

# SILENT SKY

## Discussion/Essay Questions

1. The play touches upon the importance of “wonder” in knowledge and understanding. Henrietta states at the end of the play, “...wonder will always get us there.” How does wonder help understanding? What do you wonder about?
2. Margaret is concerned about Henrietta leaving home to work, that she might start wearing “bloomers” and drink whiskey with suffragettes. How have the roles and opportunities for women changed since the early 1900s? Has anything stayed the same?
3. Margaret tells Henrietta early in the play, “One day there will be a word for you.” What does she mean by this? What word would you offer for a person like Henrietta?
4. Henrietta says to her sister, “I have questions. I have fundamental problems with the state of human knowledge. Who are we, why are we-where are we?!” What do you think she means? How would you answer those questions?
5. Henrietta’s discovery is sparked by hearing Margaret’s symphony. What are some ways math and music are related?
6. In the play, Henrietta’s sister Margaret sings a Christian hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” at the end of Act 1, Scene 1 and again at the end of Act 1, Scene 2. Why do you think the songs are included in the play?
7. Henrietta is shocked that astronomy is not Peter’s passion. Why is this significant?
8. The historical female characters in the play made important contributions to science, yet few primary sources exist to detail their lives. What are some ways to remember important, yet overlooked figures from the past?
9. Who is your favorite overlooked historical figure, and why?
10. *Silent Sky* is historical fiction. The playwright Lauren Gunderson has said that fiction gives us something that facts alone cannot accomplish. Can you think of a story you’ve heard, read or seen on screen or stage that helped you connect to an idea or historical event in a way that facts alone didn’t? How did the story do that for you?
11. Annie says the women computers “resist the temptation to analyze” the data they are collecting, but the women do make discoveries, and Williamina says a few lines later in the scene, “resisting doesn’t always work.” Why can’t the women resist analyzing their data? What does this character trait tell us about humanity?
12. Henrietta must work tirelessly to be an astronomer. Annie Jump Cannon is fighting for women’s voting rights. Peter wanted to be an actor, “but Dad thought not.” What do these characters have in common?
13. How would you describe the relationships between the women in the play?
14. Henrietta’s discovery led to breakthroughs in astronomical understanding and exploration. Her work made it possible for astronomers to confirm the universe was expanding and for the development of the Hubble Space Telescope, which launched in 1990 and continues to send images back to Earth today. What should be the focus for space exploration in the 21st century? For example, should astronomers work to make it possible to live on Mars, search for life on other planets or make it possible for regular people to travel farther distances in space?
15. Henrietta’s father is only mentioned in the play and not represented as a character on stage. What do you imagine he would say to Henrietta about her work or discovery?
16. What is the significance of Henrietta’s father giving her the book of Walt Whitman poems and marking the poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” in particular?
17. At the end of the play, Henrietta’s last line is “And there’s a reason we measure it all in light.” What do you think she means by this?
18. How would you honor/memorialize the person/people who discovered how to measure the distance of stars in the universe?
19. Is it important to know and understand why we exist? Why or why not?
20. What is the role of music in this play?

