

J.B.

by Archibald MacLeish



THE AUTHOR

Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) was born into a prosperous family in Glencoe, Illinois. He attended private schools, then went on to Yale, where he majored in English, then entered Harvard Law School. When the United States entered World War I, he served in a field hospital and later captained an artillery unit. After the war, he returned to Harvard to complete his law degree, finishing first in his class. The life of a lawyer dissatisfied him, however, and he resigned from his law firm in order to devote his life to his poetry. In 1923 he moved his wife and children to Paris, where they remained for five years as part of the expatriate literary community there. Here MacLeish befriended such writers of the era as Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald. His attempts to adopt the modernist style of poetry current at the time were largely derivative, but it was also during these years that he wrote what are considered his greatest lyric poems, such as *You*, *Andrew Marvell* and *Ars Poetica*.

Upon his return to the United States, he took a job on the editorial staff of *Fortune* magazine while continuing to write poetry. He won the first of three Pulitzer prizes for his long poem *Conquistador* (1932). Unlike the modernist poets of the era, MacLeish was convinced that poetry had to speak to the conditions of society, and in the years that followed he used his gifts to speak out against the dangers of the fascism that was rising in Europe. In 1939, he entered a period during which he laid his poetry aside to serve his government. Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed MacLeish as librarian of the Library of Congress, and during the five years in which he occupied the post he reorganized the archaic structure of the library. He also served as director of information in the Office of Facts and Figures, assistant director of the Office of War Information, and Undersecretary of State for Cultural Affairs.

He left government service in 1949 to return to Harvard University as a professor of rhetoric, where he remained until his retirement in 1962. While at Harvard, he received two more Pulitzers, one for a volume of collected verse (1952) and one for his verse drama *J.B.* (1958). He also spoke out against McCarthyism, and sought to support publicly those who had become its victims. During the twenty years following his retirement, MacLeish continued to write both lyric poetry and drama. He stands apart from the modernist poets because of his insistence that art be relevant to society rather than existing for its own sake (ironically, his reputation is thus quite contrary to the sentiments expressed in his most famous lyric, *Ars Poetica*).

Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* is a retelling of the story of Job from the Bible, and it reflects both the suffering experienced by many as a result of the Depression and World War II and the sense of the meaninglessness of life emphasized by the mid-century existentialists. His final affirmation that only love can bring meaning into a meaningless universe reflects a departure from the conclusions of the existentialists, but affords little hope of transcendent justification for man's existence.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Mr. Zuss - An old, broken-down actor earning his living as a circus balloon vendor, he takes on the role of God in the dramatization of the story of Job.
- Nickles - An old, broken-down actor earning his living as a circus popcorn vendor, he takes on the role of Satan in the dramatization of the story of Job.
- J.B. - A prosperous New England banker, he loses everything he has, but finds meaning at the end of the play in the love of his wife.
- Sarah - J.B.'s wife, who leaves him in grief over the loss of their children, but returns at the end of the play.
- David, Mary, Jonathan, Ruth, Rebecca - J.B. and Sarah's five children. All are killed - David by a land mine after the war, Mary and Jonathan in a car driven by a drunken driver, Ruth in an explosion, and Rebecca by a drugged-up teenage rapist.
- Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad - J.B.'s comforters, assuring him that his own guilt is an illusion, that society is guilty. They are presented as a psychiatrist, a priest, and a communist.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Justice!

No wonder he laughs. It's ridiculous. All of it.
God has killed his sons, his daughters,
Stolen his camels, oxen, sheep,
Everything he has and left him
Sick and stricken on a dung heap -
Not even the consciousness of crime to comfort him -
The rags of reasons.” (Nickles, Prologue)

“The one thing God can't stomach is a man,
That scratcher at cracked creation!
That eyeball squinting through into His Eye,
Blind with the sight of Sight!” (Nickles, Prologue)

“I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
‘If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God;
Take the even, take the odd,
I would not sleep here if I could
Except for the little green leaves in the wood
And the wind on the water.’” (Nickles, Prologue)

“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.” (Nickles, Prologue)

“They *see the world*. They do. They see it.
From going to and fro in the earth,
From walking up and down, they see it.
I know what Hell is now - to *see*.
Consciousness of consciousness...” (Nickles, Prologue)

“God doesn’t give all this for nothing:
A good home, good food,
Father, mother, brothers, sisters.
We too have our part to play.
If we do out part He does His,
He always has. If we forget Him
He will forget. Forever. In everything.” (Sarah, Scene 1)

“Never since I learned to tell
My shadow from my shirt, not once,
Not for a watch-tick, have I doubted
God was n my side, was good to me.
Even young and poor I knew it.
People called it luck: it wasn’t.
I never thought so from the first
Fine silver dollar to the last
Controlling interest in some company

I couldn't get - and got. It isn't
Luck." (J.B., Scene 1)

"Of course He's just.
He'll never change. A man can count on Him.
Look at the world, the order of it,
The certainty of day's return
And spring's and summer's: the leaves' green -
That never cheated expectation." (J.B., Scene 1)

"Of course he sickens you,
He trusts the will of God and loves -
Loves a woman who must sometime, somewhere,
Later, sooner, leave him; fixes
All his hopes on little children
One night's fever or a running dog
Could kill between the dark and day;
Plants his work, his enterprise, his labor,
Here where every planted thing
Fails in its time but still he plants it..." (Mr. Zuss, Scene 2)

"God will teach him better won't He?
God will show him what the world is like -
What man's like - the ignoble creature,
Victim of the spinning joke!" (Nickles, Scene 2)

"Teach him better than he knows!
God will show him God!" (Mr. Zuss, Scene 2)

"Shall I tell you why? To learn!
Every human creature born
Is born into the bright delusion
Beauty and loving-kindness care for him.
Suffering teaches! Suffering's good for us!
Imagine men and women dying
Still believing that the cuddling arms
Enclosed them! They would find the worms
Peculiar nurses, wouldn't they? Wouldn't they?
What once was cuddled must learn to kiss
The cold worm's mouth. That's all the mystery.
That's the whole muddle. Well, we learn it.
God is merciful and we learn it...
We learn to wish we'd never lived!" (Nickles, Scene 2)

"First he thought it wasn't happening -
Couldn't be happening - not to him -

Not with you in the stratosphere tooting the
Blue trombone for the moon to dance.
Then he thought it chanced by chance!
Childish hypothesis of course
But still hypothesis - a start -
A pair of tongs to take the toad by -
Recognition that it *is* a toad:
Not quite comfort but still comfortable,
Eases the hook in the gills a little:
He'll learn." (Nickles, Scene 5)
"God is there too, in the desperation.
I do not know why God should strike
But God is what is stricken also:
Life is what despairs in death
And, desperate, is life still..." (J.B., Scene 6)

"I think it stinks!
One daughter raped and murdered by an idiot,
Another crushed by stones, a son
Destroyed by some fool officer's stupidity,
Two children smeared across a road
At midnight by a drunken child -
And all with God's consent! - foreknowledge! -
And he blesses God! It isn't decent!
It isn't moral even! It's disgusting!
His weeping wife in her despair
And he beside her on his trembling ham-bones
Praising God! ... It's nauseating!" (Nickles, Scene 7)

"*Go!* Go where?
If there were darkness I'd go there.
If there were night I'd lay me down in it.
God has shut the night against me.
God has set the dark alight
With horror blazing blind as day
When I go toward it ... close my eyes." (Sarah, Scene 8)

"God is just!
If God is just our slaughtered children
Stank with sin, were rotten with it!" (Sarah, Scene 8)

"They are
Dead and they were innocent: I will not
Let you sacrifice their deaths
To make injustice justice and God good!" (Sarah, Scene 8)

“God is God or we are nothing -
Mayflies that leave their husks behind -
Our tiny lives ridiculous - a suffering
Not even sad that Someone Somewhere
Laughs at as we laugh at apes.
We have no choice but to be guilty.
God is unthinkable if we are innocent.” (J.B., Scene 8)

“My
Sin! Teach me my sin! My wickedness!
Surely iniquity that suffers
Judgment like mine cannot be secret.” (J.B., Scene 9)

“What is your fault? Man’s heart is evil!
What have you done? Man’s will is evil.
Your fault, your sin, are heart and will:
The worm at heart, the willful will
Corrupted with its foul imagining.” (Zophar, Scene 9)

“Yours is the cruelest comfort of them all,
Making the Creator of the Universe
The miscreator of mankind -
A party to the crimes He punishes...
Making my sin ... a horror ... a deformity ...” (J.B., Scene 9)

“I loved you.
I couldn’t help you any more.
You wanted justice and there was none -
Only love.” (Sarah, Scene 11)

“Blow on the coal of the heart.
The candles in churches are out.
The lights have gone out in the sky.
Blow on the coal of the heart
And we’ll see by and by.... We’ll see where we are
The wit won’t burn and the wet soul smoulders.
Blow on the coal of the heart and we’ll know...
We’ll know...” (Sarah, Scene 11)

NOTES

Prologue - Two circus vendors, Mr. Zuss and Nickles, enter an empty stage, and begin to discuss the story of Job. They are to play the parts of God and Satan, respectively. Zuss from the beginning seeks to defend God, while Nickles sarcastically offers wisecracks about the human condition. When they climb a ladder to the platform above, they find two masks - a God mask, white and unseeing, and a Satan mask, eyes wide open, sarcastic and angry. As the Prologue ends, they begin to read the opening lines from the book of Job.

Scene 1 - It is Thanksgiving, and J.B., Sarah, and their children are gathered at the table to enjoy the feast. Sarah reminds them to be thankful, but J.B. and the children seem to take their blessings for granted. J.B. sees God's goodness as a matter of grace, unearned and undeserved, while Sarah fears that if insufficient gratitude is shown it might all be taken away in God's wrath.

Scene 2 - The scene moves to the platform, where Zuss and Nickles discuss the action, the latter mocking J.B. and the former defending him. They continue to discuss the meaning of suffering, and at the end of the scene, they resume their masks, and Satan challenges God to allow him to take away Job's blessings. God agrees, but insists that Job himself should not be harmed.

Scene 3 - Two soldiers arrive to tell J.B. and his wife that their son David has been killed in an accident after the war was over.

Scene 4 - Two reporters and a girl tell J.B. and Sarah that their son Jonathan and daughter Mary were killed in a car crash when the driver of their car, who was drunk, smashed into a bridge abutment. Sarah begins to question the ways of God, but J.B. does not.

Scene 5 - At the beginning of the scene, Mr. Zuss and Nickles discuss the action. Then we move to earth, where two reporters are informing J.B. and Sarah that their youngest, Rebecca, has been found dead behind the lumberyard, having been molested and murdered by a teenage junkie.

Scene 6 - Ruth has been killed in an explosion that destroyed the bank and plant owned by J.B., leaving him both childless and penniless. He continues to bless the Lord, but Sarah accuses God of being a murderer.

Scene 7 - Mr. Zuss claims victory for God, but Nickles insists that the story is not yet over, that Job must suffer pain and agony in his own flesh. They put their masks on again, and God agrees to let Satan touch Job's body, but not his life.

Scene 8 - J.B. lies in agony, his wife at his side. His skin is covered with boils, the result of what may have been a nuclear bomb destroying the city. A group of women surround them, gaping at the pain of those who had been rich. J.B. insists on his guilt, but Sarah will not hear of it, blaming God instead. At the end of the scene, she leaves, unable to endure the pain.

Scene 9 - J.B.'s comforters appear, and try to deprive him of his guilt by arguing that it is psychological or societal. J.B. insists that he is guilty, but doesn't know what he has done. He

cries out to God to know his sin. The voice of God then speaks lines from the book of Job, questioning Job's right to question Him. As the scene ends, J.B. proclaims that he has seen God, and repents.

Scene 10 - Nickles congratulates Mr. Zuss on God's victory, but Zuss is dissatisfied because J.B., in his repentance, accepted God's refusal to answer his request for a justification of his suffering, and thus in a sense forgave God. Nickles then goes down to speak with J.B., telling him that God will restore all he has lost, but that any self-respecting man would refuse it, choosing to take his own life instead. But as the scene ends, J.B. hears someone coming.

Scene 11 - Sarah returns, and she and J.B. start over, alone in the world with nothing but their love to sustain them.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the message of the book of Job with that of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* In what important ways has the playwright altered the biblical narrative? How do these changes affect the message of the story?
2. Compare and contrast Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* with Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. To what extent do they communicate the same message about the meaning of life, and in what ways do their views differ?
3. Discuss the treatment of the problem of evil in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* Does the playwright approach the issue in a biblical way? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the relationship between Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* and the decade of the fifties. How does the play reflect the atmosphere of the postwar era, with its knowledge of the horrors of the war, the Holocaust, and the fears of the Cold War environment?
5. In Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, the playwright concludes that love provides the only hope for this world. Do you agree with his conclusion? With the way in which he arrives at that conclusion?
6. In Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, who would you say is the spokesman for the playwright? Is it J.B., Sarah, Mr. Zuss, Nickles? Defend your choice with specific quotations from the play.
7. Based on the evidence found in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, what would you say is the playwright's view of God? Defend your conclusions with quotations from the play.
8. Compare and contrast the reactions of J.B. and Sarah to the tragedies that befall them in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* How would you evaluate their respective responses?

9. What is the nature of faith as it is described in Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*? Has the playwright presented an accurate picture of Christian faith? Why or why not?
10. Would you say that Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* is a play of hope or despair? Why do you think so? Does your conclusion match the intent of the playwright?
11. In scene 8 of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, Sarah cries out in her despair, "Go! Go where? / If there were darkness I'd go there. / If there were night I'd lay me down in it. / God has shut the night against me. / God has set the dark alight / With horror blazing blind as day / When I go toward it ... close my eyes." The speech alludes to Psalm 139:11-12. How and why does Sarah view the omnipresence of God in a different way than David did? Is she justified in doing so? Why or why not?
12. In scene 8 of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, the protagonist declares, "God is God or we are nothing... We have no choice but to be guilty. / God is unthinkable if we are innocent." Do you agree? Why or why not?
13. In scene 10 of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, Mr. Zuss is upset because J.B. forgives God. Is this an accurate description of what has occurred? Is the acceptance of suffering a willingness to recognize that God is the cause of the suffering without blaming Him for it?
14. At the end of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, do you believe that the protagonist has maintained his faith? Why or why not?
15. In scene 8 of Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, Sarah responds to her husband by saying, "God is just! / If God is just our slaughtered children / Stank with sin, were rotten with it!" Is she right? Why or why not? Compare her conclusion with the teaching of Jesus in Luke 13:1-9.
16. In Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, a Voice is heard occasionally, catching Mr. Zuss and Nickles by surprise. Who is this Voice intended to be? Why does the playwright utilize this technique in the script?
17. Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* pictures the universe as a fundamentally unjust place. But Jerry Sittser, a college professor who lost his mother, wife, and only child in a car accident, responded to questions about the unfairness of it all by saying, "To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice for us, but only as nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering." To what extent is Sittser's comment an adequate response to the questions raised by MacLeish? Be sure to refer to specific lines from the play in your answer.