

The Mother-Daughter Conflict  
in Selected Works by  
Doris Lessing

by

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## ABSTRACT

The central characters in Doris Lessing's novels are usually women struggling to shape for themselves a new and authentic identity in a changing world. In this study it is argued that this quest involves the Lessing character in a conflict less with any man than with another woman. This woman is the mother. The younger woman's task is to resist the compulsion to become like her mother and so lead a narrow, entirely domesticated life.

The theme of the mother-daughter conflict is given its first extensive examination in this study. Three of Lessing's works are analysed in detail, while brief reference is made to nearly all of her novels and some African short stories. The three works selected, The Grass is Singing (1950), "To Room Nineteen" (1963), and The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five (1980), mark the beginning, an approximate mid-point, and the conclusion of the theme under discussion. They are also works that have not, as yet, enjoyed the exhaustive critical attention given to the Children of Violence series and The Golden Notebook.

In Chapter 1, the introductory chapter, the mother-daughter conflict is linked to Lessing's perennial

concern with the relations between the individual and the collective. The term "Angel in the House" is introduced as a concept (and a social role) that encapsulates all that the "daughter" figure fears and flees from. Lessing's concern with the continuing prevalence, and harmfulness, of the concept of the Angel in the House is placed in the context of the views of social scientists and other writers on the position of the modern middle-class woman.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Lessing's first novel, The Grass is Singing, and a short story entitled "To Room Nineteen" are examined. Both these works are found to express the author's violent rejection of the way of life of the domesticated woman. Both works depict the degeneration of a housewife into mental derangement and self-willed death. The prevalence of the mad housewife in women's writing and the complementary relation of this figure to the Angel in the House are discussed.

In Chapter 3, a distinction is drawn between The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen." While the novel attributes deterministic force to the social structures of the Southern Rhodesian world inhabited by Mary Turner, in the short story there is evidence of Lessing's growing concern with the need to alter consciousness if one is effectively to carry out the task of improving formal structures.

In Chapter 4, The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five is judged to represent the conclusion of the mother-daughter theme in Lessing's work. The author is

described as having moved from an attitude of angry protest to one more conciliatory. By now manifestly less concerned with the processes of role formation than with those of psychosexuality, Lessing discards her stance of satirical assailant of stereotypes for that of mythmaker, creator of archetypes.

It is argued that her substitution of fantasy for social realism does not, however, mean that Lessing relinquishes her concern with the relations between the individual and the collective. Furthermore, even if Lessing redeems the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood in Marriages, she does so only by limiting their significance within the total lifespan of the individual woman while elevating the concepts "marriage" and "motherhood" to a metaphorical status. "Mothering" then entails acceptance of any of a variety of roles, or tasks, that provide expression for the human desire to nurture or care for others.

In Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, the alterations noted in Lessing's treatment of the mother-daughter theme are linked to developments in social currents and views in the post-war period. The study concludes with an assessment of Lessing's importance as a chronicler of contemporary experience.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Doris Lessing's fiction records a persistent concern with the struggle by a female protagonist to come to terms with her identity as a woman. The central tension in this struggle arises not from the protagonist's opposition to any man, or men, but to a woman. This woman is the mother.

The term "the mother" denotes, most obviously, that fictional character who is the mother of the protagonist, and it may also refer to any other older woman of the mother's generation who serves as an exemplar, or role model, for the younger woman. More specifically, however, the term "the mother" refers to the compulsion within the protagonist to become like her mother. The conflict therefore has its "internal" and "external" aspects.

The "internal" struggle with the mother is of intense interest to Lessing. Early in her writings, in The Grass is Singing (1950), she reveals her belief in the necessity for the modern woman to change her consciousness. However, this personal trial takes place not only in reaction to older women of the protagonist's intimate circle but also within a larger public context. In diverging from the life-patterns set for them by their mothers, daughters

are obliged to forge new social roles for themselves. This involves their countering powerful conservative images of womanhood found in advertising, the popular media, and literature. As a maker of fiction herself, Lessing is concerned particularly with the part played by literature in shaping women's self-images. Her best-known rebel, Martha Quest, is described as "of that generation who, having found nothing in religion, had formed themselves by literature" (PM 73).<sup>1</sup>

The Lessing protagonist, then, reacts against images that form part of the stock of received and approved notions shaping women's destiny, images that are collective; consequently, the mother-daughter conflict should be seen as part of that broader theme the author described as "the theme" of the Children of Violence series, the "study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective."<sup>2</sup>

The daughter's task, or quest, which is to extend herself beyond the limited vision of womanhood assigned to her by her mother and literature, entails severe tests of the younger woman's sense of her own integrity. She is caught between the pressures of the social construct of femininity (that is, her definition by herself and others in terms of gender) and her own inner drive toward an independent sense of authenticity. Typically, the conflict caused by these opposed pressures leads to a climactic process during which the layers of the social self are "stripped" away before the Lessing woman can reconstitute herself with renewed awareness and strength.

Martha Quest of the Children of Violence (1952-1969) series, Anna Wulf of The Golden Notebook (1962), and Kate Brown of The Summer Before the Dark (1973), have varying degrees of success in the complex and strenuous task of shaping a new and genuine identity for themselves. Brief references will be made to their quests, but the careers of Martha and Anna in particular have already received much critical attention, and the purpose of this study is to examine, rather, the careers of those characters who arrive at extreme conclusions to the quest: those who either fail totally or succeed most completely. At one extreme of Lessing's exploration of the theme of the questing woman lies the character who never commences her adventure, and she becomes mentally deranged, and eventually chooses to die. Such is the fate of Mary Turner of The Grass is Singing and Susan Rawlings of "To Room Nineteen." Their stories are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. These women feel compelled to be compliant and to accept emotional and economic dependence upon their husbands; yet they are energetic, intelligent, and capable. The price for accommodating acute frustration is high, as Lessing depicts it. Mary and Susan die, in effect, because they do not rebel against the life-pattern of the domesticated woman.

Al·Ith of The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five (1980), on the other hand, is more successful than any previous Lessing quester. The achievement of self-realization, for her, accompanies, rather than excludes, a valuable contribution to the collective--and

it accompanies a period of living the life of a domesticated wife and mother. If Mary and Susan die because they do not reject the traditional social roles, Al·Ith attains the fully realized self because she accepts them.

Al·Ith's tale, which will be examined in Chapter 5, therefore reveals a striking development in Lessing's attitude towards marriage and motherhood. The key to the change in Lessing's attitude (and the key to the reader's acceptance of her thought) is contained in an idea that constitutes the central theme of Marriages. This idea proposes that a lowering of the "boundaries" in the mind that label, categorize, and exclude, leads to expansion and integration ("marriage") of the psyche. ("Why do you make it 'or, or, or?' It could be 'and, and, and,'" said Lessing to an interviewer recently.)<sup>3</sup> In this state of consciousness, the need to reject, rebel, fight, disappears, for acceptance of the responsibilities attaching to any one social role is not seen to preclude the performance of others. The self is not understood as bound exclusively to but as existing apart from (or transcending) any particular social roles. From a point of view that is so sure as to allow for flexibility, the self either chooses responsibility or accepts what seems inevitable. Instead of being in a state of resistance to duties and imperatives, the self is liberated into commitment.

Lessing finds the appropriate medium for her "message" in allegory, for this fictional form compels the reader to lower rigid mental categories. We understand allegory by means of analogy or metaphor. Allegory makes us more

aware than do words alone of the metaphorical nature of all words. Each feature of the allegory suggests, typifies, or represents something other than itself; characters, objects, events, and places contradict expectations of a literal correspondence between the word and the reality of the phenomenal world. The fluidity of categories Lessing gains in Marriages through using allegory is of most significance (for the purposes of this study), in relation to the definition of "motherhood." Lessing presents her most developed evaluation of the maternal aspect of women (or, rather, as will be argued, the nurturing aspect of human beings), and, as she does so, she no longer opposes work to love, restraint to freedom, and freedom to commitment; she therefore resolves, dissolves, the tensions involved in the mother-daughter conflict.

A question that emerged from this study is why, until Marriages at least, does the Lessing protagonist gain self-respect, indeed survive, only by resisting identification with the way of her mother, rather than that of her father? It does not seem satisfactory merely to take it as axiomatic that rebellion against her mother is integral to the fictional daughter's struggle to establish right relations between her "individual conscience" and "the collective." The writer must, obviously, value progress, or evolution; and Lessing does. She must also, however, view the mother as a major conservative force. Scrutiny of Lessing's biographical and historical situation reveals that there were strong reasons for her to view the mother in this way. In a recent interview she said:

I don't remember how early I began to fight with my mother ... I can't remember a time when I wasn't fighting with my mother.... My mother was an extremely talented, very energetic, and very frustrated woman--had nothing to put all those energies into except her own children. It was very classical in those days and I think perhaps it's changed. Also she was a nurse, and she liked it when we were ill ... she had all this energy going, you see, which you had to get out from, you had to get out from under it.<sup>4</sup>

Any energetic, intelligent, independently minded daughter would have to set herself in determined, even violent, opposition to such a parent in order to define herself.<sup>5</sup>

Lessing's emotional rebellion against her family was probably affirmed and reinforced by a potent, authoritative intellectual rationale. She was a member of the Communist Party in Southern Rhodesia and, later, in London. Acquaintance with Marx and, in particular, Engels would have suggested to the young girl thirsty for extensive intellectual horizons that if the family is the economic unit upon which the capitalist system is based, and if capitalism is the barrier to a better world for all, then the family must surely be destroyed. The dominant parent within Lessing's family of origin, the centre of its power, was her mother.<sup>6</sup>

Biographical reasons overlap with historical factors to explain Lessing's antipathy to motherhood and the family. If Lessing is a highly autobiographical writer, she reveals, too, an acute awareness of contemporary social currents. For instance, in 1964, in A Proper

Marriage, she presented her most sustained and detailed analysis of the destructive effects upon women of standard expectations and life-patterns. In the previous year, Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique set first the United States and then the rest of the Western world by its ears. The "happy" suburban housewife was, according to Friedan, miserable, frequently neurotic.<sup>7</sup> Other social scientists like Ann Oakley (Housewife) also discovered that the woman who has "all that a woman could want," the four walls of the nuclear family home, was in reality lonely, frustrated, bored, and distressed.<sup>8</sup> Lessing's work forms part of the post-World War II reaction to the economic and social pressures that coaxed and coerced women back into a strictly domestic existence. Such a narrowing of women's lives was especially resented after the encouragement given to women to leave the home during the war so as to replace their menfolk in office and factory.

According to Friedan's most recent book, The Second Stage (1982), the post-war Women's Liberation movement in the United States was not at its inception against marriage, family, and motherhood.<sup>9</sup> However, the American movement did develop such a thrust, which was to have an effect wherever it spread. Friedan explains that even those who, like herself, never opposed the family and motherhood in themselves, did so as they were constituted upon the denial and disparagement of self, the absence of adventure or of control over their own destiny, and the lack of recognised respect and reward that American daughters sensed in their mothers' experience. She

describes, in The Second Stage, the sort of woman whose way of life was being rejected. "Why did so many of our mothers," asks Friedan,

have that grim set of the mouth, that all-patient, all-suffering, all-disapproving perfect control that made us feel inadequate ... and made us such suckers for those guilt-inducing TV commercials? That control, that perfection demanded of home and children, that insistence that she be always right, was her version of machismo--her super-virtuous equivalent of male strength and power, which she used to counter or mask her vulnerability, her economic dependence, her denigration by society and denigration of herself. Inauthenticity was bred into women by weakness. Lacking male power in society, which was the only power recognized then, she got her power in the family by manipulating and denying the feelings of men and children, and her own real feelings, behind that mask of superficial, sweet, steely rightness.... That perfect marriage, perfect house, perfect control of children--so hard for daughters today to emulate--also hid some bitter negative feelings about that housewife-mother state of selfless service. Like all dependent people, women couldn't express, even to themselves, the rage such self-denying virtue almost had to breed, and to mask. They took it out on themselves and covertly on husbands and children. The more powerless and envious her state, the more intense her buried rage, the more guilt over that rage, the more rigid the perfection and control over family and home required to mask those shameful feelings.<sup>10</sup>

As Friedan also notes, the "unmasking" of what she terms "the inauthentic paragon of female virtue" has "preoccupied generations of novelists and dramatists," of whom Lessing is only one.<sup>11</sup> When Mrs. Quest murmurs

inducements to her daughter to feel tired and sleep, Martha resists. Her mother's face then falls "in patient and sorrowful lines, the eternal mother, holding sleep and death in her twin hands like a sweet and poisonous cloud of forgetfulness." Martha's wariness stems from her sense that behind the socially approved mask lies a "baneful figure" whose words are, to her, like "the spells of a witch" (MQ 32). Pitiful and terrible, Mrs. Quest recalls Lessing's own mother, who had "nothing to put all [her] energies into except her own children," and was "a nurse [who] liked it" when her children were ill.

The "generations" of writers, and their critics, who have preoccupied themselves with the "paragon of female virtue" have developed for her a literary name, which has literary origins. She is called the Angel in the House, and the term originates in the title of Coventry Patmore's popular verse-sequence which delineated the virtues of the Victorian ideal of womanhood.<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, with irony, appropriated the term for feminism in a speech she gave in 1931 before the National Society for Women's Service. Speaking on professions for women, Woolf contrasted the disabilities that some women suffered when they tried to earn a living with her own relatively fortunate position. She herself, in order to work, needed only inexpensive materials, and was able to earn money in "respectable" fashion by using her talents as a reviewer. Yet, despite the advantages she enjoyed, she had difficulty in applying herself to writing when she sat down to work. She blamed her inertia on a creature

whom she termed "a villain."<sup>13</sup> This "villain" was not, she said, a man, but a woman. Nor was she real, but, instead, was a "phantom," an "ideal," who (explained Woolf briskly and wittily) was accepted for reasons "to do with the British Empire, [British] colonies, Queen Victoria, Lord Tennyson, the growth of the middle class and so 'on."<sup>14</sup> The Angel is a tyrannous "villain" because she has the full weight of British institutions behind her.

Woolf's Angel appears to lead a less energetic existence than Friedan's. Her characteristics place her in the circumstances of the Leslie Stephen-Bloomsbury milieu, in which even those living in poverty were genteel, cultivated, and kept servants. "She was," said Woolf,

intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish.... She soothed, conciliated, sacrificed herself ... and in short was so constituted that she never had a wish or a mind of her own but preferred to sympathise with the wishes and minds of others.<sup>15</sup>

Since Woolf found that compliance with such behaviour made it difficult for her to claim for herself the time she needed in order to work, it is not surprising that she saw this aesthetic ideal as the most harmful imposed upon literary women by male authors: it cut them off from their own creative energy. It was necessary, she said, to "kill" the Angel in the House.<sup>16</sup>

Woolf's main objection to the Angel is that she

prevents women from doing the meaningful work that would gain them independence, self-esteem--and sheer economic survival. Yet another outline of the ideal woman, one by a literary critic, Hans Eichner, also stresses characteristics that run counter to energetic, creative occupation. She "leads," he says,

a life of almost pure contemplation ... in considerable isolation on a country estate ... a life without external events--a life whose story cannot be told as there is no story, ... she shines like a beacon in a dark world .... When those involved in feeling and action turn to her in their need, they are never dismissed without advice and consolation. She is an ideal, a model of selflessness and of purity of heart.<sup>17</sup>

This woman leads a monotonous existence waiting for events to come to her, and she has no real work.

It is the process of ridding oneself of the compulsion to be like the self-sacrificing Angel that we trace in Lessing's work as her characters struggle to define themselves against their mothers. Her attack upon the life-pattern of the domesticated woman is strongest, most angry and most fearful, in the figures of her "mad" housewives, Mary Turner and Susan Rawlings, for these crazy women are depicted as complementary to their seeming opposite, the virtuous Angel. (As Friedan's portrait reveals, beneath a serene pose may lie a vengeful, frustrated woman.) In adopting the figure of a "mad" character as a means

of expressing rage and rebellion, Lessing is by no means an innovator. Elaine Showalter has shown, for instance, that the mask of madness proved useful to nineteenth-century women writers, such as Charlotte Brontë.<sup>18</sup> However, while Brontë was constrained by the more rigid morality of her time, and her own highly dutiful, religious character, to banish her madwoman to the attic, Lessing may act with more boldness. Her demented creatures inhabit the centre of the home. Home may now openly be assailed as the place where women are driven mad.<sup>19</sup>

Lessing's characters are amongst those modern daughters, described by Friedan, who have begun to rebel openly against identifying themselves with their mothers' combination of relentless control of men and children, supervirtuousness, and lack of purpose. Martha Quest forms her character "against her mother's vapidty," says Lynn Sukenick. If Mrs. Quest clearly suffers because she lacks work equal to her talent and energies, her daughter determinedly fashions her "self-respect out of her sense of difference from the woman who hovers uselessly in the margins of her life."<sup>20</sup>

Sukenick coins the term "matrophobia" to describe the intense mistrust Martha and her friends share of women who "give in."<sup>21</sup> "Matrophobia" is defined more precisely by Adrienne Rich, the American poet, as less to do with fear of one's mother or of motherhood as "of becoming one's mother."<sup>22</sup> In her study entitled Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, Rich states: "Thousands of daughters see their mothers as

having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of."<sup>23</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner finds that "contemporary writers concur that hostility between mothers and daughters is inevitable under patriarchy" and that the formation of a separate identity for the daughter involves "a difficult 'rebirthing.'"<sup>24</sup> Lessing is therefore one in a line of writers, and other commentators on the contemporary woman's experience, who agree on the importance, the validity, even the inevitability of a strenuous effort to resist becoming like one's mother.

It is also possible, however, that what contemporary women writers like Lessing reflect is the fact that the conflict between developing an authentic identity and conforming to conventional ideas about femininity is most acutely felt and expressed by women who (like most writers) possess independent, critical, intelligent judgement, and who (again, like most writers) require solitude in order to do their work.

Such a line of speculation is encouraged by Lessing's declared appreciation of the pleasures of solitude and by the characterisation in her novels. In her interview with Bikman she said:

Solitude is that great, great luxury which you can hardly ever achieve. People don't like other people who are perfectly happy by themselves and don't want to do the things other people find essential. I get letters from these marvelous [sic] women in the States ... these naturally quirky, solitary and observant women. ... But there's someone living in the middle of America

who writes these witty letters about why all her women friends have to get married all the time.<sup>25</sup>

Turning to her characters, we find that Susan Rawlings' obsession becomes her need to be alone; of Mary Turner, the narrator says she was "made to live, by nature and upbringing, alone and sufficient to herself" (GS 108); and Al·Ith, of Marriages, suffers because, when married, she is "never alone at all" (M 192).<sup>26</sup>

Exploring such lines of speculation is of importance when deciding how we are to assess Lessing's characters, for the narrative voice claims typicality for her protagonist's experience.<sup>27</sup> Lessing's opinions are highly respected, perhaps especially in the United States, where a newsletter is published bearing her name; yet her method of generalising from the particular can obscure the potential variety of different responses to similar situations.<sup>28</sup>

If the fates of Mary Turner and Susan Rawlings are to be understood as "typical" of the housewife in the mid- and late-twentieth century (and in this study it will be argued that their experience can claim a degree of representativeness), it should be with two qualifications. The first is that the extremely destructive effect of marriage upon Mary and Susan should be understood as to some extent due to the fact that they have solitary natures. The second is that the climactic events of The Grass is

Singing and "To Room Nineteen" have a symbolic function. The characters' self-willed deaths are metaphorical representations of the psychological "deaths" the writer feels they have already inflicted upon themselves in following their mothers into miserable wifhood.

A vital part of the structure of ideas that assigns to women the roles of contemplative comforter and repository of communal ideals (instead of doer of real work) is the mythology surrounding romantic (heterosexual, monogamous) love. In her book entitled Romantic Love and Society, Jacqueline Sarsby, a sociologist, notes that, as the legal and economic position of women in English society deteriorated during the eighteenth century, there was a marked increase in the reading and writing of literature of romantic love.<sup>29</sup> Ian Watt, a literary critic, also traces a transformation of family, marriage, and ideas in the eighteenth century, in his work, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding.<sup>30</sup> While Watt and Sarsby differ about the reasons for the growth of love literature, they do agree that the "background" to its growth "is not freedom and greater equality, but greater economic pressure to marry and greater difficulties in finding a husband without bringing him a dowry."<sup>31</sup>

Amongst social historians and feminist thinkers in the English-speaking world, it is generally accepted that women not of the working-classes have during the last two centuries been relegated to a life of enforced idleness. Their status and influence waned, leaving them more dependent upon making a good marriage. Eva Figes connects

the trivialisation of women's work in England to the onset of large-scale post-Renaissance capitalism. Employing a blend of historical and sociological evidence, Figes states in Patriarchal Attitudes that while one "must not paint too rosy a picture of the Elizabethan woman's existence," she did exercise considerable authority. The Elizabethan woman shared the workplace (which was usually also the dwelling-place) with her husband, and was entitled to inherit the business on his death.<sup>32</sup> Rich, in Of Woman Born, notes a corresponding deterioration in the position of American women, which she blames upon "the Industrial Revolution" rather than the growth of "capitalism." She points out how recent is the "idea" of mother and child in a home that is separate from the public spheres of the "man's world."<sup>33</sup>

Like Rich, Olive Schreiner linked the advent of industrialisation with the serious loss of influence women have suffered in modern times. Schreiner drew attention to the fact that women no longer control the production of bread, beer, and clothing, or the education of children, while the healing crafts of the wise woman have been usurped by the male-controlled, specialised medical system.<sup>34</sup>

Nancy Chodorow, like Rich, relates the debased position of women to the institution of motherhood. She suggests that as women have found their tasks confined to the domestic sphere, their mothering, or nurturing, functions have expanded to consume the greatest portion of their time and energy.

In her study entitled The Reproduction of Mothering:

Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Chodorow blames both "capitalism" and "industrialization" for the effects upon women's status that have been noted by Figs, Rich, and Schreiner. Agreeing in essentials with their observations, and citing an impressive list of works of social history, psychology, and sociology to support her own statements, Chodorow observes that the family has "lost much of its educational and religious role, as well as its role in the care of the sick and aged," in addition to "its diminished role in material production." Over the last two centuries, the family became, she says, "a quintessentially relational and personal institution" in which women's "family role became centered on child care and taking care of men." This role "involved more than physical labor," she stresses. "It was relational and personal and, in the case of both children and men, maternal."<sup>35</sup> For their husbands, "[b]ourgeois women" have been and are expected to be "nurturant supporters" and "moral guides" upon men's return from the "immoral, competitive world of work."<sup>36</sup>

Mary Turner, Susan Rawlings, and Al·Ith are all demoralised by the absence in their lives of tasks that have recognised value; they are all frustrated by the emotional dependence entailed by their commitment to romantic love and monogamous marriage. The narrow field of activities and emotions consonant with the role of Angel in the House hampers them, while they suffer intensely from their isolation within the "nuclear" family unit.<sup>37</sup>

The works cited so far in this introductory chapter have placed the ideal of the Angel in the House in the context of developments over the past two centuries that were largely economic and technological in nature. However, our understanding of the power and persistence of this cultural image of feminine virtue is enhanced by the knowledge of those who have studied the psychological structures that underlie Western culture. Erich Neumann's The Great Mother (which draws strongly on Jungian theory) and Wolfgang Lederer's The Fear of Women are only two of the most prominent works that suggest that the Angel is a recent descendent of a much older, more potent type, or "archetype," the Good Mother.<sup>38</sup>

It is a commonplace that in Western Christian culture Woman has been seen typically, or "stereotypically," in terms of polarised "good" or "bad" features.<sup>39</sup> As Stepmother, Witch, Bitch, Vamp, Monster, the Bad Mother, she is hated. The archetypal figure here is Eve, our First Mother, who has been burdened with the blame for all human ills that followed the eviction from Eden. On the other hand, as Madonna, Angel, Virgin, the Good Mother, Woman is revered. The archetypal figure here is Mary, the Good Mother.<sup>40</sup> Both the denigration and the elevation of women are understood to be based on fear of their sex and sexuality.

While Man has by tradition been associated with the mind, and whatever is rational, just, ordered, and balanced, Woman's sphere is the body. But a long and strong tradition of Christian asceticism is mistrustful of the body and sexuality. Woman therefore represents the temptation to

betray the (superior) life of the mind, and of the spirit. She is untrustworthy because "by nature" associated with the irrational, the fickle, the intuitive, the earth. She can, however, redeem herself--if her sexuality is neutralised. Thus, while Woman is blamed for the First Sin, which may be regarded as involving some sort of sexual betrayal of Adam with the serpent, Mary redeems Eve's misdemeanour through an Immaculate Conception. Mary is both virgin and mother, girl and nurturer, but never the sexually mature, potentially threatening, woman. She is clearly the model for the gentle, pure, maternal Angel in the House.<sup>41</sup>

According to Lessing and others, the Angel still thrives because the old attitudes have found newer supports to replace those previously provided by religion and literature. In "To Room Nineteen" Susan Rawlings, who is "fed on a hundred books (psychological, anthropological, sociological)," gives up her job when her children are born to live a purely domestic existence in a house in the country, because this is what is "appropriate" ("RN" 346, 344). In 1971, nearly a decade after the publication of this short story, Kate Millett asserted that the social sciences were providing new ideological, rational support for old ideas. In her polemical work Sexual Politics, she termed these disciplines "the most useful and authoritative branches of social control and manipulation."<sup>42</sup> In 1978 Chodorow stated that "[p]ost-Freudian psychology and sociology have provided new rationales for the

idealization and enforcement of women's maternal role, as they have emphasized the crucial importance of the mother-child [as opposed to the parent-child or adult-child] relationship for the child's development."<sup>43</sup> And as recently as 1981, another feminist theorist, Elisabeth Badinter, wrote that, due to the "medical morality" inherited from Freud, the "normal woman" is still, among psychoanalysts, understood in terms of the triad of passivity, masochism, and narcissism.<sup>44</sup> To judge from these warnings the conflict women experience in shaping new social roles for themselves remains stressful and complex, and Lessing's fictional daughters may still have an important part to play in assisting real ones to understand the nature of the quest.

In the following three chapters the questions asked of the works studied are feminist in character. In Chapter 2 the main question posed is: to what extent is Lessing, in The Grass is Singing, exploding or reinforcing conventional literary images of women, especially that of the self-sacrificing maternal woman? In Chapter 3, the main question asked of "To Room Nineteen" is: how has Lessing's thought on the life of a domesticated woman changed? The main question posed of The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five, in Chapter 4, is: has Lessing, after a series of works of an analytical, angry nature on the theme of the questing woman's struggle with her maternal aspect, achieved an acceptable synthesis? What, tentatively, is the potential value of this synthesis for readers,

men as well as women?

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 5, the lines of development traced in Lessing's treatment of the theme of the mother-daughter conflict will be briefly recapitulated, and an assessment will be made of Lessing's contribution to understanding of the modern woman's situation.

In this exploration of three of Lessing's works, a deliberate attempt has been made to avoid subjecting literary texts to the rigours of a polemical framework. Aesthetic works cannot be granted or denied approval according to their conformity with or deviance from a set of ethical criteria. The particular questions posed of the texts have been done so with the intention that these should provide entry into the intriguing complexities of a theme that has absorbed a great deal of Lessing's time and skill and that is, possibly, also a theme involving conflicts that have played an important part in fuelling her creative energy.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations have been used when quoting from works by Doris Lessing:

<u>The Grass is Singing</u>	:	<u>GS</u>
<u>Martha Quest</u>	:	<u>MQ</u>
<u>A Proper Marriage</u>	:	<u>PM</u>
<u>The Golden Notebook</u>	:	<u>GN</u>
<u>The Summer Before the Dark</u>	:	<u>SD</u>
<u>The Marriages Between Zones</u>		
<u>Three, Four, and Five</u>	:	<u>M</u>
"To Room Nineteen"	:	"RN"
<u>Going Home</u>	:	<u>GH</u>

Editions used are listed on pp. 166-67.

<sup>2</sup> Doris Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice," in A Small Personal Voice, ed. Paul Schlueter (New York: Vintage Press, 1975), p. 14. A moderate, up-to-date discussion of prejudice against women in the "real" world, and of the constraints placed upon them by ideas of what constitutes femininity, is contained in Janet Radcliffe Richards' The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry (1980; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). While generalisations about "real life" made in this study may have lost some of the force of truth in a country like the United States, they appear to be accurate as a

description of prevailing mores in a more conservative society, such as is found in South Africa, and Richards finds them largely true of life in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stamberg, "An Interview with Doris Lessing," Doris Lessing Newsletter, 8, No. 2 (Fall 1984), 15.

<sup>4</sup> From the original recorded interview. A full transcript of the interview will be published in E.J. Bertelsen ed., Doris Lessing (Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> In the Bertelsen interview Lessing mentions an incident that occurred on board the ship that brought her at the age of five, with her family, to Southern Africa from England. Her parents left her with her small brother in the cabin to go to dinner; in retaliation, the child cut up her mother's evening dresses. The action is that of an extremely determined rebel.

<sup>6</sup> See Lessing, "My Father," in Schlueter, pp. 83-93.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (New York: 1963; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Ann Oakley, Housewife (London: 1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Friedan, The Second Stage (London: Michael Joseph, 1982), pp. 52-57.

<sup>10</sup> Friedan, The Second Stage, pp. 62-63.

<sup>11</sup> Friedan, The Second Stage, pp. 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> The term is used in such major works of feminist literary criticism as Elaine Showalter's A Literature of

Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing (London: Virago, 1979), Ellen Moers's Literary Women (London: Women's Press, 1978), and Tillie Olsen's Silences (New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence, 1982).

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1945), p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> Woolf, p. 150. See also Showalter, "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers," Antioch Review, 32, No. 3 (1978), 339-53. Showalter contends that some contemporary American poets and novelists are successfully confronting the guardian of respectability.

<sup>15</sup> Woolf, pp. 148-49.

<sup>16</sup> Woolf, p. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Eichner, "The Eternal Feminine: An Aspect of Goethe's Ethics," in Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, Faust, Norton Critical Ed., trans. Walter Arndt, ed. Cyrus Hamblin (New York: Norton, 1977) quoted in Gilbert and Gubar, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Showalter, pp. 342-44. See also Showalter, A Literature of Their Own, pp. 160, 166-67. Madness as a literary device for obliquely expressing feminist anger is referred to in Moers, pp. 94, 107-10, 132-34, by Annis Pratt in Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 41-58, and, at greater length, in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the

Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> The madwoman in the attic is, of course, Bertha Rochester, in Jane Eyre. An early, and brilliant, presentation of a woman driven mad by the constraints of virtuous domesticity within her own home is found in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892).

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Sukenick, "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction," Contemporary Literature, 14 (Autumn 1973); repr. in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, eds. Annis Pratt and L.S. Dembo (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Sukenick, p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (New York: Norton, 1976), p. 235. Rich draws on literature, history, anthropology, and psychology in this wide-ranging study.

<sup>23</sup> Rich, p. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Kegan Gardiner, "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," Feminist Studies, 4, (Summer 1978), 146. Gardiner bases her conclusions upon an examination of "maternal deathbed scenes" in five "varied twentieth-century novels by women" (p. 146).

<sup>25</sup> Minda Bikman, "A Talk with Doris Lessing," New York Times Book Review, 30 March 1980, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Lessing therefore articulates what Lilian S. Robinson says is "articulated only rarely," the "desperate need

for privacy, for that room of one's own. ..." Sex, Class and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 124.

<sup>27</sup> See Nicole Ward Jouve, "Of Mud and Other Matter - The Children of Violence," in Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing, ed. Jenny Taylor (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) pp. 78, 89, 91, 96. Jouve argues that Lessing is claiming more than she should when her texts assert, through the narrative voice, the typicality, even "universality," of Martha's experience. The names Lessing chooses, such as "Mary," "Susan," "Kate," "Turner," and "Brown," also encourage the reader to see these characters as representative.

<sup>28</sup> The Doris Lessing Newsletter is published at Brooklyn College, New York. As an example of Lessing's style in asserting her views, this is her opinion on contemporary marriage: "Perhaps a happy marriage is possible, but only with a great effort, renewable everyday [sic], and people aren't disposed to make the effort or sacrifice. We want it all to be simple, on a platter." Interview by Nissa Torrents, "Doris Lessing: Testimony to Mysticism," Doris Lessing Newsletter, 4, No. 2 (Winter 1980), 1.

<sup>29</sup> Jacqueline Sarsby, Romantic Love and Society (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983); see especially the chapter entitled "Romantic Courtship in Early Modern England," pp. 54-69.

<sup>30</sup> Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957); see especially Chapter v, "Love and the Novel: Pamela," pp. 135-73.

<sup>31</sup> Sarsby, p. 67.

<sup>32</sup> Eva Figes, Patriarchal Attitudes (London: Virago, 1981), pp. 68-69, 70.

<sup>33</sup> Rich, pp. 46-49.

<sup>34</sup> Olive Schreiner, "The Boer Woman and the Modern Woman's Question," in Thoughts on South Africa (London: 1923; rept. Johannesburg: Africana Book Society, 1976), pp. 209, 212-13.

<sup>35</sup> Nancy Chodorow, The Reproduction of Motherhood: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Chodorow, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Chodorow has the following to say about the isolation of the modern housewife:

What is often hidden, in generalizations about the family as an emotional refuge, is that in the family as it is currently constituted no one supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally--either women working in the home or women working in the paid labor force. This was not always the case. In a previous period, and still in some stable working-class and ethnic communities, women did support themselves emotionally by supporting and reconstituting one another. However, in the current period of high mobility and familial isolation, this support is largely removed, and there is little institutionalized daily emotional reconstitution of mothers. What there is depends on the accidents of a particular marriage, and not on the carrying out of an institutionalized support role (p.36).

Mary and Susan become unable to enjoy solitude due to their extreme isolation. Living their lives in a social vacuum, they have no fruitful way of expressing the results of their solitary thought. Furthermore, their solitude is haunted by confusion and anxiety, and the spectre of the Angel. See Chapter 2, p. 34.

<sup>38</sup> Erich Neumann, The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype, trans. Ralph Mannheim, Bollingen Series XLVII (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); Wolfgang Lederer, The Fear of Women (New York: Harvest, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> A "stereotype" is not, of course, necessarily totally false. In fact, Woolf's main objection to the "stereotype" of the Angel in the House is that she manifests herself in actual behaviour, as when the writer finds herself comforting instead of creating.

<sup>40</sup> A particularly clear example of the split view of women is found in Joseph Conrad's The Heart of Darkness. The attractive, dangerous jungle woman, who is part of the dark, earthy wildness of Africa that has lured Kurtz to his doom, contrasts with his ethereal, pure, pale, and domesticated Intended.

<sup>41</sup> Historically, Christianity adopted a female goddess in order to accommodate the religious needs of great masses of people. Mary therefore acquired some of the titles previously held by the pagan goddesses Venus, Diana, Magna Mater, and Isis: while Diana was "Queen of Heaven," Mary the Virgin came to be "Queen of the Universe." See James Westfall Thompson and

Edgar Nathaniel Johnson, An Introduction to Medieval Europe, 300-1500 (1937; New York: Norton, 1965), p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (1971; London: Virago, 1979), pp. 177, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Chodorow, pp. 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct, trans. Roger de Garis (London: Souvenir Press, 1981), pp. 260-92.

CHAPTER 2THE GRASS IS SINGING

Her wings are clipped and it is found  
deplorable that she cannot fly.

Simone de Beauvoir

Usually, when critics discuss The Grass is Singing, Lessing's first novel, the emphasis is on its racial aspects.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this study, however, Mary Turner is viewed less as a representative colonial white settler than as a representative married woman, who is also white and "privileged." Mary is part of a community that is characterised by dullness, rigidity, and intellectual and emotional sterility, in which the range of opportunities for a woman like herself is severely circumscribed. A "mad," suicidal housewife, Mary is interesting as a precursor of later Lessing characters such as Lynda Coldridge of The Four-Gated City and Susan Rawlings of "To Room Nineteen." Mary is also only one in a long line of mentally ill female protagonists in literary works by Western women.<sup>2</sup> But what is achieved by portraying a central character as deranged? What challenges to the sexist and racist status quo of Southern Africa can Lessing issue through her "mad" housewife? More particularly, for the purposes

of this study, to what extent does Lessing, in The Grass is Singing, explode, or reinforce, the conventional literary images of women that concern feminist critics?

It will be argued that the main literary image of women which Lessing attacks in her portrayal of a "mad" woman is that modern "middle-class" feminine ideal, the maternal Angel in the House. Mary tries to be this version of the Good Woman by, firstly, marrying--in response to the "steel-strong" pressure her friends impose on her to be like other women, including her own mother, and get married (GS 41). Yet marriage to Dick Turner destroys her. The novel exposes the dangers that arise when a woman feels compelled to conform to the behaviour demanded of the domestic paragon.<sup>3</sup> Other aspects of the "good" half of the "eternal feminine" resorted to by Mary, and satirised by Lessing, are the Queenly Madonna and, a more robust sister, the Brave White Frontierswoman.

The Grass is Singing suggests that, when such roles are amongst the only ones permitted by social norms, severe limitations may be imposed upon human energy and desire. The prevalent notions about gender sit so uncomfortably on Mary's personality that her intense frustration makes her increasingly masochistic and cruel. Eventually she becomes deranged and contributes to her husband's breakdown. Yet Mary, we are told, has become more and more like her mother (GS 57, 83, 95, 143).

The novel also challenges conventional notions about women by lifting the lid off the "home"--the stage on

which the Angel-mother acts her part--to expose it as, potentially, a coffin-like "black box" that can destroy even an ordinary, unambitious woman like Mary (GS 216). Lessing therefore places herself in that line of women writers who, to use critic Annis Pratt's words, "describe the golden circle of marriage ... as a tarnished enclosure" and who liken "the effects of matrimony to madness and incarceration."<sup>4</sup>

In so doing, Lessing challenges the stereotype of the "naturally" "mad" or "bad" woman. She gives reasons for Mary's condition, revealing them to be linked to her position as a woman. Thus, while Mary is, at her worst, a protagonist who is difficult not to dislike, she is not depicted by Lessing as the inhuman, monstrously "feminine." That she is seen this way by Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham is due to the settlers' scapegoating of a woman who has failed their expectations that she be a moral exemplar.

The novel suggests that within the white community, which sees itself as a vanguard of "civilisation," the pressure upon its women to fulfil the role of moral guardians is particularly heavy. Here, Lessing's critique of the abuses of power on the grounds of race merges with her condemnation of sexism. Racism and sexism are also seen to merge in Mary's abuse of her servants, the farm labourers, and their women: largely because, as a woman who is white, she has nothing to do on the farm, she resorts to venting her frustration upon those lower in the pecking order of "Zambesian" society than herself.

If Mary fails the settlers as an exemplar of white superiority, the novel transforms her into an exemplar of another sort. Lessing's cautionary statement, through her protagonist, is that the life of a domesticated woman is death to the self. Here, it becomes necessary to examine the novel's determinism.

The Grass is Singing is nothing if not deterministic. Social pressure forces Mary into a marriage for which she is ill-equipped, while the inadequacies of her character have been conditioned by her childhood. Furthermore, the narrative itself, after Chapter i, is presented in the form of a long flashback. In the first chapter the newspaper account, and the narrator's voice addressing us from a point in some indeterminate present, inform us that the tragedy has already been accomplished, the murder committed, the police investigation closed. (Our interest is therefore transferred from the question "What finally happened?" to "How did this happen?")

Yet, a deterministic story may serve as a warning of the necessity to progress, or evolve. Lessing said recently:

I think that ... the patterns of people's lives are determined by their society and by their characters and upbringing--of course. Because, I mean, you've just got to look around to see it ... what I'm interested in in people is not what makes them like everybody else, and what you can expect because they had this and that upbringing, but something else that can fight them out of it or make them different.<sup>5</sup>

Mary is someone who fails to "fight" her way out of her upbringing; and she dies.

Mary's story condemns her conditioning as a woman; however, the treatment of her death leaves untouched, in fact reinforces, some conventional (and objectionable) notions about what constitutes a permissible, desirable fate for a woman. The protagonist is given consummation, even transcendence, in sacrificing herself to a man in a "rape"/death. And the narrator approves of her choice of martyrdom.

As has been stated, the main literary image of women undermined by The Grass is Singing is the Angel in the House. The novel's critique of the Angel involves an attack upon that body of belief that gives the ideal most of her allure, the myth of romantic love. Lessing undermines the Angel and her mythology by means of direct narratorial comment, plot, character, and parody of popular images. In a sense, the entire novel is a parody, a "true, unromanticised story" of a woman living, if not "on a country estate," like the Angel described by Eichner (see Chapter 1, p. 11), then in "considerable isolation" in a rural setting. Lessing tells us that a "life without external events," a life without a "story," is a death-in-life.<sup>6</sup> Mary's withdrawal into illness, her sitting on a greasy sofa hour after hour, day after day, with her hands folded in her lap, is a grotesque parody of the paragon of social prescription. Her death is the only really "eventful" occurrence in her life, and the white community ensures that it is a silenced death.<sup>7</sup>

According to The Grass is Singing, the myth of romantic love has the following harmful effects: it creates unrealistic expectations of the marriage partner which, when confounded, lead to disillusionment and frustration; it encourages emotional distance and the use of inauthentic masks of love; the expectation in both partners that the man must be "strong" leads to emotional and economic dependence in women; the notion that the woman must be selfless and self-denying does not guarantee that she will feel true affection and compassion, while it may cripple her emotionally and psychologically; and the sexual politics of romantic love polarises control--on the one hand it imposes both the burden of initiative and the privileges of power on men, and on the other hand it encourages women to become attached to feelings of helplessness.

Like Flaubert, Lessing is conscious of the cruel gap between the expectations aroused by popular romantic literature and the tedious monotony of life in the country for a middle-class woman. Before her marriage, Mary has used romantic novels as "a drug, a soporific" (GS 66). Other media of popular culture, such as the cinema, also stimulate her expectations. When her friends destroy her "picture" of herself through their careless talk about her, she resorts to "the pictures" even "more frequently than before" (GS 41-42, 45); but the cinema leaves her "feverish and unsettled":

There seemed no connection between the distorted mirror of the screen and her own life; it was impossible to fit together what she wanted for herself, and what she was offered.

(GS 45)

Even those who are apparently immune to the popular images may turn to them in order to fulfil their deepest needs. Dick does so to relieve his acute loneliness after years of isolation on his farm. He "loathe[s] the cinema" (GS 47). He realises that it was only a "trick of light" that turned Mary, when he first glimpsed her in the cinema, from "an ordinary and not very attractive" woman into "something beautiful and strange" (GS 50). Yet, because it is "essential for him to love somebody" (GS 50), he creates a "vision" of her as "a practical ... serene person" (GS 52). She is, for him, "the woman," whose image has been fed by the picture on his wall of "a chocolate-box lady with a rose in her hand" (GS 56, 55).

If the chocolate-box image forms a parodic contrast with what the real woman is and feels, so are the events of Mary's wedding-night a parody of what such occasions are meant to be (GS 55-58). Early in the novel Lessing uses parody quite openly in order to draw attention to another stereotypical aspect of the Good Woman, one that she herself has described in Going Home, "the brave white woman housemaking in primitive conditions" (GH 58). In a scene that is mischievously humorous, the author has Dick compare the ideal woman of his fantasy with the unappealing,

demanding reality of his wife. He reads, in a book auspiciously entitled The Fair Lady, of young and titillating "Prunella van Koetzie" who "skirmished lightly on her horse on the perimeter" of a "column" of trekkers. Prunella's face, although "sweat-pearled," still contrives to be "dainty," while her "ringlets" remain "close clustering." Her sweat refines itself into pearls; her hair does not escape from under her neat "white kappie." She also bears herself "like a queen" (GS 66). When Dick puts the book down to look at Mary it is to see her also sitting with a book, her means of escape into fantasy. And the fictional world has failed her, too. The book is on her lap; she sits "staring up at the roof," conscious of the reality of her daily torment under the heat of the bare corrugated iron. She then "fretfully" asks whether they cannot have a ceiling (GS 67). The mythical woman is, therefore, ridiculed by being presented in vulgarised form, in a book within a book, and by being contrasted with a "real" settler woman who is breaking down as she experiences the grinding monotony and hardship of her life.

Mary brings few emotional resources to her marriage. These are soon depleted by poverty, the heat, her lack of a useful social function, her fear of sex, her loneliness on the isolated farm, her shyness about making friends with neighbours, and her rigid suppression of powerful impulses to express her will, talents, and energies. Afraid of the bush, she is confined to a house which, with its contents, inflicts extreme psychological and physical

suffering upon her. The nagging presence of a servant, the bedroom that is a reminder of her sexual sufferings, the shame of the ugliness and shabbiness of the furnishings, the slobbering dogs, all increase her feelings of alienation. It then becomes Mary's misfortune that she is no longer able to "drug" herself with the novels she knows so well.

Having some "clear-sightedness," she must relinquish her "hope" or "dream" that life will change on the farm or that her husband will no longer be an inefficient, debt-ridden farmer, the local "Jonah" (GS 145, 136, 140, 88-90, 139). Her novels betray Mary doubly: previously they inflated her hopes of marriage; they now no longer perform their more benign function of acting as a buffer against unbearable reality (GS 66). Nor does Mary have the range of escapist palliatives available to women "in towns," who may "live vicariously in the lives of the film stars," or "take up religion, preferably one of the more sensuous Eastern religions" (GS 141). She therefore withdraws into her own daydreams (GS 145). Tony Marston sees her not as mad but as behaving "simply as if she live[d] in a world of her own" (GS 199).

Mary and Dick start their unhappy marriage by slipping into the ready-made poses of Queenly Madonna and Indulgent Mother to Repentant Son on their wedding night. Mary is, we know, attempting to deny her deeply-rooted fear of men and her revulsion against sex when she forces herself "maternally" to "bestow the gift of herself" on Dick, who

approaches her as a "humble stranger" (GS 57). Transforming lovemaking into a "maternal" duty, she purifies it in her own mind: she "remain[s]," she imagines, "untouched" (GS 57). In this way she temporarily avoids full awareness of the force of her emotions (which will erupt later as terrifying dreams and hallucinations) and of the extent of Dick's vulnerability and anxious dependence. All the while, stock notions about the virtue of maternal selflessness enable her to strain pathetically at a sense of dignity and vulnerability.

The novel here points to the way in which modern successors to the courtly romance (such as women's magazine stories, Mills and Boon paperbacks, and the potent images of advertising and screen) create a gap between dreams and reality by suggesting that certain stereotypical poses or masks are appropriate to the heterosexual erotic lover. Such poses or masks may be used to screen off one's real feelings from one's partner and oneself. They then become barriers to understanding and communication.

Mary and Dick both bring to their union romantic images fated to conflict with the true nature of the person they marry. Yet Dick is able, despite his limitations of character, to reconcile himself to Mary's shortcomings, while Mary is driven to despair by his. The narrative indicates that the crucial difference between them is the fact that Dick has the farm. Time and again the narrator insists that Mary has nothing to do on her husband's farm (GS 65, 70, 73, 87, 129, 142, 143). Mary is alienated

from the world she inhabits because she has within it no useful productive function. The farm gives Dick a good deal of satisfaction: it fulfils his deep love of the land; it challenges him; and it provides him with a sense of purpose, ownership, and, sporadically, of achievement (GS 46, 47, 48, 80, 81, 85-86, 91-92, 93, 96, 130, 132, 190, 191, 192). Mary, on the other hand, is totally dependent, economically, once she has spent her "own saved money" on giving the crudely furnished house an "inexpensive prettiness" (GS 64). The house provides very little work, most of which is done by the servant that their status as white farmers demands.<sup>8</sup> Nor is there money for her to use in pursuing enjoyable hobbies, like the sewing at which she is expert (GS 64, 65, 70). Dick's bout of malaria gives her a temporary reprieve: she feels "exhilarated" by the "sensation of pitting her will against the farm" (GS 117, 118). The reprieve is only temporary, however, and she is driven frantic by the purposelessness of her life.

In any event, the myth of romantic love prescribes that the man should be the active and strong member in a heterosexual partnership. Thus, Mary "needed to think of Dick, the man to whom she was irrevocably married, as ... a success from his own efforts" (GS 135). When she "saw him weak and goal-less, and pitiful, she hated him, and the hate turned in on herself," for she "needed a man stronger than herself, and she was trying to create one out of Dick" (GS 135).

A constant theme in Lessing's work is the need of

Furthermore, Dick's response to Mary's energy and efficiency sets the seal on her belief that her husband should be the stronger partner. Soon after her arrival on the farm she whitewashes the walls of the house. He admires her "for her capability and self-assurance," but is also "alarmed." Not only does he wonder what she is going to do with all her energy and efficiency in the tiny, bare house, "his own self-assurance" is "undermined ... for he [knows], deep down," he himself lacks these very qualities (GS 65). Sensing this, Mary is terrified of destroying, in reality and in her own mind, the "strong" man, the rescuer, that her novel-reading and early training have taught her to expect. As year after year passes and Dick defers putting in the ceiling that would alleviate her suffering from the heat, defers having the child she hopes will give her something to do, and instead proposes one impractical, wasteful farming scheme after another, Mary withdraws, waits, daydreams, sleeps away "great gulps" of time (GS 136).

If the need for a "strong" man paralyzes Mary, so does her deeply-ingrained conviction that she should live by what is the defining characteristic of the maternal Angel in the House, selflessness. In Chapter 1 it was argued that the Virgin Mary, whose main qualities are those of unselfish compassion and devotion, has been a powerful model for women in Christian tradition. Christ's agony has also entrenched self-sacrifice as a cardinal virtue in the Christian moral scheme. But Lessing's work proposes

that there are flaws in the scheme, that a woman trying to live a life of self-denial may cripple herself in body, mind, and emotions--and exact malicious, if unconscious, vengeance on those close to her. Such is the case in The Grass is Singing, the short stories "He," "To Room Nineteen," and "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange," and the Children of Violence series (in the fate of relentless, miserable Mrs. Quest). Lessing therefore endorses Virginia Woolf's warning that it is necessary for a woman to "kill" the Angel within before she can think and act for herself, and do work she is fitted for.<sup>9</sup> Mary Turner is, precisely, a woman unable to "kill" the internalised rules that govern the behaviour of the selfless woman, as is shown by a passage in Chapter v:

So she used to sit on that sofa, her eyes shut, suffering because of the heat, and feeling at the same time tenderly sorrowful and queenly ... because of her willingness to suffer. (GS 69-70)

Exposing a web of only half-conscious emotions, Lessing describes the seductiveness of the temptation to feel regal and magnanimous while suffering. Mary is discouraged from alleviating her torment by a sense of morbid satisfaction.

An even stronger inducement than the attractions of martyrdom must lie behind Mary's "willingness to suffer," however, since her very instinct for self-preservation

has been neutralised. The dreams recounted on pages 172-75 reveal that she is unable to protect herself against pain and punishment because she has been taught that resistance is useless--to be a woman is to be powerless, at least in relation to a man.

Perhaps all erotic relationships involve a measure of domination and submission. Ideally, however, the situation should be fluid, allowing for reciprocity and for shifts in the degree of control each partner assumes. But conventional sexual politics polarises control. Sexology, developed by theorists such as Havelock Ellis early this century, claimed to provide scientific proof that male sadism and female masochism are natural. More recent commentators, such as Otave Mannoni or Michel Foucault, might be inclined to note that masochistic behaviour, as in Mary's case, is the recourse of those who have been taught to feel powerless, or who have even perhaps become addicted to helplessness.<sup>10</sup>

Mary's dreams trace a process of learnt helplessness. The first dream sequence begins in a garden: in all three of the works discussed in this study Lessing uses a garden-setting for images and action that represent an important stage in the psychic history of the protagonist.<sup>11</sup> In The Grass is Singing the scene in the garden is part of a sequence of scenes which, like Freudian "primal" scenes, depict very early experiences that have left an indelible mark on the psyche. The garden takes on the conventional literary symbolism of a place of childhood innocence and

its loss. It is, however, also particularised as being Mary's own garden. It is the kind that she, the daughter of a railway pumpman in "Zambesia," would have played in as a child, "small [and] dusty," and lying outside a "raised wood-and-iron" house (GS 172). The description of the garden also captures, metaphorically, the sterility of the emotional environment in which Mary was reared.

Nevertheless, as a garden, it is conducive to growth, and Mary dreams of herself as having been "first in the game, a leader, and [her playmates] called her name and asked her how they should play." She "stood ... in the sun, with the children all about her" (GS 172). The child is independent of the family (outside the house), feels recognised (called by name), fortunate (she stands in the sun, with no noted discomfort), knowledgeable (her playmates ask her how to play), and she feels important, effective, strong (she is "first," a "leader," they stand "all about her") (GS 172). Her activity, in community, in the outside world, is then cut short by "her mother's sharp voice [calling] for her to come in" (GS 172). Her mother, her model for her understanding of what it is to be a woman, indicates to her an alternative destiny, inside the house, inside the bedroom.

Such a destiny is not "natural" to the child at all:

At the bedroom door she stopped,  
sickened. There was her father, the  
little man with the plump juicy  
stomach, beer-smelling and jocular,

whom she hated, holding her mother in his arms as they stood by the window. Her mother was struggling in mock protest, playfully expostulating. Her father bent over her mother, and at the sight, Mary ran away.

(GS 172-73)

Part of the child's sexual nausea is her realisation that the adults are conspiring to pretend. Her mother struggles in "mock" protest only, playing her part, acting seductively. The dream-mother teaches complicity with the man who overpowers her. Mary learns this lesson only too well: she traps herself by resorting to marriage to a "nice" man, and then by sharing with Moses the conviction that she deserves to be killed by him. The dream reveals that it is also the mother who teaches her daughter the conventional coyness so grotesquely mimicked by Mary when, already an ill, "dried stick of a woman," she flirts with Charlie Slatter and Moses (GS 186, 188).

In the next stage of the dream the father, the child's model for her understanding of what it is to be a man, forcibly binds her to dependence on male sexuality and submission to male will:

Her father caught her head and held it in his lap with his small hairy hands, to cover up her eyes, laughing and joking loudly about her mother hiding. ... She struggled to get her head free, for she was half-suffocating and her father held it down, laughing at her panic. And [her brother and sister] laughed too. Screaming in her sleep she half-woke ....

(GS 173)

Mary is reared to understand male sexuality as female submission to male force. The father's sexuality (her head is in his lap) half suffocates the child, threatening her ability to breathe, that is, to live. Yet there is no help and no escape: the child is isolated by the disappearance of the mother and the cruel laughter of her father and siblings. Psychologically, there is no alternative to complicity for Mary; any critical intelligence or instinctive revulsion will be suppressed through fear that rebellion will bring even greater pain.<sup>12</sup>

The mother delivers the child over to the father by pointing the way to passive domesticity. She constructs for her daughter the "box" Mary feels she has inhabited both in childhood and as a married woman (GS 40, 216). Just as in the dream the daughter substitutes for the mother, so the adult Mary, moving within the confines of the example set for her by her mother, becomes more and more like her querulous, helpless mother. When she attacks Dick, she does so with a representative "voice" of "the suffering female" that she has "taken direct from her mother" (GS 83). Finally she, too, like her mother, wants a girl-child who will develop into the person she has never become (GS 142-44). Lessing paints a frightening picture of cycles of angry, bitter women who, realising they have wasted their lives, cling to their daughters as "a safety-valve" (GS 143). Such cycles are seen as a logical consequence of the direction given to women to live through others, "selflessly."

No genuine affection for either a child or husband, nor genuine compassion, can follow from Mary's "selfless" willingness "to suffer," since it is not grounded in love

of self and others (GS 70). When her fragile self-image is destroyed by her friends' gossip (GS 41-43), she begins to doubt and despise herself: "Mary's idea of herself was destroyed .... And she was afraid to meet people, afraid, above all, of men" (GS 45). During her marriage, her self-loathing grows. The emotional poverty and unhappiness of her childhood have led her to avoid intimacy (GS 38). When physical closeness is forced upon her by marriage she protects herself from emotional closeness by feeling contempt for her husband.

When he took her hand endearingly, and kissed it submissively, and said pleadingly, 'Darling, do you hate me for bringing you here?' she replied, 'No dear, you know I don't.' It was the only time she could bring herself to use endearments to him, when she was feeling victorious and forgiving. His craving for forgiveness, and his abasement before her was the greatest satisfaction she knew, although she despised him for it.

(GS 69)

The novel poses the following question: when a woman finds consolation in "queenly" martyrdom, and so becomes unlikely to take responsibility for herself or to attempt to improve her circumstances, what happens to faculties such as will, intelligence, energy, and efficiency? At first Mary has all of these in good measure (GS 64-65, 129). Denied any active and meaningful expression however, these faculties surface in distorted, indirect form. In

the passage just quoted they emerge in the vengeful vindictiveness of Mary's "satisfaction" at Dick's "craving for forgiveness, and his abasement"; at other times, perverted energy exerts itself in her cruel treatment of her servants (GS 61-62, 75-76, 84). But Mary is consistently suppressing strong feelings and desires, as well as denying her own value as a person. Dick's sexual dependence and need for companionship do mean she can wield some kind of cruel power over him, she does have the brief bout of energetic management of the farm, and she does attempt to run away; but all of these attempts to control and shape her world also confront Mary with a sense of her own inadequacy and uselessness. Her relationship with Dick, increasingly characterised by their irritability with each other and lack of communication, is a bitter blow to her dreams; some of the best labourers leave as a result of her harsh treatment; and she escapes to the town only to find that her old employer no longer wants her. Eventually she lacks the strength to leave Dick and the farm. She becomes increasingly physically inert, having sensations "as if there were thick cottonwool in her head, and a soft dull pressure on it from outside" (GS 142). In the last months of her life, she becomes dependent on a masochistic relationship with Moses (GS 142, 161, 163, 165, 167). Mary's regression to childish silliness and helplessness suggests that escape into the role of self-sacrificing married woman retards psychic development. So serious are the consequences that they may lead to

derangement and even, finally, to the woman's choosing not to exist.

The novel indicates that Mary degenerates into madness in great part due to her position as a woman. Yet Mary is an "ordinary" woman (neither of her names is distinctive). Lessing chooses (like other women writers such as Jean Rhys and Sue Kaufman) to focus insistently on a "mad," "bad" woman by situating her at the centre of the novel. She explores the way in which a woman who is securely and "respectably" placed at the centre of her married home may try to conform to approved "feminine" roles, may become more and more like her mother, and, as a result, may be destroyed by her anger, fear, frustration, hatred, and helplessness. "Madness" in The Grass is Singing therefore constitutes a telling indictment of stereotypical "feminine" roles and the cultural images that propagate them.

Since some of the conditions peculiar to a colonial society exacerbate Mary's condition, her madness also functions as an attack upon some of the injustices of racism. Mary (and Dick) can see no choice but to have a servant, yet this leaves her deprived of any useful function on the farm.<sup>13</sup> Racism and sexism are also linked and condemned in the settlers' response to Mary's death. By the time she dies she is extremely disturbed in mind, prematurely aged, and she even "cackle[s] with laughter," like a witch (GS 214). She does not, however, deserve the violent hatred and fear that the white community feel for her.

The madwoman remains human; she is not transformed into a mysterious, monstrous figure who might express anxieties about female independence and assertiveness. Although Mary's efforts to assert her will are mean and cruel, Lessing's analysis asks us to understand her, as a human being. By contrast, the white community transforms Mary into a scapegoat who is less than human. After the murder all the settlers feel "a fine fierce indignation against Mary," as if she were "something unpleasant and unclean, and it served her right to get murdered" (GS 11-- emphasis added). Even more shocking is the "fear," "hatred," and "contempt" Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham show when looking at her corpse (GS 17, 20, 28). The point of view of Tony Marston, the more compassionate outsider, is used to provide critical comment on their response.

It is apposite to recall Lederer's stress, in The Fear of Women, on the political importance of the massive European witchhunts. He says that, although the accusations against the women were usually proved only under torture,

[w]hat does appear before our eyes is nothing more nor less than a veritable feminine revolution, spreading through all of Europe ... and aimed at destroying, from within, a patriarchal dictatorship that had all but succeeded in strangling human nature by ideology and dogma.<sup>14</sup>

The "ideology" Mary rebels against in her association with Moses is that of the patriarchal double standard. This standard demands that women be absolutely pure. Men are permitted greater flexibility in their behaviour and consciences. They may sow their wild oats, secure in the knowledge that their womenfolk are the moral guardians of the community.<sup>15</sup> The double standard operates the more fiercely because of its heightened political significance in a colonial setting, where the white settlers see themselves as embattled in a fight to preserve "civilization" against barbarism and chaos. As the narrator states:

'white civilization' ... will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person. (GS 27)

Such a relationship would threaten the white farmers' sense of self-righteous superiority and, therefore, their belief in their right to govern and possess. The narrator declares, parodying the settlers' opinion:

Whom should it concern, if not the white farmers, that a silly woman got herself murdered by a native for reasons people might think about, but never, never, mentioned? It was their livelihood, their wives and families, their way of living, at stake. (GS 11-12)

Some of Lessing's other African writing suggests that clandestine relations between white men and black women are, however, tolerated. There is a tacit agreement to ignore them. Mr. MacFarlane in Martha Quest, Mr. MacIntosh in "The Ant Heap," and George Chester in "Leopard George" all escape public censure.<sup>16</sup> But Mary's intimacy with Moses challenges the farmers' faith in their right to rule: they see their very political and economic existence as at stake. Led by Charlie Slatter, who "personified Society for the Turners" (GS 14), they close ranks. They dispose of Mary's body as quickly and quietly as possible. Tony Marston is silenced.

In describing the responses to Mary's murder, as in recounting the causes of her madness and death, Lessing firmly links her protagonist to her particular historical and social milieu. Mary's "madness" may be seen as a metaphor for the disease present in the social body. "It is by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses," reads one of the epigraphs to the novel. It is, therefore, not surprising that Mary should die. However, this symbolic purging of a community through the death of a woman raises a question that a feminist critic must ask. Why is it that Mary's self-destructive behaviour is criticised in much of the novel, and yet, in the final chapter the narrative voice endorses her sacrifice of herself to a (black) man, grants her some kind of transcendence by means of this act, and suggests that her murder somehow appeases "Africa"? Lessing provides

a penetrating critique of the notions surrounding the angel-martyr, and then closes her tale in traditional style by giving an erring female character redemptive heroic stature through a self-willed death, at the hands of a man.

In approving of a woman's self-sacrifice to a man, Lessing is working well within literary convention--Lawrentian convention, for instance. Many critics have noted the influence of D. H. Lawrence on Lessing's writing. In The Grass is Singing, for instance, the narrator describes sexuality, in Lawrentian terms, as a "dark attraction" (GS 164). Mary, a woman who loves the town and is entirely at odds with the natural world, is stabbed with a phallic-shaped weapon, picked up in "the bush" (GS 46, 218). Moses is dark and strong, like Mellors in Lady Chatterley's Lover, and Alfred Durant of "The Daughters of the Vicar." Like Mellors and Durant, Moses washes in front of the woman who is attracted to him despite strong barriers of social taboos.<sup>17</sup> The stress on the centrality of heterosexual relations, the link between sex and the socio-political situation, the special role of the phallus, the need for the "natural" (the "rooted") to assert itself against the "unnatural," and the locating of the burden of responsibility for either improvement or deterioration in the state of affairs with a woman, and not a man, these are all Lawrentian.<sup>18</sup> This last is, however, as has been stated, not only a Lawrentian idea: it is a widespread cultural notion attaching to women as daughters of Eve; and Lessing upholds it despite the fact

that in The Grass is Singing it is the white men who control the vast majority of the black population--Mary tyrannising a black staff of only one--and despite the fact that it is impossible to determine what is gained by "Zambesia," or Africa, by Mary's death. Nothing changes.

At its close the novel moves away from a rational analysis of causes to a solution that is in essence irrational. The particularised historical context is left behind for a mythopoeic world of transcendental time and experience. Mary's murder is transformed into a ritual sacrifice.

The essence of ritual is repetition. The morning of Mary's "last day"--the portentous term she herself uses--has a distinctive quality that recalls her first morning on the farm (GS 205). The beauty, peace, and freshness of both these times is clearly demarcated from the almost unrelieved misery of the intervening years. On her first morning on the farm, while lying in bed, Mary "could see a tender gold light on the trees through the window" and "the faint rosy patches of sun lay on the white walls ..."  
(GS 59). A little later she had dressed and gone outside to examine the farm, feeling anticipation and excitement:

she shaded her eyes and gazed across the vleis, finding it strange and lovely with the dull green foliage, the endless expanses of tawny grass shining gold in the sun, and the vivid arching blue sky. And there was a chorus of birds, a shrilling and cascading of sound such as she had not heard before.

(GS 60)

Now, on her "last day," she thinks that while "usually her wakings were grey and struggling, a reluctant upheaval of her body from the bed's refuge," today she is "vastly peaceful and rested" (GS 202).

She goes to stand by the window, where she watches the dawn:

Slowly, across the sky, spread a marvellous pink flush, and the trees lifted to meet it, becoming tinged with pink and bending out into the dawn she saw the world had put on the colour and shape [sic]. The night was over.

(GS 204)

Besides this subtle hint preparing the reader to respond to the murder as some kind of sanctified act, the text gives indications that Mary has undergone some sort of limited process of rebirth. There is the symbolic implication of the sentence "The night was over," the woman has a sensation of "wonderful rooted joy," and she feels "as if the world were being created afresh for her" (GS 204). What is the cause of this "joy"? and why is it "rooted" joy?

Mary's "joy," "rooted" in the bush, stems presumably from her decision (apparently already unconsciously taken by the time she wakes) to atone to the bush by sacrificing herself, through its sacred instrument, Moses (GS 218). Utter self-loathing, stemming from guilt, characterises

the "vision" she has as she waits, later, that day, for night to fall and her murderer to come. She imagines that when she is gone the trees will crush and invade the house, to be followed by beetles, slugs, worms (GS 207-8). As the text hints, in the language of dream and metaphor the house often represents the body itself.<sup>19</sup>

If incidents and character suggest Mary's impurity, so does the writer's choice of vocabulary. When Moses washes his hands under the rain after the killing, he is described as being, not merely feeling, "cleansed" (GS 219). This archaic word is less literal than "clean," often being found in a religious context, as in "cleansed of sin." Moses has, in killing this woman, purged himself and the bush of something unclean.

Finally, a religious or supernatural aura is cast about Mary's murder by the fact that as she dies the tension of an electric storm breaks; rain begins to fall; violent, pent-up forces in Mary, Moses, and the natural world all find release (GS 218).

Moses' name recalls that of the prophet who led his people to freedom in the name of a patriarchal God. It is also worth noting that he has the support of the lightning from heaven. An article by Barbara Greenfield entitled "The Archetypal Masculine: Its Manifestation in Myth and Its Significance for Women" is of interest here. Greenfield states that when "Father Sky throws thunderbolts down from heaven or when Apollo acts in the capacity of the archer god," in addition to their phallic significance, "the arrow

and thunderbolt ... express the authority of the father, because they are instruments of punishment," meant to uphold the authority of the law and of order.<sup>20</sup> Lessing has been chastised, by Jouve, for having Martha Quest of the Children of Violence series "choos[e] ... the way of the father." Martha's mother, Mrs. Quest, "pulls," says Jouve, "like unease, neuroses even, at the text," but the mother "is never chosen: she is avoided, rebelled against, fled from, even when she is actually closest."<sup>21</sup> In The Grass is Singing what might be called the attitude to the father is conflict-ridden. Certainly, there is terror of the internalised father (GS 173, 175). But the prime fear the novel transmits is that of becoming like one's mother, for this entails psychological death.<sup>22</sup> Being like the father is therefore, perhaps, the lesser of two evils. At the least it would offer action, authority, and power.<sup>23</sup>

Such speculation could explain why Mary's death-scene is written so as to suggest approval of the punishment of a woman by a man who represents some sort of over-arching male order. Moses, after going to Marston's hut to gloat over the sleeping man whom he regards as his "rival" for Mary's favours, returns to the verandah to wait for lightning to illuminate the body. When the flash comes, the moment is "like a wet dawn," and it heralds "his final moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent" (GS 219).

On the whole, Lessing has represented

the black man externally, not claiming to know much about "the native mind" (as the narrator calls it on pages 26 and 29). Yet, at this point, the narrative voice presents a point of view for Moses, and appears to endorse it. The woman, sterile, unnatural, guilty, is sacrificed by the author, as well as by Moses--who represents the natural, the whole, the fertile, and the innocent--to this new "dawn."

Although neither noble savage nor simple, kindly servant, Moses is a romanticised figure, of a Lawrentian type. In league with the "natural," he has affinities with Thomas Stern of Landlocked (1965) (who is a gardener, has suitable left-wing politics, and was once a Polish peasant). Like Lawrence's Mellors and Alfred Durant, also "dark" men, Moses sustains the author's projection onto a male character of demonic sexual energy. This is despite Lessing's rational understanding of the settlers' fear of a lustful, vengeful black man ("[Mary] was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be"--GS 61). Moses is also like a Lawrentian man in that he not only punishes the woman, he liberates her into her true role, which is to be remedial and self-sacrificing. (Yet this is to be like the Madonna and her modern descendant, the Angel in the House.) Furthermore, as in Lawrence's writing, especially in Lady Chatterley's Lover, so, too, in the Grass is Singing, masculine ascendancy acquires transcendental significance.<sup>24</sup> Despite the condemnation of Mary's reliance upon a male "rescuer," this is what Moses ultimately is: another "rescuing"

man (GS 213). Mary cannot save herself; she is "released" by a man. Worse, it is release only into death. And when she decides not to appeal to Marston for help but to face Moses--who she knows is going to kill her--she is granted a brief moment of heroism by her creator: she gains "a queerly appropriate dignity" (GS 213).

The contradictions that have been noted, between Lessing's condemnation of the settlers' irrational fear of black men, on the one hand, and the projection of dangerous sexual energy onto a "dark" male character, on the other; between the realisation Lessing gives her protagonist that women can waste their lives waiting for men to save them (GS 213), and the transcendence she gives that same protagonist through the agency of a man; between the lucid analysis of the links between the sexual double standard and the socio-political dominance of white men, on the one hand, and, on the other, the transformation of a woman's murder into a ritual sacrifice through which she finds her true remedial, atoning role--all these contradictions suggest that there is an intellectual understanding of the harm caused by adhering to conventional gender roles, yet that at the same time there is a powerful emotional thrust, evident at the end of the novel, toward a symbolic, redeeming male figure.<sup>25</sup>

In The Grass is Singing, the housewife is a settler, her condition as a woman exacerbated by the isolation and dull social environment of colonial life. In later Lessing novels the married woman also struggles, now in a

metropolitan setting, to take responsibility for herself, to gain self-knowledge, to give her life meaning. Above all, due to her conditioning, she wrestles with her own inertia and apathy. In London, Lynda Coldridge of The Four-Gated City (1969) has bouts of mental illness. Susan Rawlings of "To Room Nineteen" (1963) commits suicide. And in The Golden Notebook (1962) Anna Wulf canvasses for the Communist Party at election time and finds five lonely women "going mad quietly by themselves, in spite of husband and children or rather because of them" (p. 175).

The middle-class, Western stereotype, the Angel in the House, stripped of idealising fancies, is seen as passive, self-limiting, and also frustrated, fearful, "psychosomatically" ill. Lessing shows mistrust of the apparently benevolent "maternal" feelings commended in the virtuous model. The gestures appropriate to the role may provide channels for disguised contrary impulses that have been distorted from their original nature. There is, for instance, the mask of magnanimity with which Mary conceals her fear and contempt when she submits to Dick's lovemaking; and there is her desire for a child merely to appease her fierce need to assert herself in some way in the world. The angel-mother is "killed off" as a role model for women early in Lessing's work. But in The Grass is Singing an alternative way is not shown, nor does Lessing give to the female protagonist the strength to be her own rescuer.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, A. H. Chennells, "Settler Myths and the Southern Rhodesian Novel," Ph.D. thesis Univ. of Zimbabwe 1982; Michelle Wender Zak, "The Grass is Singing: A Little Novel About the Emotions," Contemporary Literature, 14 (Autumn 1973); repr. in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, ed. Pratt and Dembo, pp. 64-73, and Eileen Manion, "'Not About the Colour Problem': Doris Lessing's Portrayal of the Colonial Order," World Literature Written in English, 21 (1982), 434-55. An exception is the chapter on The Grass is Singing in Rochelle Diane Cleary, "A Study of Marriage in Doris Lessing's Fiction," Ph.D. diss., SUNY (Stony Brook) 1982.

<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of mental illness in women's writing is discussed in Chapter 1, pp. 11-12, nn. 19, 20.

<sup>3</sup> In Sue Kaufman's Diary of a Mad Housewife (1967), the New York housewife of the title is driven demented by her frantic efforts to follow the dictates of the phantom Angel and comply with her ambitious husband's demands. An extraordinary number of freshly laundered shirts is needed in order to fulfil his particular version of the American Dream. Pratt finds the literary mad wife so common as to constitute an "archetype." See Archetypal Patterns, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Pratt, Archetypal Patterns, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Bertelsen, from original transcript of interview.

<sup>6</sup> The terms are Eichner's, used in his description of the Angel of the House that is quoted more fully on p. 11 of this study.

<sup>7</sup> "For [the people in 'the district' who knew the Turners] did not discuss the murder: that was the most extraordinary thing about it" (GS 9). J. Bardolph discusses the parodic elements in the novel in some detail in "Woman and the World of Things: A Reading of Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing, " Echos du Commonwealth, No. 4 (February 1978), pp. 25-35.

<sup>8</sup> In her illuminating article, Bardolph notes that the Turners' poverty limits the objects to which Mary can devote her daily time and care, that none of the usual feminine outlets such as shopping and visiting relatives is available to her, and that she is too ashamed of the shabbiness of her home to lead the social life which is a vital occupation for many white settler women, so that the only facet of the expected feminine role left for Mary to play is housework. Yet, when she arrives at the farm it is to find a servant in the kitchen. Bardolph, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Woolf's warning is discussed more fully in Chapter 1, pp. 9-11.

<sup>10</sup> On this latter concept see "The Threat of Abandonment," Chapter iii of Otave Mannoni's Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization, trans. Pamela Powesland (New York: Praeger, 1964). And for Michel Foucault on sexuality

see The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Allen Lane, 1979). See also Badinter's condemnation of the "medical morality" inherited from Freud, Chapter 1, p. 20, n. 44.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that all three protagonists are domesticated women (Al·Ith of Marriages temporarily so), as is Mrs. Gale of the short story, "The De Wets Come to Kloof Grange," who is passionate about her garden forced out of the veld. By contrast, Martha Quest, who is a quester-type, and who is intent on avoiding domesticity (even when married), has her crucial experiences in the open veld. In Martha Quest there are her "epiphanies," and in A Proper Marriage she leaps into a womb-like mud-hole when pregnant. For a comparison of the latter scenes with the garden scene in Marriages, see Chapter 4, pp. 138-39.

<sup>12</sup> In The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974), the narrator, D, views a family scene in which a young child, Emily, is being "tickled" by her father: "This was a 'game,' the bedtime 'game,' a ritual ... [Emily] was hot and sweating, and her body was contorting and twisting to escape the man's great hands that dug into her ribs, to escape the great cruel face that bent so close over her with its look of private satisfaction." The room "seemed filled with a hot anguish, the fear of being held tight there, the need for being held and captured, since this was how she pleased her captors. ... The mother ... was indifferent" (pp. 79-80, emphasis added). The girl-child's learnt dependence on masochistic behaviour is here explained

as the need to please those in power. When Moses reverses the roles of mistress and servant, he gains power over Mary. "Overlaying" the father in her psyche he would therefore stimulate masochistic, incestuous desires in her (GS 175).

<sup>13</sup> Mary does, of course, benefit from being white. When she works as a secretary in the town her life is, materially, extremely comfortable (GS 36-38).

<sup>14</sup> Lederer, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> In another "Zambesian" novel, A Proper Marriage, the young men of the Sports Club, led by Binkie Maynard, continually "give it stick" or "give it a bang." These are euphemisms for drinking too much, making a nuisance of themselves, and causing damage to property. The response of their womenfolk, even those as young as eighteen years old, is to speak of the "boys" and their exploits with an "indulgence" that is "maternal" (PM 12, 17). And Martha, just before leaving her husband, is asked by Mrs. Talbot to ignore Douglas' infidelity. "They aren't like us, they really aren't, you know," says the older woman. Martha, longing to have her own "affair" with an airman, does not retort that this seems unfair. Instead, her response reveals that she understands, and rejects, the contempt for men that lies behind the women's apparent benevolence: "I don't see why we should treat them like so many children" (PM 354), she says.

<sup>16</sup> In colonial Rhodesia the double standard was not only a matter of custom. In 1903 a law, based on

legislation passed at the Cape the year before, was approved forbidding "illicit" intercourse between white women and black men. The Federation of Women's Institutes tried unsuccessfully, four times between 1916 and 1937, to have this law changed--to have it extended to cover relations between white men and black women. See A. H. Richmond, The Colour Problem: A Study in Racial Relations (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

17 Durant is black because he is covered in coal dust. He is a miner.

18 Millett attacks Lawrence's emphasis on "phallic consciousness" in Sexual Politics, Chapter v. Many of the Lawrentian resonances in The Grass is Singing noted here are listed in an article by Charles and Liebetraut Sarvan, "D. H. Lawrence and Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing," Modern Fiction Studies, 24 (Winter 1978-79), 533-37.

19 On her "last day" Mary knows that "the blow [will] come from the front," so she locks the back door of the house. She feels that she "must be protected from the back" (GS 215). When she moves out on to the verandah that night, she stands with her back "pressed against the wall with all her strength." Moses stabs her from the front (GS 217, 218). Carey Kaplan sees the house metaphor in the last of the Children of Violence novels as "uterine." She also cites other Lessing critics as having demonstrated that "the whole Children of Violence series is full of houses which are metaphors for Martha Quest's developing

psyche." Kaplan, "A Womb with a View: the House on Radlett Street in The Four-Gated City," Doris Lessing Newsletter, 7 (Summer 1983), 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Greenfield, "The Archetypal Masculine: Its Manifestation in Myth and Its Significance for Women," Journal of Analytical Psychology, 28 (1983), 46.

<sup>21</sup> Jouve, p. 104. Cf. Juliet Mitchell: "The realization that she is like her mother, 'castrated,' makes [the girl] turn often violently against her. But at the 'best' her hostility can only repress the attachment ..."  
Psychoanalysis and Feminism (1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 111. The very violence of the rejection of the mother in The Grass is Singing (killing off a woman who has become like her mother) can be attributed to a repressed attachment to the mother. I am indebted to Jenny Davids, Dept. of Psychology, University of Cape Town, for the suggestion that the house invaded by bush, rats, beetles and worms in the terrifying vision described on pages 207-08 could represent not only Mary's own body but also the original "house" that sheltered and nurtured her, her mother's body. Further reading on the mother-daughter bond is to be found in Chodorow, The Reproduction of Mothering and Dorothy Dinnerstein, The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

<sup>22</sup> Gardiner, in "A Wake for Mother: The Maternal Deathbed in Women's Fiction," contrasts the Oedipus myth, in which the son murders the father in order to usurp him,

with the twentieth century women's myth of a daughter attaining adulthood. Gardiner maintains that the daughter "kills" her mother in order not to replace her. She finds maternal deathbed scenes that dramatise "the heroine's central struggles for their identities" in five novels by contemporary women writers (p. 146). The novels are Agnes Smedley's Daughter of Earth, 1927; Jean Rhys's After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie, 1931; Margaret Drabble's Jerusalem the Golden, 1967; Marge Piercy's Small Changes, 1972; and Lisa Alther's Kin Flicks, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Schierse Leonard, in a study of the father-daughter relationship in patriarchal culture, describes a "mode" of behaviour she terms The Martyr. Her description could be a character sketch of Mary Turner. Leonard says that in a frequent pattern a daughter reacts "against the father and even men in general on the conscious level since she has experienced [the father] as being unreliable," but "the tendency is to identify unconsciously with the masculine principle ... with masculine strength and power." Furthermore, the mother-martyr pattern emerges in relation to the husband "often when the daughter has continually heard her mother criticize and look down upon her father as weak and negligent." If the daughter "falls into the mother role in relation to her husband," he is then "reduced to the status of a son." Self-denial is "a chief feature of this personality structure--hence the martyrdom." The mother-martyr role has, says Leonard, a passive-submissive masochistic aspect which covers up a feeling

of superiority, hostility, and contempt of the male."

Leonard, The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship (Boulder, Col.: Shambala Publications, 1982), pp. 61, 73, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Millett, pp. 254. 257ff., 275, 280-93.

<sup>25</sup> As Susan Gardner states: "The sardonic, all-knowing narrator, by the time the novel has ended, has provided ample confirmation of a host of stereotypes. Moses has been 'the black man who will steal, rape, murder, if given half a chance' (p. 26). He has revenged himself against his sexual and political rival over a woman's dead body. Mary has lusted after a black man described in overwhelmingly physical terms (physical build; meagre clothing)--but she, of course, was out of her mind." Gardner cogently asks: "Have we advanced very far from popular cultural representations of female deviance [in the colonial novel]?" "Is Racism 'Sexism Extended'? Feminist Literary Criticism, 'Moral Panics,' and The Grass is Singing," paper presented at the Eighth Conference of the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa, Johannesburg, 1984, p. 13. As suggested by the reading in this study, grounds do exist for claiming Lessing has made advances over "unpopular cultural representations."

CHAPTER 3"TO ROOM NINETEEN"

In The Grass is Singing, the protagonist's fate unfolds in a setting described in some complexity and detail. There are sketches of settler life in dorp, town, on the farm. Careful touches, like the picture of a woman cut from a chocolate box and hung on the wall, or furnishings made of petrol boxes and sacking, convey a good deal of information about the texture of the daily life of white "Zambesians" (GS 55, 57).<sup>1</sup> The atmosphere of farm and veld is reverted to throughout the narration.

The short story "To Room Nineteen" also features a "mad" housewife as central character; but almost the entire narration is devoted to describing or representing the woman's thoughts and feelings. For only five pages of the story does the narrator comment on Susan and Matthew Rawlings as a couple in relation to their social milieu, then, except for brief returns to this stance (as on page 346: "So here was this couple ..."), and some dialogue rendered direct, Susan's consciousness is the focus of interest. A further indication that the central character's inner world has become the writer's more specific concern lies in the symbolic significance of the fact that, while Mary

is killed by an agent who has a separate existence within the fiction, Susan herself turns on the gas tap in Room Nineteen in Fred's Hotel, somewhere near Paddington Station: the "mad" housewife is depicted as responsible for punishing herself for her deviation from the way of proper womanhood.

"To Room Nineteen" analyses the psychic structure of a woman who may be hampered by the expectations of others, but is paralysed by her own inability to live beyond, or transcend, such expectations. Lessing is more tolerant than she was in The Grass is Singing of women who "give in": in the description of Susan's death we do not sense, as we do in the case of Mary's murder, that the character has been condemned by the author. At the same time, by virtue of her emphasis on the profound shaping of the protagonist's psyche, Lessing is, implicitly, placing final responsibility for either "rescuing" or destroying herself with the character. Even more than The Grass is Singing does "To Room Nineteen" urge the need for women to "kill" the Angel within themselves and so break the bounds of the psychological "room" or "house." Although the environment of accepted thought inhabited by the character remains crucially important, she is no longer merely a victim. She becomes the agent of her own fate, and, in doing so, does gain a certain dignity, even if it is of a limited kind.

The story indicates that it is extremely difficult for Susan to expand the horizons of her life. She remains

dependent on the fragile ideal of romantic love, and, although she comprehends her situation intellectually, she remains emotionally and psychologically bound to the constraints of being a virtuous domestic paragon. The tendency for the emotions to "lag" behind intellectual understanding, a tendency that was present in Lessing-as-author in The Grass is Singing (see Chapter 2, p. 60), now becomes the subject of her fiction. However, rationalism and "intelligence" themselves have also become suspect in "To Room Nineteen." The rational basis of thought present in the social sciences (at least as they were understood by Lessing prior to 1963, the year of publication of the story) encourages a belief in the ability of "intelligence" to solve all human problems. This belief has, according to the story, several harmful effects: it promotes mistrust of emotion, especially of the "darker" ones, such as anger; the tendency to intellectualise emotion leads to the suppression and perversion of feelings, with consequent self-division; and, of particular relevance to this study, the relentless optimism of the faith in "intelligence" is particularly harmful for women when it overlays and reinforces the notion that the model to which they should aspire, the Angel-Mother, experiences only "good" emotions.

Within its highly economical framework, "To Room Nineteen" judges both rationalism and idealised heterosexual, domesticated love to be treacherous--it also proposes, tentatively, an alternative to these absolute

values. This third supreme principle involves a tie of love or fellow-feeling, but of an impersonal, communal kind. Such a tie, it is hinted, might have saved Susan. Finally, this story leaves the reader with a sense that, even when belief in the supreme value of either the mind or the emotions is betrayed, there remains a human need for commitment to an absolute value of some kind.<sup>2</sup>

"To Room Nineteen" begins with the satirical description of a couple who are all that two modern young people of London in the early Sixties could be. Because the story parodies, in the marriage of Susan and Matthew Rawlings, the perfect contemporary partnership--"Everything right, appropriate, and what everyone would wish for, if they could choose"--and because Susan is a most unlikely candidate for the character of "mad" housewife, Lessing's condemnation of the effects of the institution of marriage and motherhood is the more forceful ("RN" 344).

The Rawlingses both, at first, have jobs that keep them in touch with whatever is trendy--Matthew works on a newspaper, Susan for an advertising agency--while their acquaintance with the topical is leavened with a sophistication gained from the "hundred books (psychological, anthropological, sociological)" on which they have been "fed" ("RN" 346). They understand a good deal about their own behaviour, and are alert to the possible difficulties they might encounter in marriage. By the time Susan marries, she has had "a number of affairs, sweet rather than bitter," and she is in love with her husband when

she marries him ("RN" 343).

Susan therefore enjoys the advantage over a woman like Mary Turner of marriage to an enlightened modern man. She is also, materially, much more comfortable than Mary. The Rawlingses soon move from their London flat to a "big, beautiful white house" at Richmond ("RN" 376). Yet, despite having a comfortable home, cars, children, money, all of which should be sources of interest and satisfaction, Susan despairs, and kills herself.

The reason for this, the narrator's sardonic criticism implies, is that the carefully nurtured and (socially) highly desirable attributes of this ideal couple exact a high cost and are potential sources of weakness. For instance, when Susan gives up her job because accepted opinion decrees that "[c]hildren [need] their mother to a certain age" she drastically narrows the scope of her life ("RN" 346). The result is that she is confined to the world of the home, which is isolated from the world of "work," while her identity becomes bound up exclusively in her relationship with her husband, for early on in their marriage Susan and Matthew decide that "the whole extraordinary structure" of children, house, and garden revolves neither around their children, nor around Matthew's job, but "their love" ("RN" 344-45). All, therefore, depends on the ideal of "the private, perfect bond between a man and a woman" (that so haunted Olive Schreiner).<sup>3</sup>

This bond is, as in The Grass is Singing, depicted as both fragile and extremely destructive. Again, as in

the novel, although the male partner's suffering is not ignored, the writer's interest is the deterioration of the female. Lessing is again exploring a theme she has said fascinates her, that of a woman defined by her relationship with her husband.<sup>4</sup>

Lessing briefly sketches some of the disadvantages for Susan of her exclusive dependence on Matthew: he has his colleagues and friends in the city, but she loses her one close adult relationship when he begins to find sexual satisfaction with other partners. She has no direct contact with any large social institutions, so does not receive any of their public rewards. Her main function is to service her husband and children; yet their prime interests and commitment lie elsewhere. She provides a support system that flows outwards to sustain the communities of school and "work," but she does not receive in return the emotional and material tributes due to someone who fills a valued place in society.

The limited status and satisfaction accorded the domesticated woman have been referred to in the discussion of the theories of Schreiner, Figs, Rich, and Chodorow in Chapter 1 (pp. 15-17). Such theories throw light on economic, political, and social aspects of Susan's experience, making it impossible to dismiss her as simply a "neurotic" or silly, self-absorbed woman. There is, indeed, a sharp division between "home" and "work," as the physical distance between London and Richmond stresses. Home has, indeed, become a refuge distinct from the

"stormy" world ("RN" 346). The traditional female skills of dressmaking and baking have been rendered redundant by factories ("RN" 351). Only partly is a woman like Susan a beneficiary of the new world of expanded knowledge: although she has been well-educated, she is expected to be contented, during all the years before her children start school, with daily tasks which offer no challenge to her intellect.

As a modern, urban woman in a nuclear family unit, Susan also lacks both the close ties of an extended family and the authority and influence that the presence of other adult females in the household would mean. Yet she is never free of the daily minutiae of domestic existence. She has the benefit neither of the nurturance of peaceful solitude nor of regular contact with a variety of well-known and trusted companions. Her psychic energy is eventually so severely depleted that she is unable either to enjoy the tasks regarded as best suited for a woman of her class and time or to extend herself beyond her immediate familial ties in any stimulating and worthwhile way. She escapes from an untenable existence in a typically "feminine" way, by withdrawing. Clinically, she is deeply depressed. Finally, she drifts off along a "dark river" of gas-filled sleep ("RN" 378). This is the only control over her body and her life of which she is capable. She "moves" into stillness, after spending more and more time sitting in an armchair in a room, as Mary Turner sat on her sofa in a room.

While Susan's disintegration and suicide stem directly from her efforts to remain a model middle-class housewife, Lessing wishes to stress, in "To Room Nineteen," that another belief, that in "intelligence" or rationality, may reinforce faith in the ideal of romantic love to exert pressure upon a woman to remain in her situation. The first words of the story are the narrator's comment, "This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlingses' marriage was grounded in intelligence" ("RN" 343). Susan and Matthew have a rationally, "intelligently," held conception of a wife and mother as self-sacrificing, dutiful, good, kind, and calm. This conception conflicts with what Susan discovers are some of her strongest feelings, those of restlessness, rage, irritation, and resentment. Since these emotions are denied validity, let alone expression, by the Rawlingses, the result is self-division for Susan.

She suffers her first severe psychic disruption after ten years of contented (and complacent) married life. The situation that causes the crisis is an age-old one, the extra-marital sexual experimentation of one of the partners. The Rawlingses' response to the situation is, however, in keeping with the code of their own particular time and class: Matthew tells; and they both try to deny the painfulness of the incident. They treat it as "banal," "not important," resorting to their props of "education ... discrimination ... and judgment" ("RN" 347, 346). Susan will allow herself "understanding" but not

"forgiveness," since forgiveness belongs to the "savage old world" of wickedness and brute passion ("RN" 347). Their responses are, however, not as amenable to the new rules as they ought to be. The incident leaves both of them "irritable," "bad-tempered, annoyed"; there is, they find, "something unassimilable about it" ("RN" 347).

Superficially, their behaviour may be sophisticated and "civilized," but they are, in reality, propelled by a compulsion to stay one step ahead of their emotions so as to deny and control them ("RN" 346). Matthew, however, does find some outlet for his feelings in the (ironically, traditional) ritual of confession. Having relieved himself of guilt and shame, he goes about his life in the City. Susan remains confined to her home, burdened by feelings that have now become "out of court," and with no adult company beyond the daily cleaning woman ("RN" 348). The rules of the game, far from being sophisticated, are naïvely cruel. Her most intense responses being denied validity, all else seems unimportant to Susan: she begins to feel "arid" ("RN" 348). She finds herself thinking: "either the ten years' fidelity was not important, or [the 'girl'] isn't ... But if she isn't important, presumably it wasn't important either when Matthew and I first went to bed with each other that afternoon whose delight even now ... lays a long, wand-like finger over us" ("RN" 347). Rational temperateness has crushed values, emotions, experiences into the flatness of meaninglessness, so that all seems "absurd" to Susan ("RN" 347, 348).

The result is that even before she reaches that crucial stage of her life when she longer needs to care full time for her children, Susan experiences a state of loss. She grieves over the destruction of her faith in the love she has shared with her husband:

It was in the nature of things that the adventures and delights could no longer be hers, because of the four children and the big house that needed so much attention. But perhaps she was secretly wishing, and even knowing that she did, that the wildness and the beauty could be his. But he was married to her. She was married to him. They were married inextricably. And therefore the gods could not strike him with the real magic, not really ... (What is it that I share with this person that shields all delight from me?) But none of it by anybody's fault ... Nobody's fault ... and nothing wrong, either, except that Matthew never was really struck, as he wanted to be, by joy; and that Susan was more and more often threatened by emptiness. ...

("RN" 348-49)

Faith in the one household god, that of "intelligence," has eroded faith in the other, that of "love." The consequence for Susan is severe, as faith in the love she shares with Matthew has sustained her in her role of "hub-of-the-family" ("RN" 349). Only under stress is she able to continue to preserve her social, "good" self, "Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs Parkes ..." ("RN" 367). The strain becomes greater when, finally, now "fortyish" and with her children "off

her hands," she realises that "her soul [is] not her own" ("RN" 349, 350). She then turns inwards, in search of an inner, essential self, only to find frightening emotions of rage and resentment that she is unable consciously to confront and assimilate ("RN" 350). These "dark" emotions consume increasing amounts of her energy because of the effort needed to suppress them and because, being unacknowledged and unassimilated, they assume an increasingly uncontrolled and active life of their own. Meanwhile, the "good" self becomes increasingly depleted of life until it is a mere "shell" for the "angry" self ("RN" 368). For a time Susan continues to be able to play the part of loving wife and mother by retreating to the peace and solitude of Room Nineteen. Here, she "buys her freedom" from her inner demons ("RN" 377). Eventually, however, she "leaves" her family "because she [has] not got the energy to stay" ("RN" 377).

While behaving like the Angel causes Susan stress and self-division, not conforming to the paragon's rational standards of behaviour causes her even more severe inner conflict. During her children's first holidays from school Susan finds herself "storming with anger at the twins ... who ... stood hand in hand looking at her with sheer dismayed disbelief." They cannot believe this is their usually "calm" mother ("RN" 352). She reacts to her loss of control and the twins' response by feeling sick and then going to lie down. That night she miserably confesses her loss of control to Matthew. When he comforts

her, she becomes "calm," and "[c]alm, she wonder[s] what [is] wrong with her, and why she should mind so much that she might, just once, have behaved unjustly with the children" ("RN" 353). Susan's guilty response to her active expression of anger is to retire into passivity, seeking her bed. Suppressing her anger, she converts it into self-punishing sickness. Even as she wonders at the perfection of composure she demands of herself, she is "calm," detached from her own feelings, and constrained by the quiet serenity demanded of a "good" mother. As this incident reveals, Susan further punishes herself by beginning to feel that there is something "wrong" with her. The term reflects how disturbingly alien is her anger to her rational conception of herself as good and kind.

The most powerful agent in Susan's alienation from her own feelings is her inner Angel, but the excessive rationalisation of feeling involved in interaction with her family is crucial to her growing conviction that she is "mad" or wicked. The many "long earnest discussions," that are necessary for her to gain a room of her own, seem to her proof that she is behaving abnormally ("RN" 357). Knowing that her husband can only see her desires to be free of "bondage" as irrational, she is afraid to tell him of her worst fears ("RN" 356). Her strained behaviour leads Matthew to treat her more carefully, as if she were a stranger ("RN" 355, 363). His response, in turn, reinforces her perception of herself as mentally disturbed

or wicked. She blames herself, and blames herself entirely, for her own breakdown and the deterioration of her marriage--and Matthew does nothing to counteract her perception ("RN" 364).

In order to add point to her exposure of the inadequacies of "intelligence," Lessing grants Susan intellectual understanding of the causes of her condition, understanding which remains useless to help her. Susan realises that life as a self-sacrificing woman has left her with no sense of herself as a person who has her own ideas, needs, desires, talents. She even realises what she ought to do:

First I spent twelve years of my adult life working, living my own life. Then I married, and from the moment I became pregnant for the first time I signed myself over, so to speak, to other people. To the children. Not for one moment in twelve years have I been alone, had time to myself. So now I have to learn to be myself ... ("RN" 351)

However, as long as she has contact with her husband and children, she is caught in the powerful dynamic of her family's demands and her conception of what she ought to be. Her family, naturally enough, want her to continue as the being that they know, who shows them warmth, affection, and acceptance.

Children and housekeeper soon intrude into the privacy

of the room she gains for herself (which is called "Mother's Room," not "Susan's Room") ("RN" 358). Desperately manoeuvring to gain herself some solitude and rest, she takes a holiday in "the remotest place she knew of," in Wales ("RN" 362). Even here, however, she is harrassed by the ties of duty which, so profoundly part of her psyche, are also expressed in the Rawlingses' usual carefully ordered, "intelligent" fashion.

Every morning the children telephoned her before they went off to school, to encourage and support her, just as they had over Mother's Room. Every evening she telephoned them, spoke to each child in turn, and then to Matthew. ("RN" 362)

Only when Susan resorts to Room Nineteen in Fred's Hotel is she able to shed all definition in terms of social roles, and, with them, her inner conflict.

Susan's state of conflict is a forcing-house for two figures that she visualizes (one as within herself, the other external), which represent denied parts of the self. By means of these figures, in combination with the motifs of the mirror and the snake, Lessing symbolizes the vigour of the irrational aspects of the human psyche and the harmfulness of suppressing energy attaching to the emotions.

The feelings that Susan suppresses are those of rage, resentment, irritation, and restlessness, all stimulated by "her big and beautiful home" ("RN" 350). As the

pressure of these intense feelings grows, she tries to detach them from her conscious self by imagining that they belong to another person, "a stranger." This is a fierce woman whom Susan dislikes "very much," as she is "cold and indifferent ..." ("RN" 364-65). However, two scenes in which Susan gazes at her reflection in a mirror reveal to her that this fierce woman, and a "demon" that she sees in her garden, in reality emanate from her own psyche.

The mirror is a motif that interested both Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir as "metaphor and reality ... a key to the feminine condition."<sup>5</sup> In "To Room Nineteen" the mirror acts as truth-teller in confronting Susan (and the reader) with the split between what she is and feels, on the one hand, and, on the other, the facade she presents to the world. When, in the second of these scenes, Susan examines in the mirror "a round, candid, pleasant face with clear dark brows and clear grey eyes," she thinks, "How very strange! Much more to the point if what looked back at me was the gingery green-eyed demon ..." ("RN" 363-64).

The image of woman-looking-in-the-mirror is, then, used to present simultaneously the opposed approved and disapproved aspects of women. The acceptable aspect is a "pleasant face" that reveals no strong, let alone evil, emotion. A bland face, it exposes none of this particular woman's suffering or cruelty. This "candid" face, the story implies, is the mask women are forced to adopt when only part of their humanity is acceptable as "feminine" or womanly.

As Susan gazes at herself in her mirror, her action

of brushing her hair is described in terms that evoke the snake motif.

She was running the brush over her hair again and again, lifting fine black clouds in a small hiss of electricity. She was peering in and smiling as if she were amused at the clinging hissing hair that followed the brush. ("RN" 364)

[S]he brushed her hair, watching the fine black stuff fly up to make its little clouds of electricity, hiss, hiss, hiss. Behind her head, across the room, was a blue wall. She realized she was absorbed in watching the black hair making shapes against the blue. ("RN" 370)

The snake motif subtly suggests that conformity with the behaviour of the calm, rational Angel leads to cramping and perversion of vitality in wives--and husbands, for Matthew is included in the image Susan sees in her mirror: she can see him lying on the bed behind her ("RN" 364, 369).

The multivalent snake motif is introduced into the story so as to indicate the uroboric snake which, in encompassing opposites (like life and death, death and resurrection, masculine and feminine) signifies wholeness, inclusiveness, and perpetual renewal. For the Rawlingses, all such positive values have dwindled into purposelessness

and pettiness: the reader is told that their life seems "to be like a snake biting its tail" ("RN" 344). The "hissing" of Susan's hair in the mirror scenes, the "shapes" it makes against the "blue" wall, evoke rays of negative power, or energy, that escape only under pressure and in perverted form because it is constrained.

The reader is aware of the rational, scientific cause for the "hissing" of Susan's hair, that brushing causes static electricity. Yet the snake motif of the story roots this scene in a world neither particularised nor naturalistic but non-rational and mythopoeic, or mythological. Susan's reflected head conjures up (more definitely in the second description) the outline of one of the Gorgons, Medusa. The hair-brushing scenes then acquire a potent, timeless resonance which, together with the narrator's ironic assertion that these scenes represent a "time-hallowed scene in the connubial bedroom," suggests that it has been the domesticated woman's lot for a long, long time to conceal a vital, angry self ("RN" 363).

The circularity of the snake and its links with process recall the challenge of the ferris wheel on the waste ground outside Martha Quest's flat in A Proper Marriage. The challenge of the wheel is to find a way to transcend constricting, deterministic patterns so as to achieve active growth in continuity instead of self-consuming stagnation. Susan fails to find a way. Her vitality takes shape, only immanently, as a male demon and as a destructive, furious figure who, traditionally,

had the ability to immobilise ("castrate") the men who looked at her.

As in The Grass is Singing, concealment of the woman's anger does not prevent it from harming the man with whom she lives. Susan sits erect at her mirror physically dominating her prone husband, while sinister energy is released from her hair. Hovering over a male who is prone and has become, by the time of the second scene, "thin, even gaunt," Susan's Medusa-like head is like a "dark" face, or aspect, of the sorrowing Madonna of the Pietá ("RN" 370). Evelyn J. Hinz and John J. Teunissen argue persuasively, in their article entitled "The Pietá as Icon in The Golden Notebook," that the sexual scenes involving the "mad" Anna Wulf and Saul Green employ the Christian prototype of the Madonna leaning over the recumbent body of her dead son, and that these encounters also reveal and emphasise "the darker face of this resigned Madonna" and "the destructive nature of maternal love."<sup>6</sup> Following in broad outline Neumann's discussion of the Magna Mater archetype in The Great Mother, Hinz and Teunissen say that the "denial" of the ambivalent nature of the "feminine," particularly in its maternal manifestation, stems from the patriarchal suppression and devaluing of women which, in cultures influenced by Christianity, involves the fear of women and of sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Woman, nature, and eros are identified with each other, and feared because associated with darkness, death, and destruction.

Part of this "female" world of nature are the animals,

which are conceived of as all that is carnal, fallen, unconscious, and irrational. Medusa was Lady of the Beasts. The large stone figure of Medusa that dominates the pediment of the Temple of Artemis in Corfu is flanked by two large spotted felines,<sup>8</sup> and in Ancient Mesopotamian sculpture lionesses represented the destructive aspect of the powerful mother goddess.<sup>9</sup> Possibly Lessing, widely-read in the mythology of different cultures, is not unaware of these facts: Susan has hair that hisses like snakes, and she goes "prowling" through her garden "like a wild cat" ("RN" 362).

Hinz and Teunissen argue that while the consciousness of the Western cultural tradition has been shaped by the image of the Great Mother as the good mother, The Golden Notebook scenes suggest that "the unconsciousness apparently recognizes another face," and that "the horror of this situation does not lie in the disjunction of the two aspects" of the archetype "but in the denial of the reality of the 'other face,' a denial which results in perversion and insanity." The "horror" does not, these critics stress, arise from the "negative" reality (the Great Mother is, after all, the source of death as well as of life, since all creatures are born to die) but "from the perversion that results from its denial."<sup>10</sup>

These remarks point to the presence in Lessing's fiction of Jungian and Laingian thought, especially as they relate to the harmful effects of denying the existence of evil aspects of the psyche. Lessing's interest in

Jung's model for understanding human behaviour is documented by Cleary,<sup>11</sup> while the affinity between Lessing's views and those of R. D. Laing on the causes and the value of madness have been commented on most thoroughly by Marion Vlastos in an article entitled "Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy."<sup>12</sup> Vlastos quotes a key passage from Laing's The Politics of Experience that serves to throw light on the depiction of Susan's self-division and the depletion of her "good" self:

It has always been recognized that if you split Being down the middle, if you insist on grabbing this without that, if you cling to the good without the bad, denying the one for the other, what happens is that the dissociated evil impulse, now evil in a double sense, returns to permeate and possess the good and turn it into itself.<sup>13</sup>

Susan's energy is drained not only by the effort involved in suppressing her "dark" emotions but also by the growing strength of her "dissociated evil impulse": the Medusa and the demons "possess" Susan.

In the first of the hair-brushing scenes Susan thinks that the reflection she sees ought to be, not that of a "sensible" woman, but that of the "gingery green-eyed demon" whom she has seen in her garden ("RN" 364). Lessing links this demon, like the Medusa, to inverted "life"

values of the snake (and the related caducea):

She was standing at the bottom of the garden watching the river ebb past, when she raised her eyes and saw this person, or being. ... He was looking at her, and grinning. In his hand was a long crooked stick, which he had picked off the ground, or broken off the tree above him. He was absent-mindedly, out of an absent-minded or freakish impulse of spite, using the stick to stir around in the coils of a blindworm or a grass snake (or some kind of snake-like creature: it was whitish and unhealthy to look at, unpleasant). The snake was twisting about, flinging its coils from side to side in a kind of dance of protest against the teasing prodding stick. ("RN" 358)

The snake is not necessarily "phallic." Neumann describes stone crosses in Ireland and Scotland that represent the "Cross-Mother," and which are similar to the Diana of Ephesus and a Cretan goddess in resemblances "extending to the coil of snakes in the belly region."<sup>14</sup> Susan's encounter with a devilish male figure, in the Edenic setting of a garden, during which a stick "stirs" the coils of a snake, is, possibly, (like Mary Turner's death) a symbolic rape.

The maleness of Susan's "demon" is significant. Greenfield, in "The Archetypal Masculine," states that those aspects of the psyche that we specify as ego are traditionally identified with the masculine.<sup>15</sup> While the archetypal feminine is characterised as static, enclosing,

material, self-contained, and is associated with nature and the unconscious, the archetypal masculine is identified with the ego, and given expression in myth and literature as various male figures.<sup>16</sup> The ego aspects of the psyche are expressed "in an active mode via intrusive and generative behaviour," says Greenfield.<sup>17</sup> If the Medusa represents Susan's lost potential for eroticism and nurturing, her male evil figure signifies her contained potentiality for asserting herself in the world at large.

Susan's devil prods with a stick, that is, behaves intrusively. The colours associated with this demon, red and green, signify, in the language of myth and poetry, vital forces (which, if unchecked, may be destructive or antisocial). By contrast, Susan's social face is characterised by lack of colour: she has "clear dark brows and clear grey eyes" ("RN" 363). The "gingery-"ness of the demon also suggests verve, zest, effervescence, mettle; these are the very qualities Susan lacks. Apprehending her own ego (or "masculine") characteristics as only evil, Susan remains unaware that a Trickster figure, of which this devil is a variety, represents transformation as well as the overthrow of orderly structure.

The constellation of figures, external and internal, around Susan represent the various aspects of her own psyche: the mischievous, volatile Trickster/Devil is the counterpart of Matthew, the stable, ordering Father; the powerful, "consuming" Medusa opposes Mrs. Parkes, a "good" maternal type. In terms of the Jungian model of the psyche,

Susan has the potential to incorporate the attributes of all these figures; but feeling bound to be only the bloodless good Angel, she dwindles, inwardly tormented by rage, into pale, lifeless depression, eventually into non-existence.

Fear and ignorance prevent Susan from realising that her "intrusive" faculties can be creative. She vacillates between bouts of vigorous but aimless movement and periods when she forces herself to sit quietly. Her sense of self is so insecurely defined that she lacks the strength needed to sustain the sense of purpose and controlled application which would harness the aggressiveness of her ego. Instead, she experiences the strength of her ego as a compulsion to destroy: the phallic stick teases and prods in a "freakish impulse of spite" ("RN" 358). Furthermore, she is haunted by that "feminine" aspect of herself, the Medusa, that wishes to freeze "masculine" generative energy, including her own. The "rape" in "To Room Nineteen" is, then, an attack upon the self: Susan turns her own powers destructively on herself. Finally, she kills all psychic and physical life in herself.

It is in the garden, the ambivalent "green" place of tradition, that Susan first sees her devil. He appears "at the bottom" of the garden where, again by tradition, strange and magical events occur ("RN" 358). Being the point furthest removed from the tamed world of the house, the bottom of the garden offers Susan the option of freer exercise of her powers. Since this region nevertheless

remains part of the domestic world, and since Susan cannot conceive of herself as entitled to be anything other than a domesticated woman, and this alone, the freedom proffers itself as temptation to do evil.

But even in a place extremely remote from her home, in the mountains of Wales, Susan carries with her the guilt-ridden conflict that distorts her perception of the phenomenal world:

Everywhere on the mountains, where she met no one at all ... she came face to face with her own craziness which might attack her in the broadest valleys, so that they seemed too small; or on a mountain-top from which she could see a hundred other mountains and valleys, so that they seemed too low, too small, with the sky pressing down too close. She would stand gazing at a hillside brilliant with ferns and bracken, jewelled with running water, and see nothing but her devil, who lifted inhuman eyes at her from where he leaned negligently on a rock, switching at his ugly yellow boots with a leafy twig.

("RN" 363)

Since contact with either the social world of fixed identity and personal claims or the asocial natural world of space and movement causes "craziness," Susan takes refuge in a small, manageable space removed from both. Her connection with Room Nineteen, the money she pays to the hotelkeeper, is impersonal. At Fred's Hotel she is known as "Mrs. Jones" ("RN" 368). The name is featureless

in its commonness and, since it is not her real name, cannot serve to categorise Susan in social terms. Here, she is "all alone and with no one knowing where [she is]" ("RN" 360). When Matthew's enquiries intrude on this precious solitude, she has nowhere else to go but into unconsciousness itself ("RN" 370-71, 372).

"To Room Nineteen" recounts a woman's pathological withdrawal from the world and eventual suicide. Afraid to live, to love or be loved, Susan is to be pitied. Yet, does Lessing hint at some redeeming features in her protagonist's path to death? Carol Christ says, in her book, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, that in women's writing female protagonists embark on spiritual as well as social quests, and that, while these protagonists usually fail in their quest for "grounding" in a social body, they often achieve a mystical grounding through epiphanies in the natural world.<sup>18</sup> Although Susan flees from "the natural world" because her experience of nature is marred by her unhappiness, she does seem eventually to find some sort of "grounding" of both the mystical and social kind.

The narrator describes Susan's way of passing the time in Room Nineteen in these terms: "... she wool-gathered--what word is there for it?--brooded, wandered, simply went dark, feeling emptiness run deliciously through her veins, like the movement of her blood" ("RN" 368). While in this state she feels she has found her essential nature. "Here I am," she thinks, "after all these years

of being married and having children and playing those roles of responsibility--and I'm just the same" ("RN" 368). More importantly, the narration links this sense of authenticity with another phenomenon: "And she leaned on the sill, and looked into the street, loving the men and women who passed, because she did not know them" ("RN" 368--emphasis added). She has a second, related experience when, on her way to Fred's Hotel for the last time, waiting in a busy tearoom for Room Nineteen to become vacant, she watches the people flow in and out the door, and feels "her being flow into them, into their movement" ("RN" 376). Contrasted with Susan's tendency to sit for longer periods, her body static and isolated, is the emotional freedom and sense of oneness she achieves as she merges effortlessly with the stream of unknown people or, later, with the "dark fructifying dream" of the sleep that precedes death ("RN" 377). Her last four hours of life she spends "delightfully darkly, sweetly, letting herself slide, gently, gently, to the edge of the river" ("RN" 377-78). And, as she dies, she drifts "off into the dark river" ("RN" 378). In retreat from the "masculine," rational, "intelligent" world, Susan merges with the "feminine," unconscious world of primal undifferentiation.

Lessing appears to be close, in "To Room Nineteen," to endorsing her protagonist's refuge in formlessness, freedom, and non-existence, to be indulging in the nostalgia for mindless peace (as opposed to a disciplined mysticism)

that is the reaction to the thwarted desire for the absolute underlying the ideal of romantic love. If the high-pitched "joy" and "magic" of the "gods" of romantic love fail, there is the "darkness" and the liberated "flow" of unconsciousness, to which the narrative attaches the importance of some sort of communal tie.

However, the narrator's and protagonist's respective points of view do not coincide as to the value of the experiences described. There is, for instance, the derisive verve with which the narrator sweeps us along through the first fifteen years of the Rawlingses' marriage in seven pages. Statements like "Anyway, they had a long discussion about the whole thing before going off to sleep in each other's arms" ("RN" 350) establish satirical distance between the story-teller and the characters. Furthermore, although a sympathetic analysis of Susan's breakdown follows, it is likely that words like "emptiness" and "deliciously," when used to describe the character's sensations, are cautionary hints that her withdrawal and death involve self-indulgence ("RN" 368). Lessing is, possibly, bitterly parodying an epiphany: what Susan attains to at her death is only a stunted remnant of her full social and biological potential. She moves from one extreme, that of intellectual aridity, to the polar opposite of mindless engulfment.

"To Room Nineteen" indicates a change in Lessing's understanding of the link between the angelic housewife and a "dark" male figure. While in The Grass is Singing

Moses murders Mary, in the short story the responsibility for killing the woman is transferred from external male agent to her own psychological make-up, in interaction with and as shaped by the social world. While Mary projects certain desires and fears onto Moses, Susan's devil represents her introjection of these same impulses. The area of conflict has become the female psyche.

The "internalisation" of women's struggle to forge a more vigorous, expansive identity may be linked to Lessing's place in one of the main strands of contemporary writing, that which focusses on the individual consciousness; it may also be related to the characteristics of a particular period within the twentieth century. During the Sixties, blacks, students, the youth, and women all urged forcefully their release from cultural and economic injustices, and the right to greater individual freedom and self-development. Amongst radical groups there was a wish to focus on universal oppression and yet link it with the specific situation in one's own country. Whilst there was the desire to revolutionise the personal as well as the political amongst all the groups, it is, as Juliet Mitchell says, "Women's Liberation," in particular, "that is concerned with that area of politics which is experienced as personal."<sup>19</sup>

Particular features of the Women's Liberation movement have been the small group and the technique

of consciousness-raising, with activists like Millett maintaining that it is essential to alter "the socialization process of temperament and role differentiation" in order to change the formal superstructure. It is precisely those areas that Millett has defined as most intractable, "[b]asic attitudes, values, emotions," with which Lessing concerns herself in this story.<sup>20</sup>

Lessing's attack upon the postwar development of the rationally-based social sciences may be linked to the condemnation by Millett, Chodorow, and Badinter of the reactionary nature of the social sciences, as has been discussed in Chapter 1 (pages 19-20). "To Room Nineteen" suggests that psychology, sociology and anthropology do, indeed, provide new ideological support for old ideas, but that, like all creeds founded upon rationality, they are ultimately naïvely optimistic about the extent to which they may control the forces of irrational emotions. Yet, despite the apparent rejection of the efficacy of purposeful social planning, and despite the romantic emphasis on the individual consciousness pitted against society, the story is concerned with commitment, with love, even if it is of an impersonal kind. The aim is clear, although the way is not.

Lessing continues to scrutinise the traditional institutions of marriage and motherhood with a critical

eye. Her married protagonists do not, after "To Room Nineteen," like Susan, refuse to play a part, says Cleary. Although this is not, in fact, true of the Martha Quest of either Ripple from the Storm (1966) or Landlocked (1967), it is true of the Martha of The Four-Gated City (1972) and of Kate Brown of The Summer before the Dark (1973). Kate, like Susan Rawlings, goes through a "mid-life crisis," only to return to her family after her outer journey to Spain and her inner journey of exploration of the self.<sup>21</sup> Although Martha Quest does not marry, she does accept long-term responsibilities for adults and children within a family grouping. Like D in Memoirs, she seems better able to rear and nurture teenagers because they are not her biological children. The looser tie allows for an emotional distance (a certain "impersonality") that leads to better understanding between adult and child.<sup>22</sup>

Commitment to playing a part is characteristic, above all, of Al·Ith of The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five (1980). Al·Ith, Mother of her realm, obeys the Order from the Providers to marry Ben Ata, for the benefit of her people. Since Ben Ata is repugnant to Al·Ith, the affirmation of the necessity to engage in the bond of marriage is (humorously) wry. Marriage still means severely curtailing one's nature: it means frustration, sacrifice, and undignified dependence; but the price is no longer too high. One can choose to play conventional social roles without extinguishing the self. There are

rewards, personal and public; and it is, finally, simply a mysterious necessity.

Lessing's mature statement, in Marriages, on the relations between the individual and the collective is linked to the insight present in "To Room Nineteen" that within the individual consciousness itself lie the forces of destruction or of healing. This knowledge means the individual no longer sees herself merely as a victim of unchangeable historical and social patterns. Within the context even of unknowable, overarching forces the individual must take responsibility for herself, and for playing her part in society.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lessing describes the use of "petrol box furniture ... [and] dyed curtains from flour sacks" as "terribly common" amongst the farmers in the Banket area of Southern Rhodesia during the Thirties. Bertelsen, from original transcript of interview.

<sup>2</sup> Betsy Draine, in Substance Under Pressure, says that Anna Wulf's central struggle in The Golden Notebook is not to be seduced by a "lying nostalgia" for the absolute or its opposite, anarchy. Behind such nostalgia, says Draine, lies a refusal, based on thwarted romanticism, to accept limitations. This leads to inability to commit oneself. Draine notes that the solution, "to hold on," is frequently in Martha Quest's mouth. Draine, Substance Under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 71-73. "Nostalgia" is attacked time and again in Shikasta (1979), where it is regarded as dangerous, since it paralyses the will to cope with a less than perfect reality.

<sup>3</sup> The term is taken from the biography by Ruth First and Ann Scott entitled Olive Schreiner (London: André Deutsch, 1980), p. 338. See also Cherry Clayton, "Olive Schreiner and Feminism," UCT Studies in English, No. 13 (November 1983), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Carol Oates, "A Visit with Doris Lessing," Southern Review, No. 9 (Winter 1973), p. 877. This theme is treated most extensively in The Summer Before the Dark.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, The Female Imagination (New York: Avon Books, 1976), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Evelyn J. Hinz and John J. Teunissen, "The Pietá as Icon in The Golden Notebook," Contemporary Literature, 14 (Autumn 1973); rpt. in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, ed. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> Hinz and Teunissen, p. 51. See Chapter 1, pp. 18-19 of this study.

<sup>8</sup> H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort and Bernard Ashmole, Art of the Ancient World (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., n.d.), p. 92. Cf. Neumann: "The terrible nature of the Feminine may take either of two forms: either the Goddess herself may become the terrifying animal or her terrible aspect may become the animal that accompanies and dominates her. Thus she may be a lioness (cf. the lion goddess of Egypt), or else she may be enthroned on a lion or ride on a lion ..." (p. 183, n. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Groenewegen-Frankfort and Ashmole, p. 250.

<sup>10</sup> Hinz and Teunissen, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Cleary, Ch. iii, p. 126, n. 54. Cleary draws attention to the letter from Lessing to Roberta Rubinstein dated March 28, 1977, in which Lessing discusses her own experience of Jungian therapy. See also Raskin, "Doris Lessing at Stony Brook," p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Vlastos, "Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy," Papers of the Modern Language Association, No. 91 (March 1976), pp. 245-58. As Vlastos states, Lessing is, like Laing, concerned with the connection between the private and the public; both thinkers see the individual's split psyche as the exaggerated form of the division in the fabric of society: individuals are sick because society is sick.

<sup>13</sup> Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York: Ballantine, 1970), p. 75, quoted in Vlastos, p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Neumann, p.255.

<sup>15</sup> Greenfield, pp. 33-50.

<sup>16</sup> Greenfield, p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> Greenfield, p. 34.

<sup>18</sup> Carol Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, Woman's Estate (1971; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 61.

<sup>20</sup> Millett, pp. 178, 177.

<sup>21</sup> Cleary makes the observation that we "might compare Lessing's use of 'rooms'" in The Summer Before the Dark to her use of them in "To Room Nineteen." If in the short story they are used as a "metaphor of constriction," in the novel they "become a metaphor for potential" (Ch. iii, p. 120, n. 40).

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Daymond proposed this idea in a paper entitled "Writing the Future: Doris Lessing's The Four-

Gated City," read at the Sixth Annual Conference of the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa, Pietermaritzburg, 1982.

CHAPTER 4THE MARRIAGES BETWEEN ZONES THREE, FOUR AND FIVE

"There's never been a book that I enjoyed writing as much as [The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five]," said Lessing in an interview she granted upon publication of the novel in 1980. "It was a piece of cake, very unlike most of my books, which are agony. I really loved it."<sup>1</sup> And Marriages is, certainly, handled with a lightness of touch only previously found in the autobiographical In Pursuit of the English (1960).

In the same interview Lessing explained that she saw herself as writing, in Marriages, about "the archetypes of male and female," that the relationships are between "stylized men and women," and that her tale is a "sort of legend" or "myth."<sup>2</sup> Lessing's allegorical legend tells of the love between Al·Ith and Ben Ata, rulers of two lands, called "zones," whose ways of life each represent "matriarchal" and "patriarchal" systems. Zone Three has always been ruled (in uniquely egalitarian fashion) by women, entitled "Mothers"; Zone Four, dominated by men, has a king who exhibits the rigid behaviour of an archetypal law-giving, judging Father.

In Marriages, Lessing presents, more sympathetically than ever before in her work, the specific characteristics,

invites the following question. Recalling that through the careers of her questing protagonists (Martha Quest, Anna Wulf, and Kate Brown) Lessing has cautioned that acceptance of the roles of conventional wife- and motherhood threatens the woman's sense of self and prevents her from commitment to broader social tasks, and recalling that Lessing accentuates her warning by "killing off" two characters, Mary Turner and Susan Rawlings, who cannot break free of the "box" of the domesticated life, does the celebration of the maternal in Marriages signal Lessing's betrayal of the aspirations of her struggling "daughter" characters? It will be argued in this chapter that, Lessing, although limited in the options she envisages for women, is not "selling out" Martha, Anna, Kate--or any of those readers who have been heartened by the writer's ability to mirror their own struggles to shape new roles for themselves.

In the previous chapter it was remarked that Lessing begins to emphasize the need to change consciousness if we are to discover the means of restructuring social institutions. It is consistent with this line of development that Lessing should, by the time she writes Marriages, be concerned less with attacking the stereotypes of social roles (which are part of the "external" field of study of sociology) than with shaping figures that originate in the "internal," psychological world, figures that she calls "archetypes." It is also consistent with the more forbearing attitude she notes in herself that

Lessing no longer engages primarily (as she does until The Summer Before the Dark) in stripping away social roles with the purpose of condemning them as false and detrimental to the real self. Traces of this customary analytical task do remain in Marriages, as in the criticisms of the kind of life Al·Ith leads as a wife-mother in Zone Four; however, Lessing's main undertaking in this novel (one she carries out with relish) is of a synthetic nature. She shapes a liberal, expansive image-- of a quester who gathers to herself, as she proceeds on her journey, roles that benefit the community and herself. These roles are unchanged, and the world in which the greater part of the quester's journey takes place, "patriarchal" Zone Four, in many ways resembles our own; but the purpose of the roles is now viewed as beneficent, and the woman herself is different. Al·Ith undertakes the domesticated phase of her life equipped with resources no previous Lessing woman has had; and, of crucial importance, she views neither her life-span nor her life's purpose as bounded entirely by the period she spends as a domesticated woman. Thus her essential nature is not confined by the conventional roles of wife- and motherhood.

One may speculate that the change in Lessing has come about in the course of her own mellowing. She was sixty-one at the time of publication of Marriages. In the interview already quoted from she said: "I don't have the old kind of feminist thoughts that I used to have.

I mean, I've lost my moral indignation completely. I certainly try to understand what is happening. That's quite different from trying to think what ought to be happening."<sup>3</sup> The humour and charm of the love-tale of Marriages, and the pleasure the author took in writing it, argue that she has indeed lost her anger.

Lessing is not alone in her release from anger; she remains attuned to contemporary developments--for Friedan, who is still one of the leading figures of the post-war Women's Liberation Movement, is also no longer angry. The Second Stage contains a plea, directed mainly to American women, for a re-evaluation of "the vital human satisfactions of warm loving relationships," some of which exist "in a family context."<sup>4</sup> It is time, Friedan argues passionately, for women to recognise their own strength and move beyond anger and resentment to take a more confident and active role in the public world, while sharing with men "the grounding, warming, human realities of daily life."<sup>5</sup> Such solidarity between men and women would enable them more successfully to cope with the insecurity of the current economic climate and to share more equitably the task of creating a stable, loving environment in which to rear children.

Friedan envisages such an environment as occurring not necessarily within the older, nuclear, one (male) wage-earner variety of family but within new kinds of family.<sup>6</sup> In Marriages, too, the apparently conservative aims commended, those of reconciliation and union

("marriage"), are achieved not by repeating established life-patterns but by venturing beyond them. Lessing stands firm by her evolutionary ideal--to which she has given expression in the flight of daughters from a narrow way set by their mothers--for Marriages clearly signals the necessity for progress (meaning both "change" and "improvement") in the events of its plot, in its characterization, and in its thematic subject matter. The novel traces a central character's arduous journey "upward" to the blue, misty regions of Zone Two after she has climbed from the plains of Zone Three and the even lower lands of Zone Four. As she journeys, Al·Ith gains in strength, self-understanding, and the capacity to love and aid others. The central concern of the novel is the way in which changes, brought about by the clash and union of opposites (the marriage of the ruler of "matriarchal" Zone Three, Al·Ith, with the king of "patriarchal" Zone Four, Ben Ata), lead to amelioration in the condition of the individuals involved and of the communities of which they form a part.

The change in Lessing's position is indeed radical. We have come to expect from her the attitude that all arrangements with men, and marriage in particular, are harmful to women. Yet, in this novel, although marriage may cause suffering and a certain diminishment of the self (for both partners), it is nevertheless a necessary and ultimately beneficial process. Motherhood, too, is viewed freshly in Marriages. Marriage is, in an ultimate

and abstract sense, Lessing's metaphor for that process by means of which the psyche incorporates alienated aspects of itself through experience in the world. Motherhood, also freshly viewed, becomes Lessing's metaphor for the acceptance of responsibility for the physical and spiritual well-being not only of one's own biological children, but also of oneself and of the social body at large. The different sorts of "mothering," or nurturing, are not exclusive of one another; they appear, in fact, to occur simultaneously. Even as Al·Ith gives birth to and rears her son, Arusi, she is also guaranteeing the future improvement of the realms ruled by herself and Ben Ata and fulfilling her own personal quest. Furthermore, even though domesticated mothering may engross most of the attention for a time, at other periods one may more consciously be engrossed in communal duties (as Al·Ith is during her life as ruler of Zone Three, before she marries Ben Ata) or in fostering one's own inner life (as Al·Ith is during the solitary spell between her departure from Zone Four and her disappearance into supramundane Zone Two). By extending her understanding of the terms "marriage" and "mothering," Lessing finally resolves the dilemma of negotiating right relations between the "individual conscience" and the "collective."

When she is Mother of Zone Three Al·Ith is responsible for the welfare of the people, animals, and plants of her realm; during the last, hermitic phase of her life she continues to provide sustenance of a spiritual or

imaginative kind to a growing band of followers. It is through accomplishments of such an heroic order that Al·Ith merits the term "cosmic mother." This is the phrase Lorna Sage applied to the "fleeting apparition" glimpsed by the narrator at the close of The Memoirs of a Survivor (1974).<sup>7</sup> As befits a personage of cosmic dimensions, Al·Ith transcends the boundaries of individual personality. Lusik, the narrator of Marriages, poses the rhetorical question:

What are any of us when we call ourselves Chronicler or song-maker, queen or farmer, lover, tender of children, the friend of animals? We are the visible and evident aspects of a whole we all share, that we all go to form. Al·Ith was, for most of her life, queen ... the substance of Zone Three expressed itself in her in that shape ... queen. Or at other times mother, friend, animal-knower. And when she went down to Zone Four how may we assess the way Zone Three squeezed and forced itself in there, as Ben Ata's wife, queen of that place with him, Yori's protector, Dabeeb's friend ... yes, but what are all these guises, aspects, presentations? Only manifestations of what we all are at different times, according to how these needs are pulled out of us.

(M 242)

In Al·Ith, Lessing incarnates an abstract principle of generativity, which she renders benevolent by attributing to it responsiveness to human needs. Such a principle is traditionally associated with the important archetype called the Great

Mother. Predominantly a Demeter figure, then, Al·Ith also, however, has Artemis's energy and ability to identify with the plants and animals, and she has Aphrodite's joyous eroticism. She is an exhilarating figure, depicted with a conviction and vitality that delight.

Lessing does, however, at times strain after the reader's acceptance of her meaning, as in the passage just quoted. Although Lusik warns that he is employing "bald words" as he explains how we are to understand Al·Ith, the reader might wish for less overt didacticism on the part of the author; for it is the accustomed voice of Lessing-as-moraliser--longing to break into essay form--that we hear in Lusik's tones (M 242).

Lusik's unashamed recognition of his use of "bald words" in order to write what he regards as the "deepest lessons" of his life recalls Lessing's acknowledgement, in an interview with C. J. Driver in 1974, that she deliberately avoids polishing her work, instead striving for a deliberate clumsiness, in order "to try to get the texture of experience."<sup>8</sup> If, as Lessing tells Driver, her aim is to "get it simple, clear," then it must be conceded that she succeeds.<sup>9</sup> The allegory of Marriages does convey abstract, sometimes complex, ideas through images and action that are easily understood. A critic is not, however, showing aversion to "experience" but solicitude for art (or aesthetic pleasure) in wishing for improvements like fewer repetitions of questions that relate to theme, such as "What is the purpose of it all?"

and its variants; nor does it seem carping to suspect that Lessing's fondness for elliptical points results at times from insufficient care on her part rather than from, say, the successful representation of Lusik's wrestling with profundities, as in the passage recently quoted. Perhaps it is Lessing's awareness of the possibility that she might lose readers who have grown accustomed to her more realistic writing that causes her at times to lose her grasp on the delicacy with which allegory makes its allusions. Lessing admires the Sufi teaching tale, which unseals its possible meaning(s) subtly, yet her own tale at times discloses lack of faith in the interchange of understanding possible between story-teller and reader.<sup>10</sup> The presence of the author's directing hand detracts from the intellectual and aesthetic pleasure of the allegory and makes for a thinness of texture.

Even as Lessing constructs an allegorical/mythological world for her archetypes, she does not quite relinquish the demythologising task so dear to her. As her king and queen employ the gestures, postures, and words of romantic lovers, they parody literary and real lovers. They play the aristocratic lovers' game, chess; but their antics and dialogue could as easily appear in a television "soap opera" or a Mills and Boon pulp "romance": they gain the democratic status of being as foolish as any two persons in love (M 92, 85-86, 117, 118).

Lessing uses a more overt demythologising device than parody when she "freezes" the narration to direct the reader's attention toward alternative ways of rendering

particular scenes. The reader is made conscious of the fiction-making process, and is compelled toward the conviction that, since all myths are provisional constructs of understanding, none is to be taken literally.

Given the author's conscious disclaimer of the role of definitive truth-teller, it may seem to be placing too heavy a weight of scrutiny upon Marriages to consider whether it is a satisfactory myth for modern women.

Furthermore, the allegorical landscape of the novel more closely resembles that of medieval times than our own: there are armoured soldiers (complete with swords and helmets), a doughty hero, a spirited heroine, and a call from a supernatural power to endure a series of trials. Far from the urbanised world of the twentieth-century housewife is the tribe of wild desert-dwellers of Zone Five, or is Andaroun, capital city of Zone Three, which, with its elaborately faceted areas of glass, water, and terraces, resembles some futuristic or ancient Middle Eastern centre of leisure and pleasure. As has been suggested, however, the social organisation of the people of Zone Four does have features that are characteristic, still, of the contemporary Western world. Zone Four is, it is true, more benign than our own world (which is represented by Shikasta), for warring is only a game in Ben Ata's kingdom, its death-ray fortresses are sham, and very few deaths result from the skirmishes with Zone Five warriors (M 36, 93-94, 122-23). Yet Zone Four is like our world in many important ways: it is patriarchal, militaristic, and hierarchical; social sanctions are

punitive; sexual relations are fraught with hostility, tension and mistrust; boy-children are reared at first almost solely by women before being alienated from women by their entry into a male-dominated environment; and when Al·Ith falls in love she suffers symptoms that are typical of (what is still) the contemporary mythology of romantic love.

Besides these resemblances to our own world, a second reason for considering whether Marriages provides a satisfactory myth for modern women lies in the authority exercised by Lessing's opinions, particularly her views on the position of women. Furthermore, even if we do bear in mind the modern attitude to myth as only a provisional model of understanding it is, precisely, a myth (rather than, say, a realistic fiction) that certain theorists think modern women lack. Psychologist Phyllis Chesler, for example, in Women and Madness, like Jung and Neumann emphasizes the serious consequences of the decline in those rituals that celebrated the important part played by women in the biological and spiritual life of a people. In modern Western culture, says Chesler, "science and Christianity have increasingly devalued female biology, without yet freeing women from being defined solely in biological terms."<sup>11</sup> Particularly harmful for Western women, she finds, has been the loss of such ancient rituals as the Eleusinian mysteries, at the heart of which lay the myth of Demeter and Persephone.<sup>12</sup> Chesler therefore selects, as an example of a myth that was especially valuable for women, one which centred on the mother-daughter

bond--precisely that bond between women which has, to judge by her fiction, most troubled Lessing, and which she now reaffirms in her creation of a Demeter who is both loving and adventurous.

Patricia Stubbs, a literary critic, accords with Chesler in assigning to non-realistic modes the capacity to inspire and strengthen readers. In her book entitled Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920, Stubbs says that the "feminist" novel must progress beyond a mere description or analysis of the existing state of affairs: the realist mode is inadequate to the task of revitalising women because unable (unlike fantasy modes such as allegory or science fiction) to envisage "experiences and aspirations which go well beyond the possibilities afforded by present reality."<sup>13</sup>

The expectations expressed by Stubbs ought not to be used prescriptively, for fear of lapsing into a weakness common in feminist literary criticism. The literary text must not be regarded as a tract, its merits to be decided according to whether or not it conforms to some already defined framework of polemical ideas. Yet, what Stubbs and Chesler say may be used to establish a tentative set of criteria in terms of which to assess Marriages as a modern women's myth. Chesler desires the reinstatement of a myth that would grant women some special and mysterious value, and so counterbalance prevalent cultural myths about male potency. However, a satisfactory myth should, presumably, discard harmful elements of idealisation (like praise of the self-sacrificing woman such as was found in Lessing's treatment of Mary Turner's death) and instead promote some ideals that have normally been associated with masculinity,

such as adventurousness and self-sufficiency. A tale that depicted women as each other's support, comforter, playmate, and friend instead of each other's sexual rival would hearten and strengthen its female readers. Lastly, a new myth might, in order to inspire readers to tap new energies, profitably exploit the depiction of "experiences and aspirations that go well beyond the possibilities afforded by present reality." In this chapter Marriages will be briefly assessed in terms of these tentative criteria. But, first, Lessing's appraisal of marriage and motherhood will be considered.

"Marriage," the process during which one is intimately exposed over a long period to a being strange (or other) to oneself, is, in this novel, painful, and productive. The troubled "mingling," "blending," or "marrying" of the fastidious, beautiful, elegant queen of Zone Three with the uncouth king of neighbouring Zone Four takes place on an order of the Providers (whose name connotes benign purposes), and the union results in a degree of restoration of biological and spiritual vitality to both realms. The child of this marriage, a boy who is a blend of Zone Four robustness and Zone Three foresight, is a promise of continuing improvement in the social and economic arrangements of both lands.

To "mother" may signify assuming the task of rearing children within the nuclear family unit, but "mothering" may also acquire the meaning of fostering one's own development of consciousness and that of taking responsibility for one's duty to the larger social body. What is distinctive about mothering

in this novel is that confinement within the domesticated "box" is not necessarily a serious threat to the woman's self, except in part and temporarily; and even the suffering of this period of diminishment ultimately leads to growth of the self through the challenge presented by the other.

During the several stages of her marriage Al·Ith endures, it seems, more frustration and confusion than joy, and these stages by which she falls in love with her husband are a prelude to the period of her greatest trial, the "dark night" of the helpless misery of her pregnancy and childbirth.

From the outset the marriage has its hardships. In Zone Four Al·Ith encounters double hostility: she is a stranger from another land and a woman in a land ruled by men. She is accustomed to the ways of Zone Three, in which heterosexual relations are harmonious, light and unpossessive. In Zone Four, possessiveness and jealousy ensure monogamy. Discipline, orderliness, law, order, rigidity, and "arbitrary authority" are key values; even the landscape "seem[s] to confine and oppress" (M 39, 35). Accordingly, marriage confines and imprisons. Ironically, the first brief moment of "frank exchange" between Al·Ith and Ben Ata is one of "complicity" at their both feeling like "prisoners who had nothing in common but their incarceration" (M 42).

Yet their marriage pavilion, built on the precise directives of the Providers, is a symbol of the potential for ease, grace, harmony, strength, variety, richness,

and pleasure that lies in this union if the partners can surmount their antagonism (M 40, 43, 51, 61). Around the pavilion are trees that have not, like all other trees in Zone Four, "been hacked into lumps and wands" (M 40). There are gardens and fountains, the air is "lively and cool," and the pavilion itself is "light," with "coloured springing arches and pillars" (M 40). These features, together with other details, such as the "sweetly-smelling wood," "ivory-coloured walls," and "embroidered curtains ... caught back with jewelled clasps," are reminiscent of Old Testament palaces (M 43). The numerologically influential numbers of seven, three and nine (present in the seven jets of water for the rectangular pool, three for the oval pool, and nine spice trees to one side of the pools) add to the impression that these are, indeed, "mythological" or "archetypal" surroundings (M 51). Lusik's comment that the pavilion, in design, "was not far from the gaiety and freshness of the public buildings of Andaroun," indicates that ancient "matriarchal" influences are in partnership with the Providers to safeguard and foster this union (M 43, 42).

During the first period of their marriage, their honeymoon period, Al-Ith and Ben Ata are able to transcend the dislike they feel for each other and so begin their task of merging, blending, "marrying," the qualities of their respective zones. They spend a great deal of time alone together, "not shrinking from each other's gaze at all," instead "both trying to enter in behind the sober thoughtfulness of his grey eyes, the soft gleam of her

black eyes, so that they could reach something deeper, and other" (M 61).

"Marrying," or merging, has its anxieties however. Ben Ata is "astonished" to feel "waves of emotion ... so strong" he wonders if he is not "ill"; Al·Ith, too, is "amaze[d]" at herself: she experiences emotions that are "foreign" to her (M 65, 66). Their feelings of malaise accompany growing dependence and helplessness. He begins to "rely on her"; she wants the "barbarian" to "enclose her in his arms" (M 64, 66). She finds, too, that her sense of belonging to Ben Ata means she is cut off from her previous easy, intimate responses to her friends in Zone Three (M 72-75). During her first return to her home after only a day and a half in Zone Four Al·Ith feels trapped within her own perverse feelings: she is unable to forget Ben Ata, yet every reminder of him is painful. Such continue to be the features of the adventure of falling in love for Al·Ith: a perverse enjoyment of pain inflicted by the other, a feeling of being highly vulnerable to the other, and emotional and physical isolation (M 121, 115). However, she knows that she is "on the verge of a descent into possibilities of herself she had not believed open to her" (M 76). The reader is reassured of the necessity of the ritual.

The narrative continually stresses the paradoxical nature of the union: both limiting and productive. The exclusiveness of "love" in Zone Four has the effect of increasingly cutting Al·Ith and Ben Ata off from their customary activities and pleasures. Al·Ith is dismayed

at the decline in her ability to think, act responsibly, and solve serious problems. The close physical confinement and half-resented need of the other that are characteristic of "love" in Zone Four fashion bring an "edge of asperity" to both their voices (M 118, 122).

You put one person with another person,  
call it love ... and then make do with  
the lowest common denominator. (M 124)

So says Al·Ith to Ben Ata. In Zone Three, as she explains, love (except that they do not use the word) means, above all, assuming responsibility over an expansively defined area.

What [love] means is being with someone.  
Taking the responsibility for everything  
that happens between you. Between the  
two people in question and of course all  
the other people involved or who might  
be involved. (M 117)

Because of their merging, by the time Al·Ith departs from Zone Four, Ben Ata, too, loves in the Zone Three way, showing more care for his responsibility: "What did it mean, to marry the woman ruler of Zone Five - that barbarous and backward place? What was he supposed to do?" he ponders of his forthcoming second marriage to the queen of Zone Five (M 246).

Even when the royal couple most clearly manifest a phenomenon Lessing attributes to romantic love, that of seeing themselves as set against the rest of the world, they are described as engaged on a valuable task, one "they had been set in self-exploration" (M 157). In "To Room Nineteen" the Rawlingses treat their marriage as a "small boat" in "a very stormy sea"; and, just so, do Ben Ata and Al·Ith protect each other within strong arms which feel like "barricades built up outside a cave where some small and infinitely vulnerable and brave thing has taken cover" ("RN" 346, M 157). However, the sardonic tone the narrator adopts towards the Rawlingses is absent from Marriages. The reciprocal protectiveness of the king and queen is graced with a serious, worthy purpose, while the period during which they concentrate intensely upon each other results in true and equal bonding. Al·Ith teaches Ben Ata "how to be equal and ready in love"; she, on the other hand, no longer disdains to eat the food of his land (M 88, 159). Nor does she scorn the clothes supplied for her: this is not only because she has changed, but also because the women of Zone Four are now producing clothes styled along the elegant lines of Zone Three. Narrative tone, character development, and plot detail confirm that this marriage between two such different partners and two such alien ways of life leads to beneficial interchange (M 160).

The losses or sacrifices involved in bonding are also, however, kept before our eye. When, the period of the initial intimacy of their union now over, Ben Ata one day

makes a weak and dishonest excuse to leave Al·Ith and return to his army, Al·Ith is also partially relieved (M 164). She realises that she needs to be alone, in order to "locate her own self again" (M 165). On the point of attending the secret ceremonies of the women of Zone Four, she realises that all the time she was "shut up" with the king "she had not once gone out to gaze up at her own realm, at her own mountain heights" (M 168). Lessing once again, as she did in The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen," condemns the lack of privacy that leads married women to neglect their sense of self. She also makes a distinct if subtle distinction between the extent to which women and men commit their identities to heterosexual relationships. When, both oppressed by thoughts of Al·Ith's future return home, the royal couple comfort each other, Al·Ith clings to Ben Ata, "feeling that without him she couldn't be anything," and "he [holds] her, thinking that without her he would be only half of himself" (M 186).

Al·Ith in love becomes tamed, trammelled, "afraid of high places," even as her husband grows more dominating (M 161). "We're married now, and she can't have her way as she did," Ben Ata thinks (M 161). He is described as treating her with husbandly "complaisance," and "uxorious benevolence" (M 223, 164). He is kindly but absent-minded, and is eager to give her treats, indulging her as if she were a dependent child (M 162).

Although more stress is laid on the cost of prolonged union to the female partner, the male's miseries are not

ignored. Lessing suggests that those in bondage to romantic love are both helpless: if Al·Ith experiences a yearning for Ben Ata's presence that she calls "pathological," he, in his turn, suffers agonies of unfounded jealousy (M 164, 178). Their differences are always a source of constraint to them both:

[W]henver a natural spring of vitality flourished in either of them it was suppressed by the natural disposition of the other.

(M 121)

Yet the balance of judgement is, to the end of the novel, weighted on the side of approval of this "union of incompatibles": it "could not be anything less than a challenge" (M 179). When Ben Ata places his hand on Al·Ith's abdomen, feeling for their unborn child, his hand is saluting the "possibilities of them both," the potentialities of the "unknown and the unexpected, as well as [the] familiar" (M 179).

It is no new departure for Lessing to praise those who have the courage to risk the unknown. To an interviewer's complaint that she is "very severe," pushing her characters "to the limit, toward the point of irrationality where a sense of direction and accumulated experience can't help us," she retorted: "But that isn't a disaster, only a way of seeing things more clearly."<sup>14</sup> Nor is it new for a female character in a Lessing novel to seek,

'There's more to mating than children,' she observed. And the commonsensicalness of this caused him to groan out loud and strike his fists hard on the floor beside him.

'Well, if so, one wouldn't think you knew much about that.'

'Indeed,' she retorted. 'But in fact it is one of the skills of our Zone.'

'Oh, no,' he said. 'Oh no, no, no, no.' And he sprang up and went striding about the room, beating the delicate walls with his fists.

(M 46-47)

These marital debates on the respective merits of the zone's economic, cultural, social and sexual customs enact the clash of different ways of life involved in "marriage." The debates are also, being lively and amusing, one of the delights of this novel.

Such encounters keep the field of marital play open to the public world, despite the couple's gradually increasing seclusion, and they reveal the commitment Al·Ith and Ben Ata both have to their roles as rulers. Their shared sense of commitment to purposes beyond their private inclinations is an important factor in the growth of a bond of "friendship" and "comradeship" between them. They are concerned for the welfare of their respective realms and understand that their marriage has been ordered for the sake of the peoples they rule (M 56-58, 61). They "come closest to each other" during that time when, after a period of shared seclusion, they revive more active solicitude for their peoples (M 191). This occurs when they undertake a tour of inspection of Zone Four. And it is because intimacy with his queen enables

him to see his land through her eyes that Ben Ata is able to acknowledge, for the first time, the poverty and hardship suffered by his people:

Everywhere had the same stamp of on the edge of poverty. And nowhere could be seen young men, or men in the prime of life, or even middle-aged men. The women were formidable, and very strong, as if they had been forced to swallow iron very early in their lives and had never digested it. The old people stared from eyes that had learned to expect nothing. The children did not seem playful or lively, but had a hard watchful stare and were suspicious.

(M 189)

Ben Ata's illumination through familiarity with his wife implies that love of an individual and love of the community foster each other. There is no need to fear, and therefore exclude, any experience. One is not defined by any particular role; one may move from task to task, the skill and understanding gained in one area of life enriching the others. The binding medium between what may be termed the world of "love" and the world of "work" is an expansive acceptance of responsibility.

All the more telling, therefore, is Lessing's critique of customs, based on fear, ignorance, and anger, that exclude certain experiences or persons. The novel devotes particular attention to those customs which create barriers to communication and understanding during late pregnancy, childbirth, and very early childhood, and so hinder satisfactory mothering.

Custom prevents Al·Ith and Ben Ata from succouring each other and their child just before and after Arusi's birth; yet parents and child are all highly susceptible to the impressions their experience makes upon them at this time. Ben Ata feels the claims of his men, Al·Ith the claims of the women (M 191). It is the women in particular who come between husband and wife and between the couple and their child: the women claim Al·Ith, and, then her child, as their own.

Of particular interest to this study is Lessing's exploration and explanation of the claustrophobic bond that the Zone Four women form with their children. Al·Ith discovers that in Zone Four a new child is "sustained," through the daytime, "by women, by the talk of women, the love of women," before and after its birth (M 192). Although she loves the Zone Four women and is grateful for their concern for her and her child, she disapproves of the way in which they exclude men from the rituals of pregnancy and childbirth (M 200, 201, 203, 213, 249). Al·Ith's recollections of Zone Three ways are used to highlight the ridiculousness of those of Zone Four, and to suggest alternative, and better, methods of managing human relations. In Zone Three it was, for instance, customary for each Gene-Mother to share the care of a child, from the time of conception, with several Gene- and Mind-Fathers (M 72, 199-200, 201, 208). These men would sustain Al·Ith throughout her pregnancies, and would come together, before the birth of the child, to support her with "their presence and their thoughts" (M 199).

They were always present to welcome the "new creature" shortly after its birth (M 200). In Zone Four, there is "not a man in sight" at these times (M 200).

Al·Ith also observes that the exclusion of the menfolk is accompanied by the women's "fierce identification with the birth of a child as if it was some sort of self-fulfilment" (M 192). It seems to her as if the birth of their children is, for the women, "a triumphing over a threat or even a wrong, meriting the wild exulting yell of a warrior over a defeated enemy" (M 192).

Lessing's understanding of the women's maternal impulses is, ultimately, derived from Freud. As in On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works, the wish for a baby is seen as an expression of "penis-envy," that is, a desire for the power that men are perceived to possess.<sup>15</sup> Children are weighted, Lessing implies, with the emotional burden of being the means by which mothers exact revenge upon husbands, fathers, or whomever else is seen by women as keeping them from fulfilment.

To Al·Ith the Zone Four women's triumph is hollow: whatever is "real and fine and precious in this new being [is] in relation only" with the "blue" of Zone Two (M 193). Parenthood should properly be regarded as a function performed in trust to some superior entity; rearing a child entails care of its higher needs as well as attention to its physical wants. Accordingly, Al·Ith tries to establish with Arusi the refined, tranquil, solitary communion she enjoyed with her previous children, only to discover that

she, too, has become infected by the debased airs of Zone Four; she is "quite dismayed and surprised" to find herself acting as possessively as any other Zone Four woman, "licking and nuzzling the child, like a mare with a foal, or a dog with its newborn young" (M 202). She feels "enclosed in a loving spell" with Arusi, and "faint with loving and wanting" him; she has a strong desire to "eat him all up" (M 202). Lessing more openly explores the primitive fear of the "consuming" mother that she has alluded to in the suffocating reliance of frustrated, angry women--like Mary Turner's mother and Mrs. Quest--upon their children. Marriages depicts the mother's identification with the child as a transfer of sexual desire from (absent) father to child, accompanied by a longing for fulfilment so strong that the mother desires to reingest her baby.<sup>16</sup>

Since this novel does not only analyse, but also synthesises, the matter is not merely raised and examined; its power to disturb is partially diluted by Al·Ith's reflections upon the matter:

Well, this was Zone Four, these were  
Zone Four ways, and so, presumably,  
there was nothing to be done about it. (M 202)

If one accepts even the most disturbing emotions as the products of a particular cultural "atmosphere," then any potential burden of guilt or anger is alleviated.

However, fear of the spectre of the "consuming" mother is more surely dissipated by the scene in the pavilion gardens that marks the culmination of the marriage. In this scene Ben Ata watches Al·Ith's "adoration" of their son. He then picks up his wife and carries her away from the baby, into the pavilion, to their last, and most profoundly satisfying, time of lovemaking (M 224-27).

From a writer who has proved almost obsessively concerned with the harm mothers may do to their children, and whose most famous character, Martha Quest, struggles fiercely to guard herself and her daughter, Caroline, from the "deep, driving egotism of maternity," a scene in which motherhood is depicted as being profoundly beneficial marks a striking development in thought (PM 279).

The setting for this important scene is exotic and sacred. There are the features of the pavilion gardens: the beautifully-shaped pools, the "splashing water" of the fountains, the nine "spice trees" shedding "their scents," and, now, a pulsing urgency of sound (M 224). Above all, there is a dazzle of light:

Light came from everywhere. ... in the middle of this golden beat of sun and sound was Al·Ith, with her son, who was lying on a spread of blue cloth on the white [platform]. Al·Ith seemed to be all light and dazzle herself.

(M 224)

The atmosphere of sacredness is created in particular by the light that pours down on the figures, transfiguring them. The "round raised white platform, or dais" on which they rest resembles, perhaps, an altar (M 224). Delicate allusions are made to the Madonna who is the sanctioned Good Mother of Christian culture, for blue and white are her colours. We recall that Mary's image haunted an earlier, less happy, encounter with motherhood. As Martha, in A Proper Marriage, fights against the glamorising "lies" that obscure the reality of "having a baby" she thinks bitterly: "One saw a flattering image of a madonna-like woman with a helpless infant in her arms; nothing could be more attractive" (PM 303). (There is a further hint at Christian belief in the presentation of Arusi as a redeemer. He is, for the Zone Four women, a child-saviour, one who will "redeem them all, and through them, the kingdom as a whole" (M 204).)<sup>17</sup>

This scene has, however, a vitality and sensuousness that is untypical of the ascetic strains of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity. Mother and son are "in the middle" of a "golden beat of sun and sound." All is wet, damp, green. The mother is unlike the Virgin in her attitudes: she is neither passive, resigned, pensive, sad, nor is she chastely enfolded in her garments. Instead, Al·Ith's "yellow dress showed thin brown arms, and her legs, where it was pushed up," while Ben Ata is conscious of her physical strength and sensuality: he sees a "lithe, tawny girl in her sunny dress, her hair iridescent in the sun" (M 224, 226). It is not surprising,

then, that the interaction between mother and boy-child is, in his eyes, "a love scene" (M 225).

By the time this scene takes place Al·Ith has for some months been deprived of erotic intimacy with another adult. During her pregnancy her "great stomach" and its "strangeness" came between her and Ben Ata, as did the women of the camps (M 191, 192, 195-96, 199). Even though Arusi is now old enough to begin to stand, Ben Ata has still not regained his desire for his wife. She, turning to her son, has found that with him she may enjoy some of the pleasures normally shared with the adult love-object. There is close eye-gazing: "She looked into the child's face, bending forward to do so, with a close, stern intentness that Ben Ata had not seen in her before" (M 224-25). She also delights in nuzzling the baby's skin. The baby's response to her attentions is immediate, spontaneous, and therefore supremely rewarding: he lies "waving his little limbs, and making soft noises, aware of his mother's adoration ..." (M 224).

Even though Al·Ith must restrain her sexuality, contact is sensual. Ben Ata, as he watches, is therefore "frightened"; he strains to see if she will "handle the boy's genitals." Even when she does not, he feels "forlorn rage," "loneliness," and "jealousy" so powerful it chokes him, as he sees his wife touching and stroking their naked son and laughing with delight (M 225). Already, however, he is beginning to relive, imaginatively, erotic pleasures he has in the past shared with his wife: "... he could imagine the touch of her lashes on his

skin ... " (M 225). He then reclaims such intense love-making for himself by picking Al·Ith up and carrying her off. During the day that follows they recover "lightness ... impulsiveness ... grace"; they are once more "[e]quals," challenging each other in "laughing antagonism" (M 227). They emerge from the leaden, tormented emotions of the months since Arusi's birth "close, healed" (M 227). What has happened?


Al·Ith has weaned her baby, and is therefore ready to turn to her husband once more after a time of close involvement with her son. Ben Ata has also been going through a period that readies him to return to his wife. He has been sharing Dabeeb's bed, getting her to talk about "all kinds of women's dreams, beliefs, ideas." These revelations disturb him. They leave him feeling that the female half of his realm is "a dark, dangerous marsh, from which monsters might suddenly appear" (M 220). Women, he now thinks, might "present him with problems and thoughts and comparisons that even went right back into history," instead of offering him the "comfort" and "oblivion" he has been taught to expect of them (M 221). In order to return wholeheartedly to Al·Ith once more he needs to be able to trust her, despite his new knowledge of women. Moreover, he needs to trust her because of his new understanding of women. He must learn to accept the beneficence and truth of the wisdom women can offer him. And this he does. Ben Ata, as Al·Ith has done, drops the barriers of fear and aggression: their marriage may now become one of mutuality.

Cleary states that in this scene Ben Ata "accepts his own vulnerability, as symbolized by his son, the vulnerability of those who love as equals," and is then released from his niggardly possessiveness.<sup>18</sup> Coming to terms with his dependence on the female entails, for the adult male, a process of adjustment to a complex of emotions he feels toward his son, in whom he sees himself. As Ben Ata watches Arusi being caressed by his mother and then struggling to raise himself into a standing position he is aware of the helplessness and vulnerability he and his son share in relation to the female. However, the mother's sensual absorption in their child alienates the father from his son. Sexual rivalry underlies Ben Ata's feeling of repulsion for his "pale long child," his "instinctive antipathy towards the nakedness of this son of his" (M 225). The child is viewed as a potential usurper; the little prince challenges his sire's identity as husband, paterfamilias, lover, king. So intense is Ben Ata's jealousy that it stimulates in him a murderous instinct that is only partially concealed by the fellow-feeling of vulnerability he shares with another male:

He was so vulnerable that baby!  
 Why, he could kill him by picking  
 him up and dropping him head down  
 on the white marble.

(M 226)

The gestures made in the tableau reveal that the woman has the means of actively dissolving the tangle of tensions that revolve around her. Although Ben Ata sees, as the baby pulls himself into a standing position by clutching at his mother's hair, a concrete representation of the increasing strength the young male gains from a woman's attentions, and although he is also reminded of the growth he himself has already experienced and may continue to enjoy with a woman of mature sexuality, he needs the active gesture of inclusion that Al·Ith makes when she finally sees him. As she places her palm on the side of his knee, "just as she had done with the baby," she is inviting him to share her affections, within a family grouping (M 226). Even if he is, as yet, incapable of an equally generous response (as he sees it, her treating him as she treated the baby is a "shameless act"), Al·Ith's gesture does include Ben Ata (M 226). He is encouraged to reinstate himself to his satisfaction as rightful husband and father, and thus to dispel his jealousy and restore harmony between himself and his wife.

Dagmar Barnouw says, in a perceptive article entitled "Disorderly Company: From The Golden Notebook to The Four-Gated City," that  until The Golden Notebook Lessing seems able only to create men who are projections of women's needs, and that her women "use relationships" with men for their "own desperate needs instead of understanding that need."<sup>19</sup> Both The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen" recount the self-destruction of women unable to do more than project their fears and

desires upon the world--and the scope and quality of the woman's "world" is determined entirely by her relationship with her husband. She lacks autonomy.

Barnouw also holds that from The Four-Gated City onward, however, Lessing's work indicates that "[s]exual liberation is possible only if it includes the 'other,' the man who was so obviously not included in The Golden Notebook."<sup>20</sup> In Marriages "the man" is not merely "included." In a scene that may be regarded as signifying the "redemption" of motherhood in Lessing's fiction, the anxieties of the man who is father and husband in the family grouping are explored, with insight and sympathy. Tellingly, his is the point of consciousness through which motherhood is appraised.

In this garden scene, as in the garden scenes in The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen," Lessing once again displays the talent she has for crystallising and condensing into scenes of powerful impact key moments of experience. Mary's dream and Susan's encounters with evil figures evoke the claustrophobic experiences of disturbed minds; in Marriages, however, the crucial garden scene takes place in the uncluttered, resonant landscape of myth. The sinister male figures of the earlier scenes make way for the towering father, who is the lawgiver; "... he was standing over her now and his shadow stretched almost to the edge of the round white platform"; there is the glowing woman who is both quintessential mother and lover; there is the infant redeemer; finally, there are the wet, bright gardens of

the Earthly Paradise of Eastern and Christian myth (M 226). The whole constitutes a celebration of a central motif and institution in Western culture, the holy (nuclear) family.

The transfiguration of the mother and the refinements of this tableau contrast also with that scene in A Proper Marriage in which Martha, when pregnant, jumps into a womb-like mudhole in the veld. In this African episode the natural world is exhilarating, and malevolent. The rain falls in "hard, stinging needles," and it drums with "fury"; the ooze of fertility in the "red," warm and "thick" water of the hole is somewhat alarming and repulsive (PM 153-54). Maternity is a solely biological event in a wild, amoral universe. The future mother celebrates her fertility without her husband (whom she despises), she is pregnant not by conscious choice, and she will choose to leave her child.

In Marriages nature is tamed, yet still fresh and vital, as in the enclosed gardens of the Earthly Paradise. The woman takes intense delight in her child, while, as the father draws near, he is welcomed affectionately into the family circle. Close as is the bond between mother and child, it is no longer overwhelmingly frightening. The drumming that fills the air in this novel is part of a purposeful, beneficent, and moral universe. Lessing has made her peace with the maternal aspect of womanhood.

It has been proposed that a revitalising myth for modern women might profitably depict potentialities that belong only to an imaginary improved future. Al·Ith is, certainly, extraordinary: she, like her people, communicates telepathically with people, animals, and trees; she sleeps (to Ben Ata's annoyance) only two to three hours a night; above all, she has an almost limitless capacity for nurturing (M 53). Yet, when she enters Zone Four to marry its king she begins a process during which she becomes increasingly restricted, physically and psychologically, to the life of a housebound wife and mother. For a time she endures the misery of domestic isolation, culturally enforced passivity, emotional over-dependence, and loss of a sense of identity beyond the walls of her nuclear-family home (albeit a splendid pavilion). For a time she even feels she will "go crazy" (M 223). The world of Marriages is by no means entirely remote from the real world: the contemporary reader may recognize some of her own experience in Al·Ith's struggles.

However, Al·Ith always retains dimensions of being that give her an unusual capacity to understand and surmount the brutalities of life in Zone Four. Furthermore, through Al·Ith and her country rich in goods, art forms, and tranquillity, Lessing suggests that, in a world run by women, culture can be developed, communities constructed, discoveries and inventions made, and value systems and intellectual traditions created. Lessing envisions an egalitarian society in which a ruler is

chosen because she represents the finest essence of a community. Released from aggressive competitiveness between themselves or with their neighbours, the members of this community, under the guardianship of their Mother, interact easily, trustfully, and warmly, so that their energies are freed for developing the highest craftsmanship in all arts, crafts, and occupations.

The novel wittily proposes not only that women are resourceful but that they even think better than men: it is Al·Ith who, accustomed to speculative thought, tells Ben Ata that they must work out for themselves what has gone wrong in their lands and, most important, what their real purpose is in being brought together (M 57, 97). Even within the boundaries of Zone Four, contaminated as it is by the rule of men, women are morally superior. They preserve the knowledge, which has been forcibly repressed by the men, of "what it is they should [all] be doing" --which appears to be to recall higher spiritual purposes in life (M 173).

In creating a myth that re-establishes a female tradition of knowledge and creativity, is Lessing also perpetuating some of her own stereotypes? Agate Nesaule Krause, in an article entitled "Doris Lessing's Feminist Plays," criticizes the view of men presented in Each His Own Wilderness and Play with a Tiger. In these plays the women are morally better than the men, who are "usually dishonest, unfaithful, hypocritical, sentimental, unjust, or even all of these things." The playwright's irony is directed "only against male beliefs and behaviour."<sup>21</sup>

This is not true of Marriages. There is the sympathy with which Lessing depicts a man's doubts about the security of his position within his family. Furthermore, Lessing uses a mode that demands flexible interpretation of place, characters, and events. In the allegorical world of the novel, a "zone" is a land filled with people, a landscape, and a way of life, but it is also, as has been suggested, an area of consciousness. Zone Three represents the "feminine," intuitive, aspect of the human psyche, Zone Four the "masculine," rational, and Zone Five the "feminine," instinctive. Lusik's "bald words" instruct us that the "guises, aspects, presentations" Al·Ith adopts are only "manifestations of what we all are at different times, according to how these needs are pulled out of us" (M 242). In one sense, then, and it is an important, defining sense, Al·Ith represents the human quester, the human self reborn.<sup>22</sup>

Other aspects of the tale support the interpretation of Al·Ith's adventures as symbolic of the human quest. "Feminine" attributes do not belong exclusively to women in Marriages: in Zone Three, for instance, men and women alike are intuitive, gay, spontaneous. Al·Ith's "matriarchal" virtues are neither incommunicable nor esoteric: they acquire most worth, and are strengthened, when in prolonged daily contact with the alien "masculine" traits of "patriarchal" Zone Four, and Ben Ata is, eventually, quite capable of teaching Vahshi, his new queen, the self-restraint and disciplined thought he has learnt from Al·Ith (M 252, 254, 255, 256, 257, 262-64).

Rational orderliness, in alliance with imaginative speculation, incorporates the vitality of the instincts. The emphasis is, as always in this novel, on an integrity (wholeness and oneness) that leads to easy communication and expansiveness of being. As part of the process of achieving such integrity, the "matriarchal" (the strength of women's knowledge, culture, and their bodies) and the "feminine" (the intuitive, instinctive, refined aspects of the human psyche) in particular are revalued, and praised, but the "patriarchal" and "masculine" are also accorded positive, even if "lower," value. No area of experience in the life of an individual or community should be cut off for fear of stultification. "The very high must be matched by the very low ... and even fed by it," says Lusik (M 243-44).

Character, plot, and theme underline the proposition that "matriarchal" and "patriarchal," "feminine" and "masculine," woman and man are essential complements to each other. Ben Ata finds life in Zone Three "lacking in any drama," and he admonishes Murti (Al·Ith's sister who assumes her function as Mother of Zone Three) for her cautious preservation of peace in her land with the words, "content is not the highest good" (M 125, 291). Lusik, the Zone Three chronicler, adds his authoritative voice to Ben Ata's. He conjectures that the comfortableness and peace of his land have in fact become its "dark forces": these he defines as "lethargy" and "stagnation" (M 243). Thus, the reluctance of animals and human beings to mate is an analogy for sterility of the spirit (M 28, 37, 56, 62, 75, 107).

Lusik finds fault with the emotional blandness of even the climaxes of life in Zone Three:

Our festivals were very beautiful. I use this word after thought. That is exactly what they were. They had a rich, rolling plumpness about them. They were reassuring. Attending one was like eating one's way through a long and abundant feast. But there was no sting or surprise there. No moments of shock. They did not stimulate.

(M 175)

In strong contrast are the women's rituals of Zone Four: held in adversity, and preserved with jealousy, they engender ecstatic joy, and pain, in the participants (M 166-74).

The complacent spirit stagnates. It lacks the "food" of novelty and challenge, the "food," even, of suffering. An appropriate cure for complacency is a fall, or, the shock of recognition of one's own faults which leads to humility and so to fresh tolerance of the weaknesses of others. If Al·Ith's marriage to Ben Ata is a descent, it also redeems her and her land. As soon as she begins to journey from her home she becomes, we are told, "more herself" (M 19). Examining her recent behaviour at a remove, she realises that her angry resistance to the Order of the Providers to marry Ben Ata has caused her to neglect duties, and this makes her more gentle with Ben Ata's soldiers (M 19-20). Once in Zone Four, and therefore able to see matters from a "patriarchal" point

of view, she learns of her own ignorance of Zone Four ways and is able to understand why Ben Ata's people, in similar ignorance, should fear and dislike Zone Three's inhabitants:

The vast plain that lay between the escarpment and the foothills of the plateau, which was itself the low base for the innumerable mountain masses of our land--this was not visible at all. One would not know it was there. The inhabitants of this low watery Zone could never imagine, gazing up at that scene of a hundred mountain ranges, the infinite variations of a landscape and country that were not to be seen by them at all.

(M 58-59)

The lesson the allegory teaches is not merely that tolerance of others is to be gained from acquaintance with humility, but that alienation from one's accustomed ways may lead to rediscovery of superior goals. Once she has become aware of the limitations of her own land, Al·Ith recollects the rarefied region of Zone Two.

The point the allegory makes of the necessity for Al·Ith's fall, which entails intimacy with and temporary dependence upon the Other, serves to comment on another modern myth for women, that of the independent woman: the independent state may lead to the illusion of self-sufficiency. Al·Ith and her people have the arrogance that stems from such an illusion. Not recognising the value of the "lower," but robust, traits of Zone Four,

they resent the union Al·Ith is ordered to make with Ben Ata. She herself at first flaunts her contempt of Ben Ata's soldiers with their "barbarian natures" (M 20).

When they arrive in Andaroun to escort her to their land she displays her sexuality aggressively, allowing them "plenty of time" to "observe ... her beauty, her strength" before she descends the steps of her palace to meet them (M 15). Very soon, however, she becomes aware of the psychological restrictions that anger and arrogance have imposed on her: she realises that she has not recently listened to the messages of trouble brought to her by her people (M 13, 19-20).

Her new humility leads her to accept the task set for her by the Providers, that of marriage to Ben Ata. It is acceptance that is the key to Al·Ith's growth. The "strong" woman must regain contact with the "feminine" qualities of acceptance and passivity so as to develop in experience and consciousness. She then drops the spurious barrier of self-sufficiency, becoming able to absorb "masculine" vigour and share with her partner her "feminine" attributes.

Lessing's myth praises "matriarchal" strength but strongly opposes separatist feminism. The ability to think for oneself and take responsibility for oneself (whether woman or man) remain as positive values at the end of the book, but more important is the extent to which these qualities contribute to one's capacity for communicating, nurturing, taking responsibility for others, and sharing with other women and men the responsibilities

of public life.

Although focussing mainly on the heterosexual bond, the novel also affirms the bonds of trust and friendship between women. In Zone Three, "matriarchal" tutelage is so strong and benevolent as to ensure a bond between all the inhabitants. In Zone Four, the women's sense that they have a mission to preserve the knowledge of the "proper purpose" of life, and the pain and joy they share in doing this, draw them together; and Lessing allows their united perseverance and concern to triumph. After Al·Ith has effected a change of heart in Ben Ata, the women are free to persuade their menfolk to "look upwards" at the "snows" of Zone Three, and so play a redemptive role (M 267). Lessing pays tribute to the solidarity of women, yet does not idealise its strength or nature. The attentions to Al·Ith and Arusi of the women of Zone Four are cloying.

The most intriguing and potentially inspiring tie between women is that between Al·Ith and Dabeeb. Dabeeb replaces Murti·, Al·Ith's sister, particularly after Murti· has banished Al·Ith from Zone Three for fear of any disturbance to its tranquillity (M 146-50). Al·Ith and Dabeeb help each other. Dabeeb, a "strong ... powerful woman," with "straight and honest" eyes teaches Al·Ith much that is useful about Zone Four ways; Al·Ith transmits to her in return knowledge of Zone Three's refinements (M 80, 83-84). Dabeeb even generously teaches Ben Ata women's lore during the time of greatest tension between Al·Ith and her husband. She eases the demands the couple

make of each other and readies Ben Ata to return to his wife and new child (M 220-21). This she does by allowing Ben Ata to share her bed and by talking to him. Sharing a man becomes not an act of rivalry or treachery but an ultimate expression of support, comfort, and trust between women. To the end of the novel, the tie between the two women is close: Dabeeb is one of those from Zone Four who is "attracted to" Al·Ith's homeland, moves to it, and stays (M 298).

It has been argued that, in Marriages, Lessing re-evaluates the important role that women, and the human qualities such as intuitiveness and gentleness that women in particular have been encouraged to develop, can play in improving collective well-being. At the centre of Lessing's potentially revitalising myth is a woman who heals and sustains. She values herself as a woman, has an awareness of a core of female knowledge and strength that she shares with other women, contains within herself susceptibility to the emotions attaching to the conventional ideas about motherhood and romantic love, yet is not defined, and is only partially restricted by, such susceptibility.

In Marriages the female world of Zone Three is the central starting-point for the action, as opposed to the norm of male-written history and a male world of deeds and events. It is a female Quester who restores the land (and the pining King), through the physical and emotional strength upon which her nurturing capacities are based.

Al·Ith contributes to her marriage a combination of

friendly companionship and skilful sex; serious commitment and light delicacy in physical and emotional interchange: these qualities do effect some changes in a patriarchal world. The myth of Al·Ith is modestly optimistic about the efficacy of these "feminine" attributes. While committed to the responsibilities (and joys) of being wife and mother, Al·Ith draws imaginatively upon the resources offered by certain qualities or states of being that are part of a paradisaical "matriarchal" past and that influence the course of her future.

Through Al·Ith, Lessing reveals new faith in the value of the bonds between men and women, and those between women. She emphasises the value of women's bodies, the potency of women's wisdom, and the beneficence of the ties between mother and child. Al·Ith's vigorous, sensuous, beautiful body is a far cry from the shrivelled, ugly, yellowed corpse of a Mary Turner. Mary and Susan Rawlings destroy themselves (and are killed off by Lessing) because they choose to adhere to the old myth of romantic love, look to a man for rescue, and become wives and mothers. In Marriages, however, Lessing is no longer compelled to portray such a woman as "trapped"; instead the "old" way may be adopted, temporarily, as part of a necessary stage in life.

Although, once again, romantic love is a target for Lessing--once again she sees it as leading to polarised sex roles, to the inauthentic enacting of the "feminine" and "masculine" masks of love, to mutual distrust and contempt, and the consequent damaging of children--the

satire in Marriages has a mischievous, humorous sureness that contrasts sharply with the overwhelming terror, hostility, and claustrophobic psychological rigidity found in The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen." The tale lacks, too, the negative aura with which sexuality has generally been surrounded in Western culture (and even in Lessing's own work, where it lures women into harmful situations and relationships). By means of the mores of Zone Three, Marriages evokes, at least in imagination, the possibility of a permissive single standard of sexual freedom to replace the double one.<sup>23</sup>

Lessing hints that women (or, rather, human beings) already have access to qualities that may be used in the present to aid evolution into an ameliorated future. Al· Ith's story suggests that women should be prepared to take risks. Women can and should imagine for themselves other ways of life, they should be prepared to take responsibility for themselves, recognise that they do have power to wield some influence, and commit themselves to doing so.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bikman, p. 24.
- <sup>2</sup> Bikman, p. 24.
- <sup>3</sup> Bikman, p. 25.
- <sup>4</sup> Friedan, The Second Stage, p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup> Friedan, The Second Stage, p. 128.
- <sup>6</sup> See the chapter entitled "The Family as New Feminist Frontier," pp. 89-129.
- <sup>7</sup> Lorna Sage, Doris Lessing, Contemporary Writers Series (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 77.
- <sup>8</sup> C. J. Driver, "Doris Lessing," New Review, 1 (November 1974), pp. 18, 19.
- <sup>9</sup> Driver, p. 20.
- <sup>10</sup> Ann Scott says the terms "mysticism" and "Sufism" should be applied to Lessing's writing with diffidence. In a lucid article, Scott points out that Lessing's stated views on Sufism render it a "peculiarly indistinct force." Lessing's mysticism should be viewed, she says, in a secular way, as a narrative strategy. It is one of the tools at work in the text, one that Lessing would see as present in order to expand the reader's mind. "The More Recent Writings: Sufism, Mysticism and Politics," in Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing, ed. Jenny Taylor (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 165, 168, 178. Some

Sufi ideas traceable in Marriages are: the stress on the exercise of a higher function of the mind leading to special perceptions; the belief that humanity is imperfectly evolved at present and that in this state energy and authentic perception may be deflected by illusion; and the concern with a critique of contemporary society rather than a call to withdrawal from the world--to be "in the world, not of it," as Lessing herself has advised in the essay on the writings of Idries Shah that she wrote in 1972. "In the World, Not of It," in A Small Personal Voice: Doris Lessing: Essays, Reviews, Interviews, ed. Paul Schleuter (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), pp. 129-137. The predominant framework of understanding of the mind in Marriages is, in fact, "Jungian," a framework which is highly amenable to mysticism. The concept of synthesis was important to Jung, as it is to Lessing. Symbolism in Marriages is Jungian: for instance, mountains represent hope, aspirations, the future, and so on. A Freudian use of or interpretation of mountains would most certainly make them phallic.

<sup>11</sup> Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Chesler, pp. xiv-xxiii, 2-31.

<sup>13</sup> Patricia Stubbs, Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920 (1979; London: Methuen, 1981), p. 234.

<sup>14</sup> Torrents, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 7, trans. under the general editorship of

James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (London, 1953-1961; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 186, 278, 297, 301-02, 321, 340.

<sup>16</sup> Later, Al·Ith is to transfer back to her lovemaking with Ben Ata some of the fierce longing she experiences during this time when she is physically helpless and deprived of both privacy and the company of men (M 212, 219, 222-23). The desire to reingest the child and the fierce longing for sexual fulfilment may be understood, in symbolic terms, as expressing a profound need to reclaim part of the self and, ultimately, to "give birth to" a new, more complete self.

<sup>17</sup> Betsy Draine comments on the "consistently messianic overtones" in another volume in the Canopus in Argos series. Johor, who undertakes a "mission to earth" in Shikasta, is, like Arusi, born to specially selected parents. See Draine, Substance under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing (Madison, Wisc.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 154-55.

<sup>18</sup> Cleary, Chapter iv, p. 68.

<sup>19</sup> Dagmar Barnouw, "Disorderly Company: From The Golden Notebook to The Four-Gated City," Contemporary Literature, 14 (Autumn 1973); rpt. in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, ed. Annis Pratt and L. S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1974), p. 80.

<sup>20</sup> Barnouw, p. 83. In this article, Barnouw establishes a connection between Anna Wulf's fear of letting in chaos and "her need to make fictitiously whole beings

out of her child and the men she comes into contact with." Only from The Four-Gated City onward, Barnouw says, can a Lessing protagonist begin the process of sexual liberation, opposing "a mental state of frenzied exclusion" by allowing in chaos. When Martha allows awareness of men as individuals to overcome her self-projection she can begin restructuring her relationships.

In both "To Room Nineteen" and Marriages Lessing uses the image of a mirror to sustain this theme of sexual liberation. Susan Rawlings' mirror is self-reflective; it reveals to her only her own fear and anger (in the shape of a Medusa and a devil), which she projects onto the world, so that no impression of her husband as he really is can penetrate her consciousness. Al'ith, on the other hand, is aware of her husband as an individual. Or, understood another way, she admits into her consciousness an awareness of her own "baser" side that enables her to love those who are unlike herself. She merges with Ben Ata until there is no separation between them at all: he becomes a part of herself. She becomes able to read his feelings from his face because "she had learned to study [it] as if her mirror had suddenly taken to supplying her with his image, insisting it was her own ..." (M 179).

<sup>21</sup> Agate Nesaule Krause, "Doris Lessing's Feminist Plays," World Literature Written in English, 15, No. 2 (1976), pp. 308, 311.

<sup>22</sup> Geraldine E. Eltis argues that as early as the Children of Violence series (1952-1969), Lessing begins

to construct a modern restorative mythology in the tradition of the medieval quest allegory. Eltis views the choice of a female quester as particularly apposite to a myth of human individual and collective revival, for "woman" is "the immediate physical source of new life." "Tales Ancient and Modern: Doris Lessing's Children of Violence and the Quest Tradition," M.A. Diss., Macquarie University, Sydney, 1983, pp. iii, 64.

<sup>23</sup> The novel's description of Zone Three's ways extends our minds to embrace the possibility of other exciting changes. As far as mother- or parenthood is concerned, in Zone Three great consideration is given to choosing the best time at which to conceive children because this affects their nature, and one has to wait one's turn for the privilege of becoming a parent (M 48, 73). This latter form of social control is already a reality in the People's Republic of China. Of particular interest is the Zone Three practice of women and men jointly raising children. Children are then subject to harmonious, balanced influences, free of any "consuming," manipulative or excessively dependent aspects of motherhood. According to Friedan's The Second Stage, American men are increasingly taking responsibility for rearing children. See the chapter entitled "The Quiet Movement of American Men," pp. 131-67.

CHAPTER 5CONCLUSION

This study has traced the struggle of three of Lessing's female characters to shape an authentic identity in reaction to the compulsion to become like the mother. The works chosen for attention cover a period of thirty years. They mark the beginning of the mother-daughter struggle in Lessing's fictional work, an approximate midpoint, and its end. The failure of the woman to complete her task in The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen" contrasts with the resolution of the struggle in an idealised figure in The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five.

Several of Lessing's women in other works partially attain their goal of autonomy and integrity, but the central characters in The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen" fail completely; and failure is fatal. Mary and Susan's madness and self-destructiveness are directly related by Lessing to their compulsion to become domesticated, "good," "proper" women. Madness is, in Lessing's fiction, less the oblique means of expressing the writer's own anger that it was for nineteenth-century women writers, than an overt way of attacking the ideas and structures of authority that are seen as assigning

to women the isolated, self-sacrificing existence of the Angel in the House. Mary and Susan, their stories suggest, disintegrate because they understand the Angel's limited characteristics as circumscribing the totality of their lives: they lack the strength and the external support to challenge the model sanctioned by society.

In both The Grass is Singing and "To Room Nineteen," outer pressures are depicted as conspiring to prevent the central character from discovering and expressing her emotions, talents, and energy. An important strength of Lessing's first novel is, precisely, the analysis of the economic, political, social, and psychosexual reasons for Mary's degeneration. There is, however, ultimately a failure of sympathy on the author's part: Mary is punished, "killed off," by her creator. The thirty-year-old woman writer rejects angrily and fearfully the sort of woman who gives in and follows the life pattern of her mother.

In "To Room Nineteen" the closer focus upon the inner world serves to suggest the intractable nature of basic emotions and attitudes; there is more sympathy for the character's dilemma; but not as yet much hope of resolving it. Susan is betrayed by her faith in rationality and in the absolute value of romantic love, upon which she bases her commitment to the role of virtuous, domesticated woman. As she chooses suicide, she is comforted only by an elusive vision of a sort of "impersonal" love. The story is, essentially, about the need to find some value that merits whole-hearted commitment.

The fulfilment of this need is gained, finally, in Marriages. Whereas motherhood and becoming like one's mother previously narrowed the scope of the protagonist's existence to an intolerable degree, in Marriages, commitment to "mothering" frees one for the performance of a variety of tasks and roles. While it may entail the usual undertaking of rearing one's biological children, it may also involve caring for both the self ("the individual conscience") and those with whom one has no personal ties ("the collective"). "Nurturing" of self and others may take place within the bond of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage or in freer, non-exclusive relationships. One may even choose the solitary path of the mystic or the imaginative creator and yet express a committed, "nurturing" sense of responsibility toward the community. Lessing writes a justification of her own solitary occupation of writer.

The mother-daughter conflict is, in Lessing's fiction, inseparable from tension between the necessity to commit oneself and the drive toward change and experiment.

Oh, I do not like to look back at  
   myself there,  
 Little among the stay-at-homes,  
   the restabeds.  
 No, sting my self-contents  
   to hunger  
 Till up I ride my heart to  
   the high lands  
 Leaving myself behind.

(M 278)

sings Al·Ith, who, by being both agile quester and tender mother, resolves the tension between commitment and freedom. Al·Ith is a mother so expansive of nature that she transcends possessiveness, releasing in others (and herself) the spirit of adventure.

Al·Ith is also the sort of woman who is able to see and experience life whole. The attempt to see life whole is part of Martha's quest in the Children of Violence series; when Martha repudiates the patterns of the lives of her parents, she intensifies her self-division.<sup>1</sup> She maintains a split between the rational watcher, sheltering behind "intellectual bastions of defence," and the irrational, instinctual self (PM 109). However, in The Four-Gated City, she is forced to consult a psychologist to help her come to terms with the division, while the consequences of splitting off emotions are severe in both stories featuring "mad" housewives. "To Room Nineteen," in fact, specifically condemns the denial and suppression of feeling in the name of "intelligence."

A lowering of sights is needed: one must accept the "lower" aspects of the self, including one's instinctual self. This is one of the implications of Lusik's words in Marriages:

without [the] sting of otherness,  
 of--even--the vicious, without the  
 terrible energies of the underside  
 of health, sanity, sense, then  
 nothing works or can work .... The  
 very high must be matched by the  
 very low ... and even fed by it .... (M 243-44)

Marriages implies that the (regrettably "low") experiences of falling in love and possessive maternity are unavoidable and, since they come to an end, need not be feared or fought against. Lessing's own declared release from anger leaves her free from the necessity to depict the domesticated woman as "trapped." Al·Ith's career in marriage and motherhood is "exemplary" and "famous," neither a silenced tragedy nor a fatal source of misery and grief (M 11). Instead of being portrayed as a victim trapped in deterministic, sterile, historical and personal forces, Al·Ith is a personage who takes an active part in a vital, beneficent plan when she enters the married state, and she never really loses her sense of commitment to the people she rules.

If the "mad" housewife is psychologically trapped within the narrative of the romantic drama in which a maiden waits for her heroic rescuer to arrive on his mount and carry her off after sweeping her up in his muscular arms--for a maiden ventures forth alone only at severe risk to her moral and physical welfare--then Lessing devises, in Marriages, a tale that, parodically, counters this myth detail by detail. Al·Ith is not a maiden, and the value set upon chastity in Zone Four is satirised: it is clearly related to Ben Ata's sense of ownership and propriety (M 47, 67, 180). Far from being cloistered, Al·Ith is mobile, vigorous, athletic, self-disciplined, and fully attuned to her libidinal energies, as attested to by her skill in and enjoyment of lovemaking, and (symbolically) her attachment to her horse. Above

all, she suggests the vitality of a woman free of emotional dependence upon a rescuing male.

However, in Lessing's fictional world there remains little or no room for negotiation once within the monogamous marriage tie, the greatest danger for women being a near-complete surrender of self. This is perhaps why Al·Ith's ultimate, and highest, destination is a solitary one, which lies beyond marriage.

Torrents has protested, in her interview with Lessing, against the loneliness her characters endure:

Your characters always go looking for new values, renouncing old, traditional values and revealing the gulf that exists between public values and private practice. It's a permanent search for one's own equilibrium ... What you propose is to travel perpetually on a tight-rope, and not everyone is so brave .... [T]his constant exercising of moral judgement leads your characters to complete loneliness.

Lessing's response was:

I don't believe that it would be a worse kind of loneliness than that experienced by a married woman ... One must take risks and not think of the loneliness that awaits us. Otherwise life is impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Yet observation of the "real" world suggests that women are able creatively and adventurously to shape new identities, relationships, and communal tasks for themselves, to "take risks," within exclusive sexual bonds, whether or not they include marriage.

But such criticism of Lessing, and that contained in previous chapters, is minor when set beside her contribution as a modern fiction writer. Lessing has been a trailblazer for women tentatively (or indomitably) challenging extremely powerful forces within and outside themselves; she has been a comforter to those who had lost faith in their right to wish to reshape their lives and the world; she has reassured angry and dissatisfied women that they were neither wicked nor crazy; she has penetrated the solitude endured by many women, helping them to know themselves and to broaden their understanding of the formal and informal structures that shape behaviour and feeling. It is here, in the area of human personality and relationships, that Lessing has, perhaps, made her greatest contribution. She trenchantly satirises rightwing colonial prejudices and leftwing radical preciousness, but she stirs the mind and emotions most profoundly in her skillful use of motifs and images that expose some of the workings of the lesser-known regions of the psyche.

To read a Lessing novel is to set oneself a challenge. Lessing probes, poses questions; questions that tease the conscience; questions like: how is freedom gained? Does one have the right to freedom? Freedom to do what? And, to what extent should one be committed to any cause?

How does one become "committed"? What is the relationship between freedom and commitment? Lessing sets a high-toned example for her readers in her own search for "answers." Her rejection of what she depicts as the narrow "personal" life has led to consecutive allegiance to two beliefs, both of which have as their goals the ambitious aim of an ameliorated universal condition. The first is political, Marxism; the second religious, Sufism. Marriage and motherhood are repudiated for reasons that have little to do with pleasure and everything to do with a purpose that is serious, strenuous, idealistic, and all-encompassing. And this is, of course, a difficulty with Lessing: her morality is so high-toned, her characters' struggles so unrelenting and earnest, their rewards, even when they appreciate the uses of adversity, apparently so meagre. A Lessing novel may invigorate, and it may as easily leave the reader feeling deflated and inadequate.<sup>3</sup>

Lessing is one of the most influential of modern writers, because she writes (prolifically) about cultural change with insight, intelligence and passion. For the Fifties, she writes short stories and a first novel, The Grass is Singing, that reflect the mood of the immediate post-World War II period. She assails colonialism, and shows early awareness of the attack upon sexism that was to mount into an international campaign in the Sixties. For this latter decade she writes, amongst other works, a short story that attacks rationalism and links it with formal structures of authority that oppress, and oppress women in particular. In "To Room Nineteen,"

Lessing, like other prominent figures of the decade of protest, such as Laing, makes a plea for greater personal liberty, and she gives expression to the wish of the radical movements of the time for a universal bond of compassion and justice to complement the drive for individual self-realization.

In The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five Lessing has written an allegory for the Eighties, reflecting a more pragmatic attitude towards women's issues. Lessing's novel urges women to act in the firm conviction of their own strength, rather than from fear and anger. Like Friedan, still a leading figure in the Women's Liberation movement, Lessing would have women unite with men to tackle the vast and urgent problems that confront humanity. If Lessing proposes a "spiritual" goal as the true one for her protagonist, this is in keeping with the acceptance of non-materialist aims for feminist women in a work of literary criticism like Christ's Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest, and with the increasing popularity of feminist theology in the United States, Britain, Europe, and South Africa.<sup>4</sup> Lessing is, for men and women readers, an impressive chronicler of contemporary experience.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Draine, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Torrents, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> See my article "Lessing is Depressing: Some Comments from Cape Town," Doris Lessing Newsletter, 9 (Summer 1985).

<sup>4</sup> See proceedings of the conference on feminist theology held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, in 1983, and published as Sexism and Feminism in Theological Perspective (Pretoria: Unisa, 1984). The concept of impersonality (particularly in regard to love), which is integral to Lessing's own quest for an absolute value, is part of traditional Christian thought, and has suffered some assault, by Existentialist theologians, only in the twentieth century.

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