

GENERAL BACKGROUND

A BIOGRAPHY OF DORIS LESSING

Doris Lessing, (née Doris May Taylor in Kermanshah, Persia, on **October 22nd 1919**) is a British writer, the author of works such as the novel ***The Grass is Singing*** and ***The Golden Notebook***. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in **2007**.

1. Her life

Her father, who had lost a leg during his service in World War I met his future wife, a nurse, at the Royal Free Hospital where he was recovering from his amputation. Alfred Taylor moved his family to Persia (now Iran), in order to take up a job as a clerk for the Imperial Bank of Persia; and it was there that Doris was born in **1919**. The family then moved to the British colony of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in **1925**, to farm maize, at the time when her father purchased around one thousand acres of bush. The farm was not successful and failed to deliver the wealth the Taylors had expected.

Doris was educated in a Roman Catholic convent all-girls school in Salisbury. She left school at 14, and thereafter, was self-educated; and worked as a nursemaid; and it was about this time that she started reading material about politics and sociology that her employer gave her to read. She began writing around that time. In **1937**, she moved to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator, and she soon married her first husband, Frank Wisdom, with whom she had two children, before the marriage ended in **1943**.

After her divorce, Lessing was drawn to Communist Left Book Club, and it was there that she met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing. They were married shortly after she joined the group, and had a child, before the marriage also ended up in a divorce in **1949**. Gottfried Lessing was sent to Uganda, where he became the East German ambassador, and was murdered in the 1979 rebellion against Idi Amin Dada.

Because of her commitment (*engagement*) in the campaign against nuclear arms and South African apartheid, Doris Lessing was banned from that country and from Rhodesia for many years. Therefore, she moved to London with her youngest son, in **1949**, and it was then that she published her first novel ***The Grass is Singing***. The book which made her really famous was ***The Golden Notebook***, published in **1962**.

In **1984**, she attempted to publish two novels, under a pseudonym, **Jane Somers**, to demonstrate the difficulty new authors faced in trying to break into print. The novels were discarded by Lessing's UK publisher, but accepted by another English publisher, Michael Joseph, and in the USA, by Alfred A. Knopf.

On **October 11th 2007**, Doris Lessing was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. At 87, she is the oldest person to have received the literature prize, and the third oldest Nobel Laureate in any category. She also stands as only the eleventh woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Swedish Academy, in its 106-year history. She told reporters outside her home:

"I've won all the prizes in Europe, every bloody one, so I'm delighted to win them all. It's a royal flush (*c'est un flush royal*)."

2. A few dates

1919 (22. October): Lessing was born in Persia

1925: Her family moved to Southern Rhodesia.

1937: She moved to Salisbury to work as a telephone operator; she married her first husband, Frank Wisdom by whom she had two children..

1943: She divorced Frank Wisdom. She joined the Left Book Club, where she met her second husband, Gottfried Lessing.

1949: She divorced Gottfried Lessing. Then, she moved to London with her youngest son. She published ***The Grass is Singing***.

1962: ***The Golden Notebook***

1976: She received the Prix Medicis Etranger for ***The Golden Notebook***.

2007: Doris Lessing received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

3. Her works

| Dates | Works |
|--------------|---|
| 1950 | The Grass is Singing |
| 1953 | Five short novels |
| 1957 | Going Home |
| 1959 | Fourteen Poems |
| 1962 | The Golden Notebook Play With a Tiger |
| 1964 | African Stories |
| 1971 | Briefing for a Descent into Hell |
| 1974 | Memoirs of a Survivor |
| 1978 | To Room Nineteen |
| 1987 | Prisons we choose to live inside (essays) The Wind Blows Away Our Words |
| 1988 | The Fifth Child |
| 1992 | African Laughter: Four visits to Zimbabwe (a memoir) |
| 1944 | Under my Skin: Volume one of My Autobiography, to 1949 |
| 1997 | Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography 1949 to 1962 |
| 1999 | Mara and Dann |
| 2000 | <i>Ben in the World</i> , (a sequel to The Fifth Child) |
| 2001 | The Sweetest Dream |
| 2003 | The Grandmothers: Four Short Novels |
| 2005 | The Story of General Dann and Mara's Daughter, Griot, and the Snow Dog (a sequel to Mara and Dann) |
| 2007 | The Cleft |
| 2008 | Alfred and Emily |

Under the pseudonym of Jane Somers

| | |
|------|-------------------------------|
| 1983 | The Diary of a Good Neighbour |
| 1984 | If Old Could |

Main points

1. When and where was Doris Lessing born? What is her nationality?
2. Why did Doris Lessing's father go to Southern Rhodesia ?
3. What about Doris Lessing's life after she was 15?
4. Show that she was a committed (*engagée*) young woman.
What about the consequences of her commitment?
5. Why did she want to write under a pseudonym?
6. When she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, which "record" did she break ?
7. Show that she was much appreciated by the critics.

4. The making of the book

The strand of the story simmered for years until, one day, Ms Lessing read a painful letter from a woman in a magazine. It went something like that: "I have had three normal children. And then, I had a baby, a girl, who, from the moment she was born, was evil. My family was loving and close, and now is ruined. She is vicious and spiteful (*méchante*), and wants only to hurt other people."

Once she had the child and the mother, she invented the rest of the story, merely to ask the question: "what if? What if you had a child like this? What would you do?" my publisher said to me, in a very authoritarian way, "Of course, this is your vision of England." I said "It hadn't occurred to me." It hadn't.

5. 1970s England

In 1964, the Labour Party is back in power. The Permissive society reaches its climax under Wilson's government. People tend to live in the suburbs (*la banlieue*) and commute to London for their work, thus partaking in the rat-race (*métro-boulot-dodo*)

I. The Permissive Society

During that period, a steady decrease in the birth rate (*taux de natalité*) could be noticed. In 1967, the Family Planning Act favoured contraception and the Pill. The composition of the family depended on voluntary planning of births, all the more so as the liberalization of abortion, from 1968 onwards, added to freedom of choice in this field. At the beginning of 1974, the rate of abortions doubled, since the law had been implemented (*mise en application*). For example, there were 15% abortions in the mid-1970s.

➔ However, marriage was jeopardized (*compromis*), with freedom of choice to have children or not, with the legislation of divorce, although the marriage rate was higher.

→ The disruption of the family was also a consequence of the generation gap: teenagers, to some extent, claiming social and economic autonomy on account of their tastes, needs, and leisures (**Youth culture, or Pop culture**).

→ The **Swinging Sixties** and their aftermath (*conséquences*) highlighted a rejection of moral taboos (particularly sexual), of all kinds of censorship, and of political and economic institutions.

→ Other changes: the development of gambling, (football pools, bingo halls).

→ The crime rate increased with the Skinheads, in the 1970s, as a reaction to the Hippy movement.

→ Decline in the influence of religion. Disappearance of Sunday Observance: opening of pubs, cinemas, even shops at “unsocial hours”.

II. Towards more equality?

→ Surprisingly enough, such changes in morals did not bring about upheavals (*bouleversements*) in the structure of society. British society was still dominated by class consciousness, illustrated by the famous distinction between “them” and “us”; “them” were those who governed and made decisions: government, red tape, (*bureaucratie*), and the establishment; and “us”, were those for whom the decisions were made, ordinary citizens, who demanded from the government more attention to their needs in increasingly numerous fields (*domaines*).

→ Equality between the sexes as concerned work: Equal Pay Act (1970), the Sex Discrimination Act (1975).

→ Improvement in wealth: in 1974, the Royal Commission of the Distribution of Income and Wealth, i.e. the Diamond commission, under Wilson’s government, pointed out less inequality.

List of English Prime Ministers during the period concerned by the novel *The Fifth Child*.

| Dates | English Prime Ministers | Party |
|-----------|-------------------------|--------------|
| 1964-1970 | Harold Wilson | Labour |
| 1970-1974 | Edward Heath | Conservative |
| 1974-1976 | Harold Wilson | Labour |
| 1976-1979 | James Callaghan | Labour |
| 1979-1990 | Margaret Thatcher | Conservative |

Main Points

1. What are the characteristics of the 1970s in England?
2. What social classes could be found in England at that period?
3. Make a parallel between 1970s England and Harriet and David's way of life.

6. The Fifth Child as a genre

The Fifth Child is labelled a **horror story**, but it is not from the Stephen King School of Horror. It is slightly more subtle but the atmosphere is more menacing. Most horror stories appeal to a collective memory of childhood, the sense of being vulnerable, in a world filled with huge, mysterious beings.

The monster-child born to the nice normal British couple, the Lovatts, is not the creation of science but a genetic error, a throwback (*un primitif*), or perhaps a throw-forward, who eventually, like Anthony Burgess's delinquents in '**A Clockwork Orange**,' finds his true home in the monster-company of the underclass: the uneducable, the unemployable, the rootless, whose vacuity leads them inevitably to drugs, violence and crime.

The Fifth Child - is **a moral or philosophical fable**. The dominant characteristic of this novel is realism, yet it uses a subtle blend (*mélange*) of fairy tale, science-fiction and gothic conventions to strengthen its nightmarish effects. The bad brother or sister, or the changeling child who brings misfortune is a recurring motif of fairy tales. Ben is just an infant, resembling, in his mother's eyes, a goblin (*lutin*) or a troll. At one point, his father, David Lovatt, tells the children a frightening fairy tale of a boy and a girl lost in a wood.

Doris Lessing makes it impossible to establish the objective nature of Ben's difference, and whether we are meant to read it as an archetype, a figure of **science fiction** (an atavism, or a product of maternal impressions), a metaphor for the construction of racial, ethnic or class difference, or a figure of social realism (a mentally disabled, physically atypical, or autistic child; a child with disabilities produced by maternal drug use.)

Ben resembles **Robert Louis Stevenson's Edward Hyde**, a figure of "nameless difformity" and physical vigour who distresses people for reasons they find hard to articulate. He also compares productively to Victor Frankenstein's creation in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). "The novel is an excellent addition to courses on disability studies or medical ethics".

There are also strong elements of **something medieval and supernatural** in "*The Fifth Child*" which create much the same atmosphere as in a gothic novel.

Here is a definition of gothic fiction:

"A type of novel and romance popular in the late 18th century and early 19th century. The word Gothic had come to mean "wild", "barbarous" and "crude", qualities which writers found attractive to cultivate in reaction against the sedate neoclassicism of earlier 18th century culture. Gothic novels were usually set in the past (most often the medieval past) and in foreign countries; they took place in monasteries, castles, dungeons and mountainous landscapes. The plots hinged on suspense and mystery, involving the fantastic and the supernatural. "

The Cambridge Guide to Literature in England (Longman 1980).

"Gothic writing emerges at a particular and definable stage. The individual comes to see himself at the mercy of forces which, in fundamental ways elude his understanding. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising to find the emergence of a literature whose key motifs are paranoia, manipulation and injustice, and whose central project is understanding the unexplicable, the taboo, the irrational.

David Punter, *The Literature of Terror (1985)*

The word "**monster**" has many definitions. Some define it as a creature having a frightening or strange appearance. It is also defined as one that inspires horror or disgust. Ben certainly fits into all of these categories. He was different right from pregnancy (*grossesse*). He looks extremely frightening, almost like a "Neanderthal". All in all, Ben is an outcast (*paria*) even in an institution for "Nature's mistakes".

Doris Lessing said of her novel: "It's an absolutely horrible book. And it has a strong effect on people", she added.

Main points

1. Are David and Harriet a representation of the society of that time?
2. Is *The Fifth Child* based on fiction, or on real facts?
3. Explain what gothic fiction means. Can it be applied to *The Fifth Child*?
4. Which literary characters is Ben compared to?

7. *Ben, in the World* *

Now, Ben is 18, but he looks 40. He is in the world. He has long been exiled from his family, roughing it (*vivant à la dure*) and always being tricked (*berné*), not able to fill out a form (*remplir une fiche*), let alone getting enough money to live on. He is dependent on the kindness of marginal people: an old pensioner living in a tower block, a tart (*une prostituée*) who likes his brute kind of sex. Everyone he knows keeps asking the same question: what is he?

He is taken up by people who are opportunists, who want to use him to their own benefit only: Johnston, who uses him as a drug dealer; Alex, the film maker who takes him in as an actor in an epic (*épopée*) about Neanderthals. He is abandoned on the Riviera, sent off to Brazil, and worst of all, kidnapped by an American scientist who drives him to a Research Institute that sees him only as a specimen; he is rescued and taken to see "my" people, i.e. people like him. Discovering who they are and where they live, triggers (*déclenche*) the calamitous ending: Ben falls off a cliff, and dies, and nobody cares. A good riddance (*Bon débarras!*)

Main Points

1. In which circumstances did Doris Lessing find the plot of her novel?
2. Which characters of *The Fifth Child* remain in *Ben in the World*?
3. Make a list of places in *Ben in the World*. What does it suggest to you?
4. Can you explain "in the World"?

* *Ben, in the World*, =the sequel to *The Fifth Child*