***Through The Tunnel***

The story begins with [**Jerry**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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.

Summary and Analysis Part by Part

***Summary Part 1:***

The story begins with [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) and his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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.

***Analysis Part 1:***

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.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) eyes move from his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother)’s white arm, then to the [rocky bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 2:***

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.

***Summary Part 3:***

The next day, [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry)’s [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 3:***

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.

***Summary Part 4:***

A sense of guilt at the idea that his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother) will be all alone at the beach almost forces [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay) once he sees that his mother makes it down the path to the beach.

***Analysis Part 4:***

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.

***Summary Part 5:***

Already a strong swimmer, [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) goes directly into the water of the [rocky bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay) and drifts far enough out that he can see his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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.

***Analysis Part 5:***

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.

***Summary Part 6:***

The biggest boy dives into the water and doesn’t come up. [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-tunnel).

***Analysis Part 6:***

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.

***Summary Part 7:***

As the [older boys](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/older-boys) prepare to perform the feat again from the diving rock, [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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.

***Analysis Part 7:***

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.

***Summary Part 8:***

[Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) gets [his mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother) to buy him a pair of goggles,  determined to swim through the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 8:***

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.

***Summary Part 9:***

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.

***Analysis Part 9:***

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.

***Summary Part 10:***

After discovering the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 11:***

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.

***Summary Part 12:***

Jerry returns to the villa, where he finds his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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.

***Analysis Part 13:***

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.

***Summary Part 14:***

Over the following few days, [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) continues his routine of underwater training and also continues to get nosebleeds at night. Worried about his well-being, his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay) and his daily training regimen to get through the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-tunnel).

***Analysis part 14:***

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 doting care of his mother and has grown to have more autonomy than ever before.

***Summary Part 15:***

Without asking for permission, the next day [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) runs off to the [rocky bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 16:***

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.

***Summary Part 17:***

One morning, [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry)’s [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 17:***

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.

***Summary Part 18:***

Nervous about his decision, Jerry grabs a stone, holds his breath and plunges down to the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 18:***

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.

***Summary Part 19:***

After reaching the crack and seeing the darkness still ahead of him in the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

***Analysis Part 19:***

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.

***Summary Part 20:***

Once he fully regains his ability to see and catches his breath, Jerry sees the group of local [older boys](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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.

***Analysis part 20:***

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.

***Summary Part 21:***

[Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry) reaches the villa before his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay).

***Analysis Part 21:***

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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| **Childhood and MaturityTheme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/themes/solitude-vs-community)**  [Solitude vs. Community](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/themes/solitude-vs-community) |

“Through the Tunnel” is the story of [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry), a young boy who is training to make a physical passage through an underwater [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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.”

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| **Solitude vs. CommunityTheme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/themes/nature)**  [Nature](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/themes/nature) |

From the story’s first sentence, when [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/jerry)’s attention is split between going to the crowded beach with his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother) or to the [rocky bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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 unwilled 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.

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| **NatureTheme Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/quotes)**  [Quotes](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/quotes) |

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/older-boys) arrive to dive to the bottom of the rock and through the [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

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| **JerryCharacter Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother)**  [Mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/mother) |

The protagonist of the story, and its only named character, Jerry is a young English boy on vacation with his [mother](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay), he is seemingly happy to be alone. When he sees a group of [older boys](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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.

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| **MotherCharacter Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/older-boys)**  [Older boys](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/older-boys) |

[Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

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| **Older boysCharacter Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols)**  [Symbols](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols) |

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/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.

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| **The TunnelSymbol Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay)**  [The Rocky Bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay) |

Along the [rocky bay](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-rocky-bay) where [Jerry](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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.

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| **The Rocky BaySymbol Analysis** | **[Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/chart-board-visualization)**  [Theme Wheel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/chart-board-visualization) |

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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/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](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/characters/older-boys) who reveal that they can swim through an underwater [tunnel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/through-the-tunnel/symbols/the-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.

An 11-year-old British boy named [Jerry](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-tunnel/study-guide/character-list#jerry) and his mother are on vacation at an unidentified foreign beach. Jerry’s mother is a widow and she is now struggling to provide both the dependence that a boy needs and the independence that she recognizes is going to become ever more important in his development. This declaration of independence takes the form of Jerry deciding to explore a rocky area of the beach while his mother goes to the “safe” beach.

While swimming among the rocks, Jerry sees a bunch of older brown-skinned boys speaking in a foreign language who remove their clothes and dive into the water from the rocks. As Jerry watches with interest, the boys each disappear beneath the surface, but do rise again as expected. Jerry begins to count, waiting for the inevitable bobbing head to break through the water that never comes. He begins to panic as they boys remain underwater without resurfacing for a dangerously prolonged period. Then, sudden and to his relief, they reappear as if by magic on the other side of the barrier. His dive into the water to figure out the trick only results in a seeing a black wall of rock. Jerry goes from being impressed at their feat to shame at himself for his own failure. After childishly trying and failing to get their attention, his shame turns to anger and he lashes out at them but they simply continue ignoring him.

Determine to discover and replicate their feat, Jerry shows up at the rocky beach the next day outfitted with a pair of goggles he talked him mom into buying to assist in his underwater exploration. The process of discovery is slow and painful as he realizes he does not possess the lung capacity to make it through the tunnel. Weighing himself with rocks, he sinks to the surface to practice holding his breath as his desire to make it through the tunnel transforms from desire to compulsion.

Once his mother announces they will be leaving in another four days, he becomes possessed with swimming through the tunnel. Fear overcomes him and he makes a resolution that he will have to wait another year to do it, but then rejects that waiting period and commits fully to doing the deed here and now.

The passage is psychologically and physically exhausting, bring on both imagined fears and actual bodily damage. Still, he pushes through and makes it through the tunnel. The sight of the bigger boys in the distance means nothing following his triumph and having fulfilled the need and satisfied the craving, he is ready to return to his mother and then back home. She expresses concern over his haggard appearance, but extends him the independence he needs by resting within the comfort of her knowledge that he can swim like a fish.

## Jerry

Jerry is 11 years-old, British, and highly dependent upon his protective mother. A vacation trip to the beach in an unnamed foreign country and a chance encounter with some older boys ignites a desire to test the limits of his mother’s protectiveness and his own sense of dependence. Immaturity ironically leads Jerry through a rite of passage that leads to maturity and the first stage of independence.

## Jerry's Mom

Notably, Jerry’s mom is a widow struggling to raise her young son to manhood without the benefit of masculine guidance. Keenly aware of both her own overprotectiveness and her son’s need to become independent leads to anxiety over a fear of failure that overcompensating for one will lead to under-compensating the other. As a result, the relationship between mother and son is strangely out-of-sync; a combination of intimacy and distance.

## The Big Boys

The bigger boys that motivate Jerry to impress them and ultimately cause him to embark up his rite of passage through the tunnel are indistinguishable, existing only as group. They are older, physically more developed, with dark brown and speak in a language Jerry cannot understand.

## Rite of Passage

A rite of passage is a term used to describe what might be termed a ceremonial ritual marking the passage from one state to another. Typically, in literature such rituals are not recognized through formal ceremonies and instead are presented as normal—if not necessarily commonplace—activities. The passage through the underground tunnel attempted by [Jerry](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-tunnel/study-guide/character-list#jerry) is one such example. Jerry’s successful completion of this task becomes a symbolic ritual not unlike something like a Jewish Bar Mitzvah or an 18th birthday party. It represents his passage from childhood dependence upon his mother into the first stages of adolescence and the beginning of a greater independence from parent supervision and authority.

## Racial Equality

Context is essential for understanding how this theme operates here. The author grew up in racial segregated Africa where blacks are seen as inherent racially inferior as part of a complex social system instituted by a history of British colonialism. Jerry is a young British lad and the swimmers who already know the secret passage through the tunnel are described as speaking in a foreign language and having brown skin. That black boys are capable of doing something that a white Brit cannot (at first) is exactly the kind of story that would find Lessing’s work eventually banned in the exact same Africa countries in which she previously lived. That this theme is not forwarded as essential to the narrative speaks not only to Lessing’s ability to weave a complex tapestry around what is basically a very simple story, but is also, paradoxically, essential to the theme existing at all. Such was the atmosphere during the period Apartheid that only by making the racial them tangential to all else would it even possibly pass rigid censorship rules regarding treatment of racial differences.

## Single Motherhood Among War Widows

The story was published in 1955. Jerry is eleven years old. Assuming the story is set in the year of publication (nothing indicates exact time period) that means Jerry was conceived and during the waning years of World War II. The narrator informs the reader that Jerry’s mother is a widow, but with no other details offered, it is safe to assume Jerry’s father died in relation to the war in some capacity. Single mothers who were war widows was most assuredly not uncommon among British women in the 1950’s. As such, the theme of how to raise young boys to become independent men without sacrificing the equal necessity of maternal intimacy and affection is another that the author recognized need not be directly outlined. Like the theme of racism, it can be pursued subtly with the conviction that context provides meaning to those aware of it without the ignorance of such context in any way lessening the impact of the story’s most obvious and universal themes related to the rite of passage.

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.

Narrator

The reader learns the protagonist is a young British boy. He’s been here before; enough times for things to be familiar. Still, there is the recognition that this visit has to be different or else why write about it? One thing can be certain: whatever new discovery is going to be made this year, it will be made over at the rocky bay side of the beach. And it will be wild. A life-changing kind of thing.

He did not ask for permission, on the following day, to go to his beach. He went, before his mother could consider the complicated rights and wrongs of the matter.

Narrator

Soon enough it becomes clear that this year’s visit to the beach is a test of independence for the young boy. He and his mother are close and enjoy a good relationship. The father is dead and the struggle for identity is growing. That he asked for her permission to explore the wilder side of the beach the day before but rejects that overture today is a demarcation between pure childhood and a commingling of childhood and adolescence. The rest of the story is the working out of that stark division as each new decision become a bolder and stronger declaration of independence.

They were of that coast; all of them were burned smooth dark brown and speaking a language he did not understand.

Narrator

The description of the bigger boys notably lacks individualism. They are a group and so are more symbolic than anything else. The color of their skin is commented upon, but not addressed; as far as Jerry’s coming of age story is concerned, it is irrelevant. Yes, the author does take the time to mention that they are brown and not speaking English. The author—Doris Lessing—grew up in racially segregated colonial Africa and this physical attribute allows for the story to become a commentary on one level about institutional British colonial racism. The brown-skinned boys are capable doing something that the white British lad cannot, after all.

He would do it if it killed him, he said defiantly to himself.

Narrator

The story is really only about a young boy swimming through an underwater tunnel that the reader already knows is not a task requiring the skill of a professional. The danger exists, but it is not the danger of the level capable of making the centerpiece of an adventure story. The adventure is not in the actual literal swimming through the tunnel, but in the significance to which Jerry gives the accomplishment. The statement made above is an example of hyperbole; he’s not really going to kill himself and, most probably, his chances of actually being killed are very low. This defiant commitment to success is palpably real, however, because the story is about setting a goal and achieving it. And that is the difference between being childhood and maturity.

# Through the Tunnel Analysis

These notes were contributed by members of the GradeSaver community. We are thankful for their contributions and encourage you to make your own.

Written by Timothy Sexton

[Doris Lessing](https://www.gradesaver.com/author/doris-lessing)’s “[Through the Tunnel](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-tunnel)” is a demonstrative example of the creative writing instructor’s exhortation that “less is more.” (Keep in mind that this is advice not always appropriate for every situation.) The simple fact is that this story is almost ridiculously easy to summarize. On the surface it is about a young boy who swims through an underwater tunnel as a rite of passage in a coming-of-age process. While it is true that this is the story in a nutshell, it has not become one of the most anthologized short stories of the second half of the 20th century because of its plot.

Plot is all fine and good for certain types of generic fiction like horror, science fiction or mystery stories, but a work of main stream literature there’s got to be more going on to attain the level of success “Through the Tunnel” has reached. That something is theme; check out most textbooks in which the story is anthologized and more than likely it will be listed in the section devoted to exploration of theme. So, we can assume that one of the “more” that comes about as a result of the “less” approach is that the story has a great theme.

Except that it really doesn’t. Well, not great in the sense of revolutionary or a revolutionary approach to a common theme. The simple story of a boy swimming through a tunnel is hardly groundbreaking in its overarching theme of presenting a rite of passage. It is a coming-of-age story and any textbook filled with short stories will probably have about half a dozen of those at least. So if the theme itself is not what makes this a great example of the less-is-more approach creative writing, what then? Layers.

The story has layers of thematic relevance. Any one of them on its own would have made a good story; including them all in the same story is remarkable. The rite of passage of young [Jerry](https://www.gradesaver.com/through-the-tunnel/study-guide/character-list#jerry) is fairly universal; even with the protagonist being a young male, most can relate to the story as an example of preparing for a big step in one’s social development. The truth is more complex, however: most can relate only because the author holds back on providing too much information. It is the holding back of information that make the work a magic trick. Here are some other themes at work in the story. If you have read it, see how many you picked up on:

• The struggle of single mothers to raise young boys into men.

• Racial equality as related to the systemic beliefs about inherent inferiority of people of color.

• The effect of World War II widowhood upon the post-WWII generation of children.

• Man versus nature.

• Man versus man.

• If at first you don’t succeed…

• Peer pressure.

• The developmental value of setting goals.

And there are more. On the surface, “Through the Tunnel” is just a story about a kid taking a step forward toward becoming more mature and less dependent on his mother. Take away the fact that the mother is British and a widow and the story takes place in the 1950’s and suddenly nearly half of the above themes disappear. And yet the fact that she is a widow is mentioned exactly one time. Take away from the fact that the author grew up and had only recently not been living within colonial Africa’s most racist regions and the fact that the big boys whom Jerry wants to emulate are described as having brown skin suddenly loses much of its thematic power. If Jerry goes straight for the attempt to swim through the tunnel, the few passages describing his preparations reduce the importance of themes related to trying and setting goals.

What makes the fact that the story does touch upon all the listed themes and others not mentioned is that none of them are really given all that much focus. A few brief mentions of the color of the boys’ skin goes no further. Take out literally just a handful of words and anything related to British history is gone.

Doris Lessing manages to stuff more themes into this story than is found in most short stories precisely because she focuses on making them less important rather than more important. Only one theme is really pursued vigorously and that theme is not adversely affected by the introduction of tangential thematic material. The story itself, however, is made all the more powerful.