

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
FROM MARXISM TO MYTH:
A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF DORIS LESSING
by
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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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For George Sajeck, my father:

He would have appreciated his name here more than
an epitaph on a "half-acre" tomb.

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Lorelei Cederstrom

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Introduction

Although Doris Lessing published her first novel more than twenty-five years ago, only quite recently has she acquired attentive and respectful critics outside Britain. In the last several years, a flurry of interest has grown up around this novelist, perhaps because her words have finally reached an audience able to appreciate her message. Doris Lessing has become, suddenly, a "standard" author. For example, one of her short stories, "From Room Fifteen," appears in the latest revision of the Norton Anthology of English Literature. Two book-length studies of Lessing and her work have been published; several doctoral dissertations have come out, and there are an ever-increasing number of articles on her work in the scholarly journals. Indeed, Contemporary Literature (Autumn, 1973) has published an issue devoted entirely to Lessing criticism. Courses on her works are being taught on university campuses, and many women's studies and contemporary novel courses include selections from her writings. In short, Lessing, who is both a prolific novelist and short-story writer, has begun to receive the attention of critics.

Critical acclaim brings with it a new set of problems and no one is more aware of the peculiarities of this attention than Lessing herself. She has described the kind of letters she receives from people all over the world, each

commenting on what he or she believes to be the "message" of one novel or other. Lessing cites three major groups into which this correspondence falls. She writes:

One letter is entirely about the sex war, about man's inhumanity to woman and woman's inhumanity to man, and the writer has produced pages and pages all about nothing else, for she--but not always a she--can't see anything else in the book.

The second is about politics, probably from an old Red like myself, and he or she writes many pages about politics, and never mentions any other theme....

The third letter, once rare, but now catching up on the others is written by a man or woman who can see nothing in it but the theme of mental illness.

But it is the same book.¹

In somewhat over-simplified fashion, Lessing has cited the three major themes of her novels: Feminism, Marxism, and Psychology; and each theme has attracted its own group of critics. Interest in Lessing within the United States began about the same time that radical Feminism achieved international prominence and it is not surprising that so many extremist women have been drawn to a novelist writing so truthfully about their lives. Problems began to arise, however, when Lessing asserted that she was not an adherent of Feminism, Marxism, or any other "ism."

Feminist and Marxist critics alike, who attended the series of lectures Lessing gave at the New School for Social Research in New York, were shocked by the things which she told them about their lives. First, Lessing denied the efficacy of any political action. In spite of the fact that she was a Communist when she began her career, she told her

audience repeatedly that she does not believe in any of the "so-called authorities" whether external or internal.

"People must learn to trust their own experiences," she said. She emphasized that she wants people "to learn to look at themselves; that is what her novels are about."²

Statements like this were bound to arouse the animosity of critics with a particular bias. Marxist critics, for example, who expected Lessing to remain a committed revolutionary, were upset not only by her words, but by the direction of her recent novels as well. They felt, on the whole, that her movement from social realism in the early novels, to mythology and psychology in the later ones, was a kind of heresy. Unable to accept this change in Lessing, they continue to force her later works into the earlier patterns. Such recent articles as Anne M. Mulkeen's "Twentieth Century Realism: the 'Grid' Structure of The Golden Notebook"³ assert that Lessing continues to be a Marxist because her novels reveal the dialectic between the individual and the complexities of modern life. This works very well until Briefing for a Descent into Hell, where the complexities of modern life have only the most tenuous value in relation to the complexities of the inner world.

Feminist critics have been equally dismayed; for how can a writer who portrays women's problems so accurately fail to carry the banners against male dominance in our society?

Lessing refuses, however, to become a partisan in the sex war, for she is more interested in the psychological dimensions of male-female relationships. A critic who approaches Lessing from the Feminist angle may well wind up in the same situation in which Florence Howe was placed during an interview. Howe disliked the male characters in The Golden Notebook, and queried Lessing about them.

F.H. But your male characters in that book are really very unpleasant, all of them. There isn't a good male character.

D.L. I don't think that's true. What's that doctor's name?...Why is he unpleasant?...

F.H. Well, he's marvelous to a point then he leaves.

D.L. Well, men do leave, after all. That doesn't make them less marvelous.⁴

Such honesty to herself and her characters creates serious problems for anyone with equally strong ideas of Lessing's place in the scheme of critical analysis.

In spite of the difficulty of pinning Lessing down, her aesthetic principles are discernible and have evolved gradually over the course of her career. It is the purpose of this study to trace the logic of Lessing's development, observing the elements that remain the same as well as the changes, while exploring the Marxist, Feminist, and psychological patterns as they are utilized within the framework of her unique talent. Psychological criticism, provided that it is not reductive, remains the most inclusive way to account for her later novels, for it is clear that midway through the Children Of Violence series, a "new" Lessing

began to emerge. Martha Quest, that most political of all protagonists outside of Soviet-realist novels, began to explore the labyrinths of her own mind rather than the dynamics of social action. After Landlocked, the fourth volume in the series, political action is always secondary to the inner workings of characters who are undergoing a crisis before change.

The changes in Lessing's interests parallel certain changes in her life. She moved from politics--she was a card-carrying Communist in Rhodesia--to the world within, probably as a result of her own psycholanalysis undertaken with a woman whom she describes as a "Roman Catholic, Jungian and Conservative."⁵ Lessing notes that in spite of the fact that she did not like much of the terminology used, the analyst was helpful to her because of the quality of her ideas. Quite simply, Lessing has become involved with ideas that can only be termed Jungian. Lessing herself, as well as all the major characters in her most recent novels, is involved in what Jung terms "the process of individuation." Lessing's distrust of collectives was engendered by this later interest in Jung, for with Jung, she has come to realize that the only efficacious changes occur within the individual himself, rather than through group action. In spite of the fact that so much of Lessing's fiction is devoted to social and political activity, her ideas about the individual and the group are, in the end, much like Jung's, who writes: "In the last

analysis the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world, ultimately springs as a gigantic summation from the hidden sources within individuals. In our most private and subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our ages, and its sufferers, but also its makers."⁶ Martha Quest, who tests her individuality against all the collectives, is a prime example of this trend of thought. This is another important aspect of Lessing's break with the Marxists, for at the New School Lessing clearly established the individual rather than the economic order as the prime mover in social change. At her lectures, discussing the problems of the early Feminists, she recalled the way scorn was heaped upon these women for asserting their basic human rights by going to restaurants alone, having male visitors in their rooms, believing in love outside of marriage, and so on. "We can see from looking at these women," Lessing said, "how it is possible for a social and moral climate to change without changing the economic base."⁷

Lessing believes that society is altered by the forces for change that irrupt in individuals. At the New School, Lessing described for her audience the ways in which they could take responsibility for their own lives. First, she emphasized that each must find "the self we are and were before the external/internal authorities got hold of us."

She suggested a number of ways to do this, methods which are, once again, indebted to Jungian analysis. Her list is short: "cultivate learning about your dream life, look at the group you're a part of and try to see which of the group's ideas are really yours, conjure up your earliest memories."

Lessing's most recent novels assert, repeatedly, the necessity of self-knowledge through the inward quest. Moreover, she attempts through formal experimentation to break down our ordinary kinds of perception. She wants to turn us back within, and provides a way out of the primordial maze by means of archetypal patterns and cosmic analogies. The Golden Notebook, Lessing's most difficult novel, is a key example. In it she traces the process of individuation in a neurotic, Marxist, Feminist character. Anna Wulf, the protagonist who is also a novelist, seeks relief from a writer's block from a Jungian analyst, disintegrates, and reintegrates as a new individuated personality. This novel is both a paradigm of Lessing's personal development and of her development as a novelist. The author's message has been consistent in the last four or five novels. In each case, the protagonist undergoes an experience much like that of Anna Wulf. Martha Quest, Professor Charles Watkins, Kate Brown, and the "Survivor" all experience a heightened awareness of what life is all about through contact with their inner, energizing centers. The overall process of development in Lessing's novels, then, is a movement from Marxism

to myth. Her early novels can be termed socialist-realist works as Lenin and Lukacs define such novels. In them, Lessing exhibits a belief in the Marxist premise which describes a unity between the individual and society creating "an organic world vision in which every action, thought and emotion of human beings is inseparably bound up with the life and struggles of the human community."⁸ In The Grass Is Singing, and the first three volumes of Children Of Violence, Mary Turner and Martha Quest are individuals fighting within and against a community more important than they are. These early works with their strong social orientation are novels in the conventional sense. From The Golden Notebook on, Lessing's novels assume a new quality and could better be termed mythic narratives.

Evelyn Hinz, in her seminal study of the distinctions between the novel and the mythic narrative,⁹ cites as a basis Mircea Eliade's studies of primitive and modern societies. Eliade feels that the most important distinction between the archaic world view and that of modern man "lies in the fact that the former feels himself indissolubly connected with the cosmos and cosmic rhythms, whereas the latter insists that he is connected only with history." Hinz continues, "Here in essence also lies the difference between the perspective of the novel and that of mythic narrative: in contrast to the novelist who, like modern man, is oriented toward history, the mythic artist, like archaic man, regards history

as illusion, and the activities, institutions, and values associated with it as profane or symptomatic of man's fallen condition. Like archaic man, the mythic artist conceives of reality as that which is imbued with the divine, that which is eternally recurrent, that which is transmitted in sacred history or myth." Lessing's career, then, includes both the novel and the mythic narrative and is characterized by the movement from one to the other.

While Lessing's early stories are more precisely novels than mythic narratives, there are some qualities of the latter present from the outset. Lessing, from the beginning of her career, was clearly influenced by D. H. Lawrence. This obvious influence has been cited by Lessing's main critics; however, her changing attitudes toward the Lawrencean content of her novels has not been discussed. While Lawrence was an important influence on the symbolism in The Grass Is Singing, and the vibrant descriptions of the living world in all of her novels, his predominant influence has been on her use of "cosmic consciousness," that feeling of unity with the life and order of the universe. There are differences in the way each writer perceives cosmic consciousness which must be noted. Lawrence experienced cosmic consciousness primarily through sex. In Lessing, on the other hand, the intense sense of being at one with the living cosmos is seen most frequently as a backdrop to failed lives, or as a commentary on the blindness of ordinary

life, with the crucial and important exception of Martha Quest's relationship with Thomas Stern. However, in most cases, cosmic unity, for Lessing, requires more than a man and a woman. For her vision is of a hierarchic society in which man, his social, biological and spiritual functions, are all linked to the natural hierarchy of earth, sun and planets. Moreover, Lessing's cosmic vision derives not from a mind-obliterating sexual experience, but from a mind-exploring breakdown, a psychic death and rebirth. Sex may trigger this event for Lessing's characters but it is not capable of providing transcendence without self-knowledge. While Lawrence explores the body's transcendent mysteries to achieve cosmic harmony, Lessing explores the mind's mysteries for the same purpose.

While Lessing's debt to Lawrence is evident throughout her career, there is an increasing use of cosmic symbolism in the later novels. The moment of crisis, the crux of her developmental process, occurs in the fourth volume of Landlocked. Here, in a scene highly reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence, in a loft over a garden with her lover, Martha Quest achieves a moment of illumination that alters her perceptions of reality permanently. After this crisis in Martha's life, Lessing's novels move more and more into the mythic.

Beyond Lawrence, there is another important influence on the structure of her later symbols which requires some

clarification. Lessing's movement into mythic narrative involves an increasing use of Jungian symbols of the structure of the psyche. Some of Jung's basic theories must be discussed here in order that Lessing's use of them may be understood. As has been mentioned previously, Lessing's protagonists are all middle-aged (with the exception of Martha Quest at the beginning of her story) and undergoing what Jung terms a crisis of individuation. Individuation, a sense of integrated self-hood, is the goal of the process of assimilation between conscious and unconscious. The synthesis of the unconscious with the conscious is necessary in order to prevent the unconscious from irrupting destructively, for middle-age is the time when the repressions of half a lifetime are most likely to break forth and assume autonomy. Thus, the goal of individuation is to harmonize the two sides of the individual, to make peace between the personality and all its unconscious resources.

At this point, a distinction must be made between the unconscious (or subconscious) as defined by Freud, and the unconscious in Jung's terminology. Lessing's perception of the unconscious is very much like D. H. Lawrence's definition in Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious. Lawrence, Lessing, and Jung do not, as Freud did, see the unconscious purely as a repository of repressions and negative traits, but believe it contains an important potential for growth as well. In this respect, Lessing discussed the unconscious

in an interview with Jonah Raskin at Stony Brook, New York, wherein she clearly aligned herself with Jung and Lawrence against the Freudians. She told Raskin: "The Freudians describe the conscious as a small lit area, all white, and the unconscious as a great dark marsh full of monsters. In their view, the monsters reach up, try to grab you by the ankles, and try to drag you down. But the unconscious can be what you make of it, good or bad, helpful or unhelpful."¹⁰

Lessing utilizes a distinction which Jung made between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The former contains all the elements which have been repressed from one's individual history, while the collective unconscious is an inherited "memory" of certain basic, eternally-recurring psychic patterns. These inherited forms and ideas are the archetypes--symbols and figures that appear in the myths, literature, and dreams of people of every culture. Both the personal and collective unconscious are used in several of Lessing's novels. Charles Watkins, for example, explores both areas in his descent into the innermost parts of his psyche in Briefing. In Memoirs of a Survivor, the two areas are most distinct. The Survivor explores the personal unconscious as she visits certain "rooms" which contain "a scene from her memory, or her history which had formed her,"¹¹ and the collective unconscious as she visits another set of "rooms" she calls "impersonal scenes." Here she encounters the archetype of the self and experiences

the cosmic harmonies which derive from this encounter.

In her investigations of the psyche and explorations of the conscious and unconscious, Lessing returns to certain archetypes. Throughout her novels, these same configurations appear: the persona, the shadow, the anima/animus, and the self. To understand what Lessing is doing, a brief description of each of these terms as Jung defines them is necessary. First, the persona is an archetype unlike the others, for it occurs throughout life, while the rest occur primarily at individuation. Martha Quest, almost from the outset of the Children of Violence series, is intrigued by the persona, which is one's public mask, determined by one's social role.¹² Martha discovers that this mask can be set aside readily as another is assumed. Martha, therefore, suffers less than Charles Watkins or Kate Brown, who have mistakenly identified the persona with the whole of their personalities. As a result, each suffers as the undeveloped parts of the personality struggle with the persona for existence. This struggle is what has brought each of them to the point of crisis.

Beyond the problem of the mask, the persona, lies the shadow, which is one of the first archetypal configurations to appear as individuation begins. The shadow has occurred in literature frequently before Lessing,¹³ for it is that Mr. Hyde which everyman carries within--the dark side of the personality which is projected onto other people of the same

sex. Charles Watkins expressed an awareness of the difficulty of the shadow when he questioned whether his true self was the cool observer or the creature of blood who came alive in the darkness. "I was already beginning to doubt that I knew who was stronger, which was stranger, which was host, what was myself and what a perverted offshoot." Watkins was plagued with the same duality of mind that bothered Captain Leggatt in Conrad's story upon the arrival of his shadow, the secret sharer. Like so many of Conrad's characters caught up in the problem of the shadow, Watkins was forced to confront his opposite as his true self. Lessing's characters, on the whole, are not as shadow-ridden as Conrad's, although the shadow is operative in such pairs as Anna and Molly in The Golden Notebook, and Kate Brown's relationship with the girl, Maureen, as well as several other women in The Summer Before the Dark.

Frequently, however, in Lessing's fiction shadow projections take place on a national or international scale. In The Grass Is Singing and many of her African stories, the white Africans project their own negative qualities onto the blacks. In another case, Martha Quest observes the way that Mark Coleridge projects all good qualities onto his own political involvements and all evil qualities onto the other side. She recognizes that this has been a pattern in most of the political activity she has observed. Martha becomes aware of the social dangers of the shadow, for unless the shadow is

recognized as part of oneself, it serves as a justification to hate and destroy others. There is a powerful scene in Landlocked wherein Martha and her friends attend a newsreel in which defeated, starving German soldiers are held up to ridicule by a commentator who makes snide references to these remnants of "the master race." Martha alone sees that these are defeated "boys." The others continue to heap upon them projections of their own destructive qualities. Martha's ability to understand her shadow and transcend it is a part of her uniqueness. Anna Wulf, too, conquers her shadow when she recognizes the dwarf-like creature who takes joy in destruction to be a part of herself. This is an awareness of profound social significance. Erich Neumann, one of Jung's pupils, has written that the sources of all evil are within, rooted in the problem of the shadow, "where the personality experiences its relationship with the enemy of mankind, the drive to aggression and destruction, in the structure of its own being."¹⁴

Another archetypal figure which is encountered primarily through projection is the anima/animus. Each is a compensatory image from the unconscious, a link with one's own creative centers, which is projected onto an individual of the opposite sex. Jung has defined the anima conclusively as an "eternal image of the woman, not the image of this or that particular woman, but a definite feminine image. This image is fundamentally unconscious, an hereditary factor of

primordial origin, an imprint or archetype of all the ancestral experience of the female, a deposit, as it were, of all the impressions ever made by woman."¹⁵ More difficulty arises when Jung defines the animus, for the anima can be encountered in centuries of art and literature while the feminine unconscious has been virtually mute. Doris Lessing is a pioneer here; she is one of the first writers to confront the animus in terms so real as to be frightening. Anna Wulf struggles with her animus in madness and near death until she achieves creativity and a transcendent self-knowledge. Emily Bronte's Heathcliffe, alone, comes close to arousing the terrors of the animus in the way that Lessing does in The Golden Notebook.

Another aspect of the animus which Lessing has also described is the yearning for wholeness, for a sense of self-hood experienced by women who have not come to terms with the animus. This yearning is frequently attributed to the loss of a particular male, rather than to a need which can be met from within. Anna Wulf, waiting, night after night, for Micheal whom she knows will not return, is one example. Also, in A Ripple from the Storm, Lessing writes of Martha, mourning "him who brought her 'self' to life." When the bearer of the projection is gone, she "lives with the empty space at her side, peopled with the image of her own potentialities until the next man walks into the space."

The stripping away of the facades of the persona, the confrontation with the shadow, the links with the deepest layers of one's own need through the anima and animus--all these are steps in the individuation process which leads, ultimately, to the self. The self is the most important archetype as it absorbs all the others as aspects of its cosmic totality. The self is "the archetype of order, organization and unification, it draws to itself and harmonizes all the other archetypes and their manifestations in complexes and consciousness. It unites the personality giving it a sense of oneness, and firmness."¹⁶ The self is thus the goal of the individuation process, and represents a state of self-realization in which all tensions between the conscious and unconscious are dissolved.

Each one of Lessing's characters is on a quest for the self and each has a glimpse, at least, of its fleeting beauty. The quest, however, is a difficult one, for the personality must be individuated before the self can become manifest with any degree of completeness. Thus, the self is rarely encountered before middle-age, the age at which most of Lessing's characters begin the trial of introspection which will lead them eventually to the cosmic wholeness of the self.

It is a vision of the self that Martha Quest pursues through the five volumes of the Children of Violence series. It is clear that she does find the self when she describes

the "crystalline gleam," the "rare, fine air" of the island on which she lives in the closing pages of the final volume. Professor Charles Watkins has a similar vision before his forced return to the world of persona functions which others term normality. In The Summer before the Dark, it is a yearning for self-hood that sets Kate Brown off on the adventures of her most important summer. The Survivor, the protagonist of Lessing's most recent novel, achieves the most complete union with the self. Her "walking through the walls" at the end of the book is a symbol of her ability to move beyond the functions of the ego or persona into a realm where these facades mean nothing, where everything is tinged with the sweetness and wholeness that only a union with the self can afford. The Survivor also speaks of "the one who went ahead, showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether."¹⁷ This "one" is the transpersonal dimension of the self, the revelation of the deity within, in which reality is "imbued with the divine."

Lessing's career as a whole, then, can be seen to move from an awareness of certain archetypal elements in human experience which, in the earlier novels is destroyed by economic necessities and the evils of the social system, to the realization that the archetypal experiences can lead one beyond these confining systems to a transpersonal realm of peace, harmony, and integration.

While the Jungian structure of Lessing's symbols provides a ready framework for the discussion of her novels, a word of caution is in order. It is not enough for the critic merely to point out that she is using this archetype or that one. It is also essential to explore the reasons that the archetype manifests itself in a certain manner. To this end, it is important to utilize a synthesis of each of the standard critical methods in order to avoid a reductive "nothing but" approach that does not do justice to the richness of her novels.

Leslie Fiedler, in an important essay on archetypal criticism written in the fifties and not often anthologized, suggests that there are two important factors in a work of mythic art--the archetype and the signature. Fiedler defines signature as "the sum total of individuating factors in a work, the sign of the Persona or Personality, through which an archetype is rendered, and which itself tends to become a subject as well as a means" of a work. "Literature" he notes, "can be said to come into existence at the moment when a signature is imposed upon the Archetype. The purely archetypal, without signature, is myth."¹⁸

Criticism of the signature, Fiedler points out, involves an analysis not only of the artist but of the social collective of which the individual is a part. The critic in search of a non-reductive approach might expand Lessing's assertion that she was, in the Children of Violence series, exploring