Under My Skin Study Guide

Under My Skin by Doris Lessing

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The book, "Under My Skin" by Doris Lessing is an autobiography. This book covers her life from birth to 1949.

It is a story of a young woman born of British parents in Persia, who then moves with her parents to Southern Rhodesia when she is five years old. It is a story of Doris and her opinions regarding blacks in Africa, women of her time, the ideals and progress of the Communist party, and her own interaction with her parents.

Doris begins the story with a brief trip through the family tree of both her mother and her father. Her mother, Maude, is a nurse during World War I, and loses the man she loves when his ship sinks at sea. While she is mourning him, she meets Doris' father, Alfred, while he is recuperating from the amputation of his leg, and from depression, at the hospital where she works.

Maude and Alfred Tayler are married, and when the war ends, Alfred is hired by the bank that employed him before the war to take a position in Persia, where the family lives for five years. It is here that Doris and her brother Harry are born. The Taylers do not miss England, nor look forward to returning there or to another bank posting, so when they return to England they began seeking a way to leave the country.

The family move to Southern Rhodesia, participating in a program created by the white government of Southern Rhodesia to colonize the country with farmers who are offered land for a small loan. Doris' years on the farm teach her the value of hard work and she becoems skilled at many chores and labors that most British children will never experience. Her schooling is through her mother's teachings and from reading books. Doris does not do well with the social structures of most boarding schools, so ends her official schooling when she is 15.

Doris' father soon decides he is tired of the fighting and arguing between Doris and her mother, and Doris is sent to find work in Salisbury. Doris marries Frank Wisdom when she is 19, and soon finds herself with two young children. Doris realizes that she is constantly making plans to be independent and free to travel, but continues taking actions that tie her down. Her restless spirit takes her on forays into communism, sexual promiscuity and, eventually, leaving her children and her husband to seek happiness in other ways.

Doris marries Gottfried Lessing, and has another son, Peter. Faced with an independent spirit, a restless yearning for something better, and a strong positive outlook on her ability to do anything, in 1949 Doris leaves Gottfried and moves herself and her son Peter to London to start a writing career.

Chapter One

Chapter One Summary and Analysis

The author traces the family trees of her mother and her father, and discovers that her mother did not love her parents, and her father did not love his either. The author notes that women seem to be invisible in history. Doris's mother, Maude, is trained to be a nurse, and is assigned to a hospital. She falls in love with a young doctor who loves her as well. The doctor, though, is assigned to a ship, and dies when the ship is torpedoed. When World War One begins, her father Alfred becomes a soldier, is injured, and ends up in the same hospital where Emily is serving as a nurse. His injury requires the amuptation of his leg, and he falls into a depression. Although Maude has a broken heart and Alfred has depression, they fall in love and marry. Alfred contacts the bank where he had worked, and is assigned to Kermanshah, in Persia. Doris is born there in October of 1919. She wonders if modern society would have been different, and how the lives of her parents would have changed if the war had not changed everything.

Analysis

This chapter outlines the exposition phase of the book, where the important persons in the author's life are described, along with a description of the family tree of both parents. Doris does not employ a tone of bragging or apologizing about her ancestors. Doris describes the meeting of her parents and their marriage with a critical eye, perhaps not wanting the reader to become too attached to these people. The questions she poses regarding the effects of the war on the world are critical to the story of Doris Lessing, because her parents were deeply affected, through her father's injury, his depression, and the re-direction of her mother's life. In these beginning chapters, the author is attempting to show the reader where she comes from, and what kind of people she is exposed to as a child.

Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary and Analysis

The author speaks of the role of truth in autobiography. She says the first part of the book is easier because most of the people involved are gone. She notes that writer's lives do not belong to them. As she writes, she learns about herself, and thinks that she has been worse than she thought all along. The author speaks of the battles she had with her mother, of the anguish of trying to find the truth in all she was told by her parents. Lessing feels that people today have an expectation that things will get better, but history has shown that people should expect what has always happened, wars, famine, sickness, and that good times are temporary. She includes the view of a historian she has recently read, who claims that our current mistrust of the government is based upon the appalling incompetence of those involved in World War I. Lessing says she has questioned authority ever since she was a child.

Analysis

In this chapter, the author lets the reader know she will be telling some parts of the truth but probably not all of it. Her principle reason for writing is to give her version, in the hopes it will be considered the voice of authority since it is her life. However, she is careful to remind her readers that she does not want to hurt anyone who is still living. This chapter also introduces her spoken attitude that life is hard and we should not expect much; this contrasts with the rest of her story, in which she consistently faces problems, hardships and decisions with courage and optimism.

Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary and Analysis

Lessing recalls her earliest memories of Persia and they consist an overwhelming feeling of being cold and treated roughly. Lessing speaks of child abuse, the type that involves a lack of love rather than sexual. Lessing believes she was born with not enough skins to protect her from the hurt. She turned to her father for affection, but her memories of him include some rough tickling that made her weep from pain. She remembers trying to sort out how to feel about the people around them, based on her observations of their reactions and what they say about them. She ends the chapter saying that her overall feeling of her childhood in Persia was of loss, and that everything was just too much. When Lessing was five, the family returned to England.

Analysis

Lessing's memories of a cold stone house, rough treatment and cold swimming areas reflect a deeper sense of coldness from her parents. As a child, she is encountering strangers who are hired to care for her, sternness from her mother, and the rough hands of her father. Nothing is what she expected, even at that age. Lessing looks at life as devoid of most creature comforts. Her comment that everything was just "too much" is confusing to the reader. On one hand she is claiming to be ignored by her parents, to the point of their being guilty of child neglect; then she complains that it was all too much.

The book was written in 1993, and the author is trying to remember feelings and sensations from a past over fifty years previous. She is currently a well known and published author of many novels, poems and short stories. The author speaks of the difficulty in sorting out true memories from stories told to one as a child while being shown photographs. The author often points to memories as she relays them, saying if they are especially vivid. The overall feeling the reader gets from this chapter is that the writer is preparing the reader for some twists and turns in the story.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Lessing's mother chooses to travel back to England by way of Moscow and her memories of this journey are deeply unpleasant. From England, the family goes to Africa, based on an exhibition they see. Heading to Southern Rhodesia, her mother and father have all of their teeth removed because they are informed proper dental care is not available there. The family takes a ship to Southern Rhodesia, and Lessing remembers the captain and her mother become great friends, but her memories of the captain are not good. Doris remembers being locked in the cabin while her parents go to dances on deck at night, and Doris cuts up one of her mother's evening dresses. The family arrives in Africa, and lodges in Lilfordia, until they find a farm. The plan is for their family to get a low interest loan from the white government of Southern Rhodesia, who are especially keen to attract ex-servicemen to their country, and start farming. As her parents leave to go see the proposed farm, Lessing is left with her brother and their nanny, Biddy. Lessing rebels by stealing things and lying about stealing them.

Analysis

The author is excellent at creating scenes, involving rancid odors, overwhelming sensations, lice, snapshots of characters seen once but never again. Her descriptions of the cold, long and unnecessary train trip are a result of her mother's bad choice in travel arrangements. The family's decision to move their lives to Africa seems equally unnecessary. The ability to make keen observations about her family and the interactions of other people in her life give the reader an insight into the qualities that will allow Doris to eventually become the writer she is. As she is relaying the story of her life to the reader, the author is interjecting profound thoughts regarding the nature of truth and the bonding of children and parents.

Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary and Analysis

The author remembers the entire family suffers from two bouts of malaria and her mother has a breakdown that keeps her in bed for a month. It is during this time that Lessing learns how to read. Lessing is learning the power of an imagination. Lessing knows now her mother's illness is anxiety or some form of depression, but at the time her mother is convinced it is the result of a bad heart. Lessing remembers being told all her life that her family is poor, but when she begins attending public school she finds there are families in much worse financial shape. Lessing sees how most white people in Africa regard the indigenous black population. Out of necessity, the two children go to the lands with their father, and play in the bush while he works the land. Her mother finally gets out of bed, deciding that it is her heavy long hair that caused her problems, and she cuts if off. The lessons for the children continue, of geography, astronomy, and mathematics. Her mother has a saying when she is done with things: that is that. This is how the chapter ends.

Analysis

The continuing refrain of illness dominates this chapter. The family contracts the usual African diseases, but her mother is dealing with mental disorders as well. Doris is discovering her imagination, and is learning about the world of prejudice, books, and the African bush. She ponders the attraction others seem to have for her mother and her father and is quick to say they were faithful to each other. The theme of "that is that", a phrase often used by her mother, is visited in this section when her mother, after several weeks of lying in bed and claiming to be ill, suddenly emerges from her sickbed one day and begins life again. The author continues to paint word pictures of some of her earliest memories, as with her description of the lizard and its tongue, and how horrified she is to see it for the first time. Her curiosity and insatiable appetite for reading is evident, and the author shares her favorite books of the time. As the writer ages, the reader learns about how she comes to look at life, her perspective on the people around her, and can anticipate somewhat the type of young woman she will become.

Chapter Six -Seven

Chapter Six -Seven Summary and Analysis

Lessing describes her bedroom in the Southern Rhodesia house as a child. She says she grows up in the most snake-infested section of the earth, but is never bitten, even when playing in the bush with bare feet and legs. She recalls a normal day of rising, dressing and going to breakfast. She has rebelled against the standard costumes of English children and is happily dressed as she wants. Her mother constantly worries that the children are not getting enough to eat, and Lessing remembers substantial breakfasts and the requirement that plates all be cleaned. Lessing tells of the arguments her parents have over the servants. Her mother wants traditional English servant behavior from people who have only known the jungle life, and her father constantly tells her how ridiculous and demeaning to their culture her attitude is. She tells about the man who runs the workers, Old Smoke, and the conversations her father and the man have that last for hours, at the African pace of speaking. Lessing creates a prose poem about sunsets that her mother sends to the Rhodesia Herald, where it is published. She reads the newspapers from England, too, thinking that in modern times children are kept from hearing about war, pestilence and violence, but she reads all of it, and listens to her parents talk to visitors about the trenches of World War I. When Lessing is seven, she begins attending school with other children. She begins to perceive how the English immigrants believe themselves to be superior from everyone else, especially the Africans, and that the English way of doing things is the only way it should be done. Lessing is sent to board with Mrs. Scott while she attends school at another place, in Avondale. She lists, in this chapter, the names of most of the books she remembers, and is glad her parents took the time and spent the money to bring these books to Africa. She is next sent to a convent for school, and reports that her family's farm was not prospering. She describes the convent school and its grounds in detail. It is about this time that Doris Lessing acquires her lifelong nickname of Tigger, after the character in Winnie the Pooh. Lessing is at the convent for four years, and does not enjoy any of it except her schoolwork and when she is reading books. Lessing says that once she discovers that reporting to the sick room in the convent meant special attention from the nurse and escape from the teacher nuns, she is often "ill". This brings her closer to her mother, who was trained by a nurse. Lessing's father is sick often as well, not from complications of his missing leg, but because of his depression.

In Chapter 7, Lessing talks of the enjoyable and companionable times she has with her brother as they explore the African bush. She refers to some of her books and stories for further elaboration on the world of Africa at that time. She talks of when she and her brother sit near the telephone wires and listen to the sounds, watching the birds land on the lines. She talks of the animals they see in the bush, and the times they watch the workers.

Analysis

As the author tells of her life, it is easy to see how she is pulled from one perspective to another by her parents. Her mother strives to keep a traditional English household in the midst of Southern Rhodesia. She retains the superiority of the English ways, while her father is open to the environment and the people he must work with to make the farm successful. Her father's long drawn out conversations with Old Smoke are an example of his willingness to see the world outside of Mother England. The diversity of the people of Africa, black and white, of cultures and lifestyles, create a fascinating background for the progression of Doris's life through the years. Throughout these chapters, the reader is presented with the life and attitudes of the white people of Southern Rhodesia, especially those from England. Lessing describes her relationship with her brother as remote, not loving but companionable. In fact, few of her interactions with other people carry any note of passion or raw emotion.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary and Analysis

The author speaks of her life as a child in Southern Rhodesia and about her dreams and nightmares. She dreams of her family, trapped by their lack of money and their life choices. She has dreams about the convent and the heavy greasy food provided the predominantly German nuns. She remembers the arrival of the Slump, a time of economic depression for Europe, and the beginning of talking movies and jazz. She continues her memories of the convent, this time about the dormitory where she is moved when she gets older. Just before an important exam, all the girls in the dorm come down with ringworm and lice and are pulled out of school. She flirts with becoming a Catholic, but when her mother confronts her with the evils of Catholicism, Lessing realizes Protestants are just as evil, and decides she is an atheist. Soon afterwards, she comes down with dysentery, and so does the entire family. When she is healed and not going back to the convent, she learns how to care for the chickens. She learns how to drive. Her family applies for and receives extensions of their loans for the farm. Lessing speaks of their neighbors, all white families from European countries. She acknowledges the ones she patterned some of her literary characters after in her stories. She is at constant war with her mother, and wants to be away from her, but cannot leave home. Instead she does what many other teenagers do at that time, stay with someone in the towns. She is in a home where there are hundreds of books and she reads day and night. Another house is traditionally British, and she sees more marriages of people who are bound together for lives of unhappiness. She is then sent to Girls' High for a year, and endures the House Mother. She finds her niche with the rest of the girls by joking and making people laugh. One day her mother comes to her school and informs Lessing that her father has diabetes. When she sees her father she is shocked at his appearance. Insulin has just been discovered, so he will not die, but he can no longer manage working the farm. Her mother writes her pages and pages of letters, mostly reprimanding Lessing for giving up her piano lessons. Lessing gets a case of the measles. When she comes home, her father is in a bed in the living room. Her mother uses her nursing experience to change his diet so he does not starve to death on the prescriptions and directions of the doctors. Soon he is able to work again. When Lessing returns to school, she contracts pinkeye. She has a strange reaction to it, and she cannot see properly. Her mother comes to get her and take her back to the farm, and she does not return to school.

Analysis

These chapters highlight more disease, with dysentery, measles, and her father's diabetes. There are hints that Lessing might feel dramatic announcements about situations are overwrought, especially when delivered by her mother. The conflict with her mother heightens when Doris is a teenager at home all of the time. The family peace suffers, so Doris goes to stay with other families. This gives her a baseline measurement by which to judge other families and their methods of dealing with life. It

also makes Doris realize the financial situation of her family as compared to others. It is during her school years that the alternate personality she calls "Tigger" flourishes. It is a nickname from her family, but her school mates learn it and she does not prevent anyone from calling her Tigger throughout her life. It is a personality she yearns for, a go-getter, happy persona that makes friends easily and is well liked by others. Lessing feels there is another personality inside her though, one that is cynical and wants to be alone. Whether this is the influence of the personality of her mother or father, or both, is not clear.

Chapter Nine - Ten

Chapter Nine - Ten Summary and Analysis

Lessing and her mother begin to wear on each other's nerves. She believes her parents are insane, and wonders what they would have been like if not for the War. She feels lost in daydreams, either hers or of her parents. While living with another family in another town, she receives letters from her mother, ten or twenty pages, saying she will end up in the brothels. Lessing refers to one of her novels, Martha Quest, and says it is not autobiographical. Lessing is diagnosed with something called Low Fever, and is sent to the mountains for healing. She begins to see that her parents use illnesses to make their lives bearable, and she decides to never be sick again. While at the mountains, she becomes aware of the power women have over men in the area of sex, from observations of two couples she sees there. Lessing realizes now that her mother isangry and frustrated with the family situation, and is taking it out on her, but she cannot control her own anger. Lessing finds ways to cover her own expenses, but her mother continues complaining, and the farm is losing money. Soon Lessing and her mother are arguing about the situation with the African blacks and the white farmers Her father grows tired of the arguing and tells Lessing she needs to leave, so she takes a job as an au pair for a family who has just had a second child, and she will care for the four year old. She is writing short stories, and selling them. At one of her au pair jobs she attempts to seduce the younger brother of the child's father. This seduction is unsuccessful, probably because the young man is not that interested in women.

In Chapter Ten, Lessing speaks of her next love, an assistant at a nearby farm, but nothing comes of this, and when the war begins, he joins up and is killed in North Africa. Lessing remembers the dances, rare social occasions, and the unwanted admiration from one of the other teenagers. It is the year that she is seventeen, and she teaches herself typing and shorthand. Her father is in the hospital and she is left to care for the farm herself. When her parents return, she gets a job at the telephone company in Salisbury.

Analysis

These chapters represent the moments when Lessing discovers her sexuality through encounters with men, her independence when left alone with the farm, and her desire to be on her own. Her disagreements with her mother increase, and she comes to see this relationship as an unending battle. It is a time of knowing herself, of stretching her boundaries and testing her abilities.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Eleven Summary and Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, while working at the telephone exchange, Lessing comes into contact with Dorothy Schwartz, who asks her to join a Left Book Club. Her first encounter with the local communists does not impress her. Lessing begins smoking and drinking and is asked out often. She exults in her physical strength and beauty, loves music and dancing. Lessing speaks of being young and cruel and beautiful, and of how older women view the younger ones. After years of telling her family she would never marry or have children, Lessing marries Frank Wisdom. She says she was not in love with him, or him with her. She is pregnant, but does not know it when she marries him. Lessing feels that "Tigger", her outward personality, is the one that marries Wisdom. They take an apartment in town, and at first she decides to get an abortion, but circumstances prevent it, and she continues with her pregnancy. When Hitler invades Poland in 1939, she is pregnant, spending time with other wives of Frank's friends. One special friend, Ivy, is also pregnant. Frank spends his time trying to get into the Army, to go fight in the war. Lessing looks to her friend Ivy for help and shares thoughts about their children. Ivy has a little girl. Their husbands spend their evenings with other men, as is usual in those times. After a few months, all three husbands are turned out of the Army, being unfit. Frank is miserable about the situation, but Lessing at the time does not understand or even care much. Lessing speaks of what the invalided soldiers and their wives talk about during this time: of the possibility of Hitler coming down from North Africa, of the Native Problem, of the war.

Analysis

Lessing tells her story with facts, and her passions lie with ideas and not with people. She seems just as surprised that she gets married as her family probably is, especially after years of listening to her berate matrimony. In this chapter begins the author's brief but intense love affair with the ideals of communism. Communism in modern times is seen as evil and restricting, but the views of it after the Russian revolution are actually hopeful and community minded. A virtual utopia is imagined by communists at its conception and early years. Lessing continues to observe those around her and the state of their marriages. Her friend Ivy seems logical and reasonable, yet descends into near madness at the thought of her husband going to war. Lessing's own comments about married life are brief, relaying day to day activities. People during the second World War have the same attitude towards those who cannot serve in the military as they did in the first World War, and Frank is distraught over having nothing to contribute. The women feel relief at their husband's non-involvement, while the men are ashamed and angry. Lessing's story of her pregnancy and birth reveal the attitudes of the time, especially as she stays in the hospital for a week, and is not allowed to see her baby very often. She and the other women accept the rules of the nurses without question, which is the way people behaved in those times.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Twelve Summary and Analysis

Lessing describes her life with the young son John. John is a very active baby, and exhausts her. She spends her mornings with the other young women and their babies. John has become her entire life with his demands. Frank's friends are all his age, about ten years older than Lessing. She is active and popular in this life, but deep inside she does not feel she belongs. When John is nine months old, Lessing and Frank decide to have another baby, and she is soon pregnant. John still needs constant supervision, as he will walk away from the house otherwise. As she pushes him in a pram about the town, she writes poems in her head, and one is included in this chapter. Frank does not like her poems, but encourages her to be a writer. Lessing and Frank grow apart, mainly because he is unhappy he is not in the Army. Lessing is beginning to resent all the evenings and weekends at the Sports Club. Lessing discusses the thoughts of 1941, as the war is heating up, and about the Atlantic Charter created by Roosevelt and Churchill. Her daughter Jean is born, and little John is jealous, and it exhausts her even more. She and Frank buy a house, and Lessing speaks of the role of the blacks in this society, serving the whites, and living in small huts behind the house. Lessing always pays their servants more than everyone else, because of their stand on the Native Problem. Their neighbors think it is foolish and wasteful. Lessing describes her days, including what she, Frank and the children eat for each meal. She begins avoiding the morning tea parties with the other wives and instead gardens and sews. She talks of how nothing was being asked of women of her age, although she yearned to do something, especially about the way the British treated the Rhodesian people. Lessing begins to be unhappy, having dreams of a giant dragon being uncovered from the dirt. Frank sends Lessing and John to Capetown, and she leaves Jean with a loving neighbor. Lessing's brother Harry narrowly escapes death when his ship is sunk. The trip gives John an opportunity to have his mother all to himself again. When she arrives in Capetown, there are many refugees in the hotel where she is staying. While on her mini-vacation, Lessing has much time for contemplation about her life. When she returns, Frank is more irritating to her than before. She and the children get whooping cough, and she travels to her parents' farm to leave the children to get better. She is amazed to see how emaciated her father is, and learns they are trying to sell the farm.

Analysis

This section tells of Lessing trying to conform to the standards of her day. She has two children and devotes her time to providing them attention. She joins the tea parties with the other women her age, spends time with her husband at the country club, drinks as much as everyone else. Soon she grows weary, not just from the physical exhaustion of chasing after John and feeding Jean, but from the tiresome domestic life she is living. Whereas she used to escape her unhappiness by going out into the bush of Africa, she now uses a trip to Capetown to clear her head. Lessing's life is changing. She feels restless, an emotion she recognizes from her days living at home with her parents. She

has a husband, two children, friends, and a social life, but it is nothing like she had thought.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Thirteen Summary and Analysis

Lessing meets Dorothy Schwartz again and is asked to join up with another group of communists. Lessing realizes when she joins that she has become a Communist and that it suits her attitude. Lessing begins to think of leaving Frank, and even of leaving her two children. She is overcome with a feeling of doom. She rationalizes leaving her children because she is convinced her house is already full of other women. Frank's old friend, his sister, and some others live at their house. Lessing becomes involved with another man, a sergeant in the RAF. She leaves her husband. In this chapter, she discusses sex and the politics of the world, and especially those in Rhodesia. Lessing takes a job as a junior typist in a lawyer's office, and attends socialist meetings and classes at night. She describes the core of the Communist party at that time, and it includes Dorothy Schwartz and Gottfried Lessing. She speaks of the power of language, and how groups can be taken over from it. She wonders at the concepts she embraced as a communist, and whether she would have behaved differently if she lived in Russia or China. She concludes that communism was too abstract an idea to appeal to the Africans, and wonders if her party actually made a difference. Lessing speaks about the people in the party, especially Gottfried, and about the social dynamics of a political group in a small town.

Analysis

Lessing makes the astonishing decision to leave not only her husband but her children. She spends very few words in this chapter on her decision, one that was unheard of in her time and must have engendered a number of comments from her friends, family and especially her husband. Yet this section dwells more on the internal dynamics of her communist party affiliation. She devotes a number of words and space on the power of language in a ideology. It is this section in particular that notifies the reader that the author is truly writing this autobiography to give her version of her life, and that strict boundaries have been drawn on what the reader is allowed to know. In her analysis of her life, Lessing is attributing communism and her writing to be the lessons most important to her readers, not her personal life decisions.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fourteen Summary and Analysis

In 1943, Lessing marries Gottfried, not because they are madly in love, but because present society would not allow them just to have an affair. She tells the story of Gottfried, who was born in Russia to German parents, then raised in Germany. When Lessing leaves her husband and her children, she is ill for some time, and it is during this illness that Gottfried comes to see her, sleeps with her, and then they marry. She writes poems during that time, and years later many of her novels and short stories are composed about characters she meets and of her own personality during this time of her life. Gottfried prefers to present a cold and unfeeling face to the world, and she realizes now they were very mismatched. One black man came to their meetings, and was never completely a part of their work, although she learned much about the black way of life from him.

Analysis

Lessing moves the autobiography from this point forward away from her own personal life, and directs it towards communism ideology, portraits of people she has known and subsequently used in books, poems and short stories. This removal of herself from the heart of the story is a defense mechanism, especially as the author states in the early chapters that it would be difficult to stick to the truth when many of the subjects are still alive.

She describes her marriage to Gottfried as the only solution acceptable for people in her time who want to have an affair. Lessing does not adequately explain why, after leaving two children, she decides so quickly to have another one with Gottfried. Marriage to him is unsatisfactory on many levels, and the only common ground they seem to have is their communism. Lessing is falling out of love with this phase in her life as well.

Chapters Fifteen, Sixteen and Seventeen

Chapters Fifteen, Sixteen and Seventeen Summary and Analysis

Lessing takes a job in another law firm because her husband says it is not good for them to spend all their waking hours together. It is at this time that the German cities are being bombed by the Allieds, and although he does not say anything about it, Gottfried is deeply affected and does not sleep well.

Lessing describes her typical day at that time in her life, working at the law firm, going to meetings, and sometimes talking to her mother, who does not understand Lessing at all. She remembers the night the war is over in Europe, and instead of feeling overjoyed like everyone else, she is empty and sad, because her husband has no news of his family in Germany. Lessing takes a new job for more pay, working as a typist for the government, and writes a book, The Grass is Singing.

In Chapter Sixteen, Lessing talks about the second world war, and the idea of people thrown together who would otherwise had never met intrigues her. Lessing recalls other couples she meets during the war whom she used for characters and situations in her later writing. Everyone she knows recommends books that are their favorites, and she lists those. She speaks of people who have whole books in their heads, books never written down. Kurt is one of these people, and never does commit his book to paper. Kurt does, however, report back on the long conversations he has with his driver, a black man named Joshua, about the life the blacks lead and how Kurt thinks things should be. Lessing's group begins to consider Joshua as the trusted source of information about the natives in Rhodesia.

In Chapter Seventeen, Gottfried finally hears from his family in Germany, along with the emerging stories about the concentration camps and the millions who died. In late 1945, Lessing becomes pregnant again. Her mother is aghast that she left two children when she divorced Frank, but now will have another. She leaves Salisbury for a working holiday in Capetown, where she is employed at a communist newspaper. She is three months pregnant and determined to have an affair while she is there. She meets a wild artist, René, who has several other lovers and a pregnant wife, and she has a carefree romance with him. She returns, unhappily, to Gottfried two months later. He has been having an affair as well, but she does not care. She is not in love with René, but she realizes she is not where she needs to be in her life.

Analysis

Doris Lessing is becoming a published writer, the beginning of her long career. Yet there is no excitement about this process as she reports that her communist friends have nothing good to say about it. Once again she loses her way to being an independent woman of freedom, as she strives to do what her husband tells her to do, and live under

his skin. She cannot enjoy the victories of the Allieds over the Germans because her husband is troubled by what has happened to Germany. Her marriage means nothing more than the first one did, and she moves from one affair to another. She wants either no attachment to the other men, or she does not want the reader to know of the importance of it. By relating the facts in chronological order, she is satisfying the autobiographical requirements, and using the book now for a platform concerning her views on world politics. The affair in Capetown with the unfaithful and wild René gives the reader a glimpse of what really makes Doris Lessing happy: carefree and uncommitted sex, freedom from children, time to write and to contemplate. Although she makes great strides towards this ideal, she always allows herself to be pulled back to conforming to society.

Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen

Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen Summary and Analysis

Peter Lessing is born in October of 1946. When the Cold War begins, Gottfried and Lessing suddenly realize they are pariahs, unacceptable in society because they are communists. More people start coming to the Lessing apartment, to talk and to be around the new baby. She realizes she has become an emotional soup kitchen for these people, and has problems finding time to write. After years of being told her father is dying, her father actually does die. Although the cause of death is listed as heart failure, Lessing believes the truth is that he died from the First World War. Lessing is restless and unhappy, and knows her marriage to Gottfried is not working. She has romances with men from the RAF, and she walks with the baby in the pram all night long.

As Chapter Nineteen begins, Lessing writes short stories and plays and in this chapter speaks of some of the people she based her characters on. Lessing has an affair with a married man, and he comes to the house while Gottfried is at work during the day. She decides to have an operation that will keep her from having any more children, and believes this is the smartest decision she has ever made.

Analysis

Perhaps an insight into Lessing's determination to keep this autobiography free of angst is her mention that she is surrounded at this time with people who are using her as an emotional soup kitchen. This providing for the needy around her is not a situation Doris finds comfortable. It is possible the over-dramatic behavior of her mother, the disillusionment of communism, and the failure of her marriages are more emotional material that she can sort through in this book.

Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One

Chapters Twenty and Twenty-One Summary and Analysis

In this chapter, Lessing describes the death of the Southern Rhodesia Communist Party. She once hears that all groups eventually dissolve into religion or mysticism, and theirs cannot do either, so people finally just drift away. Her own disillusionment with the Soviets and the Communism party come when she and Gottfried meet the Soviet Cultural Attaché in South Africa. Due to her mother's orchestrations, and partly because Salisbury is such a small town, she and Gottfried, and the baby Peter, run into Frank, his new wife and Lessing's two original children at the park.

When Chapter Twenty-One begins, it is 1948. Gottfried and Doris decide to move to London, where they will divorce but live nearby. She realizes that she is going into Soho with a small child, with aspirations of being a writer, but she feels strong about her possibilities. She discovers years later that having the small child and no domestic help is what allowed to her succeed with her goals; otherwise, as the new girl in town making the rounds she would have disappeared. Gottfried ges home to visit his family in East Germany and thinks he wants to live there. He asks Lessing to join him, but she does not want to. Gottfried makes it to Berlin and finds a job. Gottfried asks for Peter to come for the summer, and after that visit, she does not hear from him for some time. She finally reaches him, living with his sister, moving upwards in the government of East Germany. The Berlin Wall has risen, and Gottfried loses interest in his son Peter. Gottfried remarries, and becomes a figure in Soviet politics. His wife dies, and he marries again, and becomes a Soviet ambassador in Africa. Gottfried and his wife are killed in riots after Amin flees the country, in 1979. Lessing learns from her son John Wisdom that Gottfried is actually a member of the KGB, and his influence in East Africa is extensive. In 1949, Doris Lessing closes the door in her life on her life in Africa, her life with Gottfried, and is looking forward with confidence to the world that lies ahead.

Analysis

The autobiography comes to an end, and the reader is left knowing very little about Doris Lessing other than her childhood battles with her mother. The personalities of her parents, her husbands, and the memories of the communist party ideals in Southern Rhodesia are analytical and detailed, but the feelings of Doris Lessing are missing in this story. The author is attempting to relay the facts of her life, where she was born, what she remembers about specific incidents, and she tries to relay a sense of what it was like to live in a foreign country between the world wars. There are moments when Doris Lessing speaks directly to the reader with advice, relaying insights she has learned through the years of relationships and experiences; however, these are few.

Characters

Doris Lessing

Doris Tayler Wisdom Lessing is the writer of this book about her life. Although she is British, she was born in exotic Persia and raised in Southern Rhodesia. Hers was a life very different from the London women of her day, and she adds to this uniqueness by being a very independent and strong woman. This book only covers her life from her birth through 1949, until she is 30.

Doris' parents are of strong character, and independent from their British contemporaries, but both of them suffer from a sort of madness and depression throughout their lives. Doris struggles against her mother her entire life, over clothes, over music, over career. Her relationship with her father is one where she yearns to have him love her, but she turns away from him because of his rough hands and gruff behavior.

Doris is born in Persia, and the family lives there until she is a young child of five. She remembers much of Persia, and of the long train trip back to England afterwards. Her clearest memories, though, begin in Southern Rhodesia. Her family endures incredible hardship and works very hard to make the farm work, but her memories are pleasant of the Bush, the African people, and the neighboring farmers.

As Doris becomes a teenager, she finds it difficult to stay in a school environment, although she is intelligent and creative. She rebels quietly against what the other girls are seeking and what is expected of her as a young woman. She is unafraid of sex, and has many liaisons throughout the book, not only with her husbands.

Doris marries Frank Wisdom and has two children rather quickly. It is during this time that she becomes enamored with the Communist party, and begins her writing career. Her choice to leave her children with her husband after the divorce must have been highly unusual in her time, but the book devotes little space to any criticism she might have been subjected to, concentrating instead on her writing goals and successes.

Doris marries Gottfried Lessing, and has another son, Peter. She describes living in the same town as her ex-husband and occasionally meeting him, his new wife, and her children with brief statements about mild discomfort.

Doris makes the decision in 1949 to divorce Gottfried, and move to London with her son Peter to make a career of writing. Her indomitable spirit and optimism are clear through her actions, although her own descriptions of the events downplay her part in them.

Maude Tayler

Maude is the mother of Doris Lessing, and plays a huge part in the formation of Doris' beliefs and attitudes. Maude homeschools the children, and according to Doris, is always attempting to teach them lessons. The determination of her mother to advance knowledge and learning in the family is obvious from the large number of books Maude orders from England, even when the family is in financial difficulties.

Maude's first love is killed in the First World War, and Doris believes she never recovers, never loving her husband as much as she loved that man. Maude stands by her husband throughout his life, supporting his ventures, remaining loyal to him, and eventually caring for him as he dies of diabetes.

Maude is trained as a nurse, and tapped as a possible administrator for a hospital when she marries her husband and turns away from a career in nursing. When finding herself with two small children, away from civilization, on a failing farm in Africa, Maude must have had many regrets. Doris refers to this in the book when she wonders what if her mother had married her first love, or had taken the hospital job, or if her father had emerged from the war unscathed.

Maude suffers from regret, and possibly mental disorders, as she ages. Doris describes her mother's reaction to Harry's upcoming wedding as extremely unwarranted and confusing. Every interaction between Doris and her mother is one of confrontation, misunderstandings and anger.

Alfred Tayler

Alfred Tayler is Doris Lessing's father. He is injured in the First World War, when his leg is amputated as a result of a bomb. He wears a wooden leg for the rest of his life. Alfred obtains a position with an English bank after the war, and is posted in Persia for five years, where his two children are born. He decides to begin a farm in Southern Rhodesia, Africa, when this job ends, and moves his family there. The farm has marginal success, and he is always in debt. He is diagnosed with diabetes, and spends the rest of his life as an invalid.

Harry Tayler

Harry Tayler is the younger brother of Doris Lessing. The two children spend a lot of time together as they are growing up, especially in Southern Rhodesia. The author does not describe them as loving siblings, but companionable. Harry does well in school, and is popular with the other boys. He joins the Navy at the beginning of the Second World War, and although his ship sinks, Harry survives. He returns to Southern Rhodesia when he gets out of the service and marries.

Doroty Schwartz

Dorothy Schwartz is a woman who lives in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, and a friend of Doris Lessing. Doris meets Dorothy when they are both young women working at a telephone exchange, and Dorothy is the one who first introduces Doris to the local community of Communists in Southern Rhodesia. Doris and Dorothy remain friends through the end of the book, when Dorothy moves to London the same time that Doris and Gottfried do, and Gottfried rents a room in her apartment.

Frank Wisdom

Frank Wisdom is the first husband of Doris Lessing. With him, she has two children, John and Jean. Frank is a civil servant for the government of Southern Rhodesia, and stays in Africa, raising their two children. Doris divorces Frank, and leaves him with custody of the children.

John and Jean Wisdom

John and Jean Wisdom are Doris' children with Frank Wisdom. John is born first, and Doris describes him as an active child who never stops moving. Jean, the second child, is less than two years old when Doris leaves.

Gottfried Lessing

Gottfried is Doris' second husband, and the father of Peter, Doris' third child. Gottfried is born in Russia, and raised in Germany by his German parents. Doris meets Gottfried through her Communist party connections in Southern Rhodesia, and when Gottfried emigrates back to Germany after his divorce with Doris, he becomes a major player in the East German political communist party. He is murdered by terrorists in Africa many years later, in 1979.

Peter Lessing

Peter is the son of Doris and Gottfried Lessing. At the end of the book, which covers the life of Doris from birth to 1949, he is a young child who lives with his mother. Gottfried arranges for Peter to come to Germany for a visit when the boy is young, but once Gottfried begins rising in East German politics, he no longer is interested in his son.

Charles Mzingele

Charles Mzingele is the only black member of the Southern Rhodesia communist party who attends meetings. His input is fascinating and useful to the party members, and

Doris has strong memories of his comments, his personality, and his tales of oppression and persecution.

Objects/Places

Persia

Persia is the country now known as Iran, where Doris Lessing's father is posted through his employment with a British bank after he leaves the Army in the First World War. It is where Doris and her brother Harry are born. The author has memories of their great stone house in Persia, and the book includes several pictures from that time period.

Southern Rhodesia

Southern Rhodesia is the country now known as Zimbabwe, and is the land where Doris Lessing's parents relocate when her father decides to leave the bank and start a farm. This is where Doris lives through most of her childhood, until she leaves for London in 1949.

England

England is the country where Doris Lessing's mother and father are born, and because of that, it is where her original citizenship is held.

World War One

World War One plays a large part in this book. Her father's life changing injury occurs during this war, and the conflict casts a long shadow upon both her parents.

Germany

Germany is the country that was the enemy to Britain during most of Lessing's young years, and it is ironic that she makes a German citizen her second husband.

World War II

World War II is seen in this book as a great failure by Lessing's generation. The engagement of the entire civilized world in battle, so soon after the First World War is demoralizing to her because it makes her wonder what sort of creature humans are.

Tayler Farm

The farm in Southern Rhodesia represents the escape from England, the ability to prove oneself in another country, and a prosperous future for the Tayler family. By choosing a

farm in southern Africa over another bank posting, Lessing's parents were making a statement about their belief in their abilities to survive anything.

The African Bush

Lessing and her younger brother Harry love the wild areas of Africa surrounding their farm and spend their leisure time in the Bush. Somehow, these intrepid children manage to avoid bites from poisonous snakes and being eaten by lions and pythons, which probably contributed to the self confident way both of them defied their parents in later years.

Salisbury

Salisbury is the small town nearest to the Tayler Farm, and represents civilization to the Tayler family, especially Doris. It gives her the opportunity to gain employment when the situation at home grows uncomfortable, and while the Farm may have contributed to her inner growth and strength, the small town contributes to her social skills

Capetown

Capetown, South Africa, is seen by the Southern Rhodesia community as the big city, the destination for vacationers and those who want a taste of culture. In the book, when Lessing is in need of a break from a marriage, she takes a five day train trip to Capetown and returns with a clear mind.

Themes

That Was That

A recurring theme in this book is of moving on after depression, divorce, illness or financial difficulties. "That was that" is a phrase often used by Doris' mother, and is in fact, in the last sentence of the book.

When Doris' mother claims an illness that requires her to stay in bed for weeks, when Doris was young and the family first moved to Southern Rhodesia, there is no diagnosis, few symptoms, and it seems likely the episode was severe depression. Suddenly one day, Maude just arises from the bed one day, says "that was that", and life resumes.

Although Doris appears to resent her mother's influence in her life, it becomes obvious that she emulates her mother's philosophy about life. The book is filled with Doris going through phases of learning, trying new things, trying to fit into society's expectations of her, biding her time. At some point though, the reader can see a change in attitude, a shift of perspective, and the author takes whatever steps are necessary to move on from her predicament. She is mentally stating "that was that", meaning that phase of her life has passed, no sense in looking back, it is time only to look forward.

This attitude serves Doris Lessing well in the years that are covered by this autobiography. She needs to have the strength to find work in Southern Rhodesia, to change her partner and leave her children, to continue in her quest to become a writer, and to leave the country she has known all her life to travel back to England.

In each instance, after a time of contemplation, usually away from the source of her problems, Doris finds a way to pack her emotional bags, shut the door on the past and turn away from what she has left. The reticence the author displays when writing about these events in her life shows she never expected to review these decisions again, and is understandably reluctant to spend more than a cursory sentence or two regarding them.

Truth in Autobiography

The author addresses this subject in the beginning pages of the book, and promises to tell the truth as far as she can without hurting anyone. What emerges is a story told chronologically, true to the facts, but revealing little about Doris Lessing's emotions and passions.

Lessing's version of the truth appears to be defined as telling the events of her life, providing snippets of personal experiences through memories, and downplaying some of the major events by just listing them and not exploring them in more detail.

By adhering to the strictest interpretation of truth in her story, Lessing has given the reader enough to set the record straight about what happened and when, but she does not delve into the why. Lessing had a life set apart from the normal British citizen, surrounded by exotic locales and experiences. She went against society norms by leaving her husband and children at a time when women traditionally stayed married, and if divorced, certainly kept the children. Lessing was promiscuous during an almost Victorian era, managed to become a published writer while living in a foreign country, and chose communism and atheism over traditional ideologies. Instead of mining these experiences and events for emotional reasoning and the hours of contemplation and suffering these choices must have given her, the story Lessing chooses to share with the reader is more superficial, concentrating on political musings, with the occasional advice to women in passing.

As Lessing says at the book's beginning, truth is what the author makes of it, and it is clear she was comfortable with telling her story in a factual way, avoiding the pain it must have presented to analyze decisions made so long ago.

The Price of War

Doris Lessing's parents are brought together because of the First World War. Maude loses the man she loves when he is killed in a shipwreck, and Alfred is in the hospital because of the injuries he receives in battle. It is Lessing's opinion that the world war affected everyone on earth, through the battles themselves, the result of losing loved ones, or the damage to those who survived. Lessing says the wars, both the first and second, caused people who had never met or would have any reason to meet, to collide with others of a variety of socio-economic levels. She believes this was the reason for the pandemic of the Spanish influenza, and then a deeper plague of ideology and beliefs.

Throughout her childhood, Lessing's parents talk about the war, the trenches, the damage to bodies and lives. She considers the war to be a great dark cloud that hung over her world, reminding her and her parents of the evil of men, the tragedy of lives turned from their original path. When it appears obvious that the world is about to be plunged into another worldwide war, Lessing and her contemporaries wonder how human beings can allow this to happen so soon after the war that was "to end all wars."

The tragedy of war is a thread through the lives of Lessing's parents and then her own life. Her father is injured, his leg amputated and suffers for years as a result of shell shock. Her mother nurses men back to health and becomes stronger for it, but leans on illness as a way to get through life. Frank Wisdom, Lessing's first husband, wants desperately to go to war, but is prevented and therefore angry and frustrated, partially causing her to lose interest in him. Gottfried Lessing, as a German citizen with family behind the lines, gives Doris another perspective on war.

Style

Perspective

"Under My Skin" is an autobiography of Doris Lessing, so is written from a first person point of view The years covered are from her birth to 1949, and since the book was written in 1993, the author is attempting to recall memories at the age of 74 of her life from forty-four to seventy-four years ago. With the aid of photographs, memories of what she was told as a child, and a professional genealogical researcher, Lessing compiles a story that seldom digresses from the chronological telling of her life story.

Lessing is a fiction writer, but the autobiography is firmly rooted in facts. There is a certain amount of discomfort evident when the author is required to explain to the reader the reasoning or logic behind her actions. With few exceptions, the author moves the story along without comment on her feelings. Those exceptions relate to communism, world politics, and the segregation issues of Africa.

The perspective of the author is one of relaying the facts, interjecting her views on the exceptions above wherever possible, and telling her official version of her life during those years.

Tone

The tone of Doris Lessing is one of someone who would like to tell the entire story of her life to her readers, but realizes somewhere in the writing of it that the truth would hurt too many people. The writer realizes when reflecting on her actions and her attitudes of this time period, 1919 to 1949, that instead of making herself look better, the truth would more likely present her in a bad light.

Rather than a typical autobiographical tone of concentrating on the author's feelings and emotions brought about through the experiences in her life, this autobiography is written more in the vein of a dissertation on English colonization of Africa, communism, and the perils of worldwide war.

Doris Lessing speaks to her reader with the voice of someone who is not inclined to apologize for anit-social behavior, or expound upon her right to have such behavior. The events are presented in order, with little or no commentary on what the reactions were from her family or associates. Her membership in the communist party lasted for a shorter time than either of her marriages, but the communist ideology consumes a number of paragraphs. Doris never personally participated in any prejudicial behavior or apartheid, but her observations on the behavior of English settlers in Africa are in every chapter of the book. A reader expects, when reading an autobiography, to learn about the individual writing it, to delve deeply into what made that person successful, what held them back, what moved them forward. This author does not allow her readers to take that trip with her.

Structure

"Under My Skin" is an autobiography by Doris Lessing, a writer. The book consists of 419 pages, broken into twenty-one chapters. The book has an acknowledgment page, a note from the author regarding the population numbers for Southern Rhodesia, a glossary of African terms used in the book, and two pages of quotes regarding music and a specific quote from Cole Porter's song "I've got you under my skin."

There are also sixteen pages of photographs from the author's past and these photos are placed together in the center of the book.

The author tells the story in a chronological fashion, with some references to the present condition of certain persons in the story. Often during the story the author points to a specific incident or character and reveals this was the source of a character or theme of a subsequent work of fiction she has authored.

At some points in the story, the author shares the words from songs that were popular at that time in her life.

The author begins with a brief outline of the family tree of her mother and her father, describing what she derives from their stories. She brings the reader forward with the story of her parents, their lives before meeting, and their marriage and history before she is born.

The years in Persia where she was born are not well remembered by the author, so many stories about her from these years are the result of what she was told later in her life. A long and uncomfortable train ride, blamed on her mother's bad choices, is especially recalled. The family goes back to England briefly, then decides to escape the gloominess of their native land to start a farm in Southern Rhodesia, Africa.

When the family arrives in Africa, the children and their father adapt easily to the new environment and attitudes of the country, but Maude the mother resists and tries to keep the sprit of colonial English in the family. The author describes life in the bush, with a struggling farm and the freedom of the children to learn new things.

As the author grows older, her difficulties and anger with her mother increase, finally to a point where the author is sent to live with other families, to boarding schools, and eventually, when these do not provide a sufficient relenting of the conflict, she moves to a nearby town, Salisbury, gets a job, and soon after gets married.

The author describes her married life and the birth of two children very soon after marriage. She discusses her entry into the communist party, and her observations of party dynamics, the role of women in marriage and parenting, and her progressive attitude towards sex.

As the author begins searching for an ideal situation for herself, she divorces her husband and does not take the children with her. She soon finds a new husband, and

has a child with him. Her affection for the communist ideology wanes, and the author begins a serious career as a writer.

In 1949, the author decides to divorce her second husband, take the third child to England and pursue a writing career. She turns away from her family, her ex-husbands, her first two children, her ties to the communist party, and her life in Africa to seek her happiness in London. This is where the story ends for this section of the life of Doris Lessing.

Quotes

Chapter One, p. 5, Lessing:
Strange how once influential books disappear.

Chapter One, p. 10, Lessing:
Perhaps it was from that war that I first felt the struggling panicky need to escape, with a nervous aversion to where I have just stood, as if something there might blow up or drag me down by the heel.

Chapter 5, p. 66, Lessing:
When my father remonstrated she shouted at him that he knew nothing about the country; perhaps it was the first time I heard all the white clichés: You don't understand our problems. They only understand the stick. They are nothing but savages. They are just down from the trees. You have to keep them in their place.

Chapter 6, p. 88, Lessing:
A bad book cannot tell you about people—only about the author.

Chapter 9, p. 171, Lessing:
Quite soon, they married. Later they divorced. Women with this kind of lazy mercenary sexuality end up alone, though usually well heeled.

Chapter 10, p. 196, Lessing:
My mother's voice, for these so frequent announcements, was dramatic as always, but I no longer listened, could not listen, calamity should not be declared too often.

Chapter 10, p. 197, Lessing:
No writer can come up with anything as merciless as what Life Itself, that savage satirist, does every day.

Chapter 14, p. 301, Lessing:
Nothing is simpler than to impress people by being silent, then coming in with a few decisive words.

Chapter 15, p. 316, Lessing:
When principles are invoked, common sense flies out of the window.

Chapter 16, p. 328, Lessing:

Ripeness may be all, mellowing you into a shrug of the shoulders and a smile, but the raw rub of time itself was the engine of events.

Chapter 18, p. 377, Lessing:
There is really nothing much we can do about what we are born with.

Chapter 19, p. 382, Lessing:
You don't need to calculate rent, or degrees of common sense and suitability, if it is a question of dream places.

Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Doris could never reach a comfortable understanding with her mother? Was it the normal teenage angst or something more serious?

Re-read the sections regarding Doris' marriage to Frank with special emphasis on her relationship with her children John and Jean. Can you discover any hints that she will soon decide to leave her husband and children?

Was Doris Lessing ahead of her times? Describe which situations reflect your opinion on this question.

Who do you believe was more influential in the life of Doris Lessing: her mother, her father, her brother?

Was Communism a passing phase for Doris, or did it most accurately describe her political views?

In what ways would Doris' life been different had her family chosen to stay in England after their return from Persia?

Why do you think Doris chose to have another child, after leaving the first two?

Why do you think Doris had so much trouble staying in a conventional school system?

What traits of her father's personality do you see in the Doris of this book? Of her mother's?

Do you believe that Doris Lessing has told the truth in this autobiography? What critical areas do you feel she should have spent more time on?