Prisons We Choose to Live Inside Study Guide

Prisons We Choose to Live Inside by Doris Lessing

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, by Doris Lessing, is based on a series of five lectures given in 1985 by the famed novelist and nonfiction writer at the request of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Lessing, an English citizen born in Persia (now Iran) and raised in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2007, has authored scores of books and often has been acclaimed as one of the great writers of her time. The title of her lectures and the subsequent book, Prisons We Choose to Live Inside, refers to the domination of human beings by the savagery of their past, and how they have the tools to escape this domination in the form of new behavioral information, but have not assimilated or applied that information to make the necessary changes. She means that the madness of war, the destruction of the environment, prejudice, and many other forms of degradation and barbarism can be anticipated and curbed if people were to properly understand and use the relatively new tools of the social or behavioral sciences that are at their command. These disciplines, including psychology, sociology, social psychology, and social anthropology, are breaking new ground in helping us to understand why individuals and groups act as they do, but Lessing decries the fashionable tendency to dismiss such areas of study as the so-called "soft" sciences, because their findings supposedly cannot be measured as readily or rigorously as could those of the more traditional branches of science.

Lessing argues that future generations will be amazed at how much information people of our time have gathered about themselves, while failing to use it to improve their lives. Her first chapter outlines the problem and stresses this pressing need to put the information to practical use. The second chapter investigates the penchant of people not only to attach themselves to beliefs of all kinds, but to throw away reason in favor of blind faith and to vilify everyone who does not share the same belief. Her third chapter deals with the many guises of brainwashing, as a form of torture in war, in religious practices, and in governmental or private enterprise efforts to direct and control the preferences and activities of groups. The fourth chapter is about the difficulties of thinking for oneself when surrounded by others who hold opposing opinions or beliefs, otherwise known as the phenomenon of the group mind. The fifth chapter explores ways to use the data being compiled by the social sciences to engineer meaningful change in the way people think and behave, from the level of the individual to that of the nation. By combining the observations and information in these chapters, Lessing's intent is to expose non-rational thinking, and to show how insights gained from studies in the social sciences could be applied to lift humankind from primitive, ignorance-driven behaviors into a new level of civilized living.

When in the Future They Look Back on Us

When in the Future They Look Back on Us Summary and Analysis

Doris Lessing's Prisons We Choose to Live Inside is the text of five interrelated speeches given in 1985 by the then-famed English writer, who receives the Nobel Prize for Literature more than two decades later. The speeches are solicited for an annual Canadian series of talks by prominent thinkers on topics of widespread, contemporary interest. Lessing's addresses, and the subsequent book, concern the failure of humans to properly use accumulated wisdom about the past and about individual and group behavior to create more peaceful and kinder societies. The book's first section, "When in the Future They Look Back on Us," is preceded by short quotes from three nineteenth-century men: the poet and dramatist, Friedrich Hebbel; the Austrian statesman, Wenzel Lothar Metternich; and the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. These quotes establish the importance of paying attention to history, of cultivating ideas, and of condemning bigotry. Lessing's own text begins with an anecdote about a farmer and his family whom she knows well when she is growing up in Southern Rhodesia, now known as Zimbabwe, after World War II. The farmer, Scottish by origin, imports an expensive stud bull from Scotland. When the bull turns on its keeper, a black boy, and kills him, the boy's parents demand and receive compensation. The farmer goes further, deciding to execute the bull, which he does, despite advice from many people that this action is illogical and a waste of money. Lessing writes that the man's response goes far back into the past, to a time when humans could hardly differentiate themselves from beasts.

Lessing then mentions a tree in France that is associated with a traitor, and subsequently is cut down. She regards these events as symbolic of an "awful primitivism" that sometimes still holds humans in its grip. She adds that information is being rapidly gathered about humans acting as individuals and in groups, but that such data has not yet been assimilated sufficiently to use it in changing our behaviors. She agrees with those who think the human race is in a terrible mess, but she thinks that the ability to observe ourselves from different viewpoints might be our saving grace. She mentions an Indian book, at least two thousand years old, called the Arthásàstra, by Kautilya. It is about sensible governing, and describes itself as the latest in a long line of such books, which Lessing regards as a hopeful sign, because we know so much more about ourselves than we did then. She predicts that people in the future will look back on these times and be amazed that we knew so much, yet changed so little of our behavior. In her life, large numbers of people embraced ridiculous beliefs on several occasions, only to discard and ridicule them later. As an example, she mentions widespread affection for Stalin, Russia, and Communism that disappears after Hitler is defeated and the Cold War between the East and West begins. Lessing, who feels that

detachment from mass emotions allows criticism of such behavior, writes that one of the best things novelists do is allow people to see themselves as others see them. She regards writers as a unity, almost an organism, which allows societies to examine themselves.

Another example she gives of mass emotion is British soccer hooligans in Brussels, who recently urinated on the corpses of people they killed in a riot. War, she adds, provides the opportunity for humans to revert to their brutal past. This permission to be cruel is why many people enjoy war, she contends, although such pleasure is rarely admitted. She writes that soldiers in Zimbabwe in 1982, two years after the country's seven-year war of independence, are still stunned, and yet they tell her they will never experience anything so intense again. The skills and alertness required by war are unmatchable in everyday life. After the shock of war subsides, Lessing argued, leaders, including Thomas Jefferson, need only to mention the word "blood" to raise people's temperatures. The "magic" of blood goes back to ritual sacrifice, she says, and to ancient enmities. She cites a psychology experiment at an American university, in which townspeople gather to participate, but find no one there. Soon, the people begin to argue about what is going on. The arguments expand into other subjects, the group break into sub-groups led by spokespersons, and scuffling breaks out. The researchers then appear to say that to observe the group's behavior is the experiment. Lessing observes that the tendency to say one side is right and the other wrong is powerful, but it is nonsense. Over time, every viewpoint is bound to be seen as ludicrous, or at least outmoded by the process of development.

You Are Damned, We Are Saved

You Are Damned, We Are Saved Summary and Analysis

Lessing begins this chapter by describing the Rhodesia of her upbringing as a place where the ruling white minority holds extremely ugly prejudices against the black majority and considers anyone who disagrees with them to be evil, corrupt and sexually depraved. They seem to think their regime will last forever, although it lasts only ninety years, a blink in history. Lessing describes a long miners' strike in Britain in the 1980s, during which a miner goes back to work because he feels the strike's leader, Arthur Scargill, has performed badly. The miner is beaten in his home by his friends. Lessing writes that the wife is surprised by this, but should have expected it. Tight-knit groups automatically act together, she wrote, although a few resist the pack mentality, and this minority must be strengthened in the future. Lessing decries a fashion to denigrate the "soft sciences," such as psychology and social anthropology, as "failed" disciplines, when they actually are producing the best new data about human behavior. She thinks this information is not being applied to predict what groups will do and help to avoid unwanted outcomes, because people crave certainties or dogmas that can be applied to every situation. The miners' strike shows that the Left has fragmented into sub-groups with opposing opinions, which she says is a recipe for social disorder, even revolution. The miners' strike deteriorates into rioting, with both sides blaming the other, although onlookers know both sides are lying. When political or religious movements enter such a phase of conflict, their members resort to catch-phrases and stop thinking, Lessing writes. The Christian Church has exercised such power over Europeans for more than two thousand years, its leaders never hesitating to kill or persecute in the name of God. Christians believe in redemption and the political Left believes in revolution. Both groups, she notes, vilify their opposition, which is a kind of lunacy, one of great strength.

Lessing describes going through a period of being a Communist as a young woman, which is a short-lived conversion she undergoes, sparked by her rejection of the repressive and unjust white majority rule in Rhodesia. Her group of about forty people is lively, well-read, and quite normal, and yet it holds as axioms certain items of faith that cannot be questioned. Foremost among these beliefs are that the world will be Communist, without crime, racial, or sexual prejudice. Lessing admits that these convictions are insane, and yet, her group believes them, at least until the war in Rhodesia ends. She and her friends are in the grip of a powerful, primitive force that has come to be understood but that people still never make the effort to control. Lessing mentions a friend whose daughter has become a Born Again Christian, and has rejected her family. Lessing recognizes the same you-are-damned, I-am-saved pattern that she experienced as a Communist. People often fall into such periods of being raving bigots and lunatics, she writes, but they often emerge. Lessing feels that the best hope for young people who fall into this trap is that it might happen when their country is not in a period of its history that will allow the new converts to put their murderous and bigoted

ideas into practice. She also hopes that young people will emerge from their temporary insanities with an appreciation of their own capabilities for intolerance and of how sane people in periods of public insanity can swear that black is white.

Switching Off to See Dallas

Switching Off to See Dallas Summary and Analysis

Lessing writes that during the Korean War, the American Government is astounded to find that U.S. soldiers are confessing to crimes they have not committed. This discovery precipitates a government investigation into brainwashing techniques and indoctrination that has continued ever since, she writes. Lessing contends that such studies produce important information about how we view ourselves, and about how governments and priesthoods have used such techniques for thousands of years. Examples she gives included the Show Trials in Russia and Czechoslovakia, during which people confess to ridiculous crimes, and the witch hunts in America that prompt many confessions. Lessing believes everyone is brainwashed, to some degree, by their own country, through processes that are half-conscious or unconscious. She describes three well-known aspects of brainwashing: tension followed by relaxation, repetition and the use of slogans. Lessing says a researcher at an unnamed university could use brainwashing techniques to turn a subject into an adherent of a series of beliefs, each one held as powerfully as the one before it. At the end, the subject could be returned to a state of regarding all such beliefs as silly. To those who would argue that this could not happen to them, Lessing cautions that any sane person is susceptible; only the insane are safe. The good thing is that brainwashing is usually temporary, she notes, and this new understanding of it is an important step toward eliminating self-delusion, because it can help people to examine themselves more dispassionately. A good way to examine brainwashing at work is by studying sects, she writes, but the observer runs the risk of falling prey to the beliefs of the sect. Other options are to look at government activities and at advertising, she suggests.

Lessing points out that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher hires the advertising firm, Saatchi & Saatchi, to stage-manage every aspect of her election campaign in a way that is calculated to arouse "easy emotions" in the public and media. Lessing's point is that information about indoctrination is now being used by virtually all governments to control people. She thinks that good-hearted people who belong to worthy social movements are reluctant to examine brainwashing techniques, because they dislike them, but Lessing says those people's opponents have no such qualms. Soldiers can be desensitized to killing. Media exposure can desensitize viewers to famine or other disasters around the world, which is not brainwashing but an almost haphazard result of the technology that goes with brainwashing. Lessing thinks that such disinterest in the sufferings of others is another aspect of being governed by waves of mass emotion, in contrast to the cool dispassion that would lead to better reactions. She looks back on her life, which begins around World War I and embraces World War II, as well as terribly bloody revolutions in Russia and China. One mass movement of boiling emotion succeeds another, and she decides that the only objective response to such wild emotionalism is laughter. The researchers of indoctrination find that those who resist best know how to laugh. She describes an incident in Persia (now Iran) in which a man who names his cat "King of Kings" is imprisoned under the Shah's

regime. She says this is because the Shah is not aware of what people underneath him are doing, which she feels is often the case, although sometimes leaders do not want to know what their underlings are doing. She cites a checking mechanism in some unnamed countries in ancient times, by which government employees pretend to be ordinary citizens, to make sure other government officials are not mistreating the public. Such a technique requires cool self-appraisal by the governments and Lessing declares that nothing could stop us from doing the same.

Group Minds

Group Minds Summary and Analysis

Lessing writes that people in democratic societies tend to believe they are free to make their own choices and the worst restriction on them is possibly not having enough money to do what they wish. She adds that this is a flattering misconception, because people live in groups that coerce them to conform in many ways. The problem is not belonging to groups, because humans need companionship, but in not understanding the social laws that drive groups, she said. Lessing describes a "typical" scientific experiment that shows how a group can control the thinking of its members. A group is taken into the researcher's confidence, but one or two people are left in the dark. The group is told to insist, for example, that two boards of unequal length are equal. The minority objects, but after much struggle, they usually agree with the majority. Lessing says most of us will admit that it is hard to maintain opposition to group opinion, but few take the next step of saying that, if this is true, then we must be objective about analyzing and organizing our attitudes accordingly. Such group power extends, she declares, beyond political parties or religions to entire cultures, and these group minds are "equipped with sacred assumptions about which there can be no discussion." In London, Lessing wrote, the writer Jean Rhys is ignored for many years, but only when she publishes a popular book are all her previous works resurrected and praised. That is an example of the collective, follow-the-leader mind, Lessing declares.

Critics and other commentators often will repeat each other's phrases, Lessing observes. This is the compulsion to be like everyone else, which they hardly notice, although outsiders do. Lessing describes her own experiment of writing two books under the pseudonym of Jane Somers. The first is turned down by her two main publishers but accepted by several others. Eventually it is reviewed, briefly and patronizingly. The second is also published, and still nobody guesses that Lessing has written the books. She predicts in an interview that the British literary establishment will be angry and declare the books no good when the hoax is announced, while everyone else will be delighted and she is right. She says experts have discovered that only ten percent of all people are natural leaders who follow their own minds. This raises what Lessing calls the unfashionable notion of elitism. She says one person can overturn conformity, but a pressure even stronger on most people than that of the group mind is the internal pressure to conform. This "inner censorship" can cause an individual to adopt a previously disliked attitude. Lessing cites the Milgram experiment, in which people are asked to administer shocks to other people. The shocks are not real, but the subjects did not know this. Most of them administer increasingly powerful shocks, despite the screams of the "victims," simply because they are told to do so. Later, they are astounded by their obedience to authority.

Lessing cites experiments showing that sane people placed in mental hospitals are considered ill by staff but not so by other patients and that ordinary citizens placed in prisons as inmates or warders begin to adopt the behaviors associated with these roles

and later are amazed that they have done so. Lessing asks if it is imaginable that schools or governments would train people to dispassionately study the information about human behavior, so they could free themselves from manipulation and blind loyalties. She thinks the only government that ever does this is that of America around the time of the Gettysburg Address, but this interlude does not survive the madness of the Civil War. During World War II, she feels, everyone is temporarily insane. She cannot imagine any government or political party ever teaching people how to become free of mass psychology, even in democracies. Oddly, she adds, the people who say they oppose tyrannies become squeamish at the mention of group psychology and do not want to discuss it, even as power structures around the world eagerly put the tools into practice.

Laboratories of Social Change

Laboratories of Social Change Summary and Analysis

In this concluding chapter, Lessing points out that a regular diet of bad news keeps people in a depressed state concerning the human condition, but her belief is that this is a time of upheaval and rapid change. She thinks that people in a century or two will look back and say this was a time when the developing forces of self-knowledge warred with those of stupidity and mob thinking. On the bright side, she observes that several countries have adopted democracy in recent years, but on the dark side, many young people seem to regard democracy as a sham and a mask for exploitation. Lessing sympathizes, having witnessed hypocritical democracies, but she stresses that historically, the rights of choice and public criticism of government are relatively new. Ancient Greece was a slave state. The English, French, and American Revolutions were when individual rights were born. Some people denounce democracy, but Lessing feels that good ideas are never lost. She gives the social sciences as an example. They suffer budget cuts at British universities, but those funds recently have been restored, because of the perceived value of these sciences to industry. Similarly, she thinks that the contemporary equation of Communism with tyranny might diminish over time, as people remember the ancient dream of justice for all from which Communism was born. Communism, terrorism, democracy, and all other types of society are ruled by elites, she notes. Some of these privileged groups are bad and others good. She decides that the word "elite" has bad connotations, however, and decides to discard it from her discussion. Instead, she would redefine the word to mean any group of people who have ideas that are ahead of the majority, because such ideas often are developed under intense opposition, but then eventually may become accepted and applauded by the majority.

Lessing thinks that eventually, people must come to recognize today's treason as tomorrow's orthodoxy, which will make them more accepting of others' opinions, and more aware of the lessons of history. The young, especially, must learn that their fervent embrace of new ideas is a process that occurs throughout history. One way of looking at the past two-and-a-half centuries, she writes, is as laboratories of social change. One needs distance and detachment to learn the lessons of the past, and the repositories of those lessons are literature and history, she declares. A problem is that much education tends toward short-term, practical applications, she feels. This demands a redefinition of the term "useful", to include long-term, contemplative thinking. The ability to hold contradictory ideas in one's mind would be a hallmark of thinking by people in the future. She thinks democracy will prevail in the long term, because of its inherent flexibility, but the most significant developments in society will come through individuals. Looking back, Lessing sees that the great blocs, movements and regimes of her life have disappeared and only individuals remain in her mind as powerful agents of change, even people who are apparently obscure. She does not mean eccentrics, in love with the image of eccentricity, but true thinkers who assimilate and use information. It is too much to hope that governments will cultivate such people, teaching them how to be

individualists, but parents, and even some schools, can do it. This potential is a gift not available to countries under totalitarian rule. As an example of iconoclastic individuals influencing events, she mentions Akhnaton, an Egyptian ruler 1,400 years before Christ, who hated the death-obsessed, multi-god religion of his time and replaced it with a religion based on love, with one god. He was soon overthrown, and the other religion restored, yet centuries later, he was rediscovered by historians and celebrated by such great thinkers as Sigmund Freud and Thomas Mann. Lessing thinks Akhnaton must have seen the odds against him as overwhelming, but he still made the effort, and eventually had a huge impact. She asks only that we use our current freedoms to examine ideas, from wherever they may come, to see if they could be useful in improving our lives and societies.

Characters

Doris Lessing

The book's author, Doris Lessing, is by far its most important figure. Given that the book is based on a series of lectures she is asked to present, it follows that Lessing's ideas predominate. In fact, very few other people are named in the book, and each of them gets only passing mention, usually as the author of an important work, a political leader, or other prominent personality. The book is about what Lessing thinks and believes, based on what she has learned and experienced. Through her commentary, a picture emerges of her attitude toward several issues addressed in the book and of her general demeanor. Her intelligence shines through the text, along with her strong censorship of what she sees as humankind's general failure to either heed the lessons of history or to create practical applications of newfound information. Her commitment to emotionally detached rationalism is evident, as is her largely successful effort (at least in this text) to restrain her anger at what she considers to be the failure of humankind to shake off the age-old shackles of barbarity. Underpinning these attitudes is a strong ego. It is evident that Lessing is convinced that she can think more clearly about issues of general moral concern, particularly those involving violent or manipulative behavior, than can most people. She sees herself as part of an elite few, clear-thinking individuals, and she believes it is her duty to help lead others in the direction of moral and social improvement. In this book, her strong ego does not seem offensive or overwhelming. It comes across instead as commitment, determination, and a willingness to be hopeful of positive change in humans, despite the evidence of selfish and stupid behavior that she perceives on all sides, throughout time.

Jane Somers

Jane Somers is the pseudonym used by Doris Lessing during an experiment she undertakes, in which she offers two books by Somers to publishers. She is rejected by her own publishers in Britain, but others accept the books, including foreign publishers. When she reveals the hoax, the British condemn the books and everyone else praises them, just as Lessing predicts. She tells this anecdote in the book as an example of group thinking.

Akhnaton

Akhnaton is ruler of Egypt 1,400 years before Christ. He replaces the religion of his day, which has many gods and a gloomy preoccupation with death, with a new religion called Aten that has one god, affirms life and celebrates love. He is quickly deposed, the old religion is restored, and Akhnaton's name virtually disappears from history. After he is rediscovered in the nineteenth century, he is celebrated by artists and intellectuals.

Lessing contends that Akhnaton's achievement, although short-lived, is a good example of how one free-thinking individual can change society and affect the future.

Kautilya

Kautilya is an Indian who writes a book on government more than two thousand years ago. The book, called the Arthásàstra, is usually found only in specialist libraries. It impresses Lessing because of its level-headedness, and because Kautilya describes it as the latest in a long line of such writings.

Margaret Thatcher

Margaret Thatcher is the Prime Minister of Great Britain. She hires the advertising firm, Saatchi & Saatchi, to orchestrate every aspect of her election campaign, according to a sophisticated social prescription, and the plan works. Lessing describes this campaign as an example of the power of social brainwashing.

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson is the American President who, at one point in his political career, comments that the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. Lessing gives this statement as an example of the inflammatory nature of the word "blood."

Arthur Scargill

Arthur Scargill is the leader of the miners' strike in Britain in the 1980s. Lessing describes one miner who goes back to work because he believes Scargill has done a poor job of leading the strike. The miner is attacked and beaten in his home by his own friends.

The Shah of Iran

The Shah of Iran is the leader of Persia when a village man names his cat Shah-in-Shah, which means King of Kings. The man is thrown in jail. When Lessing tells people this story, they often say the Shah would never be so silly, but Lessing feels that the explanation is that the Shah does not know what people below him are doing. She says this is often the case in governments, and safeguards have to be applied to protect citizens from the cruelties of government functionaries.

Jean Rhys

Jean Rhys is a British writer whose work is mostly obscure until she publishes a book, The Cruel Sargasso Sea, which becomes popular. After that, all of Rhys' previous books, which have been ignored, are suddenly remembered and praised. Lessing tells this anecdote as a typical example of the power of the group mind.

Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud is an Austrian intellectual and the founder of psychoanalysis. After the rediscovery by historians of the ancient Egyptian leader, Akhnaton, who starts a short-lived religion that has only one god, Freud suggests that Moses gets his idea of monotheism from Akhnaton.

Thomas Mann

Thomas Mann is a famed German novelist who, like Sigmund Freud, is inspired by the historical rediscovery of the ancient Egyptian ruler, Akhnaton. Mann puts Akhnaton into his celebrated novel, Joseph and His Brethren.

Objects/Places

Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe, formerly known as Southern Rhodesia, is the country in which Doris Lessing is raised. Several anecdotes she tells and other examples she gives in the book are drawn from events in her youth that occur in Rhodesia, or when she returns as an adult to visit Zimbabwe. The country undergoes a violent war for independence from Great Britain in the 1970s, and when Lessing is young in the post-World War II years, she belongs to a small white minority that dominates the black majority. Over time, the country sees much bigotry and violence, upon which Lessing frequently draws to make points about group behavior in this book.

Britain

Britain is the site of a major miners' strike in the 1980s that Lessing uses as a central example of her thesis that adherents to the cause of a political or religious group will, especially in times of strife, lose all reason, and adopt the crazed, bigoted notion that everyone who opposes their groups' views is evil and must be subjugated or destroyed.

Persia

Persia, now known as Iran, is the country where Doris Lessing is born. In the book, she occasionally tells anecdotes from Persia to make points, such as the story of a man who names his cat King of Kings, and subsequently is jailed by the Shah of Iran's regime.

London

London is where Lessing lives when she writes this book. She mentions it on occasion, as when she discusses how the work of writers, such as those of Jean Rhys, often fall out of favor and then come back again, which Lessing regards as an example of follow-the-leader group thinking.

Brussels

Brussels is the city in Belgium where Lessing reports that loutish British soccer fans kill people during a riot, and then urinate on their corpses. Lessing gives this as an example of human behavior, not animal behavior, although it is a barbarism that goes back many thousands of years, to the beginnings of human history.

The Soviet Union

The Soviet Union is mentioned several times in the book, especially with regard to the rise of Communism, the power of the ideology to attract people and the bloody revolution it engendered in Russia.

Egypt

Egypt is where the ancient ruler, Akhnaton, installs a new religion based on love to replace one based on death. Akhnaton is later celebrated by several nineteenth century thinkers. Lessing discusses this event as an example of how one iconoclastic individual can make a huge impact on society and even on the future.

The Milgram Experiment

The Milgram Experiment is a controversial study in which people are told to administer shocks to others. Although the shocks are a sham, the subjects do not know this, and they often continue to administer increasingly stronger shocks on command. Lessing describes this experiment as an example of how most people willingly submit to authority.

The Massey Lectures

The Massey Lectures are inaugurated by the Canadian Broadcasting System in 1961 to enable distinguished authorities to communicate the results of original study or research on subjects of general interest. Each year, a book is published based on the presentations of that year's speaker. Doris Lessing is the speaker in 1985 and this book, based on her talks, is published in 1987.

Themes

The Tragic Flaw

In literature, tragedy arises when an individual with qualities of greatness is brought low by one character flaw. Prisons We Choose to Live Inside extrapolates this tragic flaw to the entire species. In arguing that humans have gathered the information necessary to understand their barbaric behavior but have done nothing to alter that behavior, Doris Lessing points out our tragic flaw: we have failed to learn from our mistakes. Tragic heroes are punished, and our punishment as a race is to continually repeat our woeful past of war, prejudice and other manifestations of unthinking, destructive conduct. Implicit in this tragic view is that the hero is capable of greatness, because a character flaw in someone who is small and petty is not tragic, but merely sad. That is why Lessing's criticism of human beings does not indicate that she has given up on the species or that we are incapable of transforming ourselves. Her critique is constructive, not destructive. She celebrates as a major step forward the new discoveries in the social sciences about how we behave individually and in groups. She acknowledges that we have gathered information vital to our progress toward a more decent and caring world. She sees our ability to think and learn through scientific study and other forms of rationalism as evidence of our greatness. Failing to apply what we have learned in ways that will prevent us from repeating the mistakes of the past is the flaw we are required to eliminate in order to achieve our potential. Lessing's point is that, at least in this case, the hero has the means to escape tragedy, and must put those means to good use.

Individualism versus the Herd Instinct

Celebration of the rare person who resists the temptation to think and act as others do is a frequently-seen literary theme, which should not be surprising, because gifted writers often have such a personality characteristic. Lessing champions this theme in her book, but she is careful to distinguish individualism from eccentricity, which she sees as merely a picturesque pose rather than true strength of character. She contrasts individualism with the group mind, the powerful inclination people have to agree with the opinions of others. By the same token, the more people who are in agreement, the harder it becomes for one person to hold an opposing view. Lessing stresses that the ability of human beings to learn from the mistakes of the past, and to thereby fashion a better future, depends to a large extent on the resistance of the few to certain ideas of the many. Without a small percentage of people who are capable of withstanding public opinion in favor of voicing their choice for a new way, significant change cannot occur. The group mind is too powerful for most people to avoid, Lessing argues. The only way to effect change is if the many who are susceptible to the group mind are led into new ways of thinking by the few who truly can think for themselves. Lessing recognizes her theme as a kind of elitism and she even apologizes for it, but she concludes that no alternative exists to this solution of the few being led by the many toward a better future.

Faith and Reason

Perhaps the most controversial theme in Lessing's book concerns the clash between faith and reason. Revisiting this ancient dialectic might not be controversial, but Lessing spices the argument with a correlation between faith and brainwashing. Expanding on the concept of the group mind, she suggests that people are herded into holding certain opinions, and that this herding is done by government bodies, private enterprise, and religions. Contrasting the blindness of belief systems to the open-eyed rationalism of science, she argues that people who embrace beliefs of any kind have a powerful urge to vilify everyone who does not hold the same belief. This compulsion to see everyone else as wrongheaded or the enemy lies at the root of group behaviors that have led to prejudice and unthinking aggression throughout the ages, and that still works powerfully in the contemporary world. In essence, Lessing's exploration of this theme concludes that belief without evidence is dangerous, and has led through the centuries to exploitation and degradation of the worst kind. On the other hand, the rationalism of science is the way people can separate themselves from uninformed opinion and beliefs that often are illogical, if not crazed. While she argues for careful gathering and use of information, which in itself is not controversial, she is bound to excite some readers with her contrasting of these methods to ill-informed or even hysterical beliefs, some of which come from religion. Belief without evidence, particularly when such beliefs are held in common by groups, is a form of brainwashing, Lessing contends. Right or wrong, her theme is a loaded one.

Style

Perspective

The book is presented to the reader entirely from the perspective of its author, Doris Lessing, who offers her thoughts and ideas based on experience and research. Directly addressing the reader in first person, she never wavers from this personal interpretation of her topic to consider other viewpoints or to entertain opposing arguments from secondary sources. Quotes she uses, either from individuals of her acquaintance or from published writings, are selected to bolster her own arguments. By closing off perspectives other than her own except as aids to her viewpoints, Lessing admits no challengers. As a technique of persuasion, this one-sided approach is an attempt to deny the validity of opposing opinions, evidently with the goal of presenting the author's opinion as the only reasonable one. The use of this singular perspective allows Lessing to concentrate on making her points as forcefully as possible rather than presenting a more balanced view, which might have defused the power of her message. Lessing's overall objective of convincing people that her ideas are valid is well-served by this straightforward perspective, which makes it seem as if the author is speaking privately to the reader. Of course, the genesis of this book as a series of lectures plays a key role in Lessing's choice of perspective. The text is originally delivered orally and taped for radio broadcast, which no doubt influences Lessing's decision to use first person and to present her ideas without qualification or countervailing ideas from others.

Tone

Lessing's tone in this book is wisely confiding, occasionally dismayed or miffed, but generally accepting of the follies of humankind. Her emotional stance throughout the book is largely one of detached recognition that people often act in ways she would prefer not to witness. At the same time, she accepts these sad facts and asks, with a hint of impatience, when people are going to use the information at their fingertips to make improvements. In presenting her evidence that the behavior of people is predictable in certain circumstances, and that this opens up opportunities to manage behavior for more desirable outcomes, Lessing's tone is generally calm and analytical. Her adoption of a cool stance toward both petty and major examples of human misbehavior helps her efforts to convince readers that her approach is well-considered and reasonable. Rather than becoming outraged, sarcastic, or embittered by what she describes as the primitive and barbarous conduct of humans throughout history, she employs an unflustered tone in pointing out that this problem is in urgent need of fixing. It is as if she has decided that the best way to be persuasive is to place herself in the position of a wise master, as opposed to a strident critic. The thinking behind this strategy appears to be that quiet reasoning actually is more forceful than loud warnings. Her tone is reminiscent of the notion that the best way for speakers to command listeners' attention is by lowering their voices. It also is in keeping with her message,

that only through calm, detached reflection could new information on human behavior be understood, and those lessons applied to help change society.

Structure

The book has five chapters, each of which is one lecture in a series of talks given by the author on invitation in 1985. That information is not provided to the reader anywhere in the book or on its covers until two paragraphs are printed on a separate page after the end of the last chapter. Those paragraphs are followed by a short biographical section about the author. The book's title is taken from Lessing's title for the group of lectures. The book begins with three quotes from other people, followed by a simple table of contents and then the first chapter or lecture. Each chapter has a title but there are no chapter numbers, subtitles, or other breaks in the text of any kind. The book's structure reveals a thematic connection, in that a central idea is presented in the first chapter, and then is elaborated upon in subsequent sections. The structure, therefore, is a kind of embroidery on this central premise that we are dominated by our savage past but that we are rapidly gathering information which, if used properly, could help us to escape this domination. Throughout the book, Lessing adds increasingly more detail and evidence to establish and confirm the validity of this premise. Rephrasing or repeating the central idea is part of her embroidery, so that each chapter can be said to overlay or interlace with its fellow sections, thus deepening and enriching the pattern while strengthening the argument.

Quotes

"Everywhere we look we see brutality, stupidity, until it seems that there is nothing else to be seen but that—a descent into barbarism, everywhere, which we are unable to check," (When in the Future They Look Back on Us, p. 3).

"I think when people look back at our time, they will be amazed at one thing more than any other. It is this—that we do know more about ourselves now than people did in the past, but that very little of this knowledge has been put into effect," (When in the Future They Look Back on Us, p. 5).

"In times of war, as everyone knows who has lived through one, or talked to soldiers when they are allowing themselves to remember the truth, and not the sentimentalities with which we all shield ourselves form the horrors of which we are capable . . . in times of war we revert, as a species, to the past, and are permitted to be brutal and cruel," (When in the Future They Look Back on Us, p. 9).

"It is not too much to say that when the word 'blood' is pronounced, this is a sign that reason is about to depart," (When in the Future They Look Back on Us, p. 13).

"People like certainties. More, they crave certainty, they seek certainty, and great resounding truths," (You Are Damned, We Are Saved, p. 21).

"Perhaps it is not too much to say that in these violent times the kindest, wisest wish we have for the young must be: 'We hope that your period of immersion in group lunacy, group self-righteousness, will not coincide with some period of your country's history when you can put your murderous and stupid ideas into practice,'" (When in the Future They Look Back on Us, p. 30).

"Any nation can be made to revert to drum-beating, to dancing around a campfire waving tomahawks—metaphorically speaking—by any leader able to use the appropriate phrases and war cries," (Switching Off to See "Dallas", p. 37).

"The point I am making is that information we have been given about ourselves, as individuals, as groups, as crowds, as mobs, is being used consciously and deliberately by experts, which almost every government in the world now employs to manipulate its subjects," (Switching Off to See "Dallas", p. 38).

"Laughter is a very powerful thing, and only the civilized, the liberated, the free person can laugh at herself, himself," (Switching Off to See "Dallas", p. 44).

"It is individuals who change societies, give birth to ideas, who, standing out against tides of opinion, change them," (Laboratories of Social Change, p. 73).

"The underlying assumptions and assertions that govern the group are never discussed, never challenged, probably never noticed, the main one being precisely this: that it is a group mind, intensely resistant to change, equipped with sacred assumptions about which there can be no discussion," (Switching Off to See "Dallas", p. 50).

"When a war starts, nations go mad—and have to go mad, in order to survive," (Group Minds, p. 61).

"Poor economies breed tyrannies," (Laboratories of Social Change, p. 66).

"I think this attitude, that history is not worth studying, will strike those who come after us as quite amazing," (Laboratories of Social Change, p. 70).

Topics for Discussion

Doris Lessing never explains or refers to the title of her book in the text itself. What "prisons" is she talking about, and why does she say we "choose" to live inside them?

Lessing contends that the "soft sciences," such as psychology, sociology, and social anthropology, are responsible for generating the best information on human behavior, but people are not putting the lessons from these discoveries to practical use. Why not? What does Lessing regard as the main impediments to this accomplishment?

When people of the future look back on this time, they will marvel at how much we learned about ourselves, and how little we did to change our behavior, Lessing contends. Her attitude toward this failure has several aspects. How would you describe it?

People who are captivated by a group's ideas or dogma often regard others who do not share their beliefs as confused or even depraved, Lessing says. Why does she think people take this position, and what does it tell us about human nature?

Religions and governments have used brainwashing and indoctrination techniques for centuries, Lessing writes. What did she mean by this? What does she think should be done about it?

In the book, Lessing gives several examples of how difficult it is for people in a group to think independently. Discuss the disadvantages and dangers, in her opinion, of the group mind.

The potential for improvement in social conditions rests with a minority of natural leaders, Lessing thinks. Describe her ideas about elitism. Does she think people can or will be instructed to develop more leaders in societies?