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**"It's odd, isn't it?": irony, breakdown, and self-healing in Doris  
Lessing's The golden notebook**

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“IT’S ODD, ISN’T IT?”: IRONY, BREAKDOWN, AND SELF-HEALING IN DORIS  
LESSING’S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK*

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By

Rachel M. Goodner

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## Introduction

When Doris Lessing wrote the Nobel Prize-winning *The Golden Notebook* (1962), she hoped to capture the fractured essence of 20th-century life in a post-World War II society. In her introduction to the 1971 edition of the novel, Lessing specifies that her goal was to write a “novel which described the intellectual and moral climate” (viii) of her century in a rapidly changing Britain. Lessing wrote that her “major aim was to shape a book which would make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped” (xix). Lessing’s main theme is the “theme of ‘breakdown,’ that sometimes when people ‘crack-up’ it is a way of *self-healing*” (xii, emphasis added). People must break down to heal. Breaking down and healing happen, in *The Golden Notebook*, through a person’s perspective on truth and whether or not truth is achievable. Breaking down occurs when a person becomes aware of their fractured, postmodern consciousness. A person would “breakdown” after recognizing that they do not have one identity, but actually have a fragmented identity made up of different parts. During the break-down process, the fragmented consciousness is recognized but not accepted. Healing occurs after the fragmented identity has been accepted as-is— rather than attempting to piece together fragments of the self to *understand the self*, the fragments of the self are accepted *as the self*. Lessing created Anna Wulf (author)<sup>1</sup> to enact the breakdown and self-healing process: Anna’s failed attempts to write the truth prompt her to break down, and it is only when she accepts that truth is unachievable that she is able to heal. Her attempts to write the absolute truth

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, the character Lessing created to be the author of the notebooks and “Free Women” will be referred to as “Anna (author)” and the character Anna Wulf (author) created in “Free Women” will be referred to as “Anna (character).”

ironically produce dishonest texts, but Anna eventually heals by accepting the ironies she sought to avoid and by writing fiction again.

Lessing immediately introduces irony to the reader in the first “Free Women” section with the ironic title and with her characters Anna (character), Molly, and Tommy. Simply put, irony is defined as a contrast between expectation and reality— one thing is expected, yet the opposite happens. Through the contrast, irony brings attention to both what is expected and the reality of the situation. There are primarily two types of irony in *The Golden Notebook*. For example, some ironies revolve around Anna’s (character) situation as a woman in “Free Women” as an unfree woman or as Anna’s (author) situation as a writer struggling with writer’s block who is writing; other ironies primarily revolve around what Anna (author) intends to write in the notebooks versus what is accomplished by her writing in the notebooks. While discussing the ironies of their situations in the beginning of the novel, Anna (character) and Molly use the phrase “Odd, isn’t it?” (Lessing 1). The unavoidable ironies of their lives as “free women” are brushed off with an “it’s odd, isn’t it?” However, this aloof approach to irony is juxtaposed with the approach in Anna’s (author) notebooks. Anna (author) does not brush off the ironies of her life, instead, she obsesses over them. Lessing uses the juxtaposition in the beginning of the novel to immediately establish the difference between the way character and author approach irony. Anna (character) sloughs irony off as “odd,” and Anna (author) fights against it. After Lessing reveals Anna (author) as the author of “Free Women,” the implications of the phrase “it’s odd, isn’t it” and the ironies of “Free Women” change.

Lessing has Anna (author) end her fiction with the same phrase that began it to direct the reader back to the beginning of the novel. That structural direction prompts the reader to reconsider the weight of the phrase “isn’t it odd” within the context of Anna’s development. The

last lines of *The Golden Notebook* are: “‘It’s all very odd, isn’t it Anna?’ ‘Very.’ The two women [Molly and Anna (character)] kissed and separated” (Lessing 635). In “Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*: Ideology Coherence and Possibility,” Molly Hite writes that the final “It’s all very odd” admonition on the last page of *The Golden Notebook* “sums up the preceding action and confirms the triumph of the dry, ironic tone that Anna was trying to elude in the opening scenes” (22). In “The Future in a Different Shape: Broken Form and Possibility in Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook*,” Hite writes about that final admonition again, stating that by the end of “Free Women” the “’oddness’ has become the pervasive quality of a world distanced by irony, and having no more to discuss about such a world, the two women kiss and separate” (43). Lessing’s placement of “it’s odd, isn’t it?” at the beginning and at the end of the novel shows Anna’s (author) development from avoiding irony to accepting it. Once Anna accepts that ironies are unavoidable and the truth is impossible to write, she is able to heal and move on.

As she searches for truth in a world saturated with irony, Lessing’s protagonist experiences the shift from a modern to a postmodern mindset: at first, Anna Wulf believes that she can write the truth of her experience in her notebooks but eventually realizes absolute truth is non-existent. Postmodernists, including Lessing, believe that there is no absolute truth while modernists believed that a relative truth could be achieved through language and writing. The shift from modern to postmodern thought in *The Golden Notebook* is not explicitly named by Lessing because Lessing does not identify Anna Wulf as either a modernist or a postmodernist. Rather than classifying Anna’s changed perspective on truth and her relationship to irony, Lessing enacts the process that leads Anna to break down and heal.

Betsy Draine considers the irony of Lessing's structure in "Nostalgia and Irony: The Post Modern Order in *The Golden Notebook*" by exploring how the chaotic and fragmented structure of the novel mirrors Anna's own chaotic and fragmented experience. Draine argues that "the novel refuses to put a lid on chaos; neither does it let chaos freely reign. Instead, the novel expresses in its structure and story a powerful tension between chaos and order—a tension that characterizes the post-modern consciousness" (31). The postmodern consciousness fragmented, as is *The Golden Notebook*. Draine states that "the complicated, highly ordered super-structure of the novel is clearly at odds with the apparent disorder of the content within that structure" introducing the inherent irony of the novel itself, and that the "form-content split in the novel, in turn, mirrors Anna's awareness of the split between the forms (social, artistic, emotional, intellectual) of her consciousness and the experiential chaos that these forms attempt to control"(3). Draine ends her argument by stating that

the parts of *The Golden Notebook* create an image not only of Lessing's *personal* condition but also of a *public* condition, called the postmodern consciousness.

This state of mind is a jumble of contradictory moods— a wrenching nostalgia for the comfort of past forms, a paralyzing fear of the formlessness of the present, a despairing sense of emptiness and futility, [and] a positive will to confront chaos.

(Draine 18)

Draine is occupied with the chaos, the "formlessness," and the "emptiness and futility" of the postmodern condition and only briefly touches on the possibility of self-healing. Draine states that "The dynamic of the novel pushes the reader and the central character Anna Wulf toward a state of saving schizophrenia—a state that permits her commitment to practical goals . . . while at the same allowing her to acknowledge and even honor all that accompanies chaos" (19).

Draine opens the door for development in Anna's (author) life, but Draine does not consider the healing nature of that development. Draine also attributes the “chaos” in *The Golden Notebook* to “schizophrenia” when the “chaos” should be considered an essential part of the fractured postmodern consciousness, not necessarily a product of “schizophrenia.” Given that Lessing is a postmodernist and that Anna (author) is struggling with a nonexistent truth, the multiplicity of Anna’s identity should be considered a reflection of the fractured postmodern consciousness. The relationship between the highly structured novel and the highly chaotic content reflects Anna’s postmodern mentality, but Draine stays within the realm of “break down” instead of considering how nostalgia, irony, and the structure of *the Golden Notebook* contribute to the self-healing that Anna experiences. According to Draine, the “schizophrenia” saves Anna (author), but Draine does not establish how it “saves” her, or what that “saving” is. I argue that Anna self-heals, and is “saved,” when she accepts that absolute truth does not exist and accepts that irony is unavoidable. This acceptance allows Anna (author) to heal herself, but it is not only the acceptance of chaos that allows Anna (author) to heal herself. By reflecting on her experience with the notebooks in “Free Women” Anna (author), rather than pushing back on the chaos she ironically produced, uses those very ironies to write which allows her to heal.

Lessing’s theme of breakdown and self-healing is found within the structure of *The Golden Notebook*. The five colored notebooks consist of Anna's (author) breakdown and journey to accept the postmodern idea of truth, and “Free Women” is the product of that acceptance and the evidence of self-healing. *While* she writes in the notebooks and *before* she writes “Free Women,” Anna (author) suffers from writer’s block because she only wants to write the truth, which she has yet to accept does not exist. After Anna (author) accepts that an absolute truth cannot exist, she is able to create a fictionalized version of herself, Anna (character) in “Free



Women” who is, in that story, also writing in the notebooks and suffering from writer’s block.

Lessing layers the authorship by having Anna (author) create a fictional Anna (character).

Through the structure of *the Golden Notebook*, Lessing blurs the line between reality and fiction to highlight the unstable concept of an absolute truth.

Lessing manipulates what is approached as “reality” and what is approached as “fiction” by concealing Anna as the author of “Free women.” John L. Carey writes in “Art and Reality” that

a casual reading may leave the impression that the ‘Free Women’ sections represent the objective ordering of experience by Lessing herself. After she has presented Anna Wulf’s subjective version of the events in the notebooks, in the ‘Free Women’ sections Lessing gives us the real “truth” of these events, “truth” which only an omniscient author would know. (Carey 4)

Because Lessing’s character Anna (author) is the author of “Free Women,” those sections cannot be approached as objective or “true.” When Lessing reveals Anna as the author of “Free Women,” the line between reality and fiction is blurred. This structure reinforces the postmodern idea that there is no truth, only fiction. Because there is no absolute truth, every account (which are repetitions or mimics) holds a semblance of fiction. Lessing employs “Free Women” as the supporting framework of *The Golden Notebook* and its “truthfulness” does not contribute to the role it plays. Whether “Free Women” is approached as fact or fiction does not diminish the support it provides Lessing’s novel. Lessing’s structure encapsulates the postmodern idea that there is only fiction and the illusion of truth, and in that same way there is only chaos and the illusion of order.

To postmodernists like Lessing, the concept of relative truth became an idealist, naive notion that Anna (author) clings to before she writes "Free Women." Her obsession with truth prompts her to start her notebooks, but her search for absolute truth ironically fails. Lessing has Anna realize, through her experience with the notebooks, that language and writing are only capable of representing a version of life experiences and thoughts, and that representation reinforces the concept that the truth of a person's experience cannot exist: there is only parody, mimicry, and repetition.

Anna (author) transitions from believing in an absolute truth to not believing in one through her notebooks and "Free Women." Anna heals through her breakdown and writes "Free Women" because she is no longer distracted by her search for an absolute truth. Anna (author), at first, dismisses the limitations of language in her notebooks. She believes that if she perseveres with language, continues to write, and avoids delving into "lying nostalgia" (Lessing 61) that she will eventually write the truth of herself and her experience. Patrocínio M. Schweickart writes in "Reading a Wordless Statement" that "Anna the writer longs for the integrated perspective of the nineteenth-century novel in spite of her conviction that such a novel can no longer be written honestly" (11). Anna (author) believes that truth cannot be found in the novel form, so she abandons the fiction she believes to be dishonest and searches for truth in her notebooks. According to Lessing, a postmodernist, "lying nostalgia"(Lessing 61) is all there is. Ellena Cronan Rose states in "'The End of the Game: New Directions in Doris Lessing's Fiction" that according to Anna (author) the "Nostalgia, the retrospective ordering ('naming') of remembered experience is a lie" (3). Anna (author) pushes for an absolute truth in her notebooks, which ironically pushes her further into mimicry and further into psychological chaos. Lessing's novel

argues that the harder one tries to capture that non-existent truth through language, the more the concept of truth fractures and breaks down.

It is only when Anna (author) accepts that there is no absolute truth, there is only parody, mimicry, and repetition that she writes something to completion again. Carey argues that Anna's writer's block is healed "by the end of the novel, Anna, finally . . . through writing her notebooks, has come to understand her role as an artist," and she is able to write her novel 'Free Women'" (20). Anna (author) accepts the "mingling of 'fact' and 'fiction,' a form based not on nostalgia but on the unity of life and art" (Carey 20). Anna (author) writes fiction again because she has accepted that there is no truth, there are only representations and fiction, so fiction is as "true" as anything can be. Anna's (author) obsession with an absolute truth ironically leads her further from the truth just as Lessing's highly organized novel ironically produces a disorganized narrative.

Lessing's organization of the novel forces the reader to mirror Anna's mental journey through breakdown into self-healing that she experiences as she comes to accept the irony of her attempts. James Arnett argues in "What's Left of Feelings? Affective Labor of Politics in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*" that "the labor it takes to read the novel mirrors the productive capability of the novel's composition, and that both redound upon the novel's systemic reflections on the nature of progressive politics" (78). Arnett investigates how the structure of the novel works upon the reader and what that means for the content of the novel: "In ranging through its complex narrative structure—the nested and nestling notebooks presented to the reader as if one narrative (the titular "golden" notebook)—the novel ramifies and validates the exhaustion in and of left affect, while demonstrating through its composition and coherence the promise of progress" (81). Arnett explores the paradoxical relationship between "exhaustion"

and “progress” through *The Golden Notebook*’s composition and how those seemingly opposite poles need each other to function in the same way “self-healing” needs “break down.” Arnett touches on Lessing’s construction of the novel and how it mirrors Anna’s personal journey, but he does not consider Anna to have healed. However, her writing “Free Women” is simultaneously a part of her self-healing process and evidence of her self-healing.

Lessing separated *The Golden Notebook* into five sections. These sections begin with parts of a short novella, titled “Free Women,” and continue with segments from Anna’s Wulf’s notebooks. The “Free Women” sections serve as a skeleton connecting and supporting each segment of notebook entries. Through this structure, Lessing intended the “Free Women” sections to serve as an introduction to Anna and her life, to contextualize the notebooks, and to conclude Anna’s narrative. The “Free Women” sections are not identified as fiction, nor is Anna identified as the author of “Free Women” until the end of “The Golden Notebook” and directly before the last “Free Women” section. There are five notebooks: a Black Notebook, a Red Notebook, a Yellow Notebook, a Blue Notebook, and a Golden Notebook. The pattern of *The Golden Notebook* is this: “Free Women” 1, Black Notebook 1, Red Notebook 1, Yellow Notebook 1, Blue Notebook 1; “Free Women” 2, Black Notebook 2, Red Notebook 2, Yellow Notebook 2, Blue Notebook 2; “Free Women” 3, Black Notebook 3, Red Notebook 3, Yellow Notebook 3, Blue Notebook 3; “Free Women” 4, Black Notebook 4 [end], Red Notebook 4 [end], Yellow Notebook 4 [end], Blue Notebook 4 [end], the “Golden Notebook” [end]; “Free Women” 5 [end].

Free Women 1	Free Women 2	Free Women 3	Free Women 4	Free Women 5
Black Notebook 1	Black Notebook 2	Black Notebook 3	Black Notebook 4	
Red Notebook 1	Red Notebook 2	Red Notebook 3	Red Notebook 4	
Yellow Notebook 1	Yellow Notebook 2	Yellow Notebook 2	Yellow Notebook 4	
Blue Notebook 1	Blue Notebook 2	Blue Notebook 3	Blue Notebook 4	
			The "Golden Notebook"	

Figure 1: The Structure of Doris Lessing's postmodern novel *The Golden Notebook*

In the attached graph, based on Anne M. Mulkeen's visual aid in "Twentieth-Century Realism: The "Grid" Structure of *The Golden Notebook*," the highly ordered structure of the novel is quite clear. The structure of the attached graph is the same as Mulkeen's graph (265), but I have removed the dates and plot analysis that Mulkeen included in her graph because they do not directly correspond with my argument. "Free Women" and each notebook are written chronologically and all sections of *The Golden Notebook* can function as their own entity despite how incomplete they would be. Because Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, however, is organized into parts as described in my previous paragraph, the entire novel reads in a disjointed, fragmented way. Rather than reading "Free Women" 1-5, the reader is taken through the first, second, third, and fourth sections of each notebook before they get the next installation of the

“Free Women” narrative. Lessing intended the “Free Women” sections to serve as a “skeletal frame” holding up *The Golden Notebook*’s narrative (Lessing i). After each fragment of the notebooks are read, the reader is thrust into the “Free Women” narrative again as if they are beginning a new section. The cycle of *The Golden Notebook* is “Free Women” to the notebooks, to “Free Women” to the notebooks, ect. The “Free Women” sections, because of their third-person narration and linear plot, serve as spaces of reprise after bouts of confusion and chaos with the notebooks.

In her notebooks, Anna (author) searches for truth and attempts to organize her life in an ironic and disorganized world. She aims to write down everything that happens in her life without the “nostalgia” she claims is dishonest. Rose writes that “Anna can only record the fragments of her experience in the four notebooks because she thinks that to shape them into a novel would be to distort and misrepresent them” (4). Initially, Anna (author) keeps four notebooks that correlate to four different aspects of her life. The Black Notebook contains entries about Anna's (author) income, the Red Notebook contains entries about her time in the British Communist Party, the Yellow Notebook contains her attempts to write fiction, and the Blue Notebook contains her attempt at a diary. Her purpose in keeping four separate notebooks is to organize her life so she can make sense of it. She believes that if it is organized, it will be easier to understand.

Lessing intends Anna Wulf to be understood as the author of each segment of the novel. *The Golden Notebook*, comprised of the fractured notebooks, the “Golden Notebook,” and “Free Women,” is complete and captures a picture of Anna Wulf for the reader. The distinction between Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and Anna's (author) “Golden Notebook” is imperative to distinguish: *The Golden Notebook* contains the process of Anna (author) breaking down into

self-healing, the “Golden Notebook” is one part of that process. *The Golden Notebook* is Lessing’s complete novel that the reader holds in their hand. The “Golden Notebook” is a section within *The Golden Notebook*, is incomplete, and is another colored notebook Anna keeps before she writes “Free Women.” Lessing includes the “Golden Notebook” as a bait-switch. The reader, up until they complete the “Golden Notebook,” assume that Anna will write “all of herself” in that notebook, but she does not. The “Golden Notebook” remains as incomplete and as fractured as Anna's (author) other notebooks.

Each notebook, including the “Golden Notebook,” captures Anna’s struggle to find truth and her struggle to organize and understand her life. The “Golden Notebook” is different because it serves as, what Anna (author) believes to be, her last resort in her search for truth. Anna decides to “pack away the four notebooks” and “start a new [golden] notebook” where she writes “all of [herself] in one book” (Lessing 580). Thus, “Golden Notebook” is the most chaotic of all the notebooks. It includes detailed dreams about her life as a stage-production, Anna’s stress about her relationship with Saul, and the peak of her psychological break-down. Draine writes that the “Golden Notebook,” although it is the peak of Anna’s psychological break-down, is where “Anna battles her way to a temperate and responsible assessment of the relation between base experience (‘what I had known’) and interpreted experience (‘what I had invented’)” (16). The progress Anna (author) makes in her relationship to irony and truth in the “Golden Notebook” allows her to completely break-down, to accept the things she pushed against, and to heal and write again.

Structurally, Lessing places “Free Women” at the beginning and end of *The Golden Notebook* to contextualize and support the otherwise chaotic notebooks. That structure reinforces Anna's (author) self-healing by placing the product of Anna’s healing as the stabilizing element

in the novel. Lessing's structure contributes to what Arnett called "the affective labor" of the novel (Arnett 81) and the reader experiences the breakdown that Anna (author) experiences by fracturing the narrative—the reader experiences the product of Anna's healing *at the same time* they experience the breakdown that spurred the healing. Chronologically, Lessing places the notebooks before "Free Women." The notebooks are written between 1950 and 1957, and "Free Women" is written after they are abandoned. My argument will be structured chronologically, beginning with the Notebooks and ending with "Free Women" because Anna's journey through breakdown to self-healing is chronological.

Chapter 1 will discuss the irony of Anna's attempt to write the truth, how those attempts bring Anna to break down, and what Lessing implies about truth and irony through that process. Anna (author) begins her notebooks to write the absolute truth of herself and experience because she refuses to believe things are merely "odd." Ironically, her attempts produce failure and she considers her notebooks dishonest. Anna (author), at first ignores the irony of her attempts and still searches for truth. Chapter 1 begins by analyzing the combative and avoidant relationship to the irony of her search for truth Lessing designed, then it analyzes the breakdown Anna's avoidance produces in "the Golden Notebook." Anna's breakdown in the "Golden Notebook" reinforces the postmodern concept that there is no absolute truth, there are only representations. Lessing crafts a character who breaks down after trying to accomplish the impossible. After Anna accepts that writing the truth is impossible and representation is all there is, she produces "Free Women."

Chapter 2 will discuss the product of Anna's (author) healing, "Free Women," and Lessing's implications about the relationship between irony, break down, and self-healing found in Anna's (author) "Free Women" characters. The "Free Women" characters, Anna (character),



Molly, and Tommy are products of Anna's (author) imagination and representations of her experience with the notebooks. In the same way Lessing employs Anna (author) in *The Golden Notebook* to enact the process of breaking down into self-healing, Anna (author) employs her own characters to enact the process of breaking down into self-healing. Anna (character) and Molly function as representations of Anna's (author) ironic situation as a woman, and Anna (character) and Tommy are representations of Anna's ironic search for truth. By the time she writes "Free Women," Anna (author) has decided that the truth cannot be found and the ironies of life, which cannot be ironed out, are simply "odd." Considering the ironies as "odd" allows Anna to progress and to heal.

## Chapter 1

“The Fact Is, The Real Experience Can’t Be Described”: Breakdown and Irony in Anna’s  
Notebooks

The beginning of the notebooks is the beginning of Anna’s documented struggle with irony. Because of that struggle, Anna (author) says she will write down her life in an organized manner in her notebooks, without any nostalgia, to avoid the chaos of her life. Over the seven years that Anna (author) keeps the notebooks, she slowly comes to the realization that “lying nostalgia” (Lessing 61) is all writing is composed of. “Lying nostalgia” is all she has been writing in her notebooks, no matter her dedication to stay away from it. Anna’s frustration with the ironies of life propel her to admit that she will “‘never write another [novel]’ . . . ‘Because [she] no longer believe[s] in art” (Lessing 221). Anna (author), although she does not realize it until she writes the notebooks, is the same kind of person she tells her psychoanalyst Mrs. Marks about when she denounced art: Anna (author) “decide[d] to be this thing or that. But it’s as if it’s a sort of dance— [she] might just as well [have done] the opposite with equal conviction” (Lessing 221). She ends her four colored notebooks because they have ironically accomplished the opposite of what she intended to accomplish. In “Doris Lessing’s *Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*: Ideology, Coherence, and Possibility,” Molly Hite states that Anna’s decision to write her life down “places ironic emphasis on the fact that” her notebooks “are written representations”(Hite 4) and are inherently composed of the “dishonesty” Anna attempts to avoid. Realizing the irony of the notebooks, Anna picks up the “Golden Notebook,” her fifth notebook, to truthfully write all of herself in. Again, Anna is ironically faced with failure. Facing irony’s inescapability pushes Anna to break down, yet that same realization pushes Anna

(author) to accept the irony of her search for truth and eventually heal. Anna's (author) relationship with truth and irony changes from unaccepting to accepting as her five notebooks progress and eventually end, then she is able to write again.

Anne M. Mulkeen analyzes the change Anna experiences and the ironic structure of Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* by looking at the unique grid structure of Lessing's work and what it accomplishes. Mulkeen identifies the timeline of Anna's (author) breakdown, and the breakdown directly corresponds with Anna's (author) relationship to irony as it spins out of control. Mulkeen writes in "Twentieth-Century Realism: The 'Grid' Structure in *The Golden Notebook*" that

the grid pattern worked out in the arrangement of Anna's notebooks also shows constant, rapid *change*. . . . Reading across in any one of the notebooks, one discovers that this particular aspect of Anna's world [her notebooks] has its ups and downs, its stages— and when one looks at all four notebooks lined up, one realizes that the stages roughly correspond...

1950 saw many beginnings both personal and for groups and movements; 1954 saw many endings— after 1954 there were many abortive, ever more short-lived attempts, already tinged with hopelessness, at personal and world salvation.

Anna's world arrives at 1957 with almost no more openings to try. (9)

Mulkeen has aptly identified the downward slope of Anna's (author) mental health as the notebooks progress, but she argues that *The Golden Notebook* "shows only decent" (10) because she does not consider how the breakdown in the "Golden Notebook" leads Anna to acceptance and eventually to the creation of "Free Women." Although the notebooks primarily show decent,

the descent is isolated to the colored notebooks and is not present in Lessing's entire novel. The "Golden Notebook" paradoxically contains a descent that propels her into self-healing.

In Anna's (author) notebooks, she experiences the downward slope, the breakdown that Mulkeen identified. Anna experiences the "ups and downs" of beginnings and harsh endings, but she also experiences another "up," another beginning, after the notebooks have concluded (Mulkeen 9). The beginnings Anna experiences in the notebooks are the decisions to do a certain thing, for example: to rid *The Frontiers of War* of its "lying nostalgia" (Lessing 61) in the Black Notebook, to be a loyal communist in the Red Notebook, to write a new novel in the Yellow Notebook, to keep a truthful diary in the Blue Notebook, or to write all of herself (Lessing 580) in the "Golden Notebook." At the end of the five notebooks, Anna (author) realizes that she ironically accomplished the opposite of what she decided to do with them. This realization leads her to break down into self-healing by forcing her to confront the impossibility of writing truthfully and the inevitability of irony.

Anna (author) decides to write down everything that happens in her life without the "lying nostalgia" she claims is dishonest by avoiding the novel form. According to Rose, "Anna can only record the fragments of her experience in the four notebooks because she thinks that to shape them into a novel would be to distort and misrepresent them" (4). Initially, Anna (author) keeps four notebooks that correlate to four different aspects of her life. The fractured nature of the four notebooks ironically creates chaos. To remedy that chaos Anna (author) begins one notebook to replace the fractured four, the "Golden Notebook," and the notebook ironically creates *more* chaos. Each notebook contains entries isolated to a different part of Anna's experience and identity. Anna (author) aims to write the truth of her existence in the notebooks to better understand herself and remedy her fractured consciousness. Until the end of the final

“Golden Notebook,” Anna (author) maintains that the solution to her problem is to write herself truthfully. Lessing’s purpose for each notebook and what each notebook contains must be understood to establish how irony leads Anna to break down into self-healing.

The irony of the notebooks is found in the contrast between what Anna (author) attempts to do versus what is actually accomplished through her writing. The graph below depicts Anna’s goal for the four notebooks followed by the outcome of each notebook. The cycle of beginnings and endings are clearly represented in the graph below. Anna (author) begins the Black, Red, Yellow, and Blue notebooks with the hope that she can find truth, and she ends each notebook after finding dishonesty.

Attempts to write <i>Frontiers of War</i> “truthfully”	Attempts to write out her experience with the BCP	Attempts to write a novel about her past relationship	Attempts to keep a diary of her life and not keep things from herself
Writes an untruthful, nostalgic representation of Mashopi	Writes what she wishes to do rather than what she does; censors herself	Writes a list of ideas, about other people, that don’t end up as stories at all	Writes the intricacies of her days and then crosses them out entirely

Figure 2: Anna’s (author) beginnings and endings of the four colored notebooks

The disparity between *what should be* and *what is* is reflective of the postmodern consciousness: Anna believes she should be able to write the truth, but she realistically cannot because (according to Lessing, a postmodernist) the truth does not exist; Anna believes that she should have a unified self, but she realistically has a fragmented, multiplicitous self. Anna experiences conflict between fiction and reality as she writes her notebooks, regarding truth, the self, and

even the notebooks. The graph provides a visual representation of the split between fiction and truth Anna experiences while writing her notebooks.

The Black Notebook holds all of her interactions with money, primarily revolving around the novel she wrote about her time in Mashopi, a British Colony in Africa. She spent time there during the war with airmen and communists. *Frontiers of War*, the book Anna (author) wrote about her experience in Mashopi in the 1940s, was widely successful and brought her a large sum of money. The Black Notebook begins with two columns, one titled “Money” and the other titled “Source.” Anna (author) catalogs where she gets her money in these columns (Lessing 55). In that notebook, Anna writes out her frustration with capitalizing off of something she considers to be a lie. In her mind, *The Frontiers of War* is a failure (Lessing 55) and an “immoral novel because of the terrible lying nostalgia that lights every sentence” (Lessing 61). Lessing sets a precedent in the Black Notebook that is held up in all of the notebooks: Anna wants to avoid the “lying nostalgia” of events in her life and simply write “the truth.”

The Black Notebook serves primarily as a place for Anna (author) to atone for, what she believes to be, the misrepresentation of her World War II experiences in *Frontiers of War*. Anna feels guilty for profiting off of a book she considers to be dishonest, so she uses the Black Notebook to re-write what happened in Mashopi without the dishonesty saturating her novel. Ironically, in the Black Notebook, Anna writes a representation of a representation despite her intentions to write, “simply, the truth” (Lessing 61). Anna's (author) novel narrates a pure and sensual romance between a fighter pilot and a young black woman in the British Colony in Africa. Her later, Black Notebook account of Mashopi differs greatly from *Frontiers of War*. Anna writes:

I remember very clearly the moment in which that novel [*Frontiers of War*] was born. The pulse beat, violently; afterwards, when I knew what I would write, I worked out what I could write. The “subject” was almost immaterial. Yet now what interests me is precisely this — why did I not write an account of what had happened, instead of shaping a “story” which had nothing to do with the material that fueled it. (Lessing 61)

Anna’s experiences in Mashopi, the ones that fueled *Frontiers of War*, were brutal, racist, and embarrassing. The romance in the novel was inspired by extramarital affairs, abuse, and racism, but Anna censored those themes and crafted something nostalgic, romantic, and “untrue.” Anna (author) corrects herself if she finds that she is too nostalgic and on the verge of misrepresenting her experience in Mashopi again: “I’ll go on with this entry once I can write it straight, not in that tone” (Lessing 86). After she corrects herself, Anna (author) continues to write her account of Mashopi in what she believes to be “straight,” only to find out after she re-reads the account that the entries are saturated with exactly what she hoped to avoid. Anna writes, “I read this over today, for the first time since I wrote it. It’s full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although at the time I wrote it I thought I was being ‘objective’” (Lessing 145). The “lying nostalgia” (61) Anna (author) set out to, and thought she did, avoid in the Black Notebook blatantly stands out upon a revisit. The realization that her account of Mashopi was not objective, and was ironically full of the nostalgia she wanted to avoid compels Anna to put down the Black Notebook for four years.

To enforce her postmodern philosophy that truth cannot exist, Lessing writes that Anna picks up the Black Notebook in another attempt at truth, but the impossibility of writing truthfully and without any nostalgia persists. She is plagued with dreams about different versions

of *Frontiers of War* with each version getting further from the truth. A section of the last entry in the Black Notebook reads:

Last night I dreamed that a television film was to be made about the group of people at the Mashopi Hotel. There was a script ready, written by someone else. The director kept assuring me: “You’ll be pleased when you see the script, it’s exactly what you would have written yourself.” . . . What would emerge on the completed film would be something quite different from what I remembered. . . . I asked the director “Why did you change my story?” I saw he did not understand what I meant. . . . I realized that . . . what I “remembered” was probably untrue.

(Lessing 502)

Here Lessing writes Anna (author), for the first time, acknowledging that her quest for truth could be in vain. Just as *Frontiers of War* is untrue to Anna because it is a *nostalgic representation*, her account of Mashopi in the Black Notebook is untrue because it is a *representation*. The contents of the Black Notebook, no matter Anna's (author) intentions, are as far removed from the truth as the film adaptation Anna dreams of and dreads. She ironically accomplishes the opposite of what she set out to do with the Black Notebook: Anna has not atoned for her faulty representation of Mashopi, she has merely created further representations.

In the Red Notebook, Anna writes about her time in the British Communist Party. She writes about experiences with other party members, her time canvassing, and her issues with the “naivety” of the communist party (Lessing 428) . She joins the BCP because she is, again, distressed with the broken-up and chaotic nature of her current political climate. Anna’s participation in the BCP seems counter-intuitive considering she believes the BCP to be hypocritical, but she stays. She works diligently for them canvassing and editing their



publications for about seven years. She is not working for her income, and she is no longer writing fiction, so she has time to devote energy to a political party that aims to transform society by equally distributing wealth and opportunity. The equality the BCP aims to establish and the work it provides interests Anna because she is searching for unification in some aspect of her life. In her attempts to be a loyal member Anna (author) censors some critiques of the party by keeping them out of the Red Notebook and inserting overt critiques in other notebooks. Anna (author) eventually realizes that the Communist party ironically perpetuates the division they aim to abolish. Consequently, while external political division is the reason Anna joined the party, internal political division is why she left.

Anna allows her enchantment with what the British Communist Party offers to cloud her better judgement to not join; she is willfully dishonest with herself about the party's hypocrisy despite her effort to be truthful. Ironically, she writes what she wants to do, should do, or would do in the Red Notebook, but does the opposite outside of her notebook. She writes of reasons she should not join, or not stay in the party after she's joined, all while diligently working for the party and ignoring those reasons. Despite her best efforts to stay away from the party, she joins it and subsequently spends the next few years of her life devoted to the party. At the beginning of the Red Notebook she writes,

in spite of the fact that I've been telling myself for months I couldn't possibly join an organization that seems to me dishonest, I've caught myself over and over again on the verge of the decision to join. And always at the same moment— there are two of them. The first, whenever I meet, for some reason, writers, publishers, etc.— the literary world. It is a world so prissy, maiden-auntish; so class-bound; or it's the commercial side, so blatant, that any contact with it sets me thinking of

joining the Party. The other moment is when I see Molly, just rushing off to organize something, full of life and enthusiasm, or when I come up the stairs, and I hear voices from the kitchen— I go in. The atmosphere of friendliness, or people working to a common end. But that's not enough. (Lessing 147)

The next day those reasons become “enough” and she joins the party even though she went to meet with the party leader “to tell him [she] would not join” (147). Anna ironically says one thing and does another.

Lessing writes that Anna's account of her time in the British Communist Party in the Red Notebook revolve around her issues with the Communist Party and why she does not want to stay in it. However, Anna defends the BCP to non-party members and ex-party members. Anna's die-hard defense of the Communist Party only arises when she has conversations with people outside of the party because she does not want to admit that she has made a counter-intuitive decision. Anna's (author) decision to conceal her feelings about the party is evidence that Anna struggles to accept her counter-intuitive decision. At that point, she is dishonest with herself and the people in her life both inside and outside of the BCP. Anna does not want to acknowledge her position in the party because the closer she looks at her decision, the more ironic it becomes.

Anna (author) is aware that the British Communist Party boasts equality while basing itself completely upon political hierarchy and division, but she writes of the hypocrisies of the BCP in the Black Notebook, not the Red Notebook. Anna omits this entry from the Red Notebook to maintain appearances. If Anna (author) wrote down in her Red Notebook that she was aware of the hypocrisy of the BCP, it would highlight her counter-intuitive decision to join and reinforce the ironies she is trying to avoid. In the Black Notebook Anna writes:

It is now obvious that inherent in the structure of a communist party or group is a self-dividing principle. Any communist party anywhere exists and perhaps even flourishes by this process of discarding individuals or groups; not because of personal merits or demerits, but according to how they accord with the inner dynamism of the party at any given moment.

Anna (author) writes this critique in 1954, after she joined the British Communist Party, so she is aware of the irony of the party and of her decision to join it, yet she remains in the party until 1957. Anna (author) chooses, however, to keep that critique out of her Red Notebook. Anna (author) does not want to admit that the BCP's structure follows the same divisive political and economic structure that the BCP claims to fight against in the notebook dedicated to the party. It would be too ironic.

However, throughout the entries in the Red Notebook Anna (author) slowly begins to acknowledge the irony of the British Communist Party. As she slowly comes to the realization that the BCP ironically accomplishes the opposite of what they set out to, Anna (author) begins writing about small qualms she has with the party. For example, she notices canvassers cataloging voters as "doubtful" and "undecided" of voting for the British Communist Party when they have decided to vote Labour (Lessing 157). As her time in the party passes, Anna begins to write down larger issues she has with the party. Anna (author) comes to believe that the BCP is willfully ignorant of their failing political party. The irony of the British Communist party's "self-dividing" structure becomes increasingly harder to avoid as the BCP changes and attempts to solve its internal problems, but she continues to work, further attempting to avoid the unavoidable irony of her situation. In the Red Notebook on September of 1956, Anna writes that there

have been no more meetings. The idea in the air, so I'm told, is to start a new "really British C.P." as an example and an alternative to the existing C.P. People are contemplating, apparently without misgivings, the existence of two rival C.P.'s. Yet it's obvious what would happen. The energies of both would be occupied by throwing insults at each other and denying each other's right to be communist at all. A recipe for farce. But it's no more stupid than the idea of "throwing out" the old guard by democratic means and reforming the party "from within." Stupid. Yet I was wrapped in it for months. (Lessing 428)

Anna is aware of the inevitability of the Communist Party's collapse, yet she stays involved and "wraps [herself] up in" the politics as she avoids confronting the irony of her situation in the party. She participates in the BCP, knowing of its hypocrisies and eventual demise, in the same way she continues to write in her notebooks. She writes the pieces of her life separately in the hopes of organizing them and giving them each their own space to thrive, but that organization is what ironically creates the disorganized separation. At the beginning of her time in the Communist Party Anna (author) had not faced the ironies of the party or of her situation, but by the end of her time in the Communist Party, and at the end of the Red Notebook, Anna (author) accepts the irony of the party as unavoidable and that what the party is built up of is inherently ironic. The Communist party attempted to create order, but their attempts ironically created more disorder— in that same way, Anna (author) attempts to create order out of disorder by writing her notebooks, but she ironically creates more disorder.

In the Yellow Notebook, Anna plans to write a novel and title it *The Shadow of the Third*, but the hypothetical novel exists only in a beta state. According to John L. Carey, *the Shadow of the Third* "is one of Anna's notebooks. It is part of the chaos and will never be published" (15).

Although the *Yellow Notebook* is Anna's (author) fiction, it does not take a novel form, distinguishing *The Shadow of the Third* from Anna's other fictions *Frontiers of War* and "Free Women." In the *Yellow Notebook*, Anna fictionalizes herself as Ella and fictionalizes her ex-lover Michael as Paul Tanner. Anna is frustrated with her inability to write the romance between Ella and Paul in a way that captures the truth of her past, failed relationship with Michael. The *Yellow Notebook* remains in the planning stage of the story because Anna obsesses over how to write the story truthfully. She aims to be as objective and truthful as possible but stops herself from writing before she gets started. Anna blocks herself from writing by critiquing her character Ella's ironic behavior and by critiquing her own "dishonesty." The constant critique hinders her from writing and the novel never progresses. Anna (author) goes back and re-rewrites scene after scene, attempting to get closer to the truth of the failed relationship, but with each iteration Anna ironically gets further from the truth.

Considering that Anna (author) is a writer suffering from writer's block, the *Yellow Notebook* is heavily saturated with irony. The *Yellow Notebook* holds Anna's (author) ideas for a novel she would write if she were not suffering from writer's block. Lessing does not write Anna to see the overt irony of this notebook. Lessing cleverly designed the *Yellow Notebook* to be written "like the manuscript of a novel" without being a novel (it remains in the planning stage) to highlight the irony in Anna's use of fiction (Lessing 161). In the *Yellow Notebook*, Anna (author) aims to truthfully write out what happened between her and her ex-husband Michael; because all accounts must be written after the fact. Anna (author) attempts to bypass that nostalgia by fictionalizing herself as Ella and Michael as Paul. Anna believes that by fictionalizing herself and her ex-husband would remove the nostalgia and make a more honest account. Anna considers that through the fictional form of the *Yellow Notebook* "there is no

nostalgia in [the] piece, about Paul and Ella” as there is in her piece about Mashopi (216).

Despite that fiction removes the nostalgia from the Yellow Notebook, the fact that all fiction is a representation ironically makes Anna’s attempt at truth through fiction another failure. After rereading the story of Ella and Paul, Anna (author) writes that

the trouble with this story is that it is written in terms of analysis of the laws of dissolution of the relationship between Paul and Ella. I don’t see any other way to write it. As soon as one has lived through something, it falls into a pattern. And the pattern of an affair, even one that has lasted five years and has been as close as a marriage, is seen in terms of what ends it. That is why all this is untrue. Because while living through something one doesn’t think like that at all. (Lessing 216)

At this point in the Yellow Notebook, Anna acknowledges that retrospectively writing an account of something is untrue because it is written after the fact. After acknowledging that her first version of Ella and Paul’s relationship is untrue, she immediately throws out the idea and begins again. She continues *The Shadow of the Third*, attempting to write the truth of her relationship with Michael through Paul and Ella. Anna (author) ignorantly refuses to believe that writing truthfully is impossible to do.

Because Anna (author) believes she cannot write her relationship with Michael truthfully because she is approaching it wrong, Lessing writes Anna to dissolve the Yellow Notebook into a series of lists. Anna (author) refuses to believe that there is “no other way to write” her relationship (Lessing 216), so she lists out the different ways she could write it truthfully. The list is composed of numbered ideas, either titled “A Short Story” or “A Short Novel,” with paragraphs summarizing the idea for her story. One of Anna’s ideas reads: “A woman, starved for love, meets a man rather younger than herself, younger perhaps in emotional experience than

in years; or perhaps in the depth of his emotional experience. She deludes herself about the nature of the man, for him another love affair merely” (Lessing 508). The Yellow Notebook ends after 19 story ideas with the sentence, “If I’ve gone back to pistache, then it’s time to stop” (Lessing 517). Anna, in her attempt to avoid writing dishonestly, ironically avoids writing at all.

The Blue notebook functions as a diary where she attempts to truthfully write out her day-to-day experiences and entirely avoid fiction, but Anna ironically ends up writing nothing at all. Throughout the notebook, Anna (author) writes out her dreams and reflects upon her sessions with a psychoanalyst Mrs. Marks. The Blue Notebook contains the beginning of Anna’s relationship with an American Communist named Saul, a writer also suffering from writer’s block and what appears to be, according to Betsy Draine (15), schizophrenia. According to Joseph Hynes in “The Construction of the Golden Notebook” in her attempt to get closer to the truth in the Blue Notebook, “Anna is driven away from writing and toward the pseudo-objectivity of newspaper clippings” (9), so she pastes headlines and newspaper clippings in notebook to replace her personal entries. Hynes argues that Anna is driven away from writing and towards newspaper clippings because she deems her writing too far from the truth. Ironically, Anna’s attempt to get closer to the truth pushes her from the truth and “toward insanity” (Hynes 9). The pages are filled with headline after headline and years pass in the Blue Notebook without containing an entry about Anna’s personal life or thoughts.

Anna's (author) Blue Notebook began as an attempt at a diary, but once again her quest for truth ironically produced a text she considers untruthful. The Blue Notebook begins as if it were a fiction, but Anna (author) quickly corrects herself because it goes against her main goal: to write the absolute truth. The first line of the Blue Notebook reads: “Tommy appeared to be

accusing his mother” (Lessing 217). Anna quickly reprimands herself for falling into a fictional tone again:

I came upstairs from the scene between Tommy and Molly and instantly began to turn it into a short story. It struck me that my doing this— turning everything into fiction— *must be an evasion*. Why not write down, simply, what happened between. Molly and her son today? Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? Why don't I keep a diary? Obviously my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself. . . . I shall keep a diary. (Lessing 217)

So Anna (author) keeps the Blue Notebook as a working diary. Anna (author) begins it as a diary, but shortly after starting it she stops writing her thoughts and experiences in it because she does not consider them truthful enough. Her thoughts and experiences, as they are retold after the fact, seem to Anna as nostalgic and untrue. Through this notebook, Lessing points out that Anna's entries are parodies and will never be the truth Anna desires to write. Anna begins that notebook with an idealized “up” (Mulkeen 9) that eventually breaks down and the notebook abruptly ends.

During the Blue Notebook's descent, Anna (author) resorts to pasting newspaper clippings where entries should go because she believes they are closer to the truth of what happened that day than what she would write. Anna (author) ends the Blue Notebook after realizing the irony of its contents. Having censored herself in the Red Notebook, Anna (author) knows she can likely fall into the trap of censorship during her quest for truth, so she lays out the rule that she will not censor or “conceal” anything from herself in the Blue Notebook (Lessing 217). Ironically, by the end of the Blue Notebook “the last eighteen months had been ruled out,



every page, with a thick black cross,” because her attempts at truth were not truthful enough. Anna (author), frustrated with her failure, crosses out the entries. Upon a reread of the Blue Notebook’s contents, Anna (author) writes:

So all that is a failure too. The blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them. I expected a terse record of facts to present some sort of a pattern when I read it over, but this sort of record is as false as the account of what happened on 15th September, 1954, which I read now embarrassed because of its emotionalism and because of its assumption that if I wrote “at nine-thirty I went to the lavatory to shit and at two to pee and at four I sweated,” this would be more real than if I simply wrote what I thought. And yet I still don’t understand why. (Lessing 448)

This entry is written after 18 months of crossed out entries. At that point in her life, Anna does not understand why the truth evades her, despite her efforts. Anna ironically produces what she aims to avoid which frustrates her because she has not come to accept that truth is unachievable and irony is unavoidable. Each time Anna (author) reads past entries, she realizes she has ironically produced exactly what she aimed to avoid: the lying nostalgia.

After Anna realizes the irony of her attempts at truth, she puts down the colored notebooks forever and picks up the “Golden Notebook,” the notebook where she descends into “breakdown and madness” (Mulkeen 6). In the “Golden Notebook” she plans to write “all of [herself] in one book” (Lessing 580). Anna (author) attempts to not censor herself, as she did in the Blue Notebook, or to hide critiques in separate notebooks, as she did with the Black and Red Notebooks, or to fictionalize any part of her experience, as she does in the Yellow Notebook; all of Anna is to be included and written in the “Golden Notebook.” The “Golden Notebook” is

Anna's final attempt to write an absolute truth, and that failed attempt prompts her to psychologically break down. Katherine N. Hayles writes in "Fracturing Forms: Recuperation and Chaos" that "the plan of *The Golden Notebook* is to document the encroaching presence of chaos, until in the inner 'Golden Notebook' even the traditional forms of time and space break down; out of this chaos something new is to emerge" (21). At the beginning of each notebook, Anna (author) attempts to write the truth of her experience and each notebook inevitably fails because, according to the postmodernists, there is no absolute truth. The breakdown that occurs in the "Golden Notebook" forces Anna (author) to confront and accept the ironic content she previously attempted to avoid.

Lessing craftily titled the notebook Anna believes she will accomplish her goals in the "Golden Notebook" because, given the novel is titled *The Golden Notebook*, the reader would naturally assume that Anna (author) finally succeeds in finding truth and avoiding ironies. The "Golden Notebook" is viewed as a hero that will save Anna (author) from chaos and gratify the reader's desire for Anna to finally write herself truthfully. Lessing intended the notebooks to be fractured and chaotic for the effect on her audience; after the notebooks repeatedly fail, the reader looks forward to when Anna finally "writes all of [herself] in one notebook" (580) as much as Anna (author) does. Lessing designed that Anna *break down into healing*. The "Golden Notebook" is where Anna breaks down and realizes that she cannot write the truth of herself at all, which is a realization that eventually brings her to self-healing.

Lessing places an indicator that the final notebook is as ironic as the other notebooks by beginning the "Golden Notebook" with another character's writing. The "Golden Notebook" begins with a "curse" that reads: "*Whoever he be who looks in this / He shall be cursed, / That is my wish. / Saul Green, his book (!!!)*" (Lessing 583). Saul Green, Anna's (author) schizophrenic

boyfriend, claims the notebook she intended to write all of herself in. In the “Golden Notebook,” Anna (author) documents the peak of her psychological breakdown after her failure to write truth in her notebooks. Anna (author) has abandoned the other notebooks out of frustration with the irony they contained and picked up the “golden notebook” as a final, desperate attempt to remedy the encroaching breakdown brought on by the notebooks. The “Golden Notebook,” although it does not censor, it is not separated, and it is not fictionalized, still does not contain the truth Anna obsesses over. Anna (author) addresses each “problem” responsible for the dishonesty in the four notebooks in the “Golden Notebook,” but the “Golden Notebook” is still untruthful and pushes her to her breaking point.

Anna (author) dreams of stage productions, which symbolize the untruthful representations she ironically tried to avoid in her other notebooks. When she begins the “Golden Notebook,” Anna (author) is no longer working for the BCP, her daughter Janet is gone at school, and she is still not writing fiction, so she is no longer playing the role of a communist, a mother, or a writer. Anna confines herself to her apartment with only her notebooks and her schizophrenic boyfriend Saul. In the “Golden Notebook” however, the stage play and film representations of her life, which she continually dreams about, begin as nightmares. Anna writes:

Scene after scene flicked on, then off; I knew this brief “visiting” of the past was so that I should be reminded I still had to work on it. Paul Tanner and Ella, Michael and Anna, Julia and Ella, Molly and Anna, Mother sugar, Tommy, Richard, Dr. West — these people appeared briefly, distorted with speed, and vanished again, and then the film broke off, or rather ran down, with a jarring dislocation. (Lessing 590)

The dreams Anna has of the “projectionist” showing these plays force her to confront that they are merely representations. At the beginning of her breakdown, Anna (author) believes she “still [has] to work on” her retelling of Mashopi, of her and Michael, of her and Molly, of Tommy, and of her characters in *The Shadow of the Third*. Anna (author) writes that the dreams have “faced [her] with the burden of re-creating order out of the chaos that [her] life had become” (591). Anna writes, “Time had gone, and my memory did not exist, and I was unable to distinguish what I had invented and what I had known, and I knew that I had invented was all false” (Lessing 591). Despite her failed attempts at truth in her notebooks, Anna continues to believe she only needs to work harder to write truthfully. Lessing emphasizes the madness of Anna’s attempts at truth: after having failed at writing absolute truth (which does not, according to Lessing, exist) in her other notebooks, Anna (author) continues to try and continues to fail in the “Golden Notebook.” Anna’s attachment to her goal leads her further into madness because her goal cannot be accomplished.

Lessing designed the realization that leads Anna (author) to break down to be the same realization that leads her to self-healing. After having what Anna (author) describes as “weeks of craziness and timelessness” plagued with dreams about untruthful reproductions, Anna finally writes, “The fact is, the real experience can’t be described,” which is her first admonition that her goal to write the truth cannot be accomplished (604). Anna (author) accepts that the real experience cannot be described and that everything she has written is merely a representation. After this acceptance, Anna (author) writes,

The people who have been there, in the place in themselves where words, patterns, order, dissolve, will know what I mean [when she says “the real experience can’t be described”] and others won’t. But once having been there,

*there's a terrible irony, a terrible shrug of the shoulders, and it's not a question of fighting it, or disowning it, or of right or wrong, but simply knowing that it is there, always.* (Lessing 605, emphasis added)

Lessing places Anna's acceptance that there is no truth in the notebook that contains the peak of her psychological breakdown. The structure of *The Golden Notebook* reinforces Lessing's concept that breaking down is an essential part of the self-healing process (Lessing xii). Anna needed to fail in each of her notebooks, including her largest failure in the "Golden Notebook" in order to realize that when it comes to writing the absolute truth, failure is all there is. Once Anna (author) realizes that concept, there is nothing she can do but accept the irony of her situation.

Anna (author) set out to write what captured the truth of her experience in her notebooks—to not conceal anything, but ironically her attempts conceal just as much as they reveal. After a series of failed attempts in the four colored notebooks and in the beginning of the "Golden Notebook" Lessing faces Anna with the inevitability of failure when it comes to documenting an absolute truth. Lessing brings Anna to the conclusion that representations are inherently dishonest because they are merely representations. Lessing understands, and writes Anna to understand, that life is complex. Life includes paradoxes and ironies that cannot be avoided. The complexities of life and cannot ever be accurately represented through language because language has limitations. Anna discovers the limitations of language through her notebooks. After discovering that language is limiting and can only reproduce representations, Anna accepts that representations, although insufficient, are all people have. Writing fiction is not an "evasion" as Anna (author) once thought it to be (Lessing 217), but writing fiction is a medium by which Anna (author) can convey the complexities of life through language. This conclusion first causes her to break down, then the conclusion causes her to heal. Because the

truth can only ever be represented, Anna is free to write fiction again because representation is all there is. Instead of fighting against the postmodern truth that there is no absolute truth, as Anna did in her notebooks, Anna is able to move forward with an air of acceptance because she “simply know[s] [irony] is there, always.”

## Chapter 2

## “The Two Women Were Alone In a London Flat”: Self-Healing and Irony in “Free Women”

Lessing designed *The Golden Notebook* to begin with a “Free Women” section, but after Anna’s breakdown, Lessing reveals Anna as the author of “Free Women” and Anna’s self-healing becomes evident to the reader. In the “Golden Notebook,” Anna (author) discusses her writer’s block with her lover Saul. Anna (author) tells Saul about a story she would write if she were not suffering from writer’s block, and Saul helps her get started: Saul says to Anna (author), as she is breaking down under the pressure of her ironic situation, ““you can’t go on like this, you’ve got to start writing again””(Lessing 610). Saul then takes it upon himself to give Anna (author) the first line of the short story she “would” write “if [she]could.” That line is “The two women were alone in the London flat” (Lessing 610). The first line in Lessing’s novel—the first line in Anna’s “Free Women”—is “The two women were alone in the London flat” (Lessing 1). Because this information is only divulged before the final “Free Women” section, Lessing’s commentary on writing and self-healing are starkly evident to the reader by the end of the “Golden Notebook.” Anna’s search for an absolute truth leads to a break-down, but when she accepts the absence of truth and accepts the ironies and repetition of her life she can write them out in “Free Women.”

Lessing strategically differentiates, after the reader has finished almost all of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna (character) from Anna (author) by defining that Anna (character) is a product of Anna (author). This differentiation reinforces Lessing’s ambiguity between “truth” and “fiction” and further reinforces that truth can only be represented. Molly Hite writes in “Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and *The Four-Gated City*: Ideology, Coherence, and Possibility” that the

“distinction between levels of reality— between fact and fiction within the narrative— is . . . blurred” (22). Before the reader finds out that Anna is the author of “Free Women,” Lessing makes it seem that Anna (character) *is* the Anna (author) of the notebooks. Lessing reveals Anna (author) as the author of “Free Women” at the end of the “Golden Notebook.” The “Free Women” sections are not how they initially appear to be after the reader discovers that Lessing wrote Anna (author) to have written them: Lessing did not want “Free Women” to be approached as Lessing’s omniscient narration by the end of the novel. Lessing and Anna (author) intend for the “Free Women” sections to be approached as “fiction” and thus they take all the liberties of fiction. Anna (author) draws upon accounts in the notebooks and uses them as she wishes in her novel. Because Lessing writes Anna as the author of “Free Women,” the “Free Women” sections serve as Anna’s literature where she “isolat[es] and emphas[izes] the factors” that are essential to understanding the point of the events (Lessing 216). Lessing, through Anna (author) defines “literature [as] analysis after the event,” which means that “Free Women” is an analysis of the notebooks which are an analysis of events in Anna’s life. Anna (author) represents her experience with the notebooks in “Free Women,” which is evidence that she has accepted representations and irony and has healed through her breakdown.

By the time Lessing reveals that the reader has read Anna’s literature, her “analysis after the event” (Lessing 216), it is clear that *the Golden Notebook* does not show, as Mulkeen argued in “Twentieth-Century Realism: The ‘Grid’ Structure in *The Golden Notebook*,” “only decent” (Mulkeen 10). The notebooks are an account of a woman battling with the concept of truth, struggling with the ironies in her life, and eventually coming to terms with those struggles by accepting that there is no truth, there are only representations of truth. Writing the notebooks



helped Anna (author) move towards the possibility of acceptance and growth that is manifested in her fictional “Free Women.”

Lessing indicates that Anna has healed from her breakdown in the “Free Women” sections by defining Anna as the author of Anna (character), Molly, and Tommy’s narratives. Lessing indicates that Anna (author) has experienced self-healing by having Anna (author) use the irony of her life as fuel for “Free Women,” which shows that she has accepted that irony is “there, always” (Lessing 605). Lessing has Anna rely heavily on irony when writing about Anna (character) and Molly. The second indication that Anna (author) has healed is her use of the “Free Women” character Tommy. Lessing writes Anna (author) to write Tommy as her double to indicate that she has accepted that truth can only be represented. In “Free Women” Tommy critiques Anna’s (character) ironic notebooks, which is evidence for Anna’s (author) awareness. Anna also uses Tommy to mirror her own journey from breakdown to self-healing through acceptance. Lessing writes Anna (author) to recognize the cycle of break down and self-healing she has just experienced. Anna understands that she went through a phase with the notebooks, and is now in a different phase with “Free Women.” Lessing writes that Anna creates Tommy to struggle with phases and the cyclic nature of life to represent Anna’s cycle from breakdown into self-healing.

Lessing ironically creates Anna (author) to design the character Tommy Portmain, a young man, to be the pinnacle of plot in “Free Women” despite the indication that the story would be about Anna. Lessing’s direction to have Anna (author) include Tommy as her double in “Free Women” provides a gendered complication to Anna’s fragmented, postmodern consciousness. Because Anna (author) should be a “free woman” but is clearly unfree, Anna (author) finds a form of freedom by writing herself through Tommy Portmain, a man— a man

who in the British post-WWII society is at least freer than she is. The irony of Anna using a man as her double, is that Anna (author and character) is bound to societal obligations as a woman: she is unfree, but Anna is “free” when she embodies Tommy in “Free Women” because she is able to say things through a male mouthpiece that might otherwise be deemed inappropriate for a woman (even a “new woman”). Through Tommy, Anna is able to both parody the absurdity of her position as a “Free Woman” and experience performative freedom from her societal obligations through writing fiction. It is only through fiction that Anna (author) is able to freely write the multiplicity of her postmodern self because she is able to embody different characters and different genders. Anna (character) and Tommy Portmain are both doubles of Anna (author), which means that Lessing intended Anna (author) to be aware of her ironic situation and accepting of her postmodern consciousness.

Lessing organized *The Golden Notebook* to immediately introduce the reader to overt ironies, and after the revelation of Anna as the author of “Free Women,” those overt ironies become Anna's (author). Lessing’s novel is saturated with irony, but when the “Free Women” sections are attributed by Lessing to Anna (author), the irony takes on a different role. Lessing has Anna (author) use the ironies of her own life as content for her fiction, which indicates that she has accepted those ironies. The ironies of Anna (character) and Molly’s experience revolve around their sexual and financial “freedom.” In the beginning of “Free Women,” Anna (character) and her friend, Molly, have a conversation revolving around the idea that they are “a completely new kind of woman” (Lessing 5) because they are unmarried, working women. Anna's (author) two characters, the two “completely new kind of wom[en],” are inspired from pieces from the notebooks. Their “newness” is taken from what Anna (author) writes in the Yellow Notebook regarding her relationship with Michael. Anna (character) and Molly are

“new” because they have not yet found their place in the post-war society. Lessing has Anna (author) write in the Yellow Notebook that “women’s emotions are all still fitted for a kind of society that no longer exists. My deep emotions, my real ones, are to do with my relationship with a man” (Lessing 300). Anna (author) [Ella] is unmarried and “free” in the same way Anna (character) and Molly are “free.” In “Free Women,” opposed to in the Yellow Notebook, Anna (character)’s and Molly’s “newness,” their “freedom,” is not a point of contention for them as it was for Anna (author) in the Yellow Notebook. For Anna's (author) characters, the irony of their position as “free women” is merely a fact they accept and shrug off as “odd” (Lessing 1).

Lessing represents Anna’s authorial decision to choose the exasperatingly ironic name “Free Women” for a story about a woman who is anything but free means she has accepted the ironic nature of her experience. Rather than push against the ironies and try to avoid them, as she did at the beginning of her notebooks, with “Free Women” Anna (author) leans into the ironies and uses them to fuel her fiction. Before her breakdown, Anna (author) attempts to write only the truth. Anna accepts that there is no truth, there is only parody and repetition. That acceptance leads her to write a parody of her own life: “Free Women.” Anna (author) suffers from writer’s block before she accepts the postmodern concept that there is no absolute truth, and her search for an absolute truth broke her down into chaos. Rather than remaining in the phase of breakdown and writer’s block, Anna's (author) newfound acceptance of irony enabled her to write fiction again, heal, and enter a new phase of her life.

In “Free Women” Anna (author) uses irony to highlight the absurdity of her situation through parody rather than trying to make sense of it, as she would have in her notebooks. Lessing has her character, Anna (author) draw overt attention to the irony of her character’s position: “‘Free Women’, Anna [(character)] says wryly. She added with an anger new to Molly .

. . . : ‘They still define us in terms of relationships with men, even the best of them.’” To which Molly aptly responds: “‘Well, *we* do, don’t we?’” (4). Here, it is evident that Anna (character) acknowledges the irony of the term “Free Women” because she does not view herself as free at all. Anna’s (character) pert response to the term “Free Women” signifies her relationship with it: she views it as unavoidable. Anna’s (author) decision to write that irony as unavoidable indicates that she has accepted, for herself, irony’s inevitability.

Rather than solely being a literary device to propel “Free Women,” the irony is evidence that Anna has accepted that life itself is saturated with unavoidable ironies she would have tried to avoid in her notebooks. Lessing has Anna saturate “Free Women” with irony to highlight her progress. Anna’s (author) character Richard ironically goes to the two women he considers “free” to seek advice about what to do with his alcohol dependent wife, Marion, whom he is now legally tied to and does not want to be. Richard is both married and “free” to do what he pleases. To Richard, his ex-wife Molly and Anna (character) are interchangeable, so when Molly was out of town working, Richard went to see Anna (character) about Marion which irritates Molly because years before, she had been in Marion’s position:

Molly let her anger spurt out with: “It’s very odd he seems to to expect me to almost control Marion. Why me? Or you? Well, perhaps you’d better go after all. It’s going to be difficult if all sorts of complications have been going on while my back was turned.”

Anna said firmly: “No, Molly. I didn’t ask Richard to come and see me. I didn’t ask Marion to come and see me. After all, it’s not your fault or mine that we seem to play the same role for people. I said what you would have said— at least, I think so.” (Lessing 8)

Anna (character) and Molly are viewed by the people, primarily men, and in this case, Marion, in their life as the same, further highlighting the irony of their situation because they “play the same role for people.” Anna (character), although she is not Richard’s ex-wife, is an unmarried woman, so Richard believes Anna (character) would feel the same way that Molly would about any given situation. Because she is unmarried and “available” for Richard to turn to, Richard turns to Anna (character) for counsel and advice about his personal matters because she is not concerned with the personal matters of another man. Ironically, Anna’s “freedom” comes with a bounty of responsibilities, almost all of which revolve around men. Because she is unmarried she should be free from marital problems. However, other people’s marital problems still follow and she is altogether not free from marital problems. Because she is considered a “free woman” Anna (character) is bound to problems and responsibilities she would not otherwise have. Lessing has Anna (author) highlight the irony of her position through Anna (character) in “Free Women,” when in the notebooks Anna would have attempted to avoid, erase, or rewrite repeatedly to capture the truth of it. The irony of Anna (character)’s situation is evidence that Anna (author) has come to accept the irony of her own situation.

Lessing has Anna (author) write Molly and Anna to be ironically ignorant of their past affiliations with the BCP so Anna (author) can use Tommy Portmain as a critic of that behavior. “Free Women” takes place after Anna (character) and Molly both leave the communist party to establish Anna's (author) self-healing and ability to reflect on her ironic phase as a communist. They leave the party because of its failed idealism, looking back on their time in the party as a time of delusion and naivety. Because Tommy is in his 20s and is a part of a socialist party, Anna (character) and Molly see the similarities between Tommy’s attachments to the socialist party and their previous attachment to the communist party. Because of their own political

experiences Anna (author) and Molly discount Tommy's political experiences as delusional and naive. They approach Tommy with a condescension masked as loving concern, but Tommy is aware of the mask while Anna and Molly are not. Lessing, through Anna (author), includes the hypocritical condescension of Anna (author) and Molly to show that Anna (author) has come to terms with the irony of her past actions by highlighting the ignorance of the character's actions.

Anna (author) writes her character Anna to ignorantly push back against the idea that life is composed of ironies and repetition, and she uses her character Tommy Portmain to highlight that ignorance. Lessing juxtaposes Anna's (author) awareness and Anna's (character) ignorance regarding the notebooks, by attributing "Free Women" to Anna (author), to show the growth and healing Anna has gained through acceptance. Anna (author) employs Tommy Portmain as a tool, a mouthpiece, to converse with Anna (character) and to critique her counteractive relationship with the notebooks. Anna (author) represented her past ignorance with the notebooks through Tommy's critiques. Anna (author) has accepted that her past attempts at truth and order are in vain, so she uses Tommy to critique the ignorance of her past persistence represented in Anna (character). Rather than living in a counteractive place with the "non-fiction" notebooks, Anna (author) has moved through her break-down, where she could not write or complete things, into an active place where she is able to write fiction to completion. Anna (author) uses fiction to represent the past events of her life so she can reflect upon them.

When Lessing reveals that "Free Women" is written by Anna (author) at the end of the "Golden Notebook," Tommy's role in "Free Women" changes from merely being a character to being Anna's double. Upon a first read, Tommy Portmain is merely an young man going through a difficult period of his life who eventually, after attempting suicide, finds purpose in his life. After Anna (author) is found out to be the creator of Tommy, the reader realizes that Anna

represents Tommy's journey through his breakdown to his healing to reflect on Anna's same journey from breakdown to self-healing. In the notebooks, Anna struggles with the concept that truth can only be represented. By the end of the "Golden Notebook," Anna (author) has accepted that representations are all there can be, and her creation of Tommy as a representation of both her past and current herself, is evidence of that acceptance and self-healing.

Although Lessing's character Tommy is often mentioned in scholarship about *The Golden Notebook*, not many scholars approach Tommy as Anna's (author) character or the implications of that layer. Elizabeth Abel, one scholar who approaches Tommy as Anna's character, writes in "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Literature" that

Anna rudely plucks [Tommy] from his actual life (as described in her blue notebook), brings him to her flat to read private notebooks, and has him violently blind himself. Anna transforms Tommy into her dark double, who confronts the same tormenting existential questions, vehemently denies that he is going through a "phase" that differentiates his point of view from hers, and, on the brink of plunging into the same chaos she faces, chooses the alternative route of blindness as the limitation that preserves control. (434)

Anna (author) does turn Tommy into a "double" who mirrors Anna's breaking down process, but Abel fails to acknowledge that after Tommy attempts suicide, he heals and is able to progress in his life. Rather than being confined to his room with his "madness books" (Lessing 250), in the same way Anna (author) was confined to her flat with her notebooks, Tommy is able to move forward with his life after the peak of his psychological breakdown, in the same way Anna (author) is able to move forward from the peak of her psychological breakdown in the "Golden

Notebook.” I approach Tommy as a double, but I argue that Anna writes Tommy to plunge into “the same chaos” Anna experienced in the notebooks, which results in his attempted suicide. Anna (author) writes Tommy to live through the suicide, to be left blind, but to be “happy for the first time in his life” (Lessing 362). By writing Tommy as her double to experience the same breakdown, to accept his new phase he is in, and eventually be happy, Anna gives evidence of her own self-healing after her breakdown. Because she has experienced the process of breaking down into self-healing, she is able to narrate the entire process for her character Tommy.

As the author of *the Golden Notebook*, Lessing layers Anna (author) as the author of “Free Women” who creates Tommy Portmain as a double of Anna (Author). Lessing’s layers show Anna’s growth and the things she accepted after she does away with her fractured notebooks. Anna’s character Tommy is evidence of Anna’s healing through her breakdown. During Tommy and Anna’s conversation about the notebooks, the idea that Anna and Tommy are connected is implied throughout “Free Women.” In “Free Women: 2,” Anna is at her writing desk looking at the four notebooks sprawled out before her. Tommy comes into her room. “Usually, at the sound of feet on the stair, Anna removed herself from the big room,” but “this time she looked sharply around and only just prevented an exclamation of relief as the footsteps turned out to be Tommy’s” (Lessing 247) Here, Tommy’s presence around a private process does not illicit concern, but relief. Tommy’s “smile acknowledges her, her room, the pencil in her hand, and her spread notebooks, as a scene he had expected to see” (Lessing 247). Anna (character) writes privately and keeps her things hidden, but Tommy knows of Anna’s private behaviors. Not only does Tommy expect Anna to be in her usual places, doing her usual things, but he expects her to say certain things. During that conversation, “Tommy wait[s] for her to have finished saying what he had expected her to say,” as if he understands Anna on a different



level (249). All of Anna's (author) narrative decisions indicate that Tommy is as much Anna's (author) double as Anna (character).

Because the conversations between Tommy and Anna (character) take place in "Free Women," Lessing indicates through the structure that the conversation was conjured up and written down by Anna (author). In this way Anna (author) is behind both Tommy and Anna (character)'s voices in that conversation, and Lessing intentionally layered the authorship that highlights Anna's (author) retrospective opinion on her ironic past behavior. Anna (author) writes Anna (character) and Tommy to discuss Molly's concern for her son and what Tommy calls his "madness books," which are his books on politics and philosophy to draw a stronger connection between Anna's (author) breakdown to Tommy's breakdown. Anna's notebooks are also full of madness and chaos. The first instance of Anna (author) using Tommy as a version of herself to view and converse with Anna (character) is when Tommy tells Anna that her "bed's just like a coffin." Then, "Anna [sees] herself, small pale, neat, wearing black trousers and a black shirt, squatting cross-legged on the narrow black-draped bed," almost as if she were viewing herself from Tommy's perspective— as if Tommy were her, looking at herself during her own time of madness and break-down. This self-reflection makes her uncomfortable, so she gets off the bed and moves opposite to him in a chair, to remove herself from "the coffin" that she has gained perspective of. Anna (character), while she writes the notebooks, is uncomfortable with self-reflection. Anna (character) feels that she is seeing herself through Tommy's perspective while she sits on the bed, and Anna's compulsion to mirror his "hysterical" behavior is evidence that Tommy, during his breakdown, is a reflection of Anna (author) during her own break-down.

Throughout the conversation, Anna (character) notes that Tommy does not seem to be himself, and she feels compelled to mirror his behavior which further solidifies Anna's (author)

intent to have Tommy serve as a representation, or double, of herself. At the beginning of their conversation “Tommy giggled. The giggle was new— harsh, uncontrolled, and malicious. At the sound Anna felt rise in her a wave of panic. She even felt a desire to giggle herself. She calmed herself, thinking ”He hasn’t been here five minutes, but his hysteria’s infecting me already. Be careful” (248). Anna (author) repeatedly notes, from the perspective of Anna (character), that Tommy does not seem to be himself. First, Anna (character) notes that “she felt as if there were a stranger in her room. He even looked strange, for his blunt dark obstinate face was twisted into a mask of smiling spite,” going as far as to say Tommy appears to be “a malicious stranger” (249). This conversation takes place directly before Tommy attempts suicide.

At this point in the “Free Women” narrative, Tommy has fallen into a mental break-down himself, his parents and Anna (character) are concerned about his well being. His break down and incentive to commit suicide narrated in “Free Women” mirrors the breakdown Anna (author) suffered in her “Golden Notebook.”

Anna writes that Tommy’s break-down revolves around the issue that life is built up of inescapable phases to mirror her past phase with the notebooks. He tells Anna (character) about a time when he was younger and overheard her and his mother saying, “he’s in a difficult phase,” and that his mother’s use of that phrase, which summed up and belittled he fears and struggles he felt as a child, “canceled [him] out” (256). He says, ““All through my childhood I kept reaching something that seemed new and important. I kept gaining victories. . . . I was clinging onto something, a feeling of who I really was. Then my mother says, just a phase. In other words, what I felt just then didn’t matter, it was a product of glands, or something, and it would pass” (256). He continues, ““one can’t go through life in phases. There must be a goal somewhere,” and that people are just “temporary shapes of something. *Phases.*” (Lessing 256, original

emphasis). The idea of life's inevitable cyclic nature depresses him and makes life seem pointless. After he heals from his attempted suicide, Tommy lives his life confidently in the phase he is in. He accepts that it is a phase. The acceptance of these repeating phases of life and the inevitability of the cyclic nature of life is something Anna (character) does not experience but that Anna (author) does. Because Tommy, rather than Anna (character), experiences self-healing some scholars ignore the concept of self-healing in "Free Women" altogether. It is evident, however, that Anna (author) of "Free Women" has accepted the postmodernist concept of repetition and that that life consists of repetitions in the form of cyclical life phases. Anna's (author) acceptance of the cyclic nature of life is evident through her characterization of Tommy because he represents the irony in trying to escape those phases, and as Anna's double, he eventually accepts the phases.

In "Free Women: 2" the reader is given Anna's (author) analysis of the Blue Notebook's ironic nature through Anna (character) and Tommy. Lessing creates a direct link between the notebooks and "Free Women" by Anna (author) writing that she saw Molly's son Tommy "coming down the stairs" (Lessing 217) in her first attempt at writing in the Blue Notebook to establish that "Free Women" is inspired by the events in the notebooks. Tommy reads the Blue Notebook, the only notebook he reads, and critiques the irony of Anna (character)'s "diary." Tommy serves as a mouthpiece for Anna (author) to critique Anna's (character), and by extension, her own, ironic attempt in the Blue Notebook to not "conceal" (Lessing 217) anything from herself and to write truthfully. Tommy urges Anna to see the irony in her search for truth. Although Tommy does not explicitly call Anna's notebooks or her behavior ironic, the critiques Tommy makes about Anna's notebooks and behavior revolve around irony. He points out a diary

entry that, when put against her intention with the Blue Notebook, accomplishes the exact opposite. Tommy reads the entry out loud to Anna (character):

“Here you’ve got an entry, it was when you were still living in our house. ‘I stood looking down out of the window. The street seemed miles down. Suddenly I felt as if I’d flung myself out of the window. I could see myself lying on the pavement. Then I seemed to be standing by the body on the pavement. I was two people. Blood and brains were scattered everywhere. I knelt down and began licking up the blood and the brains’”

He looked at her accusing, and Anna was silent. “When you had written that, you put heavy brackets around it. And then you wrote: ‘I went to the shop and bought a pound and a half of tomatoes, half a pound of cheese, a pot of cherry jam, and a quarter of tea. Then I made a tomato salad and took Janet to the park for a walk.’” (Lessing 261)

Anna (character) has deemed “the blood and the brains” entry a “flash of madness,” and categorized it as untrue, so she sectioned it off as separate from her entry, from her account of the day. Tommy and Anna’s (character) dialogue continues:

[Tommy says,] “Then why write it down at all? Do you realize the whole of this notebook, the blue one, is either newspaper cuttings or bits like the blood and brain bit, all bracketed off, or crossed out; and then entries like buying tomatoes or tea?”

[Anna (character) replies,] “I suppose it is. It’s because I keep trying to write the truth and realizing it’s not true.”

“Perhaps it is true,” he said suddenly, “perhaps it is, and you can’t bear to, so you cross it out.”

[Anna (character) responds,] “Perhaps.” (Lessing 262)

Having already been through her experience with the notebooks, Anna (author) writes this scene in “Free Women” from a different perspective: she understands while she is writing “Free Women” that the notebooks are ironic— that her goal to write things truly and accurately was in vain. Perhaps “the blood and brains” entry is true, and perhaps the grocery entry is true, but all Anna (author) can rely on is “perhaps” because there is no absolute truth. By the time Anna (author) writes “Free Women,” she has become comfortable with the concept of “perhaps.” As a postmodern author, Lessing has created a protagonist who herself discovers, through her various attempts in the notebooks, that she cannot write the absolute truth. After this discovery, Anna writes “Free Women” to explain her experience with the notebooks and her relationship to truth. While writing “Free Women,” Anna (author) does not attempt to write the absolute truth, she writes what she feels to be true about her experience. Paradoxically, Anna’s fiction is both less true and more true than her notebooks.

After Tommy’s brief encounter with the notebooks he shoots himself in the head but ironically accomplishes the opposite of what he set out to do, and he lives through the attempted suicide. Tommy recovers from his attempt but is permanently blinded (Lessing 356). When Tommy returns home to live with Anna and Molly, he is a changed person. He is confident in himself and his beliefs, he throws himself further into politics and even procures a relationship with Richard’s wife, soon second ex-wife, Marion, Tommy goes on to work with Marion for the socialist party. Tommy eventually shares with Anna and Molly that he will inevitably join his father in his capitalist career because life is cyclical and repetitive. Working as a capitalist,

despite his current phase as a socialist, is ironically the next phase of his life. Tommy acknowledges that life is cyclical, which initially led him to break down, so his blindness is not a metaphor for ignorance. Tommy accepts that he will eventually leave the socialist party, and he will follow in his father's footsteps because that is the path that has been set out for him by his social situation. Tommy's breakdown allows him to accept the next phase of his life without trying to understand it beyond what it is: a phase. The same way Tommy accepted that life is built out of phases, Anna (author) accepts that life is built out of representations. Tommy's healing is evidence of Anna's healing.

In "Free Women," it is evident that Anna (author) has accepted the ironies of her life. She understands that chaotic periods and break-downs, are a necessary part of life and a person's growth. Lessing attributes the ironies in "Free Women" to Anna (author) to show that Anna (author) has healed and is no longer troubled by the ironies. By using Anna (character), Molly, and Richard, Anna (author) represents her ironic situation as a "free woman." The fact that Anna is able to represent her situation, rather than explain or make sense of it, shows that she has exited the truth-seeking phase she was previously in. Anna claims the irony of her situation as her own through Molly, Anna, and Richard. She shrugs ironies off, lives with them, and uses them to represent her experiences. Anna (author) understands that the ironies of life are unavoidable. Pushing back against what is unavoidable leads to breakdown, which leads to acknowledgement, acceptance, and self-healing. Lessing shows the necessity of breaking down in the self-healing process through Tommy by directing Anna to write him as her double. Tommy accepts his situation and heals as Anna (author) accepts her situation and heals. This acknowledgement and acceptance is gained through Anna's experience with the notebooks and is actualized in her fictional "Free Women."



## Conclusion

Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is structured so Anna's descent into madness, her breakdown, is contextualized and supported by the product of her self-healing. The breakdown in the notebooks and the self-healing in "Free Women" happen simultaneously, but Lessing designed that *The Golden Notebook* would appear to be a story of only breakdown until the end of the novel when Anna Wulf is revealed as the author of "Free Women." The structure enforces Lessing's belief "that sometimes when people 'crack-up' it is a way of self-healing" (xii) by revealing that Anna's breakdown is what brought her to write "Free Women." Through the complex structure of *The Golden Notebook*, the reader experiences both the breakdown and the self-healing simultaneously without realizing it.

Lessing's structure creates a mirroring effect. The reader must go back and reevaluate what they believed to be true in *The Golden Notebook*. In the same way, Anna had to reevaluate what she considered "true" after writing her notebooks. The "lying nostalgia" (Lessing 61) that led Anna to break down ironically leads her to self-healing. Lessing structured *The Golden Notebook* so the reader is required to reevaluate the things they read as "truth" as instead "fiction." By requiring her reader to go through the same process Anna went through, Lessing successfully accomplished her goal of creating "novel which described the intellectual and moral climate" (viii) of Britain during an ideological shift to the postmodern sensibility. By reevaluating what is "true" as "fiction," and by disrupting the reader's concept of "truth," Lessing effectively enacts the changes the "intellectual and moral climate" Britain faced after WWII. Lessing's structure and content depend on each other to accurately represent the complex postmodern reality.



Lessing did not only create a successful postmodern novel, she also successfully communicates the postmodern consciousness. The fractured structure of *The Golden Notebook* reflects the fractured postmodern consciousness, but that is not all the structure accomplishes. When Lessing reveals Anna Wulf as the author of “Free Women” and disrupts the idea of “truth,” Lessing represents the postmodern concept of “truth.” Not one section in *The Golden Notebook* can be approached as objective or “true” because they are all written to be represented as being written by Lessing’s fictional character, Anna Wulf. Using her character Anna as the author of each section, Lessing intended each section of *The Golden Notebook* to not be “true.” There is not even a fictional objective “truth,” there are only Anna’s representations. To a postmodernist, the concept that there is no truth is not a disheartening concept it is a freeing one. The absence of truth allows Anna to open up and to write fiction again. Through the structure of *The Golden Notebook* Lessing enacts how shifting from the modern to the postmodern philosophy of truth allows Anna (author) to heal. By allowing Anna to heal, to write again, Lessing shows that the postmodern concept of truth is not limiting.

Lessing employs irony in *The Golden Notebook* to highlight the absurdities of Anna’s attempts at an absolute truth. The irony of Anna's (author) attempts to capture an absolute truth in her notebooks is the first indicator that the absolute truth does not exist. Lessing creates Anna (author) to be hyper-aware of irony. Anna is bothered by the irony of her situation and the ironic behaviors of others in her life, so she attempts to avoid irony altogether. Lessing makes the irony Anna (author) faces unavoidable to enforce the idea that acceptance is the only way to move forward and heal. Lessing has Anna accept the unavoidable irony of her attempts at absolute truth and accept that there is no truth so she can heal through her breakdown and write again. The irony that brought Anna to break down in the notebooks is an essential part of Anna’s

self-healing process in “Free Women.” When Lessing attributes “Free Women” to her character Anna, the irony in “Free Women” becomes a tool for Anna to represent and to reflect upon her earlier experience writing the notebooks and ironically searching for truth. Anna’s newly claimed ability to use irony in “Free Women” contrasts with her earlier inability to write under the pressure of irony in the notebooks. In this way, Lessing uses Anna’s relationship to irony to show Anna’s progress. Having already gone through that phase of her life, Anna (author) knows the beginning and end of the breakdown and self-healing cycle. Lessing has Anna use that knowledge to create Tommy as he goes through the same breakdown and self-healing cycle.

Acknowledging irony as “odd” is a sign of acceptance because Anna has accepted that irony is unavoidable and uses it in her fiction. Lessing believes that there is no absolute truth, that people can only accept that representations of truth are only that— representations. In this way, all representations are, in a sense, fiction. Just as “Free Women” serves the same, supportive role in *The Golden Notebook* as “fiction” as it does as “truth,” representations still serve an essential role in people’s lives. The representations in *The Golden Notebook* allow Anna to heal, even though representations brought Anna to break down in the first place. In the beginning of *The Golden Notebook*, the phrase “It’s odd, isn’t it” is merely a catch phrase of two gossiping women. By the end of Lessing’s novel, the phrase “It’s odd, isn’t it” signifies the acceptance and healing Anna (author) has experienced.

Lessing lays out the paradoxical relationship of breakdown and self-healing through the structure of *The Golden Notebook*. Breakdown and self-healing are interdependent in the same way the notebooks and “Free Women” are interdependent. They inform each other— they give each other purpose. *The Golden Notebook* serves as a blueprint for how to deal with life’s complexities during a difficult phase of life. Chaos and irony are inevitable, but what one does

with chaos and irony is individual. Lessing does not write Anna to be consumed by the inevitable chaos and irony, she writes her to accept them and heal. Lessing discourages her reader from searching for an absolute truth through Anna's ironic notebooks. By blurring the line between fiction and reality in her novel, Lessing enacts that an absolute truth is not necessary to support Anna's narrative. Fiction, the representation of Anna's experience, accomplishes what Anna thought the notebooks and an absolute truth would. Fiction gave her the space to write herself. Lessing writes, "We've got to believe in our beautiful impossible blueprints," the representations of truth we create, in order to save ourselves (Lessing 609). It's odd, but the absence of truth is not bleak, it is ironically hopeful.

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