

Handout

“Miss American” Close Reading

Directions: In your small group, read the text out loud and answer the corresponding questions.

Text

America was not yet at war, and the air in Washington was summer pleasant. But neither Katharine Hepburn, nor her supporting cast, nor I thought of pleasantries in those days. We were there to try and convince a handful of congressmen to permit refugees to enter our country. Very small refugees, baby refugees, who would be in the path of the German Blitzkrieg. We did the broadcast and happily our immigration door opened a small, blessed crack and some very small, blessed children escaped Hitler and Company.

Innocent children caught in the whirlpool of inhuman hatred. Children ostracized, excluded from schools and public places. Threatened with physical harm, forbidden the simplest requirements of spiritual survival. Surely our American sympathies go out to these—the most pitiful and helpless of sufferers.

[Aunt Mary]: “Staring at us every time we walked the deck. I told the captain exactly how we felt about the matter!”

[Ronnie]: “We?”

[Aunt Mary]: “The things we talked about this morning.”

[Ronnie]: “Oh, oh, yes I remember.”

[Aunt Mary]: “I should think you would. You were quite definite in your opinions. And of course I—I agree with you. They have no right to take such young children and bring them to New York to—to heaven knows what. But you know the captain, that little charming smile and he changed the subject and well, what difference does it really make? We’ll be docking in the morning and away from all of this.”

Text-Dependent Questions

What can you infer about the purposes and aims of the author of the play, Arch Oboler, based on this short monologue?

What rhetorical strategies are employed in this short narration? How do you know this?

What words or phrases particularly capture your attention?

Text

[Ronnie]: "Waiting for America? What silly nonsense were these children thinking! Couldn't laugh until America? I thought to myself, How silly! Both of these children strangers, aliens, foreign to our sorts. Aloud, I said, 'Listen, the four of you! Are you trying to rid me in your infant continental manner? If you're waiting until you land until you laugh, I'm warning you, you better start laughing now! [exasperated laugh] There isn't much to laugh about there, let me assure you. The dumbest, dumbest place on Earth. Why do you think I went abroad? Laugh in America? Don't make me laugh! We've got depressions and recessions and concessions and dissensions and . . .'"

[Ronnie continues]: "And while I kept talking, the children's faces grew angrier and angrier. Their eyes larger and larger—hating me for what I was saying. Angrier and angrier, until at last one of them cried out—"

[little boy]: "No! No! Wait!"

[Ronnie]: "Wait?"

[little boy]: "Miss American, wait, what you say. It is not right."

[Ronnie]: "What's not right?"

[little boy]: "All these things you say of America. I—I do not understand. I do not know. But-but, this I know—it-it is not right."

[yelling and shouting]

[Ronnie]: "Now, now! Wait a moment, wait a moment. And what is right here, Professor?"

[little boy]: "America is . . . is good. And-and is a good place. B-because, because, because, Jan, you say it."

[Jan]: "Because—because in America a-all men are—are—"

[other voice adds]: "Created equal—"

[Jan continues]: "Ya, and they are en-endowed by-by—"

Text-Dependent Questions

What language do Aunt Mary and Ronnie use to imply a vision of who America is for?

What is the significance of the children's anger in response to Ronnie?

Text

[other voice adds]: “Their creator with—”

[Jan continues]: “With rights of life and—”

[other voice adds]: “Liberty—”

[Jan continues]: “And liberty and pursuit of happiness.”

[Ronnie]: “Bravo! Right out of the Ol’ Declaration of Independence. So, where did you learn that and what does it mean?”

[children]: “Jan teacher, Ja, yes, yes!”

[Jan]: “He learned the war. He gave me a book. I read. H-how you say it, Miss American? I teach.”

[Ronnie]: “You. Teach. You? And, what do you teach? All—all that about life and liberty? What can it possibly mean to four children like you?”

[Jan]: “Maybe I do not understand everything you say, Miss American. What me learn, it mean that no matter what is wrong in America, it can be fixed. We are free and equal, and we can work and help America.”

[pause]

[Ronnie]: “Help America. When he said that, I didn’t have anything more to say. Nothing cute or bright or clever. Four little children. I stood in front of them. Suddenly, I wanted to say so—so many things to them. But my throat, I couldn’t—I couldn’t. Until one of them said—”

[older boy]: “Please Miss American, what the book say about America, it is all right?”

[Ronnie]: “Right?”

[children]: “Tell us of it, Miss American. Bitte.”

[Ronnie]: “America. It’s—it’s very large. And very beautiful. And all the people in it, all their fathers, all their fathers’ fathers, came over the water to

Text-Dependent Questions

What evidence do the children use to describe a different vision of who America is for than the vision put forth by Ronnie and Aunt Mary? How does the author use irony to accentuate their perspective?

What is the implicit meaning and significance of the words “large” and “bigness” in Ronnie’s description of America?

Paraphrase the quotation “the American way is the human way” in your own words.

Text

it. Just the way you're doing. And there's a bigness to it, and a braveness to it. And you need never be afraid. And no matter what goes wrong there, there's always hope. As long as there's someone like you to remind the rest of us. That the—the American way is the human way."

[pause]

[Ronnie]: "That's what I said to them, yes. And they came close to me and touched my hands. And they smiled at each other, and at me. And so I—I'm in love, yes in love. With my country, for remembering four little people who want to help us."