

DISCOVERY GUIDE

Nightingale

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY

Lynn Redgrave

Directed by Joseph Hardy



American Premiere October 4–November 19, 2006
Mark Taper Forum

 Center
Theatre
Group
L.A.'s Theatre Company

P.L.A.Y.

PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

DISCOVERY GUIDE

Nightingale

How to Use this Discovery Guide

OBJECTIVES OF THIS DISCOVERY GUIDE

A HEADSTONE that was the only visible evidence of a woman's life is blank, her name and dates burned away by acid rain. The silence imposed on her in life by the rigid Victorian society into which she was born is now complete. Hers is a story never before told, a song never heard. In the American premiere of Lynn Redgrave's one-woman play *Nightingale*, at the Mark Taper Forum, Redgrave imagines the life story of her late grandmother, Beatrice Kempson, whom she called "Beanie" (and who is named Mildred in the play), by becoming her onstage. Only now, through her granddaughter, can this nightingale finally sing.

This Discovery Guide has been created to increase your enjoyment of *Nightingale*. It contains historical information and a summary of the play. At the end of each section you will find opportunities to respond to the play's themes, events and characters.

Vocabulary words are in **bold type**. You will find definitions of these words at the end of each section.

Provide an overview of the play's historical and literary contexts

Consider Lynn Redgrave's life and work as actress and playwright

Examine the impact of Queen Victoria and Victorian attitudes on succeeding generations

Explore the power of connecting with your past

Offer resources to enrich your experience of the play

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SYNOPSIS

Nightingale



Lynn Redgrave. PHOTOS BY CRAIG SCHWARTZ

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(all portrayed by Lynn Redgrave)

Mildred Asher
*a fictionalized version
of Redgrave's grandmother*

Errol Asher
Mildred's husband

Ethleen
Mildred's sister

Rose (Lady Randall)
Mildred and Errol's daughter

Mark (Lieutenant Asher)
Mildred and Errol's son

Mr. Morton
*a Devonshire farmer
and landlord*



NIGHTINGALE'S FAIRY-TALE opening line, "Once upon a time," echoes and mocks life in Edwardian (or post-Victorian) England, a self-indulgent society whose superficial elegance hid unspoken suffering and heartache. A woman who is herself in distress, inspired by the **pathos** of a blank headstone, reaches back to that England of a hundred years ago and reconnects with her mysteriously remote and tightlipped grandmother, Beanie, bringing her to life before our eyes as "Mildred" in a series of dramatic scenes.

We meet Mildred in 1904 as a **pensive** 11-year-old, apologizing to God for admitting that she has never been happy. We see her bewilderment about sex begin with the onset of what her mother calls "the curse," and continue throughout her adolescence. Mildred fears she will be a spinster; when she becomes a bride after all, her honeymoon is made disastrous by her innocence and ignorance, which the groom shares.

In their marriage, Mildred becomes not just **frigid**, but frozen, a callous young wife and mother. Trapped in an emotional vacuum, she recreates the grim and loveless household of her youth. Later in life, she has a brief encounter with love, which may give her, at last, access to her own feelings.

Mildred lives her life as a bird in a cage, mute about the longings that fill her heart, but by imagining and enacting her haunting story, she is rescued from the silence of an anonymous grave. Redgrave lets the play show us how much women's lives have changed in a century, and also surprises us with the discovery of all we can learn by forging new connections to our past.



Queen Victoria at her Golden Jubilee (1887).

THE VICTORIANS & THE EDWARDIANS: A TUG OF WAR

Mildred, the central character of *Nightingale*, was born during the Victorian era (1837–1901), a child of strict Victorian parents. By the time she was three years old, however, England’s cultural climate was shifting away from **stolid propriety** toward a more light-hearted approach to life, as Prince Edward VII began to eclipse his mother, Queen Victoria, even before she died.



Suffragettes protest against the government, c.1909. COURTESY OF THE WOMEN'S LIBRARY

The Edwardian era (1901–1910), also called the post-Victorian era, *La Belle Époque* or the lost golden

age, was a reaction against the half-century of stiff **decorum** and utter lack of frivolity which Queen Victoria had imposed on her subjects. It was a period of **paradox**, characterized by high society and low morals, rigid social codes and sweeping social upheavals such as the women’s **suffrage** movement. Remembered now for the grace of its fashions, arts and architecture and the brilliance of such theorists as Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud, this lost golden age glowed all the more brightly in retrospect to many who lived through it, because of its contrast with the dark horrors of World War I, which followed. Yet its radiance came at a price: a third of the British population was living on borrowed money in an attempt to keep up appearances. Beneath them was another large group expected to live out their lives in the servant class, and these were the fortunate ones. Grinding poverty lay at the bottom, unacknowledged.

Edward VII gained the throne in 1901 at the age of 60 after Queen Victoria died, and ruled for nine years. He surrounded himself with beautiful women and his wealthy and privileged friends, and exhibited the very self-indulgence his mother had condemned.



Edward VII and family c.1892, before he ascended the throne.



Edwardians enjoying the St. Giles' Fair in Oxford COURTESY OF RICHARD MERRY

Yet Victoria, powerful even from the grave, cast her long shadow over his brief reign. Not everyone joined in the partying, and in *Nightingale* we sense that Mildred and Errol would have been among those who did not. Some disapproved of the insult to Victoria’s memory, while others were alert to the trouble that lay ahead as the working classes watched the wealthy with growing resentment. The image of the grand steamship Titanic sinking into the icy ocean waters on its maiden voyage is often viewed as an apt symbol of this “lost golden age.”



Blue and White by Louise Jopling (1896) shows Edwardian women washing the dishes. LADY LEVER ART GALLERY, PORT SUNLIGHT, ENGLAND

Vocabulary

Decorum: The appropriateness of behavior or conduct

Frigid: Persistently unresponsive to sexual advances or stimuli

La Belle Époque: A French phrase meaning 'the beautiful era'

Paradox: A statement containing contradictory aspects which may nevertheless be true

Pathos: A quality that arouses feelings of pity, sympathy, tenderness, or sorrow

Pensive: Engaged in deep and perhaps melancholy thought

Propriety: The conformity to established standards of proper behavior or manners

Stolid: Having or showing little emotion

Suffrage: The right or privilege of voting

Questions & Exercises:

- Lynn Redgrave had a grandmother, Margaret "Daisy" Scudamore, who was an actress, and another grandmother, Beatrice "Beanie" Kempson, who Redgrave says was not even "very good at being a granny." Why do you think Redgrave chose to write about Beanie rather than Daisy? List three reasons, other than the blank headstone, that might have made Beanie interesting or appealing to her as a subject.
- Consider why Lynn Redgrave chose to write about Beanie. Write 250–500 words about a relative or forebear of yours who is a bit of a mystery to you. Your writing may be factual, a work of fiction or a combination of both. You may find that by making a leap of the imagination you can discover something about that person.

Hmmm...
My Grandma...



Lynn Redgrave



Lynn Redgrave. PHOTO BY ANNABEL CLARK



WRITERS are often reminded of the advice of author Henry James: “Be one of those on whom nothing is wasted.” It is a **maxim** Lynn Redgrave completely fulfills, turning even life’s hardships to good use. Although she had already established an impressive dramatic career, at 50 she feared that it had reached a plateau, perhaps because of her age. Stung by the thought, she turned to writing and penned her first play, *Shakespeare for My Father*. Critics hailed it, and it

took her dramatic career to new heights. Similarly, when her father died of Parkinson’s disease, her mother’s grief moved Redgrave to begin work on a second play, *The Mandrake Root*, which premiered in 2001. Her bout with breast cancer inspired a joint effort with daughter Annabel Clark, a photographer, to produce the book *Journal: A Mother and Daughter’s Recovery from Breast Cancer*, and the end of her 33-year marriage led Redgrave to ponder the issues of family and connection, and ultimately to create *Nightingale*.

A **hallmark** of this multi-talented artist is her **candor**. Although she has kept journals since childhood, Redgrave observes in an interview with P.L.A.Y., “I did not officially begin writing until I was fifty.” Asked whether she views the writing as a special bond with her father, who also wrote well, she says immediately, “Oh, no. *Everyone* in the family writes!” She adds that her first play was a kind of search for her father, because her shyness as a child made it difficult for her to share her feelings with him. “Once,” she recalls, “when he had been away, he brought me a pair of slippers. They were beautiful; perfect. I had never seen any like them. But I could not think how to say all this. ‘Well?’ he asked me. ‘What do you think?’ And I just stood there, stunned. In the end, I left the room rather in disgrace, and he never knew how I had felt.” Her inability to express herself was a dilemma of their relationship which the writing and performing of *Shakespeare for My Father* helped to heal.

Nightingale, Redgrave says, is the least factually precise of her three plays. Fashioned from what she knows and what she has guessed about her grandmother’s life, it is composed also of inventions inspired by family **lore**, and “it has been enormous fun to write,” she says, “because I have had the freedom to speculate. If you know *everything* about somebody, it limits you.”

About the experience of performing her own work, she says, “The wonderful thing about writing for myself is that I just sense when we need to laugh, or pick up the pace. I feel it in my body. I am aware of the power of silence, too. But you have to earn each silence.” In *Nightingale*, Redgrave takes the silence of another and turns it into song.



Lynn Redgrave with her father, Sir Michael Redgrave. COURTESY OF LYNN REDGRAVE

THE REDGRAVES

Actress, author and playwright Lynn Redgrave is a distinguished member of a renowned British theatrical **dynasty** that can now be traced through five generations. She says that she does not know why so many members of her family have been drawn to the theatre. Her parents were Sir Michael Redgrave, a peerless Shakespearean actor, and the actress and author Rachel Kempson, who debuted famously in 1932 as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* at Stratford-upon-Avon in England, the birthplace of William Shakespeare and home of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Sir Michael and Rachel, now both deceased, met in 1934 when they starred together in *Flowers of the Forest* and were married for five decades until his death in 1985. Sir Michael's parents, Roy Redgrave and Margaret Scudamore, were also well-known actors. Lynn Redgrave's brother Corin and sister Vanessa are actors and writers, and their children include the actresses Natasha and Joely Richardson, actress Jemma Redgrave as well as Lynn Redgrave's three children, Benjamin, Kelly and Annabel Clark.



Vocabulary

Candor: Straightforwardness; frankness of expression

Dynasty: A family or group that retains power for several generations

Hallmark: A clear feature or characteristic; a mark indicating quality or excellence

Lore: Accumulated fact, tradition or belief about a particular subject; tales

Maxim: A concise expression of a fundamental principle



The Redgrave family parish church, St. Nicholas of Myra, Chiswick.

Questions & Exercises:

Nightingale begins with a visit to a family cemetery plot. If your family has such a plot, visit it and do a “gravestone rubbing” — but only after getting permission from the person or group in charge of the cemetery. Some cemetery associations do not allow stone rubbing. Some require you to register. Please respect each graveyard’s requirements and leave the stones and the area as you found them.

Materials:

- butcher paper or newsprint
- lumber crayon (available at hardware or office-supply stores) or rubbing wax (available at art-supply stores)
- small soft brushes to clean the gravestone without damaging it
- masking tape
- scissors, old towels, a pencil, a notepad

Directions:

- Choose a gravestone that is sound, undamaged and stable. Rap on it lightly with your knuckles, and if it has a hollow sound, do not proceed. Choose another.
- Gently clean and dry the stone with your brush and towel, then tape the paper to it securely.
- Pressing the paper against the stone, rub your crayon or rubbing wax along the outside edges and then across the lettering. Rub as lightly as possible.
- Remove the paper from the stone carefully, then remove the tape from the paper and roll the paper to protect the rubbing you have created.
- When you get home, you may want to preserve your rubbing by mounting it on a mat board or framing it. Visit an art-supply store to get help with this.

More information is also available in the Resources section at the end of this guide.

The High Pure Notes of Poetry

SETTING / CONTEXT

Nightingale



TWENTIETH-CENTURY poet T. S. Eliot believed that carrying culture forward was a responsibility of art, and his own poetry is filled with references to the works of earlier writers. Literature that has this dimension can affect us profoundly; the echoes of a previous time give it **resonance** and depth. The more exploring you do in the directions it indicates, the more you discover, and the more richly you can experience the work at hand.

The play *Nightingale* reaches back into literary history and brings us the poetry of the Victorian era,

which the Edwardians read in school. When Mildred, sleepless, leans into a soft summer night to listen to the nightingales and feels the full force of her longing for the love she cannot have, it is Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning whose words speak the emotions in Mildred's heart: "I am the nearest nightingale/That singeth in Eden after you."

Poetry lovers might have expected to hear lines from *Ode to a Nightingale*, by renowned British poet John Keats, but his nightingale was happy, and sang of summer.

The nightingale in Browning's poem *Farewells from Paradise* is,

like Mildred, **bereft** and desperate; it builds a song "of high pure notes" to reach someone who has been shut out of paradise. Browning, born Elizabeth Barrett in 1806, was—along with all of the offspring in the bizarre Barrett family— forbidden to marry. An invalid, she was confined to her room, although she pined for companionship. Like Mildred, she wished for what she thought she could not have. Unlike Mildred, however, Elizabeth Barrett did not remain silent. From the darkness of her circumstances, she called out to the world through her poetry, and fellow poet Robert Browning responded. The two fell in love, were secretly married, and eloped to Italy in 1846, where they lived happily until her death 15 years later. Instead of the blank headstone of *Nightingale's* opening scene, Browning has a sculpted marble tomb in Florence, and this year the people of Florence laid a laurel wreath on it to honor the 200th anniversary of her birth.

Mildred's silence to the end, like her longing for love, is given voice in the play through the words of English poet Thomas Hood. A contemporary of the Brownings and a fan of Keats, Hood – like Mildred – went through life with his deepest feelings unexpressed. Only when he was stricken with a terminal illness did Hood burst forth with the somber yet brilliant poems for which he is now remembered—and only when Mildred has experienced an unbearable loss does she speak the opening lines from one of them, a poem called *Silence*. The first line, "There is a silence where hath been no sound," could serve as the **epitaph** on her rain-etched headstone.



Elizabeth Barrett Browning's tomb in the English cemetery in Piazzale Donatello, Florence, Italy.



BIRD-SPIRIT

from *Farewells from Paradise*
by Elizabeth Barrett Browning

I am the nearest nightingale
That singeth in Eden after you;
And I am singing loud and true,
And sweet,—I do not fail.
I sit upon a cypress bough,
Close to the gate, and I fling my song
Over the gate and through the mail
Of the warden angels marshall'd strong,—
Over the gate and after you!
And the warden angels let it pass,
Because the poor brown bird, alas,
Sings in the garden, sweet and true.
And I build my song of high pure notes,
Note over note, height over height,
Till I strike the arch of the Infinite,
And I bridge abysmal agonies
With strong, clear calms of harmonies,—
And something abides, and something floats,
In the song which I sing after you.
Fare ye well, farewell!
The creature-sounds, no longer audible,
Expire at Eden's door.
Each footstep of your treading
Treads out some cadence which ye heard before
Farewell! the birds of Eden
Ye shall hear nevermore!



From the *Nightingale* set design. COURTESY OF TOBIN OST.

THE BIRD OF LOVE

Known for the liquid melancholy of its song, the nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*, or 'singer of the night') is unusual because it sings in the dark. This makes it a perfect symbol for Mildred, whose sorrow and loneliness are transformed into beauty onstage.

The English nightingale winters in southern Africa. Its reappearance in England each year is greeted as a sign of spring, and it is regarded as the bird of May and also of love. Its song, unique in range and variety, includes everything from low, long notes to graceful trills. Only the male nightingale sings, but in literature and legend the female is the singer. Operatic soprano Jenny Lind was called the Swedish nightingale because of the lyric beauty of her voice.

One legend says that the nightingale sings while leaning against a thorn to keep itself awake, because it has stolen one of its eyes from a worm and is afraid that the worm will come to steal it back. The wild nature of this folk tale reflects a certain wildness in the bird itself. Nightingales cannot live in **captivity**; a nightingale in a cage will not survive for even a month.

Vocabulary

Bereft: Deprived; lacking something that was needed or expected

Captivity: The state of being forcibly confined; imprisonment

Epitaph: An inscription on a tombstone, or a brief literary piece, commemorating one who is deceased

Lyric: Expressive of deeply felt emotion; having a musical quality

Resonance: An intensity of sound produced by sympathetic vibration

Poems

Ode to a Nightingale
Farewells from Paradise

Poetry Collections

Good Poems
The Discovery of Poetry
A Family of Poems



Questions & Exercises:

Poetry was one of the earliest forms of oral history, and has been part of human culture for thousands of years. We still look to poets to “express the inexpressible,” but fewer and fewer people feel that they can understand what poetry is saying.

- Is poetry a part of your life? List three poems that are important to you. Do you know one “by heart”? What is it about your favorite poem(s) that you value above other poems? Is it what they say, or the way they say it, or both? Make a list of the elements in a poem you love that make it special to you, then write a paragraph or draw a picture which captures the spirit of that poem. (If you do not yet have three favorite poems, perhaps you can find them in a good poetry collection. Try *Good Poems*, edited by Garrison Keillor; *The Discovery of Poetry*, by Frances Mayes; or *A Family of Poems*, by Caroline Kennedy, or go to www.bartleby.com and click on “Verse.”)
- Look up *Ode to a Nightingale* by John Keats and *Farewells from Paradise* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in an anthology of British poetry. (Try *The Columbia Anthology of British Poetry* or go to www.bartleby.com.) Do these two poems differ in what they say about life? Do they differ in the way they make you feel when you read them? Write a 300-word essay comparing the two poems in terms of what they say and how they make you feel.

Interested in knowing more about the people and events of *Nightingale*?

Here are some websites, books and films to check out.

WEB SITES:

www.victoriana.com

Quotations from Queen Victoria's books and letters, along with photographs of the queen and her children, enliven these web pages. Click on "History" and choose from such articles as "Queen Victoria's Not So 'Victorian' Writings."

www.victorianweb.org

Hosted by George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History at Brown University, this is a treasure trove of information on Elizabeth Barrett Browning (click on "Authors") and all things Victorian.

www.bbc.co.uk/history

Articles such as "Edward VII: Britain's First Constitutional Monarch" are available at this website hosted by the British Broadcasting Company, and offer details about the life of Queen Victoria's oldest son and royal heir

www.redgrave.com

The official Website of Lynn Redgrave and the Redgrave family, it contains photographs and career summaries of four generations of Redgraves, plus a family tree.

www.fashion-era.com

An excellent resource for details of the Belle Époque, this website features Edwardian fashion information on every aspect of society, from royals to chimney sweeps.

www.savinggraves.org

Visit this website – hosted by Saving Graves, a group dedicated to the preservation of cemeteries—for precise information and instructions on how to do gravestone rubbings safely, legally and beautifully.

www.bartleby.com

This site has the contents of The Oxford Book of English Verse, with much of the great British poetry from 1250–1900.

www.ancestry.com

Visit this website to do online family-history research. For best results, know the full name of the person you want to look up, and if possible that person's dates of birth and death. Also at this site: links to U.S. Census records, vital statistics, immigration records and obituaries.

www.lds.org

This is the website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which maintains the largest family-history database in the world. Just click on "Family History" and proceed – have as much information with you as possible.

BOOKS:

The Essential Guide to Unpuzzling Your Past by Emily Anne Croom (Betterway Books, 2003)

Subtitled The Classic Source for Tracing Your Family History, this book will take you step-by-step through the process of discovering and documenting your family background.

Discovering Your African-American Ancestors by Franklin Carter Smith and Emily Anne Croom (Betterway Books, 2003)

This resource addresses the special challenges that can be involved in tracing African-American family history, particularly the impact of slavery and lack of records.

The Everything Family Tree Book by Kimberly Powell (Adams Media Corporation, 1998)

Here is the information you need to put your family tree together, from finding the details to creating the chart.

The Columbia Anthology of British Poetry edited by James Shapiro (Columbia University Press, 1995)

This huge and authoritative collection has all of the best-known British poetry from the past 12

centuries, from Old and Middle English to the late 20th century.

Life Among the Redgraves by Rachel Kempson (Dutton, 1986)

A classic memoir written by Lynn Redgrave's mother, this book is an intimate and informed description of the famous British theatrical family.

FILM & VIDEO:

The Barretts of Wimpole Street directed by Sidney Franklin (MGM, 1934)

Nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, the film tells the story of 19th century poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning's imprisonment at home. It was remade in 1957, with Sidney Franklin again directing.

Remains of the Day directed by James Ivory (Merchant Ivory, 1993)

This is a poignant portrayal of the last days of the Edwardian era, as World War I looms.

Upstairs, Downstairs (television series) directed by Bill Bain and Derek Bennett (ITV, 1974)

A series so popular that it still has a fan club, *Upstairs, Downstairs* provides a romanticized but appealing look at life in post-Victorian England.

A Room with a View directed by James Ivory (Merchant Ivory, 1986)

Based on the novel by E. M. Forster, this film shows the sexual innocence of post-Victorian adults that we also see in *Nightingale*.

Brideshead Revisited (television series) directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg and Charles Sturridge (Granada Television, 1981)

A journey through time, this series takes you from Edwardian England through World War I, so that you, too, can look back on the "lost golden era" with an appreciation of all that was lost.

About P.L.A.Y.

P.L.A.Y. Nightingale

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PERFORMING FOR LOS ANGELES YOUTH

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