

Through the Tunnel



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DORIS LESSING

Born in Iran to two British expatriates, a former military officer and a former nurse, Doris Lessing led a travel-filled life from an early age. In 1925, her family moved to the British Colony of Southern Rhodesia so they could farm on a large plot of land that her father had purchased. Lessing attended a Roman Catholic school in the capital of Salisbury (now Harare), but dropped out when she was 13. From that point on, Lessing was entirely self-educated. She started to write shortly thereafter and held a number of odd jobs for many years. By 1943, she had already married, had two children and gotten divorced, after which she became active in Socialist politics. Lessing met her second husband through the famed Left Book Club, had another son and got a second divorce in 1949. She moved to London with her youngest son that same year and decided to seriously pursue a writing career. After many years of selling short stories to magazines, Lessing published her first novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, in 1950. Over the course of her career, she published over 50 novels, which moved between social realism to science fiction and many styles in between, all the while focusing on political themes. At the age of 88, Lessing won the Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the oldest winner in that category and only the eleventh woman to ever win the prize.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the events of the wider world never explicitly enter into the story's somewhat removed setting of a tranquil vacation at the beach, the era in which "Through the Tunnel" was published was a time of great transitions across the globe. When the story was published in 1955, the aftermath of the Second World War could still be felt throughout Europe. How or when Jerry lost his father is never mentioned within the story itself, but it is entirely feasible that he was one of the nearly half a million British casualties from that war and that Jerry's mother is one of the many war widows who suddenly became single mothers afterward. Throughout her life, Lessing was attuned to global politics, which she confronted both as a writer and as an activist. She had moved to London from her native Rhodesia six years before the publication of "Through the Tunnel," yet remained concerned with the racial inequalities of neighboring South Africa's apartheid policies within much of her early fiction. In this story, apartheid is never mentioned, though Lessing notes the "burned smooth dark brown" skin of the local boys in the unnamed seaside town where Jerry and his mother are vacationing. The setting is presumably somewhere along the Mediterranean or a coastal region of

France, but the dynamic between the well-off British vacationers and the natives takes on a different angle knowing Lessing's deep concern with racial politics and European imperialism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Throughout her multi-decade career of writing novels, short stories, plays and poems, Doris Lessing covered a wide variety of styles and genres. Many of her books, in fact, would be difficult to categorize into any single genre at a time. "Through the Tunnel," however, fits into the time-tested genre of the coming-of-age story. Most often, this genre is affiliated with the novel form—where it is often given the German term *Bildungsroman*, "*Bildung*" meaning "education" and "*roman*" meaning "novel." There are countless examples of coming-of-age novels, including James Joyce's [A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man](#), J.D. Salinger's [The Catcher in the Rye](#) and Sylvia Plath's [The Bell Jar](#), among many others. The coming-of-age narrative is a somewhat less common genre within the constraints of the short story, but "The Flowers" by Alice Walker, "Her First Ball" by Katherine Mansfield and "I Want to Know Why" by Sherwood Anderson are all narratives that depict a person grappling with the struggles of passing from childhood into adulthood.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Through the Tunnel"
- **When Written:** 1955
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 1955
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Realism
- **Setting:** A foreign seaside
- **Climax:** After many days of training, Jerry swims through the underwater tunnel
- **Antagonist:** There is no traditional antagonist, though Jerry is working against his own fears and physical limitations throughout the story
- **Point of View:** Close third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Pen Names: To demonstrate the difficulty that new authors face in getting their work published, Doris Lessing used the pen name "Jane Somers" while writing two novels midway into her career. The manuscripts were rejected by her normal publisher in the United Kingdom but were later picked up by another

publisher in England.

Rejecting Awards: When offered damehood by the British government in 1992, Lessing declined, stating that it was only an honor “in the name of a non-existent Empire.” She had also rejected an OBE designation in 1977. Decades later, when she was told of her Nobel Prize, Lessing told reporters “I couldn’t care less.”



PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with Jerry and his widowed mother on vacation from their native England to a coastal town in an unnamed foreign country. They seem to have visited the area many times before, as they already have a routine in place of visiting a certain popular beach. On the stroll down to this beach, Jerry notices the “wild and **rocky bay**,” set apart from their usual area and down a separate fork in the path. Partly out of a sense of adventurous curiosity and partly out of a desire to spend time away from his doting mother, Jerry sets off on his own to explore the rocky bay.

Already a strong swimmer, Jerry goes into the water and drifts far enough out that he can see his mother in the distance, just a small dot on the crowded beach. On his way back to the rocks, Jerry sees a group of local older boys who are diving and playing in the water. They motion for him to join them, so he does. Once the boys realize that he can’t speak or understand their native language, though, they ignore him. The biggest boy dives into the water and doesn’t come up for several moments. Jerry is surprised and yells out to the others, but they don’t seem concerned about the other boy’s disappearance. When the boy eventually surfaces in the water on the other side of a large rock, the rest of them follow suit and dive off the rock. Jerry goes in after them but can only see the surface of the rock. When they, too, suddenly reappear on the other side of the rock, Jerry realizes that they must have passed through an underwater **tunnel**.

As the boys prepare to perform the feat again from the diving wall, Jerry is desperate for their approval. He flails about and tries speaking to them in broken French, but they are unimpressed. One by one, the boys dive into the water and seemingly disappear. Jerry counts off the minutes, shocked at the length of time they are underwater. When he gets to one hundred and sixty, the boys reappear on the other side of the rock again and go back to the shore, ignoring him all the while. After Jerry returns to the diving rock, the boys leave to another area on the shore and he cries to himself.

Throughout the following days, Jerry spends all his time contemplating how he can get through the tunnel. He gets his mother to buy him a pair of goggles, he practices holding his breath, both underwater and on land, and learns to use a

boulder to help sink himself into the opening of the tunnel. In his training process, he suffers nose bleeds and experiences nausea, starting to worry that this will happen to him as he is making his way through the long underwater tunnel.

When his mother says they’ll be returning back home in four days, Jerry decides that his opportunities to make his passage are disappearing and decides to make the attempt two days before they leave. When the day comes, Jerry employs all the tricks he has been practicing. When he is finally inside of the tunnel, his lungs start aching, his eyes burn, and he gets excessively lightheaded. A crack in the rock letting in the daylight gives him the illusion that his ordeal is over, but he is only partway through. When he eventually does make it through to the other side and emerges above the surface of the water, he is desperate for air and bleeding from a gash on his head, but feels elated at his accomplishment. Returning home, he sees the group of older boys, but feels no desire to win their approval any longer. He falls fast asleep when he gets home, and awakes when his mother returns. She asks about the gash on his head, but he doesn’t tell her of his courageous feat—only that he can hold his breath for over two minutes. She tells him not to overdo it, but he has no desire to return to the rocky bay again.



CHARACTERS

Jerry – The protagonist of the story, and its only named character, Jerry is a young English boy on vacation with his mother to a coastal town in a foreign country. He is eleven years old and his father is dead. When Jerry’s mother decides to spend another day at their usual beach and he sets off on his own down to the separate **rocky bay**, he is seemingly happy to be alone. When he sees a group of older boys, though, Jerry is eager to impress them with his swimming abilities. When the boys ignore him, diving underwater and swimming through a **tunnel** in a rock, Jerry becomes determined to do the same and spends the remainder of the story preparing to perform this task. By the end of the story, Jerry has proved his abilities to himself, and no longer seeks the approval of the older boys. Thus, his journey “through the tunnel” is symbolic of the journey all children must go through—from dependence on their parents to a degree of independence. In this way, “Through the Tunnel” is a coming-of-age story in miniature, as it portrays Jerry’s courageous feat as a universal one: that of making the passage from childhood to young adulthood.

Mother – Jerry’s mother is a widow on vacation with her son. She spends her vacation days sunbathing and relaxing at a crowded beach while Jerry goes off to explore the **rocky bay**. Midway through the story, Jerry’s mother buys him a pair of goggles, but otherwise doesn’t interact with her son again until the story’s end, when she remarks on various changes in his physical appearance—a gash on his head, his pale skin—as they

eat lunch in their villa. She hesitantly allows her son a greater degree of independence than she has in the past, worried that perhaps she dotes on him too closely, and by the end of the story seems to understand that Jerry has established a healthy sense of independence from her.

Older boys – The only other people in the story are a group of local older boys that Jerry encounters during his first day exploring the **rocky bay**. They are bigger than Jerry, don't speak English, and are very familiar with the features along the shore. Their initial act of swimming through the **tunnel** is what prompts Jerry to undertake the feat himself. By the end of the story, Jerry no longer seeks the affirmation or acceptance of this group of boys—suggesting that self-assurance relies not on proving oneself to others, but rather to oneself.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CHILDHOOD AND MATURITY

“Through the Tunnel” is the story of Jerry, a young boy who is training to make a physical passage through an underwater **tunnel**, but it is also a story about a boy preparing (unbeknown to him) to make the passage from childhood into young adulthood. As the story opens, in the time before Jerry has attempted to swim beneath the rock and through the tunnel, he is still a boy. By the time the story has ended and he has accomplished this grueling task after a long period of preparation, and has made a significant step toward maturity.

Making his way through the tunnel is one way for Jerry to test himself and prove that he is no longer merely a child, but a young adult who can withstand physical pain and emotional strife. When Jerry first observes the group of older boys swimming, Lessing notes that “they were big boys—men, to Jerry.” Jerry fails to impress them with his simple swimming and diving. After watching the boys dive deep into the water and re-emerge on the other side of a massive rock after a long stretch of time, Jerry understands that only by performing this trick himself will he find acceptance among their ranks. After an extensive training period, Jerry makes his final attempt to swim through the tunnel. He experiences a long, head-numbing darkness while making his way through the tunnel, but eventually emerges into the sunlit green water on the other side, a newly self-actualized person. Making his way home afterwards, Jerry “could see the local boys diving and playing half a mile away. He did not want them. He wanted nothing but

to get back home and lie down.” Once he has accomplished the difficult task all on his own, he no longer feels compelled to impress the other boys—suggesting that self-assurance relies not on proving oneself to others, but rather to oneself.

Jerry's growth is marked not only by this physical feat, but also by his increasing physical and emotional distance from his mother. In the beginning of the story, Jerry's existence is defined by his proximity to his mother, but as the story progresses, she essentially disappears from the narrative. The story's opening paragraph sets up Jerry's relationship with his caring, if overly concerned, mother. They are walking along a path that forks in two: one direction goes toward the “crowded beach he knew so well from other years” and the other leads to a “wild and **rocky bay**.” For the remainder of the story, the familiar beach represents Jerry's life under his mother's watch and the rocky bay represents Jerry's desire for independence. Lessing writes that, after stopping for a moment to ponder the rocky bay, “contrition sent [Jerry] running after [his mother]. And yet, as he ran, he looked back over his shoulder at the wild bay; and all morning, as he played on the safe beach, he was thinking of it.” During his first day alone at the bay, he occasionally swims out to check in on his mom to make sure she's still on the beach. Yet once Jerry is absorbed with the activities of the older boys, his thoughts about his mom all but disappear. From that moment onward, he is only focused on improving his swimming abilities.

After seeing that the group of local boys are able to pass through the cave because of their ability to hold their breath underwater for long stretches of time, Jerry is determined to improve his own endurance. Lessing tells readers early on that he is already a good swimmer, but learning how to hold his breath, sink easily to the bottom of the seafloor, and squeeze his body through the tunnel are all necessary skills for Jerry to safely make his way through the tunnel. After having his mother buy him goggles, he begins to explore the underwater tunnel. He uses heavy stones to help him sink down to the opening of the tunnel and then sets to work on improving his breathing. He spends time practicing on land, and is “incredulous and then proud to find he [can] hold his breath without strain for two minutes.” The very thought of this stokes his excitement for “the adventure that was so necessary to him.”

At the opening of the story, the reader sees Jerry as a young boy under the close supervision of his mother. During his training period, he suffers from occasional nosebleeds and dizzy spells. By the story's end, when Jerry ultimately does make it through the tunnel, he emerges from the water unable to see, with his nose gushing blood and his head visibly banged-up. Each of these minor physical ills is a sign of his strenuous journey from innocence to young adulthood. Jerry's struggle to swim through the tunnel sets him on the path to gaining the confidence of a mature young adult. Having proven himself in this way, he loses his desire to impress the other, older boys,

signifying a newfound self-assurance in himself and his own abilities. Confirming the symbolism of the bay as a proving ground for Jerry on a physical as well as deeply personal level, Lessing finally writes that, after this point, “it was no longer of the least importance to go to the bay.”



SOLITUDE VS. COMMUNITY

From the story’s first sentence, when Jerry’s attention is split between going to the crowded beach with his mother or to the **rocky bay** by himself, Lessing creates a sharp contrast between solitude and community. Throughout the story, Jerry seems to be privately weighing the burdens and benefits of being surrounded by others in a community against the difficulties—and, he discovers, the joys—of being alone.

Although Jerry decides to explore the isolated strip of rocky bay without the supervision of his mother, he immediately encounters a group of older boys whom he watches with admiration and awe. He tries to impress them in a variety of ways and gain admission into their tight-knit group of friends. When he first sees the boys swimming, he feels a strong desire to be among them. “To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body,” Lessing writes. He experiences a few fleeting moments of camaraderie swimming with the boys, and although they quickly go off without him, the urge to be included is what initially drives Jerry to train himself to swim into the **tunnel**. When Jerry first sees the group of local boys, it is observed that they are “burned smooth dark brown”. No mention is made of Jerry’s skin tone, but readers know that his mother’s naked arm is “very white in the sun,” so it’s likely that the young English boy’s complexion is similar. At the end of the story, after the end of a vacation spent swimming outside, the mother lays “her hand on [Jerry’s] warm brown shoulder,” subtly suggesting that he has “earned his stripes,” so to speak—becoming more like the daring locals.

Like the various physical injuries that he receives in the process of training to swim through the tunnel, Jerry also experiences a deep sense of loneliness that shades his time alone at the wild bay. When he first floats out to get a look at the crowded beach from his side of the promontory, Jerry searches the crowd for the sight of his mother. “There she was,” Lessing writes, “a speck of yellow under an umbrella that looked like a slice of orange peel. He swam back to shore, relieved at being sure she was there, but all at once very lonely.” Jerry is excited to be all alone, even as he is nervous and perhaps even frightened about the independence that he has obtained in that moment.

Jerry and his mother are from England, and are vacationing in a foreign country. When Jerry encounters the older boys, he is left out of their group not only because of his inability to swim beneath the rock and through the tunnel, but also because of

his lack of understanding their native language. In a panic, Jerry “look[s] up at the group of big brown boys on the rock and shout[s], ‘Bonjour! Merci! Au revoir! Monsieur, monsieur!’” It remains unclear whether the boys are in fact French, but they decide to ignore Jerry’s unimpressive attempts to communicate with them. In this way, Jerry’s time spent at the bay is characterized by his solitude—partially willed as he cautiously distances himself from his mother, partially unwilling as he yearns for inclusion among the locals.

Although he is initially hesitant to explore the rough and unfamiliar landscape of the rocky bay without the guidance and support of his mother, Jerry’s decision to venture forth on his own shapes his eventual transformation over the course of the story. He experiences a succession of rich feelings—*isolation*, *camaraderie*, *struggle*, and *accomplishment*—that he wouldn’t have necessarily felt if he had taken the comfortable route of going to the beach with his mother. In writing Jerry’s narrative in this way, Lessing suggests that true inner development can only happen when a person is able to directly confront their physical or emotional boundaries on their own, without the comforts—or constraints—of community.



NATURE

Aside from a few short passages that are set in the villa, this story takes place entirely outside at the seashore. More than acting as a mere backdrop for human action, though, the natural world has an integral relationship to Jerry’s psychological development within the narrative. The ocean, as Lessing describes it, is both beautiful and unforgiving, a site for tranquility and for risk-taking adventure. Lessing’s language lyrically captures both the scenery of the coast and the potential dangers lurking beneath the surface of the water. As Jerry’s emotions toggle between joy and fear, doubt and confidence, the surrounding environment plays an important role as it reflects his varied emotional states on his path toward a newfound maturity.

The crowded beach and the **rocky bay** represent two approaches to appreciating not just the ocean, but the natural world at large. The beach is a site of leisure and easy relaxation, while the rocky bay—at least as Jerry experiences it over the course of the story—is a place of adventure and exploration. Early in the story, Lessing writes that going to the beach revolves around a “routine of swimming and sunbathing,” which Jerry’s mother seems perfectly happy with, while Jerry has grown somewhat bored with this routine through his many repeated visits to the area. When he first reaches the rocky bay on his first day alone, Jerry uses his time to aimlessly swim and relax. It’s only when the older boys arrive to dive to the bottom of the rock and through the **tunnel** that Jerry begins to see the bay as a site for adventure and pushing the limits of his physical abilities—marking a shift in his own relationship to the natural world from a passive one to one that is much more active and

engaged.

The ocean, as Lessing frequently depicts it throughout the story, is a potentially harsh environment—one that can inflict pain on humans who don't take its threat seriously. As he begins to train for his swim through the tunnel, the fear and uncertainty that Jerry experiences are mirrored in the variety of physical dangers lurking just beneath the surface of the water. In his earliest stages of acquainting himself with the rock and trying to find the tunnel, Jerry experiences the immensity of the obstacle before him: "he could see nothing through the stinging salt water but the blank rock," Lessing writes. It takes some experimenting for him to figure out that he needs to use a heavy rock to sink to the opening of the tunnel and then swim through it. As he makes his first attempt at entering the tunnel, he encounters darkness and a further sense of confusion when something "soft and clammy" touches his mouth, and he sees "a dark frond moving against the grayish rock;" panic fills him, as he thinks "of octopuses, of clinging weed." This sensation of panic and confusion accompanies him on his successful swim through the tunnel, as well; he feels the slimy ceiling of the tunnel and again imagines an octopus waiting for him inside. In this way, the natural environment reflects Jerry's fearful and vulnerable state of mind.

Throughout the story, Lessing describes the ocean in vivid poetic language that emphasizes the beauty of the environment surrounding Jerry's adventures and also conveys the sense of freedom that he gradually gains through his exploration of the rocky bay. Lessing's lyricism helps convey to the reader that Jerry's process of self-discovery is not only concerned with physical challenges and emotional turmoil, but also with his increasing awareness of the natural world outside of himself. When Jerry first goes into the water with his new goggles, Lessing helps readers see through his eyes with her crisp descriptive writing: "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." Moments like this help the reader inhabit Jerry's perspective as it widens to encompass more of the world around him. Similarly, when Lessing writes of the small fish populating the water—ones that might go unnoticed by characters in other stories—she shows Jerry completely immersed in a new and alien environment in a moment of nearly ecstatic observation: "Fish again—myriads of minute fish, the length of his fingernail—were drifting through the water, and in a moment he could feel the innumerable tiny touches of them against his limbs. It was like swimming in flaked silver." If his life before setting out to swim the tunnel was relatively closed under his mother's supervision, once Jerry sets out on his own at the rocky bay, he is able to expand his understanding of the natural environment and his own position within it.

Through her stylistic choices, Lessing makes the complex exterior world of the ocean mirror Jerry's inner developments

through the story. Just as the setting can be tranquil and picturesque one moment, then harsh and somewhat violent the next, Jerry goes through a full range of corresponding emotions as he moves through the environment. This gives readers the opportunity to experience both the challenges and the rewards of his task, as Jerry struggles to venture through the darkness of the narrow tunnel and ultimately make it out into bright, open ocean on the other side with an ecstatic sense of accomplishment. Rather than acting as a mere backdrop for Jerry's activities, the natural world both influences and reflects his psychological maturation through the arc of the story.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE TUNNEL

Along the **rocky bay** where Jerry goes to swim without his mother's supervision, there is a large rock sticking out of the water. Jerry doesn't make notice of this feature until he is swimming with the group of older boys and watches them dive underwater and swim through a tunnel at the bottom of the rock. These boys, who are bigger and more confident than Jerry, perform this impressive feat with ease. Jerry quickly becomes determined to swim through the tunnel, too. When the story opens, Jerry is still a young boy under the close guidance of his mother, but after he notices the boys perform this stunt, he embarks on a journey toward his own independence and maturity. The act of training to swim through the tunnel is an intense emotional and physical struggle for Jerry, so when he finally does make it through by the end of the story, he has made a new step toward the independence of adulthood. In this way, the tunnel is symbolic of the passage from childhood into young adulthood, dependence into independence, and weakness into strength.



THE ROCKY BAY

From the very first sentence of the story, Jerry is presented with two separate paths, both literal and figurative: one leading to the crowded beach that he frequently visits with his mother and another leading to a rocky bay that seems much more open and wild than his usual routine. This forking of paths represents the split that Jerry experiences between childhood as he's known it and a more independent maturity apart from his mother. When Jerry first visits the bay, he encounters the group of older boys who reveal that they can swim through an underwater **tunnel**, which in turn gives him the incentive to perform this feat for himself. All this takes place in the rocky bay, which thus comes to represent the emotional

proving ground on which young people face the challenges that teach them self-sufficiency and self-confidence. By the end of the story, Jerry has lost his desire to return to the rocky bay, suggesting that he has proven himself *to himself*, and thus no longer seeks the approval of the older boys or the once-unfamiliar thrills of the rocky bay.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Stories* published in 1980.

Through the Tunnel Quotes

Going to the shore on the first morning of the vacation, the young English boy stopped at a turning of the path and looked down at a wild and rocky bay and then over to the crowded beach he knew so well from other years.

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

At the very opening of the story, and the beginning of his annual vacation with his mother, the two potential paths for Jerry's psychological development are set out before him. On one path, he can choose to go to the crowded beach with his doting mother, where familiar routines of sunbathing and swimming await him. On the other path, he can choose to embark on an adventure by himself at the "wild and rocky bay," an area which is altogether unknown to him. Should he choose to follow his mother to the usual beach, his would remain in stagnant boyhood, whereas if he chooses to set out on his own, he could gain a new sense of independence—a badge of young adulthood.

She was thinking, Of course he's old enough to be safe without me. Have I been keeping him too close? He mustn't feel he ought to be with me. I must be careful.

Related Characters: Mother, Jerry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

In this rare glimpse into the thought process of Jerry's mother, who is largely out of view in this story, the constant push and pull that she feels as a widowed single parent is fully evident here. She wants to encourage Jerry, her only son, to face the unfamiliar world and explore what it might have to offer him. Yet, even more strongly, she wants to keep him safe from the various threats out in the world. Ultimately, within the span of these few short interior sentences, she recognizes that she should avoid being overprotective, as it might harm her son in the long run.

He ran straight into the water and began swimming. He was a good swimmer. He went out fast over the gleaming sand, over a middle region where rocks lay like discolored monsters under the surface, and then he was in the real sea—a warm sea where irregular cold currents from the deep water shocked his limbs.

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

When he first arrives at the rocky bay, Jerry enters the water and is able to quickly survey the area, establishing both the rugged beauty and the slight hint of danger surrounding him. There is "gleaming sand" but there are also rocks that resemble "discolored monsters." The water is both warm and bracingly cold at once. Like the other descriptions of the ocean landscape in this story, there is a tension between the ocean as a place for leisure and as a possibly threatening or dangerous place. Ultimately, as the story develops, it proves to be both at once, but Jerry has yet to learn this when he takes his first swim at the bay.

When he was so far out that he could look back not only on the little bay but past the promontory that was between it and the big beach, he floated on the buoyant surface and looked for his mother. There she was, a speck of yellow under an umbrella that looked like a slice of orange peel. He swam back to shore, relieved at being sure she was there, but all at once very lonely.

Related Characters: Mother, Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Though he gets his first real taste of independence on his first day of swimming at the rocky bay, Jerry is still concerned with the whereabouts of his mother. As a widowed single mother and an only child, they have a kind of symbiotic worrying relationship, where they are both continually thinking about the other's well-being. This is emphasized even further when Jerry floats far out in the water between the rocky bay and the big beach, where he can see both his mother in a familiar environment and the as-yet-unexplored, unknown landscape that awaits him. This will be his final moment of being torn between these two poles before he fully embarks on the adventure of learning how to swim through the tunnel.

The English boy swam toward them but kept his distance at a stone's throw. They were of that coast; all of them were burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand. To be with them, of them, was a craving that filled his whole body.

Related Characters: Older boys, Jerry

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

When Jerry first sees the local older boys, he is temporarily referred to not by his name but by his nationality. He becomes "the English boy," while the boys are described as

being "of that coast"—native to the region. This sets up an important distinction: Jerry and his mother are foreign tourists, mere visitors to this particular seaside, in contrast to the local boys whom Jerry admires. The boys are different from Jerry in many respects. They are larger than him, older than him, they speak a different language, come from a different culture, and are familiar with the landscape. Though no specific mention of race or ethnicity is made in the story, we know that Jerry's mother is pale and that the boys are "burned smooth dark brown"—yet another way that Jerry doesn't quite belong with them, even though he desperately wants to be a part of their group. This sense of not belonging is part of what drives Jerry to try swimming through the tunnel, as he hopes it will help him gain acceptance and a sense of fellowship with the other boys.

Soon the biggest of the boys poised himself, shot down into the water, and did not come up. The others stood about, watching. Jerry, after waiting for the sleek brown head to appear, let out a yell of warning; they looked at him idly and turned their eyes back toward the water. After a long time, the boy came up on the other side of a big dark rock, letting the air out of his lungs in a sputtering gasp and a shout of triumph.

Related Characters: Older boys, Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

When Jerry first witnesses the oldest local boy performing the feat of diving deep into the water and then swimming through the tunnel in the rock, it is a complete shock to him. As he can't see any opening in the rock, he assumes the worst and screams out to the other boys, who are clearly accustomed to this activity. When the boy re-emerges above the water, but on the other side of the rock, it represents Jerry's initiation into this grueling physical endeavor. When he watches all of the boys swim through the tunnel before ignoring him entirely, Jerry begins to set himself the goal of being able to accomplish the same feat.

Under him, six or seven feet down, was a floor of perfectly clean, shining white sand, rippled firm and hard by the tides. Two grayish shapes steered there, like long, rounded pieces of wood or slate. They were fish. He saw them nose toward each other, poise motionless, make a dart forward, swerve off, and come around again. It was like a water dance.

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

After Jerry makes his mother buy him a pair of goggles so that he can explore the tunnel, he notices the world beneath the surface of the water for the first time. He observes the movements of the fish and the layout of the topography with great clarity. This is his initiation into the underwater world, about which he will become more knowledgeable as he explores the tunnel with intensity throughout the rest of the story. As he watches the fish and their “water dance,” the freedom of their movements is matched with the freedom he feels in his newfound sense of independence.

He got his head in, found his shoulders jammed, moved them in sidewise, and was inside as far as his wrist. He could see nothing ahead. Something soft and clammy touched his mouth; he saw a dark frond moving against the grayish rock, and panic filled him. He thought of octopuses, of clinging weed.

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

During his first attempt to make his way through the tunnel—a task that he may have assumed to be relatively easy judging by how effortlessly it was performed by the local boys—Jerry finds it to be a surprisingly scary environment. Not only is it completely dark, it is also too narrow for his body, and the strange variety of textures bring to mind thoughts of sinister octopuses and strangling

weeds. At this moment, Jerry understands that it will take some preparation and training, both mental and physical, before he can swim through the tunnel as comfortably as the locals were able to before. His thoughts of octopuses and “clinging weeds” reflect his fears, insecurities, and uncertainties as he attempts to prove himself capable of such a difficult feat.

Again his nose bled at night, and his mother insisted on his coming with her the next day. It was a torment to him to waste a day of his careful self-training, but he stayed with her on that other beach, which now seemed a place for small children, a place where his mother might lie safe in the sun. It was not his beach.

Related Characters: Mother, Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

After days of rigorous training, Jerry is finally able to hold his breath for longer than he could before, yet this is unfortunately coupled with increasingly bad nosebleeds and dizzy spells. When his mother insists that Jerry join her at the crowded beach instead of continuing his efforts at the rocky bay, he seems to instantly revert to an earlier, more child-like state. At the rocky bay, Jerry feels a sense of independence and nascent maturity, but at the beach, everything feels too safe and family-oriented. Though he may look like he belongs with the children at the beach, Jerry knows that he should be at the wild and untamed environment of the bay. Like all processes of “loss of innocence,” this one proves to be irreversible once underway.

He was without light, and the water seemed to press upon him with the weight of rock. Seventy-one, seventy-two. There was no strain on his lungs. He felt like an inflated balloon, his lungs were so light and easy, but his head was pulsing.

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

When Jerry finally makes the decision to swim through the tunnel, it is initially easier than he thought it would be. As he has been training for days and can hold his breath for two full minutes, he feels pleased at how his lungs aren't straining at all and how smoothly he can navigate his body through the cramped space. Yet as Jerry counts the seconds of his held breath, the looming sense of danger begins to present itself again. His general confidence in his efforts begins to unwind. Shortly thereafter, Jerry sees a crack in the rock, which tricks him into thinking he's finished, though he is only partway through the tunnel and genuine panic begins to set in. The difficulty of the journey through the tunnel is symbolic of the difficulty of making passage from childhood into young adulthood.

●● He could see nothing but a red-veined, clotted dark. His eyes must have burst, he thought; they were full of blood. He tore off his goggles and a gout of blood went into the sea. His nose was bleeding, and the blood had filled the goggles.

48

Related Characters: Jerry

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

By the time Jerry makes it through the other side of the tunnel, he has completely exhausted his abilities, both physically and psychologically. His lungs are burning, his

head is throbbing, and once he finally surfaces he feels like he may have been blinded by his arduous task. When Jerry removes his goggles, unable to see, he wonders whether his eyes burst during his swim, but then realizes that it's just the blood from a cut on his head that had filled the goggles. Just as the goggles represented the possibility of clear vision before he began training to swim through the tunnel, by the time he has completed his rite of passage, the goggles have the opposite function—trapping blood and obscuring his vision. Perhaps the physical tolls associated with successfully completing such a challenging feat of machismo are not, ultimately, worth the payoff.

●● After a time, his heart quieted, his eyes cleared, and he sat up. He could see the local boys diving and playing half a mile away. He did not want them. He wanted nothing but to get back home and lie down.

Related Characters: Older boys, Jerry

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After he fully recovers from his strenuous swim through the tunnel, Jerry spots the local boys who had been the inspiration for him to take on this task in the first place. Though he once so desperately wanted to be a part of their group—making all kinds of efforts to earn their respect—when he actually does complete the one feat that may have impressed them, he finds that he no longer cares about proving himself to them, having already proven himself *to himself*. As a sign of his growing maturity, he cares more about taking care of his own needs than about trying to gain accolades from others. He is satisfied with what he has achieved and has no need for outside approval anymore.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THROUGH THE TUNNEL

The story begins with Jerry and his mother on vacation from their native England to a coastal town in an unnamed foreign country. It is clear that they have visited the area many times before, as they already have a routine in place of visiting a certain popular beach. On the stroll down to this beach, Jerry notices the “wild and **rocky bay**” which is set apart from their usual area, down a separate fork in the path. Jerry’s mother is walking in front of him, carrying a striped bag in one hand and letting the other “white naked arm” swing at her side.

Jerry eyes move from his mother’s white arm, then to the **rocky bay**, then back to his mother. Noticing that he hasn’t stayed directly behind her on their stroll down the path, Jerry’s mother turns around and asks if he’d rather not go with her to their usual sunbathing beach. Sensing her displeasure at the thought that he may not want to join her, Jerry’s feeling of contrition keeps him alongside his mother as they go to the safe beach. The whole time that he plays on the safe beach that day, though, Jerry thinks about the wild and rocky bay.

The next day, Jerry’s mother, whose white arm has noticeably reddened since the day before, asks outright if he’s tired of their normal beach routine. At first Jerry says that he isn’t but as they continue to walk toward the beach he announces that he wants to check out the **rocky bay**. Jerry’s mother, with some hesitancy at the thought that her son would spend the afternoon alone at a “wild-looking place” and then some worry that she is being too overbearing with her son, agrees that Jerry can go explore on his own. She tells him to join her at the big beach once he tires of the rocky bay.

A sense of guilt at the idea that his mother will be all alone at the beach almost forces Jerry to follow her again. Readers then learn that Jerry is an only child and that his mother is a widow. She goes on to the beach, concerned as always about Jerry’s well-being, and he descends to the **rocky bay** once he sees that his mother makes it down the path to the beach.

From the opening sentence, there are two initial thematic splits in the story: one between Jerry and his mother, another between the overcrowded beach and the rocky bay. As they walk to the beach and Jerry sees the rocky bay, there is both a physical and metaphorical fork in the path: the beach is tame and familiar, while the rocky bay is rugged and unknown.



As Jerry deliberates between following his mother’s arm, still bright white from a lack of exposure to the sun, and the rocky bay, he is also contemplating whether to stay with his comfortable routines or explore a new territory. As she wants to make her son happy but also protect him, Jerry’s mother is torn between letting him decide what he wants to do and wanting to keep him close at all times. An obedient son, Jerry doesn’t want to upset his mother, so he fights his growing curiosity and follows her to the beach. Yet the sight of the wild and rocky bay was so intriguing that he can’t stop thinking about what it might be like to swim and play there.



After only one day of sunbathing, Jerry’s mother’s arm has noticeably reddened, which demonstrates how foreign the climate and geography are for these British tourists. Jerry is tempted again on this second day to follow his mother out of a guilty sense of duty but ultimately can’t contain his desire to explore. His mother again wants to protect him from the potential threats of the “wild-looking place” but also wants to grant him some degree of independence as he gets older. As a kind of compromise for herself, telling him to come back to the sunbathing beach when he is done with the rocky bay is a way of satisfying both of her conflicting instincts.



As an only child, Jerry feels some responsibility for looking after his widowed mother, just as she feels the need to keep him safe at all times. This need to care for his mother’s well-being is shown when he doesn’t immediately run down to explore on his own, but watches after her first.



Already a strong swimmer, Jerry goes directly into the water of the **rocky bay** and drifts far enough out that he can see his mother in the distance, just a small dot on the crowded beach. On his way back to the rocks, Jerry sees a group of local older boys who are diving and playing in the water. They motion for him to join them, so he does. Once the boys realize that he can't speak or understand their native language, though, they ignore him.

Excited to explore on his own, but still feeling the need to make sure that his mother is doing well without him nearby, Jerry is compelled to check in on her from a distance. The local older boys at the rocky bay show that what seemed wild to him at first is familiar to the locals. Jerry badly wants to be a part of their group, and can seemingly swim as well as they can, yet his inability to speak their language makes him not only inferior to them in age and stature, but in ability. Nevertheless, the boys represent an attainable form of maturity for Jerry, even if they want nothing to do with him.



The biggest boy dives into the water and doesn't come up. Jerry is surprised and yells out to the others, who don't seem concerned about the other boy's disappearance. When he comes out of the water on the other side of a large rock, the rest of them follow the same routine and dive down. Jerry goes in after them but can only see the surface of the rock. When they suddenly reappear on the other side, Jerry realizes that they must have passed through an underwater **tunnel**.

The biggest boy, and the apparent leader of the group, is the first to attempt the daring feat of swimming through the underwater tunnel, which Jerry can't see. Shocked by this novel trick, and still desperate to be accepted into their group, he dives after them. Yet, as he is unsure of what they are doing, he doesn't know where to swim and his body is unaccustomed to this new physical challenge. Unable to communicate with the boys, he will have to teach himself if he hopes to be able to do as they do.



As the older boys prepare to perform the feat again from the diving rock, Jerry is desperate for their approval. He flails about and tries speaking to them in broken French, but they are unimpressed. One by one, the boys dive into the water and seemingly disappear. Jerry counts off the minutes, shocked at the length of time they are underwater. When he gets to one hundred and sixty, the boys reappear on the other side of the rock again and go back to the shore, ignoring him all the while. After Jerry returns to the diving rock, the boys leave to another area on the shore and he cries to himself.

As a last effort at earning the older boys' respect, Jerry frantically moves about to get a laugh from them and then, not knowing their native language, tries speaking a few phrases in French. Choosing to ignore him altogether instead, they escape from his childish behavior by diving through the tunnel again, which they know he is unable to do. Paying closer attention this time, he counts the seconds they are underwater and is surprised at their advanced skill at holding breath. With this, Jerry has been definitively rejected from their small community, by dint of a gap in physical ability as well as their disdain for him as an outsider.



Jerry gets his mother to buy him a pair of goggles, determined to swim through the **tunnel** on his own. After searching around underwater and unable to see the opening of the tunnel, Jerry is eventually able to feel it far beneath him with just his feet. To more easily reach the hole again, Jerry grabs a large stone to help sink himself deep to the sea floor. He is finally able to see the tunnel directly.

Though he understands that he may never befriend the group of boys, Jerry still wants to figure out the mystery of swimming through this tunnel. As an outsider to the area, he has to use goggles to see where the boys already know to swim, and a heavy rock to reach a depth they have no trouble diving to. Using these tools, he begins to slowly teach himself how to approximate what the boys did.



After making note of its dimensions, Jerry drops his rock and tries to wedge himself into the hole but has some difficulty fitting himself inside, getting in only as far as his wrists. The space is pitch black. He feels a piece of seaweed drift against his face and imagines an octopus waiting for him in the dark of the tunnel.

After discovering the **tunnel** and struggling to fit inside its opening, Jerry goes back to the shore and stares at the rock, thinking about how he can make his way through it without any guidance. He decides that learning how to control his breath will be the only way to accomplish the task. Jerry takes another large stone and sinks to the bottom of the water, holding his breath for as long as he possibly can. He counts to fifty-two and floats back to the surface.

Jerry returns to the villa, where he finds his mother eating her dinner. That night, Jerry dreams of the tunnel and returns to it immediately the next morning. He continues his process of training himself to hold his breath underwater. That night Jerry gets his first nosebleed and dizzy spell. His mother tells him not to physically overdo it during his time at the bay.

Over the following few days, Jerry continues his routine of underwater training and also continues to get nosebleeds at night. Worried about his well-being, his mother insists that she join him at the crowded beach. Following her orders, Jerry accompanies his mother but realizes that the old beach is no longer suitable to his needs and desires. He misses the **rocky bay** and his daily training regimen to get through the **tunnel**.

Without asking for permission, the next day Jerry runs off to the **rocky bay** by himself. While he sets off on his routine, Jerry is surprised that he can hold his breath for ten whole seconds longer than his previous attempts. He thinks he could probably make his way through the **tunnel** at this point, but decides to wait. Instead, Jerry sits at the ocean floor and studies every aspect of the tunnel. At the villa, he times his breath and realizes that he can hold it for two full minutes.

In this early stage of exploring both the tunnel and his newfound freedom, Jerry still has a rather childish imagination, as when he assumes an underwater plant could be a threatening octopus. Pushing through these fears, though, Jerry still wants nothing more than to accomplish exactly what the older boys could perform with ease.



Unable to physically fit into the hole yet, Jerry pieces together what he'll need to do if he wants to safely swim into the unknown darkness of the tunnel. Holding his breath for long periods of time, he determines, is necessary for him to navigate this natural environment. Thus, growth and learning are integral pieces of the process of maturation.



After only a day of not being under his mother's close care, Jerry is now significantly less concerned with being an obedient son. He slowly becomes obsessed with his new task of getting through the tunnel. Jerry's mother notices his nosebleeds but doesn't know what he is doing when he is at the rocky bay, highlighting that part of the process of maturation, for Jerry, is this growing distance between mother and child.



As he continues to improve his abilities to hold his breath, Jerry's health begins to deteriorate, which partly justifies his mother's earlier worries about him being alone. Though he had a small taste of independence and freedom during his previous days at the rocky bay, Jerry quickly reverts to a more child-like mode when his mother makes him go to the overcrowded beach. While there, he finally understands that he has outgrown the dotting care of his mother and has grown to have more autonomy than ever before.



Eager to regain what he lost the day before (i.e., both his sense of autonomy and his physical training regimen), Jerry re-establishes his base at the rocky bay. His increased ability to hold his breath has proved that there is something tangible to be earned from his otherwise hard-to-describe feeling of growing independence. By studiously surveying the details of the tunnel, Jerry is making a place that was once quite foreign to him into one that is quite familiar.



One morning, Jerry's mother tells him that they will be leaving to go back home in four days. This makes Jerry realize that he has to make his swim through the **tunnel** soon. Two days before they are set to leave, Jerry holds his breath for longer than ever before and also gets one of his worst nose bleeds. After recovering, Jerry wonders if he should wait until the next summer to try swimming through the tunnel. Instead, in a quick turn, he spontaneously decides that he needs to swim right then.

Nervous about his decision, Jerry grabs a stone, holds his breath and plunges down to the **tunnel**. He squeezes his body into the opening and slowly makes his way through. In the process of swimming through the tunnel, he bumps his head against the ceiling of the tunnel, but feels confident about his breathing. He again imagines a threatening octopus lurking in the dark. Jerry sees a light and feels relieved that he has accomplished his goal, but is quickly dismayed when he realizes that it's only a crack in the outer rock.

After reaching the crack and seeing the darkness still ahead of him in the **tunnel**, Jerry passes the two-minute mark of holding his breath. Just as he begins to feel like he might lose consciousness and die in the tunnel, Jerry sees the bright green light of the open ocean and scrambles to the surface of the water, gasping for air as he emerges. He climbs onto the shore, unable to see anything, and tears off his goggles, thinking that he might be blind. His nose is bleeding heavily, and the blood fills up his goggles.

Once he fully regains his ability to see and catches his breath, Jerry sees the group of local older boys playing down the shore, but he is no longer concerned with them. He only wants to go back to the villa and rest.

Until the point when his mother set an end-date to their vacation, all of Jerry's physical accomplishments were somewhat abstract. Once there is a determined end in sight, though, he realizes that he needs to finally put into practice all that he had been training for thus far. He loses confidence again when he gets his worst nosebleed, but is still determined to reach his goal.



As determined as he is to fulfill his self-determined rite of passage of swimming through the tunnel, Jerry's nervousness and shaky confidence make him seem to revert, at least partially, to his earlier child-like state of fear when he first began exploring the tunnel. Just as he imagined an octopus in that earlier episode, he imagines it again here. As he feels close to the tunnel's end, he regains his confidence, only to lose it yet again when he realizes that he's only partway through the tunnel. In this way, the natural world and its many surprises mirror Jerry's internal state with its many ups and downs.



Though Jerry ultimately achieves his goal of swimming through the tunnel, which had been in his sights for several days, he also physically suffers a great deal in the process. This pain is perhaps the ultimate mark of Jerry's new, hard-won endurance and general sense of confidence, as though the only way he can truly earn his maturity is through these physical setbacks.



By finally completing his rite of passage and emerging into a newfound sense of maturity, Jerry loses the desire to compare himself to the group of older boys. What began as a campaign to prove himself to others ends as an affirmation of the importance of proving oneself to oneself, first and foremost.



Jerry reaches the villa before his mother returns from her daily trip to the beach. He immediately falls asleep. He wakes up when he hears his mother walking up to the front door and quickly washes the blood and tears from his face. Jerry's mother remarks that he has a gash on his head and that his face has paled, but he doesn't tell her about his adventure through the **tunnel**—only that he can hold his breath for up to three minutes. She tells him again not to overdo it, but it doesn't matter because Jerry is no longer interested in going to the **rocky bay**.

Unaware of what Jerry had been doing out of her sight at the rocky bay, his mother is only able to notice the injuries that he sustained while swimming through the tunnel. Jerry's maturity, confidence and autonomy are all concealed away from her view, accessible only to Jerry himself. Jerry's loss of interest in visiting the bay shows that the obstacle it represented for him no longer looms so large in his mind, having proven himself capable of rising to a challenge through determination, perseverance, and hard work.





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