To Room Nineteen Study Guide

To Room Nineteen by Doris Lessing

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Introduction

"To Room Nineteen," one of the collected stories in Doris Lessing's *A Man and Two Women* (1963), has been singled out as one of her best stories. It centers on a middle-aged English woman, whose world in a mid-twentieth century London suburb revolves around her husband, her four children, and her home. Everyone thinks Susan and her husband Matthew are the perfect couple, who have made all the right choices in life. When Susan packs her youngest children off to school, however, she begins to question the "intelligent" decisions she has made. When she discovers that her husband has been having extramarital affairs, she embarks on a journey of self-discovery that ultimately becomes a descent into madness.

This well-crafted story explores the warring impulses of intellect and instinct, mind and heart, against the backdrop of early 1960s London, when women were caught in the social conservatism of the past and unable to see the promise of a future that would encourage choice, fulfillment, and personal freedom. Lessing's tragic story illuminates the restrictions placed on women of this era and the devastating consequences of those restrictions. "To Room Nineteen" cemented Lessing's reputation as one of the century's finest short story writers.

Author Biography

To Room Nineteen: Doris Lessing [graphic graphicname="TIF00052169" orient="portrait" size="A"]

Doris Lessing was born Doris May Tayler on October 22, 1919, in Kermanshah, Persia (now Iran) to two transplanted British expatriates, Alfred Cook Taylor (a farmer) and Emily Maude McVeagh. In 1924 the family moved to a farm in Southern Rhodesia, where they stayed for twenty years. Doris's education began at a convent school and later at a government school for girls. Her formal education ended when she was twelve. After two failed marriages, she kept her second husband's name and moved to London where she resided as of 2004.

Her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, (1950) which focused on the horrors of apartheid and colonization, was well received. Fiona Barnes, in her article on Lessing for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, notes, however, that Lessing worried about being labeled as too narrowly political, as she noted in her description of what it was like to be a writer from Africa. She admited her situation had "many advantages," which included "being at the centre of a modern battlefield; part of a society in rapid, dramatic change." Yet ultimately, she saw her experience as "a handicap" for a writer, arguing that "to wake up every morning with one's eyes on fresh evidence of inhumanity; to be reminded twenty times a day of injustice, and always the same brand of it, can be limiting."

Although several of her works did center on the politics within her Middle-Eastern homeland, over her more than four decades of work, Lessing broadened her literary focus to include explorations of other important issues of the later half of the twentieth century. In her story "To Room Nineteen," for example, her focus is on the limited roles for women in 1960s London. Gail Caldwell, in her article for the *Boston Globe*, writes that Lessing has "written prolifically on everything from British colonialism . . . to the failure of ideology" and notes that she has "taken on the apocalyptic potential of a futuristic, Blade Runner London, the perils of the color bar in Africa, [and] the life of a young girl growing up on the veld." Lessing, who over the span of her literary career has written short stories, autobiographies, novels, and plays, has been celebrated as one of the most important writers of the age.

Her major awards include the Somerset Maugham Award, Society of Authors, 1954, for *Five: Short Novels*; Austrian State Prize for European Literature, 1981; German Federal Republic Shakespeare Prize, 1982; W. H. Smith Literary Award, 1986, Palermo Prize, 1987, and Premio Internazionale Mondello, 1987, all for *The Good Terrorist*; Grinzane Cavour award (Italy), 1989, for *The Fifth Child*; honorary degree, Princeton University, 1989, and Harvard University, 1995; James Tait Black Memorial Book Prize, University of Edinburgh, and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, both 1995, both for *Under My Skin*; and finally the David Cohen British Literary Prize, 2001, for her life's work.

Plot Summary

Part 1

The story begins with a description of the history of Susan and Matthew Rawlings's marriage, which has been a very practical union. They married in their late twenties after having known each other for some time and after having experienced other relationships. They, and their friends, consider them to be "well matched."

Before their children came, Susan worked in an advertising firm while Matthew was a sub-editor for a London newspaper. They began their family in a house in Richmond, a suburb of London, and they eventually had four children. Their life together was happy but rather flat. They privately began to wonder about the central point of all of the work they did□Matthew outside the home and Susan inside. They did, however, love each other and were determined to have a successful marriage. As a result then, they convinced themselves that "things were under control."

One night Matthew comes home late and admits that he has been with another woman. Both he and Susan determine that the event was not important and would not damage their relationship. Yet, they both become irritable. Susan begins to wonder about her importance to Matthew and thinks about the ten years of her fidelity. Eventually, they determine that the sensible thing to do is to forget the entire incident. Matthew continues his infidelities, however, prompting Susan to consider the emptiness of her life and her lack of freedom.

Part 2

By the time they are in their early forties, Susan begins to think about what she would do when all of her children go to school. On the day that she drops the twins, her youngest, off for their first day of school, Susan returns home and spends a restless morning, not knowing quite what to do with herself. The restlessness evolves into a state of panic until she convinces herself that her feelings are quite normal and that it would take time to discover her own needs after caring so long for others' needs. Yet, she spends the day helping their maid take care of the house.

This pattern continues until the school holiday, when she feels resentment that she will no longer have any freedom, even though she has carefully avoided freeing herself from her domestic duties. She experiences a growing sense of restlessness and emptiness but hides her feelings from Matthew, because they are not "sensible."

On the fourth day of the holiday, her irritation grows to the point that she snaps at her children. Matthew's understanding and comfort help her regain control of herself, but the sense of restlessness returns when the children go back to school. In an effort to find a place where she can be alone and gain some measure of freedom, which has become increasingly important to her, Susan takes a spare room in the house for her own where

she can enjoy some privacy. Matthew and the children respect her time there and determine not to take her for granted in the future.

Susan's restlessness, however, is not abated by the time in her room. Her increased impatience and anger frighten her, especially one afternoon when she thinks she sees a man in her garden, stirring a snake coiled at his feet. As she determines that this devilish man has brought on the emotional turmoil she is caught up in, he disappears.

Part 3

One afternoon, Susan decides to rent a room in London for a day so that she can be truly alone. Yet when the hotel's proprietress will not leave her in peace, Susan leaves, feeling defeated. At home, her maid complains that she did not like having the responsibilities of the house fall on her for the entire day while Susan was gone.

When Susan takes a holiday in Wales, she feels no relief since her husband and children call her each day with their questions and concerns. Returning home, she insists to Matthew that they need an au pair to help run the house. Recognizing that Susan has already spiritually removed herself from her family, Matthew reluctantly agrees.

Sophie, the au pair, becomes a great success in the household, embraced by all of its members. As a result, Susan feels that she will not be missed if she spends time away from home. Three days a week, she rents a shabby room in London where she sits alone, reveling in her freedom. Her time in the room allows her to endure her domestic roles at home. Soon the three days turn into five.

One night, assuming that she has taken a lover, Matthew asks her whether she wants a divorce. Susan dodges the question. The next day she discovers that Matthew has found out about her room, and as a result, she feels her freedom slipping away. When she returns home, she sees her daughter Molly being consoled by Sophie, and "blinks tears of farewell" in response.

Later, while trying to explain to Matthew what she was doing in the room, she decides that it would be easier to tell him that she does have a lover. This relieves Matthew, who admits that he is having an affair as well with a friend of theirs. The next morning, Matthew proposes that the four of them meet with each other and get everything out in the open. Susan panics, blurting out that her lover, "Michael Plant," is out of town. Determining that suicide will be the only way to quiet "the demons" in her head and achieve the freedom she so desperately needs, Susan returns to Room Nineteen, turns on the gas, and drifts "off into the dark river."

Characters

Mrs. Parkes

Mrs. Parkes, the Rawlings's housekeeper, is "one of the servers of this world, but she needed someone to serve." She does her job well, but cannot handle the responsibility of making any household decisions while Susan is away. She impedes Susan's freedom until Sophie is hired.

Matthew Rawlings

When the story opens, Matthew Rawlings is in his forties, as is his wife Susan. He is a "sensible" man who seems to have made all of the right choices in life. He married in his late twenties and only after he had experienced other relationships, unlike his friends who married young and "regretted lost opportunities." He chose Susan because he thought that they were "well matched" in temperament. Matthew is known for his moderation, his humor, and his "abstinence from painful experience," and so, he has become known as a reliable friend. Others depend on him for his levelheadedness. Matthew's job fits his personality and so satisfies him. He is a sub-editor for a large London newspaper where he is "one of the essential background people who in fact steady, inspire and make possible the people in the limelight."

Matthew's sensible nature does not let him blame his wife when he begins to feel a "certain flatness" to his life. He "never was really struck, as he wanted to be, by joy." Yet, his shallowness surfaces when he accepts the cultural "inevitability" that men will be tempted by other women at parties their wives cannot attend, since they are home with the children. When Matthew begins to have extramarital affairs, however, they initially leave him feeling guilty.

Readers begin to doubt Matthew's "intelligence" in his response to Susan's problems. His conventional nature refuses to allow him to see what is really wrong with her and so he cannot offer any help. As a result he withdraws from her when she stops acting sensibly and rationally according to the unwritten rules of their marriage. When he confronts her about the time she is spending in Room Nineteen, he is relieved when she insists that she is having an affair. His inability to face any really troubling reality causes him to fall back into his conventionality.

It is easier for him to believe that Susan has been unfaithful than to realize that there are serious problems in their marriage. He would rather find any way to avoid divorce, even though they have not been married in any real sense for some time. In an effort to ease the tensions of the admitted infidelities on both sides, Matthew proposes that they all be "civilized" about the situation and meet. Revealing his expertise at hiding his emotions, in this case jealousy, he suggests "reasonably" and "sensibly" that they could become "a foursome."

Molly Rawlings

Molly, one of Susan's twins, gives Susan the final impetus to commit suicide. As she watches Sophie comfort Molly through the window, Susan realizes that she is no longer needed by her family and that perhaps they would be better off without her.

Susan Rawlings

Susan is introduced as a mirror image of her husband. They share the same qualities: levelheadedness, intelligence, a good sense of humor, and dependability. Like Matthew, she also has trained herself to avoid any unpleasant experience. Both of them use "their intelligence to preserve what they had created from a painful and explosive world." She easily adapts to the change she undergoes when she and Matthew marry, giving up her job in a "concession to popular wisdom," and moving to the suburbs to care for her family. Both she and Matthew appear to have "an infallible sense for *choosing* right," and a determination that they would "not make the same mistakes" that they see their friends make.

Susan and Matthew have learned to control their emotions. "[T]he inner storms and quicksands were understood and charted." Susan selflessly gives up her independence for her family and even comes to accept Matthew's occasional infidelities, insisting that they are not his fault. Her "intelligence barred, too, quarrelling, sulking, anger, silences of withdrawal, accusations and tears." Gradually though, her emotions, so long suppressed, begin to emerge as Matthew's behavior, coupled with her closeted life in the suburbs, makes her feel more and more that her life "had become a desert, and that nothing mattered." She recognizes that the "essential Susan" was "in abeyance, as if she were in cold storage."

Unsure of what the essential Susan really is, she soon falls into an uncontrollable restlessness, which eventually forces her to abandon her traditional domestic duties. She begins to resent her lack of freedom and so tries to find places to be alone. Initially, her desire for freedom causes her to feel remorseful, especially when Matthew cannot understand her feelings. Soon she recognizes that the "conscious controlled decency" by which she lives makes her feel even more isolated and "nearly drove her crazy." Ironically, as she begins a search for her true self, which is continually impeded by her husband and family's requirements, her "sensible" nature reasserts itself, leading her to believe that she is being irrational.

Susan does begin to lose her sanity as she fails to find the freedom she so desperately needs. She begins to see "demons" in her garden and tries to escape them by fleeing to her room in London. When Matthew threatens to rob her of the freedom she finds there, she breaks and commits suicide, not having "the energy to stay" with her family.

Sophie Traub

Sophie, the Rawlings's au pair, is a young, healthy, German girl who cheerfully takes over all of Susan's duties in the household and becomes "a success with everyone." The entire family soon turns their attention to and their dependence on her, which enables Susan to spend her days in Room Nineteen. Feeling that Sophie could care for her family better than she, and concluding that Sophie "was already the mother of those children," Susan leaves her "big, beautiful white house . . . silently dedicating it to Sophie."

Themes

Conformity and Restriction

Susan experiences social as well as personal pressure to conform to specific cultural dictates. Her class, place, and gender all place social restrictions on her. Her class (middle) and place (suburbia) have been proscribed by specific cultural boundaries. Since she is in the middle class, she must own an expensive, large home in suburbia and maintain it well, which involves a great deal of time and money. As she attends to her home, her position in suburbia cuts her off from the more active life of the city. Her interaction in the community is limited to other middle-class homeowners and the servants who work for them.

The most pressing social restrictions, however, are placed on Susan as a result of her gender. She, not Matthew, must confine herself to the house in the suburbs because that is what was expected of women in England during the mid-twentieth century. Before she married Matthew, she worked in London in an advertising firm, where she could be an active part of the diverse city life, and where she could enjoy a measure of freedom. When she married, however, she made a "concession to popular wisdom" and along with Matthew, decided they would buy a house and start a family.

Susan acquiesces to and reinforces the restrictions placed on her. Without a second thought, she adopts the role of housewife and mother because her culture insists that this is the "intelligent" choice. She has learned to carefully order her life according to "sensible discrimination," which dictates an "abstinence from painful experience." Thus she avoids any challenge to the rules that might cause problems for her or her husband. She strives to achieve "everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose." Of course, ironically, Susan really has no choice. To ensure that she maintains a "balanced and sensible family," she allows society to dictate her life.

Self-Discovery

While Susan has to admit that she and Matthew "had everything they had wanted and had planned for," she soon feels a sense of flatness and restriction. As the youngest two of her four children begin school, she realizes that she has given up her identity for her family and struggles to recapture a sense of self. In order to accomplish this, Susan must reject the traditional roles that she has previously accepted. This means that if she no longer accepts her role as wife and mother, she, by the standard definition, will no longer be acting sensibly and rationally. Lessing prompts us to wonder in this instance whose world is the more rational—Susan's, where attaining an authentic sense of self becomes a priority, or Matthew's, where any deviance from the norm is considered "madness." This conflict causes the reader to reexamine the word "intelligence" as it is applied to the Rawlings's marriage.

Madness

The tragedy of "To Room Nineteen" is that Susan's search for an authentic self leads to madness and ultimately suicide. Ironically, the insights she gains during her search reveal her inherent sanity. Susan cannot exist without a sense of freedom, which is a fundamental human desire. Denying that basic need, which Susan does for years, can be considered a form of madness. Thus, when she asserts her right to experience and satisfy this desire, she is acting sanely. This ironic interplay between insanity and madness becomes most evident in the final pages of the story.

In order to preserve the measure of freedom that she has achieved in Room Nineteen, Susan concocts a "rational" story for her time there. Her manufactured infidelity appears to be a reasonable explanation for her abandonment of her traditional duties as wife and mother. Susan recognizes Matthew's need to have a sensible explanation for her absences□a behavior that matches and thus condones his own infidelities.

Susan recognizes the irony of this situation in the room when she declares, "Oh, how ridiculous! How absurd! How humiliating!" The irony is extended by the description of her suicide, which becomes a "fructifying dream that seemed to caress her inwardly, like the movement of her blood." Susan's tragedy is that she believes suicide offers her the only pathway to true selfhood and freedom, so she drifts "off into the dark river" of death.

Style

Narrative

Fiona Barnes, in her article for *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, argues that Lessing's "stories benefit from the creative tension caused by the unsettling contrast between the ethical, at times political, commitment of her vision and the cool, frequently humorous, detachment of her ironic tone." Lessing displays this ironic tone masterfully in "To Room Nineteen." From the opening line, the narrator sets up the tension between Lessing's political focus in the story and the detached narrative tone: "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings's marriage was grounded in intelligence."

The "I suppose" undercuts the suggestion that what drives Susan to suicide is the "failure" of her intelligence—her inability to control her emotions and her deep-seated desire for freedom. The narrator continues this subterfuge of the accepted judgment of Susan's condition throughout the story. For example, when the narrator notes that both Susan and Matthew feel a certain flatness in their marriage, she immediately insists "well, even this was expected. . . . [I]t was natural they sometimes felt like this." This statement though is immediately countered with the question "like what?" which suggests that the couple is actively avoiding any emotional introspection, which is the ultimate cause of the failure of their marriage and Susan's subsequent suicide.

By the end of the story, however, as Susan slips further into madness, the story's narrative voice shifts. The previously detached narrator now reflects Susan's point of view and presents a different irony. At this point, Susan is clear about the hypocrisy of her life as she slowly drifts "off into the dark river," for her the only route to true freedom.

Symbols

Glenna Bell, in her article for *The Explicator*, analyzes Lessing's use of color in the story, arguing that colors help symbolize Susan's descent into madness. The beginning "lacks color imagery altogether but, as Susan gradually becomes a more desperate personality, Lessing's references to color become more frequent, more noticeable, and more significant for the understanding of Susan's character." Bell suggests that the white house symbolizes the absence of color in Susan's life, reflecting the void she feels within her, while the greenness of her garden is representative of "the naturalness of a fertile and productive life."

The demonic figure in the garden is more complex. He suggests both the attraction and danger of her desire to reject "rationality" and to allow her emotions to surface. Later though, he represents all the voices of reason that have restricted her. When Susan allows her emotional self to take control in her final visit to Room Nineteen, "the demons" disappear, "gone forever, because she was buying her freedom from them."

Historical Context

A Woman's Place

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, feminist thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic engaged in a rigorous investigation of female identity as it related to all aspects of a woman's life. Some declared the institution of marriage to be a form of slavery and thus recommended its abolition. Others derided the ideal of the maternal instinct, rejecting the notion that motherhood should be the ultimate goal of all women. The more conservative feminists of this age considered marriage and motherhood acceptable roles only if guidelines were set in order to prevent a wife from assuming an inferior position to her husband in any area of their life together. A woman granted equality in marriage would serve as an exemplary role model for her children by encouraging the development of an independent spirit.

The early feminists in America and England, such as Eleanor Rathbone, who became a leading figure in England's National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, were able to gain certain rights for women, including the right to vote. They were not able, however, to change society's view of a woman's place within the home. During World War II, American and British women were encouraged to enter the workplace, where they enjoyed a measure of independence and responsibility. After the war, however, they were forced to give up their jobs to the returning male troops. Hundreds of thousands of women were laid off and expected to resume their place in the home.

Training began at an early age to ensure that girls would conform to the feminine ideal□the perfect wife and mother. Women who tried to gain self-fulfillment through a career were criticized and deemed dangerous to the stability of the family. They were pressed to find fulfillment exclusively through their support of a successful husband. Television shows, popular magazines, and advertisements all encouraged the image of woman-as-housewife throughout the 1960s. The small number of women who did work outside the home often suffered discrimination and exploitation as they were relegated to low-paying clerical, service, or assembly-line positions. Women would have to wait until the 1970s to gain meaningful social and economic advancement.

Sexuality

Traditional attitudes about sex began to change during the 1960s. Dr. Alfred Kinsey's reports on the sexual behavior of men and women (1948, 1953) helped bring discussions of this subject out in the open. The public was intrigued by movie stars like Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, who openly flaunted their sexuality. During this decade, relaxed moral standards resulted in an age of sexual freedom.

London was at the forefront of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which promoted freer attitudes toward sexuality as well as other behaviors that had been restricted in the

1950s. "Swinging London" became the international center for what was most current in music, fashion, art, and film. The rise of youth culture, coupled with the energy generated by creative people in the arts, centered on Carnaby Street, made household names of Mary Quant, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Terrence Stamp, and Vidal Sassoon. Sexual expression and experimentation became one of the cultural hallmarks of this era.

Critical Overview

"To Room Nineteen" was first published in *A Man and Two Women*, a collection of Lessing's short stories that helped cement her reputation as an important short story writer. Most reviewers praised Lessing for her literary artistry. Paul Pickrel in *Harper* wrote that the "best of her work [in the collection] is equal to the best short stories now being written in English."

Dorothy Brewster, in her article on the author in *Twayne's English Authors Series Online*, applauds Lessing's focus on human relationships "with no particular significance in themselves, but successful in suggesting the flow of life around us" and her questioning "about what people mean to each other." A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* finds the stories in "this most notable collection" to be "intensely imagined." Peter Deane in *Book Week* concurs, arguing that the stories "all evidence a sound intelligence and often a very acute, intuitive insight. They are written with exacting care." Deane, however, finds the lack of "a personal tone" in the stories, "a sense of something necessitous or deeply felt."

A *Newsweek* reviewer determined that "To Room Nineteen" is the best in the collection. Critical response to the story has been consistently strong. Linda H. Halisky, in her article for *Studies in Short Fiction* praises Lessing's ability to bring her readers "to the brink of potentially healing new insights" about the relationships between men and women. Maria Elena Raymond, in *Feminist Writers* argues that the story is "on a par with the works of Poe, and reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'"

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the theme of self-knowledge in Lessing's short story.

D. H. Lawrence centered many of his novels and short stories on the difficulties inherent in what he called in his foreword to *Women in Love* "the passionate struggle into conscious being." Lawrence's work traces the chronological development of his characters' growing awareness of themselves and their relation to their world. He also explores the antithetical forces that can impede an individual's quest for self-knowledge.

Lawrence believed that we gain knowledge of ourselves through two contradictory processes: our minds (what he called "mental consciousness") as well as our physical selves (our "blood-consciousness"). He explains in his December 8, 1915, letter to Bertrand Russell that the blood-consciousness "exists in us independently of the ordinary mental consciousness." Lawrence writes:

And the tragedy of this our life, and of your life, is that the mental and nerve consciousness exerts a tyranny over the blood-consciousness, and is engaged in the destruction of your blood-being or blood-consciousness, the final liberating of the one, which is only death in result.

Doris Lessing joined the discussion generated by Lawrence's narratives of female and male self-discovery, which include his concentration on these antithetical impulses, but adapted them to her own historical moment. Lawrence's focus in the early decades of the twentieth century was a focus on the quest for an authentic self through the process of sexual awakening, reflecting the age's rejection of Victorian notions of propriety. Fiona R. Barnes, in her article on Lessing for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, notes that Lessing's works become "historical records that tackle the central political, spiritual, and psychological questions of the last half of the twentieth century."

One such work is her celebrated short story "To Room Nineteen." As Lawrence had done several decades earlier, Lessing centers on her character's internal quest for an authentic self grounded in the historical moment of the story, here in the early 1960s, when women were struggling to find an identity outside of the domestic sphere. In this story, Susan Rawlings experiences a battle of wills between her mental consciousness, which insists that she accept her traditional role as wife and mother, and her blood consciousness, which sparks her quest for absolute freedom.

During the first-wave feminist movement in America and Great Britain, which occurred from the late nineteenth century to early twentieth century, women made great strides in their push for equality in the areas of voting rights and birth control. During World War II, the American and British government encouraged women to join the workforce, where they added to the accomplishments of the early women's rights activists by succeeding in positions outside the home.

When the war ended, however, women were forced to give up their jobs, along with their newly developed sense of independence, and to retreat into the traditional roles of wife and mother. Post-war America and Britain returned to a renewed sense of domesticity and social conformity. The second-wave feminist movement did not begin to make significant gains in the fight for equality until the mid 1960s, when in America, the Civil Rights Act was passed, prohibiting sexual and racial employment discrimination.

Barnes writes, "despite her disavowal of feminism [Lessing] is perhaps most successful (and most renowned) for her portrayals of the changing female consciousness as it reacts to problems of the age." The problem for Susan Rawlings is that she marries before the second-wave activists begin their push for female autonomy. Susan is caught in the middle stage between the two waves of feminism□in the social conformity of the 1950s and early 1960s, a time when the "intelligent" thing to do is to adopt traditional male and female roles.

For the first ten years of her marriage, Susan has allowed, in Lawrence's terms, her mental consciousness to exert "a tyranny over the blood-consciousness" by dictating her life choices. Yet, as the last of her children start school, Susan's "blood consciousness" begins to emerge, threatening the fabric of her family, as well as her sanity.

Susan and Matthew have handled their relationship "sensibly," marrying late in their twenties, moving to the suburbs, and adopting conventional roles. Their "foresight and their sense" prompted them to decide that Susan would give up her job with an advertising firm and take care of the house and the children while Matthew would support them, both determining that "children needed their mother to a certain age." In the early days of their marriage, they, along with their friends, were certain that they had chosen "everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose." Their "intelligence" kept them from wanting more and ensured that they would appreciate what they had.

Yet at the beginning of the story, this "balanced and sensible" couple begins to experience a sense of flatness, which becomes most pronounced for Susan. Initially, she responds by throwing all of her energy into the care of her children and the upkeep of the house. She struggles, though, to find a point for her hard work, a raison d'être, for she could not say "for the sake of *this* is all the rest." The closest she comes to finding a reason for her sacrifice is in their love for each other. Yet, she feels a growing sense that this is not enough, not "important enough, to support it all," especially when she discovers that Matthew is having sexual relationships with other women.

Susan finds that she has little to say to Matthew when he comes home, other than the details of the day-to-day life of the household. She has become dependent on him to connect her to the outside world that she had once been an active part of. As she struggles to keep in check her hidden resentment, she does not, according to her "intelligent" sensibility, "make the mistake of taking a job for the sake of her independence." Her mental consciousness asserts its influence as "the inner storms

and quicksands were understood and charted. So everything was all right. Everything was in order. Yes, things were under control."

As the narrator notes, however, in the first line, "this is a story . . . about a failure in intelligence," the intelligence on which the Rawlings' marriage is based. Susan reaches a point where she can no longer suppress her passionate desire for freedom. When her youngest children begin school, she embarks on an intense process of self-examination. As a result, she acknowledges that in order to survive, she must break the hold that her intelligence has had over her and follow the instincts of her blood consciousness, which impel her to establish self autonomy□physically and emotionally.

Yet Susan's struggle to break the tyranny of her mental consciousness, which compels her to resist the urge to abandon her family, pushes her to the verge of madness. As she recognizes that even the embrace of her beautiful twins becomes a "human cage of loving limbs," she begins to visualize a void, at first "something was waiting for her" at home, then "an enemy," then a "demon," then a "devil," that appears to her in her garden. She gains solace only in an empty hotel room, the Room Nineteen of the title. When Matthew spies on her daily sojourns there, he shatters the sense of freedom she gains and unwittingly forces her to attempt what she determines to be her only outlet□suicide. After turning on the gas in the hotel room, Susan drifts "off into the dark river" that "seemed to caress her inwardly, like the movement of her blood" echoing Lawrence's assertion that blood-consciousness "is one half of life, belonging to the darkness."

The story presents an ironic reversal, however, of Lawrence's insistence that death will result when mental consciousness takes over. Lessing suggests the reverse□that Susan's consuming desire to be free, to allow her blood consciousness to take control, leads her to suicide, the only option she sees. Susan's tragedy results from her inability to allow her "unreasonable" emotions and desires to surface earlier and more gradually. The battle that inevitably ensues between her intellect and her emotions drives her mad. Yet her madness becomes her path to freedom, as she slips "into the dark fructifying dream."

Linda H. Halisky, in her article for *Studies in Short Fiction*, notes the ironic use of madness in the story. As Susan's true self is emerging, those around her, including Susan, determine that she is not "herself." Halisky insists that when Susan expresses this thought, what she means is that "she is no longer the self she set herself willingly, sensibly, reasonably to become. Some deeper self has hold of her; some inexplicable, non-rational self is rearing its head and asserting its due." Susan has been "programmed, by the reason her culture has taught her to consider definitive, to label the expression of that self 'madness.'"

Janina Nordius writes in her article for *The Explicator* that in "To Room Nineteen," Lessing offers a "woman's perspective on the alienation fostered by modern society and its celebration of 'intelligence.'" As Lessing explores the mid-twentieth century restrictions placed on women's freedom and search for an authentic self, she also engages in a dialogue with D. H. Lawrence and his views on the interplay of

contradictory human impulses. "To Room Nineteen" reflects this dialogue as it details the tragic result of the tyranny of the intellect.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "To Room Nineteen," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Think about how a dramatic version of "To Room Nineteen" could be produced. How would you deal with the background information on the Rawlings's developing relationship before the story begins? How would you depict Susan's descent into madness?

Compare and contrast Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* with "To Room Nineteen," focusing on madness and its consequences in both works.

Research the developments of political and literary feminism in Britain and relate them to the story.

"Swinging London" became the center of 1960s culture. How would you rewrite "To Room Nineteen," placing it in this influential era?

Compare and Contrast

Early 1960s: In 1960, in a landmark obscenity trial *Regina v. Penguin Books Limited*, the court determines that D. H. Lawrence's long-banned novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is not obscene.

Today: Reflecting the relaxed sexual mores of the twenty-first century, explicit sexual acts can be viewed on cable television as well as on the Internet. However, the Bush administration has increased funding in the annual federal budget for trying obscenity cases.

Early 1960s: In 1963, Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tershkova becomes the first woman in space.

Today: Women continue to travel in space as well as run large corporations. Media mogul Oprah Winfrey is one of the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world.

Early 1960s: In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan is published. The book chronicles the growing sense of dissatisfaction women feel about the unequal treatment they are receiving in the home, the workplace, and in other institutions.

Today: Women have made major gains in their fight for equality, although the Equal Rights Amendment, intended to codify the equality of men and women, has yet to be passed. It was introduced to every Congress between 1923 and 1972. In 1972 it was passed and then sent to the states to be ratified, but it failed to gain the approval of the required number of states. It has also been introduced to every Congress since 1972.

What Do I Read Next?

The Awakening (1899) is Kate Chopin's masterful novel of a young woman who struggles to find self-knowledge and inevitably suffers the consequences of trying to establish herself as an independent spirit.

In the play *A Doll's House* (1879), Henrik Ibsen examines a woman's restricted role in the nineteenth century and the disastrous effects those limitations have on her marriage.

Lessing's *The Fifth Child* (1989) is a harrowing portrait of a mother's struggle to raise a "disturbed" child, raising important issues about the nature of family and a woman's role within it.

Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (2002) focuses on similar themes of madness and traditional notions of a woman's place.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) studies the history and dynamics of feminism.

Further Study

Dean, Sharon, "Marriage, Motherhood, and Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen,'" in *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, Vol. 5, 1981, pp. 1, 14.

These subjects are explored in Lessing's story.

Pruitt, Virginia, "Crucial Balance: A Theme in Lessing's Short Fiction," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 18, 1981, pp. 281—85.

Pruitt examines this dominant theme in Lessing's stories.

St. Andrews, Bonnie, *Forbidden Fruit: On the Relationship between Women and Knowledge in Doris Lessing, Selma Lagerlöf, Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood*, Whitston, 1986.

St. Andrews explores the treatment of self knowledge in Lessing's work and that of other authors.

Tiger, Virginia, "Taking Hands and Dancing in (Dis)Unity: Story to Storied in Doris Lessing's 'To Room Nineteen' and 'A Room,'" in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 36, 1990, pp. 421—33.

Tiger compares Lessing's two stories, focusing on their structure and voice.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Short Stories for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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