Debbie and Julie Study Guide

Debbie and Julie by Doris Lessing

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Introduction

"Debbie and Julie," a matter-of-fact fictional account of teenage pregnancy, opens Doris Lessing's 1989 collection of stories and sketches about London titled *The Real Thing*. This volume, written toward the end of Lessing's long, varied, and prolific career, represents a return to the realistic style with which she first gained her literary reputation in the 1950s and '60s. Though *The Real Thing* is not considered to be among Lessing's most significant works, critics have singled out "Debbie and Julie" for praise as a well-crafted and emotionally wrenching example of Lessing's talent. The story touches on highly relevant issues, such as teen pregnancy, runaways, and parent-child relationships, and serves as an excellent introduction to Lessing's lengthy body of work.

The story opens with Julie, the protagonist, in labor and leaving the London apartment of Debbie, a prostitute who took her in when she ran away from home five months earlier. Throughout the dramatic events that follow—Julie's solitary delivery and abandonment of a baby girl and her return to the cold and conservative home of her parents—Julie thinks about all she has learned from her trusting and frank relationship with Debbie. Throughout her many experiments with fiction, Lessing has shown an abiding interest in how individuals—especially women and girls—cope psychologically and practically with society's labels, assumptions, and unwritten rules. Lessing portrays Julie's thought process in an understated, realistic style, using the teenager's harrowing experience to explore issues of intimacy, morality, and identity in a way that is both accessible and complex.

Author Biography

On October 22, 1919, Lessing was born Doris May Tayler in Persia (now Iran), where her parents, both British citizens, were living at the time. Her father, a disabled veteran of World War I, worked at a British bank there until moving the family, when Lessing was five, to colonial Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) with the hopes of getting rich on farming and panning for gold. However, the family continued to struggle financially. Of Lessing's African childhood, critic Mona Knapp writes in her critical study *Doris Lessing*, "Her solitary hours roughing it in the bush were an antidote to the maternal pressure to be dainty and ladylike. During these years, distaste for traditional feminine roles was instilled in young Doris Tayler—an aversion the later Doris Lessing will never lose."

In Southern Rhodesia, Lessing was educated first at a convent school, then at an all-girl's school run by the government. She was an avid reader and an excellent student but dropped out of school at age thirteen, never to continue her formal education. Committed to writing, she began to publish short stories at age eighteen. When she was twenty, Lessing married Frank Wisdom, a much older man. They quickly had two children, then divorced four years later, in 1943. Her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), is based closely upon the failed marriage. In the early 1940s, Lessing became involved in the Communist Party, with which she dissolved all ties a decade later. In connection to her political activities, she met Gottfried Lessing. They were married from 1945 to 1949 and had one son.

In 1949 Lessing left Africa and her family— including the two children from her first marriage— behind. She settled in London, which was to become her beloved adopted home. However, she drew on the scenes and settings of her colonial African childhood throughout her career as a writer. Her outspoken views on colonialism, racism, and feminism grew out of these formative early experiences. In cosmopolitan London, Lessing began life anew as a writer. Her debut novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, was met with strong critical praise. Lessing moved on to publish the five novels of her autobiographical "Children of Violence" series in less than a decade. She followed with *The Golden Notebook*, published in 1962, an experimental narrative in diary form that became her best known work. While she earned her literary reputation on psychologically honest realism, Lessing's numerous novels of the 1970s and 1980s became more mystical. She also wrote a number of what she calls "inner space" science fiction novels, including her "Canopus in Argos" series.

Lessing has continued to publish prolifically into her old age, moving freely from science fiction, nonfiction, and drama back to the autobiography and psychological realism of her roots. She is the recipient of numerous awards and honors. Throughout her many works, Lessing has maintained an interest in ideology and the assumptions underlying people's most basic life choices.

Plot Summary

The story opens with Julie, the pregnant teenager who is its protagonist, looking at herself in the mirror. She is in the London apartment of Debbie, a prostitute who took her in five months earlier, when she ran away from home to hide her condition from her parents. Julie is now in labor, and Debbie, who had promised to help her, is out of the country with a man. Julie is surprised that the other people in the apartment—from whom she has managed to keep her pregnancy a secret—do not seem to notice that her water has broken and that she is soaked with sweat. She leaves a note for Debbie with her home address and gets a bag she had prepared ahead of time. As she is about to leave, she goes back and takes extra towels from Debbie's bathroom, reflecting on the older woman's generosity toward her.

According to her plan, Julie takes a bus to another part of town where she knows there is an unlocked shed in an abandoned lot. It is sleeting, and she is in pain. When she gets to the shed, there is a large dog in front of the door. She throws a brick at it, and the dog runs into the shed where she is planning to give birth. She soon realizes that it is a starving stray and allows it to stay with her. She doesn't know what to do next. She takes off her underwear and calls out quietly for Debbie. She is in agony and feels very lonely. She squats against the wall and soon delivers the baby.

She has supplies for wrapping the baby and cutting its umbilical cord. When she picks up the baby, she is surprised that she feels happy and proud. She examines it, seeing that it is healthy and noticing that it is a girl. She delivers the afterbirth, which she allows the hungry dog to devour. She dresses, puts the bundled baby inside of her coat, and goes out into the street. She goes into a phone booth, puts the baby on the floor, and leaves.

Julie then goes to a nearby pub and uses its bathroom to clean herself up. She watches through the pub's window as a couple goes into the phone booth, finds the baby, and calls for an ambulance. It had been her plan for the baby to be found and taken somewhere safe, but Julie nevertheless feels sad and empty as she heads back out into the rain. She gets on the subway and heads home to her parents' house in a nearby suburb.

When Julie arrives home, her father, Len, answers the door. She is surprised by how small and ordinary he looks; her fear of him is what drove her to run away from home in the first place. Len calls for her mother, and they invite her in. Her parents are crying. They treat her politely, promising not to ask her "awkward questions." Julie asks for something to eat and a bath. She bathes quickly and goes back downstairs to her parents. As she eats the meager sandwich her mother has prepared, she thinks of the exotic and plentiful food that Debbie provided her while she was pregnant. Julie tells her parents she'd been staying with a girl, and they are relieved that she was not with a boyfriend. At this point, Julie reflects back on the single sexual encounter that led to her pregnancy.

Julie feels that she can see her parents more clearly now. Compared to Debbie, they seem repressed and cold. She thinks about Debbie's situation as a prostitute and her reasons for taking Julie in and caring for her. She remembers spending the night in Debbie's bed and thinks about the lack of physical affection in her own family. A news item comes on the television. It is about an abandoned baby found in a phone booth, Julie's baby. Julie is worried that her parents will put the pieces together, but they do not. Instead, her father mentions Julie's aunt, Jessie, who, he reveals, got pregnant out of wedlock as a teenager and kept the baby. Len cries as he tells the story. He had feared that this was what had happened to Julie and is now relieved because he thinks that it did not. Julie is shocked by this revelation. To keep herself from crying, she excuses herself to go to bed. She first apologizes to her parents, and they accept. She is confused because she realizes that if she had told her parents about her pregnancy, they would not have kicked her out. She wonders about her own future and tries to imagine a life with her baby, living either with Debbie or with her parents. She dismisses both options and starts thinking about moving to London as soon as she has finished high school. As she drifts off to sleep, she tries to reassure herself that she has proven that she can do anything she wants to do.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

As this story begins, Julie, the story's main character, is in labor. Discovering that she was pregnant five months earlier, she has run away from home and made her way to London, where she was taken in by a prostitute named Debbie. Although Debbie had promised Julie that she would help her give birth to the baby, when the time finally arrives, Debbie is out of the country, and Julie is alone to manage the birth.

As Julie prepares to leave Debbie's apartment, she is puzzled by the fact that no one there seems to realize that she is pregnant. Her water has broken, soaking her clothes, and her face is flushed with pain. Even so, the other people in the apartment do not seem to notice her or her predicament.

Julie leaves the apartment briefly and then returns to retrieve more towels that she adds to the bag that she had prepared for this occasion. As she retrieves the towels, Julie recalls the day she met Debbie; she had just arrived in London alone and scared. Rather than sending her home, Debbie had taken her in and from that day forward, had shared her home and possessions with Julie and even made sure Julie had proper medical care.

Satisfied that she has everything she needs, Julie leaves the apartment and heads down to the street to catch the bus. It is evening and there is a cold rain falling. Exiting the bus three stops later, she makes her way to an abandoned shed. As she walks toward the shed, she is surprised and frightened to find a dog near the shed's entrance. Although the dog seems at first to be vicious, Julie knows from the continual trickle of water running down her legs and throbbing pain in her back that she has little time to waste. In an effort to scare the dog, she throws a brick at it, but this only causes the animal to retreat inside the shed. Julie follows and is relieved to find that the dog is a mangy, malnourished stray that will most likely not harm her.

Next, Julie begins the process of preparing for the baby's birth. As she spreads out a blanket that she had left during an earlier visit to the shed, her thoughts turn again to Debbie. She is disappointed that Debbie was not with her, especially since she had assured her that she would. Julie's thoughts are quickly interrupted by another wave of pain and soon, the baby is born.

As the baby lay on the floor, Julie begins the process of cutting the umbilical cord. As she does this, the dog looks on, its appetite made even more intense by the smell of blood. After cutting the cord, Julie turns her attention to the baby who, up to this point, has not made a sound. She wraps the baby in one of the towels she had packed and as she lifts the baby girl, from the ground, she hears her daughter's first cry.

Julie is unnerved by the baby's cries and is not sure what to do. She does know from the books she has read that she cannot leave the shed until she delivers the afterbirth. This happens a few minutes later, and the dog quickly eats it. As Julie prepares to leave the shed, she contemplates leaving the baby, but knowing the dog would likely eat her, she quickly dismisses the idea. Therefore, she hides the baby in her coat and goes back into the cold, rainy night.

Julie walks directly to a telephone box that she had found when she planned the place of her baby's birth. Quickly checking the surrounding area, she is satisfied that there is no one around, and so she places the baby on the floor of the telephone box and walks away.

Julie makes her way to a nearby pub and goes directly to the ladies room the wash up. When she finishes, she goes to the bar, orders a drink and then goes to a window where she can clearly see the telephone box. Before long, a young couple walking by the telephone box notices the baby. They stop, and while the young lady comforts the baby, her male companion telephones for an ambulance. The ambulance arrives and takes the baby and the young couple to the hospital. As the ambulance pulls away, Julie leaves the pub.

As Julie returns to the cold, rainy street, her thoughts turn once again to Debbie and she wonders where her friend is. Debbie and many of the women who frequently come to her apartment travel with their clients quite often, something that Debbie tells Julie she too will be able to do some day. For now, Julie only wants to go home and so she goes to the Underground train station and to begin her journey.

Drawing closer to her home, she discards her blood soaked coat and hopes that her disheveled appearance does not betray her. When she reaches her parents' home, she rings the bell. Before long, her father answers the door, and because he is startled to see her, he calls for his wife. Julie's mother – Anne – comes to the door and ushers Julie inside. Julie's father – Len – noticing that Julie is cold and wet, tells Anne to get her a cup of tea.

As Julie sits waiting for her tea, she realizes that the ordeal of childbirth has left her in pain. She also notices that her parents remain physically distant from each other and from her. As they sit in the family's living room, Julie's parents assure her that they will not ask her questions regarding her disappearance. Their dismissive attitude angers Julie and she senses a familiar feeling of irritation toward her parents.

Desperate for a bath, Julie tells her mother that she fell in the street and wants to clean up. Anne tells her to go for a bath while she makes Julie some sandwiches. Julie goes to her bedroom, finds some clean clothes and then goes to the bathroom for her bath. As she dresses, she realizes that soon her breasts will become engorged with milk. She knows that she will be able to keep this development from her parents as well since they have long respected her privacy. Again, her thoughts turn to Debbie and the casual atmosphere of her apartment. Finding that she is near tears, Julie admonishes herself to not cry.

Julie notices that her parents have been crying when she returns downstairs. She devours the two sandwiches her mother made and Anne, thinking that Julie has not had enough to eat, goes to the kitchen to get bread, jam and more tea. As she eats, Julie tells her parents that she has spent the last five months with "a girl" named Debbie. She assures her parents that she has been well taken care of.

When Len expresses surprise that Julie has been with a girl rather than a boy as they had assumed, Julie assures them that she has indeed been with a girl this entire time. As she does this, her mind wanders back to the incident that resulted in her pregnancy and ensuing decision to leave home. Her thoughts are interrupted by Anne who asks Julie if she will return to school. Julie says she will and then once again gets lost in her thoughts, wondering if she should tell her parents more about her disappearance.

As she watched her parents, she yearns to be held and comforted by her mother, yet she knows that this is not something that her parents are comfortable doing. In contrast to the demonstrative people living in Debbie's apartment, Julie's parents are methodical people who seem to thrive on routine and regular habits.

Once again, Julie's thoughts turn to her time spent with Debbie. While Julie is aware that Debbie has had a hard life, she is not fully aware of the circumstances and she wonders if Debbie originally arrived in London alone, scared and pregnant, just like her. Then, her thoughts turn to the nights she spent being comforted by Debbie in Debbie's bed. Again, she compares this to her parents who spend their nights in separate beds.

As Julie's thoughts return to her immediate surroundings, she notices that her parents have turned on the television and are watching the late news. One of the stories is about the discovery of Julie's baby girl in the telephone box. In an effort to distract her parents' attention from this story, she asks why the family does not own a dog while her father wonders aloud how Jessie, Julie's aunt, feels when she hears stories about abandoned babies. After some prompting, Len tells Julie that Jessie had become pregnant at age seventeen and despite her parents' protests, decided to keep the baby. Len says that he and Anne had feared that the same thing happened to Julie and that is why she left home. Julie asks what happened to the baby and is surprised to find that it is her cousin Freda.

Julie eventually leaves her parents to go to bed. She is confused and realizes that she could have come home with her baby, and in the end, her parents would probably have let her stay. She calls out to Debbie, asking her for guidance. Then, her thoughts turn toward the future. Julie decides that when she finishes school, she will go to London, get a job and find her baby. Then, realizing that this is probably a silly idea, her thoughts turn to her Aunt Jessie's house and how much she enjoys spending time there. She realizes perhaps for the first time, how similar it is to Debbie's apartment.

Julie finally realizes that if she brings her baby home, she will not be able to leave again until she marries. Therefore, she decides to finish school and then leave home to live in London. She knows that she will be fine; she managed to hide her pregnancy from her apartment-mates as well as her parents, and she gave birth by herself and made sure

her baby was cared for. Just before falling asleep, Julie finally realizes that she can do whatever she sets her mind to.

Analysis

Doris Lessing's short story, "Debbie and Julie," appears in her collection of stories entitled *The Real Thing*. Told from the viewpoint of Julie, a teenage girl, "Debbie and Julie" is, at least on the surface, a story of teenage pregnancy and coming of age. Delving further into the story, however, there is one theme that presents itself at numerous points throughout the story: that of physical and emotional abandonment.

The notion of abandonment is first introduced when Julie's pregnancy forces her to abandon her studies, her parents and her home and leave for London so that she can conceal her pregnancy from her parents. Once there, she meets Debbie who gives her shelter, food and emotional support for the duration of her pregnancy, only to physically abandon her as the baby's birth draws near. After delivering the baby, Julie abandons her in a telephone booth. When she returns home to her parents, Julie finds that while her parents welcome her back into the family's home, they have abandoned her emotionally. As the story concludes, Julie makes up her mind to leave home again as soon as she completes her schooling.

One can argue that since Julie and her parents did not have a close emotional relationship before she left home, their reserved reaction to her return cannot be described as abandonment. Even so, it is clear that when she returned, Julie was in desperate need of comfort. This becomes evident when, after having bathed and eaten, Julie, lost in her own thoughts, thinks of the nights she spent in Debbie's bed. She longs for her mother's comfort: "Suppose she said to her mother now, Mum, let me come into your bed tonight, I'm scared, I've missed you…" Knowing that such an appeal would only embarrass her mother, Julie can only cry and secretly long for her parents' comfort. At this point, we know that Julie has finally come to terms with her parents' emotional distance.

Another point that bears at least some discussion is the contrast between Anne and Len's demeanor when they are with their daughter versus that when they are alone. While they appear to not be able to bring themselves to physically comfort their daughter, it is clear that they are not totally devoid of emotion. Recall that when Julie returns home, upon answering the door, Len calls to Anne so that he can retreat from the door without Julie seeing his tears. Similarly, when Julie goes upstairs to bathe, she returns to find her parents crying. While their reasons for withholding physical comfort are unclear, we know that it has had a remarkable effect on Julie's life.

In some respects, Debbie's physical abandonment of Julie is not much different from Julie's parents' emotional distance. Why, then, does Julie continue to turn to Debbie – even if only in thought - in times of need? Most likely, the reason lies in the fact that Julie sees Debbie not only as a friend and protector, but also – despite the fact that she is a prostitute – as a role model. Remember, when Julie arrived in London, she was

alone and scared. As she stood on the platform at the train station, she was aware of the many people who could have brought her harm, or even worse, sent her home. Instead, she met Debbie who provided her with acceptance, food, shelter and guidance. She demonstrated that she was someone that Julie could trust as evidenced by the fact that she did not betray Julie by divulging her pregnancy to others.

While Julie cannot be entirely sure, she surmises that Debbie may have originally come to London under the same circumstances as Julie. This would account for her loyalty and support. Regardless of the reason, Julie is grateful to Debbie for her unconditional friendship and protection, but mostly, she is grateful for the emotional support and comfort she received, which, based on what we have learned about Julie's home life, is something that has been decidedly missing from her life thus far.

Julie's Aunt Jessie provides a sharp contrast to her relationship with Debbie. Recall that Jessie, like Julie, endured a teenage pregnancy. Unlike Julie, however, Jessie decided to inform her parents of her pregnancy and keep her baby. While Jessie eventually did marry, her husband is described as being not very ambitious and somewhat "beneath" Jessie. The implication here is that Jessie's decision to keep her baby has had a significant negative impact on her life; while she is fortunate to have been able to marry, her marriage is far from ideal. Julie recognizes this and realizes that the same fate will befall her should she attempt to retrieve her baby. On the other hand, as Julie evaluates Debbie's lifestyle, she comes to understand that although Debbie seems to be strong and in control, she longs for a relationship with "just one man." This is a key point because it tells us that Debbie, despite her outward show of confidence and independence, is, at least to some extent, emotionally dependent as well.

It is interesting to watch Julie's character develop and even flourish upon her return home. Although the story begins after Julie had left home, based on the descriptions offered, we are given to assume that before her pregnancy she was a docile, obedient girl who took great measures to ensure she did not disappoint her parents. In contrast, when she returns home, she seems to view her parents in a new light and has little patience for their emotional distance and predictable lifestyle.

It is also interesting to compare Julie's sense of self at the beginning and the end of the story. As the story begins, she is described as "the fat girl in the sky blue coat." Additionally, there are numerous references to her fear and uncertainty; she is described at different times as feeling ill prepared, ignorant, and nearly in a state of panic. She attributes many of her feelings to the fact that Debbie is not with her and believes that if her friend were there, she would have no trouble getting through the baby's birth.

In contrast, as the story ends, she is firm in her resolve to finish school before setting out to begin the next phase of her life. As she recounts the events that have taken place during the last five months of her life, Julie realizes that she is emotionally stronger than she originally thought and comes to understand that her destiny is entirely within her control.

Characters

American Man

When Julie goes into labor, Debbie is not there to help her as she had promised. Instead, she has extended a trip with a client, an American television producer, who seems like a promising prospect. Debbie has always wished for "just one regular customer" or "just one man."

Anne

Anne is Julie's mother. She and her husband, Len, accept Julie back into their home when she returns after a five-month absence. She encourages Len not to ask Julie any questions about where she has been. Anne is a figure of repressed emotion. Anne and Len sleep in separate beds. They are quiet and seldom express emotion. Anne is frugal with food and physically undemonstrative. She was older when she had Julie, a fact that Julie thinks might explain the lack of vitality and affection in her upbringing. Comparing her with Debbie, the mother figure who took her in, Anne seems "empty and sad" to Julie.

The Baby

The baby, also known as Rosie, is the name the nurses give to Julie's baby after she is discovered abandoned in a telephone booth and brought to the hospital. Julie has mixed feelings toward the baby. She tries not to look at her so she will not love her, but when she first holds her, she can't help feeling proud and happy. She later thinks of the baby by name and tries to imagine a future with her, but cannot.

Uncle Bob

Uncle Bob is Auntie Jessie's husband. It is revealed that he married her despite the fact that she had already given birth to another man's child out of wedlock. Julie sees Uncle Bob as unimpressive, "Auntie Jessie's shadow, not up to much." She now understands why her aunt agreed to marry him.

Debbie

Debbie is a call girl, a high-status prostitute. She does not have a pimp but runs her own business out of the apartment that she shares with Julie. She appears to Julie to be independent and in control, despite the fact that she does not have what she wants out of life. Debbie is considerably older than Julie, with a painful past that she will not discuss. She is worldly and uninhibited—a figure of knowledge, teaching Julie "what

things cost, the value of everything, and of people, of what you did for them and what they did for you." Despite a sharp and savvy exterior, she is warm, protective, and generous toward Julie, giving to her freely and never asking for anything in return.

Debbie extends a trip with one of her clients and is therefore not available to help Julie when she goes into labor as she had promised to do. Julie is disappointed in her and feels lonely, but she also understands Debbie's needs and priorities. Julie misses Debbie greatly during her labor and after she returns to her repressive family home. An unconventional mother figure, Debbie stands in vital contrast to Julie's own bloodless, undemonstrative mother. Julie is grateful to Debbie for the wisdom she has imparted.

Derek

Derek is Debbie's "real" boyfriend—not one of her clients. Derek likes Julie, but she does not like him, thinking him not good enough for Debbie.

Freda

Freda is Julie's cousin. Julie learns that she is a "love child," born out of wedlock to her aunt Jessie when she was a teenager.

Billy Jayson

Billy Jayson is the boy who impregnated Julie during one brief sexual encounter in their school cloak room. Julie never told him about her pregnancy and assumes that he never suspected it.

Auntie Jessie

Jessie is Julie's aunt. At the end of the story, Julie's father reveals to her that Jessie had given birth to her first child, cousin Freda, out of wedlock at age seventeen. This limited her prospects, and she married soon after. Auntie Jessie represents an option that Julie has not taken. Jessie's noisy, exciting house reminds her in some way of Debbie's.

Julie

Julie is the protagonist of the story. She is a teenager from a London suburb who runs away from home when she is four months pregnant, fearing her father's wrath and her family's rejection. She is taken in by Debbie, a call girl, who identifies with her plight and protects and nurtures her during her pregnancy. The story relates the events of Julie's labor and childbirth and her subsequent return to her family home.

Julie, a "sensible girl" from a conservative family, flees to London, lives with a prostitute, and then gives birth alone in an abandoned shed. She leaves home an innocent and returns with a new ability to understand her family and herself. Though Debbie never appears in the story, the narrative centers on her influence on Julie as she makes this passage. Julie learns from Debbie an attitude of autonomy and toughness but, more importantly, the value of intimacy and emotional expressiveness. Julie has been raised in a cold, repressive family. Her first sexual encounter is devoid of love or meaning. Debbie forges an important emotional connection with Julie, which gives the girl the strength to act in her own best interest and allows her to see her parents' weaknesses and limitations.

Lebanese Man

One of the shady figures who hang around at Debbie's apartment is a Lebanese man who is a drug dealer. Oblivious to her pregnancy, he is there when Julie, in the midst of labor pains, leaves the apartment to give birth and then go home. He had once tried to procure Julie from Debbie for sex, but Debbie refused him. Julie is afraid of him.

Len

Len is Julie's father. She attributes her original motivation to run away to him, assuming that if he learned of her pregnancy, he would kick her out anyway. She is intimidated by him, seeing him as powerful, but this changes when she returns home after she has given birth. He looks old and gray to her, and she sees him, for the first time, as vulnerable. He cries, and she can tell that she has hurt him. She understands that he feared her moral corruption, and she lets him believe that this fear was groundless by assuring him that she had been staying with a girl, not a boyfriend, for the past months. He accedes to his wife's admonishments not to ask Julie any uncomfortable questions, but at the story's end, he reveals a shocking skeleton in the family closet—that Julie's aunt Jessie had gotten pregnant out of wedlock as a teenager.

Rosie

See The Baby

Themes

Knowledge and Ignorance

"Debbie and Julie" tells of the knowledge that is earned through the trials of life experience. Julie, its teenage protagonist, runs away from her conservative parents in order to hide her pregnancy from them. She is taken in by a kind prostitute and survives the terrifying ordeal of giving birth alone in an abandoned shed. After a five-month absence, she returns home, a more mature and insightful person. Most significantly, she is now able to see her parents with more critical distance and more sympa- thetic understanding. At the end of the story, she is in a position to consider her future options with greater freedom and realism than she was before her accidental pregnancy.

Julie attributes much of her newfound knowledge to Debbie, the woman who took her in. Debbie is worldly. She has had a hard life as a prostitute but has won a measure of independence with her own business. When Julie arrived in London, she was "innocent and silly." She has learned from Debbie "the value of everything" and "what had to be paid." In addition to this lesson in pragmatic selfpreservation, however, she has also learned the value of emotional openness and expressiveness. Debbie is uninhibited and nonjudgmental—a stark contrast to Julie's parents, who live a narrow and repressed existence. Julie realizes that her parents are ignorant of many of life's pleasures and opportunities and that they choose to remain blinded to some of life's agonies, as well: "It was as if they had switched themselves off."

Love and Intimacy

The title names the relationship between Debbie and Julie as the most significant one in the story, despite the fact that Debbie is absent throughout the events of the narrative. The love between Debbie and Julie is stronger than the love between Julie and her mother or her newborn baby, let alone the boy who impregnated her. Debbie helps Julie when she is in need, accepts her without judgment, and is demonstrative and generous in her love. In return, Julie understands Debbie's vulnerabilities: she "knew she was the only person who really understood Debbie." She also holds up Debbie as a model, having learned from her the value of trust and intimacy. There is some irony in this fact, since Debbie—looking out for her own interests— abandons Julie when she is most in need. This can be seen as a thematic echo of Julie's pragmatic decision to abandon her newborn daughter.

In the months preceding the events of the story, Debbie has taken on a mothering role, protecting Julie and nurturing her physically and emotionally through her pregnancy. Julie longingly recalls Debbie's warmth and love after she has returned home to her own parents. At several points, she makes explicit comparisons between her mother's capacity for love and Debbie's. She recalls curling up with Debbie when she was afraid to sleep alone and the intimate gesture of Debbie's hand touching her pregnant belly.

Upon her return home, Julie reflects that her mother would be embarrassed if Julie asked to share her bed with her. "In this family, they simply did not touch each other." Julie was not able even to tell her mother about her pregnancy, let alone share mutual emotional vulnerabilities and comfort.

Choices and Consequences

Julie is a character who has faced the difficult consequences of her choices. She becomes pregnant accidentally and decides that she must leave home to avoid having her condition discovered by her parents, an option she considers unthinkable. When Debbie sees Julie arrive on a London train platform, she seems to understand implicitly how narrow and dangerous Julie's choices are and offers to take her in. Debbie, who has had a difficult past, represents one set of consequences for being a sexually active woman: she has become a prostitute and relies on men for her livelihood, if not for her emotional sustenance. Julie's Auntie Jessie represents a different set of consequences: as a teenager, she admitted to her parents that she was pregnant, kept the baby, and later married a man who was not good enough for her. She too is dependent on a man, though she lives a "respectable" life, and her options and limitations are very different from Debbie's. At the story's close, Julie tries to imagine a range of different options for her future, reassuring herself that she is strong and, perhaps, capable of independence that will be greater than either Debbie's or Jessie's. She also recognizes what her choices have cost her; she cannot imagine a way to include her newborn daughter in her future.

Style

Point of View

"Debbie and Julie" opens with the image of Julie looking in the mirror and closes with her private thoughts as she drifts off to sleep, suggesting that the story is centrally concerned with Julie's consciousness and self-perception. It is narrated from a third-person point of view. The narrator is not a participant in the events described but has a point of view closely aligned with that of Julie, with full access to her inner thoughts and feelings. This is described in literary terms as limited omniscience. The narrator's omniscience or "all-knowingness" is limited because it does not extend beyond Julie's consciousness. For example, readers aren't given access to Julie's father's experience of her homecoming, only Julie's perceptions of his experience.

Structure

"Debbie and Julie" concerns extreme changes taking place in the protagonist's life and in her outlook, and its plot reflects these changes. Julie is a "plump, fresh-faced girl" who has always done well in her suburban school. Her parents consider her "sensible," a "good girl." When she gets pregnant, runs away to London, and becomes part of Debbie's unconventional lifestyle, she discovers a new part of herself and new ways of understanding other people. The story has two distinct parts, highlighting the strong contrast between Julie's experiences and identity in London and her experiences and identity at home.

In the first part, Julie has the extreme experience of giving birth alone in an abandoned shed. This terrifying episode concludes her eye-opening, five-month stay in London with Debbie, which is described throughout the story in brief flashbacks and recollections. In the second part, Julie takes a subway ride and returns to the "normal" life she had always known with her parents, who, themselves largely unchanged, remain ignorant of all that she has been through. "It was hard enough for her to believe that she could sit here in her pretty little dressing gown, smelling of bath powder, when she had given birth by herself in a dirty shed with only a dog for company." Much of the story's drama is based on the contrast between its two parts, particularly the difference between how Julie now sees herself and how her parents will continue seeing her.

Symbolism

Though the story is narrated in a realistic mode, with attention to concrete detail and closely observed behavior, Lessing also employs understated symbolism to amplify her ideas about the characters and their situations. Like its structure, the symbolism in "Debbie and Julie" is based on contrast. For example, at the beginning of the story, Julie is wearing a once-fashionable sky-blue coat borrowed from Debbie. It reflects her worldly, sometimes shocking, experiences in London, as well as her close friendship

with Debbie. Debbie lends her part of her identity, and this helps Julie through her solitary trial of labor and delivery. Julie sheds the coat just before entering her parents' house, soon taking a bath and changing into a pretty and childish- looking pink dressing gown. This suggests a return to her former identity, which is meant to reassure as well as to deceive her parents. Whereas Debbie and Julie shared everything, from clothes to feelings, Julie and her parents maintain a cautious distance from each other.

Throughout the story, Lessing endows dirt and cleanliness with symbolic meaning. Julie worries about her post-labor bleeding dirtying the "fluffy pink towels, which her mother changed three times a week." These towels are implicitly contrasted with those she takes freely from Debbie's apartment just before she leaves, knowing that she will bleed all over them. Dirtiness is an intrinsic part of life in London with Debbie, reflecting Debbie's "dirty" profession and Julie's own compromised situation. It is, however, in many ways a relief compared to the clean, orderly, respectable life Julie had always known with her parents, who are cold and rigid. The order and tidiness of Len and Anne's house is contrasted not only with Debbie's apartment but also with the more extreme and literal dirtiness of the shed where Julie gives birth. Julie's parents shy away from the symbolic messiness of intimacy, creating a home that is emotionally sterile.

Historical Context

Teen Runaways in Great Britain

In 1989, the same year that Lessing published "Debbie and Julie," the British government recognized the problem of teen runaways by passing the Children Act, which made provisions for outreach to runaways and offered some sources of refuge for them. However, the great majority of British runaways do not receive aid from any agency or organization. Because of their wariness of authority figures, runaways are notoriously hard to trace or study. Based on police reports, approximately 43,000 children and teenagers under the age of sixteen run away from home each year in Great Britain. However, there is evidence that this statistic may minimize the problem, since many runaways are not reported missing by their families.

The majority of runaways in Great Britain are between fourteen and sixteen years old, with the gender ratio of these roughly equal. (Younger runaways are more likely to be boys.) Problems at home are the most frequently cited reasons for running away. Many runaways report arguments, sexual and emotional abuse, and domestic violence in the homes from which they flee. At least sixty percent of runaways come from homes where a divorce or other split has occurred. A high proportion of children and teens in foster care also run away.

Though runaways describe some positive results of the decision to leave home, they are a highly vulnerable population, subject to many risks. A majority of young people reported being frightened, a quarter physically injured, and one in nine sexually assaulted while on the run. Many were hungry or otherwise physically deprived, leading more than half to admit to stealing. Furthermore, a high incidence of self-destructive behavior, including suicide attempts and drug use, reflects the emotional toll on the life of a runaway.

Julie's experience as a runaway is quite atypical. First, she runs away from a stable family. Second, she quickly finds a relatively safe and secure place to stay. However, her decision-making process reflects a feeling characteristic among runaways that staying at home is an intolerable option. Despite her luck in finding a place to live, Julie is particularly vulnerable because her pregnancy places her at a greater physical and emotional risk than the average runaway.

Teen Pregnancy on the Rise

Julie's pregnancy reflects a dramatic demographic trend. In the 1980s the teen pregnancy rate in Great Britain rose to become one of the highest in Europe. Only a decade earlier, the country's teen pregnancy rate was reported as average for the continent. Some experts attributed the troubling rise to Britain's economic problems, supported by the fact that poorer areas had far higher teen pregnancy rates than the

rest of the country. Youngsters with few hopes for the future saw little reason not to get pregnant. Several cases involving pregnant preteens were highlighted in the press, bringing widespread attention to the problem. Though this was a period of social conservatism, such publicity led to activism for earlier and more extensive sex education and easier access to contraception for teens.

Though she apparently did not consider it, abortion would have been a legal option for Julie. Abortion has been legal in Great Britain since 1968 and may be performed up to twenty-eight weeks into the pregnancy, or through the second trimester. It is covered as a medical procedure under the public health care system, in which anyone over the age of sixteen can consent to his or her own medical treatment. Girls under sixteen may also decide independently on abortion if their doctors find them capable of making such a decision, but most doctors require parental consent.

Critical Overview

Lessing earned critical success with her very first novel, 1950's *The Grass is Singing*, and has, in the half century since, grown in stature to be considered one of the most important writers of her time. She has never rested on her laurels, instead continuing to write at a furious pace and to experiment with both style and subject matter.

Her fame reached a high point in 1962 with the publication of her seventeenth book. *The Golden Notebook* takes the form of a diary, revealing the tensions in one modern woman's relationships and commitments and expressing her disillusionment with feminism, Communism, and other collective movements. Though critical of organized feminism, the novel was embraced by feminists around the world. This was the first of Lessing's works to be published in many languages, and it brought her significant international prominence. It remains Lessing's best known and most highly esteemed effort.

While her early works, including *The Golden Notebook*, were grounded in social and psychological realism and centrally concerned with her characters' relationships to social and ideological movements, in the late 1960s, Lessing's work underwent an important change. Beginning with 1969's *Four- Gated City* (the last volume in her autobiographical "Children of Violence" series), her writing became more mystical and preoccupied with the expansion of consciousness. Critics attribute this shift to Lessing's growing interest in Sufism, an ancient cult of mysticism. Some also see connections between her ideas in this period and those of contemporary theories of psychiatry. In the 1970s she continued to pursue this path, publishing a number of "inner space" books that explore concepts of consciousness, madness, and sanity. While these novels have a pessimistic tone, her next series, begun in 1979, begins to envision positive alternatives. The science fiction "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series represents a bold step further away from the realism of Lessing's literary roots. "With this series," writes Mona Knapp in Doris Lessing, "it is necessary to draw an unavoidably simplistic line between the 'old,' realist Lessing and the 'new' Lessing." She goes on to say that "most of her readers identify with one or the other," while few embrace both styles.

After undergoing this dramatic mid-career change in literary identity, Lessing continued to foil those who would wish to label her or her writing. For example, in 1984 she wrote *The Diaries of Jane Sommers* under a pen name in order to dramatize the difficulties that young, unknown authors have getting published. This work echoes the diary form as well as some of the concerns of *The Golden Notebook*. She also returned to autobiography, publishing a two-volume account of her life. Her 1989 publication, *The Real Thing: Stories and Sketches*, can be understood as part of this shift back toward realism.

This volume, in which "Debbie and Julie" appears, combines fiction and nonfiction portraits of life in London. It makes her "beloved adopted home seem like a character in its own right," writes *Maclean's* John Belrose. Many critics responded more favorably to the stories than the sketches. The reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* opines that overall

the volume is "less than substantial, satisfying in short takes, but not a major contribution to her works," while naming "Debbie and Julie" as a "splendid example of Lessing's iridescent prose . . . consist[ing] of tantalizingly unresolved scraps of character and situation." In a warmer review, Eils Lotozo of *The New York Times Book Review* singles out "Debbie and Julie" as "harrowing" and praises Lessing for how, "as always, [she] expertly deciphers the complex relationships that characterize modern life." The *Kirkus Review* also makes note of "Debbie and Julie" as an "especially fine" contribution to the collection, characterizing the story as "almost clinical in the telling but devastating in effect."

Due in part to Lessing's stellar reputation, *The Real Thing* was reviewed widely, but it is generally considered a side note to Lessing's long and varied career, and little critical attention has been paid to the book since its publication. However, in recent years Lessing's reputation overall has continued to shine among scholars. She is the subject of numerous critical studies and dissertations, the recipient of many awards, and she has diverse and loyal fans. Knapp writes that Lessing "thwarts the 'isms' that would otherwise divide her readership. This is the natural result of her books' focus, unchanged over thirty years: they attack compartmentalized thinking and strive toward a vision of the whole rather than the particular."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the theme of motherhood and the contrast between Debbie and Anne as maternal figures.

"Debbie and Julie" concerns a teenager's decision not to take on the responsibilities of motherhood. Julie, the adolescent protagonist of the story, gives birth to a baby daughter and, resisting the positive feelings she has toward the infant, abandons her in telephone booth, a place in which she hopes the baby will be quickly found. Relinquishing her own role as a mother is only one of the ways in which Julie learns hard lessons about motherhood over the course of the events that the story describes. The narrative characterizes Debbie, the prostitute who took Julie in when she ran away from home, as a mother figure and compares her to Anne, the respectable but repressed mother in whom Julie dared not confide.

That Debbie is a mother figure is supported by the fact that she recognizes Julie's vulnerability, takes her into her home, and nurtures her physically and emotionally. Furthermore, Julie speculates that Debbie probably ended a pregnancy or gave up a newborn when she, like Julie, was a vulnerable and impractical teenager. As Debbie is significantly older than Julie, with "wear under her eyes," Julie might now be just about the age Debbie's child would have been. This suggests that their relationship fulfills a mother-daughter intimacy that both have felt missing in their lives. Debbie's maternal qualities are further highlighted through explicit and implicit comparisons between Debbie and Julie's mother, Anne. Debbie and Anne are both flawed mothers. However, the story centers on the positive lessons Debbie has taught Julie about vulnerability and nurturing. In this essay, Debbie and Anne's capacities for mothering will be compared, and the language Lessing uses to characterize love and intimacy will be explored.

The contrast between the characters of Debbie and Anne could hardly be stronger: Debbie is an urban prostitute; Anne is a proper suburban wife. Anne is middle-aged and gray-haired but appears "almost girlish" with "blue eyes full of wounded and uncomprehending innocence"; Debbie has "scarlet lips," "black eyes," and an assertive, knowing attitude. "She made up her lips to be thin and scarlet, just right for the lashing, slashing tongue behind them." Anne wears a "pretty pale blue dress with its nice little collar and the little pearl buttons down the front;" Debbie "might answer the door in her satin camiknickers, those great breasts of hers lolling about." According to these descriptions, Anne probably fits most people's mental image of a "good mother" much more closely than Debbie does. As Anne's appearance suggests, she is predictable, emotionally contained, and traditional. Debbie, on the other hand, is tough, passionate, and unconventional. Furthermore, she exudes an overt sexuality that is conventionally seen as antithetical to motherhood. Through Julie's perceptions, however, Lessing suggests that Debbie's qualities make her a more fit mother than Anne is.

One of the ways that Lessing expresses the difference between Anne's ability to take care of Julie and Debbie's is through their attitudes toward food and feeding, which are

closely associated with mothering. When Julie arrives at her parents' doorstep and, famished after her ordeal, asks for a sandwich, she immediately recognizes that her needs are interfering with her mother's sense of order and propriety. "She knew what had been on those plates was exactly calculated, not a pea or a bit of potato left over," Julie says of the dinner that Len and Anne had eaten earlier. She also knew that "the next proper meal (lunch, tomorrow) would already be on a plate ready to cook, with a plastic film on it, in the fridge." There is nothing in the story to suggest that Julie's family is so poor that they have to count every pea; rather Anne plans the family meals so carefully in order to give her life the structure and predictability that she considers proper. This sense of "right" behavior overrides Anne's ability to recognize and respond to her daughter's particular and changing needs. The coldness and sterility of the imagery in this passage echoes the coldness of the family's interpersonal behavior. It is as if they interact with a "plastic film" between them. They never touch each other, and they never argue. Thus it is not so much that Anne is callous to Julie's needs—whether to her hunger (physical or emotional) or to the terrible dilemma presented by her pregnancy—but that she is simply too far removed from her daughter to ever find out about her needs.

As Julie eats the simple snack of bread, jam, and tea that her mother has brought from the kitchen for her, she remembers the "feasts" that Debbie had provided: "the pizzas that arrived all hours of the day and the night from almost next door, the Kentucky chicken, the special steak feeds when Debbie got hungry, which was often." The word feasts suggests extravagance and celebration, and part of the food's appeal lay in its variety and spontaneity. Debbie is a woman of appetites— physical, sexual, and emotional. She recognizes Julie's literal and symbolic "hungers" because she is in touch with her own: "In the little kitchen was a bowl from Morocco kept piled with fruit. . . . 'You must get enough vitamins,' Debbie kept saying, and brought in more grapes, more apples and pears, let alone fruit Julie had never heard of, like pomegranates and pawpaws." In Anne's kitchen predictability and familiarity are valued; in contrast, Debbie's offerings are a testament to her willingness to experience life in all of its variety. Her wisdom comes from having taken risks and survived trying times; because of this, she is, unlike Julie's real mother, able to understand Julie's plight implicitly and the needs that arise from it.

Anne is responsible in practical ways but inept at intimacy. Though she is as dependable as clockwork in her domestic routine, she is revealed as having been emotionally absent as a mother. Upon returning home, Julie realizes that she has never been able to turn to her mother for the many simple comforts that Debbie spontaneously offered. "I wish I could just snuggle up to Mum and she could hold me and I could go to sleep," Julie thinks at the end of her harrowing day of labor and her uncomfortable homecoming. "Surely this must have happened when [I] was small," she goes on to speculate, "but she could not remember it. In this family, they simply did not touch each other." The only response she can imagine from her mother is embarrassment. The distance and repression in the mother- daughter relationship is echoed in the marriage between Anne and Len. "Each day was a pattern of cups of tea, meals, cups of coffee and biscuits, always at exactly the same times, with bedtime as a goal," when the husband and wife go to sleep in separate beds. Though they provide what is often

valued as an wholesome home environment, Anne and Len seem to have "switched themselves off," leaving little opportunity for emotional connection between parent and child.

While Debbie presents the world with the face of a wily prostitute, someone who has learned, the hard way, the rules of "what things cost, the value of everything, and of people, of what you did for them, and what they did for you," she is also, to Julie, a source of the kind of primal maternal comfort her own mother denied her. Julie sometimes spends the night in Debbie's bed, not at Julie's request but at Debbie's, asked there to assuage Debbie's fear of being alone—a real enough fear for a call girl who is no longer young. Debbie reveals her vulnerabilities to Julie and, in return, is sensitive to Julie's. This mutuality and openness is the key to the intimacy that they share: "Julie lay entangled with Debbie, and they were like two cats that have just finished washing each other and gone to sleep, and Julie knew how terribly she had been deprived at home, and how empty and sad her parents were." Likewise, Debbie receives from Julie a kind of closeness of which she is deprived in her relationships with men, whom she relates to in terms of contractual exchange. Thus Debbie represents two diametrically opposed concepts of intimacy—one, in relation to men, that is a set of carefully negotiated conditions, and the other, in relation to Julie, that is spontaneous and mutual. Debbie gives Julie a sky blue coat, some towels, and a safe place to stay. She assigns a price tag to the most intimate physical acts, but she refuses to take a penny in rent from the teenager, seeming to find reward enough in the friendship that they share and in the promise of Julie's brighter future.

Though Debbie, the amoral prostitute, is revealed as a nurturing woman who teaches Julie some very wholesome lessons about love, she remains a flawed mother figure. Before Julie abandons her infant child in a phone booth, she had been abandoned by her own two mother figures. She has long been abandoned by Anne, by the emotional distance that Anne has established, and she is once again abandoned by Debbie, now in geographical distance. Debbie is out of the country with a client when Julie goes into labor. Though she had promised to help Julie in this time of great need, Debbie is not available for her. She is, instead, catering to her own need to gain security though her sexual relationships with men. Thus, on a cold and rainy night, Julie makes the painful passage into motherhood, alone, in a dirty shed, with only a stray dog for company. Her own shortcomings in fulfilling this momentous role can be attributed to the mother figures that let her down. But it is Debbie's name Julie cries out in the dark.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, Critical Essay on "Debbie and Julie," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she analyzes the unraveling of the character "Julie."

"Debbie and Julie" is one of the so-called "London stories" collected in Lessing's *The Real Thing*. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* called the eighteen pieces in the volume "splendid examples of Lessing's iridescent prose." The reviewer noted, however, that "most consist of tantalizingly unresolved scraps of character and situation." As one of these sketches, the reviewer singled out "Debbie and Julie," which is described as "a grim story about a girl who gives birth alone in a shed." This story, though long at about twenty-five pages, indeed reveals only bare scraps about its main characters and their motivations.

Although Debbie and Julie share title billing, Debbie never actually appears on the pages; away in America as the drama plays out, Debbie exists only in Julie's memory. The action of the story focuses on Julie; the eye of the writer follows her from Debbie's lively apartment, to the decrepit shed where she gives birth, and then back to her parents' silent home outside of London. This eye is distant, however, so Julie's feelings about the cataclysmic events taking place are difficult to gauge. Not until the end of the story is any true glimpse into Julie's personality seen. Another challenge the text poses is its extremely gradual revelation of key characteristics. The story falls into place as the pieces of a puzzle slowly interlock; only upon completion is a cohesive picture created.

The story's opening is a prime example of Lessing's deliberate narrative blurring: "The fat girl in the sky-blue coat again took herself to the mirror." Here Lessing indulges in misrepresentation; as the author, Lessing knows that Julie is not fat but is pregnant. Theoretically, however, the reader may not become aware of this fact until several pages into the story, when Julie is on the cusp of giving birth. The third paragraph begins with another misleading, potentially confusing description. Julie, "so wet she was afraid she would start squelching," worries about "the wet" bleeding through to her coat. Where is the wet coming from? A reader might logically assume that Julie has been outside, but this makes no sense. First, her coat is not wet but her dress is. Second, why would she be concerned that her outer garment gets wet? Third, the reader is told that Julie has been inside all along—she "knew it was cold outside, for she had opened a window to check." The lack of clarity of the opening details challenges the reader early on to take an active role in understanding the story.

And there is a lot to sort out. One issue the reader must grapple with is Julie's place in Debbie's world. It is immediately apparent that Debbie is a prostitute. As Julie recalls in the second paragraph, "[P]eople (men) from everywhere" came to Debbie's flat. As the story opens, Debbie is not present, but a host of other characters are. For example, the "man she [Julie] was afraid of, and who had tried to 'get' her"; a girl who worked for a drug dealer; and "two girls Julie had never seen before, and she supposed they were innocents, as she had been." Julie's subsequent musings on her relationship with

Debbie seem somewhat contradictory. In her five months in London, Julie learned from Debbie "what things cost, the value of everything, and of people, of what you did for them, and what they did for you." Still, "Debbie had never allowed her to pay for anything."

Despite Julie's assertions, a hint of sexual payoff floats in and out of the story. First, and most obviously, Debbie is a prostitute, and the other girls in the story seem well on their way to becoming prostitutes also—the two new girls whom Julie characterizes as "all giggly and anxious to please." Also, Debbie and Julie sometimes shared Debbie's bed, and "if Debbie woke in the night, she might turn to Julie and draw her into an embrace." Even though Debbie "never actually 'did' anything," Julie waited, "for 'something' to happen." An implication that Julie would not be adverse to a sexual relationship with Debbie also arises in different places throughout the story. For one thing, although Julie is pregnant, she is not sexually promiscuous. The "incident in the school cloakroom" that led to her pregnancy she equates more with a "virgin birth." As Julie told Debbie, "He hardly got it in. . . . I didn't think anything had really happened." Julie also is possessive of Debbie, believing that her boyfriend is "not good enough" for her

Despite these allusions, what Julie offers Debbie has nothing to do with sex; rather, it is all about helping out a girl who is young, alone, and pregnant, as Debbie once had been. Although Debbie never talked about it, Julie surmises that she had once "stood very late in a railway station, pregnant, her head full of rubbish about how she would get a job, have the baby, bring it up, find a man who would love her and the baby." Although she rebels against the truth, Julie knows, "It was not she, Julie, who had earned five months of Debbie's love and protection, it was pregnant Julie, helpless and alone." Because of this, Julie has no choice but to return home after giving birth; she cannot stay with Debbie.

Another issue that arises after Julie leaves London is how she feels about the baby whom she deserted in the phone booth. She knows that physically the baby will be cared for, or as she puts it, "safe." However, she thinks little about the child. Instead, upon arriving home, she is concerned with bathing, eating, keeping her pregnancy secret, and, most importantly, seeing her parents through new eyes—Debbie's eyes. When her father opens the door, she thinks,

That can't be him, that can't be my *father*—for he had shrunk and become grey and ordinary, and . . . *what on earth had she been afraid of?* She could just hear what Debbie would say about him! Why, he was nothing at all.

Not until later that evening, when she and her parents are watching television, do her thoughts return to the newborn infant. A newscast announces that a child has been found in a phone booth. "The nurses have called her Rosie," the anchor reports, causing in Julie "[h]ot waves of jealously . . . when she saw how the nurse smiled down at the little face." Julie is even more taken aback by the conversation the report provokes among her and her parents. She learns that her aunt Jessie had been an unwed, teenaged mother herself and had stayed at home with the child until she married and moved into a house with her new husband.

The implications of the long-held family secret put Julie into a brief turmoil as she realizes that "she could be sitting here now, with her baby Rosie," and that "they [her parents] wouldn't have thrown her out." However, Julie soon acknowledges the truth, that "Rosie her daughter could not come here, because she, Julie, could not stand it." With these blunt revelations, Julie's selfishness emerges. She has hurt others: the baby deserted on a rainy night and crying out its "short angry spasms," the disheartened parents, who even upon her return "weep, their bitter faces full of loss," left behind without a word. Julie could never bring Rosie to her parents' home because if she did so, she would have to stay there, just like Aunt Jessie, until she found some weak-willed "shadow" of a man who was willing to marry her.

With these realizations, the pieces of Julie's puzzle—her own true character—fall into place. Julie's intense isolation becomes stark. At her parents' home, in her family, "they simply did not touch each other." Debbie hugged Julie and lavished affection upon her, but now Debbie has no use for Julie. Although she does not admit it, Julie knows that her perception of Debbie was only a fantasy. Debbie did not even bother to return to England in time to help Julie give birth, although "she had promised" to do so. She had assured Julie for months that she would be there to "see everything's all right." Instead, she left Julie completely alone to give birth to her child in a shed, her only companion a stray dog eager to eat the afterbirth. The tears that Julie cries at home are for herself—for her own loss of the artificial closeness she had once shared with Debbie—not for anyone else. Debbie would not take her in now.

In her childhood bed that night, clutching a panda bear, Julie goes over future plans, but these plans, steeped in a bitter acceptance of reality, will only further serve to isolate her. She falsely builds herself up and attempts to deceive herself in her ability to start a new life independently. The "accomplishments" that she uses to praise herself are hardly accomplishments at all. She "lived in Debbie's flat, and didn't get hurt by them." More signifi- cantly, she tells herself," [I] had Rosie by myself in that shed with only a dog to help me, and then I put Rosie in a safe place and now she's all right." Julie completely overlooks any moral implications of her actions in deserting and endangering a helpless child. She can only think of her own wants. Her final thought before she falls asleep reveals the selfabsorbed, delusional, and yet extremely lonely child who remains inside Julie: "I can do anything I want to do, I've proved that."

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Debbie and Julie," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Perkins is an associate professor of English at Prince George's Community College in Maryland. In the following essay she focuses on how the structure of Doris Lessing's "Debbie and Julie" illuminates the story's themes.

In the short sketch "Storms," one of the collected pieces published in Doris Lessing's *The Real Thing*, a passenger in a London cab expresses her feelings for the city: "It was like a great theater, I said; you could watch what went on all day, and sometimes I did. You could sit for hours in a cafe or on a bench and just watch. Always something remarkable, or amusing." The collection of stories in *The Real Thing* have been heralded for their realistic snapshots of London and Londoners. In one of the darker stories in the collection "Debbie and Julie," Lessing presents a harrowing portrait of a young Londoner, who finds herself quite alone as she faces the impending birth of her child. Lessing's clear, direct prose and tight narrative structure illuminate the story's exploration of the methods and consequences of survival.

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted that "the fiction pieces [in *The Real Thing*] are splendid examples of Lessing's iridescent prose, though most consist of tantalizingly unresolved scraps of character and situation." The reviewer argues that the pieces in the collection "tease with implications that they do not fully explore." Lessing employs this "teasing" to full advantage in "Debbie and Julie," as she focuses on the main character's powerful urge for self-preservation. She does not flesh out Julie's story because Julie herself feels compelled to ignore or suppress some of the painful realities of her life.

The story opens with Julie observing herself in the mirror—an appropriate beginning to a story about a woman who must focus on her own needs in order to survive. Lessing begins in the middle of things, with Julie alone, cut off from her family, from her friend Debbie, from everyone, facing the unconscionable prospect of delivering her baby on her own. In order to survive this event, Julie must not think about what she is doing, other than to concentrate upon the purely mechanical acts she must complete so that she and the baby will stay alive. Lessing's spare style and matter-of-fact reportorial prose reflect Julie's desperate attempt to control her emotions and to make it through the experience. At this point, she gives us no details about how Julie got into this situation. Her focus is only on the measures Julie must take for her own self-preservation.

Julie's sense of isolation is compounded by the fact that no one in Debbie's apartment notices her. "She thought they did not see her," but recognizes that since Debbie let it be known that she would be protecting Julie, the "dangerous" people who come and go there "got nothing out of noticing her." When she comes out of her room, the people in the apartment do not even look at her.

Her loneliness grows when she thinks of Debbie's absence. Lessing never allows us to meet Debbie; we only know her through Julie's subjective point of view, which reinforces

what the woman meant to her. Debbie has provided her with much needed comfort and has taught her how to survive on her own. She remembers how Debbie and she would joke about "how little people noticed about other people." As her labor begins, however, some of her buried emotions surface. She longs for her friend and feels "she could not bear to go without seeing her."

As the labor intensifies, Julie prepares to leave for the shack, mentally ticking off a detailed list of the contents of her bag, rather than focusing on what she has decided to do with the baby after it is born. Something, however, nags at her as she admits, "She felt ill-prepared, she did not have enough of something, but what could it be?" At this point she remembers Debbie's philosophy: "take what you want and don't pay for it." But Julie had learned from Debbie "what things cost, the value of everything, and of people, of what you did for them, and what they did for you." Before she "hadn't known what had to be paid." She now knows that she must pay for the price of survival, by giving up her child.

Julie focuses on what is happening to her body and it frightens her. Lessing's descriptions of the labor and birth reflect Julie's internal torment. Alone, she stumbles down a dark alley in the frozen rain to a broken-down, filthy shack inhabited by a starving, mangy dog. The dog, focused, like Julie, solely on self-preservation, will eat the bloody afterbirth. Julie notes, "Its eyes were saying, Please, please. . . . It was gulping and licking its lips, because of all the blood, when it was so hungry."

As the pain gets worse, she thinks about Debbie, chanting her name like a mantra, but notes that even though her friend insisted that she would stay with her to "see everything's all right," she had left with a man. While Julie makes herself think, "I don't blame her," she groans, "Oh, Debbie, Debbie, why did you leave me?" She acknowledges that "Debbie had left her to cope on her own, after providing everything from shelter and food and visits to a doctor, to the clothes." Just before the birth, Julie admits "the pain was awful, but that wasn't the worst of it. She felt so alone, so lonely."

Julie's feelings about her baby emerge in Lessing's narration after the birth. Although the baby appears gray and bloody, Julie recognizes the connection between them as she picks up the umbilical cord, "a thick twisted rope of flesh, full of life, hot and pulsing in her hand." While looking at her daughter, she admits "its wriggling strength, its warmth, the life she could feel beating there, astonished and pleased her. Unexpectedly she was full of pleasure and pride." Her suppression of the decision she has made about giving up her baby results in momentary confusion. After she cuts the cord, she worries because she is "getting something wrong, but [can't] remember what it was."

Her confusion causes her to consider leaving the baby in the shack, but she decides that would be unwise because of the presence of the dog. Yet as she considers her options, she looks at her child and struggles to contain her feelings for her. Julie observes the baby stop crying and lie "quietly looking at her," and resolves "she wasn't going to look back, she wasn't going to love it." Her determination plays out as she places her daughter in a telephone box and walks toward the "brilliant lights of the pub at the corner" without looking back. Yet, once inside the pub, she finds a window that

she can sit beside and view "the bundle, a small pathetic thing." Even after she watches a young woman and her companion find her baby and make a phone call, presumably for an ambulance, she decides "she ought to leave . . . she ought not to stand here . . . but she stayed, watching, while the noise of the pub beat around her," at a safe distance from her painful reality.

In an effort to gain control of her emotions, Julie observes in an objective, reportorial tone the details of her daughter's departure in an ambulance with the couple who found her. She reports, "So the baby was safe. It was done. She had done it." Yet her sorrow emerges "as she went out into the sleety rain." As "she saw the ambulance lights vanish . . . her heart plunged into loss and became empty and bitter, in the way she had been determined would not happen." In an effort to cope with her loss, with "the tears running, she calls . . . 'Where are you Debbie?'"

Lessing fills in some of the narrative details when Debbie returns to her parents. Julie had been sure that her father would have thrown her out after discovering she was pregnant. Yet when she sees him looking "small and weak," she wonders "what on earth had she been afraid of?" Her parents are unable to offer her any consolation as they sit weeping "each in a chair well apart from the other, not comforting each other, or holding her, or wanting to hold each other, or to hold her." Later she admits, "I wish I could just snuggle up to Mum and she could hold me and I could go to sleep. . . [but] in this family, they simply did not touch each other."

Julie admits that she has been trying to ignore the pain she caused her parents, noting "she had been making things easier for herself by saying, they won't care I'm not there. They probably won't even notice. Now she could see how much they had been grieving for her."

Although she "soaped and rubbed, getting rid of the birth," in her shower, desperately trying to get rid of the memory of what she had done, later, while watching the news, "hot waves of jealousy went through Julie when she saw how the nurse smiled down at the little face seen briefly by Julie in torchlight."

When her parents admit that her aunt had gotten pregnant and kept the baby at home, Julie becomes "numbed and confused," recognizing that "she, Julie, could have . . . she could be sitting here now, with her baby Rosie, they wouldn't have thrown her out." At this point "she didn't know what to think, or to feel," or what she wants, and so calls out "oh, Debbie . . . what am I to do?"

Finally she resolves to finish school, go back to London and get her baby, but then the reality of her situation hits her. She acknowledges "what things cost" and so tells herself "stop it, stop it, you know better." She understands that Rosie, her daughter, "could not come here, because she, Julie, could not stand it." The price for Julie's survival is the loss of her daughter.

Lessing closes the story with Julie's focus on herself and her needs. Julie drifts off to sleep determining, "I've got to get out of here. . . . I've got to," and "I'm all right. . . . I can do anything I want to do, I've proved that."

In her interview with Lessing, Florence Howe admits that Lessing's stories do not make her "feel comfortable. They're tough-minded, thoroughly unsentimental, sometimes cruel, often pessimistic, at least about personal relations." This conclusion becomes an apt description for "Debbie and Julie" as Lessing tests the limits of conscience and endurance in the face of overwhelming loss.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Debbie and Julie," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Do you think that Julie made the right choice to abandon her infant daughter? Why or why not?

Julie sees Debbie as a positive force in her life and compares her favorably to her own parents. Do you think that Debbie is a positive model for Julie? Explain why. If you do not think Debbie is a positive role model for Julie, explain why you think this.

Compare the characters of Julie, Debbie, Anne, and Jessie to female characters in other stories in *The Real Thing*. What are some of Lessing's most important points about women's place in society and their relationships to one another?

Do some research about the most prevalent social perceptions of teen mothers in the 1980s, when the story takes place, and compare them to those a generation earlier, when Julie's Auntie Jessie gave birth.

Find some American and British magazine articles from the 1980s about the issue of teen pregnancy. How were public debates about sexual morality different in the two countries

What Do I Read Next?

The Doris Lessing Reader (1988) makes an excellent introduction to Lessing's varied body of work. It includes short stories, novel excerpts, and nonfiction essays that highlight Lessing's long career.

The Golden Notebook (1962), Lessing's best known work, is widely considered a masterpiece. An inventive narrative based on the diary form, the novel frankly reveals a modern woman's political and interpersonal struggles.

Victoria Line, Central Station (1978), by Maeve Binchy, is a collection of twenty-five short stories exploring the variety and vitality of life in London. Each story is related to one of London's "Tube" subway stops.

The Magic Toyshop (1967), a gothic novel by Angela Carter, narrates an adolescent girl's experiences when she is sent to London to live with relatives after her parents' death. It gives the themes of sexuality and family dynamics a dark and fantastical twist.

Due East (1987), by Valerie Sayers, is set in small-town South Carolina and tells of the struggles of a fifteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant and decides to keep her baby.

Local Girls (1999) is Alice Hoffman's cycle of interconnected short stories centering on the relationships among two teenage girls and two adult women. Set in Long Island, the stories take up issues of friendship, divorce, and illness.

Further Study

Englander, Annrenee, and Corinne M. Wilks, eds., *Dear Diary, I'm Pregnant*, Annick Press, 1997.

The editors non-judgmentally present first-person accounts of the experiences of ten teenagers who became pregnant and explored the options and consequences of abortion, adoption, and motherhood.

Lessing, Doris, *Doris Lessing: Conversations*, with an introduction by Earl G. Ingersoll, Ontario Review Press, 2000.

Interviews dated from the 1960s to the 1990s shed light on Lessing's provocative and changing views on literature, gender relations, and social justice.

———, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography*, HarperCollins, 1994.

The first part of Lessing's two-part autobiography tells of her childhood and upbringing in colonial Southern Rhodesia, her developing political beliefs, and her marriages, leaving off before her move to London.

Rowe, Margaret Moan, and Simon P. Sibelman, *Doris Lessing*, St. Martin's Press, 1994.

One of the more recent studies of Lessing's long writing career, this volume is concerned primarily with Lessing's novels. The authors discuss her as being both maverick and mainstream in her approach to literature.

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Review in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 239, No. 17, April 6, 1992, p. 51.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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