In the Presence of Audience

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Chapter 4

Doris Lessing’s
The Golden Notebook:
“An Exposed Position”

“Why aren’t you honest with me Anna?... he began examining her notebooks, his back set in stubborn opposition to the possibility of her preventing him.... Anna sat still, terribly exposed....” (Lessing 1973, 272).

When Tommy reads Anna’s notebooks and decides that she is “dishonest,” that her previous concealment of the notebooks is “arrogant” (274), and that she is “making patterns out of cowardice” (275), Anna feels the presence of “some invisible enemy... something evil... an almost tangible shape of malice and destruction” (270). When Tommy goes home and immediately attempts suicide, Anna fears her own complicity. Ironically, his exposing of her through his reading of her so-called private text brings about Tommy’s blindness, symbolically pointing to his inability to see or understand what she had written and why. His interpretation of Anna’s text confirms his narrow view of existence; his vision fails, but he blames her. What Anna has written for herself he judges as her failure, bringing him disappointment and despair. Anna turns her anger at Tommy’s intrusion inward on herself, despite his trespass against her and her notebooks. She regards her truth as dangerous and open to misunderstanding, written in notebooks she has not guarded well enough. Knowing that he misconstrued her work only feeds her guilt. In some inexplicable way her life, her notebooks have ruined Tommy. She feels she has failed in her role as writer, woman, surrogate mother, wise advisor. That Tommy debases her by his appropriation of her notebooks, his rigid judgments of her, and his readiness to find her at fault never occurs to Anna.

Doris Lessing’s Golden Notebook, in both the “Notebook” and the “Free Women” sections, depicts women’s fear of exposure in all their discursive practices but particularly in the diary, or “notebooks,” as Anna calls them.
A study of Lessing’s novel enables us to see clearly through both theme and structure the forceful presence of audience on women who—like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and Violet Hunt, and perhaps Lessing herself—use literary strategies to claim their own stories and rewrite cultural scripts without calumny.1

Women such as these try to mediate the relationship between oppression and writing, between personal and cultural. They feel particularly vulnerable to masculine imposition and definition because they are at the mercy of men’s judgment, domestically as wives and lovers and professionally as writers. Lessing’s autobiographical fiction foregrounds the issue of audience and its influence on a woman writer’s production of autobiography. Lessing, through Anna Wulf’s narration, strategically circulates autobiography in fiction to stage images of selves that displace the author/autobiographical presence; in this way Lessing/Anna avoids the “insistent, cynical inquisitors and consciences” (Sprague 1987, 68) of the inhibiting characters/readers, usually, but not always, male.2

Anna, like Lessing, declines a simple autobiographical or fictional reading of her text. Anna narrates the novel titled Free Women and the four notebooks that also make up the text within The Golden Notebook. The notebooks house even more fictions, sections of stories that prompted Anna’s published Frontiers of War; a new novel she is writing in her yellow notebook titled The Shadow of the Third, narrated by an autobiographical Ella; tracts and letters by comrades without literary talent; two diary parodies in the black notebook; and hundreds of newspaper clippings.3 The notebooks and the Free Women sections overlap in subject matter, merging and parting, resisting any separation of the fictional Anna from the fictional Ella.

The tricks and false clues within Lessing’s novel subvert any narrow reading, including the feminist theme of the dangers of the male audience and presence to women writers, but the colliding fictions and characters mirror the fear and rage that may reside in women writers whose critique of culture make them vulnerable to “disgust, irritation, or voyeuristic curiosity in the reader rather than solidarity and sympathy” (Felski 1989, 116–17).

Lessing’s novel occludes authorial presence and complicates any notion of a knowable “I.” Deliberately forcing a multiplicity of readings of the text (and by extension herself), Lessing creates a text that itself cannot be located at one center, with one set of characters, one theme, one plot. A Chinese box of texts within texts and thematic mirrors and deflections capture the prismatic quality of diaries, a term Anna rejects in favor of “chaos” (1973, 41). Lessing perforates fictional/autobiographical genre
boundaries, challenges perceptions of truth by multiple perspectives, and explores themes and counterthemes to evade authorial containment. Her public challenge illuminates those strategies of multiplying and dispersing readings of self more subtly embedded into the diarists' texts.

Theorizing themselves through fictions as well as more prosaic autobiographical fragments, Lessing, her Anna, and the writers of my own study evade a knowable, seamless presence to better “tell” as well as to avoid being “told.”4 Woolf writes in her diary to tell her existence and to make sense of her life as she perceives it, just as her homonymic double Anna Wulf struggles to make order in the “scramble” and “mess” of her life. But like Woolf, Anna represses parts of her experience—her bout of madness, for example—that threaten her relationships. These she relegates to fiction, allowing herself to write reflectively of “the new dimension . . . away from sanity” (613) in a discursive practice of fictionality, not of privacy. Both Woolf and Wulf illustrate the diary writer’s reluctance to speak of cultural taboos and their own aberrant subjectivities.

Both the fictional Anna and the writer Virginia may relegate their more nonconformist perceptions of themselves to story form in response to an audience reading their diaries as private. They may also be responding to their own preference for fiction as a site for imagining their life stories. Anna’s perception of herself as a creative writer eclipses her identity as a diary writer, forcing her to ponder, as did Woolf, “why did I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a ‘story’ . . .” (63). As readers we must be mindful that the fictionalizing of experience for publication and within diaries may be more than an effort to hide behind protective walls; producing fictions may also be a matter of funneling experience creatively for art’s sake, to entertain potential readers. Lessing uses the yellow notebook section to extend her notion of the fictionality of experience and foreground the role of the artist/author in writing even diary discourse. Just as Katherine Mansfield writes poems and story fragments within her diary and as Hunt tells of legend and fairy tales within The Desirable Alien, Lessing’s similar strategies enable us to read more clearly their purpose in writing multiple fictions within the diaries.

Anna’s disregard for genre, her fictionalizing what may be autobiographical, parallels the techniques of Mansfield and Hunt in many ways; Anna’s manipulation of text casts light on Mansfield’s chaotic compilation of many diaries, her inclusive fictions, her desperate appeals to Murry, her inclusion of letters, parodies, and poems. We are made aware, too, of Hunt’s strategies of layering with legends and fairy tales her diary/fiction narrative in Alien. Lessing creates a novel from a supposed mass of scraps (which may or may not be autobiographical), while she resides outside all
of these proliferating texts, subverting author location, preventing the reader from overly defining the writer: This “defect . . . may now seem less serious and more interesting because of the critical doubt surrounding the viability of the unified subject” (Valerie Sanders in Newey and Shaw 1996, 154). The texture of *The Golden Notebook* defeats efforts by readers, both Anna’s and Lessing’s, to narrow and reduce experience, to contain the feminine within a single narrator or a single reading.5

In a strategy designed to overturn limited readings of diaries, Lessing/Anna divests diaries of their traditional status as texts of personal disclosure by a self-reflexive parodying of the diary form. The parodies of diaries appear in the black notebook under the “Money” section; Lessing thus structures Anna’s notebooks to mock the economic underpinnings of writing a diary for publication, to mock the reading public avid for glimpses of the so-called “private” lives of others. Anna “amuses” herself by creating a masculine persona who writes an “imaginary journal of the right tone” (Lessing 1973, 434), full of exotic place names, cryptic comments on money and romance, and quasi-philosophical musings: “June 22nd. *Café de Flore*. Time is the River on which the leaves of our thoughts are carried into oblivion . . . Am writing a porno for Jules called *Loins*. Art is the Mirror of our betrayed ideals” (435). Lest the parody escape the reader, Anna notes that she “concocted another thousand or so words” (436) with a friend. Subsequently they published this pseudodiary. Anna and her collaborator invent next another diary “written by a lady author of early middle-age, who had spent some years in an African colony” (437). This persona could be Lessing, Anna, or no one at all.

The parodies, the collaborator, and the self-reflexive refusal to acknowledge the diary text as personal are all designed by Lessing to question the myth of diary as private. As Lessing invites her readers to see Anna’s notebooks as parody, her own *Golden Notebook* becomes a meta-parody that both presents and misrepresents assumptions about private writing, particularly women’s writing. Diaries begun as records of the personal sometimes become texts that provide impetus to further fictions, distortions of private thoughts and emotions by their very nature, especially when publishers, friends, lovers, and public readers become part of the diary process. Anna, for example, experiences much frustration in trying to shape her diary according to preconceived notions about what a diary should be. Anna struggles with her blue notebook, the one she has designated as diary: “[T]he blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them . . . but this sort of record is . . . false” (468). Lessing manifests through Anna a deep-seated wariness of language’s ability to reflect truth and the willingness of...
the writer to expose herself in imperfect words. Both the author and her character question the possibility of a personal discourse that resides apart from the stories an author creates. For Lessing the private becomes public and the public emerges from the private: “Now I must write personally; but I would not, if I didn’t know that nothing we can say about ourselves is personal” (Lessing 1974, 98).

Anna, writing the personal to represent impersonality and vice versa, juxtaposes fictions to her more “factual” notebooks, telling the same stories differently in each but in such a way that truth and fiction seem to inhabit both the fictional and autobiographical texts. We simply cannot locate Lessing’s truth or Anna’s or any autobiographer’s unless we as readers willingly suspend both belief and disbelief, willingly see fiction as autobiography and vice versa, and willingly acknowledge difference and impossibility as all true or all fiction or neither. Our vision must expand to take in multiple readings that break through realist/autobiographical considerations.

The story of Tommy, told in part at the beginning of this chapter, confuses fiction and autobiography even within the fictional frame of Lessing’s novel and provides a telling example of an author’s refusal to depict for readers an absolute version of their own experience. “Free Women 3” explores Tommy’s attempted suicide and resulting blindness beginning with the italicized tag: “Tommy adjusts himself to being blind/while the older people try to help him” (371). The blue notebook, “which tries to be a diary” (474), records a different result of the suicide attempt and indeed tells of a quite different Tommy, who becomes a socialist and marries a “ghastly wife... girl’d do beautifully as the wife of a provincial businessman with slightly liberal leanings” (547). The disparity between the tragic Tommy in the “Free Women” section and the disappointingly healthy and shallow Tommy of the diary points to the ambivalence of Anna toward her young accuser. The notebooks register Anna’s disappointment in him and what he has become, but Anna’s “Free Women” sections underscore Tommy’s role as judge, observer, blind seer.

Tommy has become a man much like his father, Richard, a man who threatens Anna with “I’m going to see that you’re exposed” (509); Lessing cleverly conflates the father and the son in their exposing of Anna, the son in private, the father for public consumption. In the notebook section, then, Tommy is blind only in a metaphoric sense, as is his father. Neither man can “see” Anna’s attempts to live ethically. Anna’s fictions illumine her fears: for the privacy of her notebooks; of the power of language to both depict and misrepresent. Lessing forces the reader to see Tommy symbolically, autobiographically, fictionally—yet not realistically. In giving up our quest for truth, for the real Tommy, we must also give up our quest for the
“real” Lessing. Anna’s so-called autobiographical notebooks and the novel provide a “rich shadow to the public Free Women . . . reshaped for public consumption” (Sprague 1987, 80); but we must note, too, that the notebooks are fictions within Lessing’s *Golden Notebook*. She protects herself and her women characters with refugiation, which Anna calls “an evasion” (1973, 197). Lessing, in her later autobiography *Walking in the Shade*, says it is impossible “to describe a writer’s life, for the real part of it cannot be written down” (1997, 92), impossible to “fully convey the richness, complexity, and mysterious ‘truth of the process of writing’” (94).

When a writer distorts private autobiography by turning it into fiction, she may do so because she wants to go beyond a diary discourse too closely allied to the personal. Yet “an evasion” into fiction may also be an attempt to truthfully and reliably represent experience as both of and outside the personal. As Susanna Egan reminds us, autobiography has political context as the writer is responsive to and inclusive of community (1999). Lessing’s valuing of the community’s consciousness over that of the individual’s leads her to use “a whispering complexity of insinuations” (Lessing quoting Henry Green 2001, 62). These deflect attention from the writer herself to broader issues.

This reaching beyond personal experience to say something more can inhibit an artist, even in a notebook, as Lessing illustrates. Anna, fearful about writing anything at all, frequently uses crossouts, brackets, asterisks, doodlings, and newspaper clippings pasted in notebooks in lieu of her own commentary. In infrequent authorial narrative intrusions, Lessing describes Anna’s resistance to asserting her own views; after Lessing’s bracketed description of a notebook page with a black line through it Anna notes, “I drew that line because I didn’t want to write it. As if writing about it sucks me further into danger”: the danger of articulation, the danger of writing what she “feels,” and the danger of writing to “name” it (Lessing 1973, 479). In this specific case Anna wants to avoid relating a dream in which she recognizes “a malicious force . . . in that person who was a friend” (ibid.). She simultaneously fears her own unconscious depictions becoming hard text and the “malicious force” of the friend the dream reveals to her. Interestingly, her fear of audience here is her fear of the self as writer/reader and the fear of another’s malevolent disapproval. The complicated proliferation of readers prevents her articulation. Somehow if she draws a thick black line through her text, she undermines the power of her words and finds safety. Anna, looking for “the safety of anonymity” that she admits she knows “too well” (486), prides herself on her ability to “name” her emotions in writing but in one of many such maneuvers searches for ways to undo what she has done discursively.
This painful process of editing her own experience illustrates her desire to write something of importance in establishing who she is and what she feels. Much like Mansfield, whose halting entries frustrate her sense of what she wants to say, Anna finds that words “are nothing, or like the secretions of a caterpillar that are forced out in ribbons to harden in the air” (476). Perceiving themselves as writers, Anna and the diarists we have queried endeavor to display their literary capabilities even in diaries to an audience that may be imagined or quite real. Anna, pressured by an inner mistrust of her ability to write “the truth” and an external fear of readers who judge not only her writing but her very being, mitigates her writer’s anxiety by focusing on others, blurring fact and fiction, erasing and editing, hiding her writing, refusing both wholly private and wholly public discourse.

Anna, anxious to dilute the personal in favor of something larger and stronger, represses the self in all but the short-lived diary in the blue notebook, which she dismisses as “destroying the truth” (341). In all her other writings, even the notebooks that purportedly tell her story, she resists the “sick Anna . . . the I.I.I.I” (628). In writing in the black notebook, for example, Anna tells not her story but Willi’s, saying, “But I don’t want to write Willi’s history” (72), only to return to him to admit her own complicity in his dominating arrogance. She says, “It was from Willi I learned how many women like to be bullied” (98). She implies but denies that she was once one of them. Much later she writes that Max, her ex-husband, was “(Willi in the black notebook),” a man who made her feel overcome with “helplessness” (230). Ironically, her feeling of helplessness “made me write about him before” (ibid.) as Max and now as Willi in the reflective black notebook. She limits a personalized rendering of Max to one short diary entry and a long history in which she changes his name to Willi.

Even as she writes these autobiographical entries within the notebooks, she notes “these words will have no connection with anything that I feel is true” (ibid.). Lessing, through Anna, displays her view that the denials women write sometimes engender panic. They know “something strange happens when one writes about oneself, that is, one’s self direct, not one’s self projected. The result is cold, pitiless, judging” (571). Having felt the heat of others’ responses and reactions to her notebooks, “Anna is torn between individualist and interdependent ideals and an interdependent sharer of selves” (Franko 1995, 266). Diarists’ apprehension of their inadequacy as writers extends to the “judging” that the written word engenders.

The complexity of female/male sexual compacts complicates the writer/reader relationship further and may impose additional fears of judgment. Where the “Free Women” section and the yellow notebook
cross in *The Golden Notebook*, Anna collapses autobiography and fiction to speak of the real misgivings women have about self-disclosure in both private and public discourse. Anna’s and her fictional character Ella’s efforts to write while under a sexual spell and under the male gaze presumably critiques the effect of romantic love and the consequent sacrifices that love demands in women. Anna records a double despair through her fictional double, Ella. She cannot write for a time, and when she finally succeeds, she knows she will lose the man she loves. Sexual and discursive impotence commingle to make Ella, and Anna, afraid. Desperately trying to please by subordinating the writer in themselves to the mistress, they lose their ability to articulate honestly what they see as true. Anna writes sporadically, convinced of the failure of her words. Michael has contempt for the notebooks he is forbidden to see and exhorts her to do something real, to write a novel. Anna for a time can write nothing at all, then writes and hides her work. Her fictional character has more success, but it is a success marred by her perception that her novel contains “nothing very startling” (212). Because Paul belittles her project, Ella (like Anna) first hides her novel, then finishes it and publishes it as he begins to withdraw from her. Paul reads it and scorns what he sees as “revolution . . . women against men” (213). He seems desperate to hurt her for her revelations, responding to the novel by telling her “you’ll have ice applied to your ovaries yet” (214). His deliberate unsexing of her comes from what he perceives as the threat to men her novel represents.

The “end of the affair” (212) comes with the novel’s publication. Ella’s worst fears are realized. Her exposed self occasions his betrayal, perhaps because he feels her writing betrays his sex: “Well, we men might just as well resign from life” (213), he tells her, and he “resigns” from her life. Ella clearly represents a fictional Anna, who struggles to finish her own novel (about Ella) under the gaze of Michael, who classifies her notebooks as a waste of time and her novel as wasted effort.

Anna’s obsession about what Lessing calls “the sex-war” (Introduction, x) prompts her to write ideas for stories exploring this topic that most unsettles her, “The Woman’s emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison” (333). One section of the yellow notebook contains thirteen fictional fragments, all of them explorations from different points of view of men and women in love; nearly all of these thirteen fragments reference Anna’s experience, occasionally openly autobiographical. She ends the plot exploration in “*11 A Short Novel*” by commenting on Mother Sugar’s theories, then writing: “(This sort of comment belongs to the blue notebook. I must keep them separate)” (537). Coming as it does in the middle of “Anna’s” fictions, this comment reminds us of Anna’s
struggle to separate and rigidly control the various aspects of her life. Rigorously relegating to fiction those experiences and feelings too uncomfortable for diaries and notebooks, writers avoid defenseless positionings.

The story fragments themselves sharply critique relationships. Anna’s mistrust of men, her depiction of women “starved for love” (531), the power of love to corrode the health and work of women, the widely varying nature of men’s and women’s needs—all these become subjects of Anna’s fictions. Anna consciously creates fictions to critique the very precarious nature of women’s relationships with men. She explores this need for deflection, for relegating to public discourse private considerations in “*14 A Short Novel.” This fictional fragment outlines the effect on a relationship and on the diaries themselves when a man and woman “married or in a long relationship secretly read each other’s diaries” (538). They soon find the same resolution, each keeping two diaries, one “locked up,” one “for the other to read” (ibid.). The betrayal each feels when the truly secret diaries are discovered “drives them apart for ever” (ibid.). Lessing, through Anna, explores the danger of the “private diary” in the relations between men and women, then quickly changes fictions and goes on to explore in “*15” the “emotional deadlock” of an American man and an English woman.

Both “*14 A Short Novel” and “*15 A Short Story” record in fictionalized fragments Anna’s reading of Saul’s diary and the consequence. Desperate to know whether he is sleeping with someone else, she sneaks to his room and reads the diary. After she writes of her discovery she puts “(*14),” referencing the earlier story, drawing closer the fictions in the notebook section and the fiction of the Free Women sections. She finds his diary’s chronological order stilted and artificial because it so differs from her own technique of sectioning off by subject matter. But she cannot resist reading it for a glimpse of the man she feels has hidden himself from her. She says, “I sat there on the bed, trying to marry the two images, the man I knew and the man pictured here, who is totally self-pitying, cold, calculating, emotionless” (571). Though she acknowledges that “something strange happens when one writes about oneself” (ibid.), with the lifeless quality of diary prose, she cannot resist reading Saul’s view of their life together. Shocked, she observes that “I’m full of a triumphant ugly joy because I’ve caught him out” (573) and then starts another story “(*15),” her story of “emotional deadlock” (538).

In this section about diary discovery, written in the diary part of her notebooks, Lessing through Anna thrusts before the readers the despair of finding another’s private vision so different from one’s own. Anna’s reading of Saul’s diary ironically heightens her anxiety about her own exposed
rhetorical nakedness. She hides her notebooks, then searches for his. And because she is a woman, she turns her fury inward when she reads of his betrayal. “The entry, I don’t enjoy sleeping with Anna, cut me so deep I couldn’t breathe for a few moments” (573). His casual indifference to her and her willingness to snoop in “someone’s private papers” (ibid.) shock her. Her discovery undermines her conception of herself because his version of their life together so differs from hers, and she gives his version credence. After days of sneaking up to read the diary she admits it to him, hoping to transfer some of the humiliation of the reader to the writer: “His face . . . showed fear, then rage, then furtive triumph” (580). He defends his version of events and his promiscuity and turns to attack her jealousy and possessiveness with “a vague, spattering boastfulness” (ibid.).

Rather than feeling caught and exposed as she does when her notebooks are scrutinized, Saul feels victory at his superiority, a masculine pride at having taken what he wanted and having been discovered. Later she returns to his diary; “it was lying carelessly exposed” (587), and Anna wonders whether he has meant for her to see the entry that says, “‘Am a prisoner. Am slowly going mad with frustration’” (ibid.). Whether Saul purposely wrote for her discovery or not, the entry “cancelled out” (ibid.) what Anna had perceived as the week of happiness that preceded the entry. Anna’s reading of the entry begins her regression into madness, a loss of self that parallels Tommy’s reaction when he reads her notebooks. Unlike Saul, who makes use of Anna’s curiosity to assert his superiority of vision, Anna becomes consumed with guilt at her notebooks’ failure to convince her unauthorized reader, Tommy, of her personal worth and the integrity of her vision. Milt, a potential lover of Anna’s in the “Free Woman 5” section, also reads Anna’s diaries, although she tells him, “I don’t want you to read them” (659). At her insistence he finally stops, relieving them both of the burden of exposing her attempt to “Cage the truth” (660).

Diaries are dangerous documents for the reader and the writer, making them both vulnerable to what lies within. These fictional renderings record the painful loss that can result when readers trespass onto a text that both reader and writer perceive as private. In excruciating detail Lessing images the consequences of careless diary writing, a carelessness avoided by the women writers in this study. Lessing thus overturns the conventional definition of diaries as private reflections of a unified self. She explores intentionality and motivation and depicts the complexity of relationships between writers and readers that proliferate selves as well as readings.

Within the narratives of the various parts of The Golden Notebook, Lessing builds an awareness of audience that she ties to the threat of male
appropriation, an awareness central to a woman autobiographer. “Since autobiography is a public expression [a woman] speaks before and to ‘man.’ [She is] attuned to the ways women have been dressed up for public exposure, attuned also to the price women pay for public self-disclosure . . .” (S. Smith 1987, 49). Writing within the structural ambiguity of notebooks and fictions, Lessing mitigates her self-exposure. But she places her women characters in the harsh light of male interest and criticism, exploring the effect on the writer of masculine interest and imposition. The diaries within the text are as exposed as other autobiographical and fictional sections; for Lessing the diary shares with more traditional literary genres the same analytical scrutiny by others.

This visibility prompts many women writers such as the ones who are the subjects of this study to devise rhetorical strategies to protect themselves from the men in their lives whom they wish to please. In the yellow notebook, where Anna writes her novel *The Shadow of the Third*, Ella, Anna’s autobiographical character, acknowledges her fear of writing, yet her fear is not of loneliness but of Paul’s judgment and withdrawal. Ella notes parenthetically, “(To Julia she makes bitter jokes about Jane Austen hiding her novels under the blotting paper . . . quotes Stendhal’s dictum that any woman under fifty who writes, should do so under a pseudonym)” (208). When Paul, his voice “full of distrust when he mentions her writing,” continues to disparage her writing, Ella “begins to hide her work from him” (ibid.). He accuses her of using his “professional knowledge to get facts for her novel” (ibid.), curtailing discussions about her writing. Ella’s desire to please Paul inhibits her ability to write; she allows “a black cold fear to enclose her” (207) when she thinks of his leaving her.

When Paul leaves Ella, as Michael leaves Anna, Lessing articulates through Anna’s analysis of both the affairs the “theme of naivety” (211) and its effect on a woman and her writing. Blending and doubling autobiographical and fictional discourses, Lessing uses Anna to critique the powerful adversarial effect of romantic and sexual obsessions on a woman’s ability to both perceive the truth and write about it. Lessing not only removes her authorial voice by allowing Anna to narrate, Anna uses her fictional characters Ella and Paul to play out the grim specter of a woman writer’s struggle to please her lover as well as herself. Like Lessing’s women, Hunt writes her *1917 Diary* in a blunt, curtailed style recording the shameful closing down of writing that results when a woman finds herself too caught up in performing for someone threatened by her disclosures.

Anna’s and Ella’s stories within *The Golden Notebook* examine man’s relationship as appositional and stifling to woman’s experience and woman’s writing. Perhaps Lessing’s view helps explain the horror we experience in
reading Hunt’s dependence on Ford at the expense of her own talent and happiness. Yet Lessing evades any personal relationship to the crippling effect of a male or patriarchal audience. She avoids that kind of “entrap-ping” by her refusal to be either Ella or Anna, by her refusal to write autobiographical diaries or notebooks that can only be called fictions, by her refusal to expose herself.8

Lessing emphasizes through her fictional women the “adjustments women make in order to increase or preserve their portion of praise, love, and comfort” (Sukenick 1973, 106). Indeed, the yellow notebook, which contains Anna’s fiction, and the blue notebook, which she perceives as diary, relate the same story—except the names have been changed. Through Anna and Ella, Lessing illustrates the construction of autobiography into fiction as a strategy to deflect the criticism of men whom women invest with the power to hurt them. Women caught between the desire to please and the will to write must struggle to write at all, and when they do, Lessing implies they shape the discourse in response to their ambiguous place in a masculine-dominated culture.

A world that insists on its own definitions of women and resists as unsound and unfair women’s depictions that differ from the male view makes women vulnerable to being misunderstood and to misunderstanding others; both are equally dangerous. We see in Violet Hunt’s relationship with Ford her vulnerability and the horrible misunderstandings that result. Lessing addresses inequalities and paradoxes within the man/woman relationship within her novel, relegating to fiction, much as Hunt does in Alien, the precarious position woman inhabits. This theme surfaces in the first line of Lessing’s novel: “The two women were alone in the London flat” (3). In using “women” and “alone” Lessing marks both their vulnerability and their community in defending themselves against masculine imposition, specifically Richard, whose visit is imminent. While waiting for Richard’s entrance Anna remarks on the irony of calling themselves “‘Free women,’” noting “‘They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them’”; Molly reminds Anna, “Well, we do, don’t we?” (4).

Though Anna would like to deny her own complicity in defining herself in terms of a man, she recalls Mother Sugar’s reminders of Anna’s failed rebellions. Mother Sugar calls her “Electra” or “Antigone,” whose strength and subsequent tragedies derive from their attachment to a father and brother, respectively, and their refusal to accept traditional roles as women. The tragedy of Anna’s life is that she cannot write; her energy, like Hunt’s, has been spent defending her position as a woman in a society where she cannot find the correct designation. Anna can explore with
Mother Sugar but cannot write her explorations. As Tommy says accusingly, “You’re afraid of writing what you think about life, because you might find yourself in an exposed position, you might expose yourself, you might be alone” (39). This haunting threat recalls Ford’s abandoning Hunt when he had no more use for her, after his exposing her to public censure. Mansfield, too, bitterly decries having spent her latter years away from Murry. Only Woolf remained with Leonard, though her suicide suggests that she too was alone.

The struggle to write within an alienating culture that upholds the sexual dominance and importance of the male partner impinges on a woman’s creative process. Anna and Saul explore the equation between sexuality and creativity and the man’s need to dominate both spheres. Saul sullenly tells Anna, “. . . Knowing you are here spinning out all these words, it drives me crazy” (604). When Anna responds by saying that “a competitive American shouldn’t be with a woman who has written a book” (ibid.), Lessing gives Saul the words that explain masculine resistance and hostility to feminine creativity: He says Anna’s writing is “a challenge to my sexual superiority, and that isn’t a joke” (ibid.). Appropriating Anna’s new golden notebook for his own when she refuses to give it to him, he writes: “Whoever he be who looks in this/He shall be cursed,/That is my wish./Saul Green, his book.(!!)” (607). Saul thus reinstates his “sexual superiority.”

But in writing what Anna calls “the old schoolboy’s curse” (607), Saul makes Anna laugh. His obvious usurpation releases her from taking the book, or him, seriously. When she throws off Saul’s desire to take her book and control its contents, she vows to write “a new notebook, all of myself in one book” (ibid.), and she does so, calling it The Golden Notebook. Saul’s “naming” of her fears of sexual and creative dominance and possession allows Anna to wrest herself free of his, or any man’s, imposition. Anna notes her desire to give the notebook to him, saying, “But I will not, I will not, I will not” (ibid.). Finally free from her fierce desire to please, Anna seizes the notebooks for her own, establishing her discursive independence.9

Lessing’s tone oscillates between hostility and sympathy concerning the women who measure their achievement against male standards because of emotional dependence. Perhaps what the fictional Anna and Virginia Woolf share is the sense that a gap separates a man’s understanding from a woman’s—and the dangers that attend the difference. As Anna says, “And yet there’s always a point even with the most perceptive and intelligent man, when a woman looks at him across a gulf: he hasn’t understood; she suddenly feels alone . . .” (214). Anna’s repressions and evasions in her
Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* may, like Woolf’s, stem from a sense of loneliness, of misunderstanding, of gendered differences that cannot be breached; Anna-the-diarist represents women stifled and fearful of “institutions rigid and oppressive” (Introduction, xvi). But Lessing’s depictions of difference are different from those of Woolf, whose dependence on Leonard was domestic and cultural rather than driven by erotic complicity. Lessing clearly sympathizes with the sexual compulsion of the heterosexual woman, yet she sees this attachment as destructive when it becomes a psychological dependence that interferes with a woman’s creative act.

Lessing’s sympathies clearly reside with Anna, who in self-mockery speaks impatiently of women who allow themselves to be consumed by male opinion. Often through Ella, Anna speaks of Lessing’s understanding of the sexual compacts between men and women that undermine women’s own sense of competence. In the yellow notebook Ella “is acutely humiliated, thinking . . . she is dependent on men for ‘having sex,’ for ‘being serviced,’ for ‘being satisfied’ . . . that was not for sex, but . . . all the emotional hungers of her life” (455). In this section, only when Ella feels “completely sexless” can she begin to write “the book which is already written inside her” (459).

Lessing thus forces readers to acknowledge that even in autobiographical writing “no single ‘authorial I’ controls perception (Egan 1999, 2). Anna tries to write everything down on September 15, 1954, in order to find a personal pattern of truth. But her perception of the falsity of “this kind of record” and her fear of readers’ opinions complicate her project. “I begin to doubt the value of a day’s recording before I’ve started . . .” (Lessing 1973, 340). This humility in recording daily experience and the concern with social propriety and literary value surface in the diaries of Woolf, Mansfield, and Hunt, hinting at the uneasy juxtaposition of woman and writer. Anna, like the others, cannot ignore the problems of cultural convention and audience even in what she perceives as her most private notebook. She talks of James Joyce’s description of a man (Bloom) defecating, then writes: “[I]n some review, a man said he would be revolted by the description of a woman defecating. I resented this. . . . But he was right for all that” (ibid.). Caught between cultural taboos and literary tact, diary writers cannot record the sum of experience in a private text. Anna’s diary admits to the “problems of being truthful in writing (which is being truthful about oneself)” (ibid.).

Anna’s writing block, this writing and nullifying, results from the caution in revealing herself to the peering and peeking of—Tommy, Richard, Michael/Paul, Saul/Milt, Jack—and in part from her internalized audience’s expectations about who and what she should be. Her insecurity,
especially about relationships, beleauers her sense of self-worth, subverting her ability to write of the personal except in circumlocution and incomplete fictions. The world that culturally inscribes Anna and the male authorities she courts impose their values on her as she struggles to write. The “invisible enemy . . . the almost tangible shape of malice and destruction” (270) that Tommy embodies when he reads Anna’s notebooks resides in Michael when he says, “Ah, Anna, you make up stories about life and tell them to yourself,” reducing her feelings to “coldness and dismay” (331). Male mockery makes her feel “as if the substance of the self were thinning and dissolving” (ibid.). Similarly, when Paul leaves Ella after first criticizing her writing, she feels “as if a skin had been peeled off her” (312). Needing man’s validation “for the emotional hungers of her life” (455), Anna nevertheless feels the weight of masculine pressure, both culturally and personally, when she begins to write her experience. As she explains to Saul, “[A]t the moment I sit down to write, someone comes into the room, looks over my shoulder and stops me” (639). She describes her intruder in plural figures, presumably masculine: “It could be a Chinese peasant . . . Castro’s guerilla fighters . . . an Algerian fighter . . . or Mr. Mathlong. They stand here . . . and say, why aren’t you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?” (ibid.). Anna’s heightened sensitivity about the opinions of others draws attention to the constraint diarists such as Mansfield and Woolf, and Hunt to a lesser extent, feel in presenting versions of themselves to an audience. In anxiously fearing criticism, they seek to place the focus of their writing elsewhere—not on their own subjectivity.

Lessing’s deep suspicion of institutional writing practices and their negative effects on writers indicates the author/narrator’s cognizance of audiences that go beyond the personal reader. The dangerous nature of political discourse surfaces early in the novel. Anna’s strong philosophical attachment to Marxism informs her thinking and her writing, but she cannot write what she wishes until she releases herself from the contradictions of “truth and lies” (481) the British communist party came to embody. Clearly, Lessing sees the party as a metaphor for all politically imposed systems; her attack is not on the communist party so much as it encompasses all patriarchal systems. Anna, in an ambivalent relationship to the party, struggles to separate the “truth and lies” of her own life. She works to throw off institutionally imposed versions of experience. Early in the novel Anna advises Molly to rip up materials the party had asked for that delineated her “doubts and confusions” about party membership. Anna tells Molly she is “mad” to write down what she calls “evidence to hang you” and urges her to destroy her complaints, which Molly does. Anna knows the party’s
potentially dangerous judgments of her and other members; she struggles to
balance the important philosophical underpinnings of communism with
the oppression of the actual party.

In the brief vignettes about Anna’s work with the party, her joining, her
leaving, Lessing explores the institutional silencing of dissent. She draws
attention to the tyranny that can destroy a writer’s quest for meaning.
Anna’s descriptions of the party’s attempt to control discursive practice
and the consequences of disclosure draw attention to the power of artic-
ulation and the dangers that await writers within oppressive systems.
Anna “jokes” with Jack when arguing their warring political positions: “I
am essentially the one to be shot—that is traditionally my role” (341).
Anna’s awareness of the danger of her rebellion forces her to curtail writ-
ing about her political doubts. As Lessing puts it, “Anna’s stammer was
because she was evading something. Once a pressure or a current . . . start-
ed, there was . . . no way of not being intensely subjective” (xiii). Cultural
institutions promote their own version of “truth” at the expense of indi-
vidual renderings.

In embedding harsh critiques in fictions, she ranges from the South
African system she writes of in her black notebook, to the British capital-
ists who want to change her book for cinema. This look at the imposition
of broader, more formalized audiences on discourse may seem far afield
from the world of the diary writer. Lessing, however, exposes not herself
in the diary but the layers of corrosive ideology on a writer’s freedom, illu-
minating the oppressive systems within which the women of this study
function. Lessing works within a structure of alterity, inducing readers to
interrogate diary texts and to use those texts to critique social and politi-
cal practices.

Although both men and women write under what Jacques Derrida calls
the “fatal necessity” of representation, women are particularly vulnerable to
the pressures of audiences holding the power to political and sexual
economies. Lessing subverts readers’ intentionality to place her, to name
her, while she challenges existing modes of experience by creating new dis-
cursive practices of her own. Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and
Violet Hunt each exercise their genius and their remarkably adept use of
language to likewise shift such intentions and challenge prevailing custom.

Anna’s “invisible projectionist,” laughing and jeering, unveiling the
script of her life, symbolizes the spectators that so threaten women’s dis-
covery. In the “Golden Notebook” section, which ends the book, Anna
dreams of the projectionist’s screening of her experience, “Directed by
Anna Wulf” (619). He berates her with her “untruth,” and Anna, “faced
with the burden of re-creating order out of the chaos that [her] . . . life
had become,” agonizes. Anna confesses that “I was unable to distinguish between what I had invented and what I had known” (ibid.). Neither Anna nor the reader can extricate truth from the dream discourse. Is the projectionist’s “sadistically delighted” (620) undoing of Anna’s script caused by her own internalized censor casting doubt on its worth or by another’s twisted reception? Anna awakens and gives Saul the projectionist’s role, telling him, “Do you know, you’ve become a sort of inner conscience or critic . . . ?” (621).

Saul has become all of the men (Michael, the Pauls, Jack, Willi, and Max) who instructed, criticized, and judged Anna. Yet Anna internalizes Saul, amalgamating a cultural imposition. Always searching, she finds the truth unwinding on the projector of the mind before her, a projector run by a male “projectionist.” In her mind Anna names Saul as the purveyor of truth, shifting and subordinating her own keen observations to a masculine sensibility.

Yet, ironically, this recognition of her dependence on Saul liberates Anna. Once she recognizes his influence, she works to reinstate her control of the “critical and thinking Anna” (331) that men have discouraged: “The projectionist now being silent . . . so I leaned out my own hand to switch off the machine” (635). Anna triumphs by writing her book, but at a cost she finds herself unable to measure. Lessing thus contemplates the considerable challenge women writers face in ridding themselves of the “projectionist” to write their own stories—and she illustrates in her own textual strategies the methods they may employ to mediate between the artist and her audience, both internal and external.

Lessing’s narrator Anna as well as Woolf, Mansfield, and Hunt face audiences similar to those the Duchess of Newcastle anticipated when she wrote her own diary in 1656: the “carping tongues” and “malicious censurers” (Newcastle, quoted in Jones 1988, 154). The weight of the wedding band or the ache of its absence imposes on these women a deliberate need to negotiate their position in a culture that seeks to diminish them. In their artistry of words, in their arrangement of sentences, they write themselves into text. And, as Bruss points out, “Language . . . offers no way of recording, without also staging” (1976, 302). In staging the performances of their lives, these women diarists write their lines in the presence of audience.