

Candidate 4

'Jenseits der Stille': a comparative study of how the film and the novel enhance our understanding of what it is to be deaf.

'Jenseits der Stille' is an insightful German novel by Caroline Link which translates to 'Beyond Silence' in English. The novel explores the life of a young girl named Lara, who has two deaf parents and follows her journey into adulthood. As Lara pursues her dream of becoming a clarinet player, the chasm between Lara's world of hearing and the non-hearing world of her parents widens, resulting in tensions between Lara and her father. In 1996, the novel was adapted for screen, directed by author Caroline Link thus providing the basis for an interesting comparative study. Throughout the novel and the film, Link skilfully explores the theme of isolation and what it means to be deaf in society using various techniques such as the theme of isolation; the presentation and development of characterisation and key moments. Through analysis of these techniques, I will discuss how they help to enhance audience's understanding of what it is to be deaf; and to what extent one medium provides a more detailed insight into the our understanding of what it means to be deaf in the modern world.

There are several significant moments that occur both in the narratives of the book and the film that provide an awareness of the alienation that can be faced by deaf people. One key scene is when the whole Bischoff family gather at a restaurant to celebrate Lara's Aunt Clarissa's birthday. Immediately it becomes apparent that Lara's deaf parents are excluded from the conversation and only their hearing children Lara and her younger sister Marie, try to include them. This moment emphasises how excluded deaf people can be in everyday situations – even during extended family gatherings due to hearing peoples' failure to speak clearly enough to be lip read, or indeed knowing how to sign. Lara's parents, Martin and Kai have much to contribute to the conversation, yet they are left feeling like outsiders. However, if hearing people are prepared to learn to sign language, communication between the worlds becomes possible; thereby bridges are built rather than drawn.

In Link's novel, Lara describes her parents as "Martin und Kai fühlten sich wie Statisten, die in dieser Familie eigentlich nichts zu suchen hatten". These keen observations from the narrative voice of Lara allow the reader to appreciate the significance of her parents being excluded and separated from the conversation and their hearing daughter's awareness of it. In the film, Link conveys Martin's alienation during this scene by remaining silent and playing with his fork. Hands which could have been used to communicate are now redundant and aimlessly focus on a mundane task. This visualisation of isolation is effective in portraying his character and the theme of separation. However, without Lara's narrative comment, the viewer could misinterpret this action as boredom and lack of interest.

From childhood memories, to Lara excluding him, music has caused Martin pain and anguish throughout his life. These experiences of not being a part of something so much enjoyed by others, reinforces the notion that Martin is disabled and does not belong in the hearing world. Music is what separates Martin from Lara and threatens to take her away from him. He has kept Lara close to him in his own little world for so long, but the clarinet is the reason that Lara is escaping the silence and venturing into a world that Martin can never be part of. Music makes Martin so angry and resentful because it symbolises his exclusion from the hearing world and he is afraid of losing Lara to this world.

Isolation caused by music is portrayed well in the film and the book. Music is a symbol of the hearing world and is used as a vehicle to emphasise the isolation faced by Martin and Kai – their deafness excludes them the appreciation of their daughter's passion, the clarinet. The book cleverly conveys the conflict caused by Martin's attempts to keep Lara close, or lose her because of her love of music - their arguments are usually related to music. When Martin confiscates Lara's clarinet because she is not doing her homework, she shouts at him and tells him that he does not know what music is, because he is deaf. He responds with violence – slapping her across the face: "Mein Vater gab mir eine Ohrfeige, die erstes Ohrfeige meines Lebens...Ich starrte ihn fassunglos und wütend zugleich an." Lara, as the narrative voice, gives a direct emotional response which clearly explains to the reader the significance of the slap. Martin's reaction to his daughter's unconscious cruelty conveys his sensitivity to the way others see him and treat him because of his deafness.

The film includes a scene from Martin's past, successfully explaining how he associates music with pain and exclusion. The audience views a childhood memory that has haunted him throughout his life: the young Martin watching his sister's clarinet concert, utterly bewildered and disruptive, thus leading to his banishment and exclusion from any further family concerts. This key scene is presented in a powerful way: the muffled sound of the music and conversation contrasts sharply with Martin's sounds of distress, which are in the foreground. The event is recalled in a flashback; the colours used are dim, the sound is muffled and the actors move in slow motion, thus we are experiencing this long ago memory from Martin's perspective, allowing the audience to empathise with Martin.

The characterisation of Lara in both mediums advances the reader's understanding of what it is to be deaf, because she has been exposed to the hearing world as well as the non-hearing world. Lara experiences isolation as a child, as a result of her parent's deafness. She is perceived as different and an 'einzgängerin' by her peers and by her wider society where prejudice and stigma is prevalent. People are afraid of those who are different and so reject them rather than embracing their diversity. Lara is strongly influenced by these unconscious and negative beliefs about disability held by society. This is demonstrated through her conflicted desire to leave her parents, her infatuation with her aunt and her desire for a 'normal' mum and a 'normal' life where she is not isolated but valued by society. In Berlin, Lara says to her boyfriend Tom, 'Ich habe mir gewünscht, einer Vater zu haben, auf den ich stolz sein kann.' This

shows that the skewed perception that society holds of deaf people has taught Lara that her parents are not worthy of her pride, highlighting the extent of isolation faced by Martin and Kai, as even their daughter rejects who they are.

However, when Lara goes to Berlin she becomes homesick and begins to see that her true feelings about her family and deafness were influenced by societal prejudice. A key moment during her time in Berlin is when she follows Tom, because she sees him using sign language - this is a comfort to her as it reminds her of her family. Her emotional connection to sign language and her immediate appreciation of it symbolises that she has become more accepting of her parents and their deafness. She sees it as something beautiful and intrinsic to her family. It is part of her; she has been brought up with deafness and no longer sees it as something that holds her back but as something that belongs to her, enriching her life. This shift in Lara's response to deafness allows the reader or viewer to appreciate the beauty of sign language and celebrate different aspects of deafness.

The novel shows Lara's positive portrayal of deafness through her description of sign language. She describes Tom's signing in a fond way. "Leicht und Schwungvoll schreiben seine Händen Wörter und Gefühle in die Luft." Lara's narrative voice expresses how beautiful and unique sign language is and helps to convey the celebratory message of deafness in the novel. The film reveals the limitations of spoken language. Sign language, on the screen, is a beautiful, mesmerising form of communication. It appears to be more expressive and moving than spoken language. One key scene where this is explored is when Lara and Tom sign to the song 'I Will Survive'. In this moment sign language is presented like a form of art. The sign language contrasts from the music playing in the background and it grabs the viewer's attention and demonstrates how marvellous and entertaining sign language can be. In this moment the differences between the hearing and non-hearing worlds are reconciled for Lara.

In conclusion, *Jenseits der Stille* is a deeply moving novel and film leading to a sophisticated understanding of what it is to be deaf. This is achieved by developing rounded, unique and complex characters and depicting the isolation faced by Lara and her family. The film adopts a different narrative style to the novel and characters are presented visually and through dialogue. This is effective as the film uses its ability to manipulate sound and images to allow the viewer to empathise more with the characters' experiences. Kai and Martin were played by the deaf actors Howie Seago and Emmanuelle Laborit, giving the film an authentic touch. However, in the novel Lara is the narrative voice, so consequently themes, ideas and characters are portrayed from her perspective. For me, this is more effective than the film because of the complex characterisation in the novel. Moreover, the theme of isolation is more developed in the book and Lara's personal insight into the barriers her parents faced deepens our understanding of her parents' experience of stigma and being set apart because of their deafness. In the words of Caroline Link, Lara's experiences teach us that- 'Die Behinderungen sind wir alle, wenn wir den Kontakt verlieren zu unseren Mitmenschen und den wirklich wichtigen Dingen des Lebens.'

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