

Bimla (Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*)**Independent**

Character As the oldest of four siblings, Bimla is the most confident and assertive, and while this doesn't change, it does assume a different shape in her later years. She remains an independent person, even though this requires decisions that do not always bring her happiness. While her siblings escape from the family home, she remains (with her autistic brother, Baba). She also remains unmarried, preferring to support herself by teaching history in a women's college. It is significant that she has chosen history, rather than, say, literature, since a key theme of the novel is the passage of time. Her movements are confined to the house, the garden, the neighbours' house and the college. While she is (largely) content, the burdens of the past bear down on her as the story unfolds. Events from her childhood continue to haunt her, and the rising costs of the house worry her. Although a single and independent woman, she takes on the housewifely tasks of cleaning, cooking and looking after a tubercular brother and an autistic brother. Bimla is a conflicted character, who wishes to live as an independent woman but also wants to keep the family together. In some ways, she represents a traditional way of life, unhurried, unselfish, unconcerned with change. That last attitude, however, is her flaw.

Activities Bimla, as a young person, studies a lot, and when she plays with her siblings, she takes the dominant role. Later, she spends most of her time teaching at the college, preparing classes and talking with students. Throughout her life, she plays the role of a carer, and a surrogate mother, to her ill brother, Raja, and the autistic Baba.

Illustrative moments

Independent After her father dies, and the children are orphaned, Bimla speaks to herself during a walk in the garden at twilight. She reviews her young life and then makes a decision: 'I shall work – I shall do things. I shall earn my own living – and look after Mira-masi [her aunt] and Baba [her brother] – and be independent.' This is a heady thing for a young person to decide, but she never swerves from this commitment.

Self-pitying Part of the subtlety of Desai's description of Bimla is that we don't really know if she is happy or not. When Tara comes back from America, with her successful and wealthy husband, the unmarried, grey-haired Bimla and Tara have a long talk. Tara says it is nice to be in Delhi again, and Bimla replies, 'Old Delhi does not change. It only decays.' The reader knows she is also speaking of herself.

Introspective While none of the characters are religious—they are part of a modern, English-educated elite—Bimla has an introspection that comes close to meditation. After the fireworks and arguments at the end of the novel, she goes to her neighbours' house to listen to a concert of classical Indian songs by two men. In the serenity of that familiar setting, a house she has known all her life, she has a sort of epiphany. As she 'heard the difference between the old man's voice (sharp, cracked with the bitterness of experience) and the young man's voice (like a child's sweet and clear), she remembered the line in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "Time the destroyer is time the preserver".'