

DORIS LESSING'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATOR

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATOR
IN DORIS LESSING'S
"THE CHILDREN OF VIOLENCE"

by

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ABSTRACT

The problem of the shifting narrator in Doris Lessing's novel-series, "The Children of Violence" (1952-1969), is resolved by examining the series from the perspective of what has been seen as a second problem, the degree of autobiography. Even a cursory examination of Lessing's biography reveals parallels with so many of the major events (and even their locations) in Martha Quest's life, that it is reasonable to speak of the narrator as an autobiographical narrator.

The concept of an autobiographical narrator explains the verisimilitude of the portrait of the young girl, Martha Quest, growing into adulthood in Southern Africa. It also, however, explains Lessing's shift into interior monologue and symbolic language as her protagonist approaches her own age at the time of writing, since by the time she wrote the fourth novel in the series, Landlocked (1965), Lessing was steeped in an ancient mystic Islamic sect, Sufism, with its emphasis on the "teaching story".

Becoming conscious of her craft, and more particularly of the power of words and the sense of the fictional itself, Lessing, in her fifth novel, The Four-Gated City (1969), fuses fact and fiction to create a fictional documentary. She leaves behind her author/god role and introduces metafictional elements such as internal texts and specific vocabularies in order to keep the reader aware that he or she is reading a work of fiction.

In linking Lessing's life and consciousness with those of her narrator, I believe that I have found a way to demonstrate the unity of a series of novels in which the question of technique has remained problematic since the publication of the last novel, twenty years ago.

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ABBREVIATIONS

For the purposes of concision, parenthetical references to Doris Lessing's works will be given as follows:

Martha Quest	MQ
A Proper Marriage	APM
A Ripple From the Storm	ARFS
Landlocked	L
The Four-Gated City	TFGC
A Small Personal Voice	ASPV

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The study of narrative technique in Doris Lessing's novel-sequence "The Children of Violence" presents a disconcerting problem. While the series is ostensibly a Bildungsroman describing the evolution of the protagonist, Martha Quest, from restless teenager on the African veld, through 'incarnations' as Matty, Mrs Knowell, and Mrs Hesse, what Martha becomes in the latter half of the last book, and the techniques used to describe the changes in her character, force the reader to reflect back on the relative simplicity of the first four books and to question their simplicity.

The first four books, Martha Quest (1952), A Proper Marriage (1954), A Ripple From the Storm (1958), and Landlocked (1965), are written in a conventional way. In fact, until she wrote The Golden Notebook (1962), Doris Lessing's narrative technique in all her fictional works appeared to be quite conventional, perhaps even "out of fashion" as she states in her Author's Notes to The Four-Gated City (1969, 671). Indeed, in her essay "A Small Personal Voice" (1957), she declares, "I hold the view that the realist novel, the realist story, is the highest form of prose writing." (4) Her style has been compared by Michael Thorpe in Doris Lessing's Africa (1978) to the

Bildungsroman of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister (52) and to the more recent Thomas Mann's Der Zauberberg (1924; trans. The Magic Mountain, 1927) (52).

On one hand, this very conventionality has been attacked. A reviewer like D.J. Enright, in Man is An Onion (1972), says that in "the first four novels, Mrs Lessing is a conscientiously realistic writer ... and the detail of the narration impresses me as quite suffocating at times." (26) Still, he admits to preferring such suffocation by detail to "the gimmick of the apocalyptic, or the science-fictional" (27). Enright concludes that while there "is nothing intrinsically impossible or even improbable in Mrs Lessing's 'Catastrophe,' a real Martha Quest could certainly end this way--...it won't do for Mrs Lessing's Martha." (27)

Enright's off-hand dismissal--he never fully explains his criticisms--of Lessing's change of technique is typical of early criticism. However, Enright's discomfort in reading Lessing is understandable--The Four-Gated City demands much from the reader for which the first four books did not prepare him.

Others, however, have seen the shift from conventional narrative technique as Lessing's strength rather than her weakness. When I began to research Lessing criticism, I was dismayed to discover that much of what has been written about her has not only been written largely by women, but also more often than not from a feminist perspective. While I agree that Lessing represents a significant 'voice' for women's experience, I would

like to see her accepted as a novelist, not simply as a 'woman's' novelist. Jane Miller, in Women Writing About Men (1986), sums up the feminist appreciation of Lessing. "Feminism becomes, for [Christina Stead and Doris Lessing], an urgent commitment to change, lived and expressed by women who see their interests and their struggle as shared with all those who are exploited and unheard." (199) She recognizes as well, though, that Doris Lessing represents "a politics which enjoins a refusal to assume that women are simply victims of injustice and men the perpetrators." (214)

This political consciousness, this 'commitment to change', is what Lee R. Edwards, in Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form (1984), sees as at the root of Lessing's shift in technique. "The realistic novel, with its commitment to logic, causality, and rationality, was gradually strained beyond containment by Lessing's developing awareness that these commitments worked against the solutions she was beginning to define. The new wine threatened the old bottles." (272) That is, regardless of what Lessing might have intended to do with Martha Quest when she began the series, by the time she got to Landlocked and especially by the time she wrote The Four-Gated City, Lessing was forced to leave verisimilitude behind in order to make the points she needed to make.

Margaret Drabble, perhaps, best sums up early critical views of narrative technique in the "Children of Violence" sequence in her essay, "Doris Lessing: Cassandra in a World Under

Siege" (1972): "Children of Violence must be one of the oddest novel sequences ever written, and its oddity, as a structure, is symptomatic of Doris Lessing's disrespect for consistency, categories, style as a-thing-in-itself." (Sprague and Tiger, Critical Essays on Doris Lessing 185-186) Drabble is impressed, as are nearly all critics, by the volume and perspicacity of Lessing's perceptions of human nature, and particularly by her portrayals of what it is like to grow up as a woman. She also states that Lessing's apocalyptic "vision of the future can be rejected, but not for lacking credibility or documentation." (190) But, like other early critics, Drabble is not impressed with Lessing's style.

On the other hand, in the last ten years, criticism has begun to focus on the special way in which Lessing uses narrative technique, but such criticisms have focussed on The Golden Notebook and her later space fictions, avoiding, in general, the troublesome narrator in the "Children of Violence" series. Critics such as Jane Miller (Women Writing About Men, 1986), Sydney Janet Kaplan (in Staley, Twentieth-Century Women Novelists, 1982), and Alvin Sullivan (in Kaplan and Rose, Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, 1988) discuss only The Four-Gated City if they discuss this series at all.

Early criticism often pointed to the gap of some seventeen years between the publication of Martha Quest and The Four-Gated City as the explanation for the shift in technique, arguing that Lessing could not possibly have intended the events

of the last book when she began the first for the simple reason that the events of the last book--the '50s and '60s--had not yet taken place when she published Martha Quest in 1952.

But such dismissal of the structure of the series is unfair to Lessing, particularly when she has so often stated that her structuring is conscious. In "An Interview by Roy Newquist," (1963) she states that she "got angry over reviews of The Golden Notebook. They thought it was personal--it was, in parts. But it was a very highly structured book, carefully planned." (A Small Personal Voice 51) While she has never to my knowledge made similar claims for "The Children of Violence", I believe that if we simply follow where her narrator leads us, the process of reading the series, and the challenges which the shifts in narrative technique offer us, become part of the message that Lessing is trying to convey to us.

Elizabeth Maslen, in her article, "Narrators and Readers In Three Novels," (1986) agrees. "Lessing has been writing novels for more than thirty years now, and throughout that period she has shown remarkable versatility in manipulating the relationship between narrator and reader." (Doris Lessing Newsletter 4) However, as recently as 1988, critics such as Carey Kaplan and Ellen Cronan Rose, in Doris Lessing: The Alchemy of Survival, have declared that while Lessing is interested in structure, she "rarely indulges in wordplay, double entendre, trope, motif, symbol, mythology, in all the playfulness that characterizes much of the most highly regarded literature of the past fifty years."

(7) Lessing's technique is described by Kaplan and Rose as "feminine": "material, solid, and concrete." (7)

Yet Maslen argues the opposite; that Lessing "uses a variety of narrative voices to demonstrate linguistic traps, to exploit them, or to probe them. In her later works she makes ever-increasing demands on her readers to work out for themselves what her narrative voices are up to." (4) While this is certainly more obvious in works like The Golden Notebook and Briefing for a Descent into Hell (1972), there are indications that the earlier series might be read in this way as well. To begin with, there are the internal fictions of Mark's and Jimmy's novels, and the way they oppose one another; there are the diaries and journals of some of the women, including Martha; and there are the notes of Thomas Stern. All of these internal fictions make us conscious of the 'outer' fiction that is The Four-Gated City.

The Four-Gated City in its turn, I believe, challenges the realism of the first four books, looks at it ironically and critically, and asks us to rethink our acceptance of the ideas of the first books and their use of a traditional narrative technique. It is true that it was not until after the first three books of "The Children of Violence" were written that Lessing began her studies of Sufism, as we are told by Mona Knapp in Doris Lessing (1984, xiv-xvii). It might have been because of this that Lessing became more daring in her narrative challenges to her readers. But surely the essence of Sufism must have

interested her because it addressed problems with which she was already concerned. This will be dealt with more explicitly later in the section examining the influence of Sufism on her work.

There are, in the course of the "Children of Violence" series, shifts in point of view from omniscient to limited-third-person, with later excursions into interior monologue and finally a switch into epistolary form. This shift in narrative technique has been declared an artistic weakness. Even admirer Margaret Drabble says that Lessing's early novels and stories often show "marks of clumsiness" (Critical Essays on Doris Lessing 185). But singularity of voice is for Lessing simple-minded; and surely it must be said that in this whole series she attempts to capture complexities in life and landscape.

Claire Sprague, in Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition (1987), says that Lessing's "dramatic projections are a way of questioning and enlarging the singleness and stability of personality--especially women--and of narrative conventions." (5) Sprague insists that Lessing "sees double and multiple forces in constant interaction." (4) While Sprague focuses on Lessing's use of repetition in the initial letters of names: "M" names, "A" names and to a lesser degree "J" names proliferate in her works (5), she also demonstrates Lessing's fascination with number patterns. Given such conscious use of an element like letter and number repetition, is it not possible that her narrator's multiplicity, or perhaps duplicity

would be a better word, is equally intentional in "The Children of Violence"?

Sprague speculates that "Lessing's long-remarked uncertain manipulation of point of view in the Martha Quest novels may be related to a desire for a certain kind of objectivity. Her efforts to present comment dramatically in those novels are sporadic, often unclear, contradictory, and sometimes simply inept." (11) This points up what I see to be a significant omission in Doris Lessing criticism: just who is the narrator in the "Children of Violence", and how, given the acknowledged shift in narrative technique, can the series be judged as a whole? Is Enright correct, after all, in saying that the Martha of the first book, Martha Quest, could not possibly be the same Martha as the one in the Appendix to The Four-Gated City (27)?

A way of explaining the multiplicity of point of view in the series is to consider the narrator as autobiographical. The presence of autobiography in her writing has shifted from being considered a criticism of Lessing, which she objects to in the "Interview by Roy Newquist" (1963): "The writer who tosses a scrap of autobiography into an otherwise fictional piece (which writers always have done and always will do), he's not credited with any imagination" (A Small Personal Voice 51-52) to being considered irrelevant by such critics as Michael Thorpe, in Doris Lessing's Africa: "Obviously, it is a short step from reading fiction as disguised autobiography to converting it into

autobiography pure and simple--to no valuable end, since it eludes ultimate proof. Such excursions may be inevitable because authors' lives interest us, but cannot pass for useful criticism of the work of art." (56)

I would like to argue that not only is the level of autobiography in "The Children of Violence" self-evident and undeniable (the 'ultimate proof' lying in even a cursory examination of her biography), but that it is the unifying element of the series. Some of the most obvious examples of the overlap between Doris Lessing and Martha Quest can be discovered from an examination of the chronology of Lessing's life found in Mona Kapp's Doris Lessing (1984): Doris Lessing's family, like Martha Quest's, lived in Southern Africa (Zambesia in the novel) after the first World War; the sketches of Martha's parents, (father injured in the war and hypochondriac, mother a nurse and long-suffering) parallel Lessing's own parents; Martha leaves the family farm to work in the nearest town, as did Lessing; Martha makes an early marriage to a civil servant, has one child and divorces her first husband, leaving him with custody, which parallels Lessing's first marriage except that she had two children and gives Martha no son; Martha marries a German refugee, as did Lessing, with even the fictional character's name, Anton, being the second name of Lessing's real husband; Lessing joined, and later left, the communist party, as does Martha, for reasons which are explicitly outlined in the novel A Ripple From the Storm; Lessing even underwent psychotherapy for a

time, which is explored along with the theme of madness. (xiii-xviii)

This could hardly be called a 'scrap of autobiography', although it is understandable that Lessing might want to deny the extent to which her real life went into "The Children of Violence" since she was being criticized for it. Other authors not only do not deny levels of autobiography in their fiction, but utilize them: James Joyce is a case in point. As John Paul Riquelme says about Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) in Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction: Oscillating Perspectives (1983), "the use of third person and past tense indicates a tendency toward fusion of character's voice with teller's voice. The ambiguous merger of voices makes it difficult, even impossible, for the reader to distinguish between the cunningly combined voices of character and narrator." (54) Riquelme states that "the narrator's reiterated shifts between internal and external views makes A Portrait a work about the transforming of a character into an artist. ... When the style includes narrated monologue, the reader shares the role of teller with the character by speaking the character's mind." (60)

Narrative variation is employed by Lessing for a similar purpose: she is not only telling Martha Quest's life story, she is demonstrating the 'evolution' of consciousness, not as artist, as in Joyce's works, but as a means of demonstrating a kind of purpose to life beyond mere existence. Those who read Lessing without this overview, like Frederick R. Karl in A Reader's Guide

to the Contemporary English Novel (1971), find the series, and particularly the climactic fifth book, The Four-Gated City, "nothing less than a nightmare, the portrait of a city, London, in which all four gates are guarded by Cerberus." (293). Even a less hysterical view, that of Mona Knapp in Doris Lessing, suggests that "the book presents modern life's miseries as more or less given, and society's self-destruction as a foregone conclusion." (99)

Having read the series closely several times, such essentially negative views shock me. I see the series as a signpost for man's development, a warning perhaps, but a warning not without suggestions of solution, as the quoted authors imply. The first four novels can be seen from parallel perspectives: they represent both a kind of autobiographical past, in which the emotions and thought-processes of the maturing woman are portrayed with verisimilitude; and they also represent the attempts of the individual to solve the eternal dilemma of man's search for meaning in life.

That there is an autobiographical narrator in the novels representing ages through which Lessing has already passed is natural; that, when Martha approaches Lessing's own age at the time of writing, there is a shift in narrative technique to include the internal consciousness of the character to a much larger extent is equally natural. To imagine one's own future is an intriguing exercise; to choose to portray a disturbing and provocative future is natural if one considers that by the time

the last two volumes of the series had been written, Lessing was steeped in Sufi philosophy. (Knapp xiv-xvii) I would like to propose that the entire series is autobiographical, that it shifts from an autobiography of events, in the first four books, to an autobiography of consciousness in The Four-Gated City, and that finally, in the Appendix, when Martha fuses with the narrator in the first-person epistolary section, Lessing is speaking directly to her readers in a warning, and is offering a signpost to man's possible future development.

Accepting such a close bond between author and narrator has been out of style for some time. On the other hand, critical theory has come more or less full circle on the subject of the relationship of the author to his or her work. Susan Sniader Lanser, in her book, The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction (1981), explains the history of criticism of narration:

Within the framework of a conception of mimesis that was at best naive and inappropriate to the narrative, and an equally rudimentary conception of the author-narrator relationship, most nineteenth-century critics of the novel made stringent demands for a practice of point of view that would retain the "illusion of reality" while exploiting the potential for ideological and structural control which is conventional to narrative. (25)

Lanser goes on to explain that the omniscient, first-person and epistolary forms of narration were "outdated" by the early twentieth century. (26) "Indeed, the 'writer' had all but disappeared from the conception of point of view." (26)

At the same time, says Lanser, some critics, such as Lubbock, had already begun to note that the "indirect" method

"did not dispense with the authorial voice." (26) Wayne Booth, in his landmark book, The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), was the first to examine in depth the relationship between author and narrator and to question the modernist denial of authorial presence. "What is it, in fact," he asks, "that we might expunge if we attempted to drive the author from the house of fiction?" (16)

G rard Genette's Discours du recit (1972) took Booth's ideas and explored them in relation to structuralist narratology. (Lanser 36-37) "Genette carefully distinguishes," says Lanser, "as many critics have not, between voice ('who speaks?') and vision ('who sees?')." (37) This point has been expanded by Wallace Martin in Recent Theories of Narrative (1986). Martin states that in "treating grammatical person and access to consciousness as the defining features of point of view, traditional accounts of the subject overlooked a crucial distinction. 'Access to consciousness' has two meanings: a third-person narrator can look into a character's mind or look through it." (143) Thus, one can examine the narrator in Lessing's series through the role she plays in the discourse between Lessing and her readers. Are we to see the characters as the narrator sees them (in which case it is the narrator who is speaking), or as they see each other (in which case it is the characters who are doing the seeing)?

This discussion of narrative distance, that is, the distance between narrator and author, narrator and characters,

and narrator and reader, is an important one in discerning the depths of the ideology expressed in Lessing's writings. Lanser points out an important effect of distancing an author from his or her work: "one effect of isolating the text from social realities is the complete disregard of gender in the formalist study of narrative voice. ... Yet contemporary research has amply demonstrated that gender is one of the strongest determinants of social, linguistic, and literary behavior in patriarchal societies" (46-47). Further, Lanser quotes Robert Weimann as stating that point of view provides "'a potential link between the actual and the fictive modes of narrative communication and representation', integrating social and aesthetic form." (59)

Lessing's ideological and artistic attitudes shape this series in important ways. That gender is an important consideration is shown in the quantity of feminist critical interest in Lessing. That Lessing has a message which she is trying to convey directly to her readers is shown in her statement, in A Small Personal Voice, that "we are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them." (7) Lessing has stated a number of times that she is concerned with the role of writing and reading as part of the evolution of consciousness. "This question of I, who am I, what different levels there are inside of us, is very relevant to writing, to the process of creative writing about which we know nothing whatsoever." (ASPV 60)

The narrator in "The Children of Violence" not only changes from the autobiographical omniscience of the first four books to the problematic shifting voices in The Four-Gated City, but also merges more directly with Lessing's own voice throughout the series. Martin tells us, in Recent Theories of Narrative, that the "contending languages of the everyday world are used for the transmission of ideas and attitudes. ... The purpose of the novel, in Bakhtin's view, is to represent these differences so that they will become visible and to allow them to interact."

(148) The 'contending languages' that Bakhtin was concerned with are what we might call "tones of speech"; for instance, we can say the same sentence, such as "What a nice dress" in a number of different ways to convey a wide range of meanings, such as compliment, sarcasm, envy, frustration, or disappointment.

Lessing's omniscient narrator is nonetheless not strictly a nineteenth-century one; she does not always tell us explicitly that the thoughts we are reading belong to a particular character. For instance, when the teenage Martha envisions her perfect city of the future, she excludes "her parents, the Van Rensbergs, in fact most of the people of the district, forever excluded from the golden city because of their pettiness of vision and small understanding." (MQ 17) We are not told explicitly that these are Martha's thoughts, but we may assume they are hers because the language used carries the righteous tone of the teenager, who has yet to see her own limitations, and can therefore be smugly critical of the limitations of others.

The narrator, ironic as always, highlights the pettiness of Martha's own vision by stating directly after this speech that Martha must always remain at the gate to her own utopia because "unfortunately one gets nothing, not even a dream, without paying heavily for it, and in Martha's version of the golden age there must always be at least one person standing at the gate to exclude the unworthy." (MQ 17-18) Early in the series, then, the omniscient narrator/author stands ironically, viewing Martha's past through the eyes of experience. But as Martin states, "Booth argued that fiction is a form of communication." (153) As Lessing's concept of writing as a means of communication deepened, both through her own experiences and through her exposure to Sufi teaching stories (this will be discussed later), the role of the narrator deepened as well.

By the time she wrote The Four-Gated City, Lessing had moved away from her earlier preference for the "realist" novel. Just after the release of that novel, Lessing was interviewed by Jonah Raskin, who asked about what influenced it. She responded, "I'm very much concerned about the future. I've been reading a lot of science fiction, and I think that science fiction writers have captured our culture's sense of the future. The Four-Gated City is a prophetic novel." (ASPV 70) Obviously, Lessing's relationship to her own ideas of writing and creativity had changed as well. Like that of many contemporary writers, Lessing's use of narrative technique had become problematic.

"The disappearance of the author who addresses readers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," says Martin, "as well as the appearance of problematic and fragmentary narratives in the twentieth century, has forced readers to participate in the production as well as the interpretation of texts." (157) With Lessing's obvious concern for mankind's future, it seems appropriate that she should attempt to engage her readers in a more direct way when she comes to discussing the breakdown, and the possible future, of our society.

Another clue to Lessing's relationship with the narrator may be seen in the many epigraphs that are found in the series. As Lanser states, extrafictional structures, such as titles, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, and so on, have a number of uses to the author, among which are "to disclose information about the author's identity; to establish rapport with the audience; ... to clarify the (real or ostensible) purpose of the text; to establish the relationship between the story and history." (125) Because we encounter epigraphs before we read the story, moreover, and "because the extrafictional voice carries the ontological status of history, it conventionally serves as the ultimate textual authority. All other voices that the text creates are subordinate to it." (128)

In any discussion of narrative technique in Lessing, therefore, it is naive to dismiss the role of the narrator, or to call it, as Drabble has done, "clumsy". However apparently discontinuous the narrative voice may appear to be from the

beginning to the end, there are a number of elements which powerfully connect Martha Quest to The Four-Gated City.

Narrative "voice", the distance between author and narrator, omniscience or lack of it, autobiographical elements, gender and political consciousness, and extrafictional devices such as epigraphs, all signal us to pay attention to the way the series has been written as much as to the story itself.

Lessing is concerned with political and social issues, with the role of women and the mad and other 'minority' groups, as she states in A Small Personal Voice: "This is what the series of novels is about--this whole pattern of discrimination and tyranny and violence" (58), as well as "a study of the individual conscience in its relations with the collective" (14). This means that we cannot read "The Children of Violence" as simply a Bildungsroman. Its scope is too broad, its meaning too ideological, and ultimately, its technique too problematic, to narrow our focus onto the development of the protagonist, Martha Quest, alone.

Through an examination of narrative technique, I believe that we may penetrate nearer to the heart of Lessing's purpose in writing this series; by examining the first four books through the 'eyes' of the last, I believe that we may find a unity in the theme of evolution of consciousness that might not be apparent if we accept the omniscient narrator as a nineteenth-century reader would probably have done.

CHAPTER TWO

Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage, A Ripple From the Storm, and

Landlocked

The conventional narrative technique of the first four books of the "Children of Violence" series reflects the conventional methods through which Martha Quest ^{努力寻找} attempts to find meaning in her life. The first thing we read in the first book of the series, Martha Quest, is a nineteenth-century novelist's device, an epigraph: "I am so tired of it, and also tired of the future before it comes." (MQ 7) This epigraph tells us a number of things, before we read even a single word of Lessing's novel. It reflects her admiration for the techniques of the nineteenth-century novelist; it warns us that the solutions which Martha will attempt in this novel are doomed to failure; and it reflects the cyclical structure of conventional family life--as Sprague says, "repetition is one face of Lessing's fatality." (6)

This first book presents an omniscient third-person narrator, who sees into everyone's mind, and views Martha with the irony of ^{hindsight} hindsight. At the same time, however, the focus of the narrative sticks so closely to Martha, her thoughts, and her actions, that it at times more closely resembles the limited third-person narrator of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). We hear thoughts which must be Martha's, but

are not explicitly delineated as such; for instance, we are told that Martha has been affected by the psychology books loaned to her by Joss Cohen. Martha has learned that she

was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past. (MQ 14-15)

Because of this concentration upon Martha, and because of the degree of overlap between Martha Quest's and Doris Lessing's experiences, I would like to call this early narrator an autobiographical narrator. We also see that in this work, there appears to be considerable overlap between Genette's concepts of voice (the omniscient narrator "telling" the story) and vision (what the characters in the story perceive). We look through Martha's eyes as often as we look at her.

In spite of such focalus upon Martha, however, the dominant voice of this first novel is that of the ironic narrator. On the very first page of Martha Quest, for example, we are told by the narrator that when Martha is frustrated by the interruption of her reading by the gossip of her mother and Mrs. Van Rensberg, "there was nothing to prevent her moving somewhere else; and her spasms of resentment when she was asked a question, or her name was used in the family chronicling, were therefore unreasonable." (MQ 7) The narrator already sees the trap that Martha imagines herself to be free of; for she is interested in their conversation in spite of herself, and this interest may

condemn her to repeat the pattern of family life which she loathes in the women of her mother's generation.

The narrator's distance from Martha at this point is demonstrated by such editorial comments as "Martha, having listened to such talk for a large part of her life, should have learned that there was nothing insulting, or even personal, intended. She was merely expected to play the part 'young girl' against their own familiar roles." (MQ 8) This comment not only removes the narrator from involvement with Martha's predicaments, but also highlights, even as early as the second page of the novel, what the novel will be about. "Roles" is an important word, as are "nothing ... personal", for they reflect the traditional and repetitious essence of the conventions of family life, and this is what is to be mocked in this book.

Martha's rebellion against the fate of her sex even begins, at times, to sound like Maggie Tulliver's. She

made resolutions day after day that from now on she would be quite different. And yet a fatal demon always took possession of her, so that at the slightest remark from her mother she was impelled to take it up, examine it, and hand it back, like a challenge--and by then the antagonist was no longer there; Mrs. Quest was simply not interested. (MQ 11)

Mother as enemy is a theme that will run throughout this series, for Martha must face and appease the 'enemy' in The Four-Gated City before she can move on in her quest for an integrated self.

Lessing shows Martha and her mother to be antithetical aspects of the same self, through the use of the ironic awareness of the autobiographical narrator in describing May's thoughts

about Martha in this first book. "Thoughts of Martha always filled her with such violent and supplicating and angry emotions that she could not sustain them; she began to pray for Martha: please help me to save her, please let her forget her silly ideas, please let her be like her brother." (MQ 69) This desire to "save" Martha from herself resembles too closely Martha's later desire to "save" Caroline; however, in Martha's case, she desires to save Caroline from her (Martha's) self. She believes, although she later sees the impossibility of such an action, that by abandoning Caroline she may free them both from conventional mother-daughter hostilities. Too late she realizes that she has only changed the pattern of such hostility, not erased it entirely. The ironic narrator is capable of demonstrating these parallels between mother and daughter; at this point, there is a large gap between the level of awareness of the narrator and that of the protagonist. Lessing, when she wrote this novel, would probably have agreed with W. J. Harvey, in his essay, "Character and The Contest of Things", in Perspectives in Fiction (1968), that the relationship between an author and his characters is typically "not human but god-like. However invisible he may make himself, whatever narrative techniques he may use to conceal his exit from his fiction, the novelist is and must be omnipotent and omniscient." (356) At this point, Lessing appears to be comfortable not only in manipulating her characters' lives, but also in giving the narrator the ironic distance, which we share, to view Martha critically.

Conventional narrative techniques in this first book, then, reflect the conventionality of Martha's "quest" at this point. But the themes of this novel are beginning to more closely resemble the themes of the last book in the series than at first appears. One can only wonder whether Lessing consciously intended the apocalypse of The Four-Gated City when she wrote Martha Quest. Yet there are hints of the last book within the first. Teenage Martha's fantasies of the future perfect city, "set foursquare and colonnaded along its falling flower-bordered terraces. ... --the blue-eyed, fair-skinned children of the North playing hand in hand with the bronze-skinned, dark-eyed children of the South" (MQ 17) certainly foreshadows the city set up by Mark in the African desert before the catastrophe in England.

In fact, at the same time as Lessing is portraying the failure of conventional methods of questing-for-self, she is beginning to set up the theme of evolution toward a common consciousness. Martha experiences a moment, on the veld, in which

there was a slow integration, during which she, and the little animals, and the moving grasses, and the sunwarmed trees, and the slopes of shivering silvery mealies, and the great dome of blue light overhead, and the stones of earth under her feet, became one, shuddering together in a dissolution of dancing atoms. She felt the rivers under the ground forcing themselves painfully along her veins, swelling them out in an unbearable pressure; her flesh was the earth, and suffered growth like a ferment; and her eyes stared, fixed like the eye of the sun. (MQ 62)

The powerful imagery of this passage, particularly coming through the voice of the previously ironical narrator, affects us

strongly. The narrative distance between author and narrator and character and reader disappears for a moment; we both sense that this is Doris Lessing's own memory and we feel that there is nothing ironic in her presentation of it. We experience the intensity first-hand, although it is a third-person account. We understand why "not for one second longer (if the terms for time apply) could she have born it." (MQ 62) As Nancy Shields says in her essay, "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way", "even as an adolescent on the African veld, Martha realized the painful quality of mystical participation in the world of soul." (Pratt and Dembo 156)

The distance between narrator and protagonist returns in the next section of the novel, however. We view from the vantage point of the autobiographical narrator the development toward a common consciousness which is also foreshadowed, if ironically, in Martha's attempt at submergence within the identity of the Social Club. She has left the farm in rebellion against the role she forsees for herself there; but in the city, she only finds a new set of rules and roles to play. "It was all so public, anything was permissible, the romances, the flirtations, the quarrels, provided they were shared." (MQ 152) After the isolation of life on the farm, this shared identity, although her own participation puzzles her, suits Martha. Importantly, this "system of shared emotion might have been designed to prevent marriage; but if by chance a couple managed to evade Binkie's vigilance and the group jealousy, and presented themselves

engaged, ... then the group, like one of those jellylike spores which live by absorption, swelled out and surrounded the couple, swallowing the marriage whole." (MQ 153)

Martha fears repeating her parents' pattern of conventional family life, and The Club appears to offer her protection. But again this first book seems to foreshadow, if ironically, the solutions of the last, in that there "were already half a dozen children, club children, who slept in their prams through sundowners and dances, and grew up on the veranda among the hockey sticks, beer mugs and bare legs, like a doom made visible." (MQ 153-154) This is a foretaste of the house in London, Mark's house, with its various family members and their children living communally, as well as a foreshadowing of the settlement in Africa after the catastrophe. But at this point Martha is not ready to accept the thought of either marriage or children, and is repulsed by both.

The language of this section of the novel is important. It foreshadows the sensual language of the description of Martha bathing naked in a pot-hole during her pregnancy in A Proper Marriage; and the words spoken by the narrator--Martha is temporarily forgotten--are the sort of editorial comments which nineteenth-century novelists delighted in addressing to their readers. The traditional narrative shows us Martha in ways in which she cannot see herself, and this emphasizes both her limited self-awareness and, I believe, the universality of her experiences. The further back the narrator stands, the broader

the perspective she offers, the more Martha can be seen to be part of a process beyond her own control.

Thus, Martha has not found herself in her rebellion against her parents; in leaving home to work in the city; in participating in the predictable if relentlessly exciting mating rituals of The Club; and finally, in spite of herself, she falls into the inevitable trap of trying to find herself through marriage. These are almost archetypal methods that modern women have followed in a search for identity. And even if the failure of such methods is inevitable, they are acceptable as stages through which one must pass in order to outgrow them. The distance between narrator and protagonist reflects the hopelessness of Martha's desire to thwart nature's cyclicity and to avoid conventional solutions to her search for meaning in life. She is at the mercy of her creator as the author implies we are at the mercy of world events and social patterns.

On a linguistic level, this book often simply expresses the sentimentalities of family discourse, and reveals the traps these involve. Even fifteen-year-old Martha's rebellious display of a treatise on sex is treated by her mother with such a calm, maternal, dismissive attitude that Martha is enraged. "In fact, Martha would have earned nothing but a good-natured and traditional sigh of protest, had not her remaining on the steps been in itself something of a challenge." (MQ 10) When Martha goes to the city, she believes that she has left behind the enclosing language of family discourse. She has been furious at

her mother and Mrs. Van Rensberg for their sentimental and unrealistic discussions of family life, but when she thinks about politics and the possibility of war, she finds herself trapped in equally romantic frames of thought. This section of the novel deals with the power of words themselves to excite our emotions.

For instance, upon reading the rhetoric of a communist poem, with the words, "that line/Traced in our graphs through history where the oppressor/Starves and deprives the poor", Martha "watched herself sliding into the gulf of rich and pleasurable melancholy where she was so dangerously at home, while a sarcastic and self-destructive voice inside her remarked, Well, well, and did you see that?" (MQ 185) The word "war" has a similarly powerful effect on her. "She was thinking that she would take lessons in nursing, and volunteer for service overseas --her blood quickened at the idea of it--and she was picturing herself a heroine in the trenches ... But she suddenly leaped out of the bath in disgust at herself, saying, 'I'm doing it too.'" (MQ 185) Martha recognizes, as does Lessing, the hypnotic power of certain words. "These highly coloured fantasies of heroism and fated death were so powerful she could only with a great effort close her mind to them." (MQ 185) Nonetheless, a different variety of rhetoric which Martha hears near the end of the novel foreshadows her next stage of development, her interest in communism. "Fragments of Irish speech came floating over the heads of the crowd; 'humanity', 'drift to war', 'fascism', Martha heard and looked at Douglas to share her excitement." (MQ 265)

That Douglas does not share this excitement ensures that he will have to be left behind.

This theme of the entrapping power of words is developed much more emphatically in Lessing's later novel, The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire (1983), but critics who see her early books as devoid of metafictional elements have missed such implied criticisms of romantic literature. In fact, this self-reflexive consciousness enters the series as early as page 13 of Martha Quest. "It was with a bleak and puzzled look that she stared at a sunlit and glittering bush which stood at her feet; for she did not see it, she was seeing herself, and in the only way she was equipped to do this--through literature." The young Martha seeks to know herself, and attempts to do so through the mirror of the books she has read. Lessing is obviously aware that her own novel only represents another sort of literature for readers like Martha (and us) to learn from, but Lessing is trying to make us suspicious of words, suspicious of literature as an accurate reflection of reality. The narrator's distance from the protagonist is at this point very important. We are being warned that, like Martha's study of psychology, books both clarify and distort her perceptions of herself.

Finally, in a book that offers what is so nearly a limited third-person narrator, it is disconcerting that the last words of this first book, which has been setting the stage for the series, focus not on Martha, but on Judge Maynard; disconcerting because he represents everything Martha hates about Zambesia (Southern

Africa): racial bigotry and a preservation of the status quo. But Lessing never lets us off with easy judgments, for her entries into Maynard's mind always leave us in a reluctant sympathy. "He thought, Well, Douggie's got married, that's a step in the right direction; more than I can hope for Binkie. He began thinking, with the wistfulness of a lonely and ageing man, of possible grandchildren; for to a man like Mr. Maynard a son like Binkie is as good as having no son at all." (MQ 271) With respect to Maynard, the narrator's omniscience itself becomes problematic, not in terms of reliability, but in terms of sympathy; for the autobiographical narrator ought to condemn Maynard, but in fact leaves us feeling sorry for him. This is certainly not the attitude of the Martha of this novel, and perhaps not even of the Martha of the last novel; again the narrator has distanced herself from the protagonist, and it is on this note that the novel ends. It is as if the narrator, and perhaps Doris Lessing, is attempting to leave behind the painful events and emotions of this part of Martha Quest's life.

If conventional narrative technique in Martha Quest reflected the conventions of family life, the same technique in A Proper Marriage reflects the social conventions through which Martha next attempts to find meaning in her life. The epigraph at the beginning of the novel reads "You shouldn't make jokes, Alice said, 'if it makes you so unhappy.'" (APM 7) The reference to Alice in Wonderland is significant. The social world in which

Alice finds herself is either inverted or insane. Attempting to use reason in such a place is useless, for the characters do not bother to make sense. Martha's hectic social life in A Proper Marriage conveys something of the same sense of activity for activity's sake. The juxtaposition in the epigraph of 'jokes' and 'unhappy' also implies the confusing nature of the rules by which society runs itself. Martha may be laughing, but she does not appear to be happy.

Plainly, Martha should never have married. Certainly, in the first book, she has had her doubts. "She did not want to marry Douglas, she did not want to marry at all. With a cold, disparaging eye, she looked at the image of Douglas and shuddered." (MQ 246) But once she has committed herself to the action, once she is married, she receives a number of letters. This epistolary form, an eighteenth-century novelist's device, is, more importantly, a formal social convention. "Most were of that sort which people write to those getting married, in order that they may say with pride, 'We had so and so many letters of congratulation.'" (APM 39)

We are told that Martha cannot understand this convention except as meaningless politeness, and she does not even look at the formal letters. (APM 39) One of the letters she does read is from her brother. The narrator tells us that the letter was "full of determinedly humorous tolerance" (APM 39) and then editorializes that Martha and her brother have always got along

because "in order that two people may quarrel they must have something in common to quarrel over." (APM 39)

The tone of the narrative in this book reflects not only the language of social discourse, but also the overworked clichés of traditional literature. The description of Martha's attitude toward the next letter, from Joss Cohen, sounds more like something from a passage in Emma than something from a twentieth-century novel. "She opened it with the most vivid delight; she even held it unopened for a moment, to delay the pleasure of reading it. What she expected from it was--but what did she not expect from Joss Cohen!" However, she is disappointed in Joss's merely formal note of congratulation. "She admitted at last that she felt abandoned because he had not thought her worth even the trouble of a sarcastic phrase. Very well, then: she dropped the letter into the pile of purely formal ones." (APM 40)

The letter from (Solly Cohen) is more specifically critical. He sneers at her husband's civil service position, and warns Martha, "you'll have to be a good girl now, no naughty ideas about the colour bar--no ideas of any kind for that matter. If there is one thing you can't afford, dear Matty, in the station of life into which you've chosen to marry, god help you, it is ideas." (APM 41) This letter foreshadows not only her later involvements, specifically with 'ideas' (communist) and the 'colour bar', but also the communal consciousness toward which Martha must work: Solly is experimenting with a commune in the coloured section of the city, and tells Martha, "I am not

supposed to have letters unless the whole group approves, but I shall explain that a certain amount is due to you as a victim of the system." (APM 41)

These letters, as first-person narratives, with their familiar and accusatory use of "you", engage the reader on a more direct level. The words may be from Solly's pen, but the warning sounds like something one might have read in one of Doris Lessing's essays, especially phrases such as "victim of the system." This is Lessing at her most pedantic, and all of the passages that relate to class struggle seem to carry this overtone of moralization that becomes tiresome to a reader who does not wish (or need) to be educated in this way.

The narrator moves more often and more deeply into the minds of other characters in A Proper Marriage, with the result that we are often not sure "who" is speaking the thoughts--the narrator, Martha, or one of the other characters. For instance, very early in the novel we overhear a discussion between Martha and Judge Maynard about Maynard's prodigal son Binkie. On the defensive, as she always is in Maynard's sardonic and worldly-amused presence, Martha has been defending the wild antics of the boys from the Club by saying that since no one has ever been hurt, they couldn't be as crazy as everyone thinks. Reminded by Maynard of "young Mendolis, who went over the edge of the Falls three years ago ... She shrugged. An allowable percentage of casualties, apparently. Then she added, in a different voice,

hard and impatient, 'There's going to be a war, anyway.'

(APM 15)

The tone of the phrase, "an allowable percentage of casualties, apparently", is ironic, critical. It might represent Maynard's perception of Martha, or it might represent the ironic narrator's perception of her callowness, but it certainly allows that Martha is, at least, partially conscious of the inappropriateness of her response when she covers it up with a platitude about war. Lessing does not identify the speaker of this thought; it sounds like an equally possible thought for the narrator and for Maynard. Is there, then, some overlap not only between Martha and Lessing but also between Maynard and Lessing? This would seem impossible, since Martha and Maynard are almost polar opposites in character, but they are both products of the same mind, and Lessing's level of self-awareness would probably allow for her to recognize her own potential for 'Maynardness'.

Part Two of A Proper Marriage, dealing with Martha in her pregnancy and in giving birth to her daughter, is prefaced by an epigraph which is an excerpt from a handbook on how to have a baby. "You must remember that having a baby is a perfectly natural process." (APM 123) We could not miss the irony of such a phrase from a book that purports to tell us "how to do" this "natural process." Lessing mocks the 'scientific' approach to pregnancy and childbirth, and her description of Martha and Alice bathing naked in a pot-hole in a rainstorm has an intensity that

reflects the primal feelings which Lessing connects with pregnancy.

The baby inside Martha is connected in this passage with the natural life around her. Martha

felt the crouching infant, still moving tentatively around in its prison, protected from the warm red water by half an inch of flesh. Her stomach stretched and contracted; and the frog swam slowly across the water, with slow, strong spasms of its legs, still watching Martha from one bright eye. In the jelly spawn were tiny dark dots of life. (APM 153)

This oneness which Martha experiences is reminiscent of her moment of integration on the veld, and signals her continuing development on a non-intellectual level. At this point, she is changing, but she is not changing herself so much as being changed by the events that take place against her wishes; Martha is not yet capable of conscious development. This is the contradiction in these novels: they are fatalistic in demonstrating how Martha does all the things she is terrified of doing--staying in the colony, getting married, having a baby--and at the same time, they show how it is through these actions that she grows to become the whole self of the last book.

The shifting focus of the narrative continues to make our judgments difficult. We are taken, for example, into the mind of yet another character antipathetic to Martha: her mother, May. When May hears that Martha is going to have a baby, she fantasizes about taking the child away from her incompetent daughter and raising it properly. When she realizes that this is a dream that will never come true (it does in the long run to

some extent, but neither Martha nor May know this yet) she lapses into self-pity. "Life is unfair, unfair! she was crying out in her heart, that lonely unassauged heart that was aching now with its emptiness." (APM 124) Martha hates and fears her mother, but we (as we are with Maynard) are forced into a supercilious pity which we share with the narrator but not with Martha.

Martha can see her mother only as a negative role model. She vows passionately to her unborn baby that "she, Martha, the free spirit, would protect the creature from her, Martha, the maternal force; the maternal Martha, that enemy, would not be allowed to enter the picture." (APM 127) This is Martha's intellect at work, and it is this feeling that her mind can and will control her body (and therefore her fate) that is destroyed in the childbirth experience.

The language of the description of the labour and delivery of Caroline again leaves behind the world of ideas for the world of sense. As we were on the veld, and again in the pot-hole, we are engaged on a highly sensual level in this passage. Martha's desire to separate mind from body-experience is made explicit. "When the wave of pain had receded, and she lay spent, she was grimly flogging her mind to imagine the quality of the pain that had just gone. Impossible. And when she was writhing in the grip of the giant fist, she was gasping with determination to imagine no pain. She could not. ... There were two Marthas, and there was nothing to bridge them. Failure. Complete failure." (APM 164)

Finally, under the guidance of a native char-woman, "Martha let the cold knot of determination loosen, she let herself go, she let her mind go dark into the pain." (APM 165) That Martha is soon after pronounced "ripe!" to give birth implies that it has only been through her submission to her bodily experience that Martha gets through it. Anyone who has experienced childbirth will recognize the verisimilitude of these passages.

Lessing takes us into Martha's mind with increasing frequency as the series progresses. This forces us to identify with her more and more, and to share the experience of her development. If one of the points that Lessing is making is that we must do, rather than think, in order to truly learn, then it is important that we identify progressively more closely with the protagonist, for our vicarious experience of her life will be our education.

At the same time as we are forced to become more involved with her, Martha's level of self-awareness grows continually in the course of these novels. By the end of A Proper Marriage, Martha's relationship with Dr. Stern has changed. Dr. Stern, whose name is one of the few symbolic names aside from Martha Quest's, is the paternal figure to all the flock of young women who come to him first for birth-control information, and soon after, demanding an abortion, and soon after that, for childbirth. Martha has been sent to him so that he can encourage her to get pregnant again, which she has no intention of doing. We are shown how her consciousness is evolving when we are told

that "there was a part of her brain which remained satirical and watchful, even amused, while it tried to analyse the process by which Dr. Stern handled her. But the watchful other person did not prevent him from playing her like a fish on a line, she thought." (APM 300)

Her consciousness will be changed even more importantly by her involvement with the communist party. It is odd, and therefore significant, that it is Martha's as yet subconscious enemy (for she will not examine what her feelings for him are beyond the derision expected from the young and idealistic for the 'reactionary') Judge Maynard who is instrumental in introducing her to the leftist movement in the city. Martha fears him, and yet is powerless to snub him in a way that would break with her upbringing. He, for his part, is portrayed as being at the mercy of his feelings for her. "That quality of sincere enthusiasm sanctioned his own youth, and he said suddenly, 'You know, my dear, I'm very fond of you.'" When her response shows him that she sees him only as a "kindly old gentleman, " he "abruptly set himself in motion away from her." (APM 331) That she is unconscious of his attraction to her is a marker for us of her continued naivete; that he is painfully aware of her lack of attraction to him makes us once again sympathetic to him.

Martha's feelings about her daughter Caroline throughout the series are also markers of her state of development as a conscious human being. Though she will later come to regret

these feelings, Martha is at this point able not only to leave her husband, Douglas, but also to abandon Caroline. "Martha held the energetic and vibrant creature tight for a moment, and whispered in a moment of pure tenderness, 'You'll be perfectly free, Caroline. I'm setting you free.'" (APM 374) It is easy for the reader to question this belief in setting a child free by abandoning her--but the narrator at this point distances herself from Martha by leaving it to Maynard to reveal the inappropriateness of Martha's attitude, and to again have the last word in the novel. "'I'm not going to forgive you for leaving my goddaughter,' he said, smiling painfully." (APM 380)

The epigraph to A Ripple From the Storm is a passage by Louis Aragon on the subject of "the absolute". Aragon links the passion for the absolute with "the focal point of destruction", warning that to "such as have not be warned, ... the passion for the absolute is the same as a passion for unhappiness." (ARFS 7) Recalling as this does the epigraph from A Proper Marriage, particularly in its reference to the word "unhappy", we are signalled to regard this quotation critically, ironically. Since this book deals with Martha's passionate involvement with politics, and more particularly with communism, before we've read the first paragraph of this novel, we already know that she will not find happiness in her political involvements any more than she did in her social involvements or her familial involvements.

In fact, one might say that the sentiments of this entire novel were foreshadowed in Martha's thoughts about rebellion against her family in A Proper Marriage. She

felt obscurely that the whole thing was old-fashioned. The time for dramatic revolts against parents was past; it all had a stale air. How ridiculous Solly was, with his communal settlements, and throwing up university - for what? It had all been done and said already. She had no idea what was the origin of this appalling feeling of flatness, staleness and futility. (APM 43)

Martha has already discovered the unsatisfactory quality of rebellion against family tradition, and the unfortunately equally unsatisfactory involvement in social conventions. Leaving her husband and daughter, she believes herself to be striking out into freedom. But perhaps it is significant that we are still locked into a conventional narrative technique. If other conventional methods have failed to satisfy Martha's need for meaning, can politics do so?

The patterns of Martha's life, like the patterns of technique in these novels, continue to repeat themselves. The announcement of Martha leaving Douglas and Caroline is greeted by at least one letter, from her mother. We are told that Martha's "mother had also cast her off, in a letter of the ritual quality [of Jasmine's parents' rejection]. Martha, Mrs. Quest had announced by registered letter, was no longer her daughter." (ARFS 9) When Martha does not respond to this theatrical declaration, her mother comes to visit her in her room. Family ritual continues: they oscillate between anger and supplication.

The language of this book, perhaps more than any of the other early novels, reflects the ideologies behind it; it is constructed both of the language of politics and of the romantic attitudes that the communist-rebels have of themselves. For instance, we are told that to "Martha, with her painful need to admire someone for qualities she could never possess herself, it seemed natural that Jasmine's love should be at home here, camped among the files and papers of the world revolution." (ARFS 8) That a small group of activists in a small town in Zambesia constitutes part of a "world revolution" is the sort of romanticism which only those involved in such a group could accept unthinkingly.

The communist group is led by the German refugee, Anton Hesse, who is serious about his political beliefs in a way Martha only wishes she could be. One of the phrases that will be used again and again in this book, with increasing irony, is the communist cliché, "analyse the situation". Hesse's voice in this narrative is that of the ideologue upon whom such groups depend. He lectures the group, early in the novel,

'... our situation in this country has never been analysed. Not once. We have been too busy to think. Yet a real communist never takes an action which does not flow from a comprehensive understanding of the economic situation in a given situation and the relation of the class forces. We have merely rushed into activity spurred on by revolutionary or so-called revolutionary phrases.' (ARFS 36)

Of course, Hesse is unaware that many of his own statements are mere "revolutionary phrases". It is upon this sort of irony that Lessing builds the novel.

Lessing, as she will later do in The Good Terrorist (1985), shows us the psychological links between a person's past and his or her current beliefs. Martha herself recognizes this process during a speech by Anton. When he says, "... in nature, nothing happens alone'," Martha remembers "the thrust and push of knitting natural forces which had grappled with the substance of her own flesh, to become part of it, in the moments of illumination in her past." (ARFS 62) The unifying effect of Anton's rhetoric recalls Martha's other moments of integration. "She knew that everyone in the room felt as she did. She was linked with them all, and from the deepest needs of her being." (ARFS 63). It is significant to Lessing's portrayal of Martha's evolution of consciousness that this euphoric experience is produced by man, not nature as it was before, and shared with others, unlike her previous solitary experiences.

Lessing is demonstrating the power of the language of politics. But she also returns us to reality, as she always quickly does, by showing that it is the educated elite, not the working class, that is affected by these rhetorical phrases. "'Ah, heck now,' said the Scotsman. 'No one says a word against the workers while I'm by. But all this is too high-falutin' for me, it's the truth.'" (ARFS 64)

We have been seeing Martha increasingly through her own eyes as she grows in self-awareness. The autobiographical narrator has become more and more willing to let Martha's conscious thoughts predominate, and we go inside her character

again when Martha becomes seriously ill. This section, describing the delirium of her illness, is the first passage of stream-of-consciousness in the sequence. "But her hands were not hers. They seemed to have swelled. Her hands were enormous, and she could not control their size. ... The world lay safe inside her hands. ... She thought: Because of us, everyone will be saved." (ARFS 108) This passage not only portrays the wandering thoughts of delirium, but foreshadows, perhaps ironically, how people with such 'mad' thoughts end up predicting the catastrophe and thereby saving some portion of mankind in The Four-Gated City.

In A Ripple From the Storm, Lessing also diversifies the narrative perspective to include the thoughts of such people as Mrs. Van (220), Maisie (232), and Andrew (237). This broadens the focus of the series, allowing it to diverge from a strict Bildungsroman, for the thoughts of these characters are not only not concerned with Martha, but also completely unrelated to her, and cannot therefore develop her character in any way.

One of the most intense and dramatic examples of entering the thoughts of a character unrelated to thoughts of Martha is the passage describing the night outside the army camp, when one of the airmen, Jimmy, aches to leave behind the enclosed and mechanical atmosphere of the camp and to spend the night outdoors. A city boy, his experience of nature is very different from Martha's. At first, his experience is euphoric. "City boy from blackened, cold streets, he breathed the fresh tart air of

the high-veld in and out of tainted lungs, fingered grains of heavy soil that clung to his fingers, frowned at the moonlight about him and thought: This is something like it. Never see a sky like this at home." (ARFS 150) But his essential alienation from his surroundings quickly changes his experience to one of terror. His

flesh crawled with fear. Looking down at himself, as he crouched in the grass, he saw his legs and body splotted with dark objects. My God, they were all over him, large, horny beetle-insects, clumsily waving their feelers and moving up over him. He let out a yell of fear, and brushed them off with frantic hands. ... they were everywhere! He let out another yell of pure terror and ran off fast away from the camp into the trees, beating at his legs and body with his hands as if he were on fire and he were beating out the flames. (ARFS 151-152)

The narrator at this point is limited to Jimmy, to his perceptions. We are not seeing Jimmy, but seeing through him, through the eyes of his sickness (tuberculosis) and fear. Lessing will come back to Kafkaesque passages like these again when she is describing Lynda's and Martha's madness in The Four-Gated City.

Jimmy also offers Lessing an opportunity to show the disparity between the ideals which the communists hold for ending apartheid and the reality which faces the blacks of Zambesia at this time. Jimmy seeks refuge in the house of Elias, the black man who has been recruited into the communist group of which Jimmy and Martha are a part. But when the white man Jimmy seeks refuge in the black 'settlement', the fear and resentment of its

inhabitants extends even to Elias, and the language of comradeship is shown to be meaningless here.

'But, Comrade Elias, I want to discuss with you how we can work to deliver your people from their bondage.'

Elias was silent. Jimmy realized he had used the words: deliver from bondage. They struck him as inaccurate--unpolitical. But they filled him again with a warm and protective emotion. ...

Elias' voice rose in a wail of angry fear: 'You must go now, baas, you must not be here. Go now.'
(ARFS 158-159)

Who does Jimmy want to help? The omniscient narrator has drawn back, out of Jimmy's perceptions, to show that Jimmy's sentimental and romantic notions of 'delivering' the blacks are not to be believed, especially by the blacks who have a less romantic perception of reality. Lessing is mocking the exaggerated language of political idealism.

The narrator's cool irony returns to show us Elias running to Judge Maynard to explain about Jimmy's visit before someone else tells on him. Maynard listens, placates the black man, and then tells his wife to have certain airmen posted: "James Jones, William Bolton and Murdoch Mathews." Then "Mr. Maynard made his way to the Court, regretting that he had been so sharp with Elias. After all, he did not want this source to dry up. He would tip him well--ten shillings, or something like that." (ARFS 164) Maynard's patronizing attitude is one the blacks more easily accept, since it represents the social norm.

This book focuses on Martha-as-communist, her breaking away from the Club-wife stereotype into the good-comrade stereotype. Her marriage to the German, Anton Hesse, is a sympathetic act,

offering no better reason for marriage than she had for marrying Douglas. Yet the marriage allows her to grow in her awareness of herself, until she begins to get a clear idea of who she is, at least in relationship to Anton:

She knew that the moment she put her arms about him, to coax him out of his silence, that creature in herself she despised would be born again: she would be capricious, charming, filial: to this compliant little girl Anton would be kind--and patronizing. .. But this would be a mask for his being dependent on her; she would not be his child, but he hers. (ARFS 274)

The narrator at this point is limited again--allowing us to see through Martha's eyes. We are learning to be able to trust Martha's perceptions of herself. The narrator does not need to be so ironically editorial about Martha's actions.

We are also privy to an interior monologue which enforces our identification with Martha. Near the end of the novel, Martha "recognized Marjorie's dry and humorous tone, and thought: 'Why is it I listen for the echoes of other people in my voice and what I do all the time? The fact is, I'm not a person at all, I'm nothing yet--perhaps I never will be.'" (ARFS 279) We identify with the sense of amorphousness common to a certain stage of personal development, when we have learned what we are not, but have yet to learn what we are. The self-awareness of this passage also represents a considerable degree of development from the teenager in Martha Quest who was so self-righteous about guarding her perfect city from the adults around her. Martha is beginning to see the influence which others have upon her, and to wonder what this means in terms of her sense of identity.

By the end of the novel, the communist group is down to three members, and Martha realizes that another passage of her life is over. She "was examining two very clear convictions that existed simultaneously in her mind. One, it was inevitable that everything should have happened in exactly the way it had happened: no one could have behaved differently. Two, that everything which had happened was unreal, grotesque, and irrelevant." (ARFS 280) These are, perhaps, Lessing's final words on conventionality. That Martha's marriage to Anton Hesse is also finished is underscored in the final words of the novel. "She lay down on the bed, her back to Anton, who was already freshly analysing the situation, and allowed herself to slide into sleep like a diver weighted with lead." (ARFS 281)

It was between the writing of A Ripple From the Storm and the next book in the series, Landlocked, that Lessing discovered Sufism. While, as Mona Knapp tells us, Lessing has denied the influence of Sufism on these later novels (102-103), this is difficult to accept when the introductory epigraph of Landlocked comes from the writings of Idries Shah. Therefore, I think that it is important at this point to examine Sufi thought and then to reflect on its influence on the techniques of the last two books in the series, Landlocked and The Four-Gated City. Nancy Shield's essay, "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way", in Doris Lessing: Critical Studies, (1974), explains Lessing's introduction to Sufism, and examines the influence of Sufism on

Lessing's work. She tells us that Lessing was a student of Shah, and that Lessing had reviewed Shah's book, The Sufis (1971).

Shields initially attempts to define Sufism for us. "In the most general terms, Sufism is a form of Islamic mysticism whose literature covers some 1,400 years ... and includes scientists as well as philosophers and writers in its numbers." (149) Shields quotes Lessing's review of Idries Shah's book. "Idries Shah is a 'master of the difficult arts of deliberate provocation, slight dislocation of expected sense, use of the apparently banal--to make one read a thing again, and more carefully.'" (149) Shields also quotes Ustad Hilmi, Mevlevi, "The Sufi Quest," from Thinkers of the East (1972). "'Sufism has two main technical objectives: (1) to show the man himself as he really is; and (2) to help him develop his real, inner self, his permanent part.'" (163)

Shields also quotes Lessing's review entitled "What Looks Like an Egg and Is an Egg?" from the New York Times Book Review (May 7, 1972). "The Sufis themselves seldom conceal that they are concerned with presentation and effectiveness, not indoctrination. Hence their writings are littered with phrases like 'The colour of the wine is the same as the color of the bottle'" (149). That is, that you cannot separate the message from the form in which it comes. This would seem to have a direct bearing on the narrative changes which take place in Lessing's writing, particularly in The Four-Gated City. While she is portraying the conventional methods through which Martha

Quest seeks meaning in her life, conventional narrative techniques are appropriate. But when she breaks away from convention into madness and extrasensory perceptions, she must equally change the 'bottle' in which these ideas come.

If Lessing desires, like the Sufis, to show man himself as he really is, and to help him develop his inner self, narrative technique in "The Children of Violence" is one device by which she attempts to do so. We are shown Martha as she really is, and as she will be, beyond our and Doris Lessing's time. The question of identity is made amusingly clear in the quotation from a Nasrudin teaching story in the epigraph at the beginning of Landlocked. It tells 'of a Mulla who goes into a shop, and asks the owner, "Have you ever seen me before?' 'Never in my life' [answers the owner]. 'Then how do you know it is me?'" (9)

"Nasrudin," says Shields, "presents provocative situations whose unexpected juxtaposition of ideas is designed to jar the reader or listener from rigid thought patterns." (151) Such could equally be said of the final two books in this series. The necessity of a change in our patterns of thinking and response recalls Lessing's insistence in A Small Personal Voice that "we are living at a time which is so dangerous, violent, explosive, and precarious that it is in question whether soon there will be people left alive to write books and to read them. ... It is not merely a question of preventing an evil, but of strengthening a vision of good which may defeat the evil." (7)

With such strong feelings about the imminent self-destruction of society (thirty years ago), it is understandable that Lessing should feel that the old patterns had failed, and were likely to continue to fail, and that a new kind of vision was necessary to save us from ourselves. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis says in Writing Beyond the Ending (1985), the "early novels of the series undertake the discrediting of the conventional life of women--in romance, marriage, affairs, motherhood, the nuclear family, and other family ties. Love of all sorts is coolly examined as Martha the quester moves unflinchingly down mandated paths to female success: being attractive, marrying well, becoming a mother." (187)

Hints of a different solution come with Martha's expanded self-awareness in Landlocked. But first she must recognize the futility of the relationships she has attempted this far. She

felt positively sick with exasperation already--because of the banality of what they were going to say. Both Anton and she would be thinking quite sensible, even intelligent thoughts--but what they said would be idiotic, and their bad temper, their unpleasantness, would be because both knew they could not express their sense in their words, let alone actions. Martha even felt as if this conversation or discussion (if the coming exchange could be dignified by such words) had taken place already and there was no point in going through with it again. (L 65)

This passage is important for two reasons. It echoes the fatalism of conventionality, repeating the word 'already' for emphasis, and it makes explicit the sense that words may fail as a form of communication. This is the first time that Lessing has challenged the power of words to tell the truth. In A Proper

Marriage, Martha felt "unable to say what she meant in a way that sounded true" (APM 43), which attributes the weakness to the person, Martha, but in Landlocked, and especially in The Four-Gated City, Lessing will challenge the words themselves as being at fault.

Early in Landlocked, we are told one of Martha's dreams. This is significant, for dreams have the quality of "other-worldliness" that will be important in the next book. Her

dream at this time, the one which recurred, like a thermometer, or gauge, from which she could check herself, was of a large house, a bungalow, with half-a-dozen different rooms in it, and she, Martha (the person who held herself together, who watched, who must preserve wholeness through a time of dryness and disintegration) moved from one room to the next, on guard. These rooms, each furnished differently, had to be kept separate--had to be, it was Martha's task for this time. (L 20-21)

This dream not only foreshadows Martha as the person 'holding together' Mark's house in the next book, but deals with identity and disintegration directly. The omniscient narrator who hides her deus ex machina behind the actions and words of her characters is being replaced by a more complex voice, one willing to act on a symbolic level.

In contrast to the strictly traditional realism of the first books, this dream uses ant-images to link Martha's state of being to nature and to her parents' house on the kopje. "... it was the house of the kopje, collapsed into a mess of ant-tunnelled mud, ant-consumed grass, where red ant-made tunnels wove a net, like red veins, over the burial mound of Martha's soul, over the rotting wood, rotting grass, subsiding mud".

(L 21) Ant imagery represents a new thematic device for the series at this point as a means for demonstrating the state of Martha's psyche.

Martha is aware of these dreams, and conscious that within her is a guardian, "who stood somewhere, was somewhere in this shell of substance, smooth brown flesh so pleasantly curved into the shape of young woman with smooth browny-gold hair, alert dark eyes. The guardian was to be trusted in messages of life and death; and to be trusted too when the dream (the Dream, she was beginning to think of it, it came in so many shapes and guises, and so often) moved back in time, or perhaps forward--she did not know" (L 21). The language of this passage foreshadows Lessing's "Conopus in Argos: Archives" series, which views mankind from the perspective of an extra-terrestrial race who live longer than 10,000 years; the description of Martha's body as "the shape of young woman" suggests something consciously chosen rather than born into. And just who is this guardian? It might be said to parallel the narrator, and this is important because the separation between narrator, author-god, and protagonist will diminish increasingly from now on; it is almost as if Martha has become aware of the narrator as a persona.

The Bildungsroman, if it can still be called that, begins to shift at this point from an autobiography of events outside Martha to an autobiography of Martha's states of being. For example, we are told at one point that when Martha is hungry, inside "her opened up the lit space on to which, unless she was

careful (this was not the moment for it), emotions would walk like actors and begin to speak without (apparently) any prompting from her. ... The tall lit space was not an enemy, it was where, at some time, the centre of the house would build itself." (L 35)

She recognizes herself as disintegrated into these rooms, or aspects of herself, which she must keep separate, and wonders "what she was waiting for, in waiting for (as she knew she did) a man? Why, someone who would unify her elements, a man would be like a roof, or like a fire burning in the centre of the empty space." (L 37) Martha has been married twice to men who did not touch anything essential in her. But her relationship with Thomas Stern changes all that, although it takes her some time to recognize it. "A few weeks ago she had thought: Thomas, or Joss-- a man. Now here was Thomas and he was sucking her in to an intensity of feeling simply by standing there and claiming her." (L 88)

The epigraph to Part Two is an ironically-drawn excerpt from "an officially-inspired handbook for young people on Sex, Love, Marriage." "Don't make any mistake about this. Real love is a question of compromise, tolerance, shared views and tastes, preferably a common background of experience, the small comforts of day-to-day living. Anything else is just illusion and blind sex." An interesting thing about Lessing's epigraphs is that we are not sure whether the sources are real or invented by Lessing. An epigraph like the one to Part Four of A Ripple From the Storm, which quotes Karl Marx as stating "The origin of states gets lost

in a myth in which one may believe but one may not discuss", we must assume to be genuine, although Lessing does not identify the book or writing from which it comes. But the above quotation sounds more like Doris Lessing's ironic narrator speaking than a genuine treatise on the nature of love. If Lessing desires in a Sufi-like way to 'make one read a thing again, and more carefully', then such confusion of real and possibly imaginary texts ought to make us more suspicious as readers.

Martha's previous marriages depended on compromise and tolerance on her part; they appeared to have been based on common experience (The Club with Douglas, the communist party with Anton), and survived for a time on day-to-day realities. But they were nothing to Martha, certainly evoking nothing like love from her. The scene which follows the above epigraph describes in vividly sensual terms Martha's state following love-making with Thomas. While their relationship, by the standards of the epigraph, might be reduced to 'blind sex' (not only is Thomas married, but he's told her frankly, "'The thing is, Martha, I have affairs all the time, you know that'" (L 88)), what is between Martha and Thomas is part of her process of development. The deeply sensual level of their relationship, and the language used to describe it, are important aspects of that development. "Six inches of marred glass in a warped frame reflected beams of orange light into the loft, laid quivering green from the jacaranda outside over wooden planks and over the naked arm of a young woman who lay face down on a rough bed, dipping her arm in

and out of the greenish sun-lanced light below her as if into water." (L 102)

Thomas represents the "centre" which she had been seeking in order to end the division of her life into "rooms". The room they share in the loft "had ended the division. From this centre she now lived--a loft of aromatic wood from whose crooked window could be seen only sky and the boughs of trees." (L 103) That the "room" and the "centre" have figurative as well as literal qualities reflects the shift in narrative technique away from the traditional realism of the earlier novels.

Lessing has begun to play with her medium. She even endows this relationship with fairy-tale qualities by the use of a fairy-tale format and language. "Once upon a time, so it is said, people listened to their dreams as if bending to a door beyond which great figures moved; half-human, speaking half-divine truths. ... Martha's dreams registered a calmly-beating pulse, although she knew that loving Thomas must hold its own risks, and that this was as true for him as for her." (L 103)

There is another shift in the technique of this novel from the ones before it. More often and at greater length are there patches of dialogue uninterrupted by comments from the narrator. Thomas and Martha speak directly to one another, and this type of writing more closely resembles the kind approved of by the sort of critics who object to intrusions by the author. In such dialogue, the narrator has withdrawn altogether, leaving the

characters to speak for themselves. This type of writing is more immediate for the reader, drawing us into the story.

The death of the old conventional Martha and the birth of a newer, more natural woman is symbolized by her discovery that the "old farm", which her parents had abandoned to move into town shortly after Martha's first marriage, "had sunk to its knees under the blows of the first wet season after the Quests had left it, as if the shambling structure had been held upright only the the spirit of the family in it. Already it had been absorbed into a welter of damp growth and it was hard to tell ... where the old house had stood." (L 196) Martha realizes that the city she lives in is equally fragile. After a few years of abandonment, "this city could be like the minute, brittle, transparent cases that have held insects and now lie blowing about on the sand. It would be like the carcass of a stick insect, so light it can be lifted into an eddy of air and up into the empty sky in columns of glistening trash to drift until the rains come to wash the air clean." (L 197) The images of abandoned civilization and dryness foreshadow the cataclysm of The Four-Gated City and the city in the desert where the survivors will live.

The moment of integration in this novel leaves behind the integration with nature of the first two novels, and the integration with other people and the rejection of integration of the third. In Landlocked, the integration is more global and abstract:

The soul of the human race, that part of the mind which has no name, is not called Thomas and Martha,

which holds the human race as frogspawn is held in jelly--that part of Martha and of Thomas was twisted and warped, was part of a twist and a damage. She could no more dissociate herself from the violence done her, done by her, than a tadpole can live out of water. (L 202)

This passage echoes the experience of the pregnant Martha in the pot-hole in A Proper Marriage ('frogspawn held in jelly' in particular), but it also foreshadows the common consciousness, the linked minds, of The Four-Gated City, and the image of Earth (Shikasta) as twisted and broken in the "Canopus in Argos: Archives" (1979-1983) series.

Martha will move on, but Lessing uses this novel to challenge and condemn what become the conventional attitudes to life engendered by exposure to the mass annihilations of war. "Lives that appear to them meaningless, wasted, hang around their necks like decaying carcasses. They are hypnotised into futility by self-observation. It is as if consciousness itself has speeded up the process, a curve of destruction." (L 212)

The epigraph to Part Four, again a quotation from Idries Shah's The Sufis, exemplifies the danger of this passive observation of our own destruction. "'Yes, carry on, take advantage of a dead man,' said Nasrudin from his abject position; 'but if I had been alive I would not have allowed you to take liberties with my donkey.'" (L 219) Martha has been stagnant, paralyzed by her choices. As DuPlessis has argued in Writing Beyond the Ending, "both marriages distance her from herself." (189) It takes her affair with Thomas Stern to shake Martha free.

The energizing force which will become the instrument of change, partially through madness, in The Four-Gated City, is seen for the first time through this relationship. "But she did not know what had taken place between her and Thomas. Some force, some power, had taken hold of them both, and had made such changes in her--what, soul? (but she did not even know what words she must use) psyche? being?--that now she was changed and did not understand herself." (L 222) What has begun in Martha is the disintegration of ego. When critics such as Frederick R. Karl in A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel (1972, 294) and Sydney Janet Kaplan in Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel (1975, 139) speak of the disintegration of the individual as a negative theme in Lessing, I believe they have missed the point. Before Thomas, Martha saw herself as fragmented into a number of different rooms which she must somehow hold together. This is what civilization had made of her.

But what happens to Martha and Thomas is something quite different. Martha realizes that "even the long process of breaking-down--as they both learned to put it--for the other; of learning to expose oneself, was something they did together, acknowledging they had to do it." (L 223) In their case, "breaking down" means opening up, and this is the opposite of the fragmentation which Martha has experienced in her other relationships. Even when the relationship ends, they both realize that something special, something different, has happened

to them. Yet Lessing is not prepared to offer fairy-tale endings, apparently. Thomas goes off to live with natives, and dies of disease.

Martha 'inherits' Thomas's notes, which "were clearly meant to be a part of Thomas's report on conditions in the rural areas. They were in a dreadful state; for the ink had run where rain-water had dripped on them, probably from an ill-thatched roof." (L 276) The "they" in this sentence is interesting. It is clearly meant to refer to Thomas's report, but its position in the passage infers reference to the "rural areas". Thus, the condition of the notes becomes itself a comment on the conditions of the natives. This will become typical of Lessing's increasing attention to the relationship between form and content.

Interestingly, the "pages were not numbered, and apparently had never been but in order. How was Martha, or anybody, to know what Thomas had meant? How much had been destroyed, or lost? Also, there were notes, comments, scribbled over and across and on the margins of the original text, in red pencil. These, hard to decipher, were in themselves a different story, or at least, made of the original a different story." (L 276) Surely, this sort of comment on the text is metafictional? The significance of this internal text will be made more explicit in the next book, when Mark uses these notes as part of his quest to understand what is really happening in the world, but the essential epistemological problem has been broached: can words express truth? The next book is certainly foreshadowed in the

last words of this one. "At the corner she turned to wave:
'Barricades!' she said, almost formally, as she might have said,
good night, or how are you? Then she vanished from sight."

(L 288) 'Barricades' come from the language of war, and are what
Martha will find when she comes to England: mental ones, as well
as physical ones, to be overcome.

CHAPTER THREE

The Four-Gated City

Another idea was that if the book were shaped in the right way it would make its own comment about the conventional novel. ... How little I have managed to say of the truth, how little I have caught of all that complexity; how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped.

-- from the Preface to The Golden Notebook (ASPV 32)

Doris Lessing's comments about The Golden Notebook might well have been written about The Four-Gated City. Coming as it did only seven years after The Golden Notebook, it seems fair to assume that some of the same concerns with form went into it. Indeed, discussion of technique in "The Children of Violence" has focused almost entirely on this novel, and the relationship between the way this novel was written and the message which Lessing was attempting to convey.

Sydney Janet Kaplan, in "Passionate Portrayal of Things to Come: Doris Lessing's recent fiction", in Twentieth-Century Women Novelists (1982), argues that, since

the evolution of consciousness in Lessing's fiction is towards the universal, it necessitates a change in her methods of characterization as well, if she is to express the immediate relationship between the illusion of a self-contained ego and the reality of universal forces, powers, currents, and cosmic energies. (5)

Perhaps, after all, D.J. Enright's intuitive conclusion, that the Martha of this last book does not connect with the Martha of the first book, is correct. But not because of an artistic weakness on Lessing's part, but rather because the character has evolved

to such a degree that she is almost disconnected from her own past.

Jenny Taylor, in her "Introduction: situating reading" to Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing (1982), says that as the series progresses, "increasingly, explicit forms of fabulation and manifestations of unreason and transgression--dreams, visions, a gamut of disturbed or violent psychic states---press up against the realistic narrative, but they never quite operate as a Gothic or uncanny subversion of it." (6) Clearly, Doris Lessing is playing with technique in The Four-Gated City. In Taylor's book of criticism, Ann Scott, in "The more recent writings: sufism, mysticism and politics," tells us that

the Sufi voice in The Four-Gated City, therefore, works both overtly and, if it's meaningful to speak in this way, since Lessing herself is so attentive to the relation between spoken and unspoken, as the 'unconscious' of the text. The body of the novel calls on a range of different vocabularies: those of psychotherapy (ideas of 'containing', and 'working through'), telecommunications (radio sets, being 'plugged in'), and of religion (Christian images of the Station of the Cross, Martha's experience of the devil). (170)

The idea of the 'unconscious' is important because it is one of the themes to be explored by Lessing, both in relation to her characters and in relation to her text. The different vocabularies reflect the metafictional element of this novel.

But there is something beyond the desire for the metafictional in this work. "The novel unfolds on two levels simultaneously: the literal or phenomenal plane traces development of events in the macrocosm, the world of other

people, while the symbolic plane connects those events to the microcosm of Martha Quest's own consciousness" (130) says Roberta Rubenstein in The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness (1979). The individual ego that had been the focus of the work in the first three books had begun to expand, by the time Lessing wrote Landlocked, into a representation of a number of characters. This process is expanded in The Four-Gated City with the presentation not only of the thoughts of other characters, but also of a certain amount of overlap in consciousnesses between her characters, so that they begin to merge, as we shall see.

In addition, techniques of narration become instrumental in what Lessing is saying both about identity and about the fictional itself. As Scholes and Kellogg argue in The Nature of Narrative (1966), "by giving himself a fictional shape [the author] has entered the ironic gap, which now lies not between author or narrator and characters but between limited understanding which is real, and an ideal of absolute truth which is itself suspect. This irony cuts in two directions simultaneously." (277) I would add that this series has not only represented the very real gap between the ideal but illusory 'omniscient narrator' and the limited but tangible perceptions of real people at any given point in their lives, but that it has also led us to evolve in awareness along with the protagonist to a point where we are ready for deeper understandings of both Martha and ourselves. Throughout The Four-Gated City, there

seems to be a desire, which was hinted at in the 'real' quotations of her earlier epigraphs, for Lessing to create a fictional documentary--that is, a blend of the real and the fictional which will make of this work both a record of things-as-they-are, and allow her to project into things-as-they-might-be.

The Four-Gated City begins from the point of view of a limited-third-person narrative. Significantly, the ironic narrator has disappeared entirely. There appear to be only two points of view in the first part of this novel: Martha's perceptions, which are often as ironic as the narrator's had been in the earlier novels, and those of the omniscient narrator who tells of events without editorial comment. We follow Martha through London as she tries on various personae, even going so far as to create names and fictitious pasts for herself in an effort to avoid the traps of social identity. Martha perceives a name and a history to represent an "imposed personality" (TFGC 25) like the personalities of "Matty" or "Mrs. Knowell" or "Mrs. Hesse", which seem to have no more connection to the person she is at this time than the personalities she invents for herself.

If the narrator's perceptions at this point have been subsumed by Martha's, this suggests that the narrator herself might be another "imposed personality". This supports my idea of the autobiographical connection between Martha and Lessing. An autobiographical narrator is natural in looking backward toward the past; omniscience about the past is easy. But as Martha

approaches our and Lessing's present, it is no longer easy, or perhaps even possible, to continue to be omniscient.

Interior monologues, which begin as early as page twenty of this novel, enforce our identification with the protagonist, and signal that internal or psychological events will dominate this book. Martha's thoughts ramble in a way similar to stream-of-consciousness writing.

She had to walk across the river, walk into a decision; not loiter and dally until she found herself back at the cafe with a joke that was the currency of false pleading: she had caught herself thinking, I'll go back into the cafe and take off this coat before I ... the coat was too hot. Mrs. Van had had it during the war, that is, when skirts were knee-high and shoulders thick. ... She must buy a new coat. But she had no money. There were five pounds left. Which was why decisions were imminent and responsibility inevitable. She must make that telephone call today: she was to telephone Marjorie's sister Phoebe. (TFGC 20-21)

This mixture of past, present and future thoughts challenges the singularity of narrative perspective, as do all attempts to represent consciousness rather than events. The narrator has merged with the protagonist. Indeed, it is through Martha's eyes that we see the action of this novel and through her voice that we hear the editorial comments which had come from the ironic narrator in the earlier novels. "But now Martha could see perfectly well why her clothes, every bit as expensive, and certainly more attractive, that is, if clothes are to be judged by what they can do for the appearance of who wears them, would not do, and why the black dress did: she was not in the right uniform." (TFGC 35-36)

The narrator becomes identified, soon in the novel, with that part of Martha which is the 'watcher'. "Martha's daytime brain had become detached, wary, watchful, on guard--to protect another part of it which had just started to wake, to listen, because of the fast walk through the moving, lit streets."

(TFGC 45) This watcher, thus made explicit, becomes the 'teller' of the story.

Walking down damp smelling pavements under the wet London sky in the summer of five years after the war, she was (but really became, as if nothing had intervened), Martha Quest, a young girl sitting under the tree from where she could see a great hot landscape and a sky full of birds and clouds. ... Or she was the Martha who had pushed a small child under leafy avenues with the smell of roses coming off town gardens. But really, there she was: she was, nothing to do with Martha, or any other name she might have attached to her, ... (TFGC 48)

Martha-as-teller describes Martha-the-doer as 'she'. Later Lynda will warn Martha not to tell the psychiatrist, Dr. Lamb, about the watcher, since this will be diagnosed as schizophrenia and she will be given drugs or shock therapy in order to kill the second voice. This idea of schizophrenia, of displacement of personality, is interesting, because the very nature of narrative, particularly autobiographical narrative, is to take one's own experiences and look at them as if they had happened to another person. Also, we could argue that the reader-who-is-reading is conscious of the reader-who-identifies-with-the-protagonist, an equally schizophrenic state, if by schizophrenia we mean the presence of multiple perspectives existing simultaneously in consciousness.

That such a reading of Lessing is not only permissible but necessary is argued by Claire Sprague in Rereading Doris Lessing: Narrative Patterns of Doubling and Repetition (1987). Sprague says that in all her fiction, Lessing "explores fixed, fragmented, double, variable, and multiple identities." (6) And not only are the identities of narrator and character played with, but so is the identity of the text itself. Sprague argues that "The Four-Gated City contains a less obvious set of shadow fictions in Thomas's testament, Dorothy's diaries, Martha's notes, Mark's walls. These buried texts become an anguished echo to the primary fiction. In these two works, The Golden Notebook and The Four-Gated City, Lessing insistently records her dissatisfactions with the limits of existing forms, with the limits of writing itself" (10-11). Recall the epigraph placed at the beginning of this chapter, from Lessing's Preface to The Golden Notebook. "... how can this small neat thing be true when what I experienced was so rough and apparently formless and unshaped." (ASPV 32) Obviously, in The Four-Gated City, Lessing is attempting to leave behind small, neat, traditional realism for the complexities of interior monologue and metafictional elements in order to more closely represent the complexities of psychological realities and to challenge our acceptance of fictional realities.

For instance, fairly early in the novel, Lessing inserts thoughts, italicized and in the first person, as she begins to allow Martha's consciousness to dominate this book. "If Martha

were to go in now, unexpected, after two unexplained nights, she could only do so as 'Matty'. And she was damned if she would. If I get taken over by her, then I'll have her riding me for the rest of the day, and I won't have her around when I'm lunching with Phoebe." (86) Martha's actions at this point, while struggling against conventionality, are hardly insane, but these are thoughts, not only of some aspect of herself as 'outside' of her, but of persecution by this other Martha; these thoughts might easily belong later to a recognizably mentally-ill character, Lynda (who Martha has not yet met). But the first-person enforces our identification with the character. It is no coincidence that we are forced to identify with such alienated thoughts, for this is the direction the novel is taking, and this is what Lessing must want us to experience.

The problem of identity is not only presented with regard to Lessing's characters, but also with regard to her story itself. The language of the novel challenges the assumptions of fictional reality. For instance, the language of utopia is introduced through the internal fiction of Mark's book, A City in the Desert. Mark gets the idea from a talk he has with Martha, angrily explaining to her the sort of utopia he believes her to be searching for. This section utilizes story-book language. "It was a gardened city. A great number of the inhabitants spent their lives on the gardens, and the fountains and parks. Even the trees and plants were known for their properties and qualities and grown exactly, in a relation to other plants, and

to people and buildings, ..." (TFGC 151). Mark, in telling this story, has become the omniscient narrator. But Martha mocks this narrative, adding to his description that "'around that city, just like all the cities we know, like Johannesburg for instance, grew up a shadow city of poverty and beastliness. A shanty town. Around that marvellous ordered city, another one of hungry and dirty and short-lived people.'" (TFGC 151) Martha has become another omniscient narrator, trying to insert reality into fiction, as Lessing herself is doing. Both Mark and Martha become caught up in the story nonetheless, and Mark expands this fantasy into a full-length novel. Lessing both mocks and acknowledges the power of fiction by having a number of people write to Mark, after the publication of A City in the Desert, wanting to know its location. It is one of Lessing's ironies that the book becomes a blueprint for a real city eventually in spite of itself.

The epigraph to Part Two is a lengthy quotation which deals with one man's thoughts about the properties and elements of water. "Ultimately the whole thing dissolved into systems of formulae that were all somehow connected with each other, and in the whole wide world there were only a few dozen people who thought alike about even as simple a thing as water; ... So it must be said that if a man just starts thinking a bit he gets into what one might call pretty disorderly company." (TFGC 165) Lessing challenges rational thought as a way of understanding reality, and this quotation reflects the difficulty of

understanding even the simplest thing through attempting to understand its parts. Perhaps Lessing is suggesting that only through the unifying effects of symbolism and metafictional elements can one begin to create a text that in any way accurately reflects reality.

In Part Two, we again have a limited third-person narrator. We see through Martha's eyes, and through her language. This language sounds so much like the language of Doris Lessing's essays that the link between Martha and Lessing is hard to deny. "A bad time is announced by an event. A woman gasses herself because her will to survive is exhausted. This event is different in quality from previous events. It is surprising. But it should not have been surprising. It could have been foreseen." (TFGC 167)

Point of view in this novel is constantly shifting. After having been immersed in Martha's perceptions for a time, we leave them behind in the second internal text of this novel, which comes in the form of Dorothy's notes about household problems. Dorothy, Lynda's friend from the mental institution, has been attempting to resolve simple household problems like a leaking tap. Dorothy's notes document the breakdown of the systems which support society, as well as perhaps the breakdown of communication, because Dorothy's biggest problem seems to be that she simply cannot get in touch with the man or men who should be available to help her. Written in the first person, the rage and frustration of these notes reflect the way anyone would react to

this situation, and this reinforces the sense of there being something real, as opposed to fictional, about the presentation of these events.

The epigraph to Part Three of this novel offers "Various remarks about the weather from school textbooks." (TFGC 301) These also reinforce the link that Lessing is building between the real and the fictional, and emphasize the universality toward which the novel is moving. For instance, we are told, "Lightning is the parent of fire on our earth. ... Thus, in a drama miles above our heads earth is host to rain which is suspended in air where fire is implicit in the separation of cloud and earth masses." (TFGC 301) Lessing's epigraphs are becoming more and more cryptic. The simplicity of the early epigraphs, which told us fairly directly how to read the text which followed, have been replaced by words which we are not sure how to take. What has lightning got to do with Martha Quest? We must think deeply to see the connection between quotations like the one above and the collective consciousness which is introduced in this section.

The opening words of this section seem to come directly from the author, bypassing the narrator entirely. "1956, as everyone knows, was a climactic year, a water-shed, a turning point, a cross-roads; it has become one of the years one refers to: oh, yes, that year, of course!" (TFGC 303) The authorial, conversational quality of these words detaches them from the fiction which surrounds them, and acts as another introduction of

the 'real' into the 'fictional', since the events of 1956 are documentable.

Lessing challenges the fictional in a different way later in this section, when she records a conversation between Paul and Martha in the same way in which interviews with celebrities (including Lessing herself) are recorded. For instance:

Paul: 'If I do steal, and I'm not admitting it, then I'm stealing love. Anyone can tell you that.'

Martha: 'That isn't how the shopkeepers see it.'

Paul: 'They've had a progressive school on their doorstep for years, so it's time they did then!'

Martha: 'The headmaster says you must leave.' (TFGC 316)

A second conversation between Martha and Paul is also set out as an interview, or as a play (TFGC 327). To describe these conversations as the text of a play is perhaps more appropriate, for they reflect conventions in which Paul plays his part, naughty schoolboy, against Martha's part of stern parent. Both Lessing's language, and the form of presentation which she uses, reflect her self-consciousness about the nature of fiction.

Lessing's push away from focus on the individual toward a more global or universal perspective is symbolized by the manner in which her protagonist, Martha, becomes increasingly linked to two other characters, Mark and Lynda. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis says in Writing Beyond the Ending, "the collective protagonist is announced at the Aldermaston March against nuclear weapons in 1961, when Martha, Lynda, and Mark watch themselves in various other triplets as 'variations on a theme' (FGC,397)." (197) We follow as the collective protagonist, "Mar/k/tha explore exterior time, political choices, historical action, utopian

possibilities; Lynd/Martha work with a transhistorical stratum, probe psychological depths, and experience madness." (194)

The protagonist of the Bildungsroman has suddenly become a triplet because, as Nancy Shields says in "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way," "Lessing's protagonists are at various stages in 'blasting' their way through the solid wall of the normal ego to the realization of a 'new kind of ego functioning.'" (Pratt and Dembo 155). What happens to narrative when the protagonist becomes a triplet in this way? Claire Sprague argues that "Mark and Lynda are more permanent pieces of [Martha]. Mark could be called the 'public' side of Martha and Lynda is her innermost self." (92) Sprague suggests that "one of the rhythms of the novel is the movement from individuals to groups. Sometimes Martha, the protagonist, is eclipsed; sometimes she is the sole actor in a chapter." (101) Thus, not only has the narrator become merged with Martha throughout most of The Four-Gated City, but also Martha herself has ceased to be a single entity. What then are the implications for the autobiographical narrator? Perhaps Lessing is expanding her vision so that the story does not only represent her, Doris Lessing's history and consciousness, but also that of her entire generation.

This is supported by what she herself said in an interview with Jonah Raskin in 1969. Asked by Raskin what she considered to be her relationship between her fiction and herself, Lessing replied, "Since writing The Golden Notebook I've become less personal. ... I've stopped saying, 'This is mine, this is my

experience.'" (ASPV 68) Lessing describes the artist as "a mirror of society." (ASPV 68)

Not only is Lessing attempting to bridge the gap between the separate identities of her characters, says Sprague, but also the gap between people and environment. She says that one way which Lessing dramatizes the interaction between the individual and the collective is "to make her environments mirrors of the self. Something unprecedented happens to the character-environment in The Four-Gated City; the walls, rooms, and houses, people inhabit become living extensions of their bodily selves." (8) For instance, Mark's entire room has become a text: the walls are covered with notes, newspaper and magazine clippings, all kinds of information. Even the ceiling has been used, to place "dates and facts about space travel, such as: 16th September, 1959: A rocket launched from the earth lands on the moon." (TFGC 448) Mark has been trying to make sense of the chaos of data available to him by compartmentalizing it, in order to try to understand what is going on in the world. On his walls (and ceiling), "this fact, or statement, would have fixed by it a star, or a marker, in some colour (Mark used about a dozen of them) which connected it with one, or several facts, or statements in different parts of the room." (TFGC 448) This desire to find rational explanations, to connect in a logical way one event with another, is symbolic of the way Western man has attempted to understand reality in the last two thousand years, and as such, is doomed to failure within the cosmology of this

novel. As Nancy Shields says in "Doris Lessing and the Sufi Way," "Mark Coldridge of The Four-Gated City desires to know another form of reality but is trapped by his limited modes of perception." (Pratt and Dembo 158)

The epigraph to Part Four of The Four-Gated City offers an explanation of Lessing's interest in shifting narrative technique and the treatment of character, from Idries Shah's The Sufis. "The difference between all evolution up to date and the present need for evolution is that for the last ten thousand years or so we have been given the responsibility of a conscious evolution. So essential is this more rarefied evolution that our future depends on it." (TFGC 461) Conscious evolution depends on our ability to become or remain conscious, aware. Conventional narrative lulls us into an acceptance of its values and ideals because it follows an expected pattern. We are 'comfortable' reading it, and in fact, are unlikely to think of it as 'fiction' while we are in the process of reading it. The shifting voices and vocabularies of The Four-Gated City challenge us to question the fiction, to remain awake while we read, in fact, to 'watch' ourselves read. This is one of the aims of post-modernist literature--but the ideology behind post-modernist literature is not necessarily the same as Lessing's.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that:

after almost the whole of five novels has been told in an empirical realism that depends on conventional frames of time and space, on understanding of the limits and shapes of consciousness, and on agreement about characters' boundaries, Lessing breaks with these strategies. Notably, she contests the sense of the

fictional itself and its center in the bounded individual. She moves the fiction into the future, postulating a growth in the telepathic potential of individual consciousness. (187)

In the climactic Part Four of The Four-Gated City, the last gate is madness, loss of self, before one merges into the collective consciousness, and the narrative technique for describing madness must of necessity be interior monologue, because how can anyone describe such journeys into the inner self from the outside?

Martha ventures voluntarily into madness, which contradicts our conventional sense of mental illness as a 'disease' visited upon us against our wills. She is following the path of Lynda Coldridge, who is, says Mona Knapp in Doris Lessing, a "prototype which goes back to antiquity and the mad (or blind) seer, who alone speaks the truth but is scorned by the world as a lunatic." (99) Martha has attempted to understand extrasensory phenomena and madness through reading. This self-reflexive passage explains what Martha has been able to learn through the "shelves full of books" (TFGC 530) which she borrows. She realizes that there are many "different languages, or dialects, describing the same thing" (TFGC 530), the same psychological truths. She also realizes that she, and her whole generation, have been "programmed" to think of these things as "'dottiness', 'eccentricity', shadiness, unpleasantness." (TFGC 530) We are being warned about the power of words to 'program' us, to make us dismiss whole areas of investigation.

Martha's ventures into madness are described through interior monologue and, as another internal text, through entries

from a journal which Martha keeps during her madness; these are again stream-of-consciousness-like passages.

This is Dali landscape. I'm plugged into Dali mind. If I could draw, paint, then I'd paint this, Dali picture. Why does only Dali plug into Dali country? No Dali and me. Therefore Dali and--plenty of others. But nurse says, delusions. If ignorant, does not think: This is Dali country. Thinks: That's a silly picture. If educated, knows, thinks: I am a copycat. Or, that must be a Dali picture I haven't seen? (Perhaps it is.) (TFGC 558)

Martha's notes even offer an apologia for the stream-of-consciousness technique which uses words to describe mental processes which are so often pictures rather than words. "Works like this. Thought comes into mind. If conscious, thought in words. If not, if ordinary association-thought then it isn't words. Words are when one stands back to look." (TFGC 565)

The notes use the vocabulary of telecommunications to explain the universal consciousness. "It was as if a million radio sets ran simultaneously, and her mind plugged itself in fast to one after another." (TFGC 513) This is something much deeper than stream-of-consciousness--it is more like stream-of-collective consciousness, and Martha begins to realize her connectedness to the whole. "She thought, or wondered: it is in Lynda's head or in mine? ... well, of course, it is not a question of 'Lynda's mind' or 'Martha's mind'; it is the human mind, or part of it, and Lynda, Martha, can choose to plug in or not." (TFGC 513) The use of telecommunications jargon places an essentially mystical notion, universal consciousness, in technical language, 'radio set', 'plugged in', which we accept

much more readily; it is also an example of Lessing's juxtaposition of the rational and the anti-rational.

Just the same, lest we become too comfortable with the recognizable vocabulary of telecommunications, Lessing introduces another internal fiction, the novel by Jimmy Woods called The Force Dealers. Contrary to Mark's utopian vision, Jimmy's novel is about psychic vampires: "a certain type of human being had learned to 'plug in' to the energies of other beings, and live off them like a species of vampire." (TFGC 489) Jimmy Woods is a character almost wholly antipathetic to Martha; he invents, and then manufactures for the government, a machine that destroys people's minds. That his novel uses the same vocabulary as Martha's notes warns us that the power of rhetoric can be used to create or to destroy.

Martha learns about the power of words by 'attending' Lynda during one of her sessions of madness. Lynda babbles disconnected words (the opposite of Mark's extremely ordered room), and Martha learns that Lynda is listening to each individual word. This is Lessing at her most self-reflexive. "The words kept dropping into the listening space that was Martha's mind. She knew that if a person were to take one word, and listen; or a pebble or a jewel and look at it, the word, the stone, would give up, in the end, its own meaning and the meaning of everything." (TFGC 509) Lessing is asking that we listen to each word of her text, and the shifts in narrative technique are

one device for reminding us to be conscious of this book as a text.

There is an extraordinary sequence told as an interior monologue, in which Martha, in a state of supremely heightened awareness, the aftermath of one of her journeys into madness, goes out into the world and observes human beings as though through the eyes of an alien being. "What an extraordinary race, or near-race of half, uncompleted creatues. There they were, all soft like pale slugs, or dark slugs, with their limp flabby flesh, with hair sprouting from it, and the things like hooves on their feet, and wads or fells of hair on the tops of their heads." (TFGC 521) Not only does this passage convey an alienated mental state, but it slides into a more obvious social criticism. "Where was one person who was healthy, did not wear glasses, hearing-aids, false teeth, who slept well, who did not take half a dozen kinds of drugs, who did not attend doctors, psychiatrists? This was one of the favoured countries of the world, a country which others envied, and these were the favoured of this country." (TFGC 523) Martha's voice has merged with Lessing's again in this essay-like passage.

During Martha's 'madness', the narrator's voice is still heard--but it is equally Martha's perception of herself as she would appear from the outside. "Someone observing Martha would have seen a woman lying on the floor, beating her head on it, weeping, crying, complaining, calling out to a large variety of dieties, official and unofficial ... then jumping up as if

galvanized by conscience or command into some kind of frenzied but absurd activity ... while tears streamed down her face."

(TFGC 550-551) We live inside and outside Martha, even as she appears to be doing herself. "I've been turned inside out like a glove or a dress. I've been like the negative of a photograph. Or a mirror image. I've seen the underneath of myself." (TFGC 568-569)

If we have been forced to identify with Martha through Lessing's use of a limited third-person narrator, we must at this point be feeling very uncomfortable, for mental illness is something that happens to other people, not ourselves, but it is perhaps important to Lessing's message that we allow ourselves to be drawn into Martha's experience. Nancy Shields, again in her discussion of Lessing and Sufism, says that "the Lessing protagonist chooses to manipulate the energy generated by her anxiety and to use it in an exploration of self, in an attempt to bridge the gap within herself between the restriction of acceptable knowledge and a deeper experience of knowing." (156) What is important is not how Martha reaches new levels of consciousness, but that she does, that she progresses beyond conventional understanding in time to participate in the building of an alternative future for those who can see the coming disaster.

The omniscient narrator returns with Martha's return to sanity. Time becomes increasingly foreshortened toward the end of the novel, and so many changes in such a short period of time

can really only be described by such a narrator. We retreat from Bildungsroman entirely, into a more obvious kind of documentary describing these 'last days' of normal England, yet we still follow the story through Martha's consciousness, which has expanded so that she even recognizes her affinity to the house itself, in a passage which recalls Claire Sprague's assertion about characters' affinity for their environments:

To sit in a house which is going to be pulled down, left derelict, manipulated in some way or another, is the oddest of the forms of patience. Through here, where one's femur makes a plane with the door handle, will run a shelf? The line from the head to left ankle will be that of a dividing wall? Or, floors rising and falling as they do, one walks with one's feet on air twenty-six inches below this floor (ceiling) existing now which will vanish into dust and bits of lath and plaster.

Particularly dust. (TFGC 579)

That the house in which Martha has found some meaning to her life is about to be pulled down is symbolic of her loss of ego self.

The final warning of the coming disaster, though, comes in the form of another text, a newspaper article entitled "RAF Man 'Victim of Porton Nerve Gas'/(Report in The Observer, August 1968)." (TFGC 608) In the highly-censored language of the mass media, we are told that "almost certainly this mild exposure occurred as a result of a field experiment to assess the vulnerability of tanks, ... Mr. Cockayne has spent fourteen years trying to establish the cause of a series of nervous breakdowns. He has tried three times to commit suicide." (TFGC 608)

That the narrative ends with an internal text which is highly unreliable is emblematic of Lessing's attitude toward her

fiction. It is, therefore, all the more interesting that the narrative proper is followed by an 'Appendix' which purports to be "Various Documents, Private and Official, Dated between 1995 and 2000, in the possession of Amanda, Francis Coldridge's stepdaughter, destroyed by her before the Northern National Area (formerly North China) was overrun by the Mongolian National Area." (TFGC 611) The letters which follow were obviously not destroyed, since they are here for our benefit, as part of the archives of the 'Mongolian National Area'. If the epigraph itself is suspect, what must we think of the information which follows it?

The epistolary form, which offers a first-person narrative, has a high degree of believability, as well as a strong pull toward identification with the narrator. When we read "I", we insert ourselves for the narrator. But what we read in the letters from Francis Coldridge, Mark's and Lynda's son who is in charge of one of the African settlements after the disaster in which much of England has been rendered unlivable, is a 'history' of the future. To speak about our own future in the past tense is to suggest a fatalistic attitude which I'm not sure that Lessing intended, but which is the only way to describe this possible future in realistic language.

There is also a letter from "Martha Hesse addressed to Francis Coldridge. It was written in an old school exercise book. When it came into Francis's hands he wrapped it in Top Strength Barrier Paper and wrote on the outside: From the

contaminated island of Faris, off the North-West Coast of Scotland: Dangerous Material." (TFGC 649) That the final words of Martha Quest should be marked as dangerous is one of the final ironies of this book. This letter is, of course, another first-person narrative, and it seems at last that the narrator and the character have achieved the complete fusion that they have been striving toward over five books. The exact nature of the catastrophe is described rather cryptically by Martha:

when we left the beaches were piled with stinking fish, the birds were dropping dead from the sky, and for miles inland, there was a creeping death that spread from the sea's edge. ... it coincided with an announcement on radio that a Chinese aeroplane had crashed in Oxfordshire. A pilot 'choosing freedom' had got into a warplane full of particularly lethal nuclear devices destined for delivery to the guerrilla armies in Brazil. His crash-landing did for Britain. (TFGC 652)

Lessing has a final joke against her utopian concept of paranormal abilities as not only real, but also representative of a certain stage in human evolution. Martha sends one of the most gifted psychic children to Francis in Africa, as a kind of gift to him. But the child is sidetracked by bureaucracy into another settlement where he is classed as "subnormal to the 7th, and unfit for academic education. But fit for 3rd grade work. ... on the vegetable farm". (TFGC 664)

One of the last documents in the Appendix is an excerpt from Mark Coldridge's diary, rational as always. "Last night I dreamed of Lynda. My son dreams of her, he says. He says she isn't dead. I'm not going to ask what he means. I can't stand that nasty mixture of irony and St. John of the Cross and the

Arabian Nights that they all (Lynda, Martha, Francis) went in for. He says Martha is alive. He says he 'feels' she is. I'm not going to ask why or how or where. If they find the thought of forgiving ghosts a help, then why not." (TFGC 667) Perhaps this is Lessing's final message. What is beyond identity? We have left behind the narrator. Epistolary form forces identification with the teller and enhances our belief in what it tells. Perhaps Lessing's final statement is that the line between the fictional and the documentary goes both ways. Martha does live, within the minds of each person who reads this series. If the fictional is also on some level the real, perhaps the real is more questionable (and shapable) than we have yet acknowledged. Lessing's apocalyptic vision, as well as the language used to describe it and the form it comes in, challenge us to look at 'factual' documents in our society and ponder how close we may really be to her 'science-fictional' future.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how conventional narrative technique in the first three novels, Martha Quest, A Proper Marriage, and A Ripple From the Storm, reflects the conventional methods through which Martha Quest seeks to find meaning in her life. The story is told by an ironic narrator who not only knows the hearts and minds of all the characters, but who often addresses the reader in a direct nineteenth-century novelist's manner. Doris Lessing uses epigraphs and the vocabularies or language of family, social, and political discourse, to signal to the reader the futility of Martha's attempts to find meaning in any of these ways.

By the time she wrote the fourth novel, Landlocked, however, Lessing had become a student of the Islamic mystic sect of Sufism, which was to have a profound effect on her style and her aims in writing. The "teaching stories" which are found in epigraphs to Landlocked and The Four-Gated City reveal not only the use of humour as a teaching device, but also a problematic attitude toward identity as well as language itself which is reflected in the last two books.

The problem which I set out to resolve in the first place was, what is the role of the narrator in this series? That the ironic narrator is subsumed by Martha in The Four-Gated City is not so much a solution to this problem as it is another problem.

I have identified the narrator with Lessing through an examination of Lessing's biography in relation to the attitudes and events of her novel-series. If the narrator is also Martha, and we begin to see the narrative strictly through her eyes, where is the author? The third-person narrative becomes a thinner and thinner mask for Lessing's polemic as the series progresses. The events in Martha's life in the last book may not be exact parallels to the events of Lessing's life, but they certainly reflect Lessing's personal interests and political involvements (for example, communism and the peace movement).

Also, by the time Lessing wrote The Four-Gated City, she had begun to play with the art of writing itself. This last novel is littered with internal fictions which challenge the verisimilitude of the external book. At the same time as Lessing is introducing these metafictional elements into her work, she also intersperses her fiction with such a quantity of verifiable facts that we are tempted to read the novel as a documentary of the breakdown of western civilization.

Then, of course, there is the question of the ending to her novel and to her series. Why this apocalyptic vision? And what has this got to do with the evolution of the protagonist? While it has been the tendency of critics to assume that this novel represents a typical twentieth-century nihilist/existentialist vision (Frederick R. Karl and Mona Knapp are two who have suggested this), I think that if we follow the progression of the

series as it has developed, the ending cannot be so readily categorized.

Just as conventional modes of existence have failed Martha in her quest-for-meaning, so conventional modes of co-existence have failed our world. And as Martha has expanded into an impersonal protagonist by the end of the series, it is possible that society too must expand its vision of the possible. If there is an increased hope for peace among mankind through raising our consciousnesses toward the recognition of our common identity, then this series is not only not a nihilistic vision, but also a beacon for us all; as Shields has noted, "furthermore, Lessing, as the Sufis, sees that man's knowledge of perceptual energy is still in an evolutionary stage, even for the more advanced." (163) We need to stretch the limits of our minds to find new ways of looking at old problems if we are going to use the power of human creativity to save ourselves. The moral, intellectual, and spiritual challenges of this novel-series do just that.

Certainly, more work needs to be done on Lessing's use of narrative technique, particularly with relation to the ideologies behind it. Closer linguistic analysis should reveal the contradictions in her idealism and cynicism. She does appear to think we are condemned to self-destruction, but she also cannot present us with a picture that is totally without hope. Her later space fiction, the "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series, would lend itself richly to such study, for there are many

metafictional elements in it which have not, to my knowledge, been thoroughly analysed. Lessing herself (in her Preface to The Golden Notebook in particular) scorns such study, yet if the study enriches the understanding of her readers, present and future, of the very points she wishes to make, then I trust she would forgive us our trespasses into academic criticism.

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