

AMERICAN LIVES **Lillian Gish**
Lifetime Actress, First Lady of Film

"She loves her work and is always ready to tackle the daily responsibilities of whatever role, big or small, she has undertaken. . . . [She] contributed in no small degree to the early development of the art of film making."—Peter Glenville, Preface to Gish's autobiography, The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me (1969)

Through a lifetime of acting, Lillian Gish (1896–1993) always behaved professionally. One of the first movie stars, she helped establish the film industry by using a natural acting style that moved audiences deeply.

Abandoned by her husband when her daughters were young, Gish's mother struggled. She became an actress and soon put daughters Lillian and Dorothy on stage as well. Acting had a bad reputation, and the Gishes often did not tell other people exactly what it was that they did for a living. Lillian Gish grew up on stage, with hardly any formal schooling. But she developed her mind by reading constantly.

In the course of their performances, the Gishes met a young actress named Gladys Smith. One day they visited Smith—now calling herself Mary Pickford—on the set of a moving picture, an industry that was just beginning. She introduced her friends to director D. W. Griffith, who immediately cast the girls in his film. Unable to tell them apart, he had Lillian wear a blue bow and Dorothy a red one.

For the next decade, the two sisters made many films with Griffith. Lillian's work included some of the pioneering director's most famous works, including the landmark *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith used Lillian to show his view of the ideal woman—an innocent in a harsh world. She was a sweet farm girl in *True Heart Susie* (1919). In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), she played a victim of abuse who is eventually killed by her father because she had fallen in love with a Chinese immigrant. In *Orphans of the Storm* (1922), Lillian added to this character type. While still an innocent, she shows fierce determination in trying to find her blind sister, played by Dorothy, in the midst of the turmoil of the French Revolution.

Griffith liked Gish because she could display a wide range of emotions. According to some critics, she invented the art of acting on film. She abandoned the broad, sometimes extreme gestures typi-

cal among stage actors. Instead, she used smaller, more subtle movements and facial expressions. The results had a profound impact on audiences. In *The Mothering Heart* (1913), they felt her sorrow and rage when—after her baby died in childbirth—she shredded the petals off a rose. In *Broken Blossoms*, they felt her terror as she hid in a closet from her rampaging father.

Griffith respected Gish's professionalism. In 1920, he asked her to direct Dorothy in *Remodeling Her Husband*. Though the movie succeeded, Gish decided that directing was too much of a burden.

By the time of *Orphans of the Storm*, Gish had grown to be a huge star. Griffith, an independent producer, could not afford to pay her what she could command. He suggested that she sign a rich contract with a studio.

Lillian Gish starred in many films during the 1920s, often suggesting projects to producers. Most notable were her roles in *La Boheme* (1926), *The Scarlet Letter* (1926), and *The Wind* (1928). Then movies became talkies, and audiences began to crave tougher female leads. Gish continued to act, but less frequently in movies. Beginning in 1933, she spent more and more time in the theater, starring in such plays as *Hamlet*, *Life with Father*, *The Family Reunion*, and *Uncle Vanya*. She still made occasional movies and, after 1948, appeared from time to time on television. Her last film role was with Bette Davis in the film *The Whales of August*. She was 90 at the time, a complete professional until the end.

Questions

1. Why do you think acting had a bad reputation in the early 1900s?
2. How do you think Gish's childhood shaped her life?
3. What made Gish's acting style different?