



Dancing in the Dark

By Robyn Bavati

PLOT SUMMARY

Born into an extremely orthodox Jewish family, Ditty Cohen's life is circumscribed by restrictions which are strictly enforced by both her family and the community. She must follow guidelines about what she eats, her dress code, what she reads, where she goes and the people with whom she mixes. Indeed Ditty never makes independent decisions allowing the Torah (the book of Jewish Law) to dictate all aspects of her life.

When the book opens, she is unquestioning in her devotion to this life style. She never challenges her obligations and is a dutiful child, helping her mother, assisting with the younger children and praying to Hashem (God) as she ought. Any link to the secular world is to be avoided but unexpectedly, Ditty is exposed to television where she views a ballet performance of *Nutcracker* and she finds herself overcome, struck by the grace and beauty of movement which transports her to a world of never imagined possibility. Not surprisingly, she begs her parents to allow her to learn ballet but such blatant flouting of traditional practice is denied and the dream is quashed....temporarily.

As Ditty secretly watches the major ballets on the prohibited television set at Sara Kesten's house, she is swept up by an emerging dream. Encouraged by her modern orthodox cousin Linda, she contrives to attend ballet classes, making excuses to her mother about babysitting jobs. The lies become more elaborate, the ruse more complex and the deception complete so that Ditty is ultimately living in two worlds. While she is desperate to unburden herself to her parents, she is brutally aware that their disapproval would be absolute.

Now a talented ballerina, Ditty is encouraged and praised by Mrs. Mitchell who nurtures her so that a career as a dancer becomes a strong and real possibility but coupled with her secret success, she begins to confront many challenges to her religious world view. Ditty is forced to reconsider her commitment to the holy Sabbath, to the laws of kosher eating, to the prohibition against mixing with the opposite sex and ultimately, to her devotion to Torah.

When her secrets and betrayals are finally exposed, her father forces her to choose between her family and their orthodox life style and her career as a

dancer. Torn between two worlds, Ditty has learned that to be that person she has discovered through her dancing success at the National Theatre, she must leave home and venture into the secular world which has allowed her to experience the freedom to be herself.

THEMES

Although the plot of this book centres around ballet, it also explores some complex, universal themes each of which can be used as a spring board for in depth class discussion. Teachers can consider one or all of these themes.

Lies and secrets

Many characters in *Dancing in the Dark*, lie, keep secrets or withhold information from others. Teachers should draw student attention to some or all of the following examples from the text:

- Ditty lies to her parents in order to fulfill her own passions.

“If peace in the home was more important than truth, I might finally have found a way to ease my conscience. If truth was not the ultimate value, maybe it was okay to lie.” (p152)

- Mrs. Kesten lies to her own daughter.

“She lies to me. All the time. White lies, she calls them and when she isn’t lying, she’s keeping secrets... I am only doing to her what she did to me.” (p14)

- Mrs. Cohen lies to her husband in order to see Ditty dance on stage.

“I can’t believe my daughter has just signed a contract with the Australian Ballet. I lied to your father... He doesn’t know I am here.” (p285)

- Linda ‘pretends’ to be orthodox in order to marry her beloved Sam.

*“Does he know what you really think?
Of course he does and he doesn’t mind, as long as I’m willing to lead an orthodox lifestyle... Honestly, Ditty, I don’t think it matters whether I believe it all or not.”* (p265)

Activity:

Students should engage in an Oxford debate¹ on either of the following topics:

Can lying ever be justified?
OR
Is keeping a secret a form of lying?

Students should then write this discussion into a formal argumentative essay.

Censorship

Mr. and Mrs. Cohen insulate their children against the influences of the secular world in order to preserve the heritage of the Jewish people.

"All books were censored, and most didn't make it into the school library in the first place. Those that did were vetted..." (p29)

"...he hated the thought of us being exposed to the secular influences..." (p23)

"...their computer had access to the Internet, which my dad said was like inviting Satan right into your home." (p23)

Most parents limit and restrict their children's movements, their friendship circles and their exposure to lifestyles which are at odds with those chosen by the parents.

Activity 1:

Students are to be divided into four groups and a scribe appointed to record the discussion. The teacher should allocate one of the following topics per group and students are to engage in a round table discussion teasing out both sides of their specific issue.

1. If preservation of an honorable tradition and lifestyle is the purpose, can a restricted lifestyle be justified? *"I hardly ever got to go to Linda's. My father didn't like me going there... he hated the thought of us being exposed to the secular influences of Linda's home." (p22)*
2. Is it wrong to mould and direct the life of those in your care? (Must parents offer choice?) *"It's not that I'd want to go out with him, exactly, it's that I'd want the choice." (p199)*
3. Does censorship encourage betrayal? *"I think I'd have turned off religion forever if it had been shoved down my throat. But it wasn't like that for me. My parents gave me a choice. Yours tried to force you." (p266)*

¹ An Oxford Debate is an impromptu debate which involves the entire class. A proposition is put forward and students stand to the left of the classroom if they disagree with it and to the right if they support it. Comments pass across the room as students attempt to persuade others to cross the floor.

4. Are parents who set no restrictions irresponsible?

After fifteen minutes of discussion, two students from each group move to another group and join the discussion. The 'new arrivals' should inject new ideas into the discussion and set it on a different path. At the end of the lesson, the scribe presents the issues raised, to the rest of the class.

Activity 2:

Students should read the exchange between Ditty's father and Uncle Yitzchok on pages 38 and 39 and discuss the differing views presented.

The teacher should then assign roles and students role play this scene, developing the ideas of each of the characters. Students watching the exchange should write an opinion piece for a newspaper presenting their response to the discussion.² The final pieces can be shared and further discussion entered into.

Religion

Religion governs the life of the Cohen family and all those in the 'Haredi' community depicted in this novel. It clearly provides guidance and satisfaction to some and yet troubles and limits others.

Activity:

The teacher should place a placard with each of the statements below in the four corners of the room. After explaining each statement, students are directed to stand in the corner which best presents their view. Students discuss their view with those in their corner and then they write a 'manifesto' presenting their philosophy. Negotiating the wording will be a fascinating exercise and the teacher can discuss the way in which the UN for example or political figures often struggle to release a mutually acceptable manifesto. (Teachers could use the recent press releases from The Climate Change conference in Copenhagen to demonstrate this)

1. Religion is the opiate of the people.³
(*"We're brainwashed..."* p59)
2. Religion has an embedded system of morality and ethics which has permeated Western thinking. Without it, we would be a less moral community. (*"I am raising them to be free – free from the corruption of secularism, free to follow the path Hashem intended."* p39)

² This would be an appropriate opportunity to introduce students to the difference between reporting fact and presenting opinion. Examples of each genre, perhaps from the local newspaper should be shown to students and discussed before students set about writing their own pieces.

³ Karl Marx

3. Faith is learned (see discussion on p182)
4. All religions are the same: religion is basically guilt, with different holidays.

The Slippery Slope

The teacher should explain the concept of the 'slippery slope' and then examine the way in which it is manifest in this book. Look at the way one lie leads to another and one weakening in religious practice leads to a crack in commitment and ultimately, a crack in Ditty's faith. The following references may be useful:

"...it's one thing being friends with her when you're learning ballet. But I mean, going to her house!' She shook her head in disbelief. 'Sometimes I wonder if you know what you're doing.'" (p129)

"It got a bit easier each time. There was a tug of guilt the moment I first stepped on to the tram, but once I arrived at the National, the world outside just disappeared." (p.157)

Activity:

Should a community or faith group set boundaries to avoid the impact of the slippery slope? Can this practice be justified?

Having introduced the concept of the Slippery Slope, the teacher can then discuss this in relation to say, Euthanasia using newspaper articles and opinion pieces.⁴

Who am I?

Ditty struggles to know herself and be accepted.

"And I was starting to feel like I was an imposter, like I didn't belong." (p127)

"Out there in the audience, there are people who like what I do. People who accept me. People who approve of who I am." (p244)

⁴ http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/euthanasia/against/against_1.shtml#section_4

Activity:

Examine the following poem with your teacher and discuss it in light of Ditty's questions about self. Be sure to have the different students reading the voices so that the effect of multiple aspects of self is conveyed.

Voice one: ¹

Voice two: ²

Voice three: ³

Voice four: ⁴

Me?

¹Who am I?

³Which me is-

²Is me?

¹When I talk to my best friend- ³I am me.

²And when I talk to a boy- ¹I am me.

³But why is it that me ²and me ⁴aren't the same?

¹Who am I?

³Which me is-

²Is me?

¹When I am alone

¹With only nature to keep me company?

¹Or when I lie in bed at night,

¹Thinking about people?

¹And which ⁴Them ¹I see,

⁴Or which ¹'them' ⁴they show me.

¹Who am I?

³Which me is-

¹Is me?⁵

-Brigitta Wypych

In groups of two, discuss the idea presented both in this book and in this poem, namely, that we can never really know ourselves.

⁵ *Fun With Poetry* Sean Monahan 1982 Longman Cheshire p.30

The Influence of the Past on the Present

Re-read the discussion about the influence of the past which appears on p137.

- Ditty asks, “*Why should my future depend on the past?*”
- Emma convinces Ditty “...*you can’t change your past, Ditty, but you’ve still got your future.*” (p244)
- Ditty’s mother always reminded her that “*You are a link in a chain... Never forget your responsibility to the Jewish people*” (p203).

Activity:

Share your views on the following questions about the link between the past and who we become.

1. What influence, if any does the past have on who we become?
2. Can we escape our past? Is it advisable?
3. Can the past be a burden? Can it be a blessing?

Use the text to justify your views.

Hanging Dirty Linen in Public

Novels such as *Dancing in the Dark* (Bavati), *Does My head Look Big in This?* (Abdel-Fattah) and *The Trouble with Islam* (Manji) deal with issues of concern to particular communities. They raise issues which may indeed be sensitive or sacred and place them in the public arena for general discussion.

Activity:

Does a member of a community (even a disgruntled member) have obligations regarding privacy of the community? Discuss these issues using examples from other insular communities (such as The Mormons, The Amish). Write a letter to the editor outlining your view.

- Does Bavati go too far in her exposure and criticism of what may be considered sensitive issues in the Jewish community?

STRUCTURE

This book plays with chronology in order to heighten the dramatic effect of the climax. The teacher should draw student attention to the way in which the prologue and chapter forty one, are actually accounts of the same scene. And that the body of the book is a flashback of events leading up to this moment.⁶

Extension Activity:

Students should read another novel or short story in which this device is used say, Joan Phipson's *A Tide Flowing* or Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* and examine and discuss the dramatic effect created. In addition, a film study could extend this examination and a film such as Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* or the 1939 version of *Wuthering Heights* could be used to discuss the purpose and dramatic effect of the technique. On completion of the discussion, students should use this device of analepsis to write a short story of their own. A class reading of all the stories can follow.

Activity:

As students re-read the ending of the book, they should engage with the following question:

- Is the ending a happy or sad one? For whom?

Students should re-write the ending from the perspective of others involved in the story say, Ditty's mother, her father or any of her siblings. Students should then share these different perspectives in reading circles.

Activity:

"Maybe I could keep it a secret', I told her, after a while.

'No Ditty. You couldn't.'

'That's what you said when I first started dancing, and it's been nearly five years.'

Sara let out a long, audible breath. 'I still find it hard to believe, even though I know it's true'.

'I know. I can hardly believe it, either.'" (p220)

- Are you convinced by Bavati's premise that the deception could be maintained for so long in such a highly supervised community? Why/Why not? Provide evidence from the text to justify your view.

Activity:

Compare and contrast the following scenes which focus on the title of the book:

Mrs. Cohen remembers when little Ditty was one and a half years old and she disappeared. After looking all over the house for her *"...we thought we'd better*

⁶ External analepsis is the formal name of this device and could be explored by the teacher

look outside and that's where we found you. You were standing in the middle of the garden, dancing in the dark..." (p146)

"A moment later I am moving through space. Spinning. Twirling. Dancing. In the light..." (p287)

Using these scenes and the metaphoric interpretation of moving from darkness to light, write a few paragraphs that explain why this title was chosen by Bavati for her story. Can you suggest an alternate title?

WIDER READING

The teacher should divide the class into groups of five or six students in order to facilitate Literature Circles.⁷ Young Adult fiction that focuses on fundamentalist groups and/or minority faith groups will allow for further discussion of the themes raised in *Dancing in the Dark*.

Some suggested titles:

Grace by Morris Gleitzman

Does My Head look big in this? by Randa Abdel-Fattah

Infidel Ayaan Hirsi Ali

My Forbidden face: growing up under the Taliban- a young woman's story by Latifa

The Trouble With Islam I by Irshad Maji

⁷ Literature Circles are an effective method of reading in the multi-level classroom and provide students with an avenue for sharing their thoughts with peers using minimal teacher direction.

Methodology

Teachers provide multiple copies of selected texts (no more than 5 of each title for the best results) and students choose to read a particular book based on personal preference after hearing a short introduction from the teacher. The students in each group (i.e. reading the same book) decide on the number of pages to be read each night, and students share ideas about their reading the following day. In this way, books are completed in a condensed and limited time frame. Discussions are totally student directed. On the completion of the reading, students do a brief presentation of their discussion to the class.

EXTENSION WORK- RESEARCH

Activity 1:

Compare and contrast the following views on arranged marriages, 'shidduchim'.

"Nobody's forcing her to marry him. And anyway, arranged marriages are much, much safer. And far more likely to succeed." (p21)

"Wouldn't you want to pick the guy yourself?"

'No, not really.'

'So you'd prefer Mum and Dad pick him for you?'

'Yes. I trust their judgment...' Rochel was so calm and accepting I didn't know whether to pity or envy her." (p116)

Students should research the concept of arranged marriages across religious traditions and within the diverse communities of the world. Students can then present their finding in a formal oral presentation to the class. As the presentations are made the teacher should list the pros and cons according to the research conducted by the class. Students should write a personal piece expressing their view.

Activity 2:

Dancing in the Dark provides the reader with much information about the traditional festivals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (chapter 12).

Students are to choose one festival from any other religious tradition not represented in the classroom population, and research its origin, practices and purpose. Students present their finding to the class with a PowerPoint presentation.

FILM STUDY

As a class, watch the movie *Billy Elliot*. The Teacher should lead a discussion focusing on the similarities and differences between the experiences of the protagonists.

Activity:

Students should write a comparative analysis of Bavati's book and Stephen Daldry's *Billy Elliot*.

GEOGRAPHY AND MAPPING

The places mentioned in *Dancing in the Dark*, do indeed exist and can be visited by students in Melbourne, Australia who are studying this text.

Activity 1:

Map out the area and mark the streets, shops and places mentioned in chapter 16. Alternatively take a visit to these places and walk Ditty's journey

Activity 2:

Arrange a visit for your class to the local synagogue to meet the rabbi and discuss the fundamentals of Jewish practice across the spectrum. What can be concluded regarding the way of life presented by Bavati in this book?

Activity 3:

Arrange a visit to another ethnic community in your area and investigate the practices and beliefs of this group (e.g. Buddhist temple, Islamic mosque).

CHARACTER STUDIES

Ditty changes from being a young twelve year old, molded and influenced by the views of her 'Haredi' upbringing, into an independent thinker who rejects the teachings of her community.

Activity:

In a fluent piece of prose, trace the developments of this altered way of thinking making detailed references to the text.

In a parallel study, examine the trajectory of Linda's changed attitudes. In a fluent piece of prose draw conclusions of your own regarding the paths traveled by these young women. What might have been Bavati's purpose in creating in creating this contrast?

VISUAL LITERACY

The teacher should collect multiple copies of the picture book *The Peasant Prince* by Li Cunxin and Anne Spudvilas or multiple colour copies of the penultimate double page in which Li's parents are depicted sitting in the audience and watching their son dance for the very first time.

Activity:

The teacher should guide a discussion on the way in which Spudvilas has focused our attention on the parents. What emotions has she evoked and what devices has she used to do this?

Compare this pictorial depiction with Mrs. Cohen's first exposure to Ditty as a dancer p286/287. Bavati carefully leaves the detail of Mrs. Cohen's response to the reader's imagination. Students should write a monologue of either Mrs. Cohen's thoughts or those of Mr. and Mrs. Li at this particular moment.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

On p272 Ditty says, *"I miss my brothers and sisters."*

Write a creative story which records a reunion between Ditty and any one of her family members, years down the track. The teacher should remind students to remain faithful to the personalities created by Bavati. Students should share these creative pieces with the rest of the class.