

The following essay explores the universal themes found in Doris Lessing's short story "Through the Tunnel." Although the writer of this essay does not use in-text documentation, she still provides evidence and elaboration to support her ideas. As you read the essay, write down answers to the accompanying numbered analysis questions. The short story can be found beginning on page 401 of your *Holt Literature and Language Arts* textbook.

from *Short Stories for Students*

THROUGH THE TUNNEL: *The Search for Identity and Acceptance*

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Doris Lessing's "Through the Tunnel" examines the experience of "rite de passage"¹ for Jerry, a young English boy. This story tells of a young man's determination to prove to himself that he can do the impossible, which is to swim down where the older boys swim and emerge a man, so to speak. Parallel to this, Lessing also explores the total isolation that the reader and Jerry experiences, as he struggles to find his own identity.

1. What details does the writer include in this paragraph to tell you about Jerry's personality?

The reader learns the protagonist is Jerry, an 11-year old, only child, with a widowed mother. Initially, he feels unsure and isolated and he becomes even more so with the emergence of the group of boys, who frequent the beach. Not only do they make him feel unwelcome at first, but they already have a clique² formed and are not very enthusiastic about welcoming another member. Despite his feelings of isolation and the feeling that he is being judged, he wants more than anything to be a part of the group: "To be with

1. **rite de passage** (rēt də pã•sãzh'): an achievement or event marking a transition in a person's life.
2. **clique** (klik): a small, exclusive social group.

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them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body.” According to Jerry, even the slightest acceptance would satisfy his craving for camaraderie.³ When they see him and identify Jerry as a stranger, they “proceed to forget him.” Despite the boys’ aloofness towards Jerry, “he was happy” because “he was with them.” Jerry realizes that this whole “friendship” will be short-lived, but for the present he has friends and an identity as a part of a group.

As the boys begin to dive, Jerry decides to join in. Each time he dives, he feels “proud of himself.” However, when the diving becomes quite challenging, Jerry is not sure what to do, so he does what every normal 11-year old kid would do—he begins to make faces and show off with the hopes of winning their approval again. This is the act of a scared child who feels that if he can get them to laugh, they will forget all about his failed attempts at the “diving game.” As he begins to make faces and clown around, he is met not with the boys’ approval, but with their disapproval.

2. How does the writer explain why Jerry makes faces and shows off?

They are not laughing; instead, they begin to swim and ignore him. Again, we see a situation where Jerry seems totally isolated. It also shows that despite the number of people around him, he is still alone.

It appears that the only time Jerry is sure of himself is when his mother is around. Even then, he appears to tolerate and get around her eccentric and nurturing ways. He says that the way to deal with his mother is through “contrition.”⁴ Despite his toleration of her, he still relies on her though she tries not make him feel like a “mama’s boy.” As often as he tries to avoid her, she is still his safety zone as he looks to her for silent strength on the beach. This is where we see Jerry, the boy.

Here is a young boy, who appears to want to have friends so badly that he is willing to act childish with the hopes of gaining their acceptance. It seems that he truly wants to fit in; he just does not know how. They are the “older” boys and one can surmise these are truly teenagers.

That these teenagers do not accept him forces Jerry into a ritualistic⁵ pattern to gain not only confidence in himself, but discipline and maturity as well. Usually, when a child takes an interest or strives for some sort of transformation, be it spiritual or physical, most likely that child will have the support of a parent, relative or friend to ease some of the confusion, answer questions, or just listen to their concerns. For Jerry,

3. **camaraderie** (kam'ə•rād'ə•rē): friendly feeling.

4. **contrition** (kən•trish'ən): remorse, apology.

5. **ritualistic**: solemn, formal, and systematic.

there is no one. He does discover that no matter how badly he wants to “fit in,” in the end, it is up to him. He must find a way to transform into an adult by himself. This moment occurs when Jerry is sitting on a rock and the boys are swimming around him and scaring him by “flying down past him.” As he counts how long they are under the water, he becomes more and more scared until they surface and walk right past him. He concurs, “They were leaving to get away from him. He cried openly, fists in his eyes. There was no one to see him, and he cried himself out.” Finally, he decides to go find his mother.

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

We also see that the mother is completely blind to her son’s struggles and transformation. As Lessing writes, [the mother] “was determined to be neither possessive nor lacking in devotion.” She has a very realistic and stoic⁶ attitude toward her only child; however, we find she is in a situation where there appears not to be any males present in either the mother’s life or the son’s life, where a strong role model should be present. For him, he journeys through life alone, just as his rite de passage is experienced—alone. His acceptance into adulthood is a painful, but meaningful experience, as he never does gain acceptance with the older boys. However, it never does matter once his mission is finished, because their existence becomes inconsequential. He finally knows what it is like to be a man.

Once he purchases the goggles, he assumes a whole new identity, “Now he could see.” As Jerry realizes, “It was as if he had eyes of a different kind—fish eyes that showed everything clear and delicate and wavering in the bright water.” Even his swim takes on symbolic meaning. He swims past the “myriads⁷ of minute fish” and sees where he needs to go in order to accomplish his mission. This goal is not going to be an easy one. He first has to get ready to attempt this feat; he cannot just swim through the gap like a child. He has to learn control. The reader begins to see

3. How do the quotations from the story support the writer's point about the importance of the goggles?

6. **stoic** (stō'ik): indifferent, unflinching.

7. **myriads** (mir'ē•ədz): countless numbers, many.

a very different Jerry emerge. A child would jump in and go through the tunnel blindly; however, once he obtains the goggles and sees things in a different light and studies where he is headed, he begins to develop into a mature teenager.

One thing he does is gain control. He “exercised his lungs as if everything, the whole of his life, all that he would become depended on it,” knowing that without this control, he would be dealing with a futile⁸ attempt at developing an identity. The only problem with this whole mission is that it appears to be self-imposed with pain. He deals with nose-bleeds, exhaustion, and dizziness. All to prove to himself that he can do something the older boys can already do.

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

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

4. How does Jerry's new goal differ from his original goal of fitting in with the older boys? Why does the writer think this change is significant?

5. According to the writer, what are the important life lessons Jerry has learned through his experience?

8. futile (fyōōt'īl): vain, useless.