

Interpretation of the beginning and the silence in the genesis

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ In the beginning, there was only silence,” James Leeds says at the very beginning of *Children of a Lesser God*, “ and out of that silence there could come only one thing: Speech. That’s right. Human speech. So, speak!” he could not have been more wrong. In this opening speech, James appears to establish silence, and by extension deafness, as “ bad,” and speech and sound (and hearing) as “ good.” This is the distinction which most deaf people learn at a young age. Sarah learned this distinction from her mother and her teachers, but chose as an adult to reject this explanation and establish a definition of her own: “ Deafness [is] a silence full of sounds ... the sound of spring breaking up through the death of winter.” The words that make this phrase are beautiful; the signs that give this phrase life are deeply moving.

The struggle, then, throughout the play becomes one of making those who have ears, however residual their hearing might be, able to hear. Orin and Lydia have some hearing - not enough to allow them to function in the hearing world without assistance but some hearing nonetheless. Lydia has a crush on James and refuses to listen to anything but her own heart strings. She is oblivious to how her behavior affects Sarah and she will not listen to James’s voice or Sarah’s signs when they not so indirectly talk to her about watching television. Orin is deaf to anything that does not fit his vision of protecting the deaf. As a deaf man who speaks relatively clearly and reads lips, Orin is a good candidate for one to bridge the deaf and hearing worlds. But, he is entirely wrapped up in his “ cause”: deaf teachers for deaf children. When James takes Sarah out to dinner for the first time, Orin becomes jealous and begins to refuse to listen to James. What had once

been a vibrant student-teacher relationship disintegrates into posturing and jockeying for position. Orin is so consumed with his “ cause” that he turns a deaf ear (pun intended) to Sarah as she tries to explain what it is that she wants to say.

Mr. Franklin, the supervising teacher, is one of the hearing people whose job it should be to hear what his charges have to say about issues that affect them, but none of the deaf people in this play have any respect for the man. Franklin does nothing to earn that respect, either. He is a skilled signer; he reads Sarah’s signing at the bridge party. But throughout the play he refuses to sign in the presence of any of the deaf people, particularly Sarah, always forcing someone else to sign for him. His patronizing attitude will not allow him to hear what Sarah or anyone else (including the Commission) has to say. Poor Ms. Klein walks into what she thinks is a routine appearance before the Equal Opportunity Commission and finds herself in the middle of a four-way argument about who doesn’t listen to whom and who will do the talking for whom. She means well and has none of the mean-spiritedness that seems to come from Franklin, but for all practical purposes in this situation, she is utterly clueless. She fails to hear Orin and Sarah as they try to assert their position. Granted, Klein has limited experience with the deaf population compared to the rest of the characters, but it takes Sarah calling her speech the “ same old shit” and threatening to walk away from the Commission hearing to get Klein to hear what she and Orin have to say.

Mrs. Norman has struggled for 26 years with Sarah and her deafness. Her early attempts at “ normalcy” for Sarah were pathetic. She wrote on a pin-up

photo of singer Ricky Nelson in her own handwriting: " To Sarah. Good Luck. From Ricky." She demanded that Sarah's sister, Ruth, ask her boyfriends to find companions for Sarah. To Mrs. Norman, the steady stream of male companions meant that Sarah appeared " normal." In reality, the boys came for sex, which Sarah was willing to provide. When Sarah and James decide to marry, Mrs. Norman and Sarah attempt a reconciliation. Each appears to accept the other at face value, and, at the end of the play when Sarah leaves James, she goes to her mother's house.

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

In a kind of role reversal, it is the man who thinks he can change the woman into the prize, the perfect middle-class housewife. Sarah's success at the bridge party appears to prove James right. It is when Sarah decides that she will " speak" for herself at the Commission hearing that James's vision of the

perfect housewife begins to crumble. In frustration, he clamps her arms to her side and demands that she speak: " Shut up! You want to talk to me, then you learn my language! . . . Now come on! I want you to speak to me. Let me hear it. Speak! Speak! Speak!" James's call for speech from Sarah's silence destroys the relationship he had built with Sarah. The insistence that she speak creates a rift so deep that not even love can mend it. Sarah realizes that even though she loves him, she cannot stay with him. Maybe, she muses, they will be able to meet somewhere " not in silence or in sound but somewhere else. I don't know where that is now." Out of that silence came speech, but it was forced and pained. Out of that silence also came love, strength, self-knowledge, and beauty. James's demand that Sarah be " normal" refuses to acknowledge the idea that normalcy is in the mind and eye of the beholder.