TAKE A DIVE INTO...

...“Through the Tunnel”

By Doris May Lessing

Literary Analysis

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Period 5
The short story, “Through the Tunnel” is a classic piece of literature by Doris May Lessing. “Through the Tunnel” is about Jerry, an eleven year-old British boy, who is on vacation. He is pulled between his mother’s watchful eye and the wild bay which provides adventure for him. This rite of passage story was published in 1955 and still serves as a lesson to us all about growing up.

The conflicts in “Through the Tunnel” are man versus himself and man versus nature. Jerry, the main character, has the internal conflict of being torn between childhood that represents dependence and adolescence that represents independence. This is presented by Jerry’s constant longing to be in the water and swim through the tunnel. The external conflicts are Jerry versus the tunnel, the water, air, and human limitations. The tunnel causes Jerry to carefully plan his descent to the depths of the bay. The water causes problems for Jerry in that he must fight the buoyancy the water applies to his body. Air, or lack of air rather, causes Jerry to have to train himself to hold his breath underwater. Finally, human limitations cause Jerry to really have to train himself since humans are not meant to exist underwater. In the exposition, we are told a little bit about Jerry. We know that Jerry is eleven years old and that he is on vacation with his widowed mother. We are also shown that he is British. Jerry is outgoing and wants adventure but he tries to adhere to his mother’s rules. The inciting incident in “Through the Tunnel” occurs when Jerry sees the native boys swim through the tunnel. This sets up the conflict for the rest of the story. This is the inciting incident because, without it, there would be no complication and therefore, no story. In other words, if Jerry hadn’t seen the boys go through, there would be no desire for him to do that himself. The complication of the story is mainly centered around Jerry’s efforts to train himself to
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go through the tunnel. This includes Jerry training himself to hold his breath under water, timing the boys to see how long he needs to be able to hold his breath to get through safely, getting goggles so he can see underwater, learning to hold on to the rock so his buoyancy is reduced, and Jerry coming to the realization that he needs to succeed in his venture to the other side before he leaves to go back to England with his mother. There is also complication present when Jerry is inside the tunnel when he gets stuck and almost runs out of air. The turning point of the story occurs when Jerry sees the light while inside the tunnel. It is at this point that Jerry realizes that he must go on through the tunnel or he will die. The events that make up the falling action of “Through the Tunnel” are Jerry succeeding in making it through the tunnel, going back to the summer villa to clean up and take a nap, ‘telling’ his mother about his being able to hold his breath for over two minutes, and Jerry and his mother returning to England. The resolution of a story consists of the solving of the conflict. The man versus nature conflict is solved by Jerry making it through the tunnel by training himself to overcome his limitations as a human being. The man versus himself conflict is solved by Jerry changing into adolescent and becoming a more independent individual.

There are three prominent characters in “Through the Tunnel.” The main character is Jerry. Jerry is presented mostly through indirect presentation except in the exposition when the narrator tells us about him. We know that he is an eleven year-old British boy on vacation in France or a French-speaking island, perhaps on the Riviera or in the Mediterranean or Caribbean Sea. Jerry is a believable character, this is shown by him not being perfect, him having problems such as his nose bleeding, and having motivated change throughout the story such as him seeing the other boys go through the tunnel and wanting to do that also. Jerry changes in the story and is, therefore, a dynamic character. He makes the transition from child to adolescent. Jerry is a rounded character
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since we know quite a bit about him. Jerry’s mother, on the other hand, is a static and flat-ish rounded character. She is also presented through indirect presentation but in a different way. She is shown though her reactions toward Jerry’s actions. The third character is actually a group of characters. The natives of the location of the story are so flat that they are considered devices. Devices are characters that are existent for the sole purpose of building the story up. They are rarely, if ever, given personalities. In this story, they are not given personalities nor are their personal traits discussed. The natives are directly presented: they are told about and are static.

I picture the setting of this story to be a vacation on a white sandy beach in coastal France or a French island in the Riviera lined with villas. I also picture a wild bay with high waves splashing on the crags of the nearby cliff. The two settings of the story, the beach and the bay, correspond with Jerry. The beach corresponds with the ‘old Jerry’ and the bay corresponds with the ‘new Jerry.’ The setting affects the plot in that if there were no bay, there would be no swimming and by extension there would be no story. Another way the setting affects the plot is if they weren’t on vacation, Jerry would not have as much motivation to go through the tunnel. In other words, the vacation shortens the time window for Jerry to complete his main objective. There is also a feeling of freedom since Jerry is on vacation.

The story is told from 3rd person point-of-view as the narrator uses such pronouns as he, she, and they. The narrator is someone unnamed and is outside of the story. He or she is omniscient, meaning that he or she can see everything and he or she knows what the character is thinking. The omniscient narrator is a good choice for this story. If the narrator was limited in his or her knowledge, the reader would not be able to ‘see’ what happened underwater since that part is just Jerry’s thoughts. The underwater part of the story is a large part and the story actually wouldn’t have made sense without the omniscient narrator.
There are many prominent symbols in “Through the Tunnel.” *Light* was the main symbol. You can see the importance of this symbol by recalling the part of the story when Jerry sees the light while in the tunnel; it is a neon sign signaling the turning point. It signifies *knowledge* of what is to come. Another symbol is *water* which separates the beach from the wild bay. It signifies the *birth* of the new Jerry. The *white* beach signifies the *purity* of childhood. As you may recall, the beach corresponds with the child-Jerry. The *rocks* of the bay signify *unfeeling* as the rocks are cold and are indifferent to whether Jerry succeeds or fails in his plan. The *tunnel* signifies *passage* and is one of the main ideas in this rite of passage story. By going through the tunnel Jerry ‘grows up.’ Lastly, darkness has a significant meaning in the story, as the *darkness* at the entrance of the tunnel signifies *mysteriousness and lack of knowledge*. These symbols allow the reader to get an idea of what might happen later in the story.

The main ironies in “Through the Tunnel” occur in the form of situational irony. One part of the story that shows irony is when Jerry tells his mother that he can hold his breath for over two minutes. As the reader, you might expect her to react more strongly to Jerry disobeying her by having gone into the bay. In fact, she is fairly mellow when she tells him that she thinks that is enough swimming for today. Another example of irony occurs after Jerry completes his objective to swim through the tunnel. As the reader, you might expect Jerry to brag or at least tell someone about his success. Instead he keeps his victory to himself. Maybe the most ironic situation in this book is when Jerry gets stuck inside the tunnel. Since Jerry had spent so much time preparing for his feat, the reader may not expect for Jerry to get stuck. There is dramatic irony throughout the story since the reader knows that Jerry swims through the tunnel yet neither the natives nor Jerry’s mother has any knowledge of Jerry’s preparation or success. There are no significant examples of verbal irony in “Trough the Tunnel.”
There are two main themes in “Through the Tunnel.” The first theme is ‘growing up isn’t easy.’ As you can see, Jerry took a lot of time and effort to gain the skills necessary to swim through the tunnel and at the same time he gained confidence and independence. That leads into the next theme: ‘if you set your mind to something, then you can accomplish it.’ Jerry set his mind to getting through the tunnel and as a result, he did just that.