

A Companion Guide to Play and Production

By Lucas H Reilly



THE MOORS

By Jen Silverman

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**arvadacenter**

THE PLAY IN 100 WORDS

Set on the dreary English moors (think *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*) two very different sisters, Agatha and Huldey, yearn for something more in the wake of the death of their father. A governess arrives and a maid stokes the flames, thrusting Agatha’s desire for power and Huldey’s desire for attention into overdrive. The two sisters are prompted to follow through on their deepest passions. As this plot develops, so too does an unlikely story between the existential family Mastiff and a Moor-Hen that drops from the sky. As Agatha tells us in the play--anything here is possible.



Costume Design: Meghan Anderson Doyle

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DEFINITIONS

The following definitions will enhance a reading of the play and this guide.

- Governess:** A woman employed to teach and look after children in a private household.
- Scullery Maid:** A female house-servant charged primarily with washing the dishes and keeping things clean.
- Parlor Maid:** A female house-servant charged primarily with serving the master/mistress, especially at the table.
- Bilious:** Etymologically linked to an understanding of human behavior through the four “humours,” a peevish/ill-natured disposition.
- Lute:** A stringed instrument played like a guitar, often with a pear-shaped body.
- Ephemeral:** Lasting for a very short time.
- Anachronism:** A literary device in which the author purposefully places things out of their chronological/historical position.
- Antithesis:** A literary device in which the author purposefully contrasts ideas by placing opposing ideas in parallel structure opposite one another.
- Juxtaposition:** A literary device where two ideas are placed opposite one another for the purpose of contrasting them.
- Syphilitic:** Of the chronic, contagious venereal disease, syphilis.

THE PLAY AS ANACHRONISM

The play moves through two major tonal categories: an honest and often poetic exploration of deep human feelings and a sharp sense of humor and defeatism about the same. Both tones live within the anachronistic nature of the play. In her description of the play's setting, Silverman says "Play the anachronisms. The play is about the present." In her description of the play's time she says "1840s....ish." You'll see a play set and designed to be able to cross into both of these realities. You'll see some costumes that indicate the Brönte sisters' time and place, but you'll hear dialects that point directly to ours. While some aspects of life are distinctly different in each of these two times and places, some have not changed. This play explores/satirizes what the play's themes and situations mean for us today and what they meant in the 19th century. As you see these contrasts, consider what is intended by these choices. What does contemporary American culture have in common with the England of the Brönte sisters? What is different about our world and the world of governesses and scullery maids?



Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brönte

ANTITHESIS AND CHARACTER

The Moors is peppered (and heavily seasoned) with complex characters. From self-aware talking animals, to typhus-ridden and/or pregnant maids, to power-hungry sisters, this play is chock-full of people and personified non-humans that contrast with and reveal each other to a great extent. We would hate to spoil any of the extremely fascinating bits of character and juicy revelations present in this odd story, so in this section, we'll explore a major method by which character is established: antithesis and juxtaposition. Antithesis and juxtaposition are used throughout the play to allow us to learn the truths and desires of the characters. This method, applied to particular moments/characters in the play, reveals a great deal about the true nature of each character.

From scene 1 (page 9):

Huldey mentions that she has been writing in her diary and had reached a "good part." Agatha responds with the following, "If one is not writing sums and lists and possibly strategies, then I do not know what one is writing."

This juxtaposition in how the two women use language reveals that Huldey is a woman that not only keeps a diary, but one who notices the subtleties and changes of emotional life. Agatha, on the other hand, is clearly a woman who values utility and self-service and is less concerned with the nuances of human emotion.

From scene 3 (page 25):

An exchange is developed between Mastiff and Moor-Hen that climaxes in the following juxtaposition of language and idea:

Mastiff: I'm very lonely.

Moor-Hen: You're...what-now?

Mastiff: Lonely. It's that thing-that clench-that fist in your stomach except this time it doesn't go away, and you don't want it.

Moor-Hen: You're hungry. And I'm small. And I think I should go now.

This antithesis between desires/approaches to life reveals the Mastiff as a character concerned with the troubling nature and philosophy of existence and society and the Moor-Hen as a character interested mostly in survival and the hard realities of existence.



From scene 8 (page 46):

Agatha: I cannot stand weakness. I cannot stand it in myself, and I cannot abide it in others. There is no weakness in the moors. When I come out here, I am surrounded by merciless strength.

Emilie: But mightn't it turn on you? Mightn't you be devoured by it?



This juxtaposition, while also enhancing some major themes of the play (weakness/strength, feminism/womanhood), helps us to see Agatha as a woman who craves power and danger. Emilie's apt response puts a different light on this same behavior: mightn't a fixation on power and danger destroy a person?

The way these relationships develop are predicated on these antitheses and contrasts and coming back to them is a good way of defining character--this play has a lot going on, and you may think of these antitheses as road markers on the winding path that the story takes and better enjoy the places it takes you.

THE MOORS IN *THE MOORS*

The fresh air. The daylight. The brisk wind. No sign of civilization whatsoever. Quicksand. Ravenous birds. A savage place. Very pretty. These are just a few of the words used in the play to describe the ever-mysterious moors. Though based upon the English moors in North Yorkshire and certainly inspired by what the Brönte sisters wrote about their time there, Silverman adds her own spin to the moors in *The Moors*. A character in and of itself, the moors and the ways in which this wild, dangerous, beautiful place relates to each character tell us a great deal about the wild, dangerous, and beautiful things inside each of them. As you watch the play, how does the description of the moors affect you? What places in your life/memory does the language about the moors remind you of? Below are some photos and pieces of art of the English moors to spark your imagination and help illustrate the setting of the play.



*Far Westfield, Haworth Moor, Joseph Pighills.
Courtesy of Bradford Museums and Galleries*



North Yorkshire Moor



Lower Scottish Moor

What feelings or thoughts do these photos evoke? Do the photos resemble what you thought of when you heard the moors described in the play? How do the moors operate as a character that plays on the human (and animal) characters in the play?

THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF *THE MOORS*

The play is inspired by the literary works and the letters of Emily, Charlotte, and Anne Brönte. These women first published their work under male pseudonyms and lived a double life, expressing their deepest feelings through literature while struggling with the limitations that their gender placed upon their social and professional lives. Considering the play's origins, we can surmise that the themes of the play largely reflect those in the work of these three sisters. As a general rule, if a theme is present in *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, or other Brönte sisters' works, that theme is present in this play, albeit approached sometimes with a very different tone.

Existence/Survival:

Largely explored through Huldey and the Mastiff, the play delves into the idea of existence. As *Jane Eyre* and Nelly Dean ponder their existence in *Jane Eyre* through trying and uplifting experiences, so too do Huldey and the Mastiff. Challenged by the other characters, their attempts at making meaning in the play are of various levels of success. Other characters, like Agatha and the Moor-Hen have developed a way of life that puts a focus on survival, tossing aside existential questions in favor of more practical and social ones.

How does the Mastiff struggle and cope with his existence? How does Huldey struggle and cope with hers? Do other characters suffer from struggles with their existence? How do Agatha and the Moor-Hen manage to survive? Do other characters operate in this realm?

Desperation:

Characters in this play are pushed to the very edge of their humanity. Deprived of their deepest desires, they are led to desperate measures to fulfill their needs.

What is each character's deepest desire? How does each character act in desperate ways to fulfill these desires?



THE MOORS

THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF *THE MOORS* (CONTINUED)

Feminism/Womanhood/Identity:

Based largely upon the Brönte sisters who used male pen-names when first publishing their work, but full of 21st century anachronisms, the play deals with both contemporary feminism and 19th century womanhood. Agatha, who seeks power and position, might express the most directly contemporary feminist qualities. Huldey's expression of her womanhood is more traditionally feminine and contrasts Agatha's starkly. All of the women in the play have their own expressions of their womanhood and personhood, and these factors coagulate to express Silverman's feminism and nuanced opinion on womanhood. Silverman herself says that the play is largely about a particular set of conventions that have to do with how women are seen in our current cultural moment.

What does the play say about contemporary feminism? What does the play say about the expression of womanhood in the 1840s?

Repressed Sexuality:

Many characters engage with each other romantically and some have new experiences. Also seen outside of romantic/sexual relationships, repression is present in the expression of many character's desires. The repression and later expression of gay/queer behavior is present in the play, and this informs the play both in its contemporary social commentary and deepens the struggle and pain for these contemporary characters trapped inside Victorian social mores. Outside of the gay/queer aspects of the play, repression and unfulfilled sexuality operate in the same way to intensify and inform the struggle and pain present in the characters' arcs.

How does gay/queer content change the story? How does Agatha deal with her repressed sexuality and desire? How does the Mastiff deal with his repressed and unfulfilled desires?

PROMPTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What if any current events/issues does the play bring to your mind? How does it speak to those events/issues?
2. How does the play reflect Victorian English culture? How might it illuminate the work of the Brönte sisters?
3. What similarities are present between Agatha, Huldey, and the Mastiff? How does their shared history inform their similarities?
4. What differences are present between Agatha, Huldey, and the Mastiff? How does their shared history inform their differences?
5. The play is alternatively dark and light in tone, and the events that transpire are alternatively comical and dramatic. How do you classify the play? Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?
6. The Mastiff and the Moor-Hen are fully self-aware and use language to communicate. Why does Silverman choose to use these personified animals in the play?
7. When you look at the pictures of the moors, what reaction do you have? Is it the same as one or a few of the characters in the play or is it altogether different?
8. After answering prompt 7, write a short poem or piece of prose about the moors from your perspective. Share with a friend and compare/contrast.
9. After completing prompt 8, write a short poem from the perspective of one of the characters in the play. Share with a friend and compare/contrast.
10. How does this play inform a reading of a work by a Brönte, i.e. *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*? Does the play make these 170+ year old novels seem more accessible to us in 2018?

FURTHER READING

American Theatre Interview with Jen Silverman

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2017/07/21/the-beautiful-and-the-dangerous-in-the-moors/>

Overview of Victorian Era in England

<https://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Victorians/article.html>

Overview of the Brönte Sisters

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/bronte_sisters.shtml

Overview of Emily Bronte

http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/wuthering/index.html

Jen Silverman's Website

<http://www.jensilverman.com/>

Non-digital Further Selected Reading:

***The Brontës: Wild Genius on the Moors: The Story of a Literary Family* by Juliet Barker**

***The Roommate* by Jen Silverman**