

## The Fifth Child

### Doris Lessing – 1998

Read the first pages of the novel.

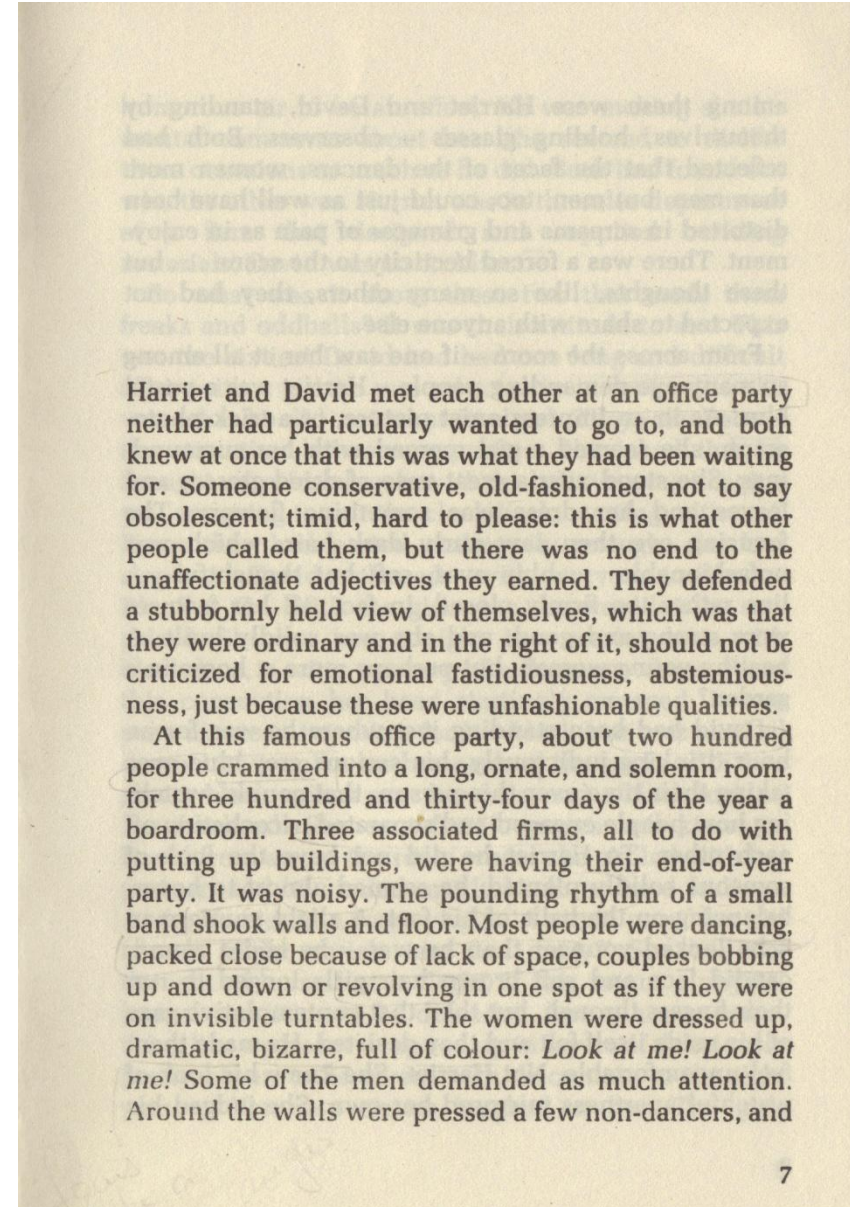
#### 1. General comprehension

Write a brief summary saying who the main characters are, where and when the scene is set, and giving the main events.

#### 2. Characters

Find out about (quote the text):

- their physical description
- their profession
- how other people see them



among these were Harriet and David, standing by themselves, holding glasses – observers. Both had reflected that the faces of the dancers, women more than men, but men, too, could just as well have been distorted in screams and grimaces of pain as in enjoyment. There was a forced hecticcy to the scene . . . but these thoughts, like so many others, they had not expected to share with anyone else.

From across the room – if one saw her at all among so many eye-demanding people – Harriet was a pastel blur. As in an Impressionist picture, or a trick photograph, she seemed a girl merged with her surroundings. She stood near a great vase of dried grasses and leaves and her dress was something flowery. The focusing eye then saw curly dark hair, which was unfashionable . . . blue eyes, soft but thoughtful . . . lips rather too firmly closed. In fact, all her features were strong and good, and she was solidly built. A healthy young woman, but perhaps more at home in a garden?

David had been standing just where he was for an hour drinking judiciously, his serious grey-blue eyes taking their time over this person, that couple, watching how people engaged and separated, ricocheting off each other. To Harriet he did not have the look of someone solidly planted: he seemed almost to hover, balancing on the balls of his feet. A slight young man – he looked younger than he was – he had a round, candid face and soft brown hair girls longed to run their fingers through, but then that contemplative gaze of his made itself felt and they desisted. He made them feel uncomfortable. Not Harriet. She knew his look of watchful apartness mirrored her own. She judged his

humorous air to be an effort. He was making similar mental comments about her: she seemed to dislike these occasions as much as he did. Both had found out who the other was. Harriet was in the sales department of a firm that designed and supplied building materials; David was an architect.

So what was it about these two that made them freaks and oddballs? It was their attitude to sex! This was the sixties! David had had one long and difficult affair with a girl he was reluctantly in love with: she was what he did *not* want in a girl. They joked about the attraction between opposites. She joked that he thought of reforming her: 'I do believe *you* imagine you are going to put the clock back, starting with me!' Since they had parted, unhappily enough, she had slept – so David reckoned – with everyone in Sissons Blend & Co. With the girls, too, he wouldn't be surprised. She was here tonight, in a scarlet dress with black lace, a witty travesty of a flamenco dress. From this concoction her head startingly emerged. It was pure nineteen-twenties, for her black hair was sleeked down into a spike on her neck at the back, with two glossy black spikes over her ears, and a black lock on her forehead. She sent frantic waves and kisses to David from across the room where she circled with her partner, and he smiled matily back: no hard feelings. As for Harriet, she was a virgin. 'A virgin *now*,' her girl friends might shriek; 'are you crazy?' She had not thought of herself as a virgin, if this meant a physiological condition to be defended, but rather as something like a present wrapped up in layers of deliciously pretty paper, to be given, with discretion, to the right person. Her own sisters laughed at her. The girls

working in the office looked studiously humorous when she insisted, 'I am sorry, I don't like all this sleeping around, it's not for me.' She knew she was discussed as an always interesting subject, and usually unkindly. With the same chilly contempt that good women of her grandmother's generation might have used, saying, 'She is quite immoral you know,' or, 'She's no better than she ought to be,' or, 'She hasn't got a moral to her name'; then (her mother's generation), 'She's man-mad,' or, 'She's a nympho' – so did the enlightened girls of now say to each other, 'It must be something in her childhood that's made her like this. Poor thing.'

And indeed she had sometimes felt herself unfortunate or deficient in some way, because the men with whom she went out for a meal or to the cinema would take her refusal as much as evidence of a pathological outlook as an ungenerous one. She had gone about with a girl friend, younger than the others, for a time, but then this one had become 'like all the others', as Harriet despairingly defined her, defining herself as a misfit. She spent many evenings alone, and went home often at weekends to her mother. Who said, 'Well, you're old-fashioned, that's all. And a lot of girls would like to be, if they got the chance.'

These two eccentrics, Harriet and David, set off from their respective corners towards each other at the same moment: this was to be important to them as the famous office party became part of their story. 'Yes, at exactly the same time ...' They had to push past people already squeezed against walls; they held their glasses high above their heads to keep them out of the way of the dancers. And so they arrived together at last, smiling – but perhaps a trifle anxiously – and he

took her hand and they squeezed their way out of this room into the next, which had the buffet and was as full of noisy people, and through that into a corridor, sparsely populated with embracing couples, and then pushed open the first door whose handle yielded to them. It was an office that had a desk and hard chairs, and, as well, a sofa. Silence ... well, almost. They sighed. They set down their glasses. They sat facing each other, so they might look as much as they wished, and then began to talk. They talked as if talk were what had been denied to them both, as if they were starving for talk. And they went on sitting there, close, talking, until the noise began to lessen in the rooms across the corridor, and then they went quietly out and to his flat, which was near. There they lay on his bed holding hands and talked, and sometimes kissed, and then slept. Almost at once she moved into his flat, for she had been able to afford only a room in a big communal flat. They had already decided to marry in the spring. Why wait? They were made for each other.

Harriet was the oldest of three daughters. It was not until she left home, at eighteen, that she knew how much she owed to her childhood, for many of her friends had divorced parents, led adventitious and haphazard lives, and tended to be, as it is put, disturbed. Harriet was not disturbed, and had always known what she wanted. She had done well enough at school, and went to an arts college where she became a graphic designer, which seemed an agreeable way of spending her time until she married. The question whether to be, or not to be, a career woman had never bothered her, though she was prepared to discuss it: she did not like to appear more eccentric than she had