

Summary "Through the Tunnel"

Nobel Prize winning, British author Doris Lessing established her literary voice in numerous genres. Her works include, but are not limited to, novels, short stories, plays, and biographies. Five years before her death at age ninety-four in 2013, she had been declared fifth on the *Times of London's* list of the top British authors since 1945. Lessing's short story "Through the Tunnel" was first published in 1955 in *The New Yorker*, an American periodical. It is the story of Jerry, an English boy vacationing at a beach locale with his widowed mother. On the bay, Jerry sees a number of older boys and tries to get their attention while he watches them swim through a rock tunnel. The tunnel would seem to be the important component of the setting as an exact name or place is not given. Jerry calls out to them in French, believing them to be "of that coast," which along with the narrative voice describing the boys as having darkly tanned skin has led to speculation that the story takes place on the French Riviera. Others have guessed that the setting is in Africa because of Lessing's use of that continent in other stories.

Jerry and his mother have vacationed at this location many times in the past. They appear to have a close relationship and to respect each other's space and individuality. The mother tries to be loving but not possessive of the boy. Jerry seems equally dedicated to his mother. On the second day of their trip, Jerry decides to explore the bay, which he describes as being "wild and rocky." He had noticed it from a path and decides that it would be a way for him to be more of an adult, not always doing things on the vacation alongside his mother. The mother, in a manner that she hopes is matter of fact, gives her permission, and Jerry leaves the safety of the beach and crowds he has always known. He enters the water and being a strong swimmer, approaches a far off beach.

Watching a shore, Jerry sees the older boys removing their clothing and running toward the rocks. He swims closer, but still remains some distance away. That is when he sees them well enough to know they are dark skinned and speaking a language different from his own. At that point, he begins to develop a strong desire to become one within their group. One of the boys waves at Jerry to join them, which he happily does. The boys, however, upon realizing that he is foreign, pay little attention to him. Jerry remains pleased to have been asked to join them. Along with the boys, Jerry dives off of a high area into the water. The biggest among the boys dives in but Jerry does not see him come up. The others begin to do the same and disappear into the water as well. When he looks down, Jerry can see shapes moving about in the water.

Jerry begins to panic as all of the boys who had surrounded him have gone into the water and not returned. Jerry believes that they are gone for good having swum through some sort of opening in the rocks. He cries from the thought that the reason they left was to get away from him. For hours after that, Jerry tries to decide if he should try swimming through the tunnel himself. He makes one attempt and develops a severe nose-bleed that leaves him feeling dizzy and ill. He fears that if the same thing were to happen inside the tunnel, he could become trapped and would die there. He convinces himself that it would be better to wait until next summer when he will be stronger, but quickly he feels that if he does not do it now, he never will. He is conflicted, fearing the tunnel, but also fearing that he will never follow through with entering it.

He eventually enters the tunnel, being careful and still trapped between feelings of success and fear. He knows that he has no choice but to go forward or he could drown. When he eventually surfaces, Jerry is still worried that he could sink, or not be able to swim the short distance back to the rock. Once he has successfully accomplished his goal, the story has become a coming of age tale in which Jerry has acquired a confidence and optimism for the future. Jerry's maturation began early in the story when he broke away from his mother as a sign of independence beginning to develop. He emulates the older boys in an attempt to become one of them and be less child-like. He reunites with his mother at the end but does not share with her what he has overcome.