

## On Existentialism in Doris Lessing's *One off the Short List*

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**Abstract:** Doris Lessing's short story ----- *One off the Short List*, like most of her famed novels, is a manifestation of individual's living state in the lonely and absurd world. In this thesis, the writer attempts to interpret this story from the view of Sartrean existentialism by analyzing the middle aged protagonist's special journey of exploring himself with suffering of being "others" so as to indicate Lessing's pessimistic attitude to modern people's existence.

**Key words:** Doris Lessing; *One off the short list*; Existentialism

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The 2007 Nobel-prize winner Doris Lessing is known to all as a complex and prolific writer. Besides her most noted novels like *The Golden Notebook*, *The Grass is Singing*, *The Fifth Child*, etc. she is also a master of short stories and has been awarded 1954 Somerset Maugham Award of the Society of Author for *Five: Short Novels*. Most of Lessing's short stories, covering a great range of material as the pre-independence African politics, the humiliations of office life, the sex war, the chill spirit of the cold war, Marxism and the anarchic mystery of artistic creativity, come from her acute social observations and transcend understanding of human nature in modern society. They are questioning, liberating, immensely varied and sometimes deeply disturbing which offer incomparable portrait of her homeland but the whole postwar Europe. Among them, *one off the short list* is one of her few works based on male's perspective which first published in 1963 and this time, Lessing seems to show her insightful concerns

to the existential issues like loneliness, and absurdity of modern people's life in this gradually alienated society.

The protagonist of this story, Graham Spence, had wanted to be a writer when he was young but failed after publishing two unsuccessful books. Later, instead of being an artist, he has become a critic of contemporary art in BBC. He is "*an impresario of other people's talent*" in Lessing's term, and a married man. Since his second meeting with Barbara Cole, a young and promising stage decorator and designer, Graham has made up his mind of sleeping with her and put her name on his "*list*" ----- a recording of his slept or potential mistresses. Taking advantage of work, he arranges an interview with Barbara on a radio program one night. Before the interview, Graham forwardly picks her up from work and takes her to dinner. Along the way, Graham's head is full of speculations about Barbara's relationships with her colleagues and schemes of being more intimated with her. After interviewing, he insists of having a cup of coffee at Barbara's and forces her to sleep with him, though he becomes impotent during the sex and Barbara is the one helping him finish it. The next day, nobody seems care about what happened the night before except Graham himself and now he also has to think about an excuse to his wife for staying out all night. Although the plot of this story is plain and simple, the description from Lessing is full of tension and fury as word like "hate" has been appeared over twenty times in whole. Actually, it is quite hard to grasp a clear theme of this work due to the protagonist's limited visual angle and perplex inner life which also making some feminists' interpretations seem illegitimate and partial in that after in-depth analysis, Graham's misstep more comes from his own disappointed choice and situation but gender issues. Therefore, based on Lessing's

implicit descriptions of the protagonist's anxiety, self-deception and the position of being "others", adopting existentialism to interpret this character may gain us more comprehensive understanding to the author's transcend connotation and apperception to modern life.

Graham, a seemingly confident man with normal family and decent work, is actually a completely frustrated loser in a dead-end job and a senseless matrimony, who used to have faith in marriage and ambition in writing career but all his paying seems not in direct proportion to his gaining: his wife almost leaves him for a younger playwright and his talents are denied of being artistic. Finally, after twenty years "stormy" marriage and two fruitless books, Graham "understood he was not going to make it" and realized that in fact this phase "turned out to be like everyone else's". However, the disillusionment does not bother him too much because he soon realizes that his peers around are all stuck in similar situations.

... his struggles as a writer had led him here, to this pub and the half dozen pubs like it, where all the men in sight had the same history.

In this sense, Graham is a lonely one. Everyone around him is more like his own shadow and his daily life is an unchangeable cycle: he yearns for a kind of free atmosphere in which he can run his own life; in other words, he does not want to be the production of a certain situation, and the freedom here resembles the one advocated by existentialists. According to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the most significant figure of existentialism, there is no predetermined nature that defines what is to be a real human. It is the individual himself who totally determines what his life is like. In other words, the individual makes himself rather than is determined by so-called human nature, and man must gradually defines himself through struggle to create his own essence since he is abandoned into the world. Sartre's affirmation of choice cause him to reject any absolute and moral standard. He holds that human beings have no essence so that human existence is identical to freedom. In addition, he argues that all the pursuit of human beings to some extent is the action of questing for freedom.

This is the starting point of Graham's working on his "list". Due to his lack of talents and excitement for art and life, Graham wants to find some young and intelligent women to cover his shortcomings and obtain a sense of satisfaction. To him, finding some brilliant mistresses every six months is quite mature which "was

far from being something he was ashamed of" as his only way to show talents

However, Graham's absurd and fallacious choice can hardly make him free. His very first impression to Barbara Cole at a party is just "pale" and "gauche". But after seeing her name on the newspapers for winning a competition and talking with a famous actor at a party, he at once makes up his mind with his "private erotic formula: *Yes, that one*" that he must sleep with her.

In the beginning, Grahams seems to be quite confident and familiar to the process and plans to win Barbara's heart step by step. He is forwardly to pick her up from the theater before the interview. While seeing the scene of Barbara and her colleagues' wholehearted working, Graham's reaction is quite intensive and intriguing.

Suddenly Graham couldn't stand it. He understood he was shaken to his depths... His eyes were filled with tears. He was seeing what a long way he had come from the crude, uncompromising, admirable young egomaniac he had been when he was twenty.

This scene is obviously a reminding of Graham's own memory of his youth when he was still a new blood with confidence, energy and faith, hanging out with a group of buddies for dream, love and art. Actually, this may be the only moment in the story that Graham has revealed his true sentiments from heart. This ideal group is envisioned in contrast with the real world of Graham's, a world of narrow-minded people living in division and isolation. Here, people in this group like the fraternal man in Gabriel Marcel's theory. According to this first French representative of existential theism, each one of us tends to become our own prisoner not only because of material interests and prejudices but self-centeredness by means of viewing everything from our own perspectives. Therefore, the freest man is the most fraternal who is always linked himself to his neighbors and community. Graham, a man being eager for his freedom, obviously longs for such a group of people who can help each other to realize his essential self and regain his trust and hope in others. In this sense, Barbara is the only key for him to enter this kind of life and once again, he makes up his mind of making her his mistress.

However, reality is always hard and cruel as middle aged Graham this time cannot direct his "show" arbitrarily and freely. During their dinner, in order to please Barbara, Graham reads his "carefully prepared monologue" for the later interview about "breadth of

her experience” and “complexity of experience” while his listener still keeps eating and “showing nothing”. This time, Graham is really irritated and believes that “she did not think him worth one”. His anger starts to spread intensively and violently though he still accepts her suggestion in patience on the surface. Finally after the program, the womenizer insists of having a cup of coffee at Barbara’s. But no matter how hard he has tried, his prey seems never show her appreciation and acceptance to him a little bit. Graham at this moment, with no dignity at all, has to force her to intercourse with him while even in this extreme way, he still cannot gain his end because of his impotent which may due to his long suffering and indignation of the whole night. Barbara, so as to have an early and sound sleep, has to finish the sex for him on her own which makes the scene more weird and pathetic.

It is obvious that the farce-like ending for Graham is a totally ironical contrast to his early confidence in his special talents. To some sense, he is defeated by Barbara physically and spiritually. But from this point of view, it is still inconvincible to immediately conclude this story just in perspective of a feminist that men cannot enslave women either from intellectuals or sexuality any more after Sex Revolution during 1960s. Based on Lessing’s complete and detailed descriptions, we should not neglect that Graham’s frustration is not only from Barbara this single character and his hatred does not even start from her, either. The word “hates” begins to appear is the appearance of Dick Mannheim whom in Graham’s eyes definitely has an affair with Barbara. He seems to treat every young man around Barbara as his rival in love and shows strong jealousy to them. His hatred starts to spread. Lessing purposely makes the collision based on ages but genders. In the theater, after Graham’s several times self-introduction in different occasions, Barbara, as well as her colleagues barely has some clear impressions of him. By end of the story, Graham insists on accompanying Barbara to work next morning as his last straw to win some dignity, and her colleagues still shows their insensibility and indifference to him as if they have never seen each other before.

He walked off slowly, listening for what might be said. For instance: “Babs, for God sake, what are you doing with him?” Or she might say: “Are you wondering about Graham Spence? Let me explain.” Graham passed the stagehands who, he could have sworn, didn’t recognize him...

Facing the group of young men, Graham is doomed to be repelled and become “outsiders”. Their slurred memory about him is the exact implication of his slim sense of existence in reality and this begins to make him discourage continually and his impotent during the sex is the frustrated summit. According to Sartre, the existence of others created a certain role for us to play, or a certain world for us to enter. This world is imposed upon us by other people and we are not responsible for this dimension of being others treat us in a certain way suggesting their judgments of us. We learn of this in our relations with them. It is in this sense that Sartre’s notion of “the Other” offers an essential account for Graham’s failure and depression. He wants to be the director in all fields but in the end, he cannot even be his own master. His hatred and anger to the young is actually an escape from his own inferiority of his talent, age and future. Sartre’s famous “Others are hell” is the real portrayal of Graham’s brutal life.

To illustrate the age war in this story, Lessing uses many colors symbols. The “emerald” on Barbara’s finger attracting Graham’s attention for many times is given from her grandmother which is obviously an irony to Graham’s age. When he forces Barbara to have sex with him, he sees her eyes which are “the absolute clarity of green in the depths of a tree in summer”. It is known to all that “green” always means vigor and youth and “summer”, as the most prosperous period among seasons, refers to Barbara’s experiencing the high moments of her life. When he at a time has controlled Barbara in his hug, Graham firstly sees her colorless and “damp” face in close distance without makeup and feels “kinship, intimacy with her”. This time, in Graham’s eyes, Barbara is for the first time on the “defenseless” side for her colorlessness and he becomes intimate with her in his real heart, though this feeling only enduring for a short time. Besides, Lessing’s descriptions of Graham’s psych and responses are in vivid details and from this internal-visual-angle, the narration scope is confined and readers can only see and judge on the basis of Graham’s own eyes. His words and conducts are full of illegitimate and occasional which makes him more like a personality split neurotic. And her sobering language also make this story real and convincing as in this alienated society, to some extent, we are all lonely, lost and empty with split personality.

Here, it is also necessary to mention Barbara’s responses to Graham. Her seemingly continuous compromise or obedience to Graham’s decision all-

night is from her manners which is also a sign of her unconcern and indifference to all tensions and problems. She do not take Graham`s painstaking into consideration at all. She seems do not care anything but her work and her ideas which are very progressive for a woman but very pathetic for a human. The reality is also unsatisfactory to Barbara as the public and media still pay more attention to her gender instead of her genius. She is also the one fighting for her own existence and identity but at present, she is more energetic and vigorous than Graham due to her young age, but what will happen after twenty or thirty years? To some extent, Barbara as the first one off the list is only the beginning. The list will be soon in-existing because it is short and names on it will be continuous off one after another.

## References

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