



## Walking in the Shade

By Doris Lessing  
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### Plot Summary:

1996 Finalist, National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography

*Walking in the Shade* opens in 1949 with Doris Lessing's resolute good-bye to Africa and her hopeful hello to England. In the second volume of her memoirs, Lessing traces her journey as a twice married mother of three in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia to her struggles as a writer and single parent in post-war London. If *Under My Skin* focuses on her childhood and various attempts to differentiate herself from her parents and the values and sacrifices they symbolized, then *Walking in the Shade* marks Lessing's development as a promising writer, cast in the shadow of her vexed relationship to the Communist Party in particular and organized politics in general. In fact, Lessing considered separating the description of her political life into a single chapter, so that disinterested readers could simply skip the section. However, Lessing soon realized that politics permeated her experience of these years so thoroughly that compartmentalization would not only be impossible, but inadvisable given her dedication to representing truthfully the age through which she lived and was

shaped. Lessing devotes much of the second volume to the evocation of her creative process, her interactions with the literati of London and the many changes--economic, social and cultural--that occurred in England throughout the 1950s. *Walking in the Shade* concludes in 1962, the year she published her most famous and most influential work to date: *The Golden Notebook*.

### Topics For Discussion

1. In the middle of *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing remarks that "coming events cast their shadows before. But looking back from the perspective of those events, it is easy to be dishonest. Some tiny passing shade of feeling, a mere cloud shadow, may ten years later become a storm of revelation: about yourself, about others, about a time. Or may have dissolved and gone." Does this metaphoric reflection relate to the title of Lessing's second autobiographical volume? If so, how?
2. Lessing punctuates the second volume of her autobiography with commentary on "The Zeitgeist: How We Were Thinking." These sections, which include reflections on politics, class warfare, and feminism, seem to promote a common theme in Lessing's work: people cannot act outside the parameters of their particular histories, of which they are a direct product. Yet, Lessing also insists that "if acceptance of social ills is a sign of maturity, what becomes of progress?" Are these philosophical positions in conflict or do they represent a productive paradox about history and change?
3. Throughout the book, Lessing suggests that all formally organized social groups, regardless of original intention, eventually become religious and frequently turn into their polar opposite. What does religion mean in the context of this hypothesis? How does Lessing describe this process of group transformation in relation to her experience with the Communist Party?
4. In England, Lessing became involved with many Americans. She concludes that "Americans are a people of extremes." Although the British and the Americans share the English language, Lessing says their "national temperaments" form a barrier to substantive communication and understanding, a contention that "may hardly be said aloud in the United States, because of political correctness." What characterizes these "national temperaments" in Lessing's opinion? How do these different dispositions manifest themselves in *Walking in the Shade*?
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### About the Author

Doris Lessing was born in Persia (now Iran) in 1919. Lessing has described her childhood as an uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain. Her mother, obsessed with raising a proper daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules, then installed Doris in a convent school and, later, an all-girls high school in Salisbury, from which she soon dropped out at the age of thirteen. Lessing, however, made herself into a self-educated intellectual, reading Dickens, Kipling, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. Doris's early years were spent absorbing her father's bitter memories of World War I, taken in as a kind of "poison." "We are all of us made by war," Lessing has written, "twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it." Lessing left home when she was fifteen and took a job as a nursemaid. Her employer gave her books on politics and sociology; she was also writing stories, and sold two to magazines in South Africa.

In 1937, she moved to Salisbury (Southern Rhodesia), where she worked as a telephone operator and, at nineteen, married Frank Wisdom and had two children. A few years later, feeling trapped in a persona she feared would destroy her, she left her family, remaining in Salisbury. She was drawn to the members of the Left Book Club, a group of Communists. Gottfried Lessing was a central member of the group; shortly after she joined, they married and had a son. During the postwar years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the Communist movement, which she left altogether in 1954. By 1949, Lessing had moved to London with her young son and published *The Grass is Singing*, beginning her career as a professional writer. After writing the *Children of Violence* series, about the growth in consciousness of her heroine, Martha Quest, Lessing broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a daring narrative experiment. Her most recent works include two volumes of autobiography, *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997), and a novel, *Love, Again* (1995).