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# FOREVER GISH

**D**W. GRIFFITH MASTERED THE CLOSE-UP AS A tool of dramatic intimacy, and if ever there was a face to have mastered it for, Lillian Gish's was it. Seventy-five years later the face is more pillowy, but the essentials haven't changed: It still holds a close-up the way a vase holds a blossom. In *The Whales of August*, a dewy "September Song" in which Gish plays a chirpy Life-and-Hope figure to sister Bette Davis's honking Gloom-and-Doom, she's as pure and lucid a presence as she was in those early silent masterpieces *Broken Blossoms*, *Way Down East* and *The Wind*. *The Whales of August* is not a great movie, but it's our only real look at Lillian Gish in half a century.

Gish's face is a clear spring—you can see all the way to the source of her emotions. She could be credibly human in the most ridiculous, idealized roles. (For *The Birth of a Nation* Griffith made her a symbol of lily-white femininity; in his view the Klan was born to save Lillian Gish from the darkies.) In her 90s now, she both looks and moves the way she did in 1919 as Griffith's little blossom girl: she has the same fixed stare, dreamy, wide-apart eyes and wind-kissed hair. Hunched over, clinging to her shawl like a dream, she has a face that seems always in repose no matter what flickers across it.

In the silents she was slung about, beaten and storm-tossed; but her face betrays little of that or of the martyrdom she suffered in her most astonishing performance as Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. The secret may be that she never married (she was chased by many but never caught) or that she has worked only sparingly onscreen since 1934, most notably in Charles Laughton's thriller *The Night of the Hunter* and also on television. In Robert Altman's *A Wedding* she was a dying matriarch, and in Alan Alda's *Sweet Liberty* she played a dotty grandmother, but those were yo-yo parts. It's her work in *The Whales of August* that once again establishes her as an indelible screen presence—still an ideal, an unbroken blossom. As a title card in *Broken Blossoms* puts it: "Her beauty, so long hidden, shines out of her like a poem."

DAVID EDELSTEIN ■



LILLIAN GISH, AT 32, IN VICTOR SJÖSTRÖM'S 1928 SILENT MASTERPIECE THE WIND.