

Study Guide for The Children's Hour

1. Lesbian fiction is a subgenre of fiction that involves one or more primary female homosexual character(s) and lesbian themes. For a number of reasons, *The Children's Hour* has not been considered "lesbian fiction." Can you think of reasons why it DOES NOT qualify? The end is not one of them—in many early works of lesbian fiction, suicide is a viable ending. Consider the thematic issues: is the movie's primary focus lesbianism or not?
2. In 1948, Kinsey developed a scale that tries to describe a person's sexual history or episodes of their sexual activity at a given time. The scale ranked sexual behavior from 0 to 6, with 0 being completely heterosexual and 6 completely homosexual. An additional category, X, was mentioned to describe asexuals, those who experienced no sexual desire (Kinsey Male volume, page 640, table 141).

The scale is as follows:

Rating	Description
0	Exclusively heterosexual
1	Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
2	Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
3	Equally heterosexual and homosexual (bisexual)
4	Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
5	Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
6	Exclusively homosexual

3. If lesbianism (homosexuality) is a disease—which Mrs. Tilford indicates when she tells Martha and Karen, "You are sick"—this raises the spectres of both contagion and moral pollution. The disease metaphor relies on a long history stretching from the plague in *Oedipus Rex* (caused by incest) to recent fears concerning AIDS. Pollution and contagion metaphors are far-reaching, as the following excerpts from Nagle indicate.

from John Copeland Nagle. "The Idea of Pollution"

All of these cases and writings illustrate that the idea of pollution continues to play a role in the law outside of environmental law, especially with respect to hostile work environments and the proper administration of criminal justice. But these broad legal understandings of pollution pale in comparison to the critical place that the idea of pollution occupies in anthropology. "The concepts of purity and pollution pose an intriguing puzzle for cultural anthropologists."<sup>1</sup> Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, numerous anthropologists have examined the rituals that various societies developed to mark the boundaries between what they regarded as pure and what they

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew S. Buckser, *Purity and Pollution*, in 3 *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 1045 (David Levinson & Melvin Ember eds., 1996).

regarded as impure.<sup>2</sup> Those boundaries most often involve sexuality, food, hygiene, and other familiar activities.... (9)

...**First, characterizing something as pollution seeks to influence the behavior of others. Second, the label of pollution can defend general views of the social order.** In either instance, “[a] polluting person is always in the wrong.”<sup>3</sup> ... Douglas and Wildvasky readily admitted that the application of pollution ideas to sexuality is strange to modern societies who see no need to rely upon rituals to explain what science can now answer. But they explored the manner in which concerns about environmental pollution are misunderstood as well, emphasizing the extent to which much air and water pollution exists naturally. In both instances, **the idea of pollution operates to stigmatize the pollutant and the polluter**, despite lingering scientific uncertainty about exactly what is happening.

4. Consider how the metaphor of disease operates in *The Children's Hour*. By movie's end (if not before) it becomes quite clear that Martha's interest in Karen is more than sisterly. Martha becomes, in the terms of disease metaphor, a “Typhoid Mary” carrying within her the “infection” of “abnormal desire”—abnormal ONLY if we accept heterosexuality as “normal.” (There are many arguments against doing so.) Dr. Joe Cardin is an obstetrician and gynecologist: a doctor whose primary focus is the healthy function of the female body in its role as reproducer of the status quo. Does the movie imply that he might “cure” the spread of Martha's “illness” by marrying Karen? (No joke. The script actually does seem to pose this question.)

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<sup>2</sup> The leading studies that preceded Mary Douglas include EDWARD B. TYLOR, *RELIGION IN PRIMITIVE CULTURE* (1958); A.R. RADCLIFFE-BROWN, *STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETY* (1952); CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS, *THE ELEMENTARY STRUCTURES OF KINSHIP* (1949); EMILE DURKHEIM, *THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE* (1915); JAMES G. FRAZIER, *THE GOLDEN BOUGH: THE ROOTS OF RELIGION AND FOLKLORE* (1890).

<sup>3</sup> DOUGLAS, *supra* note 1, at 114.