

Lesson 5 Beauty of Literature

Through the Tunnel

- Doris Lessing

On the first morning of their summer vacation, a young English boy named Jerry and his mother walked together towards their usual beach. But the young boy's eyes followed the path to a rocky bay that was a bit farther away. Feeling that his attention was elsewhere, his mother worried about the ideas that he might be getting. The boy, noticing his mother's concern, smiled at her and continued following along. He kept glancing over his shoulder at the wild bay, however, imagining what it might hold.

The next morning, Jerry's mother asked him if he was interested in trying another beach. He first answered no, regretting that he had made his mother think that he was bored with their usual place. As they were walking, however, he suddenly changed his mind and said, "I'd like to go and have a look at those rocks down there." She gave the idea some thought. The area he was pointing to looked somewhat dangerous, but she decided it would be fine to let him go on his own. As his mother walked away, Jerry felt like running after her again and enjoying the beach as they had always done, but he did not.

Reaching the rocky bay, he started swimming but soon felt somewhat lonely being so far from his mother. After some time, he encountered a group of local boys who were diving from the rocks. They were around his age, and he desperately wanted to become friends with them. He swam closer, and they turned to watch him. One smiled and waved him over. They showed him how to dive from the rocks into the deep water. He tried diving with them, but he was too afraid. Noticing his hesitation, the boys soon lost interest. Jerry tried calling out to them in the local language, "Bonjour! Merci! Monsieur, monsieur!" but they ignored him and swam away.

Feeling rejected, Jerry watched the boys from a distance and noticed that they were underwater for a long time. He started counting the seconds. At fifty, he started to worry. At one hundred, he wondered whether he should yell for help. But around one hundred and fifty, he realized that they were in fact swimming through some rocks in the water and coming out the other side. After they left, he tried to do what they had done, but when he tried to open his eyes to see underwater, his eyes stung from the salty water. With his eyes closed, however, he was unable to see the tunnel that the boys had swum through. His only option was to give up and go home.

Back home that evening, Jerry asked his mother for swimming goggles. After receiving them the next day, he ran off back to the bay. Underwater, he was now able to see the tunnel clearly. He tried to enter it, but the darkness and the feeling of seaweed on his skin frightened him. He gave up and decided to practice holding his breath underwater instead.

From that day forward, every morning, the boy left his mother at the beach and came to the rocks to practice his breathing and diving. Some days, he pushed himself too hard, and his nose would bleed from too much practice. His mother told him that she was worried about him and had him join her at their usual beach. But the beach looked different to him now. It now seemed like a place for small children.

Jerry soon began to feel restless being back at the beach with his mother, and he worried that all the practice he had put in would go to waste. The next day, he decided to go back to the rocky bay. He now spent his days exploring the tunnel at the bay and practicing his breathing whenever he was back with his mother. He knew that being prepared would help him conquer the tunnel that had defeated him.

After a few days, his mother told him that they would soon need to return home. This news urged him to go back to the bay. He felt that he absolutely needed to go through the tunnel before they went home. His fear, however, made him think that just practicing some more and trying again next year might be wiser.

But even after reaching that conclusion, he found himself sitting on the rock with a longing to overcome his fear and conquer the tunnel. It would be now or never. He decided to try once more. His hands were shaking, but he placed them firmly at his sides. He looked up at the sky, filled his lungs with air, and then sank fast into the ocean.

He soon found the entrance to the tunnel. He took the edges of the hole in his hands and drew himself into it. It was pitch black, but he kept counting, just as he had practiced. Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two... Soon he reached a hundred, a hundred and one... He kept moving through the tunnel, and when he thought he couldn't last any longer, he spotted a crack of light at the end. The feeling of victory filled him as he realized that with a few more strokes, he would be coming out the other side. He felt like he was running out of air, but he kept kicking and thinking just a little bit more!

Finally, his hands found the exit of the tunnel, and he swam out into the open sea. At first, he started to gasp like a fish out of water, but after some time, his heart quieted and his eyes cleared. He had made it. After resting a short while on the warm rock, he got on his feet and walked back home. His mother's eyes lit up, as she was happy to see him back. "Did you have a nice morning?" she asked. Jerry replied with pride, "Mom, I can stay underwater for two minutes, three minutes, at least!" His mom thought about telling him to rest for the remainder of the day, but she didn't have to. He was now happy to stay home and rest. Going to the bay was no longer important to him.