

## ***Deaf Republic* Resource Guide**

### **For Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing**

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#### **Background Information**

*Deaf Republic* is a novel, play, and work of poetry about a fictional town, Vasenka, that has been taken over by an authoritarian regime. In the opening scene, a deaf boy named Petya is watching a puppet show in the town's square. Soldiers overtake the area, and the audience becomes quiet, except for Petya, who laughs at the puppets' movements. The soldiers murder him. After the murder, the town pretends to be deaf and uses sign language to communicate with each other. Deafness is used as a strategy to resist the occupying army. The soldiers treat deafness as a disease that must be eradicated and try to quarantine the villagers who present as deaf.

Even though it is a book of poetry, *Deaf Republic* is structured as a play. The characters, or dramatis personae, are listed on page 7 along with a brief description of their role in the story. Many modern plays do not include a "chorus," represented in *Deaf Republic* by the Townspeople of Vasenka. The chorus is a traditional character in ancient dramas which can function as a narrator and is sometimes meant to inspire or reflect the inner thoughts of the reader. While a book may be organized by chapters, a play is organized by acts and scenes. In *Deaf Republic*, there are two acts and no distinct scenes, although the individual poems present a series of settings and interactions between characters.

#### **Reading Poetry**

Like any art form, poetry is created to inspire a reaction from its audience. The author provides a message, structured carefully using a variety of poetic devices and literary elements. The reader brings their own experiences and understanding to the reading of a poem. This means as you read, you should pay attention to both your mind and your body. There is no right or wrong reaction to poetry or to art, so don't worry that your thoughts and feelings about a poem may be wrong. Maybe something about your own experience has connected with the poem. Can you figure out what it is? Think about any of the following:

- What thoughts come to mind as you read?
- What feelings bubble up in your stomach or your chest?
- Can you describe the feelings you have while reading?

- Can you identify the connection you are making between something in the poem and something you have felt or experienced before?

Keep these questions in mind when reading. You'll be surprised by how differently you and your classmates may understand a poem!

### **Important Elements of Poetry**

**Tone:** Tone can be described as the mood of a poem or expression. When communicating with others, your body language and facial expressions, the words you use, and the pace of the conversation are some influences of tone. A quick pace when chatting and fidgety body language can convey a tone of excitement when paired with cheerful facial expressions. The same pace and body language can be interpreted as anger or hostility, however, when paired with downcast facial expressions (like a frown and furrowed brow). It is important to examine multiple factors to determine the tone of a conversation. The same is true when reading literature. When reading poetry, word choice, sentence length and structure, use of punctuation, and how lines are spaced out on a page all influence your feelings about the message presented.

**Figurative language:** Instead of using language that directly and literally communicates what the author means, poetry often takes a playful approach to language to connect with the feelings and experiences of the reader. Figurative language includes comparisons and contrasts, exaggeration and understatement, and use of sounds/letters in words as a way to give more detail about the message of a poem, without necessarily doing more describing. Figurative language includes:

- Metaphor - sets up a symbolic comparison, often between a concrete and abstract idea
  - Example: The snow is a white blanket over the earth.
- Simile - makes a description more emphatic or vivid, compares two ideas using the words "like" or "as"
  - Example: The bustling hostess was busy as a bee.
- Personification - uses human characteristics to describe non-human things (animals, objects, ideas)
  - Example: Lightning danced across the sky.
- Imagery - using vivid or figurative language to create a clear mental picture. Often uses language related to the five senses.
  - Example: The barn smelled of hay and manure. It smelled like the sweat of tired horses and the sweet breath of cows.

### Pre-Reading Activities

1. Like it or not, we do judge books by their covers. What does the book cover art say to you? It seems pretty certain that the image of the ear is related to the word 'Deaf' in the title, but why do you think it made of bricks? What do the two sections - half-black, half-white - suggest to you?
2. Read this short [biography](#) of Kaminsky. Take notes in the space below about what you think is important to remember as you read his poems.
3. Consider your experience with quarantine, perhaps during the recent pandemic. What words or feelings come to mind?
4. What tense events are happening in the world right now? In what ways do people seem affected or not affected?
5. Consider the relationship between silence and power. In what ways can silence be a source of power? In what ways do some people exercise power over the silence of others?

### Vocabulary Challenge

The poems in *Deaf Republic* showcase some very sophisticated and precise vocabulary meant to influence the way you feel as you read.

- a. Take a look at the vocabulary list below. Write some words or sketch some drawings that depict what feelings these words inspire.
- b. Use dictionaries, visual resources, and discussion with others to understand the meanings of the words below.
- c. Now reflect on the words and images you chose to help you understand the vocabulary words. Add, specify, and refine your responses to reflect your feelings with your deeper understanding of the words. What sophisticated and precise words and images reflect your feelings?
- d. Discuss the signs used for these words in American Sign Language. Do these signs inspire the same feelings? For words that may not have common signs, work collaboratively to create conceptually accurate ways to sign them. Take into consideration the definitions and tone you've already identified.

Vocabulary	Feeling Words and Depictions
Police state Authoritarian regime Resistance Eradicated Quarantined Empowering Injustice	

### Reading *Deaf Republic*

#### “We Lived Happily During the War”

1. The first poem in the collection, “We Lived Happily During the War,” can be read as a kind of invocation. It appears before the title page. In a way, like the cover, it sets the tone for the work to come. After you first read the poem, what do you think the tone is? What makes you think this?
2. Now let’s look at specific features of the poem.
  - a. Who is the speaker in this poem? What is his/her relationship to the actions being described?
  - b. Why do you think Kaminsky uses one and two line stanzas in this poem?
  - c. Why do you think Kaminsky uses [enjambment](#)? What is significant about the words that each line ends with?
  - d. What do you think the house of money represents? What does Kaminsky mean by “our great country of money”?
  - e. Kaminsky uses repetition through the poem, such as “but not enough,” “invisible house,” “in the \_\_\_\_\_ of money.” How does it contribute to the tone of the poem?
3. After reading the poem more carefully, has your opinion on the poem’s tone changed?
4. What do you think is the message of this poem? How might it relate to current events, such as the war in Ukraine?

#### “That Map of Bone and Open Valves”

Context - this poem describes one of the central events in *Deaf Republic*, the murder of a deaf boy by a soldier in the invading army. Petya was shot after he spat at the Sergeant. His death

spurs the town of Vasenka to rebel against the occupation by pretending to be deaf. Sonya and Alfonso are husband and wife, and two of the main characters in *Deaf Republic*.

1. Find examples of [metaphors](#) in the poem.
2. Find examples of [personification](#) in the poem.
3. Find examples of [similes](#) in the poem.
4. How is Petya's face a "map of bone and opened valves"? What tone does this description create?
5. Why do you think Kaminsky chooses not to use a simile in lines 14-15?
6. What do you think Kaminsky means when he writes, "It's the air. Something in the air wants us too much"?
7. What tone is Kaminsky trying to create by writing "The tower guards eat [cucumber sandwiches](#)"?
8. How can a moment convulse?
9. How does the last part of the poem show the mood in Vasenka after Petya's murder?

"Above Blue Tin Roofs, Deafness"

Context - this poem takes place after Alfonso's wife Sonya has been arrested and shot by the soldiers. Sonya and Alfonso helped lead the resistance against the occupation by teaching the villagers sign language.

#### Vocabulary

Piazza - a plaza or square

Eaves - the part of the roof that extends out from a building

Birches - a kind of tree, sometimes associated with rebirth and renewal because it is one of the earliest trees to put out leaves after winter.

1. In history, sometimes the violence following a revolution is just as bad, if not worse, than the violence that prompted the revolution. Why do you think this happens?
2. This poem contains a lot of [imagery](#). What do you think is the meaning of these examples:
  - a. "... he [Alfonso] is putting his tongue where his tooth has been."
  - b. "A pigeon settles on a stop sign, making it sway."
  - c. "Tomorrow we will be exposed like the thin ribs of dogs."
3. What do you think this line means; "Deafness rests in our men's chests."
4. Why do you think Kaminsky personifies deafness in this poem?
5. There are a striking number of colors in this poem. All of these colors could be a coincidence, but in a poem, every word is supposed to matter. So why all of these colors?

6. How does this poem show that the citizens have changed?

### “The Townspeople Watch Them Take Alfonso”

#### Vocabulary

Vaudeville - a comic theatrical style frequently combining exaggerated acting, pantomime, dialogue, dancing, and song.

1. How can a person be a witness stand?
2. Consider the lines that are almost repeated - “Now each of us is a witness stand:” (1-2). AND “each of us is a witness stand” (13-14). What is the meaning of the repetition and the small change?
3. This poem contains a lot of imagery. What do you think is the meaning of these examples:
  - a. What we don’t say/ we carry in our suitcases, coat pockets, our nostrils.”
  - b. “A t-shirt falls off a clothesline and an old man stops, picks it up, presses it to his face.
4. Why does Kaminsky keep reminding us of the sunlight?
5. What do you think Kaminsky means when he writes “Our silence stands up for us’?

### “In a Time of Peace”

This is the final poem in *Deaf Republic*. Notice that the point of view has shifted from the third person back to the first person narrator. This is the same speaker as in the opening poem, “We Lived Happily During the War.”

1. What current events does the opening of the poem allude to?
2. What do you think Kaminsky means when he writes: “We see in his open mouth/ the nakedness/ of the whole nation”?
3. The line “The body of a boy lies on the pavement exactly like the body of a boy” is repeated with variations throughout *Deaf Republic*. Initially, it is used to describe Petya’s body after he is shot by a soldier. Why do you think Kaminsky refuses to use a simile here? What does he want us to understand about this?
4. Explain the simile in the lines “And it clips our citizens ‘ bodies/ effortlessly, the way the President’s wife trims her toenails.”
5. Why does the narrator ask for forgiveness in the last line of the poem?
6. What do you think Kaminsky’s overall message is in this poem? Why do you think he ends the book with this poem?

### **Post-Reading Activities**

1. Create your own poem (written or in ASL) about a topic/event/injustice you feel strongly about. Be sure to include components of poetry such as figurative language, tone and repetition.
2. In the book, the townspeople created their own sign language to communicate with each other. It is your turn to create an announcement important enough to share with the other townspeople. Invent your own sign language to communicate the announcement without being caught by the authorities (do not use known signs!).
3. Writing/signing prompt: Reflect on and respond to the following statements: "The deaf don't believe in silence. Silence is the invention of the hearing."
4. After reading the poem "In a Time of Peace", write or sign your own final poem of this play. What happens to the town as life continues to move on?
5. Create a piece of art (drawing, painting, sculpture, poster, etc) that represents the theme and tone of the play/poems. Be prepared to describe your work and how the book inspired you to create it.

### Additional Information and Resources:

[https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Deaf-Republic-lesson-plan\\_Ellenbogen.pdf](https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Deaf-Republic-lesson-plan_Ellenbogen.pdf)

<https://infoguides.rit.edu/bigread/authorbio>

<https://www.rit.edu/ntid/performing-arts/big-read-ntid>