The Challenge of Teaching Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* in the Twenty-First Century

Suzette Henke

It seems curious to me again and again that . . . this book [*The Golden Notebook*] produces such an echo everywhere in the world. . . . What was still considered taboo in 1962 is no longer so today. . . . On the other hand, this response also shows me . . . that a book is a living thing which can bear many kinds of fruit.¹

Can one still teach Doris Lessing’s masterpiece, *The Golden Notebook*, at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Is Lessing’s work politically relevant (and meaningful) to an American student audience for whom the defining moment of adulthood was the tragedy of 9/11/01? And how can contemporary readers relate to the outmoded sex-role stereotypes and self-destructive patterns of personal relationships portrayed in Lessing’s opus? For those of us who came of age in the 1960s, *The Golden Notebook* has survived as a sacred feminist text, enshrined in our pedagogical projects as one of the great works produced in the twentieth century. But how can Lessing’s epic narrative, rooted as it is in midcentury politics, African colonialism, and British historical struggle, prove meaningful to younger readers teething on rap music, MTV, and computer hypertexts? What has Lessing to say to students in the new millennium?
In an interview with Bill Moyers for a PBS Now broadcast on January 24, 2003, Lessing reminisces about her father, Alfred/Michael Tayler, who was traumatized by the loss of a leg during World War I. He and his compatriots, she observes, were “terribly damaged people,” as were the veterans of World War II and the Vietnam War. She made the accusation that “your lot—your [American] warmongers” don’t understand the psychological price of warfare. People are so badly wounded emotionally and psychologically that they never recover. In fact, Lessing believes that the sixties generation vehemently protested the Vietnam War because they themselves were the children of veterans who had been damaged by World War II. Somewhat wistfully, she notes that nothing at all remains of the world into which she was born, since the British Empire, like all empires, was doomed from the start.

In a February 2003 interview with Billy Gray, Lessing confessed: “I’ve spent my entire life . . . thinking ‘this cannot be happening’ because it’s so stupid. I mean, crisis after crisis after crisis. The whole of the Second World War[,] I remember thinking ‘this cannot be happening, this waste,’ . . . but of course it was happening, and now it’s happening again . . . I just can’t believe that people can be so stupid.” Baby Boomers like me, who came of age in the era of the Vietnam War, can attest to a sense of déjà vu, as we witness the postwar occupation of Iraq, a proliferation of insurgency bombings, and a conflict between Sunni and Shiite religious factions.

As Lessing declares in her preface to The Golden Notebook, “We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. . . . Those who stay [in this self-perpetuating system] . . . are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.” In this essay, I would like to argue that with sufficient motivation, enticement, elucidation, and pedagogical enthusiasm, a twenty-first-century instructor can offer The Golden Notebook to his or her students as a rich treasure trove of historical, political, psychological, moral, and ethical insights—all served up in an intriguing postmodern porridge of scintillating narratives. Here are some examples of the Gordian knots encountered on this pedagogical journey, delineated via the “four P’s”: Global Politics, Sexual Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Postmodern Narrative.

GLOBAL POLITICS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

In The Golden Notebook, I really tried to write a book which would capture certain vital ideas that were all to do with socialism in one way or
In a new millennium dominated by American power politics of preemption and Christian/Islamic controversies, few readers have any idea of the political antagonisms that dominated “free world” consciousness in Europe and America at midcentury. In order to contextualize The Golden Notebook, one must begin with a mini history lesson that highlights the McCarthy hearings, the execution of the Rosenbergs, the death of Stalin in 1953, STASI repres-sions in East Germany, and Nikita Khrushchev’s “secret” denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. As Suzanne Clark, author of Cold Warriors, has reminded me, contemporary students have little or no familiarity with the cold war. “How,” she asks, “has our memory of the Iron Curtain been erased so quickly?” After all, it was little more than fifteen years ago that the Berlin Wall was razed, amidst great jubilation. Now that the cold war, along with its attendant political anxieties, has faded into historical memory, we face an entirely different enigma—the emergence of a Middle Eastern damask curtain, so to speak.

What seems to me ironic is that the kind of moral epic Lessing constructed in the middle of the twentieth century has more to say to us now than it did, perhaps, in the 1980s or 1990s. With the advent of the U.S. Patriot Act, we saw the ghost of McCarthyism invidiously resuscitated and attended by many of the political dangers similar to those earlier associated with the Red Menace of Communism. It all comes round again, and this time, in the form of grim governmental machinery that threatens to limit basic civil liberties. During the 1950s cold war, the American Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was empowered to round up foreign-born Communists for deportation and to detain them without bail. Analogously, foreign nationals currently perceived as potential threats to U.S. security have been (un)systematically rounded up from far-flung geographical locales such as Afghanistan and Pakistan and detained at Guantanamo military base in Cuba without criminal charges, and without the right to trial or appeal. The open-ended sentences imposed on these prisoners are so stressful that the International Red Cross reports rapid mental deterioration of detainees. In 2003 alone, 305 cases of “self-harm” were reported, including more than one hundred suicide attempts, the majority by hanging. Amnesty International, on the basis of American FBI reports, has brought allegations of prisoner torture and abuse comparable to the brutalities documented at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. And physicians from around the world issued a March 2006 appeal
in *The Lancet* urging that American doctors refuse to engage in the force-feeding of Guantanamo prisoners on hunger strike. Do civil rights, one might ask, no longer apply to foreign nationals?

Nor is Lessing’s searing critique in *The Golden Notebook* limited to cold war politics. Anna Wulf’s Black Notebook explores the “dark continent” of Africa and forces readers to consider the lives and welfare of black citizens geographically isolated and culturally remote. She acerbically reminds us that we avert our attention from the continent of Africa at our peril. Dare we ignore virtual genocide in the Congo and Darfur, the starvation of our fellow human beings in a global village, or the uncontrolled plague of HIV-AIDS decimating populations in Africa and Indonesia? Lessing’s political debates in *The Golden Notebook* are shockingly relevant at the dawn of the twenty-first century. One witnesses impending disaster with a sense of impotence and disbelief. And one cannot help sharing Lessing’s frustration and incredulity at contemporary examples of world leaders’ obliquity in the face of political mayhem.

**SEXUAL POLITICS**

I’d constructed this whole book on my experience, . . . but it never crossed my mind that I was writing about feminism or what is now called Women’s Lib.⁸

I learned that I had written a tract about the sex war, and fast discovered that nothing I said then could change that diagnosis.⁹

One of the cultural consequences of the tragedy of 9/11/01 seems to have been a sudden posttraumatic reconfiguration of the way in which we value personal relationships. In the weeks following the shock of 9/11, I recognized symptoms of posttraumatic stress in my own life and among Americans everywhere attempting to translate the bizarre television spectacle of planes crashing into the World Trade Center from the simulacrum of a made-for-TV disaster film into the register of historical reality. In the eighteen months after 9/11, five of my university colleagues gave birth to babies—perhaps as a sign of renewed hope after unimaginable disaster. A surprising number of unanticipated marriages, including my own, seemed partially motivated by an implicit confrontation with mortality and with the daily perils of life on a moving planet that appears to be spinning vertiginously out of control.

Doris Lessing claimed in her 2003 interview with Billy Gray that she
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has experienced the romantic sensation of being “in love” only once, and she decries the shattering effect that such erotic infatuation can have on one’s psyche. “What,” she asks provocatively, “is the reason for falling in love? . . . It has no purpose whatsoever. I mean, for centuries people did very well with arranged marriages . . . and the whole concept of romantic love hardly existed except in poetry.” Biographers have argued about the identity of Lessing’s unique paramour, who might have been the American writer Clancy Sigal, with whom she experienced an intensely conflicted, emotionally violent liaison, mirrored in Anna Wulf’s relationship with Saul/Milt in The Golden Notebook.

Analogously, Lessing insists that “there are a lot more important battles than the sex war” and that everything she dislikes about politics is “enshrined in the women’s movement.” In interviews she repeatedly articulates the conviction, expressed in her 1971 preface to The Golden Notebook, that “this novel was not a trumpet for Women’s Liberation.” In 1969 she declared testily: “I’m impatient with people who emphasize sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters.”

I would like to argue that The Golden Notebook is not so much a feminist novel as it is a text that offers a great deal of historical evidence suggesting why it was that women at midcentury needed to be liberated by the second wave of feminism—a movement that effected monumental political changes in the 1960s and 1970s. As Ellen Morgan shrewdly observed in her 1973 article “The Alienation of the Woman Writer in The Golden Notebook,” Lessing’s female characters sacrifice themselves on the altar of traditional sex roles, even as they invent illusory personae of the sexually free women they would like to be. Ignoring the ideological state apparatuses that regulate their lives, all the women in the novel enact archaic sex roles as faithful, devoted, and altruistic partners. The epithet “free women” is clearly—and bitterly—ironic, since “they feel incomplete and inferior as persons” and “share a minority-group psychological orientation which compels them to depreciate their femaleness and their friendship and seek approval from and identification with men.” “‘Free women,’ said Anna, wryly. . . . ‘They still define us in terms of relationships with men.’” The real problem, however, is that even Lessing’s independent women continue to judge themselves via criteria of male approval. In assessing her protagonists Anna and Molly, Lessing calls them “very courageous—for the circumstances of that time—albeit rather crazy in their experimenting with liberation.”

I first read The Golden Notebook in the 1970s, when it was assigned by Tillie Olsen in an inspiring course, “Women in Literature,” at Stanford Uni-
versity. I immediately devoured Lessing’s novel and have taught it religiously in women’s studies courses ever since. The 1970s, however, constituted an era of turbulence and transition, especially in the realm of sexual politics. Although women felt suddenly liberated from reproductive anxiety by access to oral contraceptives, prescriptions for the Pill had to be cannily negotiated by unmarried “bachelor girls.” Single women in America approached scornful pharmacists with trepidation, purchased Woolworth wedding rings to flash while traveling in company, and cautiously restricted access to phone numbers if apartments were shared with housemates of a different gender. Although social change occurred rapidly, it demanded enormous psychological resilience on the part of the generation of “flower children” who were engaged in political demonstrations against American imperialism and the Vietnam War. Protestors confronted squads of helmeted policemen, faced weapons of gas destruction, and proclaimed, in echoes of popular songs by the Beatles, that they preferred to make love rather than war. What startles me, in retrospect, is that Doris Lessing belongs to the same demographic cohort as my mother. When the 1970s generation began experimenting with liberated lifestyles, most people my parents’ age looked on with disapproval, if not downright horror, at such scandalous behavior.

*The Golden Notebook* proved to be a sacred text for the second wave of the feminist movement, but it could not be construed as a reliable handbook for women’s liberation. In the 1970s my own disappointment with Lessing’s novel aggregated around three categories: 1) a lack of reproductive realism, 2) Lessing’s perpetuation of Freudian models of female sexuality, and 3) her ostensibly restricted vision of queer politics. In women’s literature classes, my students patiently plough through 666 pages in which the author/narrator analyzes the most intimate details of female experience—premenstrual tension, the insertion of a tampon, lovemaking, orgasm (two kinds), and the draining responsibilities of single parenthood. In “For the Etruscans,” Rachel Blau DuPlessis praises Lessing’s candor and relentless “self-questioning. . . . The first Tampax in world literature.” The first Tampax, perhaps, but not the first Durex. The author of *The Golden Notebook* never broaches issues of contraception and woman’s reproductive vulnerability. In the 1970s, it troubled me considerably that Lessing stops short of conceiving a protagonist whose womanhood entails a perplexed struggle with the problematized choices of childbearing and nurturance.

In the fairy-tale landscape of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna Freeman and her lover Max Wulf wake up one morning and hear a baby crying in the next flat. Inspired by the infant’s crooning, Max proposes that they have a child. Then they make love and make a baby: “Max said: ‘Perhaps we should have
a baby?’ I said: ‘You mean having a baby would bring us together?’ . . . Then I suddenly thought: Why not? . . . [A]nd so I turned to him and we made love. That was the morning Janet was conceived.”

Only the most curious of readers might wonder what Anna and Max had been doing about fertility control prior to this particular encounter. During World War II there were fairly few options. Did the couple use condoms? Did Max withdraw? Did Anna use a diaphragm? We do not know. Nor does the author tell us. She suggests, with a distinctly male-oriented voice, that reproduction is, and always has been, a matter of volition. Women in this novel are surprisingly passive about reproductive planning, a concern that subtly slips through the gaps in their sexual discourse. The free women in Lessing’s fiction never feel sufficiently liberated to articulate either maternal desire or sexual need. Although Paul and Ella in the Yellow Notebook share bed and bodily intimacy for nearly five years, it is only when Paul predicts futuristic technological cloning, via the application of ice to women’s ovaries, that Ella cries out: “My God, Paul, if at any time during the last five years you’d asked me to have a baby, I’d have been so happy . . . Don’t you know that ever since I’ve known you I’ve wanted to have your child?”

But how could he know if she were too timorous to tell him?

In the Yellow Notebook, Paul preaches to Ella that the “real revolution” of our time is that of “women against men.” Fundamentally conservative in her notions about gender, Ella disapproves of the nascent sexual revolution erupting at midcentury because she believes that “sex is essentially emotional for women.” And the litmus test for the viability of heterosexual relationship, she insists, is vaginal orgasm—“the orgasm that is created by the man’s need for a woman, and his confidence in that need.” As her relationship with Paul deteriorates, Ella resents the fact that he begins to “rely on manipulating her externally, on giving Ella clitoral orgasms,” because such practices contradict her Freudian sexology. She believes that the “vaginal orgasm is a dissolving in a vague, dark generalised sensation like being swirled in a warm whirlpool. There . . . is only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire, takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is a substitute and a fake.”

When Paul cites “eminent physiologists who say women have no physical basis for vaginal orgasm,” Ella quickly demurs: “Then they don’t know much, do they?” After a group of incensed female physicians walks out of a lecture on sexology by the learned Professor Bloodrot, Paul’s colleague Stephanie explains that “women of any sense know better, after all these centuries, than to interrupt when men start telling them how they feel about sex.” “Integrity is the orgasm,” Ella insists. And then she asks herself: “Am I saying that I can
never come except with a man I love? Because what sort of a desert am I condemning myself to if that’s true?”

Thirty-five years ago, these pages in The Golden Notebook seemed liable to do more damage to the popular understanding of female sexual response than anything written since Freud’s infamous essays on female sexual psychology, which describe the mature woman’s eager substitution of vaginal pleasure for clitoral excitation at the outset of puberty. After all, it simply did not make physiological sense to Freud that female pleasure might be focused on a smaller version of the male penis—even though a number of African tribes realized this centuries ago and inaugurated the practice of female genital mutilation to control projected male fears of insatiable female appetites.

Admittedly, Doris Lessing did not have the advantage of Masters and Johnson’s study of Human Sexual Response or Shere Hite’s revolutionary Hite Report. Alfred Kinsey had described some fascinating scientific discoveries in Sexual Behavior in the Human Female in 1953, but his work was largely ignored by bourgeois couples. It was only in the 1970s that a significant number of women, liberated by contraceptive practice, began freely to explore their sexual desires and to communicate more openly with partners of both genders. Although Kinsey reported that 90% of all women experience sexual pleasure and orgasmic response via clitoral stimulation, a majority of females at midcentury were diagnosed “frigid,” by physicians and spouses alike, if they failed to achieve simultaneous orgasm during intercourse. It was commonly agreed that a female preference for clitoral stimulation warranted psychiatric counseling, if not surgical intervention. Throughout the 1960s marriage counselors instructed male clients to stimulate spouses to a point of high excitement and then quickly switch to the missionary position. Such ill-conceived advice must surely have destroyed countless marriages and left a number of women feeling sexually inadequate, if not legally divorced.

In the 1970s women started speaking more frankly to one another, and feminists began to share information about emotions, relationships with men and with other women, lesbian or bisexual experiences, and heterosexual mating. For the first time in centuries (or perhaps millennia), a majority of females on the planet raised their voices in heretofore silenced choruses to expose what Anne Koedt called “the myth of the vaginal orgasm.” It now seems remarkable that women, in the course of a single generation, were able to discover and acknowledge so much about their own erotic jouissance.

How does one broach the topic of Lessing’s Freudian constructions of female sexuality in conversation with twenty-first-century students? The only viable course would seem to be a bold confrontation with the historical controversy. For a bit of comic relief, I sometimes cite James Joyce’s allu-
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sion, in the “Circe” episode of Ulysses, to Rualdus Columbus (a.k.a. Realdo Colombo), the anatomist who claimed to have discovered the female clitoris in the sixteenth century, though many women undoubtedly had discovered this crucial organ long before the above-named gentleman. As one male graduate student commented about this latter-day Columbus: “I’ll bet his girlfriend was happy!” So perhaps one shouldn’t worry too much about dispelling Freudian myths when teaching The Golden Notebook in the twenty-first century. New-millennial students appear to have acquired their own, more sophisticated thoughts on the matter.

Finally, how does one deal with the novel’s apparently stereotyped vision of homosexuality in the caricatured figures of Ivor and Ronnie? A number of scholars, including Ellen Morgan, Claire Sprague, Joseph Allen Boone, and Judith Kegan Gardiner, have offered keen assessments of Anna Wulf’s postwar homophobia that disinter hints of female self-loathing disguised in emotional revulsion.32 When Anna speculates about the relationship between her daughter and their homosexual boarder Ivor, she expresses concern that “Janet needs a man in her life,” but worries about exposing the impressionable child to a queer guy who fails to meet heterosexist criteria for male authenticity. She grudgingly admits that “he’s charming” and asks herself, “so what do I mean by ‘A real man’? For Janet adored Ivor. And she adored—or said that she did—his friend Ronnie.”33 When Ivor and Ronnie indulge in sardonic mockery and mimic traditional romantic postures via a ludicrous performance of chivalric behavior, Anna interprets their charade as still another example of perverse and ugly spite. The couple soon find themselves expelled from Anna’s heterosexist haven of cozy domesticity.

In his 1998 novel The Hours, Michael Cunningham portrays Clarissa Vaughan, a child of the 1960s, taking inspiration for her iconoclastic lesbian lifestyle from Doris Lessing. Clarissa’s bedtime reading conspicuously includes The Golden Notebook, from which she manages to wrench a late-century script for personal liberation and the free choice of (homo)sexual identity. Such literary intertextuality seems somewhat ironic, insofar as Lessing provides a penetrating critique of traditional marriage, conservative politics, and cultural conventions of every kind, but appears to exhibit a glaring blind spot in her representation of homosexuality as a deviant lifestyle. Hence the implicit revulsion expressed in Anna’s snide allusion to the “gaggle of little queers” who exploit Marion when she opens a dress shop in Knightsbridge at the end of “Free Women.”34

In her recent essay “Historicizing Homophobia in The Golden Notebook,” Judith Kegan Gardiner compares Lessing’s novel with an earlier short story, “The Day Stalin Died,” to contravene Joseph Allen Boone’s attribu-
tion of homophobia both to Lessing’s fictional protagonist in *The Golden Notebook* and to the author herself. Contrasting Anna Wulf’s midcentury homophobia with her resilient acceptance of gay and bisexual comrades in Africa during World War II, Gardiner concludes that Anna, as a citizen of postwar England, “internalizes a culturally-dominant misogynistic heterosexuality that aligns femininity, women, and abjection under the alibi of an inborn nature” and “uses her gay male tenant as a way of feeling better about herself.” Gardiner concludes that Lessing implicitly satirizes homophobia in her novel, since the “emotions the gay men invoke in Anna, especially her ‘effeminophobia,’ reveal the grounding of her postwar heterosexual passions in a historicized misogyny that condemned the feminine in both women and men” and “record Anna’s progress toward psychological crackup.”

**PSYCHOANALYSIS**

[S]ometimes when people “crack up” it is a way of self-healing, of the inner self’s dismissing false dichotomies and divisions.36

People who are called mentally ill are often those who say to the society, “I’m not going to live according to your rules. I’m not going to conform.” Madness can be a form of rebellion.37

The essence of neurosis is conflict. But the essence of living now, fully, not blocking off to what goes on, is conflict. . . . People stay sane by blocking off, by limiting themselves.38

For a twenty-first-century audience familiar with psychoanalysis, *The Golden Notebook* needs to be interpreted in the context of Freud, Jung, and R. D. Laing, as well as through the more contemporary lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “schizoanalysis.”39 As Laing proposed in *The Politics of Experience*, so-called madness might not entail a psychological “breakdown” so much as a revelatory, healing “breakthrough” into expanded forms of consciousness and self-integration.40 Laing told his biographer Bob Mullan that he had given Doris Lessing LSD over the course of six visits, but Lessing “has never publicly acknowledged such treatments,” despite her willingness to speak openly about her experience with mescal.41 She explains that it is “very easy to send oneself round the bend for a couple of days” and that she “did it once, out of curiosity,” through a “technique medicine men and witch doctors were quite familiar with, going without eating or sleeping for several
days.” In deliberate experiments with protracted food and sleep deprivation, Lessing suffered hallucinations and psychological dissociation, as well as a traumatic confrontation with a “figure she calls the ‘self-hater.’ The voice repeatedly listed her weaknesses and sins in sharp accusatory tones. . . . A horrifying encounter, being told over and over how dreadful a person she was, not worthy of being alive.”

As Anna Wulf in The Golden Notebook descends into the unconscious and battles the turbulent upheavals of psychological fragmentation in the company of Saul Green, she seems to reach a new focus of self-integration via immersion in the tormented landscape of corporeal abjection. Saul, a tough American writer based on Clancy Sigal, appears to be suffering from megalomania (with the emphasis on mania), as well as from a condition that might be diagnosed as narcissistic borderline personality disorder (with the emphasis on narcissistic). Spattering a relentless, machine-gun volley of “I’s,” he lacks cathexis for other human beings, whom he persistently sees as objects to be manipulated to his own advantage. Hence Saul’s truculent fabrications in the face of Anna’s hysterical jealousy. He angrily denies sexual involvement with a long list of women named in his secret diary. When Saul and Anna surreptitiously begin reading one another’s private notebooks, they embark on an intriguing exercise in life-writing as titillating performance. But the game proves emotionally perilous, driving both players into deeper strata of mental confusion and dysphoria. Locked in a state of permanent anxiety, the two exacerbate their collaborative madness through obsessive-compulsive cycles of tenderness and bullying.

Anna’s dissociative breakdown entails a vertiginous descent into the unconscious, evocative of visceral anxiety and an overwhelming sense of shame and corporeal abjection. Accosted by feelings of self-loathing and revulsion, idiosyncratically identified as “homosexual disgust,” she envisages her body in the monstrous guise of a voracious female spider, devouring her mate in an ecstasy of postcoital cannibalism. Animal images prevail in this atavistic landscape, as Anna hallucinates an encounter with a predatory tiger hovering on the ceiling of her bedroom, with emerald eyes and a bestial, hypnotic gaze reminiscent of the green-eyed Saul. Although this feline predator seems crouched to spring, Anna feels protective of the powerful beast, whom she recognizes as a metaphorical emanation of Saul.

As the invisible “projectionist” of a rich, surrealistic dream that fuses history with fiction, nightmare with biographical reality, Saul metamorphoses in the interior Golden Notebook from tiger/lover into an inner conscience enabling Anna to name and to reify the events of her past—to revisit painful memories and work through the resonance of psychological dysphoria. The
speeded-up film is a composite personal history that fuses biography and art in therapeutic amalgamation. Through oneiric strategies of narrative reformulation, Anna is able to envisage the aesthetic reintegration of past experience, as segments of her life begin to coalesce in a new dramatic scenario. The dream-film opens up a “breakthrough” path to self-knowledge by forcing Anna creatively to integrate the people, ideas, and emotions from her past into a poignant, healing, and meaningful script. As Paul Tanner and Anna’s lover Michael are conflated in a single character, they triumphantly cling to a common goal as idealistic “boulder pushers,” post-Sisyphean laborers in the cause of social justice, whose efforts propel humanity slightly forward in the direction of enlightenment.

In *The Golden Notebook*, through a psychoanalytic exercise that resembles Laing’s antipsychiatry, Anna Wulf acknowledges the potential violence and masochistic tendencies embedded in her psyche, as well as the traumatized self-hurter and self-hater emotionally repressed and heretofore denied. Arising from what Laing might identify as the fifth dimension of mystical/schizophrenic revelation, in which ego boundaries temporarily dissolve, Anna is able to piece together fragments of her shattered psyche and engender a coherent narrative in the role of creative agent. As author/protagonist of *The Golden Notebook*, she overcomes artistic blockage and begins writing the “Free Women” sections of the convoluted text we are in the process of reading.

**POSTMODERN NARRATIVE**

[My major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped.]

I was working out the shape of *The Golden Notebook*. As you know, there’s this framework, the absolutely conventional novel. Five bits of conventional novel and all this chaos in the middle. One thing I was saying was this feeling of despair, which every writer feels when they’ve finished a novel, that you haven’t been able to say it because life is too complex ever to be put into words. That’s one thing I was saying through the structure of this book.

As Katherine Fishburn points out in her essay “Teaching Doris Lessing as a Subversive Activity,” ever since Lessing published her 1971 Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, “it is as though she asks us if we dare teach this novel at all . . . without institutionalizing it.” Fishburn argues that Lessing’s “method
of teaching is not didactic but Socratic, by which she engages her readers in a progressive dialogue that leads them through a series of multiple realities to a new view of the world.” Her Socratic pedagogy takes rich inspiration from the “literature of Sufism and the philosophy of Marxism. From the Sufi canon she has learned the art of teaching indirectly, through parables and . . . conundrums. . . . From Marxism she has learned the related art of dialectical thinking.”

Lessing’s palimpsestic postmodern technique is the dimension of the novel that many of my students initially find intimidating. In commentaries provided by graduate students in a Modern Literature seminar that I taught at the University of Louisville in spring 2003, one young woman wrote: “When I first read The Golden Notebook, I had looked at a few preliminary sources to get some idea of the modern and postmodern dimensions. About three-quarters of the way through, when the narrative structure began to fold in on itself, I realized that I had drastically oversimplified the notebooks. This ultimately became the biggest puzzle for me. . . . I’d be interested in reading the novel a second time to see if bringing different expectations to the text would result in a different reading.” Another student commented: “I had never read anything by Lessing before, even though I have a B.A. in English. Reading The Golden Notebook was a revelation to me. In class, you compared it to Joyce’s Ulysses. Now that I’ve finished the book, I agree that it’s one of the great masterpieces of the twentieth century. Why isn’t it taught more frequently?”

The Golden Notebook unfolds as a post/modern narrative of metafictional experimentation, with diverse, contradictory, diegetic dimensions that require sophisticated exercises in narratological unpacking. The book mimics a Möbius strip folding back on itself: there is no original story or experiential ur-narrative to serve as reassuring epistemological referent. As new-millennial readers face the uncertainties of a post-9/11 world, Lessing’s experimental text might tacitly reassure them that it is “okay” not to “observe the forms” of straightforward, formulaic thinking that constitute cultural dogma. The Golden Notebook forces its audience to confront the fragmented, contingent nature of modernity. Lessing “utilizes the Marxist model of dialectical progression, . . . whereby her readers learn how to escape institutionalized thought.” Lessing’s challenging narrative implicitly encourages us to question the kind of utopian schemata that characterize twenty-first century Anglo-American political rhetoric—a rhetoric of optimism contingent on a straightforward “plotline,” as well as on a “horserace mentality” culminating in the triumph of cowboy-style democracy throughout the world.
As Lessing acerbically suggests, the kind of psychic fragmentation evinced by radical behavior that “breaks the old forms” and challenges traditional values might simply prove too threatening to fundamentalist values. In *The Golden Notebook*, Molly Jacobs prophetically predicts a reactionary neoconservatism taking precedence at the end of the twentieth century: “I thought that the generation after us are going to take one look at us, and get married at eighteen, forbid divorces, and go in for strict moral codes and all that, because the chaos otherwise is just too terrifying.” Hence the moralistic platform of “guns, God, and gays” that prevailed in the U.S. presidential election of 2004. As Katherine Fishburn observes, by teaching *The Golden Notebook*, we are encouraging our students to acknowledge “that there are several ways of looking at the world, that no one social, religious, or political institution has a monopoly on truth.”

Approaching the limits of postmodern praxis, Lessing intentionally sets out to create a metafictional nest of decentered narratives whose illusory core (an always-already absent ur-narrative) balances precariously over the void. The center of this series of Chinese boxes proves to be the textual equivalent of an aesthetic “black hole.” An (in)finite series of Russian *babushka* dolls implodes from the pressure of diverse, contradictory, and thoroughly fragmented diegetic worlds. As Beth Boehm assures us, “the relationship between the real and the fictional, rather than being irrelevant, is ‘unknowable.’”

What I sometimes do to increase my students’ confidence and understanding of Lessing’s challenging postmodern text is to play a tantalizing game by handing out an in-class “quiz” filled with self-contradictory multiple-choice answers that expose the complex scaffolding of Lessing’s novel. This ludic academic exercise helps my audience come to terms with the apparent contradictions in Lessing’s text and better comprehend the involuted postmodern structure of her narrative.

**CODA**

Consciously or unconsciously we keep two-thirds of mankind improperly housed and fed. This is what [my fiction] is about—this whole pattern of discrimination and tyranny and violence.

“We must prevent another major war,” Lessing warns. “We’re already in a time of total chaos, but we’re so corrupted that we can’t see it. The world is rocking.” As Anna Wulf observes in *The Golden Notebook*, the second
half of the twentieth century seemed to offer, for the first time in human history, wildly divergent possibilities—for apocalyptic disaster evinced by the H-bomb, on the one hand; and for previously unimagined technological miracles, on the other. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the options seem even more staggering: weapons of mass destruction that could wipe out the human race in cataclysmic explosions, versus bionic reconstruction of the biological body and stem-cell research that could cure Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s, and juvenile diabetes. In utopian fantasy, one might envisage a government budgeting $400 billion to feed and clothe every citizen on the planet, wipe out AIDS and world hunger, and support a global population in dignity and well-being. In contrast, one faces the political nightmare of terrorism, insurgency, and the ongoing occupation of Iraq by coalition forces, as well as a multimillion-dollar budget allocated for U.S. military expenditures in Afghanistan. Many awestruck citizens cannot believe that world leaders could choose the latter scenario. Considering Lessing’s current political relevance, I trust that university professors will continue to take up the challenge of teaching all Lessing’s subversive oeuvre, especially *The Golden Notebook*, well into the twenty-first century—and beyond.58

**NOTES**


6. Author’s conversation with Suzanne Clark, August 2005. See Roberta Rubenstein’s “Notes for Proteus: Doris Lessing Reads the *Zeitgeist*” in Part One of this collection, where she describes further challenges for any Lessing reader—including critics—encountering her large opus for the first time [editors’ note].


12. Ibid., 192–93.
21. Ibid., 213.
22. Ibid., 214–15.
23. Ibid., 215–16.
24. Ibid., 216.
25. Ibid., 217–18.
26. Ibid., 325.
27. Ibid., 326.
31. Rereading Anne Koedt’s 1970 essay on “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” forty years after its initial publication is a fascinating historical exercise. Koedt cites Marie Bonaparte’s suggestion, in *Female Sexuality*, that if a woman’s “clitoral fixation” remains obdurate into adulthood, “a clitoral-vaginal reconciliation might be effected by surgical means” (qtd. in Koedt, 2). Koedt also quotes Frank S. Caprio, whose book on *The Sexually Adequate Female* remained a popular marriage manual throughout the 1960s: “whenever a woman is incapable of achieving orgasm via coitus, . . . she can be regarded as suffering from frigidity and requires psychiatric assistance” (qtd. in Koedt, 2). Koedt observes that, “[o]nce having laid down the law about the nature of our sexuality, Freud [and followers] not so strangely discovered a tremendous problem of frigidity in women” (2).


37. Lessing, “Doris Lessing at Stony Brook,” 69.


42. Klein, Doris Lessing, 204.

43. Ibid., 205.

44. Roberta Rubenstein, Robert Rawdon Wilson, Gayle Greene, and Linda S. Kauffman all suggest that Saul may be one of Anna’s fictional creations, a masculine double or alter ego. See Robert Rawdon Wilson, The Hydra’s Tale: Imagining Disgust (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002). Greene speculates that “Anna ‘invents’ Saul, fabricates him from all the men she has known, a kind of composite male who expresses her own ‘masculine’ potential (in Jungian terms, her animus) and guides her through breakdown” (123). See Gayle Greene, Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For further discussion of R. D. Laing’s “antipsychiatry” as an influence on Lessing, see Jean Pickering, “Philosophical Contexts for The Golden Notebook,” in Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, ed. Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), 43–49; Marion Vlastos, “Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy,” PMLA 91.2 (1976): 245–57; and Linda Kauffman, Special Delivery. Kauffman argues that Saul is an imaginary projection of Anna’s consciousness and “does not exist” (145). “Saul’s function parallels the Lacanian Imaginary, which relies on the image of the counterpart (the specular ego—another who is me)” (146n).
10: The Golden Notebook in the Twenty-First Century

48. Thanks to Dana Nichols and Ann Marie Pedersen for their thoughtful email responses on the experience of reading The Golden Notebook for the first time.
50. Fishburn, “Teaching Doris Lessing as a Subversive Activity,” 86.
53. Fishburn, “Teaching Doris Lessing as a Subversive Activity,” 90. Lessing, says Fishburn, “has peppered her text with conflicting information, calculated to remind us that there is no final reality in the novel” (90).
55. The Golden Notebook quiz:

1) Anna’s first husband was:
   a. Willi Rodde.
   b. Max Wulf.
   c. Both of the above.
   d. Stephen.
   e. George.
2) Richard Portmain and Marion:
   a. Have one son, Tommy.
   b. Have three daughters.
   c. Have three sons.
   d. Both “b” and “c.”
3) Tommy Portmain:
   a. Shoots and blinds himself.
   b. Does national service by working in the coal mines.
   c. Marries a girl who is doing a dissertation on the Chartists.
   d. Goes to Sicily with Marion.
   e. All of the above.
4) Saul/Milt:
   a. Is divorcing his wife because he loves her.
   b. Has an affair with Anna.
   c. Has never been married.
   d. All of the above.
5) Anna, at the end of the novel:
a. Gets a job with Dr. North as a “matrimonial counselor.”
b. Decides to stop writing.
c. Overcomes her writer’s block.
d. Composes a novel entitled *Free Women*.
e. All of the above.

6) Molly, at the end of the novel:
   a. Opens a dress shop.
   b. Marries a wealthy man with a house in Hampstead.
   c. Becomes a psychiatric social worker.
   d. Shoots and blinds Tommy in a fit of rage.

57. Lessing, “Doris Lessing at Stony Brook,” 71.
58. In the past, Doris Lessing has expressed profound disgruntlement with scholars who make a cult of her canon, and she has been particularly dismissive of *Doris Lessing Newsletter/Studies*. I thus apologize in advance should anything in my critique offend her. I long considered Lessing England’s best and most worthy candidate for the Nobel Prize in literature and felt enormously gratified when this “sweetest dream” was finally realized in 2007.