



The Grandmothers

By Doris Lessing
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Introduction

With the four short novels in this collection, Doris Lessing once again proves that she is unrivalled in her ability to capture the truth of the human condition.

The Grandmothers

Two women, close friends, fall in love with each other's teenage sons, and these passions last for years, until the women end them, in their respectable old age.

Victoria and the Staveney's

A poor black girl has a baby with the son of a liberal middle-class family and finds that her little girl is slowly being absorbed into a world of white privilege and becoming estranged from her.

The Reason for It

Certain to appeal to fans of *Shikasta* and *Memoirs of a Survivor*, it describes the birth, growth, and decline of a culture long ago, but with many modern echoes.

A Love Child

A soldier in World War II, during the dangerous voyage to India around the Cape, falls in love on shore leave and remains convinced that a love child resulted from the wartime romance.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the title novel -- **The Grandmothers** -- an adult Tom briefly refers to his life with his mother, her closest friend, and his closest friend in these terms: "Down there, I'm not free." Discuss the idea of personal freedom in the novel -- who is free to do what, and what choices are the characters "free" to make?
2. The tone in the title novel is noticeably cool and analytical. Why do you think Lessing chooses to tell the story in this way?
3. For a novel so focused on the personal, there is great care given to describing the physical worlds of these people. Discuss the importance of geographical elements in the story: the rough sea and the calm bay, the orderly, "perfect" land around it. The arid climate to which Harold and briefly Tom moves, and the brush thorns that litter the ground outside of the desert town.
4. In **Victoria and the Staveney's**, the author chooses to withhold the fact that Victoria is black until the fourth page (after much physical description). Why do you feel she delays this revelation?
5. One is tempted to level scorn on the Staveney's, and yet Lessing also shows them to be oddly touching, moral even. What are we meant to think about them? Do you find your response is of a personal, emotional nature or more removed? Furthermore, who is "good" in the family?
6. Does the action of Victoria and the Staveney's feel determined, or proscribed? If this is social commentary, then what are we taught; if this is simply the hand of the author, what does this reveal about her own social vision?
7. Victoria, Thomas and Edward are obviously products of their respective environments. How are they the results of their parentage? Does this parentage play into the above-mentioned notion of determination or fate?
8. What parallels do you see between the world of **The Reason for It** and our own?
9. The protagonist of **A Love Child**, James, goes through several transformations, the first, from England to South Africa; the second, from Africa to India. What precipitates these changes? Does James feel like the same person with Daphne as he was with Donald back in England? Is this change believable to you? What is Lessing trying to say about one's mutability, particularly as a result of one's caring and compassion for others?
10. What themes connect these novels?

About the Author

Doris Lessing is one of the most celebrated and distinguished writers of the second half of the twentieth century. Her most recent books include the novels **Ben, in the World** and **The Sweetest Dream**, and two volumes of autobiographies, **Under My Skin** and **Walking in the Shade**. A Companion of Honour and a Companion of Literature, she was awarded in 2001 the David Cohen Memorial Prize for British Literature and Spain's Prince of Asturias Prize. She lives in north London.