

The Summer before the Dark Short Guide

The Summer before the Dark by Doris Lessing

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Characters

As Kate's family, from her husband to her youngest son, prepare to disperse in various directions for their summer plans, Kate is feeling a sense of loss. Unexpectedly she takes on a temporary job as an interpreter, as a favor to a friend of her husband.

Within a short time, Kate unconsciously takes on the role of nurturing employee, and she begins to question her new identities. She soon discovers that the identities she habitually takes on limit her real self, which tends to be submerged into an identity that no one recognizes.

Upon completing her task as interpreter, Kate hesitates about what to do and easily falls into an agreement to vacation with fellow coworker Jeffrey Merton. Once again, nearby individuals, whether family or friends, prevent her from introspection. Eventually she realizes the necessity of leaving Jeffrey and finding a place and the necessary time for further self-introspection. Kate suspects that Jeffrey's physical illness is as much a "spiritual crisis" that reflects his inability to choose between responsibility and freedom.

Therefore, new social roles would work against his personal desires. At the same time, she finds her own body submitting to similar crisis.

Relinquishing the role as mother-wife, Kate tries on new identities. Having lost weight and no longer feeling the need to dye her hair, she is amazed at how differently she is treated in the streets of London by not only strangers but even friends who do not recognize her, namely Mary. While attending a theatrical production, she realizes that the theater is nothing more than the most artificial scene in which humans take on and act out roles continually.

Kate must also bring herself to a balance that includes her sense of self before marriage, during her child-rearing years, and now what society labels as the "empty nest syndrome". Habitually she has given up consciousness of her own desires and needs in her role as a wife and mother. She also must realize how much of her beliefs are based on illusions. As Kate sheds the old bonds of desire and duty, she puts together a new definition of self. Her last dream, when she releases the seal into the water and feels a sense of accomplishment, is full of imagery that suggests new growth.

By not fully developing the character of Kate's husband, Lessing perfectly distances him from Kate's personal concern. What is most revealing is that although they both feel they have a successful, happy marriage, he continues to have affairs with other women.

Kate's children are also never fully developed as characters, which makes it easier to sympathize with Kate from the beginning. At one point, by deciding not to visit the States, Kate not only avoids her husband's liaisons but also avoids burdening her daughter's life with changing plans.



What is necessary is that her family's impatience with her outgrown habits of mothering has caused her to be hurt rather than to reexamine her roles and identities.

Kate repeatedly returns to consider her friendship with Mary Finchley and recognizes the mixed feelings she projects onto Mary because of her own desire to uphold moral codes that Mary indifferently breaks.

She both resents and admires Mary's ability to satisfy her own needs and maintain a family.

Kate's relationship with Jeffrey might have begun as an attempt to break down sexual codes; however, Kate soon finds herself taking on the ever-familiar role of the nurturing one. As Jeffrey undergoes a longlasting fever, Kate's adaptability to others' needs returns her to that familiar role as protector and maternal figure. Once she realizes her predicament, she is able to leave Jeffrey, who has from the beginning taken advantage of her. The characterization of Jeffrey is not fully fleshed out, but it works because his presence is merely representative of Kate's tendency to assume her familiar role, even in a new relationship with the potential for various dynamics.

Not only does Maureen's apartment offer the physical dimensions that Kate's psyche needs, but Maureen's actions in her dilemma about whether and whom to marry provide Kate with the necessary courage to work through her own identity. Ambivalent about taking on the roles that marriage provides, a recognition that Kate and most women of her generation never made, Maureen tries out various identities with not only the clothes she wears but how she projects her thoughts and feelings. Although Kate has assume new roles on the job, the pressures of others' needs too easily prompts her into the familiar roles. With Maureen she is able to thoroughly work out her own dilemma.



Social Concerns

Early in *The Summer before the Dark*, middle-aged protagonist Kate Brown resigns herself to the realization that the upcoming summer season is going to be her last before the next stage of life, aging, sets upon her. Ironically, she will discover a new sense of self that rejuvenates her personally and establishes a new sense of social dynamics with her family, friends, coworkers, and strangers. In addressing issues of aging women, Lessing offers a collective understanding of how physiological and societal changes can be a positive force in entering a more advanced stage of life.

Psychologist Carl Jung's explorations of the second half of human life as offering new potential states of consciousness, akin to the metaphor of the sun, certainly reappears in Lessing's imagery.

Personal examination of the roles and identities one assumes in various social structures, particularly family and work, can lead to a more fulfilling consciousness.

Sporadically throughout the book, Kate observes how women she notices, airline stewardesses or secretaries, for example, assume rigid roles dictated by society. Unthinkingly, the women, even with education, fulfill these needs as training ground for the roles of marriage that might ultimately lessen their own personal consciousness. In other words, women who take on nurturing roles must relearn how to please themselves to renew their sense of self. As Kate rethinks her earlier life decisions, such as not completing college and marrying young, she questions the general roles of women. She meets Maureen, who represents a new generation of young women who will potentially reject the path that Kate has chosen.



Techniques

Few of Lessing's novels are so clearly marked with chapter titles that provide an overall structure. Physical surroundings reflect the consciousness of the main character in many of Lessing's work and perhaps most markedly in this one. The five sections, "At Home," "Global Food," "The Holiday," "The Hotel," and "Maureen's Flat," provide the necessary physicality reflected by Kate's growth. Kate's journey begins with her leaving the familiar haven of the home she has created. She arrives in Turkey on business and then vacations there until her soul-searching urges her back to London. In London, she initially stays in a hotel and then rents a room from a girl young enough to be her daughter. The extra room provides the necessary insular space and parallel experiences for exploration of new identities.

What is most surprising but compelling is the successful manner in which Lessing brings together two unique literary forms to uphold her theme around one character.

The Summer before the Dark is both a psychological novel and allegory. The protagonist, who goes on a quest after a difficult challenge, is not typically found in a psychological novel. By including the series of dreams, however, Lessing successfully melds the two. The dreams most clearly represent the emotional struggle that Kate is undergoing. The repetitive image of the dying seal and Kate's responses to it are indicative of the ambiguous feelings she overcomes.

Just as in the traditional quest, the protagonist begins and ends at home, but a wiser person with the experiences met along the journey.

Unlike much of Lessing's narrative strategy—a protagonist's stream of consciousness that lends it an intensity and immediacy—in *The Summer before the Dark* an omniscient narrator comments on the events.

Such a narrative voice provides detachment and distance. What Kate comes up against is not so much unique personal circumstances but the collective forces that all aging adults must encounter sooner or later in this stage of life; the narrator continually comments on this. Early on, readers are told how her quest will end, but as they follow Kate on her journey, the commentary distances itself from them so that they must determine what the experience signifies.

Themes

Although one can trace how Kate Brown represents another of Lessing's female characters who break out of traditional roles and values, Kate is the first one that depicts a different stage of life, that of the aging woman who recognizes both her psychological and physiological life changes and eventually embraces them. Lessing portrays women in such instances who do not necessarily experience a radical breakdown but whose biological tendencies allow them to be receptive to a change in life, albeit not initially. When the reader first encounters the middle-aged Kate, she is unaware and resistant to changes in her accustomed role as mother and wife, even though her children are grown and repeatedly leave the home environment she has provided. Shaped by the typical biological and societal roles of mother and wife, Kate's personality has developed accordingly.

The demands of the newfound job take Kate on a journey, but the metaphorical journey she must undertake becomes more important. Kate realizes that her quest is to leave behind her familiar nurturing relationships and focus on her own needs and desires to determine what direction she wants to take. When Kate is on the steps of her back porch, she is already attempting to identify this search for a new role in life: "She was trying to catch hold of something, or to lay it bare so that she could look and define; for some time now she had been 'trying on' ideas like so many dresses off a rack." By the time she arrives at Maureen's, she is able to explore the possibilities without getting sidetracked.

Freedom, however, does not necessarily mean abandonment of all responsibility.

Kate's battle is to maintain a sense of self within the social framework she chooses, in this case, her family. She walks away from Maureen's party unnoticed to emphasize her personal triumph. Recall also that in the last dream readers are reminded that Kate's assumption about this being her summer before the dark is misguided. In her dream, after releasing a seal, "she saw that the sun was in front of her, not behind, not far behind, under the curve of earth, which was where it had been for so long."



Key Questions

How characters redefine self as their roles in life change can be presented not only in a realistic fashion but in a more mythical or metaphorical one as well. Exploring such life changes, Lessing's characters will undergo a life-affirming change that necessitates new dynamics for the individual in relation to others, including family, friends, and coworkers.

1. Is Kate's marriage in trouble because of the personal interaction between Kate and her husband or because the bonds of marriage are outmoded?
2. Modern literature is usually free from didacticism, but clearly there is a message in this novel to which the narrator continually refers. Is this novel too didactic?
3. Lessing employs two basic styles in this novel—realistic fiction and allegory.

Does she succeed in combining the two?

4. At one point Kate describes herself as "that well-documented and much-studied phenomenon, the woman with grown-up children and not enough to do." Is Kate Brown an Everywoman, much like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman is an Everyman in the play *Death of a Salesman*?
5. Will Kate be able to successfully integrate her new sense of self upon returning to her family?
6. How does Maureen function as a foil for Kate?

Literary Precedents

From her earliest discussions about writing, Lessing has admired works of authors who can realistically portray the social and emotional life of a character. In fact, this need to depict the truth perhaps is best indicated in the periods of her career that are distinguished by her nonfiction writings. In addition, Lessing has written commentary about works by Joseph Conrad, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*. Her depiction of *Kate* continues in the same desire to present an honest portrayal of life; however, Lessing adds another layer to the work with its mystical qualities that represent the unconscious needs of the individual.

The allegorical strands of *The Summer before the Dark* might best be compared to such quest literature as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as well as the "King Arthur" legends. Most often, the protagonist of such a storyline is a young male who undertakes a mission that will result in mythical stories.

Kate Brown's story offers the rare melding of two such extreme formal genres as allegory and psychological realism.

Related Titles

Lessing's earlier novel *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* explores many of the same issues. Whereas her male protagonist, Charles Watkins, fails to achieve his identity, Kate Brown successfully completes her journey toward a greater, almost forgotten self-realization. Between the publication of these two novels, Lessing also wrote "The Temptation of Jack Orkney," a novella that presents another male protagonist undergoing a change of consciousness. With Kate's characterization, Lessing returns to the female protagonist whom she depicts so well with the new strategies of plot, theme, and a change in characterization.

Lessing returns to similar themes in her more recent *Love, Again*, in which an aging professional woman explores her relationships with friends, coworkers, and men.

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