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**An Exploding Bomb:
Self-Definition and the Housewife's Disease in
Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*
Anne Wilkinson**

Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing's protagonist in *The Golden Notebook*, often appears to be a character who both seeks and enjoys thorough self-definition. She divides her life into four notebooks, each one representing a separate section of her history, personality, or character, as a means of creating order in her supposedly chaotic world. Despite this enjoyment of self-definition, Anna is less willing to be defined by others, such as when she must take on both the role of Michael's lover and of Janet's mother. She describes a feeling of tension regarding her various duties as "the housewife's disease," a sentiment which eventually develops into a male-directed resentment. If Anna does not adopt these roles, however, she is at a loss as to who or what she truly is. She then constructs the housewife's disease in order to help herself, in addition to her character, Ella, and her friend, Molly, self-define, particularly during the times when they feel misunderstood by their romantic partners. The resentment which stems from the housewife's disease may not be a desirable goal, but it is the only way Anna can connect to other women. Therefore, the disease is a necessary evil because it serves as the link between Anna and her female companions, allowing her to realize the truth of her situation, even if she may not ultimately alter her response to it.

The housewife's disease itself is a multi-layered concept that begins as mere tension, usually regarding a sense of pressure to complete mundane yet necessary tasks, but develops into a much greater sentiment of gender inequality¹. Anna describes the disease as resentment over the fact that she "should have to spend so much of [her] time worrying over details," and it is directed at men, particularly Michael, because "he will spend his day, served by secretaries, nurses, women in all kinds of capacities, who will take this weight off him" (Lessing 318). In other words, Anna explains the housewife's disease as the tension from feeling overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks she must complete, which results in resentment toward men regarding the traditional duality in which women exist to serve and men exist to be served.² Anna,

then, applies the housewife's disease to most, if not all, women. It is, in short, the female plight.

This sentiment is found in, and perhaps most clearly demonstrated by, Ella, Anna's created character in her novel *The Shadow of the Third*. Upon reading Anna's text, it becomes clear that Ella is, in fact, "a version of Anna, a double or second self who both replicates certain of Anna's experiences and adds new material that Anna has presumably suppressed from other notebooks. She thus appears to be...a different angle on Anna" (Hite 80). Because of this strong connection between creator and creation, Ella's romantic relationships vividly reflect the emotions Anna has expressed in her own heterosexual partnerships, including this dissatisfaction with solitude and constant concern with finding a mate. When the reader is introduced to Ella, she is in the process of deciding whether or not to attend a party because, as her roommate Julia points out, she "want[s] to get married again" and needs to attend social gatherings in order to meet men (Lessing 162). Anna provides Ella's back story, pointing out that she was married once before, but that she is "now free" after a divorce from her husband, George, whom she "married...almost out of exhaustion, after he had courted her violently for a year" (Lessing 163, 172). Despite this feeling of freedom after releasing herself from a loveless marriage, Ella still admits that "she could not imagine [her] future without a man" (Lessing 163). Ella experiences a sense of liberty in knowing that she is no longer trapped in a violent relationship, in which she feels she must stay with George because "she did not have the will to break with him" (Lessing 172). But even though she recognizes that being in a passionless and unhappy partnership is unhealthy for her, she still believes that she must find a man or risk being lonely for the remainder of her life.

Although this desire to find a mate is not specific to Ella and is, on the contrary, a very human characteristic, the hint of desperation when she says that "she could not imagine this future without a man," despite having "the child [her son, Michael], her self-respect, a future," indicates that being with someone, regardless of her satisfaction or lack thereof, is perhaps more important than being alone (Lessing 163). However, when describing her first marriage, Ella points out that she "would have felt a traitor to her own self had she remained in a compromising marriage" (Lessing 163). She is

evidently willing to end a relationship due to dissatisfaction, but the thought of continuing to suffer alone is more frightening for her. This, too, may reflect a similar attitude in Anna, who allows Ella to serve as a reflection of many of her unconscious beliefs. In this instance, Ella's relationship with George is similar to Anna's relationship with Michael: each woman is fearful of solitude, but they are both dissatisfied with their respective partners. Because much of what Ella does is a manifestation of Anna's experience and insecurities, this particular aspect of a longing for romantic satisfaction is very familiar for Anna.

Due to this desire to find a romantic partner, Ella often prematurely commits herself to men, assuming that both partners are being monogamous when that it is not always the case. Ella begins dating Paul Tanner, a man she did, in fact, meet at her employer's party. Shortly after their initial encounter, he says to her "'And so you'll be free tonight, Ella.' 'What do you mean, free?' 'Oh...for your other boy-friends; you've been neglecting them, haven't you?'" (Lessing 192). Ella internalizes Paul's statement and realizes that "for the last ten days she had not felt free. Now she felt, not free, but disconnected, or as if she floated on someone else's will—Paul's" (Lessing 193). Ella acknowledges that she has, in a matter of days, committed wholly of herself to a man and has, in turn, limited her options in terms of other romantic pursuits. While Paul tries to be nonchalant about Ella's 'other boy-friends,' as though he is remarking on it as a mere afterthought, Ella recognizes that she has none, but instead believes she has found in Paul what she has not found in other men. When she turns down a date with an editor, she discovers that "he had not one spark of that instinctive warmth for a woman, liking for a woman, which was what she felt in Paul" (Lessing 193). Ella dedicates herself to Paul, entering into a supposedly monogamous relationship with him. However, when Paul confesses that he is married, Ella realizes that this commitment is not mutual. Just like the other Lessing women, Ella's "desire is monogamous, as opposed to his; promiscuity in women is not natural, but rather a form of despair" (Libby 113). While she assumes automatic commitment, he returns home to his wife, despite feeling "a stranger to her" (Lessing 191). Although Ella says "she could not possibly have let a man touch her now, whom she found attractive," she recognizes that "Paul [does]

not care one way or the other” (Lessing 193). He, on the contrary, finds little value in commitment, and while Ella sees no other option to monogamy, Paul is incapable of having their relationship any other way.

While sexuality is the “prime impetus” for Ella’s happiness, this sexuality must be with only one man (Libby 107). Because Paul is so nonchalant in his ability to share his sexuality with other woman, Ella’s very core is shaken. She places emphasis on having a deep, sexual connection and emotional bond with a single partner, and for Paul to so easily dismiss and, more extremely, not even recognize the importance of monogamy for Ella is, for her, the same as not recognizing the importance of her as a person. Hypocritically, however, Ella concedes that “she did not think of his wife at all,” obviously ignoring a major figure in her relationship with Paul (Lessing 195). Although Ella would like to believe that commitment is just as important to her as it is to Paul, in reality, he is breaking a commitment to his wife in order to be with Ella. If romantic integrity were truly that valuable to him, then he would be unable to have a relationship with her. As much as Ella is unable to use the word affair, her relationship with Paul is, indeed, an affair. She is simply unable to see their relationship as what it truly is.

As a result of this perception, Ella’s outlook is grossly misinformed. When she believes that “it must be good for [Michael] that [she’s] so happy, it must be good for him that [she’s] a real woman at last,” she begins to define herself in terms of Paul (Lessing 196). Much like Anna, her creator, it takes a man for Ella to believe that she is truly happy and real. Between her marriage to George and the beginning of her relationship with Paul, Ella “was depressed” because she was alone (Lessing 163). Despite having just gotten out of a miserable marriage, she recognized her loneliness as a sign of personal failure. She believes that if she can’t exist as part of a partnership, then she is unworthy of definition, since being with a man is the only way she knows how to understand herself. According to Ella, her existence, her ability to be a ‘real woman’ is based upon her happiness, which, in turn, is rooted in her sexual pleasure, which, once again, is a part of a loving, emotionally connected relationship. Because she believes she is lacking a definition, she constructs a non-real image of her relationship with Paul. She recognizes, however, a niggling

feeling of doubt and says that “she let herself go into Paul’s love for her, and did not think,” but “whenever she found herself looking at this relationship from the outside, as other people might see it, she felt frightened and cynical. So she did not” (Lessing 196). Ella wants to be able to define herself through her mate, but only if this definition is on her own terms. Although it is certainly easiest for her to believe that the relationship she has with Paul is perfect, functional, and turning her into a ‘real woman,’ she is also well aware that, in reality, it is none of these things. In fact, “her judgments belittle, deny, or distort her experiences and censor her spontaneous responses to them” (Morgan 472). Ella does not allow herself to feel negatively about her relationship with Paul, and because she has been unable to self-define for so long, she takes the opportunity to let her partnership define her itself.

Rather than attempting to find a man who is as willing to engage in a monogamous partnership as she is, Ella and the Lessing woman in general

seems to accept inadequacy or cruelty as natural and even inevitable in the man she loves, refusing at almost every crucial step in the relationship to confront her lover with his irresponsibility...while female nature is always changed by every serious, and even casual, affair, the men slip in and out of relationships apparently completely unaffected. (Libby 109)

The most striking aspect of Ella’s belief that she only becomes ‘real’ once she and Paul begin ‘being together’ is that she was, on the contrary, real long before becoming a part of this couple and is arguably *less* real when she is with Paul. A successful, career-driven woman with, as she even says herself, ‘the child, her self-respect, a future,’ Ella is obviously much more than what she eventually makes herself out to be. By claiming that she is only real once she is happy with Paul, she is severely downplaying her overall self-worth. This dependence on a man, particularly a man who is not especially invested in their relationship, for a misconstrued self-perception is not only disappointing, but also representative of the general female sentiment throughout *The Golden Notebook*. She is ultimately not *self-defining*, but is instead allowing a non-reality of a misinformed situation to define her. As Ellen Morgan points out, “the difference between Ella’s actual attitudes and responses and those she does not permit herself is the measure

of her alienation from her own perceptions” (Morgan 472). Ella does not allow herself to be what she actually is, but instead bases her definition, and, subsequently, her worth, on what she wants herself, her situation, and her lover to be.

While Ella initially prides herself on serving the role of mistress, she is left feeling meaningless when she realizes that Paul is not willing to entirely abandon the long-lasting relationship he has with his wife, forcing her to acknowledge that she has been kowtowing to needs that weren’t truly his own, but ones she had created for him. Her existence in Paul’s life is not to satisfy his need for loyalty, but to fulfill his desire for the anti-respectable, the opposite of his wife. Before Ella and Paul inevitably break up, the two engage in a discussion in which Paul defends his wife, Muriel, and her decision to remain loyal to him despite his constant extra-marital affairs. When he tells Ella that she “can’t stand the fact that maybe it’s how [Muriel] wants to live,” Ella reacts strongly, arguing that “no woman in the world wants to live without love” (Lessing 211). Ella’s definition of love here is obviously misinformed, since her own relationship with Paul doesn’t achieve her actual standards, only the ones she allows herself to believe when she is not “looking at this relationship from the outside” (Lessing 196). She even scoffs at Paul’s suggestion that “security and respectability” may be the reason Muriel remains married to him, but soon realizes that it is the reason behind his decision to stay married to her, as well (Lessing 211). As she internalizes this realization, she comes to believe that “it would explain why he’s always dissatisfied with [her]” because she is the opposite of his “respectable wife” and is, conversely, “the smart, gay, sexy mistress,” a role that once gave her great satisfaction (Lessing 212). In reality, Ella becomes nothing more than what Paul wants her to be, just as her perception of the happiness of their supposed union is only what she is satisfied with. Ella’s relationship with Paul ultimately ends negatively when he leaves for Nigeria “with unexpected suddenness,” and allows Ella to mislead herself into thinking that he’ll return in a matter of weeks (Lessing 212). Ella doesn’t immediately react to this abandonment, still writing Paul letters and attempting to remain in contact with him. Even when she has been clearly discarded by her lover, Ella remains loyal to him in hopes that he will return and not leave her feeling lonely and purposeless.

It is clear that Anna, too, has a strong dependency on men, and, as a result, is only able to see meaning and substance in her life when she is in a relationship. For Anna, this pattern with men begins when she is in Africa as a young communist. Upon meeting Willi, she declares that the two “neither [like] nor under[stand] each other,” yet they enter, and remain in, a monogamous relationship because of, according to Anna, “lethargy,” “curiosity,” or “weakness” (Lessing 67-68). Alone, this relationship signifies little in terms of Anna’s larger ability to emotionally commit to men. In combination with her subsequent partnerships, however, it indicates that she is willing to become romantically involved with a man despite a lack of attraction. She even admits that they “didn’t even enjoy sleeping together” and were “incompatible,” essentially confessing that she was not with Willi because she was attracted to him, but because having a loveless relationship was more important to her than having no relationship at all (Lessing 67). Anna acknowledges that “nothing stopped [them] from choosing other partners,” demonstrating that due to, perhaps, fear or the aforementioned ‘lethargy,’ ‘curiosity,’ or ‘weakness,’ both were unable to convince themselves that leaving the relationship, risking both loneliness and ultimate happiness, would be beneficial (Lessing 68).

This attitude sets a trend for Anna. As Marion Libby says, “Lessing’s ‘free’ women regard their own sexual and social status with a great deal of conscious irony—they have the desire for freedom without a satisfactory achievement of it” (Libby 107). To be sure, Anna, in this section, is restricted in two ways. Because she is unable to envision herself ‘choosing [an]other partner’ or not having a partner at all, she allows her relationship to limit her freedom to be independent. Simultaneously, her connection with Willi lacks mutual respect and understanding, thereby hindering her ability to be open within the relationship itself. In other words, she is neither sexually free nor free to be comfortable with herself within the bounds of her relationship with Willi. Furthermore, their mutual dissatisfaction with their sex life contrasts with “Anna’s struggle to establish meaning, dignity and pleasure in her existence” for which sexuality is “the prime impetus” and “the context in which much of this struggle occurs” (Libby 107). Anna begins on this sexually and emotionally dissatisfying path

as a young adult with Willi, commencing a general and lifelong feeling of romantic displeasure.

In contrast to her rather disappointing relationship with Willi, Anna later experiences true sexual satisfaction with Paul, which aids in convincing her that sexual happiness is the root of *all* happiness. Anna's sexual interaction with Paul is the most "desperately and wildly and painfully happy" that she has ever been, and she is at last content with this romantic aspect of her life (Lessing 142). As Libby notes, "much of the excitement generated by [*The Golden Notebook*] lies in the conviction that sexuality is also the source of the deepest human happiness" (Libby 107). Even as Anna realizes that she is "appalled because [her sexual encounter with Paul] had come out of so much ugliness and unhappiness," she is still well aware that "this is being happy" (Lessing 142). This sentiment, too, begins a deeply rooted belief within Anna that sex is the source of happiness and, without it, she is unable to experience true fulfillment and contentment. Because Paul dies shortly after their encounter, Anna is able to, at least temporarily, idealize him in this sexually elated state. As a result, Anna begins to perpetuate the idea that she will be unable to reach satisfaction in any area of her life without sex, claiming that "this is it," as though 'being happy' is unachievable under any other circumstances (Lessing 142). Sexual satisfaction is, for Anna, the epitome of contentment.

Because of this discovery of overwhelming sexual fulfillment with Paul, Anna seeks this contentment again and returns to Willi in an effort to satiate her newfound sexual need, despite often feeling disappointed and even disgusted by him. Before leaving the Colony, Anna expresses further discontent with Willi (who becomes Max in the blue notebook) and notes that she feels a "sexual revulsion" toward him (Lessing 219). As Anna and Max lie listening to the couple in the room next door, however, Max suggests that they "have a baby," and when Anna questions whether it "would bring [them] together," he merely repeats, "we should have a baby" (Lessing 220). Although Anna at first finds the idea ridiculous, she suddenly changes her mind because she's "always living as if something wonderful is going to crystallize some time in the future" but decides to "make something happen now" (Lessing 220). She then admits that the two "made love," thus conceiving Janet and inspiring their year-long marriage (Lessing 220). Despite

Anna's recognition that she found Max sexually revolting and her previous disclosure that the two were incompatible, she still gives into his volition for sex, likely because of her own desire to achieve the satisfaction she had found in Paul. She recognizes that she is "irritabl[e]" when speaking with him, but convinces herself that she needs to change in order to 'make something happen now' (Lessing 220). She is hopeful that Max will be able to provide for her, and alters herself in optimistic anticipation of a similar change in Max. When presented with the opportunity to reach this sexual satisfaction, it is easier for Anna to "[turn] to him and...[make] love" than it is for her to ignore him and feel unworthy and unsure of whether or not she will ever be able to achieve this happiness again (Lessing 220). As Karl acknowledges, "when Mrs. Lessing foresees that her imperfect female characters will always select an inadequate man to make themselves miserable, she is insisting that hell is within—a visceral time bomb—and it will not be simply exorcised by anything the external world can offer" (Karl 19). Anna's decision to sleep with, and eventually marry, Max is, indeed, 'a visceral time bomb.' Despite knowing that being with Max is emotionally unhealthy, Anna fears loneliness and chooses to be with him because she would rather risk unhappiness and 'irritabil[ity]' in a relationship instead of unhappiness outside of one. She tells him that "[they] aren't the same kind of person," recognizing their difference on a logical level, but still allows herself to be persuaded to sleep with him, even though she also recognizes their difference on a sexual level when she finds him sexually revolting (Lessing 219). Again, Anna is clearly dissatisfied, but elects to remain with Max in spite of her feelings to the contrary.

Because she senses resentment from her male partners regarding her relationship with her daughter, Anna often questions whether she has created an adequate balance between her roles as mother and lover. Several years after the dissolution of Anna's marriage with Max, she begins a four-year affair with Michael, who makes clear to Anna his sense of jealousy toward her due to her daughter. In the first exchange that Anna takes note of in the blue notebook, Michael expresses this resentment when he tells her that "'the cares of motherhood must ever come before lovers,'" and she reacts negatively, "[feeling] enclosed by the repetitive quality—the baby crying next door, and [her] hostility to Michael" (Lessing 221-222). This

exchange is the beginning of Anna's struggle with the expectations and division of her female roles. Although Janet, as she later says, is the most important person in her life, she feels defensive against Michael's criticism of her loyalty to her daughter, and upon hearing Michael's words, she is unable to play with Janet, acknowledging that "[she's her] child, [her] flesh and blood. But [she] couldn't feel it" (Lessing 222). When focused on Michael, as she is at this moment, Anna is unable to connect with her daughter, feeling paralyzed by his words. When she attempts to enjoy Janet, however, she feels criticized by Michael, as though she is somehow neglecting him and his needs.

These roles of mother and lover consume Anna's existence. Although she wants to be both at once, she is unsuccessful in her attempts to simultaneously please her partner and her child. As a woman, she has been forced into these inherently female molds—molds, as she later realizes, that men are not assigned. In this section, Michael's concern lies only with himself and his sexual needs, while Anna, conversely, must be concerned with not only her own desires, but also Michael's and Janet's. As she is fragmented into separate pieces, Anna is unable to self-divide into fragments that please her; rather, she is divided by the constructs of her society. She is "a composite of various roles, functions, and representations...none of these Annas, however, *is* Anna. Instead, these versions of Anna suggest or approximate what the human being or character named Anna might be like" (Michael 48). These roles that Anna assumes, then, give little indication of who she is as a whole. To Michael, she serves the function of mistress, but to Janet, she serves the function of mother. Because these roles, however, have not been defined and limited by Anna herself, she grows frustrated and resentful of the expectations that other people place on her.

Just as Ella is a manifestation of Anna's insecurities, Anna's friend Molly and Ella's roommate Julia serve as similar reflections of each other. These two women, too, create a sense of dependency on men like their respective counterparts, though they don't necessarily demonstrate this dependency in the same manner. While Anna tends to rely on men in romantic settings, Molly prides herself on the fact that "she [has] not...given up and crawled into...a safe marriage" (Lessing 16). Nevertheless, Anna and Molly both "allow Molly's ex-husband [Richard] and son [Tommy] to bully them despite the fact that they are aware

that the two men are hurting them” (Morgan 476). Molly even admits that “she had married [Richard] out of a need for security and even respectability,” much as Anna decided to marry Max and Ella decided to stay with Paul, despite being mistreated (Lessing 7). Although Molly recognizes that her “twenties marriage” to Richard was based on “a need for security and even respectability” and not love, her classification of her current unmarried situation as a “source of self respect” is not altogether true (Lessing 7, 16). Her decision to remain single, while a reflection of her independence, co-exists with her decision to relinquish much of her freedom to Richard and Tommy. Molly is theoretically at liberty to do as she wishes, but both she and Anna allow themselves to be manipulated by the men. Throughout the novel, Richard is easily angered, blaming Anna and Molly for many of Tommy’s predicaments. After Tommy’s suicide attempt, Richard “[speaks] fiercely to Molly” and “turn[s] hot and angry eyes on Anna” when they tell Tommy he is blind (Lessing 357). Richard knows he can aggravate the women’s emotions by becoming unnecessarily angry, and they do just that, “shaking with sobs” and “[breaking] into hysterical weeping” after he becomes furious with them (Lessing 357).

Tommy succeeds in manipulating the women in a similar manner. When he visits Anna, she says “she had become convinced that [he] was enjoying frightening them all,” calling his giggle “harsh, uncontrolled, and malicious” (Lessing 248). Furthermore, Tommy’s exchange with Anna moves beyond appropriately questioning to demeaning, and he tells her that she, his mother, and his father are “so stupid” (Lessing 250). Although Tommy isn’t explicit in his accusation of Anna and Molly, it is clear that he blames them for their communist involvement—creating a “paralysis of the will” within him—and that he seeks to make them uncomfortable and force them to question their previous actions (Lessing 250). The women are significantly older than Tommy, but still cower under his self-inflated supremacy. Rather than standing up to him, they give in to his control and allow him to intimidate them. Just as with Richard, Anna and Molly seek Tommy’s approval simply because he is a man.

Julia, perhaps, is the most willing to distance herself from men, although she still falls into the same trap as the other women. She acknowledges that she “think[s] [they’re] all in a

sort of sexual mad house,” but admits that she, herself, was unable to reject a man who called her a “castrating woman” for fear of hurting his feelings (Lessing 438). Neither she nor Ella “considers actually fighting back,” even though they “know that the kind of sex offered them is a threat to their dignity and self-respect” (Morgan 474). Although Julia may recognize the inequality of her romantic relationships, more so than Ella, she is still unable to resist giving into men.

Because of their unending loyalty to men, Anna, Ella, Molly, and Julia each fall into this trap of definition based on male “love.” As a result, these women often dismiss their relationships with their female friends in order to feel as though they are more devoted to, and therefore satisfied with, their male partners. After ending her relationship with Paul, Ella moves out of Julia’s flat, thereby causing a great disruption in their relationship. Anna, as author, points out that Ella “had been rather like a willing captive, with the captive’s hidden core of independence. Leaving Julia’s house was like a daughter leaving a mother” (Lessing 430). Despite being truly abandoned by Paul, it is Julia whom Ella resents. Ella realizes that “she is closer to Julia than anyone” through their “mutual confidence and shared experience,” but because of Ella’s decision to move out, their friendship “is all hatred and resentment” (Lessing 430). When the two women meet at a party, after Ella has refused to have an affair with her boss, Dr. West, Ella and Julia are at first cool to one another, but once they begin discussing their respective romantic situations, the tone shifts and “the two women are friendly again” (Lessing 431). They are able to comfortably share their stories and “are now friends on the basis of an aspect of their relationship which had always been subordinate before—criticism for men” (Lessing 431). Although they are initially unable to bond over their own non-romantic experiences, as soon as men come up, the women suddenly have almost too much to say. They are only able to unite over their mutual resentment of the men who have mistreated them, finding their sole connection through romance.

While the women misguidedly bond over this resentment, Ella also internally elevates herself to a status higher than the wives of the men she has dated, believing that she is free because she is not tied down in a marriage. Ella realizes that she, throughout her life, has experienced “an emotion of satisfaction, of victory over the wives” of the men she has had

affairs with (Lessing 433). She has perceived herself to be a “free woman” because she is “so much more exciting than the dull tied woman” (Lessing 433). Rather than creating a sense of solidarity with other females, Ella, and presumably Anna, feels as though she has won the various men in her life. However, “looking back and acknowledging this emotion she is ashamed” (Lessing 433). Ella is aware that this attitude of victory is inappropriate. After all, calling herself a ‘free woman’ is deceiving—she has been just as consumed in romantic relationships as any wife, even staying with Paul despite his lack of both interest and loyalty.

Nevertheless, Ella also believes that “the quality of her tone with Julia is that of a bitter spinster,” particularly as they assume men are “the enemy” (Lessing 433). She resolves “not to confide in Julia again or...to banish the tone of dry bitterness” (Lessing 433). Although her only connection with Julia is through their mutual disillusionment with men, it is this aspect of her relationship with her friend that she vows to discontinue. She may be ashamed by her lack of female support, but, in reality, she feels most guilty about vocalizing her criticism of men. In short, Ella is more willing to give up her ability to confide in Julia in favor of not insulting a romantic partner. Furthermore, this brief connection between the women serves as another example of their reliance on men. They are unable to discuss any of their own needs or opinions; rather, their conversations consistently center on the men with whom they are romantically involved. After Ella sleeps with Jack, a married father of three, she “decides...that she will not discuss [the] incident with Julia” because she is ashamed that he is using Ella to “denigrate his wife” (Lessing 435). The next day Ella does tell Julia about the night’s events, although she recognizes that Julia’s “bitterness is turning rapidly into a corroding contempt,” and believes that she and Julia are lesbians, “psychologically if not physically” because they are able to bond so deeply over their “criticism of men” (Lessing 435). After drawing this conclusion, Ella really does stop talking to Julia and is “isolated and lonely” (Lessing 435). When Ella feels guilty and decides to stop talking about this particular aspect of her life, she and Julia essentially have nothing left to say. Ellen Morgan articulates this relationship, saying that

Ella and...Julia quite obviously feel, on the one hand, an instinctive human need to respect themselves as people, and, on the other, a conditioned contempt for themselves as women. Spontaneously they trust one another and are very close, but they *judge* this trust to be less valuable than they *feel* it to be, less valuable than their far less trusting relationships with men. (Morgan 472)

Ella and Julia place emphasis on their romantic lives, clearly finding their self-worth through the men they choose to be with, men who care very little about their partners' opinions, values, and interests. For each other, though, these women could potentially serve as a solid support base, one which could allow them to express the feelings they so often dismiss regarding their love lives. Even as Ella realizes that becoming embittered with Julia is not her ideal state, she still feels the negative ramifications of deciding not to talk to her best friend and feels 'isolated and lonely.' Unfortunately, each woman is unwilling to give up her supposed loyalty to her partner in order to have a closer bond with her female friend. They don't believe the two can co-exist; rather they must choose one relationship over the other. Judging by Ella's admission, if man is the enemy, then it is the female's fault for being bitter. Although she's dissatisfied, she is incapable of being honest with her friend about her true feelings.

As is to be expected, Anna vocalizes similar emotions regarding her friendship with Molly. She admits that if [she] join[s] in now, in a what's-wrong-with-men session, then [she] won't go home, [she]'ll stay for lunch and all afternoon, and [she and Molly] will feel warm and friendly, all barriers gone. And when [they] part, there'll be a sudden resentment, a rancour—because after all, [their] real loyalties are always to men, and not to women. (Lessing 46)

Once again, their conversation must center on men in order for the women to be able to connect and 'feel warm and friendly.' Anna resists the 'what's-wrong-with-men session' because she doesn't want to breed this resentment over their true loyalty to men. The women, despite resenting men and, furthermore, the way they are treated by men, neglect their actual feelings for fear of turning their conversation into a male-bashing session. Even though Anna and Molly are close "on the basis of shared

understanding, experience, and life style," they will always prefer men over each other (Morgan 472). Indeed, "Anna-Ella feels strongly inclined to discuss with Molly-Julia her problems with men...she judges that all the 'complaints and the reproaches and the betrayals' ought not to be voiced" (Lessing 46; qtd. in Morgan 472). Instead of attempting to connect by discussing a different topic, however, Anna chooses to leave and avoid talking to Molly altogether, again demonstrating that the women are only able to bond when a man is somehow involved. Because these two groups of women find not only their worth, but also their definitions in men, they will always shy away from criticism of these relationships. The bonds with their female friends are, in fact, more supportive and nurturing, but because they are neither expected nor encouraged to commit their lives to these women, they are also unable to commit their honesty and their emotions to them.

It is because of this rejection of female relationships that the housewife's disease is important for the women in *The Golden Notebook*. The desire to create a loyalty to their men, despite their consistent feelings of rejection and inferiority, forces this almost overwhelming sense of resentment in Anna, Ella, Molly, and Julia. Anna describes the resentment of the housewife's disease as a sense of "unfairness...that [she] should have to spend so much of [her] time worrying over details" (Lessing 318). Each of these women spends her time being concerned about the state of her relationship and consistently doubting whether or not she is good enough for her mate, in addition to general day-to-day tasks.³ The men, in opposition, care very little about the state of their relationships, coming and going and tending to their wives or other lovers without regard for any of the women they are with. They are, in general, self-concerned, using women for their own sexual pleasure, and resentful themselves when their partners must take care of matters which do not pertain directly to them. They easily disregard others' emotions, but are offended when they themselves are disregarded. Michael, for example, sees Janet as a threat and ignores the fact that she may enter the room when he and Anna are copulating: "While Michael grips me and fills me the noises next door continue, and I know he hears them too, and that part of the pleasure, for him, is to take me in hazard" (Lessing 319). Although Anna is uncomfortable in this situation, caught between pleasing her lover and doing what's

right for her daughter, Michael ignores both her and Janet's volition, looking only to gratify himself. When Anna then goes to take care of the child, Michael pointedly remarks that now she will "[go]...desert [him] for Janet'...and he sounds like a child who feels himself slighted for a younger brother or sister" (Lessing 319). He again disrespects both Anna and Janet, wishing himself to be at the center of Anna's life and dismissing her own needs and obligations.

In response to Michael's constant self-concern, Anna confirms that "the resentment is like a raging poison," and although she doesn't enjoy being frustrated with Michael, their entire interaction in her entry on 17th September, 1954, is filled with her moments of anger and resentment (Lessing 319). This is in stark contrast to her perceived feelings on the situation and her desire to be with him, even though he easily irritates her. She gives him "complete control over their affair" because she is afraid of what she will lose should she reject him (Hite 85). Anna puts herself entirely at Michael's mercy. When he tells her that their "great love affair is coming to an end" he manipulates her into submitting to his will and then criticizes her writing, convincing her that she "make[s] up stories about life and then tell[s] them to [her]self, and [she doesn't] know what is true and what isn't" (Lessing 316). In response to this, Anna finds herself in an "unreality, as if the substance of [her] self were thinning and dissolving" (Lessing 316). She then turns into the "Anna which Michael dislikes most; the critical and thinking Anna" (Lessing 316). This unreality that Anna senses is precisely the opposite: it is, in fact, the reality of her relationship with Michael, in which she does not convince herself that it is as wonderful as she would like it to be. It is merely unreal to Anna because she seldom recognizes the truth in her situation, instead believing her created fantasy to be her supposed reality. Her resulting reaction, then, of becoming 'critical and thinking' is in concordance with the housewife's disease. The resentment and anger that ensue are, in truth, the reality of her situation.

Although Anna's relationship with Saul Green could easily be seen as a dramatic shift from her previous romantic endeavors, it actually follows a similar pattern, but only results in a supposedly altered outcome that does not ultimately satisfy Anna. After Saul moves in, Anna confesses that

it then occurred to [her] [she] was going to fall in love with Saul Green. [She] remember[ed] how [she] first ridiculed the idea, then examined it, then accepted it: more than accepted it—fought for it, as for something that was [her] due. (Lessing 532)

This admission from Anna, which is also found in the other characters in the novel, particularly during Ella's relationship with Paul, is a clear example of her attitude toward perfection. She may find Saul attractive or even worthy of becoming a potential mate, but for her to declare so early on, before entering into a relationship with him, that she knows she is 'going to fall in love with [him]' is merely her reflection on an idealized state, rather than on the reality of her connection with Saul. Anna seeks a stable, loving, and monogamous relationship in which she feels equal to her partner. More precisely, she seeks a relationship in which she does not have to succumb to the housewife's disease. During her relationship with Michael, she spends much of her time resenting him because of the housewife's disease and even recognizes this resentment as such. However, she chooses to do nothing about it, allowing their partnership to cease only when he tells her that their 'great love affair is coming to an end.' Anna is able to internally perpetuate the image that their relationship is perfect by ignoring her clear beliefs to the contrary. She does not actually fulfill her desire for romantic satisfaction, but she allows herself to live in an idealized world where perfection is the norm, not merely a desire. Ella, too, experiences this desire for perfection in her relationship with Paul. She acknowledges that by 'looking at this relationship from the outside,' she is able to see that she is unhappy, but by ignoring the reality of the situation, she can avoid feeling "frightened and cynical" (Lessing 196).

Anna's relationship with Saul, then, follows the same pattern as her other affairs. When she says that she is 'going to fall in love with [him],' she is attempting to create an idealized partnership based on what she wants, instead of what is actually happening. Saul frustrates Anna much like the other men, and although she is unsure of how to react to his violent mood swings, he, unlike the other men, inspires and encourages her. She finds his instability difficult, noting the "hatred behind his eyes" and regretting that "*he's back, is he,*" referring to the Saul with the negative "black power," in stark contrast to the caring

and stimulating man he can sometimes be (Lessing 599, 594). In the section "The Golden Notebook," however, Saul helps Anna to better understand her writing and vice versa. For the first time in any of her relationships, Anna recognizes that she and her partner are a team, albeit a dysfunctional one. She realizes that she "[feels] towards him as if he were [her] brother, as if, like a brother, it wouldn't matter how they strayed from each other...[they] would always be flesh of one flesh" (Lessing 612). Saul's difference, for Anna, stems from his ability to connect with her on a non-sexual level. He, unlike Michael and Max, sees Anna's potential as a writer, believing that she can "boil it all down to something...and beat it," thereby avoiding going crazy (Lessing 609). He "forc[es] [her] into writing," telling her "it doesn't matter if [she] fail[s]" (Lessing 609-610). Nevertheless, Anna's initial image of perfection is unfounded. Although Anna feels a stronger bond with Saul than with the men she had previously dated, their relationship is far from healthy due to Saul's instability and Anna's reaction to it. At one point, she "[weeps] weak" on the floor, "soddened" by one of Saul's rants (Lessing 601). Anna finds both support and emotional vulnerability in her relationship with him. Saul, though, just like the other men, decides to leave in the end. Anna's understanding of him means little when she is unable to achieve her ultimate goal: happiness through committed sexual fulfillment, what she was hoping to attain with Paul.

In "Free Women 5," Anna's choice to move away and work at a "sort of marriage welfare center" is her motion toward independence in which she does not have to concern herself with men (Lessing 635). After Janet leaves for boarding school, Anna finds herself "alone in the enormous flat," but decides not to rent out rooms because "the idea of another experience like the one with Ronnie and Ivor [her boarders] frightened her" (Lessing 618). Anna also says, though, that it "frightened her that it frightened her—what was happening to her, that she shrank from the complications of people, shrank from being involved? It was a betrayal of what she felt she ought to be" (Lessing 618). This supposed betrayal can be considered an acknowledgement of Anna's true feelings throughout the novel: that she is being disloyal to what she '[feels] she ought to be.' Despite being aware of the unhealthiness of her romantic relationships, Anna does what

she believes she should do and remains involved with these men. Her final decision to move away and find employment, though noble on the surface, is ultimately nothing more than settling for a life which will not satisfy her. Throughout *The Golden Notebook*, her goal in life is to enter into a stable, successful relationship and rediscover the '[desperate]...[wild]...[painful] happ[iness]' that she found so briefly with Paul. By entering into these loveless, non-committed relationships, Anna tries to rediscover what she feels she is capable of having, but is continuously let down. She doesn't want to live without a man, but because of her recognition that her relationships are unstable or unhealthy, independence appears to be a viable solution. Just as she has done with Michael and Saul, Anna creates an idealistic image of what her independent future should be like, but once again, she recognizes that "any act she might make would be without faith...but simply a sort of provisional act, hoping it might turn out well, but with not more than that hope" (Lessing 623). Anna is able to see that she constructs perfect images of her life in hopes that it will carry the same results she wishes it to. By being independent for independence's sake, Anna remains unsatisfied, just unsatisfied without men. In her final conversation with Molly, Anna claims she is "carefully avoiding [the] tone" that she and Molly are "going to be integrated with British life at its roots" because of their new choices in life (Lessing 635). Anna's words, though, adopt precisely that tone, and while she seems to be enthusiastic about "teach[ing] a night class twice a week for delinquent kids" and working with women who are "in trouble with their marriages," there is a sense of sorrow to her voice; not that she doesn't recognize the worthiness of participating in such causes, but that she realizes it isn't truly her ambition (Lessing 635). Much as she has been inclined to do throughout the rest of the novel, Anna wants to know "the exact dimensions of the bed [she's] going to fit [herself] into" (Lessing 635). This final act of leaving her home and her life behind is a means for Anna to know what she is getting into; to be able to create a perfect image of a life and actually attempt to fulfill it. Although she will successfully avoid the housewife's disease by making such a decision and abandoning her prior relationships with men, she will not avoid resentment and dissatisfaction because, clearly,

perfection in her new life, just as with any life, will be unattainable.

The general female reaction of resisting criticism of males in favor of separating from female companions is ultimately the only way women are able to understand the truth of their situation. Despite their resistance, this connection of resentment is an effective method of allowing the women to comprehend their actual—rather than their perceived—reality. Simply because they resist talking about it does not mean they don't recognize it as a problem. To be sure, wanting to discuss the difficulties in their relationships but choosing not to forces the women to not only more thoroughly consider these difficulties, but also internally question why they are so unwilling to share them with their closest friends. Although Ella calls herself and Julia "bitter spinster[s]" after they criticize their potential mates, she is, at the very least, beginning to recognize her emotions, even if she is less willing to publicly accept them (Lessing 433). The simple recognition, for Anna, of the housewife's disease is a step in the right direction. Even though she calls it "the disease of women in our time," which, as Hite points out, has a tendency to "classify female oppression as pathology," Anna is still able to understand and articulate her emotions on the resentment she feels (Lessing 318; Hite 85). Furthermore, understanding the housewife's disease as 'the disease of women in our time' creates a silent bond between these women. Although Anna and the others are not then telling themselves to overcome the disease, they are telling themselves that their perceived reality is not the truth, that believing their partners to be loyal and emotionally devoted is merely giving them a false sense of security with these men.

Ultimately, neither Anna nor the rest of the women in the novel is able to reach a point of comfortableness in which her ability to bond with other women transcends the importance of her heterosexual partnerships. The utility of the housewife's disease does not serve the purpose of reuniting the women; rather it helps them to understand why they are incapable of doing so. By recognizing the housewife's disease as a real issue, the women come to terms with their own sentiments and values: not the idealized version of their relationships, but the reality of how they themselves feel about their mates. Even still, Anna's ultimate decision to leave her life behind is simply another method of resistance, in which she convinces herself

that beginning a new chapter will somehow bring about perfection. Obviously, though, her desire for perfection will not induce her idealistic life, just as it hasn't throughout her romantic relationships. She merely transfers her long-perpetuated romantic sentiment to another avenue of her life. The hope in this situation can be found in the women's sense of awareness, albeit a silent one. Although they continue in the same manner, this awareness helps them to recognize that they are not, in fact, alone. They may be engaging in a quiet suffering, but they are able to reassure themselves that they, too, can make it through. Anna, at the very least, recognizes that what she wants is to '[know] the exact dimensions of [her] bed,' and although she has realized that she cannot attain this in her romantic life, she will try to find it in her new career. Although she has prevented the "visceral time bomb" of dissatisfaction with love from exploding, she will continue to seek a perfect life elsewhere (Karl 19).

Notes

¹ Although the housewife's disease is not an oft-explored topic, many critics have written on the issues surrounding it, including the inequalities between the genders and the female characters' attitudes toward their romantic relationships, in *The Golden Notebook*. Both Claire Sprague and Dagmar Barnouw connect Anna's relationships with men to her various selves (such as mother, lover, artist, etc.). While Sprague believes that Anna has male doubles in order to represent her internal strife in a Jekyll and Hyde-esque manner, Barnouw argues that Anna and Ella transfer their personal difficulties to their romantic relationships. Magali Cornier Michael argues that Anna exists as a compilation of these selves, each of whom indicates what the whole, non-fragmented Anna may be like. These sections of Anna, then, are significant in that they contain part of Anna's whole self, but none of them expresses her completely. In her book *The Other Side of the Story*, Molly Hite speaks to Lessing's intent with the novel and claims that she "dispersed both character and plot, challenging the claims of a single holistic vision to contain the truth" (Hite 102). In terms of fragmentation, Hite argues that Anna believes that people who are whole, instead of resisting fragmentation, are merely "reduced to a single fragment" (Hite 65). Ellen Morgan and Frederick Karl speak more specifically about the relationships. Morgan's argument focuses on the idea that the women in the novel isolate themselves from their true feelings and instead put their partner's emotions before their own. Furthermore, they "tell themself[ves] that [their] oppression is [their] own fault" and are unwilling to blame anyone else or attempt to change the situation (Morgan 474). Karl speaks of female codependency in the novel, pointing out that those women who attempt to achieve something as an individual, beyond wife- and motherhood, necessarily fail because they are incapable of living without a man. Marion Libby also speaks about this codependency, though she argues that Anna, Ella, and Molly spend the novel trying to balance their newfound feminism with their desire for commitment and monogamy.

² Libby supports this definition, believing the disease to be "the pressure of worrying over practical details" (Libby 110).

Similarly, Morgan argues that Anna “also resents the fact that because [Michael] is a man, the petty details of his life are taken care of for him by women, whereas because she is a woman, her life is composed largely of seeing to the details of others’ needs” (Morgan 478).

³ Anna specifically mentions her train-of-thought upon awakening: “The tension in me, so that peace has already gone away from me, is because the current has been switched on: I must-dress-Janet-get-her-breakfast-send-off-to-school-get-Michael’s-breakfast-don’t-forget-I’m-out-of-tea-etc.-etc” (Lessing 318)

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