

Doris Lessing: flight essay sample

[Literature](#), [Fiction](#)



This guide should help you study Flight. It should be useful to students from all parts of the world, though I have written it specifically to support students in England and Wales preparing for GCSE exams in English and English literature. It may also be helpful to the general reader who is interested in the stories of Doris Lessing. Flight was published in 1957, in a collection of short stories entitled The Habit of Loving. The author, Doris Lessing was born in 1919, in Khermanhah in Persia (now Iran). Her parents were British. At six years old, she moved to Zimbabwe (then Southern Rhodesia), where she attended a girls' school. In 1949, she moved to London, where her first novel, The Grass is Singing, was published in 1950. What happens in Flight?

An old man (unnamed) who keeps pigeons, worries about his granddaughter, Alice. He has seen his other granddaughters leave home, marry and grow up, and he is both possessive of Alice and jealous of Steven, her boyfriend. (He disapproves of Steven's appearance and his father's job.) The old man argues with Alice about her behaviour, and complains to his daughter, Alice's mother (Lucy). At the start of the story the old man shuts up his favourite pigeon, rather than let it fly. But when Steven, the boyfriend, makes him a present of a new pigeon, he is more able to accept what is going to happen, and he lets his favourite go. The ending of the story is ambiguous (it has more than one possible meaning): Alice has tears on her face, as she stares at her grandfather. But we do not know if they are for him, for Steven, for herself or for some other cause. And we do not know if they are tears of joy or sadness or some other feelings. The themes of this story

Is this a story about an old man who receives a present from his granddaughter's boyfriend? In one way, of course it is. But is this all? Or does

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this outward or surface narrative lead into another? Leaving home and becoming independent are things which most people face sooner or later. They can be alarming, but they are natural and almost inevitable. Sometimes this kind of story is described in the phrase “rites of passage” – which fits narratives about growing up, moving on and life-changes. This should make it a very suitable story for young people preparing for exams: Alice’s situation will be one that you face now or will face soon. How do you feel about this prospect? Is it scary, or exciting or both? The characters in the story

This is a very short story, so it does not have fully developed characters as we might meet in a novel or one of Shakespeare’s plays. Doris Lessing tells us only what we need to know (and perhaps misses lots of things we might like to know). So who are these characters? The old man

The central character in the story has no name. Why might this be? Does it make him seem less of an individual, or perhaps make him seem more universal, like someone we might know? Or can you think of any other reason for his not being named? We know that he is Alice’s grandfather, and that he feels possessive towards her. We know also that he keeps pigeons. The story is told largely from his viewpoint and whatever it means, it is certainly in some way about his learning or accepting things about Alice.

Alice

Alice is the old man’s granddaughter. She is a young woman but he still sees her as a child – or would like to do so. She looks young and sometimes acts

in a carefree way, but mostly she has a serious and grown up wish to marry her boyfriend, and settle into a domestic routine. Lucy

Lucy is the old man's daughter and Alice's mother. She is depicted as a grown up in her appearance ("square-fronted"), her actions (she looks after her father) and the way in which her father thinks of her ("that woman"). Her husband is absent (perhaps she is a widow or divorcee, but there is no evidence to tell the reader more, save that it is Lucy who gives Alice permission to marry). But we know that Lucy married at seventeen "and never regretted it". She tries to reassure the old man about Alice. She has already agreed to her marrying Steven, and tells her father this in the story. Steven

Steven is Alice's boyfriend. In the story we see him through the old man's eyes. The old man finds things wrong with him (his red complexion, his physical appearance and his father's job). The reader is not likely to share this disapproval. Lucy expects him to be as good a husband as her other three girls have. And he is thoughtful enough to give the old man a present of a pigeon. The setting - time and place

Doris Lessing grew up in Zimbabwe, in southern Africa. Yet the setting of this story could almost be anywhere, except for a few clues. One is the wooden veranda at the front of the whitewashed house. Another, which is repeatedly mentioned, is the frangipani tree. (This species of tree takes its name from an Italian perfumier; the scent of the blossom supposedly resembles one of his perfumes.) But many details make the story seem almost English in its

setting. Some of these are listed below. Can you think of others? * the valley, the earth, the trees;

* the dovecote;

* Lucy's sewing;

* plates and cups of tea;

* Steven's father's job – he is a “ postmaster”

Perhaps more important is the time in which this story is set. Although the narrative seems quite modern in showing a young woman about to leave home, the attitudes of the grandfather are more traditional. He wants to keep his grandchild at home, and spoil her as his favourite. Although Alice will not give in to the old man's wishes, she still shows respect for him. Doris Lessing's technique

Technique refers to the way an author writes – not what he or she says, but how it is said. Body language – actions and gestures

This is a story in which attitudes appear often in actions. For example, when her grandfather shouts: “ Hey!” Alice jumps. She is alarmed, but then becomes evasive, as we see when her “ eyes veiled themselves”. She adopts a neutral voice and tosses her head, as if to shrug off his confrontational stance. When he thinks of Steven the old man's hands curl, like claws into his palm. When Steven gives the old man the present of a new pigeon both Alice and her boyfriend try to reassure the old man: “ They hung about him, affectionate, concerned...They took his arms and directed him...enclosing him, petting him...”

Here we find another reference to eyes – they are “lying happy eyes”, telling the old man that nothing will change, when he and they know this is false. At the end of the story Alice is “wide-eyed” while tears run down her face.

Earlier it was the old man who was crying at the thought of losing her. What do her tears mean at the end of the story? Perhaps she knows that she really is to be married, and she, too, is now sad at the end of childhood. When Lucy shades her eyes with her hand, she is genuinely interested in the flight of the pigeons, but she has not let go of her domestic routine – her hand still holds her sewing. She waits on her father – “brought him a cup, set him a plate” but lets him know that she will not give in to his demands, when she takes up her sewing. Dialogue

This story is dramatic. A lot of it is in the form of conversation. While Lucy is calm and reasonable, the old man and Alice quarrel like children. Note how the old man asks questions with the word “Hey” – “Waiting for Steven, hey?” and “Think you’re old enough to go courting, hey?”. His threats are childish: “I’ll tell your mother” and “I see you!” Language

Doris Lessing uses repetition in the story to reinforce details of the scene (sunlight, the frangipani tree, the veranda, Lucy’s sewing) or to identify people (“the postmaster’s son” and “his daughter” or the “woman”). There are also many references to people’s bodies – to eyes, legs and hair. Is there a reason for this? Do they show us people as they really are (as we might see them if we were present)? Or do they show us people as the old man sees them? Is his noticing Alice’s “long bare legs” a bit disturbing – we perhaps think he should not see her in such a way. Comparisons are very

important here. Many of them are to natural things. Alice's long legs are likened to the frangipani stems – “ shining-brown” and fragrant. The old man's fingers curl like claws (an image which suggests his own pigeons). Later Alice and Steven tumble like puppies – they are not yet enjoying adult pleasure but their play is a preparation for what comes later. Sometimes a single word tells us a great deal: when the old man talks of “ courting” he reveals the gulf between himself and Alice. She is struck by the “ old-fashioned phrase”. Symbolism

This story is very obviously one where symbolism is important to our understanding. Alice is clearly likened to the favourite pigeon. The old man can keep the bird in, where he cannot control Alice. But when he receives the new pigeon, he is able to release the favourite: he accepts that shutting it in is not right. The gift also suggests that there may be some compensation for the old man in the new situation. But really he knows that nothing can make up for the loss of his last grandchild. Studying Flight for English literature

This section of guidance will help you if you are preparing coursework for assessment in GCSE English literature. For most students there will be little or no difference between what you do for English and what you do for literature. In the UK these are seen as different subjects, with slightly different emphases. For English you are expected to understand the meaning and implications of a text. For English literature, you will be expected to look more thoroughly at attitudes, techniques, implications and effects of language. This section of guidance should show you some things

for which examiners may be looking. For guidance on studying Flight for English exams, Attitudes

Attitudes in the text

In this story the attitudes we learn about most clearly are those of the old man – we see most things through his eyes. Doris Lessing gives us his view as the starting point or reference point. We can see Alice's and Lucy's not through narration or description – only in what they say to him. Steven's viewpoint is almost invisible. The only clue is his gift – but Alice may have encouraged him to give the present. Attitudes behind the text

How far does the story show (or suggest) assumptions about the world that the author makes? Are we encouraged to see any character's view as being the “right” one to accept? This is a world where men and women seem to have clearly defined rôles – can you see evidence of this? Attitudes in the reader

Can you find any evidence of what Doris Lessing assumes about her readers? This may appear in things she explains and things she doesn't explain. For a South African reader a frangipani tree is probably a common sight, but it may seem exotic to a European reader. One way to check this is to make a list of things you did not at first understand, or which you had to ask about. If Doris Lessing wrote the story today or for a particular audience, what might she wish to change? The author

If you write (or talk) about this story, try to be aware that it has an author. Suppose that the events in it had really happened. Why would Doris Lessing

choose to relate the things she does, while missing out others? For example, why is Steven almost written out of the story? In the real world, all these people would be equally important as human beings. So why are they not equal as fictional characters? Does the story reflect a woman's view of the world, in your opinion? If you did not know, could you guess the sex of the writer? How? Why does the author write so much about details of the natural world? Is this a story about nature for its own sake, or more about nature as a way of seeing human nature? Or is it something else? How far does the author tell the reader how to interpret the story? How far does she leave us alone to judge for ourselves? Comparisons

It is easy to make comparisons in the story. We are led to make comparisons between these things, among others: * the attitudes of the old man and Alice

* the arguments of the old man and Lucy about Alice's marrying * the old man's ideas of his granddaughters before and after marriage * Alice and the favourite pigeon

* sunlight and warmth at the start and dusk and cold at the end of the story

* The old man's initial defiance and eventual acceptance of Steven's courtship of Alice Can you think of any others? You can also, of course, compare this story with others that have a similar theme – stories about growing up, gaining independence and leaving home. Implied meaning

Are there any things in the story that are not what they at first seem? Are there situations that are gradually revealed to be other than what first appears? For example, does the reader at first accept the old man's

judgement of Steven, then learn what is wrong with it? Do we foresee that the old man will accept the loss of Alice? How do you respond to the ending of the story, where the old man is smiling proudly at his new pigeon's Flight, while tears run down Alice's face. Readers and reading

Reading the text

Say what you think the story means in a literal sense and in terms of theme, character and setting. Look at details of imagery, language and symbolism.

Reading the author

Try to explain what, in your view, the author wants us to think at various points. In doing this you should refer to her narrative methods. Reading your own reading

Be prepared briefly to explain your own understanding of the story, and how this changes while you are reading it for the first time, and also on subsequent readings, where you notice more details. Studying Flight for reading coursework in English

This section of guidance will help you if you are preparing coursework for assessment in GCSE English. For most students there will be little or no difference between what you do for English and what you do for English literature. In the UK these are seen as different subjects, with slightly different emphases. For English you are expected to understand the meaning and implications of a text. For English literature, you will be expected to look more thoroughly at attitudes, techniques, implications and effects of language. This section of guidance should show you some things for which examiners may be looking. For guidance on studying Flight for

English literature exams, If you are preparing work for English, it is likely that you will want to compare Flight to one or more other texts. Try to choose texts with an appropriate theme or subject. Subject, implications and moral and philosophical context

* In your own words explain Alice's relationship with her grandfather. * How does the old man feel about Alice's marrying?

* How does he feel about Steven at the start and at the end of the story? *

Try to explain how the old man comes to accept the inevitability of Alice's marrying. * As you read the story, do you identify with the old man, with Alice or some other character? Style, structure, narrative craft

* This story, though written in the third person, is told almost entirely from the old man's point of view. How does this affect our reading of it? * How does Doris Lessing suggest other viewpoints?

* Look at the descriptions the writer gives of Steven, Alice and her sisters, not as they are, but as the old man sees them. How do these affect the reader's response. (See, for instance, the paragraphs beginning at lines 12 ["His eyes travelled"], line 96 ["He thought of the other three girls..."] and line 37 ["Her smile made him see her..."]). * Comment on the structure of the story – how Doris Lessing makes the narrative about Alice parallel the secondary narrative about the pigeon. Effects of language for emotive, ironic, figurative effect;

patterns and details of language

* Comment on the symbolism of the story's title. Why is Flight a perfect title

for this story? * Explain how the old man's speech is important in the story. Consider the words he speaks to Lucy, to Alice and to the pigeon. * Both Alice and the old man cry in the story, but Doris Lessing does not tell us directly. How do we know they cry, and why is it important? * How does the word "courting" (l. 33) show the generation gap in the story?