nickles cackles to Zuss that, as usual, he has blundered: "Tumbled a whole city down / To blister one man's skin with agony." A few women and a girl sarcastically comment on the sufferings of the rich they have known only through news pictures and review

without feeling the catastrophes. J. B., though raising questions about the blindness, the meaninglessness of what has happened, clings to the belief that God is just, that he himself is guilty. Sarah says that, if God demands deception, she will not buy quiet with her children's innocence:

They are
Dead and they were innocent: I will not
Let you sacrifice their deaths
To make injustice justice and God good!

When in her anguish she urges J. B. to "curse God and die" and then leaves him, he insists, "We have no choice but to be guilty. / God is unthinkable if we are innocent." When in his agony he prays to God to show him his guilt, Nickles caustically prompts Zuss to bring on the cold comforters "Who justify the ways of God to / Job by making Job responsible."

The major part of the Biblical poem is the extended dialogue with the three comforters; the modern playwright, by involving the audience in the violent deaths of the children, increased the difficulties of maintaining dramatic tension in the latter part of the play. He must try to give dramatic form to philosophical material: ideas about guilt and innocence, about suffering and responsibility, about the relationship between man and the forces of good and evil. MacLeish adapted the three comforters into approximations of three phases of modern society: Zophar, a fat priest; Eliphaz, a lean psychiatrist in a dirty interne's jacket; and Bildad, a Marxist, a thick short man in a ragged windbreaker.

They present three different opinions on the question of guilt. To Marxist Bildad the suffering of one is not significant because what matters is not justice for one man but justice for humanity. History is not concerned with the guilt of one man: "Guilt is a sociological accident: / Wrong class—wrong century—" To Eliphaz, the psychiatrist, "Guilt is a / Psychophenomenal situation— / An illusion, a disease, a sickness": All men are victims of their own guilt even though they may be ignorant of it. J. B. rejects this idea of "an irresponsible ignorance" as the cause of his suffering, for he needs to know that he "earned the need to suffer."

Zophar, the priest, says the guilt idea is necessary to man's quality as a human being, otherwise he would vanish as do the animals: "our souls accept / Eternities of reparation." When J. B. wants to be shown his guilt, Zophar elaborates upon the "deceptive secret" of guilt that may have been "conceived in infancy." J. B. tells the priest that, until he knows the reasons for his suffering, even until death he will not violate his integrity. Zophar cynically answers that J. B.'s sin was to be born a man; to be a man is to have a will and a heart that is evil, both "Corrupted with its foul imagining." J. B. rejects the priest's answer as the most cruel of the three because it makes God "the miscreator of mankind."

Still hoping for some justification for his suffering, J. B. repeats his trust in God. The Distant Voice, the Voice out of the Whirlwind, poses a series of questions to J. B.

concerning the powers of God and the wonders of His creation; the Distant Voice for the second time rebukes J. B. for trying to instruct God; and the third time, again in a series of questions, the Distant Voice rebukes man for his presumptuousness: *"Wilt thou disannul my judgment? . . . Wilt thou condemn / Me that thou mayest be righteous? / Hast thou an arm like God? Or canst thou / Thunder with a voice like Him?"* J. B. humbly concedes the omnipotence of God, confesses to having spoken without knowledge, abhors himself and repents.

In the original version of the play, in the scene following this "repentance," Zuss uncomfortably asks Nickles how J. B. voiced his repentance, and whether he did it for God or for himself. A scene very important in the development of the experience of Job is thus presented second-hand. At the end of this scene, in very few lines and very briefly, J. B. rejects Nickles' suggestion of self-annihilation. This affirmation of life is followed by the return of Sarah and by a brief lyrical expression of human love. In this original version there is no scene in which J. B. is made to reveal what he has learned from experience, a scene very much needed in the play and one necessary for the interpretation which MacLeish gives to the Job legend. This socalled "recognition scene" was developed during the rehearsals and was substituted for the original and weaker one.

In the Broadway version J. B., thinking over the magnificent words of God about his own right hand and its power to save him, lifts to his face the scrofulous hand. Zuss, as if he were prompting his suffering victim in order to encourage him in the belief that only in the fear of God lies true repentance and his only comfort, hears J. B. repeat the vow that he abhors himself and repents. Nickles, sickened by what he calls a forced repentance because God threw at J. B. the whole creation, rages that J. B. has forgotten what happened to his little children. In his disgust over the choice that God offered, he thinks it dubious triumph that J. B. swallowed the world rather than rejecting it. Zuss petulantly asks whether or not God is to be forgiven. Nickles with supreme insolence asks, "Isn't he?"

As Nickles turns away, Zuss reminds him of the final scene in the Bible poem no matter who plays Job. He accuses his cynical opposite of not having the stamina to finish his part in the play. Nickles replies that the restoration illustrates God's mercy to man who never asked to be born. He refuses to believe that J. B. will begin all over again, risk again "all that filth and blood and / Fury . . ." The acting version portrays more clearly J. B.'s resolution. As he brings himself to his feet, his voice strong and firm, J. B. asks:

Must I be
Dumb because my mouth is mortal?—
Blind because my eyes will one day
Close forever? Is that my wickedness—
That I am weak?

The two masks are stunned by what they hear, incredulous that J. B. should ask if his breathing should be forgiven. Nickles, sensing an advantage, answers, "Not this

generation, Mister." Professing to be not the Father but the Friend, he tries to impress upon J. B. that death is not the worst alternative; the worst is having to relive all the senseless suffering. He reminds him of the millions who refused the second chance, who found a convenient means to end it all. None of those, says Nickles, knew what J. B. does: "Job's truth." Desperately Nickles tries to negate God's gift by saying that Job would rather take the filthiest kind of death than live his suffering life all over again.

When J. B. rejects Nickles, Zuss is triumphant. Zuss then restates the position implied by the Distant Voice that there is no resolution to the problem of "unintelligible suffering" but submission to the divine will. But J. B. also sternly rejects this pattern of submissive acceptance:

I will not
Duck my head again to thunder—
That bullwhip cracking at my ears!—although
He kills me with it. I must know.

When Mr. Zuss, astonished over what he has heard, repeats his theme that there is no peace except in obedience, J. B. defiantly answers both the Satan and the God masks: "I'll find a foothold somewhere *knowing.*" He vows he will not laugh at life's filthy farce nor weep among the obedient and the meek, "protesting / Nothing, questioning nothing, asking / Nothing but to rise again and / bow!"

In the final scene Sarah, who had told her husband to "curse God and die," returns to J. B. because of her love for him. These stricken people, whose experience has shown that they are alone in an indifferent universe and that they can be sure only of their human love for each other, determine to begin their lives again. Depending not on the kind of a God who will destroy children for no reason, nor on churches where the candles have gone out, they will continue to seek the answers—to know. This conviction is stated by J. B. at the close of the play:

The one thing certain in this hurtful world
Is love's inevitable heartbreak.
What's the future but the past to come
Over and over, love and loss,
What's loved most lost most.

In the final lines J. B. expresses the human capacity for suffering and, in spite of the inexplicable, the strength to continue to live and to love:

And yet again and yet again
In doubt, in dread, in ignorance, unanswered,
Over and over, with the dark before,
The dark behind it . . . and still live . . . still love.

MacLeish explained that he saw in the Job poem a relation to our own time, a time of "inexplicable sufferings" when millions were destroyed because of their race or because

they lived in a certain city. He suggests that God delivered Job into Satan's hands "Because God had need of the suffering of Job." In the struggle between God and Satan, "God stakes his supremacy as God upon man's fortitude and love." It is man alone who can prove that man loves God; only man, by his persistence, can overcome Satan, of the kingdom of death, and love God, of the kingdom of life. Without man's love, God is only a creator. It is in man's love, says MacLeish, that God exists and triumphs; in man's love that life is beautiful; in man's love that the world's injustice is resolved. "Our labor always, like Job's, is to learn through suffering to love—to love even that which lets us suffer."

The religious implications in *J. B.* aroused considerable controversy. Charles A. Fenton commented on the original production at Yale: "The notion that the individual is superior to God—is not critically palatable to the institutionalized." Tom F. Driver, after the Broadway production, described the play as suffering "from a sort of theological schizophrenia" because it began on what he thought a high religious plane and ended on a purely Humanistic one. Theodore A. Webb, who disagreed with Driver, said that MacLeish began the play on a Humanistic level when he depicted broken-down "ham-actors" as gods. Samuel Terrien wrote that "The Joban poet deals with the problem of faith in an evil world, while the author of *J. B.* presents modern man's reaction to the problem of evil without the category of faith in a loving God." He described Job as almost "an incarnation of an anti-God," but he also thought of him as an emasculated, piously conventional victim of fate who rarely rises above an intellectual stupor. Henry P. Van Dusen took issue with both Driver and Terrien. He considered the three comforters to be a brilliant and sound translation into the realities of our time. He did not find, as did Terrien, "an intelligent, eternal and gracious Power" in a God whose last words begin, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" Richard Hayes summarized the varied opinions expressed for and against the play and added his own reservations: "cultural piety demands each year its raw meat of sustenance." Reinhold Niebuhr praised MacLeish's honest statement of the problem and his ingenuity in adapting the ancient poem to modern times. He felt that the emphasis on meaningless suffering led to the neglect of the more searching question in the Book of Job about the meaning of life and thus the "message" to contemporary man: for instance, the paradox of man's capacity to discover nuclear energy and his lack of wisdom in its use. Niebuhr pointed out that MacLeish does provide two answers to modern man: he repeats the voice out of the "Whirlwind" contrasting the greatness of God's creation and man's limitations; he also states his "courageous acceptance and affirmation of life with a modern romantic emphasis on love."

J. B., published by Houghton Mifflin, March, 1958, was first produced by the Yale School of Drama on April 22, 1958; during the summer it was taken on tour to the World's Fair at Brussels and to other European capitals. The very favorable review by Brooks Atkinson of the Yale performance led to the Broadway production which opened on December 11, 1958. During the rehearsal period Mrs. Elia Kazan made one of the most perceptive comments on the play when she said that the first act had "tremendous identification" in the scenes of suffering; it had action and interaction of people that had "a forward sweep." She felt that in the second act there was too much argument, too much philosophy; the events were not dramatically developed; there was "a long

presentation, statement of a point of view, followed by a comment or brief rejection." During the New York production she had reservations about the production's becoming too theatrical.

Brooks Atkinson said that MacLeish had written "an epic of mankind" and he anticipated a long life for the play. He said that the playwright was not a solemn poet, and that much of the writing, particularly in the characters of God and Satan, was pungent and earthy. Some of the verse, he felt, was too compact for theater, and some of the scenes were begun in the middle. He also noted that the dignity, gravity, and simplicity of the King James Version was hard to match in modern poetry. He called *J. B.* impressive "in its valiant affirmation at the end," a play worthy of our time. MacLeish "has imposed his own sense of order on the chaos of the world."

Source: Signi Lenea Falk, "Later Poetry and Drama," in *Archibald MacLeish,* Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1965, pp. 118-50.

Adaptations

A recording of *J. B.,* performed by some of the actors from the Broadway production, was issued by RCA Victor (LD6075) as a record album around 1960. It has not been reissued on compact disc or audio cassette.

Topics for Further Study

Research the theories of communism, socialism and Marxism. What do these groups believe about the ways societies function and should function? What do they believe about individual freedoms and responsibilities?

The decade after World War II was a time of prosperity for many people and a time of increased poverty for others. Who profits financially from a war? Whose economic stability is threatened? Explain why this is the case.

The use of masks for theatre and for religious practices is a tradition that reaches far back in time and all around the world. Research the ways in which masks are used in African, Native American, and other cultures to represent and to communicate with God.

Read and research the biblical Book of Job. What is the origin of the story? When and where was it written? What questions do biblical scholars ask about the Prologue and the Epilogue? Do they agree in regard to the central idea, or question, of the book?

Compare and Contrast

1940s: Major cities in Europe and Japan suffer thousands of casualties in bombings during World War II.

1950s: Americans live in fear of a nuclear attack.

2001: Terrorists flying hijacked airplanes crash into the World Trade Center in New York City, into the Pentagon Building in Washington, D.C., and into the ground at another crash site, killing or wounding over 3,000 people. It is the first time the United States has suffered a large number of civilian casualties from attackers from outside the country.

1940s: CBS demonstrates color television in New York City, and WNBT, the first regularly operating television station, debuts in New York with an estimated 10,000 viewers.

1950s: Some 29 million American homes have television—approximately one in five. Most people still get their news from newspapers.

Today: Nearly every American home has at least one television, and most have two or more. With twenty-four-hour news channels and the ability to broadcast live from any location, television is the source most Americans turn to for news.

1940s: During World War II, with the United States and the Soviet Union as wartime allies, membership in the American Communist Party reaches an all-time high of 75,000.

1950s: Communists are hated and feared throughout the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy investigates alleged Communist activity within the United States and is denounced as a witch-hunter. The fear of a Communist takeover of Vietnam and then the rest of Asia involves the United States in Vietnam.

Today: The American Communist Party is small, and Communism has lost much of its influence on world politics.

1950s: The United States, the U.S.S.R., and Great Britain have the capability of detonating atomic bombs. Americans build bomb shelters in their homes and practice safety measures to take if a bomb is dropped on them.

Today: Although more than a dozen nations have nuclear weapons, including several "rogue nations" with unstable, unpredictable governments, Americans largely disregard the threat of nuclear attack.

What Do I Read Next?

MacLeish draws heavily on the Book of Job, part of the Old Testament, for the basic plot and some of his characters' names. The italicized lines in the printed version of *J. B.,* spoken by Nickles, Zuss, and others, are quoted from the King James Version, first published in 1611.

Collected Poems, 1917-1952 (1952) was MacLeish's second Pulitzer Prize-winning book. The poems in this volume demonstrate MacLeish's range, from public to personal voice and from political to intimate themes.

In *Songs for Eve* (1954), MacLeish draws on the biblical story of Adam and Eve's Fall and their eviction from the Garden of Eden, as he draws on the story of Job for *J. B.* Here, Eve is glad to have left Eden because the knowledge of mortality makes her feel more alive.

The script for the play, as it was performed on Broadway in 1958, is available as *J. B.: A Play in Verse,* published by Samuel French, Inc. MacLeish and the director Elia Kazan collaborated on several substantive changes to make the play more effective dramatically and to resolve philosophical issues that Kazan felt were troublesome in MacLeish's original book.

In the novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Stephen Crane's protagonist, Henry Fleming, sees horror and destruction as a soldier in the American Civil War and comes to wonder how God can allow such evil to exist.

Further Study

Donaldson, Scott, in collaboration with R. H. Winnick,

Archibald MacLeish: An American Life, Houghton Mifflin, 1992.

In this definitive biography of MacLeish, the discussion of *J. B.* presents MacLeish's reasons for writing the play and describes his writing and revising process as he moved from written script to performance.

Drabeck, Bernard A., and Helen E. Ellis, eds., *Archibald MacLeish: Reflections,* University of Massachusetts Press, 1986.

Arranged in a question-and-answer format, this book was pieced together from several interviews MacLeish granted during the last years of his life. MacLeish considered this book the autobiography of his professional life. His discussion of *J. B.* focuses on the differences between the published and the performed versions of the play.

Ellis, Helen E., Bernard A. Drabeck, and Margaret E. C. Howland, *Archibald MacLeish: A Selectively Annotated Bibliography,* Scarecrow Press, 1995.

With more than twenty-three hundred entries and two indices, this book is an excellent starting-place for locating books, articles, and reviews by and about the author. The book also includes a brief biography and a chronology of significant dates in MacLeish's life.

Falk, Signi Lenea, *Archibald MacLeish,* Twayne, 1965.

In an analysis of the first half century of MacLeish's career, Falk demonstrates how MacLeish's poetry grew out of and then away from the poetry of other important modern poets and how all of his writing came to demonstrate his convictions about a writer's responsibilities to address the political and social world. The book includes a thirteen-page close reading of *J. B.* Gassner, John, *Theatre at the Crossroads: Plays and Playwrights of the Mid-Century American Stage,* Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1960.

After an analysis that leads toward generalities about the plays produced in New York from the end of World War II through the 1950s, Gassner examines dozens of individual plays. His analysis of *J. B.* focuses on the differences between the Yale and the Broadway productions.

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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:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

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

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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