

# On the Face of It

by Susan Hill

Class 12 Vistas Chapter 5

## About the author

Susan Hill (born 1942).

British novelist and playwright.

Famous for 'The Woman in Black'  
and 'I'm the King of the Castle'.

Writes about isolation, fear,  
and the lonely outsider.

## About the play

'On the Face of It' is a short  
radio-style play in two scenes.

Only three voices, mostly Mr  
Lamb and Derry.

Two outsiders meet in a garden -  
an old man with a tin leg, and  
a boy with a burned face.

a play about how the world sees the 'different'

## The two characters

Mr Lamb

- \* - old, lives alone in a cottage
- \* lost a leg in a war, wears a tin leg
- \* children call him 'Lamey-Lamb'
- \* but he treats it as a joke
- \* keeps no curtains, gate always open
- \* reads, listens, makes jelly from crab apples \*

Derry

- \* about 14 years old
- \* one side of his face was burned by acid
- \* hides from people
- \* convinced no one will ever love or marry him \*
- \* angry, withdrawn, defensive
- \* climbs Mr Lamb's wall to be alone in the garden

two strangers, both 'on the outside'

## Scene 1 - in the garden

Derry climbs over the wall

thinking the garden is empty.

Mr Lamb is up a ladder picking apples and sees him.

Derry tries to run. Mr Lamb calls out gently and asks him to stay.

At first Derry is suspicious :

- \* did you see my face ?
- \* are you afraid of me ?
- \* are you laughing at me ?

Mr Lamb is matter-of-fact. He does not pity Derry. He just talks - about bees, weeds, apples, the open gate.

no pity = real respect

Slowly Derry warms to him.

He has never met an adult who

## Lamb's small lessons

Mr Lamb's worldview, spoken in plain garden words :

1. Weeds are also flowers.

A weed is just a flower in the wrong place. Same as people.

2. The gate stays open.

Anyone can walk in. Mr Lamb does not lock people out, nor himself in.

3. Hear it all - good and bad.

He keeps no curtains. He hears the cruel taunts and chooses to ignore them.

4. What matters is what is inside.

He never asks how Derry got the scar. The face does not interest him.

Derry, for the first time, hears these ideas put gently.

## Derry's two wounds

Derry says the burn is not the worst part. The worst part is how people behave.

- \* a woman in a shop said,  
'only a mother could love that face'
- \* children stare or run away
- \* two women on a bus said  
'he'd be better off dead'
- \* his own mother kisses only  
the good side of his face

the burn outside - the bigger burn inside

\*  
Mr Lamb replies that he too is mocked. The children chase him calling 'Lamey-Lamb'. But he does not nurse the wound.

He chooses not to define himself by what others say.  
He keeps the gate open.

## Scene 2 - the return

Derry's mother begs him not to go back to the strange old man. She is afraid for him.

Derry argues. He says Mr Lamb is the first person he wants to meet. He must return.

I am going back. I want to.

He runs to the cottage.

## The tragic ending

Mr Lamb is climbing the ladder again, picking apples for the jelly. The ladder slips.

Derry arrives just as Mr Lamb lies on the ground. He is too late. The old man is dying.

Derry weeps - over Lamb, over

## Themes

(a) Disability and the gaze

The pain of being stared at is greater than the pain of the wound itself.

(b) False sympathy

Pity hurts more than rudeness.

Mr Lamb refuses to pity Derry.

(c) Friendship across age

A boy of 14 and an old man meet as equals - both rejected by the world outside.

(d) Perception vs reality

On the face of it Derry is disfigured and Lamb is broken.

Underneath both are full people.

(e) Acceptance

Lamb tells Derry to come back to the world, not hide from it. Weeds are flowers too.

## Symbols

- \* the open gate - openness to the world \*
- \* the high wall - the barrier  
Derry builds inside himself
- \* the garden - a space without pity
- \* weeds = the unwanted
- \* the ladder - the fragile hope just made \*

## Style

Mostly dialogue, very few stage directions, suited to radio.

Plain words carry deep ideas.

## Quick revision

Q. Why is Mr Lamb important to Derry ?

A. He is the first adult to look at him without pity or fear.

Q. What does the ending teach ?