Love, Again Short Guide

Love, Again by Doris Lessing

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Characters

In the powerfully romantic yet rigorously analytical Love, Again, Sarah Durham is very much the "glue" that holds the story together. The other characters relate to Sarah in a sort of interconnected web. From the beginning she is an unwilling participant in love, almost a victim, protesting vigorously to herself as she falls deeper and deeper into her obsessive state. What saves her is the keen quickness of her mind, her ability to analyze and find meaning in life's situations, and even her wry sense of humor: "Ah me," she says to herself, "my sweetly fractured heart that aches gently like a rheumatic knee with the approach of bad weather." Assets like humor and strength of mind are the fruits of maturity, and in fact it is the perspective gained from years of experience which keeps Sarah from being destroyed by her passion like Stephen.

As well, Sarah has a strong sense of community with her three coworkers at The Green Bird. In fact they have become a sort of surrogate family. Mary Ford ("a solid calm competent woman of about forty"), Roy Strether ("a solid, apparently slow man, who never allowed himself excitement") and the mercurial Patrick Steele ("volatile, shrill, and moody; a slight, birdlike boy") become something like siblings to Sarah, perhaps in part making up for her unsatisfactory relationship with her brother Hal. A newcomer to The Green Bird, the young Sonia Rogers, is full of innovations that both disturb and excite the "Founding Four," upsetting protocol and fanning the creative flames. Some comic relief is provided by Sonia's shrill ongoing feud with drama critic Roger Stent, who eventually falls wildly in love with Sonia and begs her to move in with him.

Sarah's deep connection to Stephen Ellington-Smith is crucial to the development of the story. The two are on a sort of parallel course of hopeless romantic longing, but for Stephen it is far worse because he longs for a woman who died before he was born. His obsession is so compelling that he has an affair with Susan Craig, one of the young actresses who portrays Julie in the play. He jokes that this is a sort of madness, but at one point Sarah glimpses his face in an unguarded moment: "He's ill, she thought. She thought, That's grief. WhatI am looking at—that's grief. She felt ashamed to be a witness of it and turned her face away, thinking, I've never, ever, felt anything like that."

To complicate matters, Stephen is married to Elizabeth, a wealthy woman with a large estate who shows her husband no real affection but prefers the intimate company of Norah, her housekeeper. She is quite open about the relationship, as if a lesbian connection does not count as infidelity, but it devastates Stephen who feels completely cut off from his wife's affections. Their partnership is more of a business deal than a real marriage, and in fact when Stephen kills himself she quickly remarries another wealthy landowner, shunting Norah out of the picture. Elizabeth's brisk countrywoman's efficiency hides a real ruthlessness, revealed in subtle ways by Lessing's descriptions of her: "Elizabeth drove fast and well—what else? She commanded the car with every muscle of her body, as if it were a horse she could not trust not to get out of hand."

Though the young, vain actor Bill Collins is the first object of Sarah's affection, making him the supposed emotional center of the novel, his shallowness is perhaps even more

shocking than his age. Sarah's mental descriptions of him are most revealing: "He was like a young glossy animal, a deer perhaps?" Elsewhere she compares him to a vain, beautiful cat, well aware of how much it is admired. Stephen repeatedly refers to him as "that young jay." In these descriptions Bill comes across as something less than human. Though he flirts with Sarah and even leaves her a boyish lovenote, full of ambiguity, it becomes apparent that this is nothing but a teasing game for his own amusement. Later Sarah sees him in an embrace with another man and realizes he is likely bisexual. The almost absurd inappropriateness of the object of Sarah's affection is one of the ways in which Lessing avoids stereotyping in either her situations or her characters.

Henry Bisley, the American who directs the production of Julie Vairon in France, seems like a more worthy object of Sarah's love, but again the obstacles (a thirty-year age gap, the fact that Henry is married) prove to be insurmountable. Henry admits his yearning for Sarah over and over again, but the relationship is never consummated.

Meanwhile, in an almost comic development, a middle-aged Texan actor named Andrew Stead (who plays one of Julie's lovers in the play) develops a wild passion for Sarah and pursues her doggedly, to no avail. Sarah as usual finds that she must try to make sense of it all. Looking at her ageing body in the mirror, she is baffled: "Yet Henry was in love with her. And Andrew. Bill had been, in his way. What were they in love with? And here she could not suppress the thought: In a group of chimps, the senior female is sexually very popular. Better look at it like that." This dismissal, at once humorous and a bit contemptuous, is typical of Sarah's wry but insightful perception.

If the play Julie Vairon presents us with a story within a story, the ongoing drama with Sarah's troubled niece Joyce is a kind of satellite plot, secondary to the main action of the novel but ever-present. If Julie is an invigorating, vibrant presence in the novel, Joyce is just the opposite, dragging Sarah down with her erratic behavior and endless problems. Though Joyce's parents are still clinging to the illusion that she will one day get better, Sarah has come to realize that this will likely never happen and bemoans a current social myth: "our (after all quite recently adopted) view that disadvantaged people are infinitely redeemable."

Sarah's troubled relationship with her self-centered brother Hal has been a problem since their childhood, and his downtrodden wife, Anne, seems to be afraid to stand up to him. By the novel's end she can stand it no longer and leaves him. Hal shows up at Sarah's door: "Sarah, have you thought of us spending our last years together?"

"No, Hal,I can't say I have."

"You aren't getting any younger, are you?

And it's time you stopped all this theater nonsense. We could buy a place together in France or Italy."

"No, Hal, we could not."

Hal's utter selfishness thinly masks his terror of being alone, and an utter dependency on others which reveals him as a shockingly incomplete human being. His veneer of professional competence hides a hollow core. Like all of Lessing's characters, Hal is flawed and complicated and deeply human, the antithesis of a stock literary figure. Even the minor characters such as the troupe of actors performing Julie Vairon are carefully drawn, imbued with humanity in all its frailty and glory, and intricately interrelated in a delicate web of personal relationships.

Social Concerns

the acknowledgments section of her Innovel Love, Again, Doris Lessing thanks a diverse and unlikely group of writers, among them D. H. Lawrence, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, and Bob Dylan.

Though at first glance it is difficult to perceive what all these names have in common, it becomes apparent upon reading Love, Again why Lessing feels she owes them a debt of gratitude. All these writers, in different centuries and in wildly differing styles, have struggled to express certain truths about that most time-worn of subjects: love, its pleasures and perils, and its indispensable place in human destiny.

In her more than thirty books, Lessing has become known for her keen insight into the human condition, her ability to pierce the surface of her characters' lives and uncover their deepest motivations. Though this novel is about love—specifically, the romantic, obsessive variety that poets have written about for centuries—it is the antithesis of a sentimental love story. Rather it is a sort of dissection of the dynamics of love and its underpinnings, written from the wry and sometimes humorous perspective of a sixty-five-year-old woman who one day discovers, to her utter horror, that she has fallen in love with a twenty-eightyear-old man ("Her body had filled at once with the most horrible desire. . . . She would force herself to recover from this illness. For that is what it was.")

Obviously this is anything but a conventional romance, as the social obstacles between two such individuals are enormous.

In a sense, it is doomed from the beginning, but that does not stop Sarah Durham from experiencing all the agonies and delights of love, as if she were not sixty-five years old but a girl of eighteen. Indeed, one of the ideas in Love, Again is the paradox of ageing: the fact that the passions and yearnings of youth can live on like an eternal flame while the body slowly declines. As Lessing puts it, "The flesh withers around an unchanged core." Unfortunately, social strictures do not allow the free expression of romantic passion between an elderly woman and a young man; Sarah herself realizes with considerable dismay that to an outsider her situation must seem almost laughable: "Most men and more women—young women afraid for themselves—punish older women with derision, punish them with cruelty, when they show inappropriate signs of sexuality." Thus she is severely inhibited in expressing her feelings for Bill Collins, an obstacle which only intensifies the pain and shame of her forbidden desire.

Sarah Durham is a woman of the theater, a widow with grown children who for the past twenty years has felt content to pour her energies into play writing, managing and directing for a theatrical company in London called The Green Bird. When she looks in the mirror, Sarah sees "a handsome, apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body. . . . She was often thought twenty years younger than her real age." Her professional competence, her circle of warm and loyal friends and her solid, reliable

personality in no way protect her from the sudden madness of love which completely dominates her life. There is nothing in her background to prepare her for this intense infatuation with Bill Collins, a dazzlingly handsome but self-centered and vain young actor who has a major role in a play that Sarah has written.

Sarah's dilemma is at least in part due to her gender. Her professional collaborator and close friend Stephen Ellington-Smith, a man in his fifties, becomes attracted to an actress thirty years his junior during the course of the novel and feels no qualms about having an affair with her. Such things are almost expected and seem to pass without comment, whereas Sarah knows that if she becomes sexually involved with Bill she may become an object of ridicule or even contempt. Though the novel is not selfconsciously feminist, it nevertheless clearly presents us with the inequity between the two situations, which only intensifies Sarah's pain and frustration. Though Stephen experiences no lasting happiness from his affair and eventually sinks into deep depression, he is at least allowed the social freedom to act on his feelings.

Thus Love, Again explores one of the last taboos—the social and sexual restrictions on older women, which are popularly believed to have eased or even disappeared with the advent of feminism. Lessing puts her character through the ordeal of "inappropriate" love not once, but twice during the course of the novel. As Sarah gradually begins to recover from her agonizing infatuation with the shallow Bill Collins, she begins to develop an equally intense attraction to the thirty-five-year-old American theatrical director Henry Bisley. This time Sarah's feelings are returned, but social constraint wins again due to the fact that Henry is married and the father of a small boy. His guilt and sense of family responsibility prevents him from ever acting on his feelings for Sarah except in the most furtive and tentative way: "Sarah, I tell you that nothing, nothing ever, has meant as much to me as my little boy."

"Just what has that got to do with . . ."

"Everything," he said miserably.

Thus their connection, sweet as it sometimes is, is never entirely free from a sense of thwarted desire and even shame. Sarah, who has always thought of herself as "sensible" (she is, after all, a playwright, not an actress), is not quite unconventional enough to completely flout the social rules, though she realizes that if she were thirty years younger she would not hesitate to take Henry to her bed.

Techniques

It is interesting and somewhat unexpected that Lessing chooses to tell Sarah's story using a conventional third-person narrative rather than the more intimate and confessional first-person voice. This is, after all, a love story, unconventional as the dynamics of it may be. Possible reasons for this choice may involve Sarah Durham's highly analytical turn of mind. She insists on getting to the bottom of her passion for Bill and Henry, rather than simply allowing herself to be swept away. First-person narration may have struck Lessing as too intimate and confidential, perhaps allowing sentimentality to enter the picture. Sarah may be a tender-hearted and inwardly passionate woman, but she is decidedly not sentimental. She resists emotion throughout the novel, especially when listening to Julie's haunting music: "She was determined to feel nothing at all when the music began, but a sweet shaft winged straight to Sarah's solar plexus, and she turned wet eyes to meet Henry's."

Lessing's technique of creating a story within a story is masterfully done. The material in Sarah's play Julie Vairon would make a splendid novel all on its own. In fact it could be argued that Julie, though she is not literally there, is one of the central characters in Love, Again. Certainly she is a vibrant, constant presence. The story of Julie's intense, short life is every bit as absorbing as Sarah's love story. The magic is particularly potent when the play is performed in Julie's hometown of Belles Rivieres in France, when everyone in the cast seems to be affected by lovesickness. For a writer as intellectually rigorous as Lessing, this is quite a contrast—magic, eroticism and drama laid side-by-side with Sarah's insistence on analytical detachment. But Julie herself must have had great intellectual gifts to have produced such a large volume of creative work.

Lessing's great gift for descriptive detail and metaphor helps her create believable characters and lends a sense of life to the narrative. We learn much about Bill Collins's narcissism in this brief line: "Tonight he was absorbing hot rays of desire like a solar panel." Joyce is "thin as an asparagus shoot, and like one she was dead white, but with bluish marks on her arms and thighs."

And the dreamy atmosphere of Belles Rivieres is evoked by this passage: "An evening light was being sifted through a high thin cloud, and the bleached colors of the buildings, flint and chalk and ash and the crumbling white of old bone, made their case strongly, like a full palette."

Themes

Love, Again is really a story within a story. Although it concerns itself mainly with Sarah's unacceptable passion for two younger men, the framework of the novel's action is the production of a biographical play that Sarah has written with Stephen Ellington-Smith, Julie Vairon. (Though Julie is treated like an actual historic figure for the purposes of the novel, she is in fact an invention, a fictional character.) The Julie of Sarah's play was born of mixed-race parentage in Martinique in the late nineteenth century and lived in France until her suicide in mid-life. She is celebrated as much for her several forbidden, tempestuous love affairs with high-born men as she is for her poems, journals, paintings and musical compositions. A prodigiously talented young woman, she defied convention by insisting on independent living, falling into despair only when she felt respectability closing in on her.

It is interesting to speculate why a "sensible" woman like Sarah Durham would be so drawn to a deeply romantic figure like Julie Vairon. Perhaps she was able to live (if only briefly) the kind of unfettered creative and erotic life that Sarah secretly pines for.

Adapting the facts of Julie's life into a play which features her haunting musical compositions, Sarah and her collaborator Stephen inadvertently create an alternate world, so powerful that it seems to suck in everyone involved with the production: "What is it about that bloody Julie," Sarah wonders.

"She gets under people's skin; she's under mine."

Aside from love and all its complications, a main theme in Love, Again is the uneasy relationship between art and life, and all the ways in which the two can either mirror one another, or provide a sharp contrast. When Sarah is attempting to condense Julie's colorful life into a play, she finds "there was too much of everything; too many ragged ends, false starts, possibilities rejected—too much life, in short, so it all had to be tidied up." Though Julie Vairon is Sarah's creation, something over which she thinks she has complete control, the production takes on a life of its own, spawning a host of love affairs within the cast and crew. It is as if everyone involved has fallen under Julie's spell. The most extreme example is Stephen Ellington-Smith who has been obsessed with Julie for years.

The play intensifies his yearning for a woman who has been dead for eighty years until it actually begins to undermine his mental health. In fact Julie's world becomes more real than his own, and the play an escape from a reality which he can no longer bear.

Sarah at one point wonders "what witchery that woman must have had to influence people so strongly after she was dead." It is as if something almost supernatural is happening at a group level, a vivid illustration of the power of art to deeply affect, change and sometimes even damage human lives.

Another important theme in the novel is the weight of responsibility, particularly within families, and how unevenly distributed this weight can often be. Lessing emphasizes that Sarah Durham ("a good sensible name for a sensible woman") has always been perceived as solid and dependable. She has a younger brother named Hal, clearly the family favorite, who has a successful career as a doctor but seems to have abdicated all responsibility for his wayward twenty-year-old daughter Joyce.

He and his wife Anne have two other daughters who are well-adjusted, but from the beginning Joyce has been a problem: "Why?

Who knows? She was a screaming baby, a grizzling toddler, a disagreeable child. . . .

She simply could not manage school and other children." In her teens she becomes unstable, anorexic and drug-addicted. Sarah speculates that "Joyce had an 'I cannot cope' gene, or lacked an 'I can cope' gene", and reluctantly but consistently takes over responsibility for her care over the years, practically becoming a surrogate mother. It is difficult to tell if she does this out of a sense of love or duty. Joyce's interminable crises are a constant drain to Sarah's vitality ("She had only to think of Joyce, let alone sit in the same room with her, for her heart to feel it had slipped on a leaden glove"), but Hal seems almost oblivious to this problem.

In fact his main interest in life seems to be having his own needs met. Much later in the story, Sarah recalls that her mother clearly favored Hal and lavished on him the kind of unconditional love she consistently withheld from Sarah. The result is a spoiled, self-centered child of a man. Is this just one more of the many perils of love? It is as if Lessing is warning us that too much can be just as bad as not enough.

The theme of responsibility, or the lack of it, crops up again in the situation of Stephen Ellington-Smith. Obsessed with Julie, unhappy in his marriage, he sinks deeper and deeper into depression, eventually committing suicide. His wife Elizabeth is not so much grief-stricken as furious: "What I mind is—it's the utter damnable irresponsibility of it." She owns a lavish English estate which Stephen had helped to manage, and in fact this property was one of the few things holding the couple together: "We had an agreement. We made promises to each other. This place is a partnership."

Indeed, she seems to mourn him more as a business partner than as a husband, and cannot forgive the fact that he "reneged" on his responsibilities. Elizabeth seems completely unaware of the fact that his despair over his arid marriage was a contributing factor to his suicide.

Another situation which speaks to the subject of responsibility involves one of Sarah's coworkers at The Green Bird, Mary Ford, a middle-aged woman who looks after her disabled mother. Mary's life is severely circumscribed by her mother's multiple sclerosis (she often has to bring her to rehearsals to keep an eye on her) and though she longs for an affair with Jean-Pierre, one of the promoters of Julie Vairon in France, her responsibilities keep her from acting on her feelings. Once more, love is thwarted.

Lessing is not content to view love as a mere emotion, but sees it as a sort of primal force, potentially both creative and destructive. Sarah is self-analytical enough to want to know the deeper meaning of her shocking and unexpected passion for two young men. Above all she needs to know why "love" has brought her such suffering.

Lessing here reveals one of the most profound themes in the novel—the deep connection between the anguish of love and the unfulfilled emotional needs of early childhood. When Sarah is in the throes of passion for Bill, she feels a terrible yearning that brings to mind a disturbing image: "Her body was alive and vibrant, but also painful. Her breasts burned, and the lower part of her abdomen ached. Her mouth threatened to seek kisses—like a baby's mouth, turning and turning to find the nipple." She asks herself, "Am I really to believe that the awful, crushing anguish, the longing so terrible it seems one's heart is being squeezed by cruel fingers—all that is only what a baby feels when it is hungry and wants its mother?" She recalls the birth of her favored brother Hal, resulting in Sarah being shunted aside emotionally, and remembers this as a sort of exile from love.

She concludes that "to fall in love is to remember one is an exile, and that is why the sufferer does not want to be cured, even while crying, 'I can't endure this non-life, I can't endure this desert.'" Few writers have the depth of perception to trace adult suffering all the way back to the raw needs of infancy, but it is typical of Lessing to pierce the surface of a situation and find the deeper dynamics at the core. It is Sarah's discovery of this connection with childhood needs that helps her understand her experience more clearly and even to see that it happened for a reason. As she begins to recover, she asks herself, "But could anything be absolutely bad that had led to so much new understanding?"

Key Questions

Love, Again provides rich material for discussion because it far exceeds the bounds of a conventional romance novel, piercing the surface dynamics of love to reveal a core of universal human concerns. The conflicting needs that go along with being human, the desire both to adhere to and stand up to social restrictions, and the sense of responsibility that love confers—all these issues are raised repeatedly as Sarah's story unfolds. The novel overturns stereotypes in presenting us with an older woman with very young desires. It contrasts romance (Julie's story) with intellect (Sarah's rigorous analysis of her problems), and fantasy (the play) with reality (the rich, complicated lives of the characters). Never coming to easy conclusions, Love, Again dares to raise taboo issues and trace human love all the way back to its roots in early childhood.

1. How does Love, Again compare with other novels you have read which deal with the subject of love? Are there any common points between Lessing's novel and a conventional love story? In what ways does it differ?

2. Sarah Durham is so drawn to the story of Julie Vairon that she writes a play about her. Why might this be? Are there parallels between Sarah's personality and life history, and Julie's? In what ways do they contrast? How much is each of them affected by social restrictions on women?

3. Discuss Stephen Ellington-Smith's role in the novel's action, his obsession with Julie and its connection to his unhappy marriage to Elizabeth. Had Stephen been able to take another route in his life, do you believe he would have escaped depression and suicide? What other choices might he have made?

4. Critics have sometimes labeled Doris Lessing's writings as "feminist." Does Love, Again reflect this view? What does it have to say about the role of women in contemporary society?

5. Discuss the role of Joyce in Love,Again.

What purpose does she have in helping to develop the novel's themes?

6. Lessing takes the view in this novel that love is an "illness," or at least a force that can take over a person's life against their will. Is this a cynical view or a realistic one based on hard experience?

7. Is the experience of falling in love in Love, Again the same for men as for women? Compare Sarah's experience with those of Henry Bisley, Andrew Stead and Stephen Ellington-Smith.

Literary Precedents

The number of contemporary novels which deal with the theme of love would probably number in the thousands. But the idea of a mature woman falling in love with a much younger man is less common, perhaps due to the gender-related strictures already discussed under Social Concerns.

Obviously when the woman is much older, the situation still holds some shock value.

Canadian novelist Constance BeresfordHowe created a parallel situation in her short gem of a novel The Book of Eve (1973).

Her protagonist Eva is a sixty-five-year-old woman who feels suffocated by her long marriage to the arthritic, emotionally cold Burt. One day, after no particular forethought or planning, she leaves their home in a comfortable suburb of Montreal and finds a cheap basement apartment on her own. Her abandonment of responsibility is shocking enough to her family and friends, but the scandal escalates when she takes a much younger lover, an exuberant fortyyear-old Hungarian named Johnny Horvath.

The resurgence of sexuality Johnny brings into Sarah's love-starved life is comparable to Sarah's sudden burst of passion, though is perhaps more fulfilling because here the relationship is actually consummated. The only real barrier to her connection with Johnny is social propriety, which Eva has always adhered to with miserable results.

For the first time in her life she abandons hollow respectability in exchange for real joy. Beresford-Howe, like Lessing, goes far to dispel stale stereotypes about ageing, presenting us with an unorthodox but touching and very believable love story.

Popular novelist Terry McMillan, most known for her best-seller Waiting to Exhale, provides a sort of pop-culture version of the older woman/younger man scenario in How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1996). Stella Payne is a forty-year-old African-American woman from an impoverished background, the single mother of an eleven-year-old son.

She feels bogged down in responsibility in her hectic career as an investment analyst and attempts to drown her dissatisfaction in the acquisition of material goods. Stella escapes on a quick vacation to Jamaica and meets a handsome, well-built nineteen-yearold Jamaican man, Winston Shakespeare, on the beach. The story of their passionate affair and the way it transforms Stella's life is written in a breathless stream-ofconsciousness style which barely penetrates the surface of the characters' experiences.

This is in marked contrast to Lessing's extraordinary depth. In fact it is difficult to conceive of a novel more different from Love, Again, even though the basic idea is similar. McMillan is much more concerned with physical appearance and other surface phenomena than the depths of the human soul. At the novel's conclusion, Winston

proposes marriage and Stella gleefully accepts, in a sort of happily-ever-after ending which is consistent with cultural expectations, but lacking in a sense of reality.

Related Titles

Doris Lessing is a seasoned and prolific author, still writing in her eighties, whose works have been in print for some fifty years. Along with many volumes of short stories and nonfiction, she has written two five-volume series of science fiction (Canopus in Argos: Archives and Children of Violence) and some classic titles, such as The Grass Is Singing (1950) and The Golden Notebook (1962). Though Love, Again is perhaps her deepest and most intimate exploration of love, the theme has surfaced in many of her previous works. In these books Lessing explores the basic conflict between the human need for love and security, and the equally compelling need to maintain personal integrity and independence. She explores the tension between these forces with great sensitivity and depth, also touching on the social strictures that keep women from acting on their deepest desires.

In Lessing's first, acclaimed novel The Grass Is Singing, set in South Africa, Mary Turner marries a farmer named Dick mainly to conform to social expectations and feels oppressed and miserable as a result.

She has not followed her heart but has taken the safe route of respectability and security, which eventually leads to great unhappiness, violence and tragedy. In her most celebrated work, The Golden Notebook, praised by feminists as ground breaking, Lessing portrays a writer named Anna who strives to live as a man does, without financial or emotional dependency on others.

But like Sarah in Love, Again, Anna falls in love and feels her sanity threatened by it. It is as if, in Lessing's unsentimental view, love is far from the happily-ever-after solution to a woman's existential dilemmas, but can be viewed as a threat to her independence and even her sense of well-being.

This is a point of view which is very much at odds with the romantic myths of the prevailing culture.

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