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Clear Light of Day: Study Guide

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Clear Light of Day is perhaps Anita Desai's most beloved work, notable for its lush prose and compelling, compassionate look at the inner lives of an Indian family. It is also her most autobiographical work, taking place in the same area where she grew up.

Desai was inspired to write the novel by modernist poet T.S. Eliot's famed *Four Quartets*. She similarly structured her novel in four parts and ignored chronology, preferring to interweave past and present; she also quoted the poem in the epigraph to the novel. She referred to *Clear Light of Day* as "a four-dimensional piece on how a family moves backwards and forwards in a period of time."

The titular illumination refers to the lighting of the way of reconciliation once all the misunderstandings and long-held emotional barriers have been cleared out of the way. Desai achieves this through the implementation of a stream-of-consciousness technique that affords multiple viewpoints capable of shining the light of objective truth on individual events that recur through different subjective memories. The impact of the past upon the present is thematically presented in the structure of the four-part narrative. The present is introduced in the first part and takes place in the late 1970s, while Part Two transports the reader back to the year of Indian independence, 1947. The third section of the book goes back even further in time in order to show how the way children perceive the world around them can have lifelong consequences. Part Four traces the long decades of growth often required before insight is attained; finally, readers return to the novel's present.

While the novel primarily engages with the relationships between characters, there are also comments on politics, as seen in Raja's interaction with Hyder Ali and the post-independence troubles of persecution, radicalism, riots, and fires. Critic Bishnupriya Ghosh also notes Desai's interest in exploring gender: "Desai argues that women must struggle to make a place for themselves in a paternalistic nation, where womanhood is a mere symbolic construct (the 'mother' nation). Her analysis of gender and politics thus extends into a critique of Indian nationalism, which excluded gender issues from its political rhetorics of liberation and rejuvenation."

The novel was nominated for the 1980 Booker Prize.

Clear Light of Day Literary Elements

Genre

Novel

Setting and Context

Delhi, in 1947 (during partition of India), and in 1980

Narrator and Point of View

Third-person omniscient narrator, with multiple POVs

Tone and Mood

Tone: meditative, nostalgic, poignant, sympathetic, gloomy

Mood: nostalgic, dreamy, contemplative, sad, restless, dreary

Protagonist and Antagonist

All the children are protagonists, and there are few, if any, actual antagonists (one might argue that the concept of time is a kind of abstract antagonist)

Major Conflict

The major conflict is between Bim and Raja: they are not on speaking terms due to Raja's blind hero-worship of Hyder Ali and his abandonment of his siblings.

Climax

The climax occurs at the point when Bim screams at Baba and declares that he is to live with Raja henceforth. This is a turning point for Bim, who realizes the frustration she has been building inside her for all these years.

Foreshadowing

Bim narrates to Tara that she dreams of Aunt Mira running naked towards the well. This foreshadows the guilt inside Aunt Mira for being responsible for the death of their cow and the calf.

- ✓ **The novel is split into four sections covering the Das family from the children's perspective in this order: adulthood, adolescence and early adulthood, childhood, and a final return to an adult perspective in the final chapter.**

Clear Light of Day Summary

I

One morning in 1980, Tara Das wanders around in her childhood home in Old Delhi, feeling nostalgic. Her sister, Bim, is a teacher and takes care of the house. The two discuss the old days. Tara has been married to Bakul, who works in Indian embassies in foreign countries and travels a lot, and has two teenage daughters. Tara is attractive, but, unlike the intelligent and fiercely self-possessed Bim, she is mild-mannered, pliable, and dependent on her husband. Tara and Bakul are in town for the wedding of Raja's daughter; Raja is their brother, from whom Bim is estranged.

The sisters discuss the aging house and have tea sometime after. Tara serves Bakul tea with little milk that is left after the cat is fed, demonstrating Bim's disdain towards Bakul. Their brother, Baba, comes in. He is a grown man but is mentally slow. Baba plays musical records all day long, which worries Tara. She asks Baba to go to the office, which he sadly declines. Tara is sad looking at the state of her brother and declines Bakul's invitation to go out.

The needle of Baba's gramophone breaks and the silence caused by it disturbs him so much that he rushes out to the streets; there, he gets distraught by the crowd and comes running back crying. Bim and Tara discuss their brother, Raja, and his marriage to the daughter of Hyder Ali, their landlord. There are sour feelings between Bim and Raja, the two of whom used to be very close, and Bim shows Tara a letter in which Raja tells Bim that, in the aftermath of Hyder Ali's

death, he will charge her the same rent as their parents were charged. Bim finds his tone insulting and arrogant; she keeps the letter as a token of remembrance and refuses to go to Hyderabad for the marriage.

That evening they visit the Misras, their neighbors. The Misras were a rich family fallen into hard times due to their sons' debauchery, vices, and laziness. Their sisters, separated from their husbands, work hard to feed the family and yet are marginalized. The youngest, Mulk, causes a scene for not getting to host his musicians or an audience; only Bakul can quell his temper. Bim has them all return home, in order to avoid the Misras having to feed them all.

Back at the house, Bim speaks of seeing a specter of their Aunt Mira after she died; the two sisters talk of the Partition of India and Pakistan, and of the events that followed.

II

In 1947, Bim and Raja are closer to each other than the rest of the siblings. Raja hero-worships Hyder Ali, their landlord and neighbor. Given his aptitude for Urdu, he is invited frequently to their house to browse among the vast collection of Urdu poetry. He takes to going there frequently, earning disapproval from his parents, aunt, and Bim. He begins to compare the two households and begins to detest his own. He takes Urdu as his primary language in school instead of Hindi, against his family's wishes. He yearns to go to Jamia Millia, a college known for its inclination towards Islamic culture, but this is against his father's wishes. Mr. Das finally tells him that it is unsafe for a Hindu boy to study Islamic culture during these troubled times. Raja does not know how to refute this, and he enrolls at the Hindu college.

Bim, Raja, Tara, and Baba are not particularly close to their parents, who are rarely home. One day, their mother falls ill and dies in the hospital. They are not very affected, but their aunt takes to drinking out of stress.

The father also dies in an accident and Raja is stricken with tuberculosis. He is querulous and miserable, and Bim is frustrated by his obsession with the Alis. Raja is particularly distressed when the Alis flee town due to the riots and fires resulting from the Partition.

Tara spends more time with Misra sisters, whom Bim finds unambitious. Tara meets Bakul there and is love-struck, although Bim finds him pompous, arrogant, and dull.

Dr. Biswas, a young man who frequently ministers to Raja and Aunt Mira (the latter of whom is descending into senile, drunken disaster), begins to be infatuated with Bim and invites her to a concert. She is not at all interested, and even though she agrees to a meeting with his mother, she realizes that she is not interested in marriage.

Raja is required to take over his father's business, but he refuses. He wants to go to Hyder Ali, who has left for Hyderabad given the communal tension. On Raja's insistence, Bim goes to Hyder Ali's house to see what is going on. Baba sees the daughter's gramophone and records and immediately becomes obsessed. They bring the gramophone, a dog, and a servant back with them.

Bakul marries Tara and takes her with him. Aunt Mira grows worse and, after a series of embarrassing accidents, dies in her bed. She is buried in her only sari, which she never wore in

life. Now that his health is improved, Raja leaves for Hyderabad to look for Hyder Ali. Baba and Bim are left together, but they are pleased with this development.

III

Mrs. Das gives birth to her fourth (and unexpected) child, Baba. He begins exhibiting some growth defects, so she calls for Aunt Mira.

Aunt Mira, a distant cousin of Bim's mother, was widowed in her early teenage years (in the 1940s) and was thus reduced to unpaid house help. She started aging prematurely and hideously, and so was deemed unfit for the men of her household. Aunt Mira—disposable to her in-laws, for whom she was forced to work for as payment for the death of the husband—was sent for. The children are skeptical, but they all begin to love each other. She became a parental figure for children, as their parents hardly cared for them.

Aunt Mira had the parents buy a cow for fresh milk, but the animal later died when a careless servant did not lock it up and it fell into the garden well. Aunt Mira was forever haunted by this incident, as were the children.

Tara develops as a diffident, anxious child while Bim and Raja flourish. Tara is haunted by her childhood incidents, like shooting of a rabid dog and dismissal of a teacher for being in love with a foreigner. Bim, who does well at school and defends the principal in her firing of the teacher, becomes a figure of resentment for Tara.

As Raja grows up, Tara and Bim spend more time together but their relationship has many fractures. Tara abandons Bim twice in minor events—first in the midst of a bee-attack and then when Bim forced her to smoke while they dressed up in Raja's pants and discovered a sense of power in wearing male clothing. Tara has trouble forgetting when Bim cuts off Tara's hair, promising her that she will grow curls afterward.

Tara begins to grow apart from her siblings and closer to Jaya and Sarla Misra, as there were levity and life in their house as compared to her own house. The Misra sisters treated her kindly and would frequently take her out to clubs and other places. At their marriage parties, Bim tells Tara she disapproves of the Misra girls marrying without proper education; she asserts that she doesn't intend to marry.

IV

Tara tries to make Bim forgive Raja, but she won't relent. She also learns of Bim's financial problems and wonders how she is coping. Bim grows restless and angry and begins to snap at everyone, particularly when a letter from her father's company comes about financial decisions. She is angry at Raja for leaving her like this and snaps at Baba, who doesn't respond. Tara and Bakul try to convince Bim to seek out Raja's help, or at least Bakul's, but she does not relent.

The sweltering night before the wedding, Bim realizes that she has been taking her anger out on Baba, and that is unacceptable to her. She begins to think deeply about her siblings and how tightly their lives are interwoven. After looking through some of Raja's old poems and looking at an excerpt from an Indian saga, she finds that she can forgive Raja after all. She is overcome by a sense of wholeness and peace.

The next day, Bakul, Tara, and their daughters, who'd arrived recently, prepare to depart for the wedding. As Tara leaves for the wedding, Bim tells her that, while she and Baba are not coming to the wedding because they do not leave the house anymore, she would love if Raja came back here and brought the whole family.

That evening, Bim and Baba attend a concert at Misra garden, and Bim realizes that families, despite their disputes, eventually come together.

Clear Light of Day Character List

Bimla Das (Bim)

Bim is the eldest sister in the Das household. She lives in the house she lived in as a child with her family and runs it now. She is a history teacher and a great advocate of independence and individuality. She is said to have aged prematurely due to stress surrounding her household. She takes care of her brother and sick aunt even when everyone else deserts her. She wrestles with her anger towards her brother Raja, but she comes to forgive him and find peace in her tempestuous family relations by the end of the novel.

Raja Das

Raja is Bim's younger brother; they used to be very close to each other in their earlier years. Raja is intelligent, romantic, and has great passion for Urdu poetry. He hero-worships Hyder Ali, their Muslim neighbor and landlord. He is arrogant, irresponsible, ambitious, and occasionally insensitive. He later marries Benazir, Hyder Ali's daughter, and leaves his siblings in Old Delhi.

Tara

Tara is the second-youngest child of the Das household. She is pretty and sweet, but she is also less intellectual and confident than Bim. As a child, she hated going to school, and so she decided not to pursue higher education. Her only ambition was to be a mother, for which her elder siblings jeered her. She marries Bakul as a young woman and leaves India, living in various places abroad (although she visits often). She has anxiety and avoids confrontation, but occasionally demonstrates more self-possession than Bim and Bakul give her credit for.

Baba

Baba is the youngest child of the Das household. He is mentally underdeveloped, and thus entirely dependent on Bim. Baba doesn't talk but he seems to understand others. He likes playing songs on the gramophone all day long and is agitated when he is unable to do so.

Bakul

Bakul is Tara's husband and a diplomat. He is arrogant, likes to impress other people, and is a narcissist who dislikes when he is not the center of attention. He is disdainful of the Das household and does not want Tara to be affected by its unruliness and fixation on the past.

Aunt Mira (Mira Masi)

Mira-*masi* is a distant cousin of Mrs. Das. She was widowed when she was twelve and was blamed for her husband's death; thus she was made to work as an unpaid servant for her in-laws. She begins to age prematurely because of this. She is sent to take care of Baba, but all of children are elated to have her since their parents don't care for them. Many things begin to disturb her; eventually, she becomes an alcoholic and mentally unstable.

Mr. Das

He is the father and the patriarch of Das household, but is absent most of the time playing bridge at the club. He rarely interacts with his children, which is why the children don't really mourn his death. He is a partner in an insurance firm and leaves most of its running to his manager.

Mrs. Das

She is the mother of the four Das children. She suffers from diabetes and later dies of it. She has no patience for her children and, like her husband, is an absentee figure at the house. Tara and Bim think of her as commanding and imperious, concerned mostly with her appearance.

Dr. Biswas

He is the doctor who treats Raja when he was suffering from tuberculosis and Aunt Mira when she began to fall apart. Biswas studied in Germany and appreciates music immensely; he plays violin, but poorly. He takes a liking to Bim, but she doesn't return the favor. He likes to believe he is a self-sacrificing person, but Bim finds this insufferable.

Misra sisters (Jaya and Sarla)

Jaya and Sarla are the neighbors of the Das family. They had no ambition, except to get married, and thus didn't complete their studies. Ironically, this is why they are deserted by their husbands. They run and provide for the Misra household by teaching dance and music to teen girls. They like the simple and unambitious Tara more than independent and headstrong Bim.

Misra brothers

The three Misra brothers are lazy and unemployed. They were married but their wives left them out of disgust at their lazy lifestyles. They do nothing to run the house and like to make fun of Mulk, the youngest, for his singing. They have lecherous eyes and the Das sisters don't like to be around them.

Mr. Misra

He is the aging Misra patriarch. He was meant to leave for studies in London in his youth, but a prediction by a swami led his father to send him to Burma, where he made a lot of money. He used to be rich until his sons' debauchery and laziness led to their bankruptcy.

Hyder Ali

He is the landlord of multiple houses in Delhi, including the Das'. He is rich, charismatic, and lives next to the Das's in a huge mansion. He travels around on a white horse, an image that is immensely appealing to the impressionable Raja. He is a patron of Urdu poetry and encourages Raja by inviting him to his personal library and to gatherings of notable intellectuals. He and his family flee to Hyderabad when tensions over the Partition arise.

Benazir

She is the only daughter of Hyder Ali, and she is a spoilt child; she later marries Raja and bears him several children. Little is known of her except that she liked American music as a child, is plump, and likes to eat and cook rich fatty dishes.

Miss Singh

The young and vibrant teacher with whom Tara connects; she is laid off for her putatively bad behavior.

Miss Stephen

The elderly principal whom the schoolgirls hate and treat poorly in the absence of Miss Singh; Bim's outburst that the woman has cancer is enough to quell the girls' discontent.

Clear Light of Day Themes

Partition

Clear Light of Day is set during the India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. Although the lead characters are not directly involved in the event, the partition affects their lives in subsequent years. The characters live in Old Delhi, which could be considered as the better part of town, and thus they do not have to witness any violence of the partition; however, the Partition ends up dividing the family to an extent anyway. Raja moves to Hyderabad to follow his hero, Hyder Ali Khan Saheb; Tara marries out of desperation to leave her dysfunctional family; and Bim and Baba remain in a house full of ghosts of their childhood. It is also important that their separation is not a product of some grievous circumstance, but rather due to their choices. Their "partition" is self-inflicted.

Family

Clear Light of Day is primarily concerned with the Das family, but the Das siblings often compare their situation to that of other families such as the Alis and the Misras. Family is something from which one wants to escape, such as with Raja and Tara; something that exasperates, angers, and confuses; something that can be lacking, as with the Das parents; and something that can be unlike what you thought it would be, as with the close relationship between Aunt Mira and the siblings, Bim's closeness with Baba, and Bim and Tara's realization that they are more alike and love each more deeply than they'd thought. Family is one of the few sustaining things in times of duress, and even though it is not perfect, it is worth investing in. Desai suggests that family makes us who we are and that we should forgive those whom we love in order to achieve peace.

Adolescence

A major part of the book is dedicated to the early years of the Das siblings and to how that period shaped their current lives. While Bim and Raja as the eldest siblings were sure of themselves and ambitious, Tara and Baba were the least loved and grew up to be dependent—albeit in different ways—on others. The children were hardly ever cared for in their household, and so they constantly looked for affection from each other. Their experiences in adolescence were responsible for their future selves, including their oft-tense relations with each other. Raja, who was selfish and proud, becomes a rich, pompous man who is still trying to be the hero he idolized, Hyder Ali. Tara is constantly dependent on her husband and others to make decisions for her. Bim witnesses the degradation of her widowed aunt in her house and the limitations of marriage, and she decides to live a life of independence.

Escapism

The Das siblings are constantly trying to escape their immediate surroundings. This need is fuelled by the lack of attention they get from their parents. Raja starts inclining towards Islamic culture against his family's wishes, Tara first seeks attention from Mira Masi and starts to spend more time with the Misra sisters, ultimately marrying Bakul and leaving Old Delhi. Baba also tries to escape his immediate surroundings, albeit in a more unconscious manner, by constantly playing the same music on a loop. These three characters are propelled by the need to repress unpleasant memories of their childhood. Bim appears to be the only person who doesn't want to escape her family. However, as the story progresses, one sees through chinks in Bim's armor. She is constantly hurt by her siblings and needs to escape—this time, ironically, *into* the past.

Women's role in society

Bim and Tara are often compared to each other, and characters often express their opinion on one or the other based on their docility. While both sisters belong to the same surroundings, they derive their sentiments and motivations from different experiences. Bim is independent and strives for perfection, whereas Tara is an escapist and looks towards others for emotional support. The sisters are also deeply influenced by Mira Masi, their widowed aunt, and her struggles in the society, as well as the Misra sisters who despite being appropriately groomed are deserted by their husbands for not being educated. At certain points, Bim also compares herself with Raja and longs for the entitlement and the attention he gets for being a boy. Overall, Bim is able to transgress some gender boundaries but Desai is aware that 20th-century Indian culture is not one in which women have the same opportunities as men.

Memory and the Weight of the Past

The main characters in *Clear Light of Day* are constantly drawn into the past and memory. Indeed, Bim's current life is like a shrine to the past: the same house, the same routine, old papers kept, rooms never changing their decor. Bim dwells in the past in her mind as well, thinking on various grievances and memories that shaped her. Tara lives more in the present because she knows what letting in the past will do: weigh her down, make her feel as if she were sinking into the dark and scummy well. Nevertheless, Tara comes to see that some engagement with the past is necessary because it shaped her and because she needed to gain understanding and resolution to things that had haunted her. Bim, for her part, finally sees the danger in dwelling too much in the past, and releases some of her heavier, more noxious memories.

Forgiveness

One of Bim's major struggles in the novel is her inability to forgive Raja. She blames her ire towards him on the letter he wrote about being her landlord, but it is clear that her hurt stems from something deeper—something like Raja leaving the house and leaving Bim alone with the rest of the family, with whom she was not as close. Bim clings to her bitterness, believing it makes her powerful and incapable of being hurt again. However, by the end of the novel, Tara's visit has forced Bim to confront some of her own issues and to realize that her love of Raja is worth setting aside her grievance. She will accept him for who he is and will let him back into her life; her constant anger was only hurting her, rather than sustaining her. This decision to forgive was not made rashly or easily, but Bim's ability to get there reveals her to be a thoughtful, intelligent, and sympathetic character.

Clear Light of Day Quotes and Analysis

Old Delhi does not change. It only decays.

Bim, 5

Bim says these lines to Tara as they take a morning stroll in their childhood house. Tara feels that Bim is trying to make Tara feel guilty for deserting her and their younger brother, Baba, because Bim continues to compare Tara and herself—one who has traveled a lot and one who hasn't at all. Bim compares herself to Old Delhi, which remains unchanged and highly uneventful. She says that Old Delhi isn't capable of any sort of change and so it will decay as it is, much like Bim's situation. She and the house continue to grow old, without going through any

kind of changes. The house is thus a metaphor not only for Bim but also for childhood and the past, which remain locked in the way people look at them.

You're thinking how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children. Children are the real thing, you think.

Bim, 6

Bim says this to Tara as a response to Tara's expressions of astonishment for Bim's affection for her pets. Bim and Tara, who have met after a long time, seem to have a passive-aggressive relationship, in which Bim constantly attacks Tara for judging Bim for not changing or not escaping her conditions. Bim thinks she notes Tara's surprise regarding her affection for animals when she could have had children. As with most relationships, both are right/wrong. Bim saw that Tara was looking at her and certainly has had her share of people's rude opinions regarding her decision not to marry and have children, but Bim did jump the gun and snap at Tara without actual provocation. Tara did not say anything to her sister, but it is clear that she and others have made Bim feel like she is missing out for not starting her own family. This small exchange indicates how fraught such intimate relationships can be.

But it was all just dust thrown into his eyes, dust.

Tara, 12

Tara wonders this as she contemplates picking up a mulberry from the ground and eating it, but then she worries her husband would see and disapprove. Tara has repressed many of her feelings, as she felt the loss of her privileged position as baby of the family when Baba was born and she never experienced the closeness of Raja and Bim. She constantly felt the need for affection, glomming on to Aunt Mira and seeking friendships outside her family. She also chose to marry young, leaving India with Bakul and having her own children. Unsurprisingly, she is dependent on her husband emotionally, and constantly feels the need to prove herself to him. She married Bakul in her late teens, out of desperation to escape her household where no one cared about her, and while Bakul believes that he has 'tamed' his wife from a humble creature to a mature woman, she knows that isn't entirely correct. There are times when she is still the same repressed creature who longs for her childhood and for others' attention, and she is afraid that her husband might see that she had fooled him into believing the lie.

Most of the time we simply sat there on the veranda steps, staring at the gate.

Bim, 149

Bim says this to Tara as the two sisters and Bakul talk about being children and noticing things going on in their household. Bim and Tara disagree with Bakul that children rarely notice anything as they are always so busy running around and playing, to which Bim says that most of the time the siblings just sat at the veranda steps and stared at the gate, waiting for their parents to come, partly in anticipation and partly in dread. The parents hardly ever cared for the children and so they were left looking to each other or other people for attention. Bim feels that their parents' absence is responsible for the escapist tendencies the Das siblings have; their lives always revolved around waiting for their parents, and when they couldn't wait anymore, they ran away.

To Tara he could speak in a different tone. From Tara he got a different response. He looked at her fondly, like an indulgent father.

Narrator/Bakul, 71

Bakul is a completely stereotypical man in a patriarchal society in his desire for respect, acknowledgment, praise, and loyalty. He is arrogant and self-involved, thinking of Tara as his wife and his inferior, not his equal. In this quote, he moves from talking to Bim, whose intellect and frankness unsettle him, to Tara, who will always be pliable, sweet, and reverent. It is telling that in several parts in the text he admires Bim and wonders if she is superior to Tara, but quickly realizes that her independence is not something he can tolerate. While almost all of the male characters in the text evince sexist attitudes, Bakul is by far the worst.

...it was if my whole past vanished, just rolled away from me -the country of my birth, my ancestors, my family, everything -and I arrived in a new world.

Dr. Biswas, 83

Here, Dr. Biswas is extolling the merits of music, his time abroad, Mozart, etc. He tells Bim he can literally leave everything behind and dwell in the world of music only. Bim, however, is the complete opposite. For three reasons, she cannot leave everything behind; she cannot experience true and utter freedom. First of all, she is a woman and there are expectations placed upon her that cannot be ignored. Second, she is intellectually and emotionally attached to India, to her family, to her home, and to the life she has carved out for herself. Third, for better or for worse Bim cannot let go of the past. This is not to say that she should be like the fatuous doctor, but there are certainly things about her makeup and her position that render this an impossibility.

I think it's simply amazing—how very little one sees or understands even about one's own home or family...

Tara, 148

This is a striking comment, and not just because it came from Tara, the sibling who often preferred to ignore reality or live in her own version of it. Her thinking and saying such things belies her characterization as one who does not think deeply. Rather, she has come to see what we *all* come to see: that we curate, alter, downplay, and exaggerate our memories, and the way we view others is oftentimes a result of our own personal issues rather than objective truth. Furthermore, despite how well we think we know someone, in many respects they ultimately remain unknowable. Desai suggests that, in order to forge real relationships, it is important to acknowledge these issues and foster honest, compassionate communication.

Together they would form a whole that would be perfect and pure.

Narrator/Bim, 166

In this beautiful sentiment, Bim finally lets go of the bitterness, bellicosity, and division that pervaded her heart and mind. In attacking Baba earlier she realized that her rage had gone too far and that if she was to be truly happy then she needed to reckon with her ghosts. She spent much of her adulthood creating those divisions between herself and her siblings, preferring to protect herself rather than experience deep and meaningful connection. Now that she has come to embrace Tara and forgive Raja, she sees that she and Baba are the real core of the family. They are anchors and touchstones, the foundation upon which the family is built.

"Time the destroyer is time the preserver."

T.S. Eliot/Bim, 182

Bim and Raja are fond of quoting T.S. Eliot, which is no surprise given the fact that Desai loved the poet and modeled the structure of *Clear Light of Day* on Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Here, at the end of the novel, Bim thinks of this line, which is entirely apposite given the fact that she has

been wrestling with time and memory the weight of the past for decades. Time does destroy: people change, give up dreams, move on, and die. Houses decay and dust settles over everything. However, time also preserves what is important. It is time that Bim needs to forgive Raja. It is time that Tara needs to reckon with leaving Bim to the bees and alone with Aunt Mira and Baba. Desai told *India Today*, "Basically, my preoccupation was with recording the passage of time: I was trying to write a four-dimensional piece on how a family's life moves backwards and forwards in a period of time. My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a preserver, and about what the bondage of time does to people. I have tried to tunnel under the mundane surface of domesticity."

A way out of what? They still could not say, could not define the unsatisfactory atmosphere of their home. They did not realize this unsatisfactoriness was not based only on their parents continual absence, their absorption in each other. The secret, hopeless suffering of their mother was somehow at the root of this subdued greyness, this silent desperation that pervaded the house. Also the disappointment in Baba's very life and existence were to them, his hopeless future, their anxiety over him.

Narrator, 130

Here Desai provides insight into why it is the children were unhappy with their childhood and why they so desperately want to escape in a variety of ways. Their parents were absent, their mother mysteriously ailing. The climate was hot and stagnant, their house close and unchanging. Aunt Mira was a wonderful companion but did not possess anything high-minded for them to grasp at. Raja felt his studies were stifled, Bim her individuality, Tara her ability to connect with anyone deeply. And Baba was a cipher to them all: a silent sibling whose interior world could never be known to them. It is no wonder that such intelligent, intuitive children felt like they needed to do something—anything—to get out.

Clear Light of Day Symbols, Allegory and Motifs

Symbol: The Well

The Das house has an old well in its backyard where the children are not allowed to go, for fear of them falling into it. Aunt Mira is devastated when the cow she asked for falls into the well and dies; its body rots in the well and renders it unusable. The whole incident traumatizes Mira so much that, on her deathbed, she keeps trying to get to the well to jump in it; similarly, Bim jokes that she thinks about that, too. The well thus symbolizes death and decay. It is deep and dark and terrifying, a place where animals die and humans see their worst fears reflected back at them. It is uncanny and haunts their dreams, reminding them that beauty and life can be easily extinguished.

Symbol: Trousers

When Bim and Tara try on Raja's trousers, they are shocked at how powerful and liberated they feel. The trousers are a symbol of masculinity and the qualities that go along with it in a traditional, patriarchal society: freedom, rationality, power, and autonomy. Only men can wear pants and experience the ease of carrying out their daily tasks while women must wear modest clothing that does not allow them freedom of movement. Bim in particular wishes she could wear trousers and experience what Raja does.

Motif: Summer and Dust

The story is set in summer, including the flashbacks. The characters often remark on the heat, and they associate multiple elements of the season with different events. The concomitant of the heat is dust; the house is said to be dusty throughout the year and seems to accumulate more dust as the season progresses. While Tara finds it uncomfortable that Bim would allow the house to fall in such a condition, this shows Bim's acceptance of the house and its conditions. She has accepted that howsoever she tries, she can't keep the house running impeccably and instead of showing her helplessness, she tries to pass it off as something that is irrelevant to her. The heat and dust are part of life in Old Delhi and cannot be escaped. They may bring about ennui and lethargy, but they are also not things that can neither be raged against nor changed. They remain throughout childhood, young adulthood, and adulthood, and Bim's acceptance of them liberates her from discontent.

Symbol: Baba's Gramophone

Baba plays old music records all day in the house, repeating the same songs over and over again. While Bim has grown used to it, the noise distracts Tara and Bakul. When the needle of the gramophone breaks down, Baba is distraught over the silence that fills the house. He is so used to the songs that a break in the pattern fills him with a dread. The monotonous and unchanging nature of the songs symbolizes the unchanging nature of Baba's psyche. He'll never grow to be someone any different than what he is.

Symbol: The Car in the Driveway

The Das siblings were often neglected by their parents. Bim and Raja, who were eldest, learned to grow to be fierce and rebellious because of this, while Tara and Baba shaped up as reclusive beings. The absentee parents never shared much time of theirs with the children, and as a result the children were always waiting for them. Over time, they learned to ignore their absence and later began to enjoy it so much that the presence of the car in the driveway after their death made them uncomfortable. A car symbolizes journeys, adulthood, autonomy, and, for the Das children, absent parents; so, after Mr. Das's death, the presence of the car meant something unusual and a reminder of a strange time. Raja selling it off also symbolizes the complete severing of ties with their parents.

Clear Light of Day Metaphors and Similes**Simile: Raja's fever**

Raja thinks he is getting better and overexerts himself, leading to his fever returning. Desai writes, "To tell the truth, he was exhausted and could feel his temperature rising. It was as heavy as lead but it rose, as inexorably as the mercury in a thermometer" (96). The use of the word "lead" makes Raja's fever seem heavy, oppressive, and insurmountable. The thermometer is also an effective image because the reader can image the mercury rising and see its effects in Raja, who has to return to bed and labor under his illness.

Simile: Tara and her childhood home

When Tara returns to her home, she feels like part of her is "sinking languidly down into the passive pleasure of having returned to the familiar—like a pebble, she had been picked up and hurled back into the pond, and sunk down through the layer of green scum...why was the pond so muddy and stagnant? Why had nothing changed?" (12.) The pond, or the well, is an important part of the novel because it represents death and stagnation, and here Tara takes that and expands it to her entire childhood home and existence. Here she feels slow and stultified, pulled back into

the ennui of her old life. She cannot get out, and she seems doomed while she is here to sink down further.

Metaphor: Dying as a tunnel

Bim wishes, "almost, that she could lower herself into that dark tunnel, and slip along behind the passage made for her by the older, the dying woman" (98). She sees death as a passage through a dark tunnel, a tunnel that Mira has already traversed and that she, Bim, may traverse soon. The other words she chooses contribute more to the metaphor. "Lower herself" suggests a grave in its descent into the earth, and "slip along" makes death sound cool, calm, and welcoming. Here Bim is wondering if life is really worth it and if death may be a respite from emotion, tension, and suffering.

Metaphor: Old Delhi

Bim remarks of her city, "Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves" (5). This metaphor depicts Old Delhi in the language of death and decay. There is no life, no change, and no vitality. Everything is quiet, dull, and the same as it always was. While this is comforting to some, to others like Bakul, it is stultifying and incomprehensible.

Simile: Life as a river

Bim remarks to Tara, in regards to the summer of 1947, "Isn't it strange how life won't flow, like a river, but moves in jumps, as if it were held back by locks that are opened now and then to let it jump forwards in a kind of flood?" (42.) She is comparing life to a river that is dammed up and moves slowly, but then a lot of water comes out at once before being dammed up again. Most of the Das siblings' childhood was slow and dull, but occasionally there was a time when so many things happened at once—the Partition, Raja's illness, Baba's gramophone, etc.

Clear Light of Day Irony**Dramatic Irony: Tara's goals**

When the Das children were young, during their visit to the roof with Aunt Mira, Raja proclaimed that he wanted to be a hero one day, to which Bim proclaimed that she wanted to be a heroine. At this point, Tara proclaimed that she just wanted to be a mother, and Raja and Bim chided her. They laughed at the randomness of Tara's goals and how inferior her goals were in comparison to their own. Aunt Mira, however, believed Tara's goals were more likely to come true than the other two. In the end, that is how it turns out. Raja controls a huge business he has not built it by himself and has just taken over it from his father-in-law, a task he ironically found beneath him when Bim asked him to take over their father's business after his death. Bim herself has been teaching to keep her household running, and is far from the heroine she imagined herself to be. Tara has truly become what she said would, ironically, unlike her elder, more dynamic siblings.

Situational Irony: The car accident

Mr. Das dies in a car accident, one the narrator describes thusly: "There was no damage to the car at all. It could scarcely be called an accident, so minor was it in appearance" (64). This is ironic given the fact that the car sustained no damage but a human being was killed. Desai delivers this news in a straightforward, almost passive way, which cements the reader's understanding of Mr. Das as a rather inconsequential figure in the text.

Situational Irony: Raja's Heroism

Bim notes, "Raja was truly the stuff of which heroes are made, she was convinced, yet here he lay, ironically, too ill to play the hero he longed to, and she half-believed, he was meant to be" (45). Raja and Bim see Raja as a hero, a romantic and brilliant poet who is going to do great things. He is full of ideas and plans, but, ironically, it is he—not the listless Tara—who is bedridden with a devastating disease. His heroism is muted and, though he rages and complains, he can do nothing.

Situational Irony: Raja developing as a copycat

Raja, when he is young, shows a great fascination with Urdu and Muslim culture, so much that it frightens his family because the time was ripe with the stories of the Partition and communal hatred. Raja, however, proclaims his love for Urdu and adoration for Hyder Ali and leaves for Hyderabad instead of working for his father's firm after his death (he felt that such tasks were beneath a poet of his caliber). But, after marrying Hyder Ali's daughter and taking over their family business, he lets go of his ambitions as a poet and ends up living as a businessman himself; furthermore, the poetry he did write is hopelessly derivative.

Clear Light of Day Imagery**The Parents' Play Room**

The children were often intrigued by the room in which their parents entertained friends and played bridge with them. The children weren't allowed inside while a game was in process, so they held the room and the game in awe when they couldn't understand the names and numbers their parents spoke of. This was the only time their parents were ever in their house, as Mr. and Mrs. Das were very social and often left the children in the care of servants and went to various clubs; thus, the children began to dislike the room. They wanted to have their parents to themselves and plotted a number of ways to get rid of the bridge table. The play room, thus, became a thing to dread and an image of estrangement.

Tara and Bim's houses

Bim and Tara live in Old Delhi and New York respectively, and their houses reflect their respective personalities. While Tara keeps moving on continuously given the nature of his husband's job, Bim is firmly rooted in her childhood house. Tara likes to keep her house impeccably clean and adorned, while Bim is hardly concerned with getting the house dusted. Their houses mirror the polar opposites of their personalities. While Tara likes to look presentable to the world and seeks approval, Bim likes to be comfortable to the point of being unkempt—and is completely unabashed about it.

Bim's Garden

Tara's first reaction upon seeing her childhood garden is awareness of the lack of maintenance, along with nostalgia. She looks at the dirt accumulated on the trees and wonders why Bim doesn't bother to have the garden watered. She has an attachment to a pathway with rose bushes where her mother used to stroll during Tara's childhood, and she is pained to see the weakness of the flowers after so long. For her, the garden holds a special place, for it was where she could get lost and away from her overbearing siblings and unconcerned parents.

Baba

Baba is described thusly: "There was something insubstantial about his long slimness in the light white clothes, such a total absence of being, of character, of clamouring traits and

characteristics" (40). Desai indicates that Baba is not quite there by his insubstantiality and his "absence," but there is also a strong sense of his purity and ethereal nature.

Clear Light of Day The Partition

While *Clear Light of Day* deals mostly with the Das family and their private relationships, fears, and dreams, it is also set against the backdrop of one of the most momentous events in the 20th century: the independence of India from Britain and the separating of India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan were some of the British Empire's most lucrative and politically significant holdings. The Indian independence movement began as early as the 1850s and gained some ground in the 1880s with the formation of the Indian National Congress, but it began to achieve prominence from the 1920s onward when Mahatma Gandhi became its leader.

During the Second World War, the INC pushed for Britain to "Quit India," but Gandhi worried about asking for self-rule while Britain was being devastated by the Nazis. Nevertheless, when the war ended, it was clear that the demand for independence was widespread. Congress and the Muslim League dominated elections and the new British prime minister, Clement Atlee, favored independence.

The leader of the Muslim League, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argued that Muslims should have their own state. In response to this, the Mountbatten Plan would divide British India along religious lines; however, this was flawed because many Muslims lived in Hindu-majority India and Hindus and Sikhs lived in what would be Pakistan. Sir Cyril Radcliffe proposed a line that would divide the country on simple district majorities, and this "Radcliffe Line" was put into effect only five days after it was proposed. The line was later deemed "a failure in terms of boundary-making, but a striking success in terms of providing political cover to all sides." Independence day for Pakistan was August 14th, 1947, and India's was the following day because Lord Mountbatten had to travel from the former to the latter; it took two more days for Pakistan's official borders, the Radcliffe Line, to be established. Jawaharlal Nehru became India's first prime minister, and Jinnah became Pakistan's Governor-General for the interim.

British withdrawal was hasty, and, despite the elation over independence, troubles began immediately. Over 15 million Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs moved from one country to another because they feared persecution, making this the largest movement of peoples in human history. Over a million people died in this massive upheaval, and many spent time in horrific camps near cities afflicted by violence and looting. New Delhi saw the breakdown of law and order and Muslims waited for succor in the walls of Humayan's Tomb. A Hindu nationalist assassinated Gandhi in January of 1948 due to his perceived tolerance for Muslims.

After Gandhi's assassination, secular politicians began to exercise a greater hold over the country, and the first democratic elections were held in 1951.

India and Pakistan fought, and continue to fight, over Kashmir, a majority-Muslim border region whose ruler felt it was in his best interest to stay a part of India. India continues to possess about 2/3 of the area, but final boundaries are still disputed. In 1971 both India and Pakistan fought over East Pakistan, which seceded and became Bangladesh.

Sample 5 Marks Questions

1. 1

How do feminist themes color the story of *Clear Light of Day*?

The primary protagonists in *Clear Light of Day* are Bim and Tara, sisters who seem to be worlds apart. While Bim is rebellious and yearns to be a 'heroine' someday, Tara is timid and is happy to be a 'mother' when she grows up. The book focuses on the individual dynamics between the characters but also comments on the situation of women as a whole. Bim often gets defensive of her spinster status, and more than once taunts Tara for her supposedly easy choice of life. Tara is not a complete doormat, but her life is very traditional in terms of gender relations and expectations.

The two sisters grew watching their brother, Raja, getting preferential treatment; Bim, in particular, was frustrated with this. She refuses to get married because she does not see how it will improve her life, and decides she will be independent, teach, and make her own choices. Desai also offers feminist commentary with the comparison of Bim and the Misra sisters: like Bim, they are teachers and providers of their household, but they are not strong enough to speak up against their exploitative brothers.

2. 2

Does Bim's character want to escape in the same way Tara and Raja did? Why/ why not?

It is very obvious that Raja and Tara want to escape the Das household: Raja strains under the yoke of his family, religious obligations, and the repression of his intellectual and romantic aims. As soon as he heals from his sickness, he leaves the house to emulate the life of Hyder Ali, his idol. Tara also finds her household stifling and harsh. She and Bim do not get along well, Aunt Mira and Baba are difficult, and she dreams of a husband and a family. As soon as she meets Bakul she is gone. Bim, though, makes a point of remaining in the Das home and taking care of the remaining family. She does not marry, she does not travel, and she teaches local girls who come to her house. She is snide regarding Tara's "cosmopolitanism" and her travels, and she seems more or less content to live as she always has. However, even if Bim is happy with some of the choices she made, she does seem to yearn for an escape in other ways. She wants to escape the past and its hold on her; she wants to improve her relationship with Raja; she wants to open herself up to change and peace. Her escape, then, is not physical but rather mental/emotional.

3. 3

How does the historical setting of the novel influence its narrative?

The plot of *Clear Light of Day* jumps between several decades, the climactic actions set in 1947 during the Partition of India. Although the siblings, due to their religion and location, are not directly affected, the Partition puts the wheels in motion for everyone. Wary of communal tension, Hyder Ali, landlord and neighbor of the Das family, retreats to Hyderabad. Raja follows him because he idolizes him, and later marries his daughter. Bim looks upon this act as a betrayal to his family and begins to hold a grudge against him. She turns reclusive and subsequently, a rift occurs between her and Tara. The Partition of India also superimposes the theme of separation as a symbol for the drift that has occurred between siblings who were once close to each other.

4. 4

How does the novel's title relate to and inform its story?

Desai frequently uses imagery of light and dark in the work. She describes the house and the well primarily in terms of darkness: dusty, stagnant, deep, oily, dismal, shabby, etc. Obfuscation and gloom characterize the past as well, especially for Bim. She can only see things through certain lenses and will not allow the light of clarity to shine in one her and show her that some of her grievances and prejudices are misleading or harmful. At the very end of the novel when Bim has her epiphany, Desai writes, "Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all" (165). Desai interweaves the image of actual dark, as in the night, and metaphorical light, as in Bim's realization of how much she loves her family. Thus, the title refers to Bim's sloughing off of the weight of her past and her embrace of clarity and peace.

5. 5

Why does Bim become so upset at Dr. Biswas's characterization of her when she does indeed spend time taking care of her family, as he suggests?

Bim feels woefully misunderstands when Dr. Biswas lauds what he perceives as her sacrificing nature. For Bim, she is not simply choosing to give up on life and devote herself to serving others. She isn't exiling herself or taking on the role of a martyr. Rather, Bim is consciously making the decision to stay in the Das household, take care of her aunt and her brother, not marry, and pursue an education. Certainly some aspects of this situation are feminine in their attributes, but Bim is making choices that are authentically her and she does not wish to be seen as a stereotypical, self-sacrificing woman. Biswas is only being ignorant and condescending in his depiction of her.