Through the Tunnel Study Guide

Through the Tunnel by Doris Lessing

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Introduction

"Through the Tunnel" was first published in the *New Yorker* on August 6, 1955, and two years later it was reprinted in Doris Lessing's collection of short stories, *The Habit of Loving.* The story's eleven-year-old protagonist, Jerry, is caught in the difficult position of being neither a child nor an adult. On a winter holiday with his mother in a foreign country, he encounters some older boys swimming. When they disappear by swimming through a tiny underwater passageway to the other side of a large rock in the ocean, he feels left out and rejected. Jerry makes it his goal to find the passageway and swim through it, even though it means staying underwater so long that he could drown. By achieving this goal, he attains a form of independence from his mother

"Through the Tunnel" is unlike most of Lessing's fiction. Though some of her early stories concern the trials and tribulations of growing up, most of Lessing's works, like *The Golden Notebook,* concern the confusing and often contradictory roles of women in society. However, the story does illustrate one of Lessing's most common themes: an individual confronting preconceived assumptions about life in an attempt to achieve wholeness.

Author Biography

Doris Lessing was born October 22, 1919, in the country of Persia, which is now Iran. Her parents were English, and while Lessing was still young, they moved to Rhodesia, a region of South Africa which was then ruled by the British and has since been divided into the countries of Zimbabwe and Zambia. Her parents' attempts at establishing a farm there were not successful and the family struggled with poverty for many years. Lessing was schooled in a Roman Catholic convent but quit at age 14 due to recurring eye problems. At the age of 20, Lessing married a civil servant, Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children. In 1943 the couple divorced and two years later she married Gottfried Lessing, a German Marxist activist. Their son Peter was born in 1947.

Much of Lessing's early fiction takes place in Rhodesia, even though she did not begin writing until moving to London, England, in 1949, following the end of her second marriage. Struck by the racial injustice she witnessed in Africa, many of her early books, Including *The Grass Is Singing* and *African Stories* concern apartheid, Africa's legalized practice of racial discrimination. Her strong belief in human rights led her to join the Communist Party in the 1940s, though she later repudiated the Party's beliefs. Gradually, her fiction came to focus more on the emancipation of modern women, and her most well-known characters are portraits of women who seek liberation from confining societal expectations.

Though known primarily for her novels, Lessing has been one of the century's top practitioners of the short story form, publishing such acclaimed collections as *The Habit of Loving* and *Collected Stories I: To Room Nineteen.* Her most famous work is the novel *The Golden Notebook.* The book is an experimental novel which can be read on many levels. The protagonist, Anna Freeman Wu1f, attempts to integrate the experiences of her life, and thus herself, through four notebooks, which are juxtaposed with the novel that Wulf is writing. Many critics have written about this complex novel, and It is widely regarded as Lessing's masterpiece. In 1954 it won the Somerset Maugham Award, and the French translation was awarded the Prix Medicis Award In 1976.

Toward the late 1970s, Lessing became disenchanted with her realist works, even though she was considered by many critics to be one of the English language's most talented practitioners of realist fiction writing. She began writing a "space fiction" series called *Canopus in Argos: Archives.* The series concerns three different races of people who

have found a way to produce immortal beings. Many critics have noted that Lessing's science fiction evokes the overall feeling of a world on the edge of an apocalypse.

More recently, Lessing has published an autobiography, *Under My Skin: Volume One of My Autobiography, to 1949,* which was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Book Prize for Biography and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award for Biography. Through her

long and varied career, Lessing has cultivated a reputation as being one of literature's foremost voices on feminism, racism, and other social issues.

Plot Summary

In Lessing's "Through the Tunnel," Jerry, a young English boy, and his mother are vacationing at a beach they have come to many times in years past. Though the beach's location is not given, it is implied to be in a country that is foreign to them both. Each tries to please the other and not to impose too many demands. The mother, who is a widow, is "determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion," and Jerry, in turn, acts from an "unfailing impulse of contrition-a sort of chivalry."

On the second morning, however, Jerry lets it slip that he would like to explore a "wild and rocky bay" he has glimpsed from the path. His conscientious mother sends him on his way with what she hopes is a casual air, and Jerry leaves behind the crowded "safe beach" where he has always played. A strong swimmer, Jerry plunges in and goes so far out that he can see his mother only as a small yellow speck back on the other beach.

Looking back to shore, Jerry sees some boys strip off their clothes and go running down to the rocks, and he swims over toward them but keeps his distance. The boys are "of that coast; all of them were burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them was a craving that filled his whole body." He watches the boys, who are older and bigger than he is, until finally one waves at him and Jerry swims eagerly over. As soon as they realize he is a foreigner, though, they forget about him, but he is happy just to be among them.

Jerry joins them in diving off a high point into the water for a while, and then the biggest boy dives in and does not come up. "One moment, the morn ing seemed full of chattering boys; the next, the air and the surface of the water were empty. But through the heavy blue, dark shapes could be seen moving and groping." Jerry dives down, too, and sees a "black wall of rock looming at him." When the boys come up one by one on the other side of the rock, he "understood that they had swum through some gap or hole in it [But] he could. See nothing through the stinging salt water but the blank rock." Jerry feels failure and shame, yelling at them first in English and then in nonsensical French, the "pleading grin on his face like a scar that he could never remove."

The boys dive into the water all around him, and he panics when none surface. Only when his count reaches 160 do the boys surface on the other side of the rock, and as soon as they come up, they leave. Believing they are leaving to get away from him, he "cries himself out. "

When Jerry sees his mother that afternoon at the villa, he demands that she buy him goggles immediately. With the goggles he can suddenly see, as if he had "fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water." He descends again and again desperately trying to find the opening in the rock that the older boys had swum through, until finally "he shot his feet out forward and they met no obstacle."

Jerry is determined to be able to swim through the tunnel, and begins immediately a practice of learning to control his breathing. He lies "effortlessly on the bottom of the sea" with a big rock in his arms and counts. That night his nose begins bleeding badly, and he spends the next two days exercising his lungs "as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he would become, depended upon it." When his nose bleeds again, his mother insists that he rest with her on the beach. He does so for a day, but then the next morning he goes off to the bay by himself without asking, "before his mother could consider the complicated rights and wrongs of the matter. " He again practices holding his breath under water, and he experiences a "curious, most unchildlike persistence" while studying the tunnel.

When his mother announces they are to leave in four days, Jerry vows to succeed in his quest even if it kills him. His nose bleeds so badly he becomes dizzy, and he worries that the same might happen in the tunnel, that he really might *die* there, trapped. He resolves to wait until the following summer, when he will be bigger and stronger, but then an impulse overtakes him and he feels that he must make his attempt immediately-now or never. "He was trembling with fear that he would not go; and he was trembling with horror at the long, long tunnel under the rock, under the sea."

Once inside the tunnel he begins counting, swimming cautiously, feeling both victory and panic. "He must go on into the blackness ahead, or be would drown. His head was swelling, his lungs cracking. . . . He was no longer quite conscious." Even when he surfaces, he fears "he would sink now and drown; he could not swim the few feet back to the rock." When he finally pulls himself onto the rock and tears off his goggles, they are filled with blood.

He rests and then sees the local boys diving half a mile away, but he is no longer interested in them. He wants "nothing but to get back home and lie down." His mother is concerned at his "strained" appearance when he returns to the villa, but consoles herself remembering that "he can swim like a fish." He blurts out that he can stay under water for "two minutes-three minutes, at least," and she replies in her usual moderate way, cautioning him that he "shouldn't overdo it." Jerry has succeeded in his quest-it is "no longer of the least importance to go to the bay."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Through the Tunnel" is a short story originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1955. The author, Doris Lessing added it to her collection of short stories, *A Habit of Loving*, two years later.

This story is about Jerry, an eleven-year-old British boy on the verge of manhood, and his widowed mother. They are on holiday in another country, probably someplace in Africa.

In the beginning of the story, we see the concern that each of these characters has for one another. Jerry and his mother are heading to a beach and Jerry sees a bay that looks intriguing. His mother asks him if he would rather go somewhere else and being the good son, he says no. Finally, he admits that he would rather go exploring. His mother grapples with the idea and then decides that though she is worried about him, she will let him go.

Jerry is overjoyed and starts to explore his surroundings. He swam out into the ocean and at the same time kept an eye on his mother. His attention is soon caught by the other children playing, locals. They are swimming down by the rocks. They tried to talk to him, but when they saw that he could not understand, they soon started to forget him. He watched them dive off the rocks and soon joined them.

One of boys jumped into the water and swam to the bottom. It was several minutes until he popped out on the other side of the rocks. The others soon joined him. Jerry tried to follow but couldn't find the entrance to the tunnel. When he was unsuccessful, he tried to get their attention by splashing around. This only irritated the others, which embarrassed Jerry. He again watches them as they dive. This time when they appeared on the other side, they gathered their things and left. Jerry began to cry because he felt rejected by the group.

After they left, he tried once again to find the tunnel but couldn't because he was getting salt in his eyes. He asks his mother for swimming goggles and was so impatient for them he made her go by them right then.

At his next outing, he tries again to find the entrance and finally finds it. He then comes to the surface and grabs a stone that will weigh him down and jumps plunging to the bottom. He finds the hole and starts to go in but was scared back to the surface because of some seaweed that he thought was an octopus.

It is at this time that Jerry decides that he needs to go through the tunnel and will spend the rest of the summer trying to. He knows that he cannot hold his breath for as long as he needs to and over the next several days starts to work on holding his breath. His

mother just makes sure that he is ok and lets him do what he wants, never asking him what he is doing.

After a day or two Jerry's nose starts to bleed because he spends so much time trying to hold his breath. Though he was irritated, he did as he was told when his mother insisted that he rest for a day. He finds that the day of rest helped and he can hold his breath longer. He patiently waits until he is sure he can hold his breath before trying that tunnel.

Now that Jerry can hold his breath longer, he begins to study the entrance to the tunnel. When he goes home, he is told that he is going to be going home soon. This makes him more determined than ever. He goes out and two days before he is scheduled to leave, he gets a nosebleed that makes him dizzy. It is now that he realizes if he passes out in the tunnel that he will die and it makes him concerned. He debates going home and trying it next year but then decides to try it then anyways. He realizes that if he waited until next year, he would never do it.

The story goes on to describe how Jerry gets through the tunnel and his fears of dying while going through it. In the end, just as he is sure he is about to drown, he hits the open ocean. He is overjoyed that he has succeeded even though it leaves him with another bloody nose. He sees the local boys playing in the distance and doesn't even really care. He goes back home and takes nap. He doesn't tell his mother. His mother is trying to let him grow up and decides to ignore his symptoms and act like everything is fine.

Analysis

"Through the Tunnel" is a coming of age story on a small scale. It follows the emotions of a mother trying to raise her son without help. She is worried and scared for him throughout the story but also keeps that part to herself and lets him explore and learn on his own. She is apprehensive but is trying top make the right choices for her son. In the beginning, we are introduced to her dilemma and her theme doesn't change throughout the story. This is a story that many women face when their children start to exert their independence. She realizes that Jerry is at a very important age in his development. It is an age of limbo, he is starting to become a teenager and starting the journey into adulthood but yet he is still a child. She gives him just enough encouragement to explore but also has the responsibility of keeping him safe.

Jerry is a typical eleven years old. The story focuses mostly on him. At his age, many children want to grow up but are torn between the needs of growing up and the fear that comes with it. He also is looking for acceptance. This is shown when he first encounters the group of local boys. He tries to make a connection and for a while can when he dives off the rocks like they were doing. When they go through the tunnel, it is something that he is unable to do. At this point, he feels left out. He wants to still fit in and so he shows off and tries to get the older boys attention. Instead, it makes them cut their ties with him. He gets rejected and begins to resort to more childish behavior by

crying. We see here where he is not yet fully an adult. He goes and looks for his mother at this point.

Then something else happens. He makes a conscious decision to change his behavior and find a solution to the problem. This is where he starts his journey into manhood. The rest of the story is about this young man as he struggles with his own fears and limitations. He soon realizes that if he puts his mind to it, he can overcome both fear and limitation. This is a story about growth, about overcoming ones fears, and about learning to separate oneself from their parents.

This is a story about two people. It is a story about one having to grow up and become his own person and one having to let that happen. This is a story about two courageous people, also. It is about a mother who loves her son dearly and a son who exerts his independence and starts to not rely on his mother so much.

Doris Lessing crafts a beautiful story that everyone can relate to on at least one level. Many people, those who are parents can relate to both sides. They can remember how much they needed their independence at this time and how by doing so, they found themselves. As parents, they also know they heartbreak of watching their children go through this tough time in their lives. This is a time where they can no longer make everything ok and sometimes they find they just have to stop and watch as their children make their own decisions. Some of those decisions, like Jerry trying to get attention, will lead to negative things but they will learn that sometimes things don't always go their way. Other decisions, like his passing through the tunnel will define their child for years to come.

Characters

Jerry

Jerry is an eleven-year old English boy on vacation with his mother on a beach they have frequented in the past. Jerry's mother is a widow and is sometimes overprotective, sometimes not protective enough, of her son. Jerry attempts to make friends with some older boys on the beach, but they ignore him after discovering he is childish. Jerry is jealous of the older boys-he watches them as they swim through a rock in which there is a narrow underwater gap. In an attempt to become equal to them, he begins to persistently practice holding his breath so that he too may swim through the rock. He is determined to be able to hold his breath for a sufficient time so he can accomplish this feat. For Jerry, without a father and rapidly approaching adulthood, this challenge represents his coming of age, and with his success also comes independence from his often overprotective mother.

Mother

The mother is an anxious widow who takes her son, Jerry, on vacation. Her pale arms indicate that she is unused to outdoor activity, and she seems uncomfortable throughout the entire story. She worries about being too possessive, or not protective enough. She buys her son goggles and lets him play where he wants, until he comes back with a bleeding nose or pale from swimming underwater and she forces him to stay With her on the "safe beach" for a day. Jerry leaves the next day and risks his life while the mother rests on the tourists' portion of the shore. She and Jerry are alternately distant and extremely close, and the tension between her authority and her son's freedom cuts through the entire story. She is a widow and must take care of her son by herself. Her anxieties over Jerry's freedom and protection may indicate the difficulties inherent in raising her son without a father figure.

Themes

Rites of Passage

Jerry's beach vacation becomes the site of an intense personal challenge. Jerry must leave his mother at the shore, the shore Jerry sees as "a place for small children, a place where his mother might lie safe in the sun." He leaves the safety of this nursery-like beach and journeys to the treacherous "wild and rocky" bay and the underwater tunnel. An eleven year-old nearing puberty, Jerry is fatherless and approaching adulthood as the sole male of the family. Throughout the story, the interchanges between him and his mother heighten the tension of the story, but Jerry, except for the one day on the safe beach, independently controls most of the action. Like most traditional rites of passage into adulthood, Jerry must venture into the wild, braving the elements and dangers of the world by himself. When he successfully completes his swim, he returns to his mother and proudly declares that he "can stay underwater for two minutes-three minutes at least." This statement belies the danger he has faced and insures the secrecy of his personal rite.

Individualism

Jerry's ability to hold his breath may also be understood as a symbolic assertion of his independence. Jerry trains until he does not require air for minutes at a time. Breaking away from his mother allows Jerry to explore and challenge himself. He learns to swim through the dangerous tunnel by himself, without any assistance from the local boys, which establishes his independence. The young boy, who at first whines for attention later hides his bloody nose from his mother so that only he will know how dangerous his play has been. Jerry establishes his maturity through his diligence, daring, and patience and expresses it in a conventional masculine form: through physical challenge.

Alienation and Loneliness

This tension between independence and dependence parallels the stress of alienation and loneliness in the story. At first, Jerry is so desperately lonely that his desire to play with the local boys is a "craving that fill[s] his whole body." Although they beckon him closer, he is separated by language, age, and nationality. The boys eventually shun him in light of his immature antics. Jerry seems desperate for attention, yet he leaves the beach where his mother and the other tourists can be found. His loneliness is partially self-imposed. Throughout the story Jerry disdains his mother and yearns for male companionship, suggesting that he may be searching for a father figure to compensate for his deceased father's absence. Jerry fights against his loneliness, the loneliness that brings him to the tunnel, but he also embraces It by swimming to the loneliest place imaginable-the dark tunnel by himself.

Style

Point of View

"Through the Tunnel" is written in third person limited point of view. The narrator describes the feelings of both Jerry and his mother but does not penetrate the thoughts of the local boys. This separation associates the reader more closely with the white tourists who are unfamiliar with the area. By telling the story from the perspective of the English tourists, Lessing heightens the sense of distance between the main characters and the locals Jerry encounters. It also allows the reader to associate more closely with Jerry as he braves the frightening tunnel.

Setting

Lessing's depiction of the setting is characterized by a few vivid concrete details and many evocative emotional descriptions. At first, she describes the bay as "wild and rocky," then as "wild" and "wild-looking" in contrast to the "safe beach." The bay's wildness explains both the mother's concern and the boy's excitement. Later, as Jerry nears the bay, the reader is introduced to the bay as Jerry views it. Introducing the setting through Jerry's perspective primes the reader for the intense swim through the tunnel.

Imagery

In "Through the Tunnel" there is a dynamic tension between the domestic and the wild; between risk and safety. This tension emerges in the first paragraph of the story, when the "wild and rocky bay" is contrasted with the "safe beach." Repeatedly this difference is stressed, as Jerry leaves the safety of his mother's beach bags and pale skin for jagged rocks. Jerry himself is an intermediate figure between wildness and safety. He risks his life, but does so while wearing swimming goggles, which are symbolic of both his inexperience and his need for protection.

Historical Context

"Through the Tunnel" was first published by the *New Yorker magazine* in 1955. Lessing had moved from British-controlled Rhodesia in South Africa in 1949. Six years later, little had changed. Apartheid, a legal system of racial segregation structured every aspect of life for both black and white people there, and racism exploded violently in the United States, Europe and many other parts of the globe. White tourists like those in the story were able to afford vacations, while the native black population of many countries, victims of racist economic exploitation, could generally never afford to take such vacations.

In the context of this racist structure, the interaction between Jerry and the "smooth dark brown"

boys takes on greater significance. Jerry is bested by "natives," an event that contradicts the entire structure of colonial racist supremacy. The British and French, among other nations, justified their colonization of Africa and other nations with a wide variety of scientific and social science that supposedly proved the inferiority of people with darker skin. For decades, European and American scientists and anthropologists had been travelling into Africa to study "primitive man." African societies were not respected as contemporary, viable ways of life, but as throwbacks to an earlier time. All of these assumptions were part of a worldview that allowed white colonists to justify their brutality and economic exploitation of black nations.

In 1957, the single mother was a suspicious figure in the United States, as well as in Europe. Authors like Phillip Wylie, who wrote *Generation of Vipers,* and organizations like the Boy Scouts warned against the feminization of men. Such people believed that domineering, obsessive mothers were destroying men's virility and independence. In movies like *The Manchurian Candidate,* powerful mothers were portrayed as demonic communists bent on ruining the world. Because mothers were obsessive in protecting their children, these Critics argued, men were being emasculated. Groups like the Boy Scouts and summer wilderness camps boomed as parents sought to "toughen up" their children. Many social scientists argued that boys required a strong father to grow up healthy. Thus, when Jerry's mother, "a widow," worries about being "neither possessive nor lacking in devotion," she is confronting a dilemma that many women faced at this time. The widow's relationship with her son is thus fraught with undercurrents of anxiety that reach far beyond the details of the story.

Critical Overview

Lessing published "Through the Tunnel" in her 1957 collection, *The Habit of Loving.* The collection received praise for both its political commitment and its often brutal honesty. Lessing has frequently been lauded for her feminist sensibility and political approach to subjects like apartheid, but she has consistently denied that she is a political or feminist writer. Resistant to categorization, she finds such labels limiting and has actively sought to diversify her identity as a writer, experimenting and expanding into other genres like science fiction and Jung-inspired "inner space fiction." Nobel Prize-winning author Nadine Gordimer has praised Lessing's experimentation with form and plotlessness. Lessing's career has also been distinguished by her lifetime commitment to the short story. Whereas many successful Writers turn solely to the more lucrative and more commonly respected form of the novel, Lessing has consistently excelled at both novels and short stories. Critics have often commented on the symbiotic relationship between her short stories and her novels.

"Through the Tunnel" has generally been identified as one of Lessing's African stories, and one of several she has written that allude to the racial tensions underlying tourism. The story has often been noted in relation to Lessing's many stories on female rites of passage into womanhood. While many of Lessing's stories and novels depict women entering adulthood, her concentration on young Jerry's rite of passage in "Through the Tunnel" is atypical and an interesting contrast to her female characters who seem to have a much more complicated induction into adulthood.

Writer Joan Didion, in *The White Album,* writes that Lessing "register[s], in a torrent of fiction that increasingly seems conceived in a stubborn rage against the very idea of fiction, every tremor along her emotional fault system." Such intense impressions and praise of Lessing's work are not uncommon. To many, her honesty strains to transcend artifice, "the very idea of fiction." Many appreciate her ability to convey raw, vivid emotions and truths through the most carefully crafted prose. While Lessing's writings during the 1970s and 1980s received sometimes mixed reviews, earlier pieces like "Through the Tunnel" continue to be enjoyed and respected by critics and popular audiences alike.

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Sobeloff is a lecturer and instructor at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. In the following essay, she discusses how "Through the Tunnel" fits in with Lessing's other works, particularly her African stories.

Doris Lessing is known for being a writer whose work affects people. She tackles political Issues but refuses to limit herself to being a political writer, and is equally acclaimed for her essays, fiction, and even science fiction dealing with interests ranging from nature to the status of women. "Through the Tunnel," which is ultimately a story about a boy growing up, seems at first glance to stand apart from her usual concerns.

Lessing was born in what is now Iran in 1919 to a German father and British mother, and then moved with her family to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in 1924. She embraced Communism and immigrated to England in 1949. Then she returned to Africa in 1956, but was labelled a "prohibited immigrant" because of her political views, and returned to England shortly thereafter. She then quit the Communist Party in protest of Stalin's atrocities.

Just as Lessing has divided her time between living in England and Africa, her stories have been classified as either "British" or "African," the latter having been published together in a volume called *African Stories.* "Through the Tunnel" appeared in Lessing's collection *The Habit of Loving,* which was published in 1957, shortly after her return to England. "Through the Tunnel," which presumably takes place in the south of France, is one of her British stories, though Lessing never overtly identifies its location and it has many of the characteristics of her African stories.

In her preface to *African Stories,* Lessing writes of the need for African writers to be able to write non-politically. "Writers brought up in Africa have many advantages-being at the centre of a modern battlefield; part of a society in rapid, dramatic change. But in a long run it can also be a handicap: to wake up every morning with one's eyes on a fresh evidence of inhumanity; to be reminded twenty times a day of injustice, and always the same brand of it, can be limiting. There are other things in living besides mjustice, even for the victims of it." In "Through the Tunnel," as in other of her British stories, Lessing allows herself to look away from the turmoil of South Africa As Lessing says later in the same preface, "Africa gives you the knowledge that man is a small creature, among other creatures, in a large landscape," and it is this aspect of the African experience that Lessing seems to focus on in "Through the Tunnel," as Jerry, the boy, struggles for survival in an indifferent sea.

Lessing "lays bare the really important problems that face us today: survival, and beyond that, the potential of the human spirit," according to critic Mary Ann Singleton. Certainly this applies to Jerry, who strives to fulfill his human potential and ends up fighting for his life in the tunnel. Jerry's struggle is that of an individual trying to find his place in the world, and is thus about survival and the human spirit in an emotional, personal sense rather than in the larger sense of human extinction. He wants to be

accepted by older boys and to leave behind the safe beach of his childhood where his mother watched over him. Jerry wants this so badly that ultimately he is willing to risk his life to demonstrate that he is ready. The personal aspect of a story can be as important as the political, and for that reason "Through the Tunnel" has been included in anthologies such as *Great Stories from the World of Sports* and *Breath of Danger: Fifty Tales of Peril and Fear by Masters of the Short Story.*

South African writer Nadine Gordimer also sees the human potential theme in "Through the Tunnel," but with a slightly different emphasis. In her review of *The Habit Of Loving,* Gordimer highlights "the habit of loving and needing love, of seeking acceptance through achievement, like the boy in 'Through the Tunnel.'" Gordimer would disagree with critic Clare Hanson, who, apparently viewing Lessing primarily as a political writer, says in her essay "Doris Lessing in Pursuit of English, or, No Small. Personal Voice," that "critics agree we read [Lessing] for content not style." Gordimer sees "Through the Tunnel" as a story "of great beauty and the style that comes of itself from a synthesis of theme and the background in terms of which it is worked out."

According to critic Mona Knapp in her book *Doris Lessing,* nearly all the British stories focus on "a modern European individual. These protagonists are steeped in civilization and culture, thus in radically different circumstances from their solitary African counterparts, but they share with them the fight against existential, if not demographic, isolation. . . . Each protagonist comes into conflict with a given collective force, and wrests from the ensuing battle her or his identity and self-definition." Young Jerry can be viewed as a "modern European individual, wresting with self-definition from his battle with the tunnel." He is not of this place. Unlike the French boys, he is not adapted to the sea and must buy goggles before he is able to see underwater. Moreover, he ends up altering the environment in order to make it through the tunnel: the white sand under the water is "littered now by stones he had brought down from the upper air." As soon as he achieves his goal he wants "nothing but to get back home and lie down."

On the other hand, Jerry's actions fit in with the characteristics of the African stories as well. According to Knapp, what is common to all 30 African stories is the theme of the "individual's collision with an oppressive environment. While the young may emerge temporarily unscathed from this skirmish, the adults, whose strength is already eroded by poverty and hardship, are nearly always doomed."

While Jerry's "collision" with the ocean is voluntary, the aquatic environment can still be viewed as "oppressive" to the extent that Jerry's determination to conquer it puts him at risk of dying and determines the course of his activities throughout his stay, bloody noses and all. Not only that, but it also distances him from his widowed mother who tries not to interfere with his life. Likewise, as a widow, her strength can be seen as having been somewhat "eroded by hardship." It is interesting to note that Jerry swims out twice to check that she is safely on the beach, while she never checks on him; maybe she knows that he must go off and face certain challenges and that he is doing so on her behalf, too.

Most of the African stories focus on the lives of the white settlers with the natives in the background. Knapp notes that many of these stories are told from the point of view of a white child, "who is at one with the teeming veld and nature itself. The child's eyes focus on three major subject groups: the color bar and native custom, the social hierarchy among the settlers, and, most important, the basic workings of life and death within unadulterated nature" While there is no overt "color bar" guiding the interactions between Jerry and the older boys as he watches them diving, he is a pale skinned intruder, intent upon observing "native custom," while they are "of that coast. . . burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand." Similarly, the wild sea teeming with fish can be viewed as analogous to the African veld; Jerry is not quite one with it-hence the fierceness of his struggles-but that is what he is striving to become. That he loses interest as soon as he achieves his aim demonstrates that he is more a child of the city than of nature.

One story included in *African Stories* that is an example of a white child at one with the veld and which has many striking parallels to "Through the Tunnel" is "A Sunrise on the Veld." The boys in the two stories seem to be so similar that the country each story is set in seems to be the primary difference between them. The boy in "A Sunrise on the Veld," a white settler, pushes himself physically and mentally as Jerry does, training himself to wake at half-past-four every morning, delighting in controlling his brain and "every part" of himself. "He had once stayed awake three nights running, to prove that he could, and then worked all day, refusing even to admit that he was tired." Upon waking, he walks outside with his shoes in his hands to avoid waking his parents, pushing past pain as Jerry does in order to achieve his freedom: "his hands were numbed. . . and his legs began to ache with cold." This boy wakes to go hunting out on the veld; he feels there is "nothing he couldn't do, nothing!" Like Jerry this boy confronts the possibility of death, and gains the "knowledge of fatality, of what has to be." He comes upon an injured buck; seeing its carcass devoured by black ants, he realizes that he may, on any given morning, have caused similar anguish to an animal that he has shot and not followed. Jerry inflicts no cruelty, but he does worry his mother and risk his life needlessly.

Singleton writes of Lessing's protagonists who encounter the veld that they are not "separated from creation as a whole but [take] part in the cyclical repetition of life and death. . . . If the result is the loss of Eden, it is the gain of full humanity with consciousness, and its corollary, responsibility. It is Milton's Adam and Eve leaving the Garden." Both Jerry and the boy in "A Sunrise on the Veld" gain maturity from their encounters with mortality, and this helps explain why afterwards Jerry is entirely ready to leave.

Source: Judy Sobeloff, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Holleran is an adjunct instructor at Robert Morris College and a frequent writer on literary subjects. In the following essay, she discusses the major themes of "Through the Tunnel. "

Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel" examines the experience of "rite d'passage" for Jerry, a young English boy. This story tells of a young man's determination to prove to himself that he can do the impossible, which is to swim down where the older boys swim and emerge a man, so to speak. Parallel to this, Lessing also explores the total isolation that the reader and Jerry experiences, as he struggles to find his own identity.

The reader learns the protagonist is Jerry, an 11-year old, only child, with a widowed mother. Initially, he feels unsure and isolated and he becomes even more so with the emergence of the group of boys, who frequent the beach. Not only do they make him feel unwelcome at first, but they already have a clique formed and are not very enthusiastic about welcoming another member. Despite his feelings of isolation and the feeling that he is being Judged, he wants more than anything to be a part of the group: "To be With them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body." According to Jerry, even the slightest acceptance would satisfy his craving for camaraderie. When they see him and identify Jerry as a stranger, they "proceed to forget him." Despite the boys' aloofness towards Jerry, "he was happy" because "he was with them." Jerry realizes that this whole "friendship" will be short-lived, but for the present he has friends and an identity as a part of a group.

As the boys begin to dive, Jerry decides to join in. Each time he dives, he feels "proud of himself."

However, when the diving becomes quite challenging, Jerry is not sure what to do, so he does what every normal II-year old kid would do-he begins to make faces and' show off with the hopes of winning their approval again. This is the act of a scared child who feels that if he can get them to laugh, they will forget all about his failed attempts at the "diving game." As he begins to make faces and clown around, he is met not with the boys' approval, but with their disapproval. They are not laughing; instead, they begin to swim and ignore him. Again, we see a situation where Jerry seems totally isolated. It also shows that despite the number of people around him, he is still alone.

It appears that the only time Jerry is sure of himself is when his mother is around. Even then, he appears to tolerate and get around her eccentric and nurturing ways. He says that the way to deal with his mother is through "contrition." Despite his toleration of her, he still relies on her though she tries not make him feel like a "mama's boy." As often as he tries to avoid her, she is still his safety zone as he looks to her for silent strength on the beach. This is where we see Jerry, the boy.

Here is a young boy, who appears to want to have friends so badly that he is willing to act childish with the hopes of gaining their acceptance. It seems that he truly wants to fit

in; he just does not know how. They are the "older" boys and one can surmise these are truly teenagers.

That these teenagers do not accept him forces Jerry into a ritualistic pattern to gain not only confidence in himself, but discipline and maturity as well. Usually, when a child takes an interest or strives for some sort of transformation, be it spiritual or physical, most likely that child will have the support of a parent, relative or friend to ease some of the confusion, answer questions, or just listen to their concerns. For Jerry, there is no one He does discover that no matter how badly he wants to "fit in," in the end, it is up to him. He must find a way to transform into an adult by himself. This moment occurs when Jerry is sitting on a rock and the boys are swimming around him and scaring him by "flying down past him." As he counts how long they are under the water, he becomes more and more scared until they surface and walk right past him. He concurs, "They were leaving to get away from him. He cried openly, fists in his eyes. There was no one to see him, and he cried himself out." Finally, he decides to go find his mother

He is still aware of his mother's presence. As he feels her presence, he begins practicing the dive the older boys did, and his determination is greater than ever. The only problem is that he is going from child to adult to child again. He is as determined as an adult, but going about his transformation as a child. When he finally dives down far enough, the salt overpowers his eyes, so he surfaces and goes to find his mother. Jerry is now approaching a very great transformation.

We also see that the mother is completely blind to her son's struggles and transformation. As Lessing writes, [the mother] "was determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion." She has a very realistic and stoic attitude toward her only child; however, we find she is in a situation where there appears not to be any males present in either the mother's life or the son's life, where a strong role model should be present. For him, he journeys through life alone, just as his rite d'passage is experienced-alone. His acceptance into adulthood is a painful, but meaningful experience, as he never does gain acceptance with the older boys. However, It never does matter once his mission is finished, because their existence becomes inconsequential. He finally knows what it is like to be a man.

Once he purchases the goggles, he assumes a whole new identity, "Now he could see." As Jerry realizes, "It was as if he had eyes of a different kind -fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water." Even his swim takes on symbolic meaning. He swims past the "myriads of minute fish" and sees where he needs to go in order to accomplish his mission. This goal is not going to be an easy one. He first has to get ready to attempt this feat; he cannot just swim through the gap like a child. He has to learn control. The reader begins to see a very different Jerry emerge. A child would jump in and go through the tunnel blindly; however, once he obtains the goggles and sees things in a different light and studies where he is headed, he begins to develop into a mature teenager.

One thing he does is gain control. He "exercised his lungs as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he would become depended on it," knowing that without this control, he

would be dealing with a futile attempt at developing an identity. The only problem with this whole mission is that it appears to be self-imposed with pain. He deals with nosebleeds, exhaustion, and dizziness. All to prove to myself that he can do something the older boys can already do.

His goal has to wait until he can gain control over his own lungs and body. Children usually show little or no patience in waiting for something they really want. Here, Jerry develops "A curious, most unchildlike persistence, a controlled impatience." This is where the transformation is taking effect. He practices without any type of support from anyone; this is something he finds he must do on his own. As he attempts to dive through the tunnel, he realizes that he is still scared, but he also realizes "this was the moment when he would try." For Jerry, his goggles seem to present him with a kind of hidden strength and new insight into maturity. As he proceeds with the challenge to himself, he emerges victorious and understands, "He was at the end of what he could do." The only thing left was to go back home and rejoice in the fact that he achieved something he never thought he could do, despite all odds.

When Jerry tells his mother what he has done that morning, he does not explain all the details, but tells her only of his achievement of holding his breath under water. She appears to humor him and the mother-mode switches on as she cautions him on "overdoing it." As an adult now, Jerry has not only learned how to hold his breath, but also how to hold his temper and how to understand what is truly important, as opposed to what is truly nothing more than a mother's reaction. When Jerry finally achieves his goal, there is no fanfare, no applause, just a quiet celebration within himself knowing that he succeeded.

Source: Karen Holleran, "Through the Tunnel' The Search for Identity and Acceptance," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

Though the following essay does not discuss "Through the Tunnel" explicitly, Hanson does discuss Lessing's approach to short fiction, which she characterizes as the "free story, " in which the narrative is not especially driven by plot or guided to a conclusion by the author. These stylistic aspects are both present in "Through the Tunnel. "

Lessing's short fiction falls into the general category of the "free story," a term coined by Elizabeth Bowen to describe the kind of fiction that she and writers such as V. S. Pritchett were writing in the years immediately following the modernist period. The free story has been the dominant type of short story or fiction produced in this country over the last fifty years and has been much favoured by novelists who have also been attracted to the short form. The freedom of the free story consists primari1y in its potential for plotlessness, or narrative inconclusiveness. Elizabeth Bowen has made the point that the short story, "free from the longueurs of the novel is also exempt from the novel's conclusiveness-too often forced and false." Nadine Gordimer has also written persuasively of her short fiction, stressing the way in which the "new" convention of plotlessness (for it is of course a convention) implies a particular epistemological stance on the part of the author: the form reflects and imposes limits on the quality and quantity of know 1edge available to him or her:

Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one. *For the sake of the form* The novelist may juggle about with chronology and throw narrative overboard; all the time his characters have the reader by the hand, there is a consistency of relationship throughout the experience that cannot and does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fire-flies, in and out, now here, now there, in darkness Short story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of-the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point.

The form of the free story thus offers a freedom which mayor may not eventually act as a constraint. It is a form sharply marked off from the traditional short story-the "plotty story"-on the one hand, and the more radical modernist and postmodernist short fiction on the other. The free story, for example, retains a concept of character in some respects like the one that obtains in the realistic novel: character is seen as relatively consistent through time, which is not the case in modernist short fiction. The free story is also unlike modernist and postmodernist fiction in being much involved with the contingent and specific: it tends to be marked and stamped by a particular climate and atmosphere. Like the novel in England over the period 1930 to 1960, the free story has been much occupied with social change and has been responsive to social settings and pressures. Tills characteristic may be ascribed in part to the Impact of the Second World War, which affected civilian life in ways in which the First World War did not.

Doris Lessing left Rhodesia in 1949, and most of her English short fictions were written in the period 1950-1970. Many of her early stories deal with the disruption and chaos caused by the Second World War and in subject matter and technique overlap with the

contemporary short fictions of Elizabeth Bowen, V. S. Pritchett, and William Sansom. Like these writers, Lessing is closely involved with social issues. Yet there is something striking, even jarring, in the tone she employs in the examination of such issues. The prevailing tone is one of irony and distance: Lessing rarely writes of English character or setting Without the use of imaginary, or real, quotation marks. It may be that this stance of ironic detachment stems from Lessing's position as an exile, but the question seems to run deeper than that, since the sense of distance is often equally present in the African stories. By adopting an endlessly ironic stance, Lessing does more than reveal her own inability to identify successfully with specific types of English men or women: she creates a sense of alienation and detachment from all forms of society so far known. This quality of alienation seems to point forward to Lessing's later fiction. In the earlier stories she has a Swiftean ability, not to defamiliarize, but to create a sense of critical alienation from social or conventional forms and mores.

Specifically Lessing achieves her effects through a self-conscious manipulation of codes of language and behavior. She plays endlessly with different linguistic codes and available discourses; her work is more experimental in this respect than is sometimes recognized. So in "Not a Very Nice Story" (first collated in 1972) she catches, through an exaggerated use of a particular linguistic register, the middle-class "decency," and complacency, of her four main characters:

This was the peak of their lives; the long tedium of the war was over, the men were still in their early thirties, the women in their twenties. They were feeling as If at last their real lives were starting. They were all good-looking The men were of the same type; jokes had been made about that already. They were both dark, largely built, with the authority of doctors, "comfortable" as the wives said. And the women were pretty They soon established (like showing each other their passports, or references of decency and reliability) that they shared views on life-tough, but rewarding; God-dead; children-to be brought up with the right blend of permissiveness and discipline; society-to be cured by common sense and mild firmness but Without extremes of any sort.

In "The Temptation of Jack Orkney" (first published in 1972) the eponymous hero is placed for us by his self-conscious use of an ironic code, a language, or style, which he himself deprecates but cannot transcend:

It had been a long time since he had actually organized something political; others had been happy to organize *him*- his name, his presence, his approval. But an emotional telephone call from an old friend, Walter Kenting, before seven that morning, appealing that they "all" should make a demonstration of some sort about the refugees-the nine million refugees of Bangladesh this time- and the information that he was the only person available to do the organizing, had returned him to a politically active past

The effect of these layers of irony is to undercut the characters, to make us feel that they are no more than puppets, creatures of convention. In practice, such a view of human nature is one which we tend to hold temporarily, as we see the communal, the social elements of "character" exposed as in a sudden flash of light: we then relax back into our habitual sense of the reality of a person's human! humane identity and

individuality. It is this kind of dialectical movement which is reflected in the structure of Lessing's short fictions, in which there is a continual interplay between a socially and genetically deterministic view of human nature, and a sense of transcendent individuality. The form of the free story is especially well suited to the rendering of such ambivalence, and I would suggest that this is why Lessing has been more successful in presenting character as she sees it-produced somewhere between the individual and the social-in the form of short fiction rather than the novel, *pace* Lukacs' and her own statements about the dialectical possibilities of the novel form.

In the early story "Notes for a Case History" (1963) Lessing seems Initially to make out a complete case for social determinism, describing the childhood of Maureen Watson as seen by "the social viewer," or in contemporary terms probably the social worker:

Maureen Watson, conceived by chance on an unexpected granted-at-the-last-minute leave, at the height of the worst war in history, infant support of a mother only occasionally upheld (the chances of war deciding) by a husband she had met in a bomb shelter during an air raid' poor baby, born into a historical upheaval which destroyed forty million and might very well have destroyed her

But this little "report"-and again, we note, Lessing is playing with social and linguistic codes-is inset into a text which continues:

As for Maureen, her memories and the reminiscences of her parents made her dismiss the whole thing as boring and nothing to do with her.

Immediately we are brought up against the notion of *her,* the self which Maureen feels herself to possess independently of environment and conditioning. Ironically, Maureen tries to find her self through identification with ready-made social stereotypes, emulating specific social models in order to free herself from her background. Slowly, she drags herself up out of her social class by dint of careful attention to the advice given by fashion magazines, attention to her voice (her accent), and later through more sophisticated self-education via a trip to Italy and subsequent visits to art galleries.

Quietly, in her lunch hour, she went off to the National Gallery and to the Tate. There she looked, critical and respectful, at pictures, memorizing their subjects, or main colours, learning names. When invited out, she asked to be taken to "foreign" films, and when she got back home wrote down the names of the director and the stars. She looked at the book page of the *Express* (she made her parents buy It instead of the *Mirror)* and sometimes bought a recommended book, if it was a best seller.

Her progress is measured by the social status of boyfriends, exactly monitored by Lessing. Eventually she becomes engaged to her male counterpart, an apprentice architect-"she knew, by putting herself in his place, that he was looking for a wife with a little money or a house of her own, if he couldn't get a lady." But at the moment when she must finally commit herself to an existence with Stanley, her sense of self reasserts itself. Her doubts about Stanley surface through an encounter with Tony, a young accountant, also from her own background, who reflects something in Maureen herself

when he laughs good-humouredly at her attempts to escape from her class. When Maureen finally rebels against the false values she has imposed on herself, she tells herself that she is doing it "for Tony"; however, the most striking thing about the scene is its feminist content and implications, the way in which Maureen acts as and for herself. Lessing uses a damasking device which occurs repeatedly in her fiction, as Maureen literally strips herself of her painfully acquired sexual and social identity:

At four Stanley was expected, and at 3: 55 Maureen descended to the living room She wore' a faded pink dress from three summers before; her mother's cretonne overall used for housework; and a pIece of cloth tied round her hair that might very well have been a duster. At any rate, it was a faded gray. She had put on a pair of her mother's old shoes She could not be called plain, but she looked like her own faded elder sister, dressed for a hard day's spring cleaning.

The fiction ends in defeat: we are made to feel, in this case, the impossible weight of social and external forces with which the individual has to contend. However, the possibility of transcendence through (and perhaps of) the self is intermittently suggested in this early fiction: the mock brusqueness of the title itself suggests this.

"Not a Very Nice Story," a fiction from Lessing's middle period, brings to the fore questions about the relationship between the novel and the short form in Lessing's work. It requires us to consider the possibility of telling this particular story in novel form. The plot is so rich, and extends over such a long period of time, that It seems to demand novel treatment, and in consequence we begin to construct a notional novel from it. Yet Lessing's adoption of the short form here is undeniably apt and strategic. It allows her to foreground certain issues, as we read off the actual, and scanty, information that we are given against the "novel" that we wish to construct. The techniques of summary and sketch, which seem at first so inappropriate to the material, in practice makes us reconsider the ways in which we usually process and code such material. Lessing invites us to share her impatience with conventional (and social) forms and the level of judgment and awareness that their use implies:

For ten years the marriages had prospered side by side The Joneses had produced three children, the Smiths two. The young doctors worked hard, as doctors do In the two comfortable gardened houses, the two attractive young wives worked hard as wives and mothers do. And all that time the marriages were being assessed by very different standards, which had nothing to do with those trivial and inelegant acts of sex-which continued whenever circumstances allowed, quite often, though neither guilty partner searched for occasions-all that time the four people continued to take their emotional pulses, as was their training' the marriages were satisfactory, no, not so satisfactory, yes, very good again.

In "Not a Very Nice Story," as In "Notes for a Case History," the tone of the title points to one of the fiction's major preoccupations. Lessing suggests, In effect, that most of our complex social forms and processes can be reduced to very basic feelings and desires, and that until we recognise this, there can be no possibility of transcendence of such feelings. In "Not a Very Nice Story" the possibility of transcendence awaits the women in

the story. They have lived with lies about themselves and their relationships with their husbands for years, lies of which both they and the husbands have sometimes been aware, sometimes not. As the fiction moves to its close, each of the women is granted a vision of a husbandless future, a vision which is undeniably bleak, but which nonetheless seems to hold a potential for greater freedom and self-knowledge. Through the consciousness of Althea, in particular, Lessing seems to be moving towards a recognition of the importance of those areas of dream and vision which will dominate her later fiction.

Sometimes Althea would see that room without its centre, without Frederick She and Muriel were alone in the room with the children Yes, that is how It would all end, two aging women, With the children who would soon have grown up and gone. Between one blink of an eye and another, a man could vanish as Henry had done.
In the long evenings when Frederick was at the clinic, or on call, and It was as If the whole house and its occupants waited for him to come back, then Althea could not stop herself from looking across the living room at Muriel in the thought: *Coming events cast their shadow before. Can't you feel it?*
But this is our future, Althea would think. Their future, hers and Muriel's, was each other. She knew it. But It was neurotic to think like this and she must try to suppress it.

The reality and force of such a dream seems greater when it occurs in a structurally indeterminate, free floating story, rather than in a novel tied in any way to the conventions of social realism.

"The Temptation of Jack Orkney," the concluding story in the *Collected Stories* (1978; the story was first published in 1972) is a latter-day Faustian tale in which Jack Orkney is tempted to sell his radical, committed soul in order to abandon himself to the reality of a dream. The fiction starts from the crisis of his father's death, which sparks off the feelings of disenchantment and alienation which sustain the fiction; it also seems to stand as a portent, pointing to the possibility of a transcendence specifically associated with death and disintegration. This idea circles the story: so Jack's father is described In these terms near its close:

During that night he could feel his face falling into the lines and folds of his father's face-at the time, that is, when his father had been an elderly, rather than an old, man. His father's old man's face had been open and sweet, but before achieving that goodness-like the inn at the end of a road which you have no alternative but to use?-he had had the face of a Roman, heavy-lidded, skeptical, obdurate, facing into the dark' the man whose pride and strength had to come from a conscious ability to suffer, in silence, the journey into negation.

Jack Orkney's disenchantment with his world is no simple matter and raises considerable narrative difficulties. Lessing's project is to expose Jack Orkney's "false consciousness" by accumulating his reactions and responses to what he perceives as the false consciousness of others. This makes for great difficulties of tone, not just because the narrator is required to move smoothly or coherently from one discordant discourse to the next but also because the narrative can by definition come to rest at no

stable point of view. The narrator must recognize that "his" own view is as false, as culturally determined and contingent as that of any of the "character's": again, such a relativistic viewpoint is, I suggest, more easily accommodated in the form of the free (inconclusive) story rather than in the novel.

The territory which Jack Orkney occupies at the close of the fiction is analogous to that occupied by the narrator of *Memoirs of a Survivor.* The freestanding world of dream does not conflict with "reality," does not seem discrepant. Jack Orkney's world of dream is coterminous with the visionary world of *Memoirs* it waters the arid plains of his life like a swift, deep, fast-flowing stream:

He had once been a man whose sleep had been nothing, nonexistent, he had slept like a small child. Now, in spite of everything, although he knew that fear could lie in wait there, his sleep had become another country, lying just behind his daytime one. Into that country he went nightly, With an alert, even If ironical, interest: the Irony was due to his habits of obedience to his past-for a gift had been made to him Behind the face of the sceptical world was another, which no conscious decision of his could stop him exploring.

Lessing characteristically ends her free story here, in an open-ended way. Such indeterminacy affirms the reader's freedom for further exploration after the novella's formal close.

Source: Clare Hanson, "Free Stones: The Shorter Fiction of Doris Lessing," in *The Doris Lessing Newsletter,* Vol. 9, No I, Spring, 1985, pp. 7-8, 14.

Topics for Further Study

Why does Jerry not tell his mother the reason why he wants water goggles? How does Ins silence on tins matter contrast with his interactions With Ins mother at the beginning of the story?

Do you think that Jerry's determination in achieving Ins goal is healthy? Why or why not?

By the end of the story, how has Jerry changed? How does Lessing describe the boy's behavior in the beginning of the story in comparison to Ins behavior at the end?

Compare and Contrast

1949: In the aftermath of World War II, minions of young wives worldwide are widowed. Many raise their children alone.

Today: Out-of-wedlock births In the United States rise to 31 percent in 1994. Many of these children will be raised without a father figure present.

1950s: Coming-of-age novels, also known as *bildungsromans* are popular. One of the most popular is J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye.*

Today: Coming-of-age novels are less popular with young readers than paperback series that emphasize the adventures of adolescents, like R. L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series.

1948: The National Party in South Africa institutes apartheid-an often violent policy of segregation and political and economic discrimination.

Today: Apartheid ends in 1994. Nelson Mandela, after being released from his 27-year imprisonment, is elected president of South Africa in the first elections open to all citizens of the country.

What Do I Read Next?

"The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1933), by D. H. Lawrence. In an effort to gain his mother's love, a young boy rides his rocking horse into delirium attempting to divine the winners of horse races.

Reef (1994) a novel by Romesh Gunesekera. An orphaned boy becomes a cook for a wealthy single man on the island of Sri Lanka and takes solace in the discipline of housework. The rising political unrest of the country coincides with the boy's coming of age, and he is ultimately forced to flee his native land for England.

"Flavours of Exile," another of Lessing's stories written In the 1950s, in which a young girl seeks to belong to her adopted African homeland while her mother longs for the familiarity of her English past.

"A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty (1941). An elderly African-American woman perseveres on a long trek into town, encountering many obstacles in order to obtain medication for her grandson.

Further Study

Brewster, Dorothy. *Doris Lessing,* Twayne, 1965.

Biography that traces the major plots and themes in Lessing's early fiction.

Thorpe, Michael. *"The Grass Is Singing* and Other African Stories," in his *Doris Lessing,* British Council for Longman Group, 1973.

Surveys the themes of Lessing's African stones.

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Project Editor
David Galens

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Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Product Design
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Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

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Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
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Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

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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:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535