



The Sweetest Dream

Doris Lessing
(2001)

PLOT AND SETTING

The Sweetest Dream deals with the **lives and fortunes of an extended family over three decades**, the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The first part is set in **Hampstead, London, in a big, three-story house, owned by German-born Julia Lennox**. Julia, the widow of a high-ranking civil servant, decides to invite **Frances, a writer and the former wife of her only son, Johnny**, to come and live there with **her two sons, Andrew and Colin**. Frances accepts because she lacks the money to raise the two boys by herself even if she fears losing her own independence. At the same time, 'Comrade Johnny' becomes more and more involved with politics and a star of the Communist party.

It is not clear how many people come to live in the house: Andrew's and Colin's friends begin to move in, dropping out of their families and schools, occupying every available room in the house. Frances feeds them all every night and is so much absorbed in their family stories as not to make them go home. Both her sons have attended expensive schools, paid for by Julia. Her oldest son, Andrew, spends all day smoking in his room, while Colin, wants to drop out of his progressive school. As the extended family grows, Andrew and Colin have no choice but to mature. Johnny's second family, his stepdaughter, **the anorexic Sylvia**, and eventually her depressive mother Phyllida, move in. Sylvia is very ill and Andrew comes out of his room to help her. It is Julia who saves Sylvia, by simply not putting up with the anorexia: Sylvia must eat and go to school if she wants to stay. Sylvia eventually becomes a doctor.

While **Frances is the focus of the first half of the book**, **Sylvia is the centre of the second half**, which is set in **Africa**, in Zimlia (the real Zimbabwe), where she is a doctor at a mission where the hospital is made up of dusty huts in the bush. She treats over 40 patients a day, many with AIDS (called 'Slim'), and forms strong relationships with people in the village.

CHARACTERS

Comrade Johnny is the unifying element that links the many characters in the novel. He is **the irresponsible son of Julia**, a celebrity of the hard left, and an absentee father. He is **indifferent to individual pain in his blind dedication to the revolutionary and Stalinist cause**. Through the character of Johnny, Lessing attacks career politicians and mass-produced thinking: Johnny never matches his beautiful ideals in his cruel personal behaviour and this is contrasted with the small acts of kindness which

are natural to Frances or Julia. Hearing him speak only in political clichés, the reader becomes aware that language and ideals can become dangerous tools and turn good intentions into simplistic systems of thought, which waste human potential.

At the core of *The Sweetest Dream* are **three women of different generations** around whom the political and individual passions of the times are played out. **Julia is a woman who was brought up before World War I** and who, even in the Sixties and Seventies, continues to wear gloves and a hat with a veil. She is **initially critical of her daughter-in-law's free and easy ways**, but she and Frances forge bonds of understanding through their mutual contempt for the man who brought them together, Comrade Johnny.

Frances Lennox is an abandoned mother of two boys, Colin and Andrew, who becomes a 'house-mother' to a group of rebellious teenagers who have fled their own homes. All of them play out their problems around a kitchen table, Lessing's symbol of security and continuity. **Sylvia takes off to pursue her sweetest dream in Africa**. Here she becomes a mission doctor in a remote part of Zimbabwe where dictatorship together with AIDS destroy life as well as hope. Sylvia patches together a little hospital and school, trying to find supplies and fighting corrupt, interfering officials from a black-run government that has betrayed countless promises to provide for its people.

THEMES

Over three decades, Lessing explores political movements and social change, from Communism to civil rights and feminism, single motherhood and divorce to extended families that include children's friends, anorexia, AIDS and the dynamics of human relationships.

Lessing also describes the **blend of desire and guilt, passivity, resentment and responsibility, which shaped women in the middle and latter part of the 20th century**.

STYLE

The **tone is satirical**. Lessing exposes the shortcomings of reductive ideals: Catholicism, feminism, hippie counter-culture and aspects of international development work. However, the writer's approach aims at uncovering the genuinely good in human beings such as Julia, Frances and Sylvia. Lessing's **final message is a concern for the future**: the 20th century has witnessed burned-out utopias, the failures of the left and human damage of all kinds, so it is time we faced up to what these realities will mean for the changes to come.



Key idea

The sweetest dream

The dream of a perfect society is the ironic centre of the novel. The sweetest dream is the one we all have at a certain age. But we need to grow to realise that the sweetest dream might have actually been a fantasy that only

misled us. In the novel the sweetest dream is self-knowledge, which is the most important key to one's happiness.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and answer the following questions about the plot of *The Sweetest Dream*.

- 1 What does the novel deal with?
- 2 When does it take place?
- 3 Who are Julia, Frances, Andrew and Colin? What do they share?
- 4 Who is Johnny? What is his nickname?
- 5 Why is it not clear how many people come to live in the house?
- 6 Who also moves into the house?
- 7 Who really helps Sylvia?
- 8 Who is the heroine of the second part of the novel?
- 9 Where does it take place?

2 READ the texts about *The Sweetest Dream* again and find out

- who/what Lessing attacks through the character of Johnny;
- who can be found at the core of the novel;
- what the most important themes are;
- what tone characterises the novel;
- what its message is;
- what the sweetest dream is in this novel.



AIDS, a curse on us

In the following text a Government inspector, Mr Phiri, and another state official, Mr Mandizi, are visiting the mission where Sylvia has volunteered as a doctor. Also Father Kevin McGuire, the Irish priest who runs the mission, and Rebecca, the cook, take part in the conversation.

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Mr Phiri was sitting with his eyes closed, recovering. When he opened them, opposite him sat a small brown woman. Was she coloured? – no, that was the colour they went when they had too much sun, oh yes, she was the woman just now with Mr Mandizi. She was smiling at Rebecca. Was this smile a comment on him? Rage¹, which had been leaving him under the influence of the good beef and potatoes, returned, and he said, 'And are you the woman they tell me has been taking our school equipment for your lessons, so-called lessons?'

Sylvia looked at the priest, who was signalling to her, with a tightening of his lips² to say nothing. 'Doctor Lennox has bought exercise books and an atlas with her own money, you need have no concern on that score³, and now if you could give me news about your mother – she was my cook for a while, and I can say truly that I envy⁴ you with such a cook for a mother.'

'And what are those lessons you are giving our pupils? Are you a teacher? Do you have a certificate? You are a doctor, not a teacher.'

Again, Father McGuire made it impossible for Sylvia to reply. 'Yes, this is our good doctor, she is a doctor and not a teacher, but there is no need for a teacher's certificate if

1 Rage. Rabbia.

2 with ... lips. Serrando le labbra.

3 on that score. Al riguardo.

4 I envy. Invidio.



you are reading to children, if you are teaching them to read.'

'Okay,' said Mr Phiri. He was eating with **the nervous haste⁵ of one who uses food as a pacifier**. He pulled the bread to him and cut a great slab⁶: no *sadza*, but enough bread

20 would do almost as well.

Rebecca suddenly chimed in⁷: 'Perhaps the Comrade Inspector wants to come down and see how our people like what the doctor is doing, how she is helping us?'

Father McGuire **managed to control severe irritation**. 'Yes, yes,' he said. 'Yes, yes, yes. But on a hot day like this I am sure Mr Phiri would prefer to stay here with us in the cool and have a nice good strong cup of tea. Rebecca, please make the Inspector some tea.' Rebecca went out. Sylvia was about to tackle⁸ Mr Phiri about the missing exercise books and textbooks and the priest knew it, and he said, 'Sylvia, I am sure the Inspector would like to hear about **the library you have made in the village?**'

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'Yes,' said Sylvia. 'We have **about a hundred books** now.'

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'And who paid for them, may I ask?'

'The doctor has very kindly paid for them herself.'

'Indeed. And then I suppose we must be grateful to the doctor.' **He sighed⁹**, and said, 'Okay,' and that was like a sigh.

'Sylvia, you haven't eaten anything.'

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'I think I'll just have a cup of tea.'

In came Rebecca with the tea tray, set out the cups, the saucers, **all very slow and deliberate**, arranged the little net fly-shield with its beaded blue edge¹⁰ over the milk jug, and pushed the big teapot towards Sylvia. Normally, Rebecca poured the tea. She returned to the kitchen. The Inspector frowned after her¹¹, knowing there had been

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insolence, but he could not put his finger on it.

Sylvia poured, never lifting her gaze¹² from what her hands were doing. She put a cup near the Inspector, pushed the sugar bowl towards him, and sat making heaps of crumbs¹³ with her bread. A silence. Rebecca **was humming out¹⁴** in the kitchen, **one of the songs from the Liberation War, designed to annoy¹⁵ Mr Phiri**, but he didn't seem to

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recognise it.

And now, luckily, there was the sound of a car, and then it had stopped, sending showers of dust everywhere. Out stepped the mechanic in his smart blue overalls¹⁶. Mr Phiri got up. 'I see that my car is here,' he said vaguely, like someone who has lost something, but does not know what or where. **He suspected that he had behaved in an improper manner, but surely not, when he had been in the right about everything.**

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'I do so hope you will tell your father and your mother that we met, and that I pray for them.'

'I will, when I do see them. They live out in the bush¹⁷ beyond the Pambili Growth Point. They are old now.'

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He went out to the verandah. There were butterflies all over the hibiscus bushes. A lourie¹⁸ was making itself heard, half a mile away. He walked to his car, got in at the back, and the car drove off in rivers of dust.

Rebecca came in, and unusually for her, sat at the table with them. Sylvia poured her some tea. No one spoke for a while. Then, Sylvia said, 'I could hear that idiot shouting from the hospital. If I ever saw a candidate for a stroke¹⁹, it is the Comrade Inspector.'

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'Yes, yes,' said the priest.

'That was disgraceful,' said Sylvia. 'Those children, they have been dreaming of the Inspector for weeks. The Inspector will do this, he will do that, **he will get us the books.**'

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Father McGuire said, 'Sylvia, nothing has happened.'

'What? How can you say...'

Rebecca said, 'Shame. It is a shame.'

'How can you be so reasonable about it, Kevin?' Sylvia did not often call the priest by his Christian name. **It's a crime. That man is a criminal.**

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'Yes, yes, yes,' said the priest. A pretty long silence. Then, **Have you not ever thought**

5 haste. Fretta.

6 slab. Fetta.

7 suddenly chimed in. Intervenne improvvisamente.

8 tackle. Affrontare.

9 He sighed. Sospirò.

10 net ... edge. Reticella per le mosche con un bordo blu di perline.

11 frowned after her. La guardò corrucciato.

12 never lifting her gaze. Senza mai sollevare gli occhi.

13 heaps of crumbs. Mucchietti di briciole.

14 humming out. Canticchiando.

15 designed to annoy. Con il proposito di infastidire.

16 overalls. Tuta.

17 bush. Boscaglia.

18 lourie. Turaco africano.

19 stroke. Colpo apoplettico.



that that is the story of our history? The powerful take the bread out of the mouths of the povos – the povos just get along somehow.

‘And the poor are always with us?’ said Sylvia, **sarcastic**.

‘Have you ever observed anything different?’

75 **‘And there is nothing to be done and it will all go on?’**

‘Probably,’ said Father McGuire. ‘What interests me is how you see it. You are always surprised when there is injustice. But that is how things always are.’

‘But they were promised so much. At Liberation they were promised – well, everything.’

80 ‘So politicians make promises and break them.’

‘I believed it all,’ said Rebecca. **‘I was a real fool, shouting and cheering²⁰ at Liberation. I thought they meant it.’**

‘Of course they meant it,’ said the priest.

‘I think all our leaders went bad because **we were cursed**.’

85 ‘Oh, may the Lord save us,’ said the priest, snapping at last. ‘I will not sit to listen to such nonsense.’ But he did not get up from the table.

‘Yes,’ said Rebecca. ‘It was the war. **It is because we did not bury the dead of the war.**

Did you know there are skeletons over there in the caves²¹ on the hills? Did you know that? Aaron told me. And you know that if we do not bury our dead according to our

90 customs then they will come back and curse us²².’

‘Rebecca, you are one of the most intelligent women I know and . . .’

‘And now there is AIDS. And that is a curse on us. What else can it be?’

Sylvia said, **‘It’s a virus,** Rebecca, not a curse.’

‘I had six children and now I have three and soon there will be two. And every day
95 there is a new grave in the cemetery.’

‘Did you ever hear of the Black Death?’

‘How should I hear? **I did not get beyond Standard One²³.**’

This meant, that she had heard, knew more than she would let on, and wanted them to tell her.

100 ‘There was an epidemic, in Asia and in Europe and in North Africa. A third of the people died,’ said Sylvia.

‘Rats and fleas²⁴,’ said the priest. ‘They brought the disease.’

‘And who told the rats where to go?’

‘Rebecca, it was an epidemic. Like AIDS. Like Slim²⁵.’

105 **‘God is angry with us,’** said Rebecca.

‘May the Lord save us all,’ said the priest. ‘I’m getting too old, I’m going back to Ireland. I am going home.’

He was querulous²⁶, like an old man, in fact. And he did not look well either – in his case, at least, it could not be AIDS. He had had malaria again recently. **He was tired out.**

110 **Sylvia began to cry.**

‘I’m going to get my head down for a few minutes,’ said Father McGuire. ‘And I know it is no use telling you to do the same.’

Rebecca went to Sylvia, lifted her, and the two went together to Sylvia’s room.

Rebecca let Sylvia slide down²⁷ on her bed where she lay with a hand over her eyes.

115 Rebecca knelt²⁸ by the bed and slid her arm under Sylvia’s head.

‘Poor Sylvia,’ said Rebecca, and **crooned²⁹ a child’s song, a lullaby³⁰.** The sleeve of Rebecca’s tunic was loose³¹. Just in front of her eyes, through her fingers, Sylvia could see the thin black arm, and **on the arm a sore³²,** of the kind she knew only too well.

She had been dressing³³ them on a woman down in the hospital that morning. The weeping³⁴ child that Sylvia had been until that moment departed: the doctor returned. Rebecca had AIDS. Now that Sylvia knew, it was obvious, and she had known, without admitting it, for a long time now. Rebecca had AIDS and there was nothing that Sylvia could do about it. **She shut her eyes, pretended to slide into sleep.** She felt Rebecca
120 gently withdraw herself³⁵ and go out of the room.

20 cheering. Applaudire.

21 caves. Grotte.

22 curse us. Ci malediranno.

23 I did ... One. Sono andata a scuola solo tre anni.

24 fleas. Pulci.

25 Slim. È il modo in cui gli Africani chiamano l’AIDS.

26 querulous. Lamentoso.

27 slide down. Scivolare.

28 knelt. Si inginocchiò.

29 crooned. Canticchiò.

30 lullaby. Ninnananna.

31 loose. Larga.

32 sore. Piaga.

33 She had been dressing. Aveva medicato.

34 weeping. In lacrime.

35 withdraw herself. Ritirarsi.



125 Sylvia lay flat, listening to the iron roof crack in the heat. She looked at the crucifix, where the Redeemer hung. She looked at various Virgins in their blue robes. She took a glass rosary off its hook³⁶ by her bed, and let it rest in her fingers: the glass of the beads was warm, like flesh. She hung it back.

Opposite her the Leonardo women filled half a wall. Fish moth³⁷ had attacked the beautiful faces, the edges of the poster were lace³⁸, the children's chubby limbs were blotched³⁹.

Sylvia got herself out of that bed and went down to the village, where a great many disappointed⁴⁰ people would be waiting for her.

36 **hook.** Gancio.

37 **Fish moth.** Un pesciolino d'argento.

38 **lace.** Trina; *qui*: sfilacciato.

39 **chubby ... blotched.** Arti paffuti erano macchiati.

40 **disappointed.** Deluse.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 READ the text and write a heading to each section.

- Part 1 (lines 1-57):
- Part 2 (lines 58-133):

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

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3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- What justification does the priest provide to the situation in Africa?
- What does Sylvia compare AIDS to? Why?
- What ornaments are there in Sylvia's room?
- What kind of narrator is employed and whose point of view does the reader share?
- Say if the characters are mainly presented through description of physical appearance, actions and movements, thoughts and feelings or what they say.
- Which words would you use to describe each character's main mood?
- How is the theme of AIDS introduced?
- What problems connected with the disease are hinted at in the text?

COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

4 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to highlight the main problems connected with the AIDS epidemic in Africa and say what could be done in your opinion to face this emergency.