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DORIS LESSING'S SHORT STORIES : A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE?

Over the last decade a great deal of scholarly criticism has appeared concerning Doris Lessing's novels, more specifically *The Golden Notebook* and her *Children of Violence* series. Surprisingly little attention has been given to her short stories (apart from cursory reviews), although she has over sixty stories published, collected in five volumes.

Lessing, in an interview with Florence Howe[1] admitted that she was too "prolific"; she never revised what she had written, especially in her long novels. The short stories, however, have a strength and conciseness that is sometimes lacking in the longer works. Individually the stories can clarify points about an experience, an emotion, an opinion or a type of person, and yet at the same time, they can elucidate a theme or attitude that is closely related to the novels.

Stylistically the stories have a simplicity and evennness that is often lost in the bulk of Lessing's other works. Where the novels at times tend towards cumbersome and weighty prose, the short stories, on the whole, remain light and direct. They are not hampered by excessive wordiness, and the scenes that are created depend on the bare essentials. Lessing's realism is one of her great strengths, as she once confessed:

> I hold the view that the . . . realist story is the highest form of prose writing; higher than and out of the reach of any comparison with expressionism, impressionism, symbolism, naturalism, or any other ism.[2]

Her characters, especially women, reflect Lessing's view of women and their place in society. The selected themes coincide with her own view of life, both sociological and psychological, and her approach is often by the case history method wherein she works from particularity to generality. This case history method can sometimes make her writings appear more like journalism but, as she herself claims, the tools of her trade must be treated with great care:

> Words, it seems, can no longer be used simply and naturally. . . Words have become so inadequate to express the richness of our experience that the simplest sentence overheard on a bus reverberates like words shouted against a cliff.[3]

Yet Lessing does write "simply and naturally"; rather than make statements about her characters, she shows why they act as they do. Some of her most successful short stories explore the physical and emotional relationships between men and women. Especially outstanding are those stories dealing with marriage; it would seem that in Lessing's view no marriage can help to sustain a relationship; the bond of marriage acts as a catalyst for

dissension, dissatisfaction and frustration. The reason for this pessimistic view may well lie in Lessing's own personal experiences (as outlined in the loosely autobiographical novels concerning Martha Quest). One senses her underlying criticism of the women she writes about for she sees in them an obsession with emotional relationships, rather than reasoned judgments or decisions for independent and responsible lives.

The limitations on women's freedom (both social and psychological) are explored in other stories. Lessing realises the paradox in the deliberate choices made by her women yet sees no compromise or middle path. Her male characters, however, invariably find marriage a different proposition; uncommitted to emotional relationships they see the alternatives and more often than not rely on themselves, their positions and occupations.

Speaking of her own life Doris Lessing once confessed: "I do not think that marriage is one of my talents."[4] Writing about marriage, however, is certainly one of her talents. "A Man and Two Women"[5], concerns a married couple and their mutual married friend, and how they are caught in a situation where feelings of desire vie with trust and fidelity. Both these marriages are described as "real"; they are secure, strong and will not easily be broken: "No marital miseries, nothing of one partner in a marriage victim to the other" (p. 90). Yet when Stella comes to stay with her friends, Dorothy and Jack Bradford, she feels "forlorn" at her husband's absence; she badly wants him there for security reasons but she is upset at her own dependence on her man. She is, as Lessing comments in *A Ripple from the Storm*,

> [the] type of woman who can never be 'themselves' with anyone but the man to whom they have permanently or not given their hearts. If the man goes away there is left an empty space filled with shadows.[6]

(Betty, in "Our Friend Judith", feels the same way; "She had been appalled by the discovery that if her husband was away for a night she couldn't sleep; and when he went to Australia for three weeks, she stopped living until he came back.")[7] Dorothy, however, finds her "ideal" marriage stifling: "I've been thinking it must be nice, having your husband go off then come back . . . Don't you think there's something awful in two grown people stuck together all the time like Siamese twins" (p. 97). Her new baby perhaps prompts these feelings of resentment for her husband. But when she suggests that Stella satisfy Jack's sexual needs, it is the "vision of the helpless baby" (p. 107) that checks Stella. What checks Jack is Stella's reaction. He has no "vision" as she has. He has already "screwed that silly bitch Lady Edith on her brocade sofa" (p. 100) and he could do it again. Dorothy actually does test his decency (and fidelity) by suggesting he make love to her best friend. He is furiously angry when Stella refuses him: "Damn you both! I'd like to wring both your bloody necks" (p. 106).

The baby, therefore, though rarely present, plays a major part in the story. It is very nearly instrumental in upsetting the delicate balance of the friendship; it provokes new emotions while stirring up old feelings.

This story, then, essentially deals with the tensions in marriage and the moral dilemmas that both men and women face when personal and individual aspirations and motivations threaten the institution itself. Conversely, "Not a Very Nice Story"[8] is about the kinds of marriages that survive only because infidelities and deceits exist.

The title itself echoes comments made by Lessing in 1957 about the lack of objectivity in contemporary criticism:

> At the moment our critics remind me of a lot of Victorian ladies making out their library lists: this is a "nice" book; or it is not a "nice" book; the characters are "nice"; or they are not "nice".[9]

This story focusses on two marriages "both as happy as marriages are, both exemplary from society's point of view, containing a shocking flaw, a secret cancer, a hidden vice" (p. 187). A man and a woman (Frederick and Muriel) go outside their own marriages not to "make love but to have sex" with their friends' marital partners. But because they think the incident is so out of character, they don't know "what to feel". Muriel, however, realises that the essence of her affair is "lack of emotion"; Frederick thinks Muriel is "intelligent" because she refuses to become emotionally involved. Lack of emotion can enable one to function on a sensible but sterile level, but where, the reader may wonder, is the joy in that?

Throughout the story Lessing guides the reader's response by her own crisp emotionless account of her characters' lives. They are mere players with little depth; Lessing at one stage even refers to the "script" (p. 204) in which they all play their parts. As mere players, then, they can be regarded as representative "types" who embody certain characteristics. Muriel, lacking any sense of emotional responsibility to her friend or husband, fails as a convincing character because she is too one-sided. But she does make an interesting contrast to Stella ("A Man and Two Women"). Both women are in the situation where their best friends' husbands want them. Stella thinks she'll destroy everything if she succumbs to the temptation, anticipating an emotional reaction, her guilt, even before the event. Muriel, however, is able to separate the physical and emotional sides of love and have no qualms. We could imagine Stella being consumed by guilt if Jack did "drag her off into the bushes" (p. 106). But Muriel wouldn't let it worry her.

Lessing's purpose in this story is to show an extreme view, where marriage becomes a mere institution in people's lives — nothing more than a framework for individuals to operate in. It is a bleak picture of modern marriage, but not so pessimistic as that in "To Room Nineteen",[10] a story which shows how "intelligence" instead of keeping a marriage functional, leaves it devoid of all meaning.

The couple in this story constantly live by conventions and the rules that are a part of them. Frederick had called Muriel "intelligent" because she refused to become emotionally involved. In Susan and Matthew Rawlings' marriage, however, intelligence rules; in fact, "the marriage was grounded in intelligence" (p. 253). Like Kate and Michael in Lessing's

novel *The Summer Before the Dark*, "a great deal of intelligent insight had gone into their view of themselves and this marriage".[11] Their dedication to convention is gently mocked by Lessing: "they had saved each other 'for the real thing' " (p. 253).

From the outset the course Susan takes seems to be leading her straight "to Room Nineteen". Although they have "everything they had wanted and had planned for", there is still something amiss. Dissatisfaction gnaws at this "intelligent" couple. As soon as Matthew goes outside the conventions and breaks the fidelity of ten years of marriage, Susan feels "as if life had become a desert, and that nothing mattered" (p. 258). Like Esther in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* who begins to "think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state",[12] Susan, feeling tense and panic-stricken, gradually withdraws from her husband and her children. Unable to explain to her husband why she feels like a prisoner, she becomes obsessed with her own ideas of freedom. (The feeling of tension which she cannot escape takes on a form similar to Anna Wulf's "housewife's disease": "I must-dress-Janet-get - her - breakfast - send - her - off - to - school - get Michael's - breakfast-don't-forget-I'm-out-of-tea-etc.-etc.")[13] Later Susan sees her own irrational fears materialize in the garden, in the form of a demon. And she explains it as Anna does when she has seen the devils come and go in her own flat: "The devils. As if the fear, the terror, the anxiety were not inside me . . . but some force from outside which chose its moments to come and go" (p. 589). Nevertheless, Susan does become aware that her irrational self is leading her to the kind of madness explained by Ella in *The Golden Notebook* as "not being able to stop yourself doing something that you know to be irrational" (p. 230).

As Susan's path takes her nearer to Room Nineteen, she feels herself become divided in a "Laingian" sense[14]. When she actually has her room booked regularly for herself in Fred's hotel, the "real" world means nothing to her, and it is only when Susan is sought out by her husband, who suggests he meet her mythical lover, that she resigns herself entirely, breathes the gas into her lungs and drifts off "into the dark river".

This story, more than any other, has roused the most diverse reaction among Lessing's critics. Robert Taubman in his article "Near Zero"[15] attacks Susan for not considering the possibility of choice. Yet Lessing *is* convincing in relating the experience as a chain of events that denies any alternative for her character. Concerning this matter of "choice", Lessing declared in a lecture to a large group of women in 1972:

> We live under the illusion that we can be free to choose. This is dogma. Everything children are taught is taught by an authority standing before him quoting other authority figures. Yet he is never told that what he is taught is a small limited truth taught by X and not by Y. . . People must learn to trust their own experiences and that is all that matters now.[16]

But "choice" itself, in this story, as Lessing shows, does have a certain sense of inevitability. Matthew and Susan Rawlings are presented to us as a couple who people felt "had chosen; this balanced and sensible family was no more than what was due to them because of their infallible sense of *choosing* right" (p. 254). But their "intelligent" marriage was society's, not their own idea of a successful marriage. Susan's "freedom" becomes limited to those areas of her life that don't matter to her. As she becomes a "split" being, the existence she drifts into loses all reality for her and only the "appearance" of herself to others remains; all she can see in the end is chaos. Suicide, then, was the only real choice she could make because she had lost "herself". Her voluntary death was the only way she felt she could assert herself in a perverted act of freewill. Ella, in *The Golden Notebook*, comes to a similar conclusion when she is thinking of the novel she will write about the suicide of her main character:

> The moment of death would also be the moment when the real continuity of his life would be understood – a continuity not of order, discipline, practicality, commonsense, but of unreality. It would be understood, at the moment of death, that the link between the dark need for death, and death itself, had been the wild, crazy fantasies of a beautiful life; and that the commonsense and the order had been . . . symptoms of sanity, but intimations of madness (p. 182).

Susan, in destroying herself, encompasses this "continuity of unreality".

Webster Schott in his article "The Purpose of Life" claims that:

> [the] meaning of the act [Susan's suicide] reverberates to the plump upper-middle-class British life that denies women of awareness a purpose beyond the pleasuring of men and the begetting of children.[17]

Is there, then, the inference here that women in a lower social class, with less time to think and brood about their lot would not suffer the same fate?

The story "He", from an earlier collection, *The Habit of Loving*[18] tells of a woman whose whole existence depends on her home and husband. Without his presence her life is utterly miserable and meaningless. It is a depressing little piece conveying that feeling of injustice that a housewife has after caring for husband and family for many years. Unlike Kate Brown or Susan Rawlings, however, Annie Blake is a working-class woman who has "slaved" her life out for her "man and kids" (p. 185). A "terrible feeling of injustice" grips Annie. It is the same feeling that Kate experienced when she was no longer needed to "nanny" other people. Kate felt "the injustice, the pain of it, which had been waiting for her all these last years" (*Summer*, p. 56). Having been conditioned to slave for her family, Annie is lost when the responsibility is taken from her. Yet although she knows that her husband is unhappy with his new wife ("He's fed up and sick of that – cow"), she cannot bring herself to humbly take him back into her life. She is torn between what she wants and what she will have to sacrifice to get it (her pride). *He* is the one who still dominates her life even in his absence. And the future for Annie looks bleak: "I'm forty-five, and I might as well be on the dust heap" (p. 188). Kate, at forty-five, also felt "she

could look forward to nothing much but a dwindling away from full household activity into getting old" (*Summer*, p. 11).

The age factor, then, is important; there seems to come a time with Lessing's women of all classes, when the woman's energy is no longer needed to sustain either marital pressures or responsibilities. The giving up of the responsibilities and the sacrifice it entails create an emotional predicament. Annie can use her "furious energy" only in her housework. When the ex-husband arrives he takes the brunt of her anger, an anger which is more an expression of humiliation and disgust at her own weak and vulnerable position. Anna Wulf, in *The Golden Notebook*, might be speaking of Annie when she tries to rationalise a similar feeling that she has towards Michael:

> But the anger is not related to him. Long ago, in the course of the sessions with Mother Sugar, I learned that the resentment, the anger, is impersonal. It is the disease of women in our time. I can see it in women's faces, their voices, everyday, or in the letters that come to the office. The woman's emotion: resentment against injustice, an impersonal poison. The unlucky ones who do not know it is impersonal, turn it against their men (p. 329).

Annie is presumably one of "the unlucky ones". She cannot win either way. Yet we can see that finally she will submit herself to the injustices, stoically accepting her lot, because she can see no alternative or choice whatsoever.

If successful relationships in Lessing's fiction are a matter of "luck" then female characters tend to have the dice loaded against them, more often than not because they commit themselves to unsuitable partners. Once this commitment is made there is little likelihood of the woman changing or adjusting her situation accordingly, even though happiness and fulfilment cannot survive in a vacuum created by a husband's departure.

When a woman does seek some kind of fulfilment outside marriage (because her relationship with her husband is unsatisfactory) the change, especially emotionally, can often be for the worse. In an African story, "Lucy Grange"[19] Lessing shows how pressures of isolation and loneliness can affect a woman's attitude towards her husband at the expense of marital fidelity. Lucy Grange, living on a farm "fifty miles from the nearest town" (p. 71) struggles to maintain her individuality and feeling of contact with the outside world, in an environment where the harsh nature of work can sterilise human relationships. To retain her self-respect and self-confidence Lucy is determined to care for her outward physical appearance despite the scornful yet envious reaction from her female neighbours. One woman claims: "I found Lucy in the vegetable patch wearing gloves full of cold cream". One other comments: "Lucy has ordered another dress pattern from town" (p. 71). But she refuses to accept the second-rate, to lose her individuality, until a visitor arrives, who forces her "abdication from her standards", precisely because she is unlike the other "satisfactory solid women . . . with their femininity which was asserted once and for all by a

clumsy scrawl of red across the mouth".

In this story Lessing has shown the insidious way a woman can be taken advantage of through circumstances over which she has no control. The anonymous stranger is all a part of Lucy's fate (Hardy treats certain characters the same way): he is the vulture, the bird of death that instinctively knows when his prey is at its weakest. It is a harsh indictment from Lessing for such a man, a destroyer of a woman's integrity and belief in herself and her marriage. While Susan Rawlings longs for solitude, Lucy Grange is driven by her solitude into an adulterous relationship with a stranger at the cost of her own "standards" and the fidelity of her marriage.

Marriage, then, as Lessing writes about it, rarely lives up to its expectations in modern society: marriage and happiness are not, it seems, synonymous. This passage from page 65 of *Summer* might stand as a summary of Lessing's views in these short stories:

> This was a happy marriage because both she [Kate] and Michael had understood, and very early on, that the core of discontent, or of hunger, if you like, which is unfailingly part of every modern marriage . . . had nothing to do with either partner. Or with marriage. It was fed and heightened by what people were educated to expect of marriage, which was a very great deal because the texture of ordinary life was thin and unsatisfactory. Marriage had had a load heaped on it which it could not sustain.

The short stories, in their own way, demonstrate precisely this view. Lessing's women, relying on marriage for happiness and fulfilment therefore remain victims of the institution. And for Lessing, who realises the problem, there seems to be no solution.

But how does Lessing treat those women who face problems outside the context of marriage? Some women, it seems, choose and then rely on husbands to give them some kind of identity, while others prefer to let their work and position determine their status in society.

Barbara Coles, a talented young theatrical designer, who appears in "One Off the Short List"[20], is a woman whose work, rather than husband, establishes her as a woman in her own right. Because of her success, however, she becomes the victim of a mediocre journalist-turned-interviewer who determinedly sets out to manoeuvre her into bed. In their first encounter, Barbara is politely cool when Graham Spence introduces himself. Her reaction towards him, although not hostile, is casual and "careless", enough to provoke Spence into thinking he is a match for her, for he fancies himself as a man who "understands" women. Ironically it is to be his lack of instinct and inexperience with women that causes his own humiliation and failure.

His opening tactic in his little game of seduction immediately sets up a barrier between himself and Barbara. He not only refuses to let her make the choice about where they will go, but he decides where and what she will drink, and how much. Barbara, realising what his game is, and the rules

he is to abide by, resigns herself to him: "Very well, he's like that, then all right, I'll do what he wants and get it over with. . ." (p. 17). It is when Spence feels that his control over her is slipping (for he cannot control what she *thinks*) that the "cold determination" to sleep with her takes over. But the weaker his position becomes, the more he begins to hate her. In a desperate clinch, he catches a glimpse of "her great green eyes, open and dismal beneath his, he knew he had never disliked anything more than those 'jewelled' eyes. They were repulsive to him" (p. 27).

When Barbara announces the final move in the game, anticipating his intention to escort her back to the theatre where everyone can see him with her, Spence still does not comprehend his own stupidity. After he "hands her over" to her colleagues, the last thing Spence sees are "her eyes; sullen with boredom" (p. 33); those same eyes that had in the first instance attracted him so strongly ("emerald-like eyes in the face of a schoolgirl" p. 7), now repel him.

The recurrent eye imagery reinforces the appearance/reality theme of the story. What concerns Spence the most is not what he is but how he appears to others. Initially he had decided that he wanted only to be "seen out with her a few times in public. . . He might have a brief affair with this woman, but more often than not it was the appearance of an affair. . . he would make a point of taking this woman into the pubs where his male colleagues went" (p. 10). But he refuses to take Barbara into the pub she chooses because her colleagues, seeing him with her, would recognise him as a journalist, that is, his *real* role instead of his imagined role, the way that he sees himself, as Barbara's companion. His concern for making "impressions", his "pose" is so false and, seen through Lessing's eyes, his real position is ludicrous and contradictory — he allows himself to give the impression of "being settled, dependable; the husband and father", yet he treats Barbara (who is, by the way, also settled; a wife and mother) like a prostitute. His own view of himself, that of a man whose image reassures women, is completely misguided. For if he does want to give the impression of being "settled, dependable", why is he, in the first place, pursuing Barbara with such alacrity?

When Barbara finally acts like a prostitute("she administered to him, she was setting herself to please him"), and afterwards consoles him for his inability to perform, Spence's reaction is to call her "a proper little slut". He treats her like a whore yet hates her when she acts like one. This is surely Lessing's way of showing her own contempt (and her character's) for the double standard in society. Barbara, however, holds the winning card in the end — her detachment and non-involvement. The story rarely dips into her mind and in this way, Lessing controls the reader's response to Spence. Lessing won't divulge Barbara's feelings to the reader, just as Barbara refuses to show any open feeling towards Spence. And so Barbara Coles does emerge undaunted despite the attack on her by a zealous and egotistical male. She stands apart from the women Anna Wulf speaks of in *The Golden Notebook*. Barbara does "put her work first and takes men as

they come" (p. 312).

Maureen Jeffries from "Between Men"[21], however, is concerned only to work so that she can meet men. At the age of thirty-nine, Maureen, who has lived without marriage, finds that her "career", that of mistress to various men, "all of them eminent or at least potentially eminent" (p. 150), has come to a standstill. As she looks back on her past affairs she sees the pattern of her voluntary subjugation to her lovers' demands, at the expense of her own work as an artist: "she had never put her own talent, painting, first but always the career of whichever man she was living with" (p. 151). She is consoled, however, by a fellow "professional beauty", Peggy, whose husband, Tom Bayley (one of Maureen's ex-lovers), has just left her for a "pretty, sweet and dumb", but pregnant art student. With the help of a bottle of brandy, the two women pour their hearts out to each other, both bitter and sarcastic about their present predicaments. The relationship they share is similar to that between Ella and Julia in *The Golden Notebook*: "they are now friends on the basis of an aspect of their relationship which had always been subordinate before – criticism for men" (p. 439). Maureen's confessions reveal the frustrations and humiliations that she has experienced with the men she has lived with: "Not one of those men did anything but make fun, or patronize me. . . all of them in one way or another" (p. 158).

What she doesn't confess is that she has chosen to let herself be treated like this (as Peggy points out). By becoming financially and emotionally dependent on men, she has abandoned her own talents. The reason for this self-denial seems to indicate Maureen's determination to gain some kind of status from her relationships; for instance, she had achieved a certain status being the mistress of Jack Boles. The affair had been publicised for months in the newspapers ("famous film director shares flat in Cannes with the painter Maureen Jeffries"). Yet she realises as soon as she leaves the flat she will "step out, also, of the world of international money and prestige" (p. 151). But, this is the world in which the male holds the power and status, where emotional attachments are threatened and have little chance of surviving, as evidenced by Maureen's eleven affairs. In *The Golden Notebook*, Anna comments: "[People] are refusing emotion because at the end of emotion are property, money, power" (p. 529). Maureen, however, cannot live without emotional attachments. When she is "between men", her life has no meaning. Ella, Anna's fictionalized self, sees the problem clearly:

> Women's emotions are all 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... I ought to be like a man, caring more for my work than for people; I ought to put my work first, and take men as they come, or find an ordinary comfortable man for bread and butter reasons – but I won't do it, I can't be like that . . . (p. 312).

Maureen, like Ella, "can't be like that"; as well, she will not be satisfied with "an ordinary comfortable man".

In an interview in New York in 1972, Lessing expressed the essential difference, as she sees it between men and women: "I've never met a man who would stop his work entirely in order to have a love affair and I've never met a woman who wouldn't."[22] None of Maureen's lovers would have abandoned their work for her, precisely because of the advantages that operate for them, never against them, in their world.

But Peggy at least sees there is a choice left and suggests that the two women set up a dress shop together. It is clear, nevertheless, that Maureen will take a lot of convincing; the more she drinks, however, the more the world of reality slips away and the more appealing her imagined world of the future becomes – the appearance takes over from the reality because it is such an attractive proposition. Yet she is still aware that what they are *good* at is "bolshtring up some damned genus, genius" (p. 160). "Genus" may have been a Freudian slip, but it may also indicate that Maureen thinks all men are the same with no exceptions. Anna Wulf's misgivings, on page 470 of *The Golden Notebook*, illuminate Maureen's:

> I am always amazed, in myself and in other women at the strength of our need to bolster men up. This is ironical, living as we do in a time of men's criticising us for being "castrating", etc. For the truth is, women have this deep instinctive need to build up a man as a man . . . what terrifies me is my willingness. . . I can't move out of the situation once it has started, I just go along with it.

Maureen, like Anna, has gone along with her situation for twenty-one years. There seems little hope of her changing, once this pattern of her life has been established. She will always be "defined in terms of [her] relationship with men" (*The Golden Notebook*, p. 26).

Although Lessing has put Maureen's case sympathetically in "Between Men", one can sense the underlying criticism of this type of female character. In the new introduction to *The Golden Notebook,* Lessing revealed her own feelings towards women like Maureen:

> Women are the cowards they are because they have been semi-slaves for so long. The number of women prepared to stand up for what they really think, feel, experience with a man they are in love with is still small. Most women still run like little dogs with stones thrown at them when a man says: You are unfeminine, aggressive, you are unmanning me. It is my belief that any woman who marries, or takes seriously in any way at all, a man who uses this threat, deserves everything she gets (p. 9).

But Maureen, Peggy and women like them cannot be anything but "semi-slaves". They would certainly agree with Isadora Wing from Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*: "Being unmarried in a man's world was such a hassle that anything had to be better. Marriage was better. But not much. Damned clever I thought how men had made life so intolerable for single women that most would gladly embrace even bad marriages instead."[23]

And it is Maureen Watson from "Notes for a Case History" who does just that. In her struggle to rise above her situation and find herself a better

place in a male-dominated society, that is in marriage, Maureen resembles her namesake from "Between Men". (It is interesting to note the resemblance to that other Maureen in *Summer*. The Maureens of Lessing's world, it would appear, are women who equate success in life with getting a man.) "Notes for a Case History"[24], however, is not told in a case history manner, except in the brief opening that describes Maureen Watson's childhood. The title, nevertheless, obviously suggests the universality of Maureen's situation and struggle to overcome and rise above the tight strictures of her society, class and sexual role. Her ambition, provided she manages her virginity and "capital" well ("Her assets were a slight delicate prettiness, and a dress sense that must have been a gift from God" p. 229), is a marriage into a better class. She quickly realises that to succeed she must use her main "asset", her sexuality, wisely. She must be prepared to give something in return for the privilege of being courted. Prudently she "gave an open mouth, and freedom to the waist" (p. 234).

Then something happens that Maureen has not foreseen as being a threat to her plans. She meets Stanley Hunt, an apprentice architect, who is trying in his own way to do exactly what Maureen is doing. They size each other up "knowing they were the same kind". Gradually they both begin to lower their sights, despite Stanley's reluctance. Maureen "opened her mouth for him and let his hands go down to her thighs" but Stanley "was not at all caught. . . He was still looking for something better" (p. 236). He knows too that he has "assets": he "was good-looking, attractive to women. . . he ought to do better than marry Maureen". Impatient with his own lack of success, he soon forces Maureen to "cross some borderline" when they are both very passionate one night. Marriage plans are made because they feel so sexually attracted to each other, but both feel they have chosen "second best". Maureen is confused and dissatisfied. For once she has let her heart, not her head, rule and she regrets having let "her mind [become] clouded by her response to his hands" (p. 237). She did not "use her sexuality wisely" or intelligently, thereby letting herself for a moment be ruled by her emotional response.

In a recent article, Lynn Sukenick discusses Lessing's heroines who, in their emotional lives, try to resist a loss of personal will and consequent loss of freedom. "Emotions", says Sukenick, are in Lessing's fiction "a swiftly flowing stream that can put a woman up the creek in no time at all." If one is touched or overwhelmed by emotion, "one is . . . vulnerable to love, the resulting betrayal of men, and the trappings (and traps) of domesticity".[25] We can sympathise with Maureen's confusion; still, Lessing gives her character another chance to assert her independence, despite her emotional "lapse" and subsequent ill-considered decision. Maureen's performance as a charlady during Stanley's visit is a clear expression of her own feelings and her contemptuous attitude toward her mother and her fiance. It is but a brief protest, however, at their lack of understanding. Realising the gesture of defiance is futile, Maureen has to beg and weep her way back into Stanley's favour and ultimately into his power: "there was

no balance between them, the advantage was all his" (p. 243).

If one is familiar with Lessing's stories, then the ending of this one is not surprising. The heroine gives herself no choice but to submit to the male. It is evident, however, that Maureen felt the social pressure to get married: "she was getting on for twenty-two and all the girls she had grown up with were married and had their first or even second babies" (p. 238). She is a woman who, like all women, as Lessing comments in *The Grass is Singing*, "become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable but steel-strong pressure to get married".[26]

Maureen's refusal to sort out her own feelings is typical of this kind of Lessing character; like the other Maureens she leaves her ultimate fate to a man and drifts into a loveless marriage. Anna Wulf comments in *The Golden Notebook*: "Sometimes I dislike women, I dislike us all because of our capacity for not-thinking when it suits us, we choose not to think when we are reaching out for happiness. . ." (p. 485). Maureen suppresses her personal feelings so that she can gain a husband and (supposedly) social status. Her plight, nevertheless, as suggested by the title of the story, is not uncommon and is, therefore, a telling comment by Lessing on young women in general, and especially those who "unthinkingly" let the choice be made for them.

It is rare, then, to find among Lessing's women one who is as independent and successful as Judith Castlewell, in "Our Friend Judith".[27] She, however, knowing how the "system" works, enjoys what others think is a "manless and uncomforted" (p. 173) life. What makes Judith different from her peers is her refusal to compromise or be influenced by group pressures. If her cat has to be "fixed" then she would rather it die; she is "almost contemptuous" about displaying books that are dedicated to her for "she certainly despises people who feel they need attention" (p. 177).

But because she keeps so much to herself her ideas about life and people in general are somewhat limited, as she admits to her friend: "I don't understand human behaviour and I'm not particularly interested" (p. 186). She has affairs only on her own terms and will not tolerate undue human involvement: "No one can interfere with me if I don't let them" (p. 187). Like a cat she relies mainly on instinct, withdrawing from situations where she does not feel comfortable or natural.

For Judith, involvement ("when you submerge yourself in somebody else") limits perception, and this is what she has spent most of her life avoiding. Emotional entanglements restrict one's ability to think rationally or intelligently as well as curtailing one's freedom. In *The Golden Notebook* Lessing's "free" women can never be happy because their conceptions about freedom are incomplete without love or emotional involvement. In "Our Friend Judith", the woman has realised the paradox and prefers to trust her own intuition: "if one cannot rely on what one feels what can one rely on?" she asks (p. 190).

Judith, then, may be the truly "free" woman in Lessing's terms. She

cannot be "weakened" by love as Ella is by Paul in *The Golden Notebook*: "He destroyed in her the knowing, doubting, sophisticated Ella and again and again he put her intelligence to sleep. . . And when his own distrust of himself destroyed this woman-in-love, so that she began thinking, she would fight to return to naivety. . ." (p. 216). This parody of Lawrentian prose, the most obvious allusion being the punning reference to *Women in Love*, adds a derisive tone to Ella's fate. Judith's strength lies in her commitment to herself. Yet her withdrawal from situations does not make her a particularly satisfactory character from the narrator's point of view, and at the end of the story she closes up altogether:

> She turned off the electric fire, and her face closed up. She smiled, friendly and distant and said, 'I don't really see any point at all in discussing it' (p. 190).

The electric fire has its own significance – like Judith it has no real warmth and can be turned on and off when the situation requires it.

These last four stories discussed reveal Lessing's women facing problems about involvement and independence. The solution to these problems has been varied, showing the complexity of the situation from the characters' and Lessing's point of view. If Judith, however, is to be taken as representative of the "free" woman in Lessing's terms, then her freedom is just as much a paradox as it is for the "free" women in *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing, then, sees no compromise either way, and for this reason her women are limited, committed to extreme life styles neither of which contains a happy medium.

Her characters suffer from an inability to sustain satisfactory personal relationships because of the rigidly limited alternatives which, in Lessing's view, are placed on them by society and its institutions. To be "free" is to have the self divided, to be forced to choose between emotion and intellect.

Nowhere in the short stories does Lessing portray a "sexually democratic" relationship, one in which man and woman are equal on a basis of friendship. In *The Summer Before the Dark*, however, Lessing's character Kate Brown at least recognises the possibility:

> Friendship was sexually democratic. Hearts did not get broken. Of course not, careers were more important than love, or sex: probably this was the sexuality of the future; romantic love, yearning, desperations of any kind would be banished into a neurotic past' (p. 60).

The "neurotic past" is presumably our present, but one wonders whether the future, as Lessing sees it, will offer anything better. In *Justine*, Lawrence Durrell's character, Clea, expresses a similar concern:

> Is there a friendship possible this side of love which could be sought and found? I speak no more of love – the word and its conventions have become odious to me. But is there a friendship possible to attain which is deeper, even limitlessly deep, and yet wordless, idealess? It seems somehow necessary to find a human being to whom one can be faithful, not in the body (I leave that to the priests) but in the culprit mind?[28]

The stress is on intellectual compatibility and fidelity – a Platonic ideal, one which Lessing and her characters find unattainable in the modern world. But as Lessing herself has pointed out, her concern is with the "real" not the "ideal". In her subject matter, presentation and style Lessing's short stories reflect her realistic viewpoint, enabling her to explore successfully and convincingly the complexities of modern heterosexual relationships.

NOTES

Since many hardbound original editions of Lessing's works were inaccessible or in some cases unavailable, paperback reprints have had to be cited.

[1] Florence Howe, "A Talk with Doris Lessing", *Nation*, March 6, 1967, p. 312.

[2] D.M. Lessing, "The Small Personal Voice", in *A Small Personal Voice. . .*, ed. and introd. Paul Schleuter (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 4.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[4] "Interview with Doris Lessing by Roy Newquist", in *A Small Personal Voice*, p. 46.

[5] In *A Man and Two Women* (1963; rpt. London: Panther Books, 1965) pp. 88-107. In subsequent references *A Man* will replace the full title for this collection.

[6] *A Ripple from the Storm* (1965; rpt. London: Panther Books, 1966) p. 40.

[7] In *A Man*, p. 180.

[8] In *The Story of a Non-Marrying Man and Other Stories* (London: Cape, 1972), pp. 187-213.

[9] "The Small Personal Voice", in *A Small Personal Voice*, p. 14.

[10] In *A Man*, pp. 253-88.

[11] *The Summer Before the Dark* (London: Cape, 1973) p. 25. Hereafter cited as *Summer*.

[12] *The Bell Jar* (1963; rpt. London: Faber, 1966), p. 89.

[13] D.M. Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, new ed. (1972; London: Panther Books, 1973) p. 329.

[14] R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (1960; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965). Laing theorises that an individual invents a false self to cope with both himself (his despair or problems) and the outside world. The personality can disintegrate completely if the real self cannot keep pace with the growing unreality of the false self.

[15] "Near Zero", *New Statesman*, 8 November 1963, p. 653.

[16] Marilyn Webb, "Feminism and Doris Lessing: Becoming the Men We Want to Marry", *Village Voice*, January 1973, p. 14.

[17] "The Purpose of Life", *Nation*, 14 December 1963, p. 419.

[18] *The Habit of Loving* (1957; rpt. London: Panther Books, 1966) pp. 183-90.

[19] In *The Habit of Loving*, pp. 71-6.

[20] In *A Man*, pp. 7-33.

[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 148-160.

[22] *Ibid.*, Note 16, p. 16.

[23] Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying* (1974; rpt. London: Panther Books, 1974), p. 78.

[24] In *A Man*, pp. 226-243.

[25] Lynn Sukenick, "Feeling and Reason in Doris Lessing's Fiction", in *Doris Lessing: Critical Studies*, ed. Annis Pratt and L.S. Dembo (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1974), pp. 98-118.

[26] *The Grass is Singing* (1950; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 41.

[27] In *A Man*, pp. 172-190.

[28] *Justine* (1957; rpt. London: Faber, 1966), p. 214.