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# Reflections on Doris Lessing: Age, Enclosure, and the Female Experience

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**Reflections on Doris Lessing:  
Age, Enclosure, and the Female Experience**

**By Heather M. Swan**

**A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Masters of Arts Degree in English  
Longwood College  
February 2002**

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## MIRROR

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful--

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

--Sylvia Plath

## Introduction

The idea of a distorted reflection is apparent in Doris Lessing's fiction from her earlier works to her most current. And although one might assume a woman's pensive gaze at herself occurs primarily in mirrors made of glass, there are various types of mirrors that exist in the life of a woman, and these are developed in Lessing's novels. Aside from the physicality of the wall-mirror, or any other looking-glass, mental mirrors and figurative/aesthetic mirrors are apparent in the lives of many of Lessing's female characters, most particularly in the life of 65 year-old Sarah Durham, the protagonist of Lessing's 1997 novel, *Love, Again*. Sarah's numerous occasions of mirror-gazing, or scrutiny of her physical self, occur throughout the novel at key points in the plot when she is significantly altering her inner-perceptions of her own identity, which, consequently, creates changes in her outer, physical appearance as well. At times, she feels older than she believes she looks; in other scenes she feels younger and then appears younger; and then there are occasions when her self-image is congruent with her view of her physical image, where she feels older *and* looks physically older. Aging, as well as the changes it brings to one's physical appearance and inner self-perception, are developed as a valuable tool for a woman's judgment of her self worth.

In the poem, "Mirror," featured on the previous page, Sylvia Plath notes the supposed value of mirrors in the lives of women, but this inanimate object, as the personified voice of the previous poem, discloses an evaluation of its control over the female, about whom it asserts itself to be supposedly truthful. Plath recognizes that a woman's purpose in studying her reflection is to view how others see her. This act is proof of human error, demonstrating skewed



interpretations of what is actually appearing in that mirror's reflection. Lessing illustrates purposes similar to Plath's by including extensive use of mirror motifs in several of her novels. Mirrors are often falsely thought to be the only true method for one to view clearly one's physical being in its entirety. In actuality, a mirror's reflections of the body are malformations of the physicality of oneself, for the image that a woman sees when she looks into her mirror is actually the opposite of what others see. More importantly, when a woman compares this picture in a glass to her many other types of images, her own interpretation is of her interior *self*-image. It is no coincidence that such intense introspection, aided by the use of a mirror, is evident in several of Lessing's earlier works as well. Such interpretations are the basis for this study, focusing on Sarah Durham in *Love, Again* (1997) with comparisons to the middle-aged woman's introspection of Kate Brown in *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and of the adolescent self-reflection of Martha Quest in *Martha Quest* (1952).

*Love, Again* traces a reawakening of emotions that Sarah Durham has not felt in decades. The novel begins when Sarah is age 65, feeling cluttered by her past and frustrated with her brother Hal's lack of responsibility toward his family. Widowed in her mid-30s, Sarah was left to raise her children alone and was also free to hold a job with "The Green Bird," a small theatrical production company based in London. As *Love, Again* opens, Sarah's children are fully grown and leading their own lives; Sarah is independent, still working with the company, and currently writing a musical stage version of a biography of Julie Vairon, the novel's pseudo-historical French heroine (created by Lessing). This occupation provides Sarah the opportunity to interact with younger members of the theater group, including actors and production associates. She develops a deep yet disturbing friendship with Stephen Ellington-Smith, the co-writer of the play, a

man who is strangely, unrealistically in love with their play's heroine, the long-dead Julie Vairon. During the production of *Julie Vairon* in France, Sarah finds herself falling in love (to different degrees) with three men in the group who are all very much younger than she. These experiences cause Sarah not only to compare her impractical physical attractions to these men with Stephen's attraction to Julie, but also to question her own identity as an aging woman. Sarah's self-definition fluctuates throughout the novel as she compares her present physical and mental selves with her past identities at younger stages of her life. What may be discerned as a negative connotation of inner-self confusion instead ends with a positive outcome at the conclusion of the novel. These comparisons at this later stage in her life allow Sarah to compartmentalize her own self-knowledge; in this process, she learns about who she is presently, who she was in the past, and consequently how she has changed for the better.

Kate Brown in *The Summer Before the Dark* finds herself at a loss of self-purpose in life when she realizes that her now grown children and her philandering husband no longer require her "services" in her roles as a mother and a young wife. Kate feels "in the middle" at middle-age, between young womanhood and elderly womanhood, and therefore without a definite purpose in life. This realization prompts Kate to accept a temporary job that allows her to travel the world. Once the job has concluded, Kate decides to create for herself a summer of freedom by telling her self-absorbed family that she is simply vacationing. During her travels, she has a brief affair with a much younger man (Jeffrey), eventually moves into a flat with Maureen (a girl as young as her own daughter), and later finds herself renting a hotel room that serves as "a room of her own" for self-contemplation. As Kate's time away from home progresses, she enters a state of madness that, paradoxically, allows her to see the world and

herself more honestly than prior to this summer of self-exploration.

*Martha Quest* is the first novel in Lessing's *Children of Violence* series, and focuses on a short period in Martha Quest's late teenage years. Living with her parents in a British colony in Africa, Martha expresses feelings of being stifled by this setting and unknowledgeable about the world (other than what she reads about in books). Martha goes through a rather extensive series of boyfriends, each of whom brings out a different characteristic of her personality to such a distorted excess that Martha feels detrimentally unlike herself when she is with each of them. Martha attempts to escape from her family by obtaining a secretarial job and by moving into an apartment in the city, but this setting continues to prevent Martha from identifying her purpose and goals in life as well. Her frustration is compounded by her realization of the British colonists' blatant prejudices based on race and social position. Her attempt to find freedom becomes futile, as she feels trapped despite the efforts she made to escape from her childhood home and her parents. Martha comes to the conclusion that her only outlet from this oppressive setting is marriage to her latest beau, Douglas, who will provide her with what Martha predicts will be an escape to new, fresh surroundings in England.

By scrutinizing their appearances, Lessing's protagonists are attempting to answer several questions through a combination of mental and physical self-reflection. Ruth Olsen Saxton, in her dissertation *Garments of the Mind: Clothing and Appearance in the Fiction of Doris Lessing*, argues that "Lessing uses the mirror to frame her female protagonists' inquiries into their identities" (*Preface* 13). Building further upon this initial idea, this additional study will focus more specifically on Lessing's use of several types of mirrors as motifs. These mirrors show the effects of self-contemplation on the part of Sarah Durham, the

protagonist of the novel *Love, Again*, as she studies her life as an aging woman. Aiding this study of the aging, maturing female and the effect of mirrors are discussions of middle-aged Kate Brown of *The Summer Before the Dark*, and adolescent Martha Quest of *Martha Quest*. Saxton has previously asserted the importance of the protagonists' age/developmental levels in analyzing their value of using mirrors: "In adolescence, the protagonist looks in her mirror to see what *he* sees . . . . In adulthood, the protagonist begins to recognize the limitations of the mirror and the discontinuity between her surface appearance and some other felt reality" (108). This thesis, with its focus on 65-year-old protagonist Sarah Durham, will identify the significance of mirror gazing in the later, elderly years of female life.

Sarah Durham's frequent comparisons of herself, or selves, at different ages or stages in life develop Lessing's messages about the inner self hidden inside the outer physical form:

Indeed she [Sarah] remembered walking across a room knowing that everyone watched her, holding herself as if filled to the brim with a precious and dangerous fluid. Young girls do this, when they first discover their power . . . . And this condition can last until middle age deflates her . . . . This body of hers, in which she was living comfortably enough, seemed accompanied by another, her young body, shaped in a kind of ectoplasm. She was *not* going to remember or think about it, and that was the end of it.

(*Love* 96-97)

This scene is hardly "the end" of Sarah's self-perusal. Most of Lessing's mirror scenes, which will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters, contain characteristics similar to the one featured here. Apparent is the juxtaposition of

the positive and the negative effects of physical appearance as it inaccurately represents the inner self. Also typical is the protagonist's confusion and ensuing efforts to arrive at some sort of decision about how she appears to herself.

Lessing's female protagonists, at all ages, ask themselves several questions when studying their reflections. First, how does their actual physical appearance differ from how they believe other people perceive them? How does their *own* perception of themselves differ from how they believe others perceive them? And, how do they compare with other people, particularly with other women? Obviously, these questions are composed in women's subconscious with the aid of another voice, that of society's influence. It is necessary to examine what it is, societally, that causes women to crave studying their appearances in such depth. It is this societal influence of the importance of female physical appearance that most likely influenced Lessing to respond to it metaphorically in her writing.

Historically, humanity has viewed mirrors as powerful objects in superstition and legend. Could this be humanity's version of a metaphor, proving its valuation of the human appearance over the soul inside of the body? Whether it is a man-made piece of glass or a natural body of water, the ability to view one's own face has seemingly always been considered a magical phenomenon. Benjamin Goldberg, author of *The Mirror and Man*, emphasizes this point, stating that "as the mirror evolved from a pool of water to the modern looking glass, it developed into an instrument of strangely diversified attributes: feared or extolled by some, worshipped or exploited by others, an instrument both for self-revelation and revelation of the universe" (xi). Thus societally, the mirror is more than just an inanimate object; it is an object that *controls* human perceptions and emotions. This fact is the cause of Lessing's ability to use the mirror as a motif of inner self-



reflection. She anticipates that her readers will associate mirror gazing with society's power and control over women.

Several noted critics have studied in detail the effect of the mirror on humanity. In regard to the points of *this* particular study of Lessing's fiction, the most relevant of the numerous philosophical studies of mirrors is that of the French writer, Jacques Lacan. Lacan specifically targets his analysis of the mirror in regard to the development and/or deterioration of the inner self as a result of the discovery of the outer self, or "the Other," after a child's initial perception of his or her reflection in a mirror. According to Edward Peter Nolan, Lacan insists that "the discovery of the self as the Other in the mirror leads to a separation that is forever unbridgeable between the self and the Other in the real world" (275). Therefore, this theory defines the possibility of either a positive or a negative result after viewing the duality of the self (the physical reflection versus the inner self-knowledge).

Since Lacan's theory concerns the initial discovery of "the Other" as a stage in childhood that is essential in the development of the adult's future perception of him or herself, it is important to note its connection in the study of mirror motifs in Lessing's novels. Lacan might say that the reason behind Sarah Durham's, Martha Quest's, and Kate Brown's collective attention toward the changes in their reflections is the result of fragmentation or isolation of their inner-selves from the outer reflections (and their changes with time) that they view in the mirror. While Lessing herself may not have taken Lacan's identity and isolation theories into consideration in the composition of her novels, examination of such a theory is relevant in evaluating the importance of mirrors in defining the development of her characters' inner-self perception. Lacan identifies a resulting negative fragmentation of the double-self that occurs after

mirror gazing:

The mirror provides . . . the imaginable possibility, in both positive and negative aspects, of either a reconciliation or a contamination between the self and the Other. Positively charged, we assume for ourselves the value of the Other by possession, or complete our adoration of the Other by submission. Negatively charged, we loathe the cannibalistic destruction and incorporation of the Other by possession, and fear . . . that little death of the self as it dies *into* the Other in submission. (Nolan 278-79)

What remains to be proven thus far is the result of the mirror gazing in determining whether or not the fragmentation that Sarah, Martha, and Kate experience is negative or positive in their personal development.

Just as Lacan notes the existence of a double-self in his analyses, Ruth Olsen Saxton explores a duality of “voices” in terms of mirrors used in Lessing’s fiction. She identifies one of the voices as:

The familiar patriarchal voice, dominating the woman’s perception of herself, not only when she is actually looking into a mirror, but whenever her thoughts turn to her appearance, from adolescence until sometime in middle age. (89)

The second voice, according to Saxton’s subdivision, consists of a:

less familiar voice . . . the voice of another woman, a sister, or a friend, whose vision goes beyond the conventional standards or in whose presence the protagonist herself is able to gain a critical perspective on the patriarchal voice. (89)

Saxton’s analysis identifies power in both sides of the mirror, though the female voice gains power only after first listening to the patriarchal voice.

In order to answer the question regarding the negative or positive results of mirror gazing in Lessing's novels, three types of mirror motifs and their influence upon the development of three of Lessing's female protagonists will be examined in this study. First are the *physical mirrors* and reflections of the female protagonists in Lessing's novels, which include the phenomenon of aging, society's interpretation and standards of outward appearance, and the fragmentation of the female body. These are discussed in Chapter One, focusing on the numerous mirror-gazing scenes relevant to the physical changes of the female body.

Chapter Two focuses on inner, *mental mirrors* as representative of the discrepancies between expected societal roles for women and the mental reflection that results in the fragmentation of the inner-self from societal expectations. An examination of the mental effects and inner-self interpretations that result from aging/maturing ensues. Also included is a discussion of the negative result of husbands and family members in clouding the female protagonists' self-definitions. The reflection of the protagonists' mothers onto them further develops this focus on mental mirrors, since Lessing's women demonstrate aversion toward sharing similar characteristics with their mothers.

And finally, taking the motif of the mirror metaphor to a greater depth, Lessing often uses a protagonist's interaction with and observation of other characters as a *figurative mirror* in which the woman may compare her view of herself, both physically and internally. This type of mirror is discussed in Chapter Three, which focuses again on the outside world as the mirror of the inner-self. However, the mirrors in this chapter are more abstract than those discussed in Chapters One and Two. Reader interpretation is particularly important in the effect and development of these mirrors. This chapter brings forth the concept of



mirroring as an act beyond viewing a tangible reflection in a glass. This is accomplished by the exploration of character foils who function as paradoxical opposite selves of the protagonists, and aesthetic arenas (such as the theater and literature as art forms) where the protagonists compare themselves with society.

Putting together all three of these metaphorical motifs (physical mirrors, mental mirrors, and figurative/aesthetic mirrors) makes apparent the answers to the questions that Doris Lessing articulates to her readers. By allowing readers to glimpse into the lives of women who are intent on attempting to discover their own identities, Lessing's novels cause her readers to reflect mentally on themselves. Lessing's design is to challenge readers to look into themselves, and to encourage audiences to define their own identities, not based on how they think others view them, but based on how they define their souls, or inner-selves. In the end, Sarah Durham of *Love, Again* refuses to find in herself "a terrible fish," as does Plath's woman in her poem, thus proving the existence of something more to be gained by the placement of Lessing's mirror-gazing scenes in this novel. The use of mirrors as tools for reflection of the self is a motif used by Lessing in many of her early works, but this technique is taken a step further in elderly Sarah's reflective study as featured in *Love, Again*, since it provides a more positive resolution than was previously characteristic of Lessing's works. In previous writings, Lessing demonstrated several possible results women achieve when they reflect on themselves; the majority of these reflections end with a focus on the more negative aspects. Sarah's character represents a woman's life-long study of the self with a positive result in self-perception, exemplifying triumph in self-wisdom.

## Chapter 1

### Physicality and Ageism of Women in Mirrors

Most women in contemporary Western society spend an inordinate amount of time in front of mirrors preparing themselves *physically* to go somewhere or to see someone, and those who fail to make themselves “presentable” by society’s standards are stigmatized. When a woman examines her appearance in a mirror, she could be asking herself how she appears to others (either society as a whole or significant individuals), or she could be attempting to discover self-knowledge about her own physical appearance. In *Love, Again*, Doris Lessing examines the idea of a female looking to see how others view her, but this notion is complicated by how the woman appears to herself. Thus the physicality of mirrors in Lessing’s fiction involves a dual purpose in the act of female mirror gazing.

Sarah is not the first of Lessing’s protagonists to undergo such intensive self-study. As Ruth Olsen Saxton states, “in Lessing’s fiction . . . [the] woman’s body is locus of the problem of female identity” (“Female Body” 111). This is also the case for Martha Quest, the teenage protagonist in *Martha Quest*, and for Kate Brown, the middle-aged protagonist in *The Summer Before the Dark*, both of whom are prime examples of the contemplation of inner versus outer self-duality. These two women and Sarah Durham are all going through different milestone years in their lives, yet changes in their experiences seem to be centered on the changes in their *physical* appearances. Martha and Kate undergo similar experiences in their encounters with their physical appearances in mirrors. Like Sarah, they do so by relating outer changes in their bodies to their expectations of themselves and of the outside world.

Comparing all three of these protagonists' initial contacts with mirrors in their respective novels provides insight into Lessing's intended messages about the progression (or distortion) of women's self perceptions as they mature and age. As the eldest protagonist, Sarah Durham has spent the most time in front of mirrors. Lessing's readers may assume that Sarah has experienced similar, questioning feelings, as have Martha Quest and Kate Brown, about her appearance in relation to her identity during adolescence and middle-age. At these different stages, all three of these protagonists look at more than their physical selves in their mirrors. They hope to obtain answers to their confusion about their identities and self-definitions, and their questions about themselves relate to their various stages in life. Sarah wonders why she feels either older or younger (depending on the specific scene in the novel) than she actually physically appears, and essentially asks herself if her life has been lived or if there is more to look forward to in her future. Adolescent Martha prepares to leave her childhood life behind, speculating about her future possibilities without the restrictive protection of her parents. Kate, just beginning the stage in her life where her roles as a mother and as a wife are changing (her children are now grown), is attempting to define her stage of life, since she feels caught in the middle, between young and elderly adulthood.

Society's immense impact upon how women perceive their physical selves is, without question, emphasized in Lessing's novels. While women are judgmental of themselves and of each other in studying their physical appearance in Lessing's novels, men's influence on women's perceptions of their physical selves is important to consider when analyzing particular mirror scenes. According to Ruth Olsen Saxton, "Men do not usually carry mirrors, yet the voice that governs the message of the mirror, in literature as in life, is a patriarchal

voice, and the visual standards of female beauty, against which women measure their image in the frame of the mirror, are male-defined” (85). While Lessing recognizes that society’s standards for beauty have, for centuries, been set by men, this author seems to suggest that women aid in perpetuating the very conventions that restrict them. Even though these male characters make an impact on Lessing’s protagonists, the women’s ultimate goal is to stop valuing others’ opinions and instead to develop their own positive recognition of themselves.

Fragmentation inevitably ensues as Lessing’s women study themselves physically in mirrors. Mirror-gazing creates a doubling of the self, a theory supported by the criticism of Saxton, who asserts that “Lessing . . . perpetuates a deep schism between mind and body, in which the female body is seen as a shell that severely limits woman’s experience and both distorts and disguises her identity” (“Female Body” 95). Inner confusion results when Lessing’s protagonists examine each individual body part, wondering how other people, namely men, perceive each of their body parts rather than their entire selves.

### **Double Entendre: Aging Reflections**

In *Love, Again*, the majority of Sarah Durham’s studies of her physical reflection are performed because of her need to connect her inner feelings about her age with her physically aged appearance. The apparent separation of inner age and outward age is most certainly an issue for this protagonist, since it is brought up in detail within the first few pages of the novel. A strong example of this idea involves the belongings catalogued in the initial description of Sarah’s home setting; a segment of text from an open book states “ ‘that the flesh withers around an unchanged core’ ” when one is aging (*Love* 3). As Sarah studies this

open book alongside the clutter of her home, she is juxtaposing, in her mind, her inner spirit versus her outer age and setting the pensive, self-questioning tone that is apparent throughout this entire novel. The issue of the existence of one true inner spirit or aura stuck inside a forever-changing body is brought up at this point, and is further analyzed by Sarah throughout *Love, Again*.

In her premier mirror scene, Lessing's third-person omniscient narrator relates Sarah's observations of her looks to her own connections about her age:

Sarah came to a stop in front of a mirror. She looked at a handsome apparently middle-aged woman with a trim body . . . . She did not often look in the mirror: she was not anxious about her looks. Why should she be? She was often thought twenty years younger than her real age. (*Love* 6)

Again, this evidence supports the theory of the dual self in Lessing's fiction. Sarah's societally programmed inner thoughts regarding the negative connotations of her "old age" automatically cause her to dread viewing her outward physical changes with the years. Yet, paradoxically, she acknowledges the fact that her physical identity does not match her inner feelings about how she has aged. In addition, this scene shows that Sarah is not "anxious" about viewing her own reflection, an issue that will take a completely opposite turn as the events in this novel progress when Sarah continues to study herself.

An extension of this same initial mirror scene in the novel describes Sarah's appearance further: "In another mirror, through the open door to her bedroom, she seemed even less her age" (*Love* 6). Part of Sarah's lack of age in these reflections can be attributed to her memories of her husband. Sarah was widowed at a young age--her mid-thirties. Thus after looking in the mirror located in the bedroom that she had once shared with her husband, Sarah's



thoughts travel back to her middle-aged life (and her appearance then) in place of her current physical age. It seems as if Sarah's mind is playing tricks on her, since her self-perception of her physicality changes rapidly in this scene.

Rooms are used as symbols of mental enclosure in several of Lessing's previous works, but the addition of the mirrors as further creating physical and emotional feelings resulting from Sarah's isolation in *Love, Again* appears to be an expansion of Lessing's technique. Here, the location of these two mirrors in this setting is key to *how* Sarah perceives her own reflection: "the two mirrors were there because decades ago, her husband had said, 'Sarah, these rooms are too dark. Can't we get some light into them?'" (*Love* 7). The mirrors in the rooms of Sarah's home were placed there to keep the rooms well-lit; often, decoratively, mirrors are used to prevent enclosure in cluttered or small rooms. However, Sarah's viewing of her reflection in them does just the opposite of these two purposes. Instead, Sarah's self understanding is darkened and she begins to feel enclosed by her memories and by her role as an old woman at this point in her life, despite the fact that she physically appears younger than she feels. The mirror technique can be connected to the wall motif that is so predominant in Lessing's fiction. According to Derek Wright, walls in Lessing's works

may serve as barriers and divisions that keep the aspiring self in, as well as protecting screens or cocoons that keep danger out and . . . they may be the perpendiculars of prisons and cages which close in constrictively on her heroines, shutting down options and closing off freedoms. (70)

Certainly, *Love, Again* is another of Lessing's works continuing this motif. And, since the setting of the numerous mirrors in which Sarah is studying herself throughout the novel is very influential in her perception of her physical

reflection, it is essential to regard once again this combination of the walls/setting with the mirror motif. The physical location of the mirrors influences Sarah's perception of her physical self. When Sarah was a married woman and shared these walls with her husband, he undoubtedly influenced her self-image. Even though he has been physically gone from her life for several years and his memory is fading inside Sarah as time passes, he continues to influence Sarah's perception of her physical self. Premature widowhood is part of the reason why Sarah feels older than she physically appears to the outside world. While her memory of her husband fades, his physical presence (in the form of the items in the rooms, particularly these mirrors that he chose) continues to invade Sarah's lifestyle.

Just as it is meaningful to note the setting of Sarah's initial mirror scene, the setting of Martha Quest's first mirror-gazing scene is also significant in understanding Lessing's intent in using mirror-study as a means of contemplation about the influence of authority figures on women. While Sarah Durham associates the mirror that is located at her home with her past, married life and the influence of her husband, Martha Quest, during her beginning stages of life as an adolescent, associates the mirror in this scene with *her* current authority figures, her parents. Martha's use of her mother's mirror requires seclusion and secrecy, for she has to be "alone in this room, and [has to make] sure the doors [are] closed" before she can look upon her reflection in her mother's wall mirror (*Martha* 27). The fact that she is in her parents' bedroom during this time of physical study shows the importance of her parents' opinions about her adolescence and what changes it will bring in her life. Her movement into adulthood will signify a change in their lives as well with the passage of time, but more importantly (in Martha's view) is the independence it will allow her as she

is able to make choices about her own life.

This same mirror scene also includes the third-person omniscient narrator flashing back to Martha's recurring gazes at her face in yet another mirror that does not belong to her, this time her mother's hand mirror at night: "[Martha] spent much time at night, examining herself with a hand mirror . . . . This happened when Mrs. Quest had made one of her joking remarks about Martha's clumsiness, or Mr. Quest complained that girls in this country matured so early" (*Martha* 27-28). Adding to the feelings of isolation and awkwardness inherently present in the difficult years of adolescence, Mr. and Mrs. Quest are compounding the experience for Martha with negativity, thus causing Martha to question her own appearance enough to study her face to see if there might be any truth to their words.

Moreover, the narrator describes the importance of the mirror's angle or viewpoint when Martha is examining herself: "Sometimes she would take the mirror to her parents' bedroom and hold it at an angle to the one at the window, and examine herself, at this double remove, in profile; for this view of herself had a delicacy her full face lacked" (*Martha* 28). Again, Martha's study of her face is important, and by examining it in more than one angle and in *fragments*, she is attempting to change her actual reflection, or, figuratively, she is previewing her future attempts at changing her appearance entirely. This change actually happens as the novel progresses.

As Martha continues to physically mature, the necessity to revolt against her parents becomes evident: "This afternoon was a sudden climax after a long brooding underground rebellion. Standing before the mirror, she took a pair of scissors and severed the bodice from the skirt of her dress" (*Martha* 29). Destroying the dress in order to refurbish it into a more mature article of clothing



is an act against her parents because, according to Martha, the dress is “childish,” and when her mother refuses repeatedly to allow her to wear dresses more suitable to her age, the novel’s narrator identifies this “issue [as based on] social convention, and not Martha’s figure” (*Martha* 28). Rebellious teenagers are common in many of Lessing’s works, and according to Ruth Olsen Saxton, “Lessing locates a split between female self and body in adolescence, when young female characters discover a new power and trauma in their budding sexuality as their bodies metamorphose from those of little girls to those of young women” (“Female Body” 111). This garment is yet another symbol of Martha’s outward appearance: her body as a whole—which she chooses to take charge of in this compelling mirror scene.

Martha’s adolescent stage suggests the development of empowerment or independence because of the woman’s ability to sever ties with parents. Aging past young adulthood is painful for several of Lessing’s protagonists because as they age, they ironically seem to lose more and more of their independence. Kate Brown, a middle-aged protagonist, identifies strength with youth and as something that diminishes with age. Mona Knapp asserts this characteristic: “Young women are valued in our society for their looks, and the fading of the youthful facade is—at least for Kate—a major trauma” (116). Sarah Durham also demonstrates a negative attitude toward aging at the beginning of *Love, Again*, as was shown previously in the discussion regarding her initial mirror scene, and Sarah views clichés and literary statements about aging with the same scoffing attitude presented by Kate in the opening scene of *The Summer Before the Dark*. Within the first page, the third-person omniscient narrator once again notes the pensive nature of the protagonist in her contemplation regarding the falsity of the numerous clichés about “growing old gracefully”:

You have to deduce a person's real feelings about a thing by a smile she does not know is on her face, by the way bitterness tightens muscles at a mouth's corner, or the way air is allowed to flow from the lungs after: *I wouldn't like to be a child again!* Such power do these phrases have . . . it is probable many people go on repeating *Youth is the best time of your life* . . . until they actually catch sight of themselves in a mirror while they are saying something of the kind. (*Summer* 1)

Clearly, Lessing's presentation of Kate Brown at the beginning stages of this novel develops the notion that part of the fragmentation of women involves an exterior falseness in regard to facing the process of aging. In other words, women tell *each other* that they should possess the attitude that aging is a positive experience, that one becomes a better, happier person with time, and that life in youth is much more difficult than life as an aging adult.

However, evident in Lessing's message is that, while women may grow with a positive result on the inside, the progression of physical, outward aging has a negative connotation, even among women's beliefs about themselves, because of society's influential age prejudices. Supporting this point, Ruth Olsen Saxton observes Lessing's middle-aged female characters in general, stating that middle age in Lessing's fiction is developed as

an eventual escape from the tyranny of the sexually defined trap of woman's body . . . her protagonists confront their bodies in mirrors, mourn years of collision with patriarchal standards of female appearance, and, with a profound sense of the extent to which their bodies are merely temporary containers of some truer,

essential self, begin to nurture that invisible self. (“Female Body” 115)

So in both of the opening mirror scenes of *Love, Again* and *The Summer Before the Dark*, Sarah and Kate *internally* view aging negatively, yet Lessing gives attention to the fact that these attitudes are brought on, almost unfairly, by the outside influence of society, especially at points in women’s lives when there is absolutely nothing physically revolting regarding their appearance. Martha Quest, on the other hand, views her blossoming age positively, since the changes in her body signify independence and the beginning of her adult life. Also, her youthful looks fit the criteria for conventional attractiveness. Since Sarah and Kate have long since passed these “acceptable” years, they have become *unaccepting* of themselves.

### **Society’s Image: Reflecting, Directing, Stereotyping**

Lessing portrays society as having a watchful eye over the actions of women; that same eye joins protagonists as they study themselves in their mirrors, thus influencing the perception of the image. Critic Virginia Tiger generalizes about Lessing’s style and attitude in her attempts at developing a statement against society’s so-called *rules* for women: “Lessing . . . has always been at pains to question and transform traditional stereotypes; her characteristically blunt, querulous style is just one of the vehicles she has assembled against the tradition of feminine sensibility” (89). Lessing definitely associates such “feminine sensibility,” as defined by society, as beginning in female youth and progressing in responsibility with age. When Lessing’s younger female protagonists digress from society’s expectations, naiveté is blamed as the cause,

while older, adult protagonists are expected to abide by what society dictates for them.

*Love, Again* does not contain any mirror scenes as flashbacks of Sarah's youth, so the reader's only insight on Sarah's attitudes toward her reflections (other than brief references to her younger years) must be focused on her current age, 65. The lack of *direct* focus in *Love, Again* of scenes showing Sarah's younger years spent in front of a mirror might imply that Lessing's authorial attention to teenage and middle-age reflection had already been extensively covered in her previous novels at the time of her composition of this 1995 novel.

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, composed in 1973, Lessing elaborates a flashback mirror scene experienced by her middle-aged protagonist. Lessing specifically develops a mirror scene of Kate's, in which, at present, she views her aging face, by connecting it to her remembrance of gazing at her reflection in a hand mirror as a teen: "Long ago, a young girl lay on her back in a bed, with a hand mirror held close to her face, and she was thinking: This is what *he* is going to see" (*Summer* 160-161). No doubt, similar contemplations, as those stated here in Kate's experience, afflicted Sarah Durham in middle age, just as comparable thoughts cross Sarah's mind in her older age. And as remains to be discussed, teenage Martha Quest demonstrates these same thought-processes during her mirror scenes in *Martha Quest*.

As this teenage flashback scene progresses in *The Summer Before the Dark*, Lessing's style becomes stream-of-consciousness in the narrator's following of Kate's memories, which give importance to the outside influence of male opinions about how she physically appears. The identity of the "*he*" is far from unimportant in this scene, for Kate is mentally assembling every mirror experience that she has had in her past years as having been influenced by some

man, specifically identifying this as a common tale of every member of the female sex who has ever possessed the desire to be successful in her relations with men:

For years Kate, who spent the requisite amount of time in front of many different mirrors, had been able to see exactly what *he* was seeing . . . had she really spent so many years of her life--it would most certainly add up to years!--in front of a looking-glass? Just like all women. Years spent asleep or tranced. . . . For the whole of her life, or since she was sixteen--yes, the girl making love to her own face had been that age--she had looked into mirrors and seen what other people would judge her by. And now the image had rolled itself up and thrown itself into a corner, leaving behind the face of a sick monkey. (*Summer* 160-61)

Here is a realization of the ludicrous sleep-like state of women as they spend time over the years in front of mirrors in order to see how others see them. It is cathartic, in a contorted way, for Kate to finally note her intense focus, for so many years, on remaining physically acceptable according to society's standard of beauty. Kate's acknowledgment and juxtaposition of her current "face" alongside the monkey metaphor shows yet another realization. This scene presents an almost passive, invited acceptance of an expected ugliness as part of exterior aging.

But Kate does not fall into such a response easily. Just as Martha Quest's toying with her reflection in the mirror foreshadows her future attempts at altering her appearance, at points previous to this hand mirror scene of Kate's, she too is often found toying with changing her appearance, specifically for the audience of the people around her (namely men). Kate discovers that by simply altering her posture by huddling, by hiding her breasts under baggy clothing, and by "allowing



her legs to angle themselves unbecomingly . . . men did not see her" (*Summer* 43).

This physical experimentation is an integral part of Kate's self-definition,

for she was conscious . . . that the person who sat there watching, shunned or ignored by men who otherwise would have been attracted to her, was not in the slightest degree different from the person who could bring them all on again towards her by just adjusting the picture of herself. (*Summer* 43)

Here again is an example of the duality of the outer and inner-self in regard to the study of appearance in Lessing's fiction. The inner-person, or self-concept, does not change, even when the exterior person appears different to the eye. In scenes like the one above, Kate demonstrates an ability to change her outer appearance to others in order to "test" people's reaction to how she believes she will physically appear as an elderly woman in the future. She does this so that she may mentally contrast how it feels to be treated as a beautiful, youthful woman versus as an unattractive, elderly woman. Using the older "form," Kate feels invisible, but since this is only an act at this stage in her life, Kate may simply alter herself back to her present state and "reappear" to the world.

Such female invisibility and reappearance is yet another phenomenon that may be connected with the mirror motif in Lessing's fiction, especially when tied to relationships (or the possibilities of relationships) with men. In *Love, Again*, Sarah's attraction to Bill (the new, youthful actor in Sarah's theatre troupe's performance of *Julie Vairon*) is never recognized because society's boundaries do not allow women of her age to have such feelings. In one of her many pensive evenings alone in her hotel room, Sarah paces the room, thinking to herself: "old women by the thousand--probably by the million--are in love and keep quiet about it. They have to" (*Love* 177). This form of invisibility is carried out when

Sarah forces herself to repress an outward showing of affection for Bill.

This attraction to youthful Bill causes Sarah to feel old inside, but on the outside she actually appears youthful when she studies her reflection:

In the glass she saw a handsome woman . . . who had about her a dewy look far from the competent asperities appropriate to her real age. This was because of the elixirs romping in her blood. Her whole body ached, but this did not show. "Amazing," she said aloud. (*Love* 145)

Here, physically invisible are Sarah's inner feelings of being at an elderly stage in her life. Conversely, in the previously mentioned scene when Kate *consciously* alters her appearance, the opposite effect occurs. Kate actually feels youthful (or, her inner view of her appearance seems to match her true outer appearance at that point in the novel), but this fact is hidden from the men who see her because of her feigned, physically-elderly form.

Sarah demonstrates feelings of uncontrollable invisibility and isolation when forced to compare herself with the youth of her theatre company. She feels undesirable and unattractive: "I, Sarah Durham, sitting here tonight surrounded mostly by the young . . . am in exactly the same situation as the innumerable people of the world who are ugly, deformed, or crippled, or who have horrible skin disorders" (*Love* 141). However, soon after this thought crosses her mind, Sarah moves a step forward in her thoughts about her aging process; while at first she compares herself to an "old ghost" who can only sit and watch a feast rather than eat it, she realizes that "most of the time I hardly noticed that I was aging. I did not care . . . . My life is too interesting" (*Love* 141).

Sarah eventually proves to herself that she is anything *but* invisible. When the performance of *Julie Vairon* ends in France, and when Sarah comes to the

realization that this segment of her life is over, her reflection in the mirror makes an interesting change. This last evening of pacing around her hotel room gives her a new realization:

a woman's interaction with her mirror is likely to go through some changes during the decades [but] . . . someone should bottle this, she announced to the empty room . . . . It is not merely that I feel twenty years younger, I look it. (*Love* 198)

Sarah has by no means at this point in the novel fully defined her identity, yet this cathartic viewing of her own reflection exemplifies that she still has the ability, at age 65, to have such strong feelings for a man.

Another event to consider is Sarah's welcoming attitude toward her youthful responses in connection to male attention. In the previously quoted passages from *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate's attitude toward studying her appearance over long periods of time was regarded as wasteful, since growing older makes this routine eventually pointless. Sarah's positive tone in this scene implies that she had previously been "missing out" on feeling desirable to men by no longer being concerned about her appearance. Thus it seems plausible that, according to Lessing, society's decree about the woman's need to concern herself with her appearance is that it is only important when she is young and "in her prime." Further, the prompt for the youthfulness of Sarah's appearance in this scene is attraction to a youthful male, thus bringing to the surface of her memory the feelings related to adolescent or youthful attraction. If Sarah had not received this positive attention from a young man, Sarah's youthful perception of herself at this point in her life may not have occurred.

Kate has also experienced a relationship with a younger man, yet she actually goes so far as to have the sexual affair, while Sarah, on the other hand,



simply fantasizes about it. The relationship between Kate and the youthful Jeffrey during their “holiday” in Spain is no fantasy, however, since he looks upon her as a motherly figure and also, as society looks down upon this relationship between an obviously older woman with an obviously younger man, the relationship is ridden with estrangement. Janis P. Stout characterizes the distortion of the relationship between Kate, as an older woman, and Jeffrey as the youthful male: “Roles become confused, as her young ‘lover’ . . . vacillates between masculine pride and boyish confusion and dependence. Similarly, Kate vacillates between the role of free woman enjoying her sexual ripeness and that of disappointed matron envying the young their pleasures” (9). Spanish society exercises judgment upon the couple by showing discomfort at their relationship (because of the clear age difference): “This couple had been classified as an immoral one by these experts in the social condition” (*Summer* 74). At the same time, this culture clearly expresses an outward acceptance or ignorance of the relationship: “So they were judged, as being in a category which demanded the utmost in tolerance from this country, whose own standards were still strict” (*Summer* 75).

Although Kate and Jeffrey are uncomfortably aware of society’s hypocritical acceptance of their relationship, the couple never speaks to anyone specifically about the details of their connection, and this silence seems to be their attempt to prevent an outward display of their affair, since the Spaniards and the tourists (representing society as a whole) merely pretend to ignore what their standards cannot allow. Naturally, this relationship seems to be more societally detrimental to Kate rather than to Jeffrey, since she is the elder of the two and she should “know better.” Jeffrey, after all, *is* just a child, by society’s measure of maturity level:

They . . . had been classed as that time-honoured pair, older woman, younger man . . . . They were not a frivolous or an embarrassing couple; they behaved with taste and discretion. But there are conventions in love, and one is that this particular subclassification--older woman, younger man--should be desperate and romantic. (*Summer* 74-75)

Hence, Lessing's intended message affirms that society's conventions require a "woman of a certain age" to enclose her true inner feelings, attractions, and desires regarding younger men, keeping them invisible from the world rather than involve herself in social conflict and the consequential self punishment that will eventually result. This restriction may explain why Sarah Durham chooses to avoid the possibilities of romantic relationships with the young men to whom she is attracted and instead decides to hide her feelings. This progression from Kate to Sarah provides insight into Lessing's intents as a writer; she continues to explore society's pressures on its females, particularly as women age, since Sarah, the more recent of the two protagonists, is much older than Kate.

The pressures of convention create a lack of control over the effect of a female's own appearance, even in youth. In *Martha Quest*, teenage Martha is approvingly allowed by society to alter her appearance for the sake of attracting young men. Martha begins experimenting with her appearance in lieu of discovering her potential in attracting young men. This youthful protagonist "tests out" her effectiveness in doing so with former childhood friends:

Since her incarnation as a fairly successful imitation of a magazine beauty, the Cohen boys were the first males she had tried herself against. But she had never said to herself that her careful make-up and the new green linen had been put on to impress them, and

therefore she felt it as a false note that either should mention or even react to her appearance. (*Martha* 61)

Martha uses these boys in order to make a comparison, in her own mind, of the changes in her appearance from an unattractive child to a maturing young adult. This passage misleadingly implies that Martha does not value the opinions/reactions of the Cohen boys, but the opposite is actually the case. She will use their reaction to her change(s) in order to judge how other men, those she actually has interest in, will view her. The invisibility of Martha's sexuality is an issue in this situation because, previous to her conscious efforts at making her appearance match those of fashion models, Martha's relationship with the Cohen boys was strictly based on an old childhood friendship. Martha's feminine sexuality and beauty were not apparent to these young men until this particular scene, where they are able to notice Martha's painstaking alterations to her physicality. Thus Martha's femininity was invisible to these young men until she went to great efforts at making it obvious to them. And the most interesting item to note about the affect of Martha's change in appearance on these two young men is that Martha herself had no prior *conscious* intentions of "impressing" them with her appearance, yet the boys assume that she, in fact, did, since societal custom encourages women to do so.

Despite the numerous indications in passages from Lessing's fiction, suggesting that men are at fault in creating stereotypical standards of beauty for women, Lessing also suggests that women themselves perpetuate their own conformity to these standards by using mirrors to "see what *they* see." In *Love, Again*, Sarah's major conflict is dealing with the decision of whether or not to conform to her feelings of youth, despite her age in years. In deciding whether or not to conform, Sarah considers defying society's guidelines for the elderly and

aging by fabricating a youthful appearance. She ironically attempts this by using the very techniques that women use to make themselves fit society's standards of beauty: "She bought beauty products which a sense of the ridiculous forbade her to use. She even thought of having her face lifted--an idea that in her normal condition could only make her smile" (*Love* 309). Sarah views her actions as ridiculous because of her stage in life, while younger women, specifically Martha Quest in the following passage, regard artificial goals and methods of beautification as part of female life:

Martha's room may have been littered with books, but it was also plentifully supplied with magazines, where all the women conformed to that shape, and when she saw her reflection, when she imagined herself in this dress or that, she continually strained her mental image of herself upwards, thinning it, posing it; when she saw herself ideally, crossing a room, under fire from admiring eyes, it was in the guise of this other, imposed woman. (*Martha* 193)

Lessing suggests the existence of female free will, to either conform to societal standards or to branch off into their own ideals. However, Lessing also seems to point out that while choosing one's own standards involves remaining true to no one but the self, this choice is not without the consequence of social stigma. Women seem to be left with little choice, then, in deciding whether or not to conform, so the mirror is used as a tool for conformity.

### **Physical Fragmentation**

Within the numerous mirror scenes in Lessing's novels, the female protagonists have frequently studied themselves in order to find out how they

appear to others. Viewing themselves clothed, Lessing's women are preparing themselves to appear in public, dressed in society's required wardrobe. In the following scenes from *Love, Again* and *Martha Quest*, Sarah and Martha refocus their questions from their mirror self-studies more intimately upon their bodies alone, without the covering of society's protective clothing. The ensuing incidents experienced by Sarah and Martha juxtapose the outer changes of the body as experienced by an aging woman and a newly maturing woman. Both Sarah and Martha seem fascinated yet confused by their physical changes. Thus prior to these mirror studies, these women's whole beings are fragmented, since their inner-self knowledge does not necessarily match their knowledge about their physical selves.

Lessing's descriptions of these women's reactions about and their practice of studying their nude bodies imply that women of all ages perform this activity several times throughout their lives. Lessing does not emphasize this practice as an average woman's *daily* ritual, but she does seem to suggest that women study their naked bodies at times when they perceive themselves going through a major physical change or moving through a new stage in their lives.

After studying herself, Sarah realizes that her perception of herself is affected by how she believes other people view her physically. After Martha studies herself, she demonstrates subdued astonishment about her physical entrance into the adult world with the development of her sexual and childbearing parts. In accordance with this idea, Mona Knapp quotes Lessing herself as stating that

A young woman . . . "finds it very hard to separate what she really is from her appearance . . . When you get a bit older . . . a whole dimension of life suddenly slides away and you realize that what in



fact you've been using to get attention has been what you look like." (116)

Thus Martha is not at a mature enough stage in her life where she can sufficiently judge the difference between her outer and her inner identity; she sees them as one and the same. Sarah has already matured into the realization that her own interest in her physical appearance relates to her desire for the younger men to notice her and be attracted to her. She also is painfully aware of the difference between her physical and her mental selves.

An extensive mirror-gazing scene in *Love, Again* is prompted by Sarah's involvement with three significantly younger men, Bill, Henry, and Andrew, all members of the theater group, who *appear* to fall in love with Sarah during the work on the play *Julie Vairon*. Despite the fact that her interaction with them consists of no more than friendly conversations and one-way childish love letters (composed by Andrew), this is enough to impact Sarah's self-image. She studies herself fully nude in a full-length mirror for the first time in several years:

A woman of a certain age stands in front of her looking-glass naked, examining this or that part of her body. She has not done this for . . . twenty years? . . . her body had been a pretty good one, and it had held its shape (more or less) till she moved, when a subtle disintegration set in, and areas shapely enough were surfaced with the fine velvety wrinkles of an elderly peach.  
(*Love* 242-43)

With this portion of the scene is an objective notation of the uncontrollable erosion of what Sarah once possessed in terms of physical suppleness rather than a complete loss of beauty. It must also be noted that in this portion of the scene, Sarah studies herself in fragments, looking at her body in pieces to see which

portions are the most “damaged” in terms of physical aging.

Sarah’s surprise at herself for performing this study in the first place stems from the expanse of time since the last time she had been interested in discovering her complete, outer physical self. In *Martha Quest*, when Martha views herself naked in front of a mirror, Martha is also surprised at her boldness in looking at herself. At the same time she is also overwhelmed at this opportunity to study herself, something that she seems to have wanted to do since the beginning of her launch into adolescence. Martha and Sarah’s connections between the progression of their thoughts and observations of their physical beings are astounding, especially given their obvious age difference. In the previous passage, Sarah had not viewed herself without the coverage of clothing in decades; thus her view of herself at this point in her life would greatly contrast with that of one of her earlier, more youthful occasions in doing so.

Martha too is a “virgin” of sorts when it comes to viewing her naked form. While at a party with friends, one of Martha’s first, she encounters a full-length mirror in a room where she is changing her soiled white party dress:

A sheet of silver . . . took Martha’s attention, and she looked again and saw it was a mirror. She had never been alone in a room with a full-length mirror before, and she stripped off her clothes and went to stand before it. It was as if she saw a vision of someone not herself; or rather, herself transfigured to the measure of a burningly insistent future. (*Martha* 107)

This opportunity for Martha to view herself makes possible a portrayal of her hope for her future as an adult woman. The cliché of a “dream come true” seems appropriate in describing Martha’s interpretation of her reflection, since her development into a *physically* adult woman makes her appear, in her own eyes, as

someone other than herself.

Both Sarah and Martha begin to fragment each individual body part into objects for extensive study, and each part described relates to the traditionally more *feminine* body parts, those which society most frequently judges in accordance with outer beauty, such as legs, hair, and breasts. A tone of curiosity resumes throughout these examination scenes of these two women, who almost seem to not know themselves as a result of not truly knowing their own bodies in these new forms of development.

Martha's impressions of herself are a combination of awe and shame:

The white naked girl with the high small breasts that leaned forward out of the mirror was like a girl from a legend; she put forward her hands to touch, then as they encountered the cold glass, she saw the naked arms of the girl slowly rise to fold defensively across those breasts. (*Martha* 107)

Martha's apparent shame at seeing her naked breasts may be associated with her awe ("like a girl from a legend") at how she has physically matured into a woman. It has obviously been ingrained in her psyche, by society (probably in the form of her mother), to feel shame at what might be considered narcissism, the admiration of one's own physical form. Yet Martha's sheer curiosity in this scene about seeing her actual physical state, without the restrictiveness of society's clothing covering her, is simply innocent.

A large portion of Sarah's self-assessment is devoted to examination of her breasts as well, and the interesting connection between these two common scenes is that a woman's breasts are viewed by men (or, society as a whole) not only as sources of nourishment for children or as a sign of physical maturity and child-bearing age, but also as physical, sexual objects, and, consequently, as a



definitive part of a woman's beauty. And Sarah's reaction that her breasts would be acceptable by younger women suggests the female view of the importance of having "acceptable" breasts:

Her breasts? A good many young women would be pleased to have them. But wait . . . what had happened to them? . . . . The last thing anyone thought of, looking at them, was nourishment, but they have become comfortable paps . . . . What for? To cradle the heads of grandchildren? Surely the right time for these paps was when she was a mother. (*What is Nature up to?*) (*Love* 243)

Like Martha, Sarah too experiences awe at viewing her breasts, yet, according to Sarah's self-analysis, she *appears* to be digressing in age, as her breasts seem more suited to the possibilities of pregnancy and motherhood, as opposed to grandmotherhood, as her true age suggests. This digression of age can be attributed to Sarah's emotional involvement with the younger men mentioned previously and with her realization that she is physically aging more slowly than she is internally.

Self-knowledge rather than narcissism is the purpose and focus of the self-examination of these two women in these strikingly similar scenes. And perhaps the most interesting commonality is that both women, in the progression of their stream-of-consciousness-like thoughts, attribute emotions about their physicality to men in their lives. Martha's reaction is one of violation, since what prompted the removal of her white party dress previous to her mirror study was a kiss, stolen by Billy, during which her dress had been soiled with the red clay dirt of the African landscape. Martha's identity seems to have suffered as a result of this violation, causing her to "not know herself. She left the mirror, and . . . bitterly criticiz[ed] herself for allowing Billy, that impostor, to take possession of her at

all, even for an evening, even under another's features" (*Martha* 107). Truly, Martha feels as though a part of herself was lost in her interaction with this young man, since she had no control in the situation.

Sarah's frustration that she associates with men during this nude mirror scene relates to her inability to go back in time to how she once looked. She can reverse time in her mind, or her inner-self, and remember how she looked and acted as a young woman, but the outer cannot be reversed: "What she could not face (had to keep bringing herself face to face with) was that any girl at all, no matter how ill-favoured, had one thing she had not. And would never have again. It was the irrevocableness of it. There was nothing to be done" (*Love* 243). At the same time, Sarah is amazed that people around her, most importantly, the young men in the theater group, actually have the ability to rewind Sarah's age. Because of these men, Sarah returns to an age considered more societally acceptable for flirtation and physical attraction: "Yet Henry was in love with her. And Andrew. Bill had been, in his way. *What were they in love with?* And here she could not suppress the thought: In a group of chimps, the senior female is sexually very popular. Better look at it like that." (*Love* 243). Frustration is the final emotion that Sarah experiences in this stream of feelings after viewing her reflection, so making excuses for the behavior of the young men who prompted this physical self-study in the first place becomes Sarah's method of defense. Sadly, Sarah refuses to believe that what she has witnessed in her own mirror could possibly attract positive male attention.

Examining Sarah and Martha's solitary self-viewing scenes and their reactions to themselves allows insight into Lessing's message about the physicality of women. Physical change is inevitable. Therefore the message that may be derived from Sarah and Martha's mirror scenes is that in women's quests

to define and discover themselves, they become conflicted and are held back by the simple fact that they themselves are constantly changing, both physically and mentally. Young Martha's resulting self-knowledge in these scenes focuses mostly on conflict or identity confusion as her body changes because these changes are beyond her control and happening more quickly than she can comprehend. Sarah's self-analyses end with more positive resolutions. Sarah learns more about her inner self-identity than does Martha in these scenes, simply because Sarah's age and life experience allow more abstract thought and analysis of why these changes are happening and what they mean in her life.

An additional point is that women's perceptions of their physical changes and mental changes do not necessarily match one another. No matter their age, seemingly as soon as Lessing's women feel that they "know" their physical selves, they change, moving into their next stage of physical identity. This physical identity is first obvious to outward society, and, after extensive self-study (including the fragmentation of individual body parts), questioning, and finally acceptance, this identity becomes apparent to these women themselves.

### **Results of Female Physical Reflection**

By following the progression of aging/maturity as experienced by teenaged Martha Quest and middle-aged Kate Brown, Sarah Durham's elderly perception of herself may be understood as, to date, Lessing's most conclusive interpretation of the effect of mirror gazing on women. Physical appearance is obviously a priority in women's lives, and whether this is instigated by the opinions of men and perpetuated further as women pass down these ideas from generation to generation seems relatively unimportant in Lessing's fiction when compared to the way in which a woman ultimately perceives herself by the end of

her life. This seems to be one purpose for the composition of *Love, Again*. While Lessing probably did not consciously intend to create one *general* statement about the detrimental importance of physical appearance in twentieth-century, Western society in her composition of *Love, Again*, *The Summer Before the Dark*, and *Martha Quest*, placing these three novels together allows for the examination of a woman's maturation process and the effects of physical self-study on this process.

The definitive statement seems to lie in *Love, Again*, which offers a more hopeful view of the female self's physical criticism. Even though Sarah never actually recognizes definite reasons as to why she at times appears younger than she feels (and vice versa), her contemplations avoid major, direct comparisons with her past physical images, whereas Martha and Kate, at younger stages in their lives than Sarah, both tend to make hefty comparisons between their current states and their past appearances. Out of all three, Sarah seems the least concerned about her future and its inevitable changes. This makes sense, since she has, at this point, lived out the majority of her life experiences. She is also less concerned with changing her appearance (and when she actually contemplates this idea, she quickly dismisses it as foolish), and she is more focused on questioning herself about why people perceive her in the way that they do and why she reacts in the manner that she does. This reaction is more self-directed, while the teenage and middle age protagonists tend to concentrate much more on the opinions and values of others. Thus a woman's perception of her own appearance (and its changes) matures just as her body matures and changes over time.

## Chapter 2

### Contemplation and Self-Reflection in Interior Mirrors

Mirrors reflect varied images of the self. The mirror brings out the inner turmoil of women in Lessing's novels, and these protagonists are pressured by outside forces to compare their physical appearances with their personal views/opinions about their success in life. Shirley Budhos summarizes the purposes of Lessing's works, stating that her

structural, linguistic, and thematic patterns are related to her obsession with boundaries: her purpose is to reveal the world we live in and how the mind attempts to escape from restrictions of time, space, and categories . . . [that she] reveals her opposition to political, social, and psychological enclosures paralleling her protagonists' attempts to remain 'free'" (x).

The key element to note in Budhos's account is "the mind." Success is related to inner contentment with life, so while frequent study of physical appearance is performed by many of Lessing's female protagonists in actual mirrors, equally important in these women's analyses of themselves is the inner self-reflection they undergo in mental mirrors. Much of this inner reflection in Lessing's fiction is emphasized with the aid of still more mirror motifs that result from the accomplishment of studies of the physical self, as examined in Chapter One.

During mirror scenes in the "inner study" category, the general question in the minds of these women relates to their success in life thus far. The main conflict suffered by Lessing's women, no matter what their ages, centers on their doubts that they have been and will be successful in achieving their goals in life. Lessing's women are being forced into a futile attempt at defining their numerous



roles as required by society as a whole, romantic partners, peers, and even their children. Society in Lessing's novels pressures these women into an inner struggle for the nearly impossible attainment of the conventional definition of female success, which relates to marriage and family life. On the inside, Lessing's women are fighting the realizations that their own definitions of success should match their opinions about their own personal achievements. In addition, Lessing's women inadvertently perpetuate the very standards that they wish to alter. This struggle in turn creates the protagonists' feelings of isolation or enclosure within themselves. Thus the physical image of a woman when she looks in the mirror is not only the opposite of her true outward appearance to others, but the image that the woman mentally perceives may be different from her own assessment of her personal desires, expectations, and needs. In *Love, Again*, the focus of this same message is specifically aimed at the effects of the *mental* aging of women as it coincides with physical aging.

The female story (her personal isolation and the conflicts that this brings about in her life) is a key element in all of Lessing's fiction. Roberta Rubenstein describes these factors:

The relationship between the private individual and the larger society is almost invariably an adversary one; her protagonists uncover and ultimately create their identities 'over against' societal expectations, values, and structures . . . the impulse of central characters is to overcome the separations that their own perceptions generate. (8)

These feelings of separation experienced by Lessing's protagonists create three major conflicts for these women in their inner self-studies or mental mirrors. One conflict involves the growing complexity of these women's identities as a result



of physical aging and maturity, which both manifest as inner self-fragmentation. Here, when her characters reflect upon themselves mentally, Lessing notes the existence of multiple elements to the female self. Another mental conflict involves restrictive home lives and marriages. As a result of mental reflection, Lessing's protagonists often experience role confusion, where they become perplexed about how their own personal identities combine or fit with their identities as wives and mothers. A third conflict results from this role confusion, evidenced by the protagonists' fear of repeating, in their own lives, the *past* lives of their mothers. This mental mirror places the protagonist on one side of the reflection while she compares herself with her mother on the other side. Lessing's protagonists must suffer through what society considers normal passages in women's lives (aging, being wives and mothers, and having relationships with their mothers) prior to achieving feelings of self-fulfillment during the novels' resolutions.

All three of these confusing results of inner study trouble Sarah Durham throughout *Love, Again*, since this novel's major conflicts center around inner contemplations. Comparative studies of these conflicts as experienced by Martha Quest in *Martha Quest* and by Kate Brown in *The Summer Before the Dark* show connections between Lessing's treatment of the female experience in women's milestone points or years in their lives. Since Sarah has already experienced adolescence and middle-age, perusal of Martha and Kate's thoughts allows for hypotheses about Sarah's past experiences and how Lessing might believe they created her current attitude toward herself as she grows older. Placing side by side the inner contemplations of Martha and Kate along with those of Sarah makes possible a comparison of the way Lessing has used the idea of inner-self fragmentation at these three different points in life and thus at three different

points in her career as a writer. In the most recent of these three novels, *Love, Again*, Lessing presents a more positive result for Sarah after she reflects on herself and struggles through the three conflicts of the female's mental mirror.

### **The Inner Effects of Aging and Maturity**

As discussed in Chapter One, Sarah Durham studies her physical appearance in actual mirrors in order to come to an understanding of her aging and how it relates to her reluctance to becoming romantically involved with a younger man. Sarah's mental confusion stems from the conflict between her inner desire to admit to her feelings outwardly and her realization that doing so would mean breaking social expectations for women of her age. By symbolically taking off her elderly "mask," Sarah would be outwardly admitting to society her mental deviation from the norm.

In a discussion of the contemporary qualities of Lessing's fiction, Karen F. Stein addresses the outer masks that this author's protagonists wear in order to cover their inner feelings and needs. Stein is quick to point out that this method of self-betrayal is only temporary in solving female conflicts in contemporary novels like Lessing's:

To win social acceptance many women have sought, consciously or unconsciously . . . to hide or disown the traits which might be seen to threaten their acceptability. The decorated surface may come to seem a sham; the smiling mask may become . . . the false self, created to hide the vulnerable secret self. At some point the mask is no longer a convenient defense but a trap; the woman is then confronted with her own terrifying split between "monstrous" inner drives and "nice" outward appearances. (124-25)

Stein emphasizes what she terms Lessing's "gothic" quality of fragmenting her female protagonists. In essence, Lessing's women become the "monsters" of society in her novels, though at different levels, since some of them are better able than others to hide the division between their inner and outer selves. Stein's term, "nice 'outward appearances,'" refers to outward attitude rather than to outer physical appearance; in other words, she asserts that in their efforts to conform, Lessing's females often hide their true attitudes about society. In *Love, Again*, Sarah Durham's self-contemplations constantly conflict with the conventionally required outer mask of an elderly woman, thus resulting in her inner self-fragmentation.

The following mirror scene of *Love, Again* provides an almost surreal, *perceptual* transformation for Sarah Durham as she views her own face. This scene is complicated by the fact that Sarah is not actually physically viewing her appearance; rather, she is viewing her face in her own internal *mind's eye*. Thus a mental mirror is in operation in this segment of the novel. While physically Sarah's appearance should not reflect a monumental change since the beginning of the novel (no more than a few months have passed at this point), Sarah internally realizes intense additions to her identity. Lessing's narrator describes Sarah's inner feelings as noting "the presence of other entities" (*Love* 164), or other *beings* in addition to Sarah's outward 65 year-old being. Once again, Lessing's recurrent motif of inner fragmentation characterizes a female protagonist.

These observations of Sarah's are not to be taken lightly, because the prompt for her mental notations is her feeling of separation from the younger, coupled members of the theater group who are romantically involved with each other. Sarah's mind creates for itself "other entities" in addition to the self that

presently exists. Despite her close working conditions with the young members of the theatre group, she is brought into this realization by feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and loneliness. Perhaps the most interesting portion of this scene is Sarah's mental connection of the faces of men with the faces of girls:

She saw a head, young, beautiful, Bill's (or Paul's), smiling in self-love, gazing into a mirror, but it turned with a proud and seductive slowness, and the head was not a man's but a girl's, a fresh good-looking girl whose immediately striking quality was animal vitality. (*Love* 164)

The narrator's reference to vitality as existing among the young, whether male or female, clearly designates yet another difference between Sarah's past youth and current "certain age." Is vitality an inner or an outer phenomenon? This appears to be one of the many questions, unanswered at this point in the novel, which have prompted Sarah into this mental reflection.

This next vision not only brings to light the inner identity confusion with which Sarah is struggling (in relation to her aging process), but also provides yet another example of inner fragmentation in a Lessing protagonist. The involvement of youthful males in this vision creates a connection between Sarah's female identity and males, those she knows now and those she knew in the past:

This girl turned away her confident smile, and she dissolved back into a young man. Sarah put her hands up to her own face, but what her fingers lingered over was her face now. (*Love* 164)

The final word of this portion, "now," implicates Sarah's vision of her current identity. This portion of the narration creates almost a visual "melting," in both

the reader's mind and in Sarah's mind, of her other "identities" into her most current.

Further, this scene also allows insight into Sarah's younger years, prior to the opening of the novel. The reader may assume that during her younger years, Sarah must have associated her own identity with young men, while now, at age 65, Sarah has halved herself. This figurative halving indicates a lack of something (or someone) else and lends a negative connotation to Sarah's self-exploration here. The someone else Sarah needs in order to be whole, according to her emotions during this scene, is a man to fill in the other half of her that must be a couple in order to own an identity.

As this scene continues, Sarah confusedly notes the growing complexity of her identity as she continues to age:

Beneath that (so temporary) mask were the faces she had had as a young woman, as a girl, as a baby. She wanted to get up and go to the glass to make certain of what was there, but felt held to the bed by a weight of phantom bodies that did not want to get flushed out and exposed. (*Love* 164)

These various faces or identities exist within her perception of her own identity. Sarah values her past selves, yet she feels uncertain as to how they combine into her one self, particularly into the aged self she is at present. Fear is one of many emotions which may be interpreted in this segment of the mirror scene, and here the narrator articulates Sarah's apprehension at seeing and accepting her face as it appears now, since it will continually change on the outside, despite the fact that on the inside, because of her memories of her past years, Sarah is able to view numerous levels and depths to her identity.

A second mirror scene indicating Sarah's inner-self fragmentation as a



result of her hidden inner self involves an extension of the scene (featured in Chapter One) where Sarah examines her naked body in her mirror. *Physical* fragmentation becomes evident in her method of examining each individual body part and in Sarah's "break down" of her reaction; this type of fragmentation illustrates Sarah's resulting *mental* fragmentation. The limited-omniscience narration functions as the stream-of-consciousness voice of female experience; this voice describes Sarah's inner thoughts as being common to all women, as they age and mature, in the form of a mental infirmity:

There are two phases in this illness. The first is when a woman looks closer: yes, that shoulder; yes, that wrist; yes, that arm. The second is when she makes herself stand in front of a truthful glass, to stare hard and cold at an aging woman, makes herself return to the glass again, again, because the person who is doing the looking feels herself to be exactly the same (when away from the glass) as she was at twenty, thirty, forty. She *is* exactly the same as the girl and the young woman who looked into the glass and counted her attractions. She has to insist that *this* is so, *this* is the truth: not what I remember-- *this* is what I am seeing, this is what I am. This. This. (*Love* 245)

Apprehension toward accepting the *truth* of the physical changes that she sees is described from the standpoint of any and every woman. Sarah refers to the other milestone points or ages in her life: girlhood and young womanhood. This passage emphasizes a recurring incident in Lessing's fiction; during women's study of their outer, inevitable changes, they also feel concerned about the status of their inner identities. They wonder if their inner selves will change along with their outer selves, and they wonder how their past selves integrate with their

present selves. A multiplicity of identities grows with age. Mental acceptance of her outer physical changes is important in Sarah's self-concept, as explained by the repetitive segments, referring to the need to accept "this" aging body, toward the end of the passage.

When the narrator returns from its voice of generalizations about women to Sarah's own actions, Sarah seems to be modifying her mental perception of her outer self to resolve the conflict of feeling older than she believes she physically appears: "Sarah looked in the mirror, flattering what she saw, censoring out what could not be flattered, and she thought of Henry and allowed herself to melt with tenderness" (*Love* 245). The remedy has nothing to do with physical change here. In order to recover, Sarah must convince herself internally that her appearance is attractive to younger men, here focusing on Henry, one of two younger theatre group members, to articulate his attraction to Sarah. By "censoring" in her mind the individual imperfections that she notices, Sarah mentally fragments her perception of herself, seemingly with the intent of making her outer self as appealing as possible to her inner self. Thus while acceptance by Henry is important in boosting Sarah's regard for herself, more important is Sarah's own satisfaction with what she sees in her mirror.

Sarah's behavior is not representative of society's stereotypically aging woman in her sixties. In fact, Sarah projects rather youthful characteristics on several occasions in *Love, Again*. With this, Lessing seems to imply that female inner fragmentation begins in adolescence, with the advent of a woman's concern over how others view her. And this concern remains important throughout a woman's life. Examining Lessing's treatment of an adolescent female protagonist as she experiences inner fragmentation as a result of viewing her outer appearance lends insight into Lessing's intended messages about the unreliability of mirror-

gazing in helping women to identify the relationship between their inner, self-defined identities and their outer, societally-defined identities.

Martha Quest exemplifies adolescent reliance on mirrors for capricious mental identity definition. In the following scene in *Martha Quest*, Martha purposely avoids a traditional looking glass: “Martha watched her friend [Marnie] rub lipstick on . . . before the mirror, and waited on one side, for she did not want to see herself in the glass” (*Martha* 99). This conscious act of standing away promotes Martha’s comparison of herself to another adolescent female. Martha notes the importance of mirrors for success in female life, particularly in preparing one’s appearance for social gatherings, since this scene takes place at a teenage party. Marnie is presumably making herself “presentable” to the young males who will be at the party. In contrast, Martha demonstrates aversion to this ritual, as she herself feels out of place in the formal white dress that she had painstakingly chosen especially for this social occasion. All Martha desires at this point is the chance to forget her self-consciousness, since her dress ends up making her stand out terribly among her more casually-dressed peers.

Martha’s inner feelings of inadequacy toward her outer appearance create an uneasiness that society often attributes to the traditionally self-conscious adolescent female. Yet, as demonstrated by Sarah Durham, these feelings are represented by women of all ages in Lessing’s fiction. Sarah’s major conflict in *Love, Again* centers on social propriety as well, focusing on her decision of whether or not to open up her uncomfortable, unconventional emotions to society. Martha Quest becomes aware of an even greater reason to feel uncomfortable about how she appears to others by accidentally viewing what she is trying to forget--her inappropriate appearance:

As they returned to the verandah she caught sight of

herself in a windowpane; she did not know this aloof,  
 dream-clogged girl who turned a brooding face under the curve  
 of loose blonde hair; so strange did it seem that she even glanced  
 behind her to see if some other girl stood there in just such another  
 white dress. (*Martha* 99-100)

Self-fragmentation is evident in Martha's inability to recognize any connections between her inner self and the reflection of herself in the window. Martha's mental note of her own facial expressions creates for herself an internal interpretation of how she must appear to her peers at the party. In her own mind, she paints a picture of herself as a "brooding dreamer," so obviously trying to be someone whom she is not, and wearing a figurative mask when she presents herself to society. Further, Martha's mental creation of a fictional second girl like herself develops the idea that more than one Martha exists, thus reemphasizing Lessing's message that women indeed possess more than one definite self because of the schism between inner needs and societal expectation.

Adolescence is not the only cause for protagonists like Martha Quest to experience emotions of confusion and embarrassment that lead to the internal fragmentation of their identities; this conflict is experienced by women of any age in Lessing's fiction. As demonstrated by these scenes, the aging female (Sarah) and the adolescent female (Martha) both feel conflicted by their inner views of themselves and their interpretations of how others view them. Thus Lessing develops the concept of the outer, masked self as a false representation of the true inner identity of women. While this masking is a relatively new concept to young Martha, Sarah seems to accept this masking and seems to have been using it for decades. Sarah's contemplative scenes demonstrate her ability to separate the

usually negative, masked, outer identity with the more positive, true inner identity.

### **Interlopers of Inner Study: Husbands and Families**

In their self-reflective quests, the female protagonists in Lessing's novels ultimately attempt to destroy the outer shell or mask that covers, restricts, and eventually fragments their inner selves. Husbands, family members, and even friends reflect their influence upon these women, placing upon them unattainable, varied role expectations. Lessing's women feel obligated to fulfill these expectations, and during the course of the novels as they remove their masks to discover their true inner selves, they feel guilty for doing so. Shirley Budhos attributes this self-inflicted role placement to a marital pattern experienced by Lessing's female characters:

Marriage is never depicted as a supportive, non-restrictive, expansive relationship; divorced, married, single, and widowed women all function independently but often revert to their original social roles as married women because they ultimately remain dependent upon men. (vii).

Whether or not this dependency ends with a negative result depends on the particular novel and even upon an individual reader's perception of the character and her changes. In addition, the age or stage in life of the protagonist seems to have an impact on whether or not the removal of her mask is successful. In *Love, Again*, Sarah Durham becomes more independent from men than most of Lessing's previous female protagonists.

Lessing has analyzed the institution of marriage in society, saying in an interview,



I don't believe in getting married, unless you have children. I don't like marriage at all . . . People expect too much from marriage--long term romance, financial security. I like living with men, however. But having to stick to one forever is a bit much, isn't it? (Brownmiller 220).

As further shown in her fiction, Lessing identifies marriage as a large part of what creates role confusion and inner fragmentation of women. Society requires women to go against nature and requires that they fit expectations regarding physical appearance, relationships with the opposite sex, and motherhood. Apparent in Lessing's fiction is a strong message that such expectations create role confusion within the minds of women. With no control over how others view their outward appearance, their frustration grows with the lack of consideration (on the part of spouses, children, and other family members) for the women's inner needs.

Sarah Durham of *Love, Again* is actually less conventional than Lessing's previous protagonists. She has held and enjoyed a successful job in the theater for several years before the opening of the novel. However, like the majority of Lessing's other female characters, Sarah's additional roles were all related to helping others, namely, her family, and even though these roles have diminished with the passage of time, Sarah still feels *obligated* to fulfill the status of a woman whose life has been lived: that of an *old* woman, even though when she looks in the mirror, as discussed in Chapter One, she views a woman seemingly younger than she feels. Sarah's home life as presented in *Love, Again* is certainly not as insanely repetitive as those of many of Lessing's protagonists, mainly because at the beginning of this novel, she has already moved past that time in her life. If Sarah's life as a wife, mother, and young widow had been as draining as the lives

of several of Lessing's earlier protagonists, the audience does not get as much of a sample as is shown with these younger protagonists. However, Sarah's adult relationship with her brother adds insight into her frustrations at performing the role of motherhood at this point in her life when her brother frequently attempts to push his parenting responsibilities onto her. His (and his wife's) lack of ability to succeed in raising his daughter, Joyce, prompts Sarah to take over this role, for brief periods of time and for the sake of the girl; yet Sarah's realization of her own need to move past this point in her life saves her from completely taking over this role.

As far as her actual past role as a wife is concerned, brief snippets of narrative references to Sarah's husband indicate her inadvertent dependency on him during their marriage and in her mourning period after his death. After he first died, Sarah remembers that she

had listened to jazz, particularly the blues, it seemed day and night, for months. But that was when her husband died, and the music had fed her melancholy. But she did not remember . . . yes, first she had been grief-ridden, and then she had chosen music to fit her state. (*Love* 3)

Thus her husband's interests had been, unintentionally on Sarah's part, *mirrored* onto her. Her own identity was therefore clouded by his influence, since her identity had been combined with her husband's during their couplehood:

She had come to the unsettling conclusion that very little in these four rooms [of the flat] was here because of some considered choice of hers. A choice from the part of her she thought of as *herself*. No, and she had decided to go through the rooms and throw everything out . . . well, almost everything . . . (*Love* 6)

Sarah's long-term inability to rid herself of the clutter of her past married life figuratively demonstrates her mentally inescapable ties to her identity as a wife and mother.

The development of a new set of roles for Sarah is a major area of focus in *Love, Again*. She realizes that she must cast away the "clutter" of her life so that she does not *feel* so old; her life is not over yet. Sarah notices that time without a husband has allowed her a progression of independence. She has become

A calm and reasonable woman . . . true that Alan's death had thrown her into unhappiness for a time, but it wore off. That was how she put it now; knowing she was choosing not to remember the misery of that time. Hypocrite memory . . . *kind* memory that allowed her to claim a tranquil life. (*Love* 8)

Hence the lack of a husband from middle age to her present age has allowed Sarah a relatively peaceful opportunity to escape the role expectations of wifehood and to explore her own identity and interests through her career. Single motherhood over her own children does not appear to have been a stressful factor in Sarah's life, since this role is rarely mentioned in the novel.

Also at the beginning of the novel, readers discover that even though Sarah's own children have long since grown up and moved away, this particular Lessing protagonist remains instinctively maternal in her actions. Sarah deems it necessary to fulfill the roles of responsibility that do not even belong to her: "Sarah's responsibilities were self-imposed. For ten years now her vital energies--emotional--had been engaged, not by her own children and grandchildren . . . but by her brother's youngest girl, Joyce" (*Love* 12). In this case, since her brother and her sister-in-law do not recognize their responsibilities with their own daughter, Sarah takes it on herself. Sarah seems accustomed to the

demands of single-motherhood, since she became used to taking responsibility for a child when no one else was available or able to do so.

This pattern remains true for Sarah in her state at the beginning of the novel. What separates Sarah from Lessing's other protagonists are the steps that she takes to transcend this pattern of self-imposed responsibility. In effect, Sarah's mental reflection about herself in *Love, Again* is what helps her break free from these ties. Her brother Hal continually attempts to take over the role of the stifling husband in Sarah's life by making her feel guilty for refusing to continue taking care of his daughter Joyce. Prompting another mirror-studying scene for Sarah, Hal tells her, "We've [he and his wife] been meaning to tell you. You should do something about yourself. You could do with a lick of paint" (*Love* 14). This comment is made during a conversation where Sarah, not without feelings of guilt, informs her brother that she would no longer be taking responsibility for his daughter Joyce. Interestingly, Sarah connects her feelings of guilt, her brother's comment about her outer appearance, and her positive inner-self-knowledge during this mirror scene:

But there was nothing she, Sarah, could do. She would at last lead her own life. No, she did not expect to feel immediately better without the interminable drag and drudge of Joyce. Then she did take herself in hand, at last. She examined herself in the dim mirrors, switching on all the lights. Not bad, she supposed . . .

At the theatre, her colleagues commended her. They also allowed her to know she had let herself be put upon and should stand up for herself. (*Love* 14)

Even at this early stage of the novel, page 14, it is clear that Sarah has made a positive breakthrough in her inner self-reflection; this foreshadows her coming

self-revelations. Sarah decides that at this point in her life she should live for herself and for what she enjoys, namely, involvement with the theater company. This group of peers provides Sarah with a source of support and strength; the members reaffirm the very convictions that Sarah herself knows to be true. The challenge that Sarah faces after this particular realization is achieving a balance between her inner needs and desires as a woman and what society expects of a woman of her “certain age.”

Sarah Durham is not the only Lessing protagonist to experience inner-self confusion based on standards seemingly set by the people around her; this is a pattern characteristic of Lessing’s fiction. Kate Brown in *The Summer Before the Dark* shares a similar responsibility with Sarah in existing as society, her husband, and her children expect; and as asserted by Shirley Budhos, Kate also seems to “remain dependent upon men,” (vii). Critic Mona Knapp defines Kate’s antagonist in the novel as “not personal but ideological: it is the feminine desire to gain the approval of others by fulfilling their expectations” (117). Thus even though Kate feels bound to her marriage and to her family, Kate’s “enemy” is not her husband and her children; her enemy is actually her negative inner-self awareness of her female role obligations. In contrast, while Kate feels bound to her husband (despite both of their extra-marital affairs), Sarah Durham spends the duration of *Love, Again* trying to decide if she wants to discard the clutter of her past married life (including her residual feelings of self-imposed responsibility) in order to begin, once again, either a committed obligation to a man or an uncommitted affair with a man. As an elderly widow, it is much easier for Sarah to consider closing off her past (with or without the fulfillment of a new romantic relationship) than it is for Kate who is still a wife in middle age.

But like many of Lessing’s protagonists, including Sarah Durham, Kate



*struggles* throughout the novel to define for herself her identity by continually comparing her inner reflections with her interpretations of how other people perceive her. This is, in fact, the reason why Kate leaves home in the first place to experience her “summer before” resigning herself to her matronly role as expected by society. Sarah does not need to abandon her home (husband, family) in order to study herself in a mental mirror, since she has lived alone for quite some time, and Sarah is self-discerning enough to realize the ridiculousness of her feelings of guilt at “abandoning” her niece Joyce to her own parents. Kate, on the other hand, must *create* for herself a seclusion for self-reflection, not only because of her role as a wife and mother in her family, but also because she has not reached the same level of self-awareness as Sarah.

Preparing herself mentally for her journey, Kate thinks, “it was in order for her now to face herself in so many different mirrors, and to light a flame, to set certain currents running” (*Summer* 36). This beginning stage of self-reflection sounds quite confident, since Kate is merely reacting to what Gayle Green defines as Kate’s “feel[ing] herself diminished and debilitated by the qualities of empathy and relatedness that she has had to develop and to raise four children” (Greene 25). Kate almost innocently wants to take time off for herself in order to find herself:

All those years were now seeming like a betrayal of what she really was. While her body, her needs, her emotions--all of herself--had been turning like a sunflower after one man, all that time she had been holding in her hands something else, the something precious, offering it in vain to her husband, her children, to everyone she knew--but it had never been taken, had not been noticed. But this thing she had offered, without knowing

she was doing it, which had been ignored by herself and by everyone else, was what was real in her. (*Summer* 126)

The language in this passage relates Kate's life as a wife and mother as metaphorically resembling a sacrificial offering; her husband is the household "god," and she is the ever changing and aging mortal being; Sarah Durham in *Love, Again* also shows evidence, as in her previously mentioned scene, of feeling stifled by her husband's key role or defining identity in their marriage.

Throughout *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown asserts to herself that there is more to her identity than she has been "allowed" to nurture in her roles as a wife and mother. This contrasts with Sarah Durham in her period of life in *Love, Again*, since by this time she has had a bit more freedom due to her loss of her husband at the onset of her middle age. Yet, at the same time, Sarah is still expected to fulfill a role obligation, this time as the "old maid" or widow. In their quests for self-definition through mental reflection, both Sarah Durham and Kate Brown experience familial obstacles, yet Sarah Durham is the more successful of the two in discarding these elements in her self-reflection.

### **Mothers Reflecting onto Daughters**

Most critics agree that what causes Lessing's female protagonists to experience a kind of role "bondage" as wives and mothers are the expectations from the past haunting them. These characters find themselves in the same situations as did their mothers. Claire Sprague specifically ties Lessing's mothers and daughters together as essential in understanding the aging process of women in these novels (110). She states that "mothers . . . forever function as mirrors for their daughters. The complex circularity of daughters fighting mothers and then

becoming mothers themselves both repeats and advances Lessing's themes and patterns" (Sprague 110). This comparison is also evident in *Love, Again*. Even at age 65, Sarah still experiences what Gayle Green cites as a term coined in a critical article about Lessing's works: "matrophobia" (25). In other words, several of Lessing's characters are *afraid* of becoming like their mothers as they grow older. Some even appear to fear motherhood altogether. This fear may also be connected to these protagonists' fear of repeating their mothers' relationships with men, many of which are clearly unhappy in Lessing's novels. Lessing's intended message about these protagonists' fears of repeating the lives of their mothers, according to Greene, is to show that change for women in role definition is impossible because "female boundary fluidity originat[es] in the mother-daughter relationship" (24). Mothers serve as definitive archetypes of female behavior and role definition. Even though several of Lessing's protagonists rebel against resembling their mothers, the connection almost inevitably follows through.

Saxton alludes to the Grimm Fairy Tale, "Snow White," and the implications of this protagonist's stepmother as she questions in her magic mirror which of the two is the "fairest," or most beautiful, in male perception. Saxton asserts that

Lessing has created in her fiction protagonists who, like Snow White, try to escape their mothers, whom they see as their enemies. Eventually, they must come to see that, like their mothers, not only have they inherited male-defined masks and costumes of the mind, but these masks and costumes have come to inhabit *them*. They must learn to revise the questions they ask of the mirror and to revise its messages if they are to shatter their

patriarchal constrictions and break free of the competition for male approval that leads to enmity between mothers and daughters. (88)

Like Snow White, Lessing's protagonists believe that they must flee from their mothers in order to avoid self-destruction. In Saxton's analysis, the role of the enemy is being displaced upon the mother rather than upon the men in the lives of the protagonists. In an extension of this analysis, it should also be mentioned that women in Lessing's novels seem to aid in the perpetuation of their own repression. In actuality, mothers are not purposely forcing their influence upon their daughters. Rather males are reflecting their distorted influence upon how these daughters perceive themselves, and mothers and daughters alike often continue to perpetuate this patriarchal influence by following it, even when they feel the desire to go against it. The result is a vicious circle of women preserving the very patterns that they wish to transcend.

For many of Lessing's protagonists, this fear of becoming like their mothers begins in youth, particularly in adolescence. Frequently, Martha Quest's third-person narrator reveals Martha's fear of being similar to her mother, either in appearance or in lifestyle. This fear is shown by her revulsion at her own reflection. In the scene from *Martha Quest* where she "borrows" the mirror on the wall in her mother and father's bedroom, there is a definite division between Martha and her mother: "[Martha] examined herself in the mirror, leaning up on her toes, for it was too high; Mrs. Quest was a tall woman. [Martha] was by no means resigned to the appearance her mother thought suitable" (*Martha* 27). Here, the mirror that Martha is using clearly does not belong to her; its height suits only her mother, thus figuratively, the mirror is a symbol of the estranged relationship between Mrs. Quest and her daughter. In addition, the narrator's

statement (of Martha's perception, of course) about Mrs. Quest's expectations for Martha's appearance shows a rift between motherly expectation and Martha's actual physical presence. In other words, Martha is demonstrating aversion toward the possibility of becoming like her mother, and, according to Martha's perception, Martha's mother is also demonstrating antagonism about the fact that Martha does not fit her own molded expectations. Even though Mrs. Quest may not purposely intend for her daughter to repeat her own life patterns, Martha perceives a contrived purpose on the part of her mother and therefore desires to rebel against it.

Lessing's narrative pattern develops the idea of mothers learning from their own mothers and mirroring or repeating the same attitudes, principles, and even errors. Kate Brown's role as a middle-aged mother (as defined by herself and by those around her) is emphasized in several poignant mirror scenes in *The Summer Before the Dark*. The setting of this novel makes impossible an accurate comparison of Kate alongside her own daughter in this novel, since this is her summer quest away from home, yet the relationship between the two women is still important to the development of this novel and in Kate's self-quest. Maureen (Kate's young, temporary flatmate during just one of her many "vacations" away from her home, husband, and children) serves this purpose for Kate, representing the daughter figure for Kate in her exploration of her role as a mother figure. Kate seems to *purposely* regard Maureen as a pseudo-daughter figure for help with her own self-contemplation. Critic Mona Knapp describes Maureen in *The Summer Before the Dark* as

the "before" to Kate's "after": all youthful energy and glowing health, she sees and dreads the capable-matron cum nagging-housewife existence which lies ahead . . . the very status



of marriage will trick her into becoming, like Kate, a bustling household-crisis manager . . . she declares that she would do anything rather than assume this role. (119-20)

Although she is not Kate's biological daughter, adolescent Maureen shares Martha Quest's dread at becoming anything like Mrs. Quest/Kate Brown in their roles as wives and mothers.

Kate mentally associates Maureen with her daughter Eileen. As this protagonist studies her own physical changes since she left home, she combines the act of mental self-reflection with studying the physical reflection of her outer self:

On the way out Kate stopped in front of a long old-fashioned swing mirror in the hall . . . . She noted that she was in the grip of a need to do something for herself--get her hair done, buy a dress that fitted; this was because of the girl [Maureen] with her healthy young flesh, and her fresh clothes. She noted, too, that this impulse had something to do with her own daughter: Maureen was about Eileen's age. She saw that the moment of returning to her own family was going to be a dramatic one, whether by that time she had pulled herself together--or had decided not to . . .

*(Summer 166-67)*

Maureen is a "daughter" who has only known Kate during her summer away from home; therefore Maureen has never seen Kate at her best (or "role defined") appearance, while her true daughter, Eileen, has not seen her mother since before this summer of self-reflection. Kate mentally connects this encounter with Maureen as one that might possibly resemble or predict her interaction with Eileen when she first returns home from this summer away. This encounter is

helping Kate make her decision about whether or not she should choose to return to her original role or state or if she should choose to remain as she currently appears (on the inside and on the outside).

Kate's awareness of Maureen's aversion to becoming anything like her is especially evident in the following mirror scene where the two women study each other, side by side. Maureen's response to Kate's reflection is clearly negative:

Seeing Kate standing in front of the glass, in a semidark, she switched the light on, and walked in her springy energetic way quietly along the passage until she stood just behind Kate, reflected in the same glass . . . . Maureen smiled dazzlingly . . . and began dancing . . . she watched herself in the mirror as a child watched itself do something for the first time . . . . Maureen leaned forward and looked at herself carefully past Kate's shoulder. She stuck out her tongue at Kate. This was out of resentment, of self-assertion. Then, equally disliking, she stuck it out again, but at herself . . . . Kate felt assaulted. No matter how her mind said that it had been friendly, a sharing--the girl had come to share her moment at the glass--she felt it as aggression, and this was because, quite simply, of the marvelous assurance of the girl's youth. Of her courage in doing what she felt like doing. Yes, that was it, that was what she, Kate, had lost. (*Summer* 168-69)

This shared mirror scene figuratively asserts the point of view of both a mother figure and the mother's perception of the daughter-figure's expression. As the mother, Kate not only realizes her feelings of loss over her disappearing youth, but also her feelings of resentment at the daughter's repulsion of her. As the daughter, Maureen childishly declares her repulsion at the mother and also her

desire for independence. This scene is more important in Kate's development than in Maureen's. Even without accurate representation of what Kate has experienced throughout her life as a wife and mother, Maureen has already decided that she does not want to mimic Kate's roles. If Lessing were to explore Maureen's future as a wife and mother, more than likely Maureen would share the typical Lessing female characteristic of inner-self confusion. Since this novel actually traces Kate's self-quest, the importance of this mother-daughter mirrored comparison lies within the mother's psyche. In this representation, Lessing shows the mother's continuing inner-self reflection even after she has already begun influencing her daughter's concept of herself in her own inner-self reflection. The resulting message reveals that a potential cause of mother-daughter conflict is the two women's concurrent inner-self study at different stages of life and self-understanding.

The mother as the unwanted role model recurs in Lessing's fiction, as is the existence of incongruent maternal relationships with sons and daughters. Frequently, Lessing's mothers, whether they are protagonists or minor characters, favor a son over a daughter in nearly every aspect of child rearing. Thus every encounter between the mother and her daughter mirrors or repeats the patterns of negativity related to being a woman. Near the end of *Love, Again*, in a scene where Sarah visits her mother at her home as she is gardening, we discover that Sarah's mother has always favored Sarah's brother, Hal. Sarah describes her relationship with her mother as "cool, but good" (*Love* 261). The passing years have not altered this division between Sarah and her mother, as this protagonist continues to harbor negative feelings. Estrangement is obvious when Sarah gets no straight answer from her mother when she asks her about her past as a child and about her father. This lack of family harmony no doubt affected Sarah

negatively throughout her life, but is highly relevant at this particular point of her life because once her mother dies, the only evidence of that past will be through Sarah's own memory.

Sarah's mirror gazing prompts her to question her similarities to her mother in her own old age. Directly after a reference to her mother's illness, Sarah finds "herself buying beauty creams, trying to find in her mirror comfort in this aspect of her face or that, and buying clothes too young for her" (*Love* 212). One may interpret this as Sarah's realization of the fact that someday, she too will be ill and dying like her mother is today. The existence of the mirror and the obvious attention to the improvement of her physical appearance is Sarah's continuing retaliation toward the possibility of becoming similar to her mother.

A later scene in *Love, Again* that includes mother and child conflict makes the conflict between Sarah and her mother much more relevant to Sarah's closure at the end of the novel. Sarah observes a woman with her two children clearly favoring, in an almost perverted sense, the baby boy and showing nothing short of cruelty to her very young daughter. Obvious connotations cause Sarah to connect this to her own childhood: Sarah's mother had always seemed to favor her younger brother Hal. Lessing follows this scene with the revelation of Sarah's mother's death and how Sarah reacts to it: "she would sit for hours, looking into her past, trying to shine light into the dark places, even though the past had become a much less productive territory, because of her mother's death" (*Love* 349). Sarah's now past relationship with her mother is mirrored by the young mother's attitude toward her children. Lessing's theme states that mothers and daughters inevitably mirror one another. Women are immortalized in their children, particularly in their daughters, but this also often includes mirroring or repeating the same mistakes in life.

Martha Quest's, Kate Brown's, and Sarah Durham's mental reflections about the mirroring of mothers onto daughters demonstrate three different viewpoints about this particular type of self-study. Martha Quest represents youthful, adolescent aversion at ever sharing characteristics with her mother in the future. Kate Brown plays the role of the mother in her unsurprised realization of the daughter's (Maureen's) animosity; this attitude is not shocking to Kate because she herself is aware of the negative association that women have with housewifery/motherhood, as she shares these feelings about her own societally-defined role. And finally, Sarah Durham illustrates the long-term effects of both sides of mother-daughter identity conflict. Sarah shows repulsion at some of her mother's characteristics (past and present), even at the onset of her mother's death. And in her study of the young, nameless mother toward the end of *Love, Again*, Sarah also explores the roles set by society, realizing that her own mother's mistakes originated in her past and have been passed down for generations because of society's continued unattainable expectations for women in their roles as mothers. Thus Sarah's age and experience have advanced in her understanding of mother-daughter conflict. Martha and Kate have yet to fully understand this phenomenon simply because neither one has entered the stage of life that allows for this.

### **Results of Female Mental Reflection**

Mental reflection reveals three major conflicts in Doris Lessing's fiction: reflections about a female character's aging, about her roles as a wife and as a mother, and about her conflicts with her own mother (and the role of motherhood in general). Lessing's representation of these mental mirrors as typical for every woman makes probable the hypothesis that Martha Quest's teenage experiences



and Kate Brown's middle-aged experiences adequately reflect/depict Sarah Durham's (therefore, any contemporary woman's) feelings and attitudes about herself at those points in her life. As a result, Lessing's narrative themes and patterns of inner mirrors and mental self-reflection are developed at a new level in this more recent female exploration novel, *Love, Again*. The inner self-reflection of Sarah Durham is the focus of this novel, just as it is in the many other novels in which Lessing focuses specifically on the female experience. However, while inner self-study is not a new concept to Lessing's fiction, the development of female mental reflection on the part of an older protagonist allows for a more positive resolution in *Love, Again* than in Lessing's previous novels.

### Chapter 3

#### The Comparative Foil Mirrors of People and Art

The outside world often functions as a figurative mirror of the inner-self in Lessing's fiction. People and various art forms as mirrors provide women with comparative views of themselves. Thus far, Lessing's use of mirror motifs has proven valuable in the development of her self-analytical female protagonists in two major ways. First, they exist as tools for women to utilize in their quests to define their outer identities, allowing them the ability to fully view "what everyone else sees," though with unavoidable distortion. Second, mirrors in Lessing's fiction cause women to fragment their many inner identities and to examine each one individually in order to recognize the discrepancies between their own goals in life and society's goals for the female sex.

Confusion in the minds of the female protagonists has played an unavoidable role in these two particular functions of the mirror motif in Lessing's fiction, as covered in Chapters One and Two. They are drawn to self-examination in mirrors because of their confusion about themselves, yet their self-studies tend to provide more questions than direct answers. The third function of mirrors in the female protagonists' self-definition quests is no less bewildering to both Lessing's readers and protagonists. This third type of mirror motif centers on the existence of paradoxical, figurative mirrors that seem to motivate the female protagonists' quests. These mirrors include character foils or doubles, whereby Lessing's main female protagonists may make mental comparisons between themselves and their character "peers." Often in Lessing's novels, social situations allow the female protagonists the opportunity to compare themselves alongside large groups of people. Various types of art forms, such as literature

and dramatic performance, may function as mirrors by placing aesthetic traditions alongside the life experiences of the female protagonists. Thus in order for successful fulfillment of the protagonists' quests of self-study, this type of reflective comparison must take place. These women must psychologically set their bodily-encased human spirits next to the outside world. These female characters want to define normalcy to see if they themselves fit into the definition. This allows them to find out how and where they "fit" into the world as a whole.

Lessing's use of this foil motif is most prevalent in *Love, Again*. Traces of this technique are evident in *Martha Quest* and *The Summer Before the Dark*, but to a lesser extent in the overall development of the novels and of their characters, since these protagonists are at different, younger stages in their lives than is Sarah Durham. The resulting effect in *Love, Again* is the development of Sarah's independence from unrealistic expectation. Both Martha Quest and Kate Brown's comparisons of themselves with other people and with artistic expression, however, make them *appear* weaker at the conclusions of their respective novels than they were in the beginnings.

The figurative mirrors for these protagonists include character foils and art forms. Sarah's friend Stephen Ellington-Smith and Martha's boyfriend Donovan demonstrate two opposing uses of men as foil mirrors of the female protagonists. Kate's character foils involve women with whom she has no personal acquaintance other than observation, allowing her to compare herself to women as a whole. Sarah's self-comparison with Julie Vairon (the protagonist of her company's dramatic production), Martha's education from books as mirrors of the outside world, and Kate's reaction and resulting inner self-conflicts as an audience member at a Russian play are all examples of Lessing's use of art forms as figurative mirrors used by female protagonists in their self-studies.

The technique of the figurative mirror as foil is most effective in Lessing's development of Sarah as an older woman, since she is the freest from the responsibilities of adolescent and middle-aged female life. It must be mentioned, however, that even though Sarah is already past these two stages at the beginning of *Love, Again*, her memories about these stages of her life strongly affect her current stage of life and her decisions. Martha Quest's desire to date and, at the end of the novel, to marry, her latest beau, Douglas, stems from her need to be free of her parents. Her job and apartment alone did not help her to fully accomplish this, so by the end of this novel, she is desperate to prompt the parental cut-off as completely as possible. Similarly, Kate Brown, at middle-age, chooses to return home (subsequently to her husband) after her summer of freedom and mental reflection. At this point, she realizes that even though she was free to explore herself during the summer months that encompass the length of the novel, nothing was left for her to do in the end but experience the rest of her married life. For Kate, spousehood and motherhood to adult children provide clearer, more predictable, and thus, more attractive, expectations than does her summer of guessing.

Sarah, on the other hand, finds herself free to continue exploring her inner identity at the end of her novel because her roles in marriage, in motherhood, and in her occupation (since the new, youthful members are slowly taking over the theater company) are either already over or are soon to be concluded. Sarah's sense of her mortality is undeniable. The figurative mirrors in this novel, therefore, provide Sarah with a coping technique for her feelings of mortality. She is able to make comparisons between herself and her best friend, Stephen, in their quest for happiness in romantic love. Stephen and Sarah discuss, compare, and contrast their viewpoints openly. A second foil of Sarah is developed through

the character of Julie Vairon, Stephen's unconventional love interest and the historical figure that serves as the protagonist for the play which Sarah is composing. Reading and studying Julie's diaries while composing a play about this woman's life creates another mental form of reflection for Sarah as she makes comparisons between herself and Julie. These mirrors provide the medium through which Sarah may compare herself by looking back on what she has done in life, studying (and even appreciating) what she is doing now, and predicting what the world will be doing after she has died.

### **Character Foils: Contradictory Doubles**

Lessing's female protagonists frequently find themselves surrounded by people who are so like themselves that they appear to be "mirroring" each other and/or their similar characteristics in youth. This mirroring can include encountering the same emotions or life experiences, or it can encompass similar personality traits. Inspecting oneself in a mirror supposedly gives the viewer an accurate depiction of what she looks like. When a Lessing female protagonist examines herself in comparison with her character double, the two paradoxically mirror one other. This idea of paradox is validated by the frequent progression in Lessing's novels in which the similarities between the characters eventually develop into severe differences; thus their characteristics ultimately diverge rather than parallel. This realization allows the protagonists to recognize their individuality through recurrent comparisons of themselves with these "peer foils." This circumstance is especially apparent in *Love, Again* and is what provides Sarah Durham with a positive outlook on herself (past, present, and future identities) toward the close of the novel. Sarah's figurative mirror or character foil is a man named Stephen Ellington-Smith.



This newfound friendship with a man plays a large part in helping Sarah redefine her identity. Stephen is highly influential in Sarah's role and identity development, for his experiences and mistakes in life allow her to compare herself with him. These two characters are so similar in goals and in interests that Lessing utilizes the mirror motif to describe the two at the conclusion of their first meeting: "they actually laughed, at the way they echoed, or mirrored each other" (*Love* 44). This scene is the first interaction between Sarah and Stephen; thus noticeable about the two characters are their initial similarities in interests and, ostensibly, their attitudes about life.

When Sarah and Stephen first meet, their purely occupational connection with one another focuses on their work. They are collaborating in composing the play *Julie Vairon*. This initial meeting brings them together once they realize their shared quest in looking for the answer to the same question about life: What is it that creates one's ability to love and to be loved? In the beginning of their friendship, Sarah and Stephen's studies about the frequent loves and losses of Julie Vairon prompts this question. This historical interest eventually causes these two characters to compare their own lives to Julie's experiences.

The narrator's depiction of the first meeting of these two characters clearly recognizes Sarah and Stephen's awareness of their ability to "mirror" each other, for this connection prompts Sarah to confess to Stephen: "'I haven't been in love for twenty years' . . . . As she spoke, she was amazed that she was saying this to a stranger . . . things she had never said to dear and good friends" (*Love* 40). This is clearly more a meeting of soul mates rather than the average meeting of acquaintances.

This friendship deepens as Sarah becomes more in tune with the occurrences in Stephen's life, particularly of his obsession with the deceased Julie

and of his broken marriage. Stephen actually takes on what may be considered the traditionally female part in Lessing's work, since he too questions his identity and is unfulfilled by marriage. From him, Sarah learns *how* to go about questioning her current roles in life.

Stephen indisputably fulfills a traditionally female role when considering Jean Pickering's criticism about the presence of what she terms "twins" or "doubles" in several of Lessing's novels, particularly in the later novels of *The Children of Darkness* series (which feature Martha Quest as its protagonist). Pickering generalizes the typical nineteenth and twentieth century female writers' rendition of character doubles that foil one another:

Because "the twin images of angel and monster," presented by the patriarchal looking-glass have haunted women writers, their novels frequently align a "good" protagonist and an insane double, "the madwoman in the attic," on whom they project the anger and fear provoked by the literary and social confines in which they are imprisoned. (95)

As *Love, Again* progresses, Stephen's behavior could be categorized as madness, but Pickering emphasizes Lessing's atypical twist to the genre of the female novel with her unusual partnering of such twins:

Lessing goes far towards integrating the "good woman" with the "mad woman," making them allies rather than enemies. They remain separate personalities, testimony to the continuing fragmentation imposed on the woman writer by the patriarchal culture. (97)

This description adequately describes Sarah and Stephen's alliance in *Love, Again*, and explains why characters like Stephen, in the "mad" role, are able to

function as confidants with Lessing's protagonists. Lessing pulls the traditionally "mad" twin out of seclusion so that he/she may be examined in the context of society:

Lessing has redefin[ed madness] as an answer to the problems brought upon [women] by the patriarchal culture . . . . In her work the female tradition has thus undergone a significant modification: the madwoman is out of the attic and basement and powerfully loosed upon the world. (Pickering 98-99)

Perhaps more importantly, Lessing's development of these supposedly abnormal beings allows her quest-bound female protagonists another model for comparison with their own lives.

Sarah recognizes her sanity despite her feelings of *insanity* by comparing her love life to Stephen's. This negative yet crucial element in their friendship involves their common suffering from delusions or fantasies about fictional romantic relationships. Since Lessing's narrator is limited to the portrayal of Sarah's inner world, the mirror motif provides Sarah's comparison of her impossible romantic trials with Stephen's: "She did not want to see Bill. Nor Stephen with Molly, for this mirror of her situation was becoming too painful" (*Love* 162-63). Sarah's attraction to Henry and Bill, two younger men in the theater group, is limited to her imagination, and young Andrew's affinity for her shows up as a mere crush divulged in a secret love letter. Sarah does not truly plan on acting out any of these fantasies, even though her attraction to Henry and Bill is quite sincere. Stephen actually attempts to make his fantasies about Julie come true. His desire for an intimate relationship with Julie can become a reality for him only by having romantic and sexual relations with Molly, the actress who plays Julie Vairon. Since this is only a dramatization of a relationship with the

long-deceased Julie, Stephen suffers the repercussions of attempting to make an impossible fantasy a reality. Still, at this point in the novel, Sarah's confusion about the validity of Stephen's actions result from her need to compare, or to mirror her own predicament with someone else's.

One of the key characteristics of Sarah and Stephen's friendship includes their rote references to song lyrics, lines from plays, and quotes from literature, all about the woes of love. This therapeutic mirroring of the very art which both of them admire and enjoy with their own life experiences/emotions connects these two characters further. While Stephen uses Molly as the physical representation of Julie, he unconsciously realizes that his love for Julie goes beyond the physical. Sarah actually becomes the equivalent of what Stephen craves of the intellectual side of Julie because she is part of what brings Julie to life as the two compose the play about her. This infatuation is shown in Stephen and Sarah's analyses of art:

[Stephen] took his book from his pocket and read to [Sarah]: "The self-image of the sufferer becomes identified with the image of the beloved. Previous failures in love, common in this psychological type, reinforce the present condition because each surrender to the illness adds all past hopes to the present. The sufferer values pain as a guarantee of success this time. And remember that Cupid directs arrows and not roses to his victims." (*Love* 220)

This particular passage emphasizes the connection between Sarah and Stephen as representative of the average man and woman. This develops the idea of the mirroring of everyday life on the part of Lessing's two characters. This passage also alludes to a mirror with "the self-image of the suffer [as it] becomes identified with the image of the beloved" (*Love* 220). Stephen's purpose in reading the passage aloud to Sarah is to make *himself* feel better. This quote he

reads validates his emotions, since love is supposed to be painful, as he has made it for himself. This interpretation of his is self-centered, since he is oblivious to Sarah's lovesickness throughout the majority of their friendship. Truthfully, Stephen's love for Julie is no less unconventional than is Sarah's love for the much younger Bill and Henry; thus meetings such as these between Sarah and Stephen create a figurative mirror that allows Sarah to compare the unconventionality of her love to Stephen's love for Julie.

Closer to the resolution of *Love, Again*, the similarities between Stephen and Sarah come to a halt. In their final conversation, on the day prior to Stephen's suicide, Sarah notes their similar manner of contemplative introspection, but with a twist:

[Stephen] was occupied deep within himself, he was busy with an inner landscape, and did not have the energy for the outside world. [Sarah] knew this because she sometimes underwent a much less total version of this condition . . . . At meetings . . . in conversations . . . she had to make herself come up out of the depths of an inner preoccupation with pain actually to hear what they said . . . . But at least she could do it, and she was getting better. Stephen's state was worse by far than anything she herself had known, and the panic she felt deepened. (*Love* 312)

The connection that Sarah has felt with Stephen since the day they met is brought to an even deeper level at this turning point in the novel. Sarah acknowledges their similar ability to dive deep within themselves in thought. Comparing her ability with Stephen's *inability* to "function" with the outside world (despite his tendency to mentally escape from it) helps Sarah define her own strength in a way that she had never before noticed. While Sarah makes gallant efforts to help



Stephen through his deadly contemplative illness/madness, she knows that she is the strong one in the relationship, the survivor:

What he needed was someone to sit by him all day and all night . . . . No one performed this service for her, but then she was not and never had been anything like as ill as he was now. Her mind approached carefully, and in controlled terror, the thought that if the pain she felt was a minor thing compared to what he felt, then what he felt must be unendurable. For she had often thought she could not bear what she felt. (*Love* 312-13)

In fact, Sarah hardly seems surprised when Stephen's wife Elizabeth reveals to her Stephen's suicide, just days later. Sarah realizes that she will not only survive her frustration with the impossibilities of love with aging, but that she has also developed the ability to live without romantic affection, as a type of defense mechanism, so to speak. Stephen produces no defense in this battle; therefore he dies as a result of his inner conflicts related to unrealistic romantic love. Thus the characteristics shared by the two mirror foils in the earlier stages of the plot end in a divergence as the novel progresses, leaving Sarah as the survivor.

Although Sarah and Stephen are mirrors of each other, a romantic relationship between the two would make impossible the dynamics of their friendship and of their literary function as character mirrors/doubles and foils. Here, Lessing develops a mental connection between men and women, giving both sexes similar goals in life. Stephen's failure to set appropriate, attainable goals for himself romantically is not to show a weakness on the part of men as a whole, rather to demonstrate the needy, emotional side of men that society generally requires to remain hidden inside the inner spirit. Therefore, in this mirror comparison between Sarah and Stephen, Sarah's *female* quest to outwardly

realize her inner strength and Stephen's *male* quest to outwardly demonstrate emotional weakness prove an overall theme. This idea of Lessing's use of a mirrored, friendship alliance between a man and a woman in the quest for love and happiness in life may be viewed as much more substantial after hearing, straight from Lessing, that " 'some of the best battles have been fought by men and women together'" (Brownmiller 220). Clearly, one of Lessing's intents is to demonstrate the possibilities of positive results when men and women mirror one another in goals and intentions.

Sarah Durham and Stephen Ellington-Smith present a highly developed message about the similarities between the innate needs of men and women: Both sexes need to be able to demonstrate outwardly their inner strength and their inner spirit, which are unique to each individual rather than simply divided between each sex. Lessing places teenage Martha Quest beside several male companions throughout *Martha Quest*, but the most compelling of her relationships is with her boyfriend Donovan Anderson. When compared with Sarah and Stephen's friendship, the relationship between these two evolves into a very different but equally important type of male/female mirror comparison in this earlier novel of Lessing's.

Since adolescence provides Martha Quest with the opportunity and the desire to test the different angles available in teen social life, Donovan is only *one* of Martha's many beaux through the course of *Martha Quest*. Donovan's importance in this study, however, stems from his function as a male double of Martha and his consequential influence in the development of her character. No doubt, Lessing's intention in her inclusion of this male character is not to provide a likable male companion for Martha. Rather, Donovan exists in this novel to prove to Martha that her attempts at fitting in with social codes do not allow her to

be true to her inner self. Donovan represents an evil or corrupt side to Martha's existence, symbolizing patriarchal society's expectations and considerations for an appropriate physical female appearance.

On more than one occasion prior to Donovan's escorting Martha to various social events, his personal goal for social acceptance has been demonstrated by his actions in teaching Martha how to attend to her appearance when she is going to be seen alongside him. Donovan goes so far as to recreate Martha's appearance for her, reasoning that she is too ignorant to prepare herself properly for an outing. He proves Martha's inadequacies to her by commenting on her reflection in a mirror, emphasizing the Lessing motif of a mirror as the voice of patriarchal or societal truth:

He led her to the mirror, lifted her arms, and gently pulled over her head the white cotton dress . . . . "This has distinct possibilities, Matty, but anyone can look pretty." He crouched at her feet and shook out the skirt, and Martha saw a pale, tired-looking girl with untidy hair looking back at her from the mirror. "Now just look at it," said Donovan. "You see?" Donovan kneeled below her and worked on the white dress. He was quite absorbed, and she turned passively between his hands like a dummy. (*Martha* 197)

By allowing Donovan to recreate her appearance as if she were merely a mannequin in a store window, teenage Martha is testing out her feelings about being shaped by society's influences rather than shaping her own identity, as she so desires. The mirror is used as a tool for this lesson of Donovan's.

While Stephen and Sarah of *Love, Again* represent doubles/foils of one another in a psychological sense, Donovan and Martha fit this criteria through their representation of the physical, social side of human existence. At this point

in her life, Martha desires to know how society expects her to look and to act, so Donovan is her outlet to this superficial side of life. Donovan shapes Martha's outer appearance in order to meet his mental picture of the perfect, trophy-like female companion to be seen with socially, and her willingness to allow him to do so fulfills his need to control a female partner. Prior to another outing with Martha, Donovan judgmentally directs her with the following:

“Now you will lie down and sleep, because you really look awful, you know. I will come by and dress you at six. You must have a bath at five, but don't touch your hair, I'll do it”. . . . Martha lay obediently, shuddering with dislike of him, and also with gusts of hysterical laughter. (*Martha* 199)

The absurdity of Donovan's behavior and of his expectations of her are obvious by Martha's reactions here in her awareness of her inability to ever properly fit Donovan's (or male society's) criteria: “As for Donovan, he saw her as so much raw material for his own needs” (*Martha* 193). This is also evident after the ensuing description of one of Donovan's completed primping sessions and Martha's reaction to her appearance in her mirror. This passage develops two mirrors—a physical one and Donovan as the figurative foil mirror:

At the end, he led her triumphantly to the long mirror . . . . Martha looked, and, in spite of her pleasure, was uneasy. She was not herself, she felt. The simplicity of that white dress had been given a touch of the bizarre--no, *that* was not it; as she regarded herself, she was instinctively forming herself to match that young woman in the mirror, who was cold, unapproachable, and challenging. But from the cool, remote face peered a pair of troubled and uneasy eyes. (*Martha* 201)

Clearly evident in this passage is Lessing's recurring theme of the inner fragmentation of women as a result of societal expectation. Although Martha is pleased with Donovan's success at making her appear to outwardly fit society's mold for women (this is her goal in dating him in the first place), evident is her uneasiness about the obvious differences between the Inner Martha and the Outer Matty, by Donovan. Thus by placing this traditional male alongside Martha, Lessing provides the comparison between men and women's expectations and attitudes about the female sex's existence in society.

Interestingly, in this same recreation scene, Martha's eyes in the mirror give away her inner feelings of doubt, so that even Donovan notes the schism between the true Martha and the one he has worked so hard to create. Donovan persists in his almost Frankenstein-like creation, and in this mad-scientist role, Donovan almost forces upon Martha his inner idea or image of her being:

As she saw that glance--her own, it seemed--Donovan came forward quickly, and said, "Now listen, Matty, you really must see that you must change yourself for a dress like this. Don't you see?" He bent towards her, his hand hovering, ready to seize on what was wrong. "Look," he said finally, "your eyes too. Lift your head." As she remained motionless, his palm raised her head . . . . With something like horror, Martha saw him slide his own eyes slantingly sideways, into a languid, distant gleam. "You see?" he demanded triumphantly . . . . For a flash of a second, he was terrifyingly herself; and she stared at him with fascinating disgust. (*Martha* 201)

This passage is disturbing in its revelation of another side to Donovan. He has no interest in dating the real and true Martha beneath his creation, since he so



blatantly tells her that she must change herself in order to fit his mold. Donovan's desire for power over this young female is emphasized by his ability to tangibly change Martha. By actually touching her and changing or molding her with his hands, Donovan meets his goal. By distorting his own facial gestures as a demonstration of what Martha terms "terrifyingly herself," Donovan becomes a mirror of Martha. Even Martha is aware of the level of power over her this man has achieved by mirroring her. He has studied her appearance so intently that he is able to mimic even her smallest most "unattractive" gestures in attempt to change her into his own creation.

Martha's relationship with Donovan is a lie since they both seem to be using each other for a gain other than social pleasure or romantic intrigue. In contrast, Stephen and Sarah's friendship in *Love, Again* centers on honesty and mutual interests. The obvious differences between these two male-female relationships exist because of the differences in the stages of life of the two female protagonists. Teenage Martha needs to experiment with negative relationships in order to identify positive relationships, while elderly Sarah has lived long enough to be able to determine these differences. Sarah's need for a male companion stems from her need to study the painful side of romantic love from the male point of view. The major point to note is that Lessing's foiling technique develops these two women by allowing them to study themselves through comparison with companions who represent symbols of male society. Stephen and Donovan are atypical male characters. They are extreme representations of male weakness (Stephen) and male dominance (Donovan) in relationships with women.

In addition to the relationships between the sexes, the dynamics of setting in Lessing's novels also plays a part in determining the purpose and influence of

mirroring character foils. In *Love, Again*, Sarah is most often surrounded by people she knows well and works with in the theater, so despite her frequent travel abroad, these are the people with whom she most compares herself. At the beginning of *Martha Quest*, Martha resides with her parents in her hometown in South Africa. She eventually moves out of her parents' home to her own place in the city, where she lives until the very end of the novel at the onset of her marriage. The small-town-like setting where her parents live allows her to compare herself only with people she has known since childhood or with people whom she has met through her childhood acquaintances. Even though she does move out on her own to the city, young Martha has yet to actually obtain her own true picture of the world as a whole because she feels separated from the racial and societal prejudices of her white, South African neighbors in both the town and in the city. Kate travels frequently in *The Summer Before the Dark*, and purposely avoids the people she knows well, so this particular novel includes several scenes where Kate creates mirrors as foils of bystanders, people whom she barely knows or comes in contact with briefly in her travels.

Kate's figurative mirrors or character foils are not people with whom she is actually acquainted. She uses minor, flat characters in comparisons with herself so that she may view herself as an average woman, representative of most women's life experiences. Throughout the entirety of *The Summer Before the Dark* is the narrator's description of women as a whole by using the singular pronoun "she." The use of the singular rather than the plural when referring to the female sex is a generalization technique of Lessing's whereby all women are categorized as mirroring one another in their experiences, their intentions, and in their frustrations at attempting to live in accordance societal expectation. The use of this pronoun in *The Summer Before the Dark* occurs in descriptions of Kate

herself (since, as the protagonist, she represents middle-aged females as a whole) and also in depicting metaphorical descriptions of minor, flat characters, providing various “Everywoman” representatives.

A powerful example of this characterization technique is the flight attendant whom Kate studies during one of her occupational plane trips abroad. The novel’s narrator provides the “dialogue” of Kate’s mind as she, seemingly unconsciously, connects this attendant to an unavoidable fate of women:

For one year, two years, three years--at the most half a dozen--that girl has been on show, the focus of hundreds of pairs of eyes, all day; every minute of her working time a receptacle for admiration and desire and envy, the producer of warmth, comfort, attention. Then she marries. It must be like walking off a stage where a thousand people are applauding into a small dark room.

(*Summer* 54-55)

The voice of Kate’s thoughts emits a negative, sarcastic, or even jealous tone to her reactions toward the flight attendant’s youthful beauty and glamorous occupation. Kate’s observations of this woman represent a mirror of herself and of every young woman who begins adulthood independently but then gives that independence away by marrying. Lessing’s purpose for including Kate’s observations of other women, particularly in predicting this woman’s inevitable future, is to provide Kate with mirrors of herself. Kate realizes that she is not alone in her frustrations when she views these other women who reflect her memories of how she acted/looked as a young woman and how she appears to herself in the present. Since the purpose of Kate’s journey from home in *The Summer Before the Dark* is so that Kate may define her own identity, she needs a means of comparison for herself and naturally notices the characteristics of the

women surrounding her on her journey. This flight attendant may be a mere bystander in Kate's journey, but Kate's ability to predict (in her own mind) this woman's downfall connects these two women, making them mirrors of one another, since the flight attendant represents Kate's lost, single young adulthood. By making such judgments of this woman, Kate is projecting or reflecting her own life experiences and her consequential frustrations with them onto this woman.

Much later in the novel, while on a grocery shopping errand, Kate runs into yet another bystander who serves as a mirror/double of herself. The narrator articulates Kate's mental observation that this rather pathetic, physically unattractive, middle-aged woman actually mirrors herself. Kate pities the woman (and thus, herself) as she watches her chat with the store clerk: "On and on she went, the lonely woman, her eyes forced full of vivacity, her voice urged full of charm, until the shopman turned deliberately to Kate and put an end to her" (*Summer* 187). This man's obvious dismissal of the nameless woman prompts Kate to want to observe how other people treat this pathetic, middle-aged creature:

Kate followed her; Kate was following herself slowly . . . watching how she looked long into every approaching face, male or female, to see how she was being noticed, *how she was fitting into expectation that had been set in that other person by the modes of the time*, she saw how she stood at shop windows that showed clothes, examining dresses that would be appropriate for Maureen [her current flatmate], or her Eileen [her daughter]; how she kept sagging into tiredness, for her heels were punishing, then pulling herself up and throwing glances everywhere that were aggressive

and appealing at the same time. (*Summer* 187)

By following this woman, Kate obtains an out-of-body observation of herself and hence the answer to her questions: How do others view *me* when I “look my age” and do not take pains with my appearance? How well do I fit into society’s mold for women? Kate’s answers for herself are, for the most part, negative, but the final portion of the observation, “then pulling herself up and throwing glances everywhere that were aggressive and appealing at the same time” (*Summer* 187), presents an optimism: despite others’ negative regard and treatment of her, this woman (and Kate) persist in viewing the world and herself/themselves positively.

This idea of a positive self-view after comparing oneself alongside a foil or “double” has been demonstrated and taken to an even higher level by Sarah Durham from *Love, Again*. The relatively more positive result for this particular protagonist may be possible because Sarah tends to find figurative mirrors in people whom she knows well. Kate Brown, on the other hand, has compared herself with complete strangers. She assumes these people are similar to what she was like as a young woman, and she also assumes that they represent the woman she will become as she ages. As discussed previously, Sarah’s main foil is her friend Stephen, and as remains to be discussed, another foil of Sarah is the character Julie Vairon. Because of Julie’s development into a dramatic role, she may be classified as an art form with whom Sarah makes self-reflective comparisons. Even though Sarah has never met and can never meet the deceased Julie, Sarah feels kinship with this woman whose writings, musical compositions, and artistic paintings she has studied (and responded to) with great depth. Sarah’s conclusions about herself are relatively more positive than Kate’s because Sarah has knowledge of the life history and inner goals of her mirror foils, Stephen and Julie. Kate has no insight into the interior lives of the flight attendant and the



shopper. So, in the development of Lessing's fictional works over time, an aging/elderly woman possesses a greater ability to obtain knowledge of her own inner being and how it relates to her own exterior or physical changes.

### **Art Forms: Mirrors of the Soul**

While individual people who come in contact with the protagonists in Lessing's fiction provide the protagonists with social margins for comparison, artistic expressions of the self are also essential in aiding these women's self-studies. In other words, these women see themselves reflected in aesthetic mirrors, or art forms. Theater is prevalent in Lessing's fiction, and it is especially significant in the development of Sarah Durham in *Love, Again*, since it has been her occupation for several years, and because it connects her to all of the major characters in the novel. Comparing Sarah's connection to the theater with both a major theater scene in *The Summer Before the Dark* (where Kate Brown is an audience member) and with Martha's adoration of writing and literature in *Martha Quest* provides insight into Lessing's inclusion of the artistic features of the world. Art forms as figurative mirrors influence these women's definitions of themselves.

Lessing's readers may compare Sarah Durham, as the protagonist of the novel, with Julie Vairon, the novel's historical heroine (though actually fictional, created by Lessing). Julie is the protagonist of the play that Sarah co-writes with Stephen. Whether or not Sarah realizes it herself, Lessing's readers may note that these two women share more in common than simply being the main characters of their stories. In fact, Lessing would not have devoted such a large amount of text to background information about Julie had she not intended some degree of comparison between Julie and Sarah.

The novel's only literal connection between Sarah, Julie, and mirrors occurs during one of Sarah's pensive, working moments while writing the play about Julie's life: "Sarah sat at her desk and stared into the watery depths of the mirror [the glass top of the table]. She had to do more work on the songs, fitting Julie's words to music and even making some words up" (*Love* 77). In her writer's mind, the decision-making processes in choosing which elements of Julie's words (from her journals) to remain true to and which to alter gives Sarah power in creating an interpretation of Julie, or another dimension to Julie's identity. Perhaps one of the reasons why this is such a difficult decision, putting creative difficulties aside, is that Sarah herself sees so many varying dimensions to her own identity. Therefore, she unconsciously connects her life experiences to Julie's.

In this same segment of the novel, Lessing provides a short excerpt from Julie's journal that Sarah is working on adapting into a song for her play. Evident are Julie's feelings of isolation from society and her desire for a soul mate:

*every scene I am part of, when there are people in it, rejects me.  
If someone were to reach out a hand to me and I stretched out  
my hand to him, I know my hand would go into a cloud or a  
mist . . . But suppose in spite of everything my fingers closed over  
warm fingers? (Love 77)*

Julie's own word choice of "*every scene I am part of*" seems to place her directly into Sarah's play, almost as if she is predicting that Sarah would be writing about her in the future. According to the "history" recorded in this novel, Julie never seems to find this soul mate, or the owner of the "*warm fingers*," in her lifetime, though it appears that Sarah has done so in *her* lifetime.

One of Sarah's connections to Julie is Stephen, despite the fact that Julie

never knew this friend of Sarah's: "She, Sarah, had found a hand in a cloud or mist--for Stephen had certainly been an unknown--a warm hand, kindly by habit, a strong one, but holding it, she had felt its grasp become desperate. Help me, help me, said that hand" (*Love* 77). This portion of the novel makes Sarah appear as the modern-day reincarnation of the very Julie whom Stephen wishes he could know. As made evident in the previously discussed scenes showcasing their mirroring friendship, Sarah becomes the representative of Julie, the helping hand that Stephen needs, although even she cannot stop Stephen's self-destruction.

Another connection between Sarah and Julie focuses on evidence in Julie's journal that like Sarah, she also used mirrors in her lifetime to compare her inner self with her outer self: "*I feel a smile on my face. I hold the smile and go to the little mirror. I see an angry and even vicious curl to my lips. I don't know myself in that smile*" (*Love* 117). Just as Sarah often differentiates between her view of her outer appearance and her inner feelings, Julie reveals her "vicious" side in her outer appearance, while her more innocent inner self is uncomfortable with this second, "Hyde-like" identity. Sarah's "Hyde" appears when she envisions herself carrying out her desires for relations with the younger men in her life. Sarah's other, more rational side decides against reacting on these desires.

Julie's character has several dimensions, much like Sarah Durham's character. While the novel's narrator gives a voice to the study of Sarah's many dimensions as a human being, Julie's numerous identities depend upon the individual people interpreting her personality and life experiences and upon the medium in which they are being interpreted. Sarah's dramatic version of Julie's story is not the first. In fact, by composing her own version of Julie's life story (in the form of a drama), Sarah is forming an image of Julie that *reflects* her

visions/interpretations of who Julie was. Also, even though Julie's journals and artwork allow some insight about the inner Julie, only she truly knew her inner self.

By turning Julie's life into a dramatic art form, Sarah adds multiple dimensions to Julie's identity for the outside world to view. The "Julie" created by Sarah mirrors Sarah herself. By placing a foil of herself on stage, Sarah may watch and analyze a mirrored representation of her own life. And by turning Julie's life into entertainment, Sarah adds multiple dimensions to Julie's identity for the outside world to view. This play within the novel provides yet another instrument to display *Lessing's* major thematic question: How can a woman define herself, consider how others view her, consider how she views her inner self and all of its dimensions, and consider her comparisons to other people?

The theater is not presented in any form in *Martha Quest*, probably because the setting of the novel, a small farming community in South Africa, does not provide many opportunities for this type of production. An important part of the Martha's character development is her frustrations and feelings of isolation related to her lack of exposure to something other than what she has known and seen all of her life in this community. All that she has to study that represents the outside world are her books, and therefore she is an avid reader. But these points do not rule out the existence of aesthetic mirrors in this novel, helping Martha in her self-study.

In Martha's early stages of adolescence, which coincide with the early stages of the novel itself, her primary method of defining how she fits into the world is through literature. As a child and now a young teenager, limited to only the knowledge and experiences that her parents have exposed her to in the time that she has lived in the family home, Martha's only gateway into the outside

world thus far has been through her books, which have helped her identify her political ideology and her place in life:

Martha had gained a clear picture of herself, from the outside. She was adolescent, and therefore bound to be unhappy; British, and therefore uneasy and defensive; in the fourth decade of the twentieth century, and therefore inescapably beset with problems of race and class; female, and obliged to repudiate the shackled women of the past. (*Martha* 18)

Books for Martha are mirrors of the self that she wants to become. In setting goals for her hopeful future, Martha has used them as her frame of reference, thus implying a sense of discontentment with her current knowledge of herself.

But Martha shares a love/hate relationship with books. Since they are also mirrors of the world as a whole, books can never provide clear enough answers for the ever-questioning Martha: “There were, at this very moment, half a dozen books lying neglected in her bedroom, for she knew quite well that if she read them she would only be in possession of yet more information about herself, and with even less idea of how to use it” (*Martha* 19). The conclusion is that even though this artistic mirror gives Martha something with which to compare herself and gives her ideas for setting goals for her life as she continues her self-definition quest, Martha is still the only one in control, with the power and responsibility in making the ultimate decision of how she wants to appear to herself. Literature as an artistic mirror in this earlier novel of Lessing’s suits the purpose of developing the teenage protagonist. While elderly Sarah Durham of *Love, Again* may discover insight about herself by viewing the play that she wrote, teenage Martha Quest finds that she must look beyond what she learns about the world by reading. Martha is too young and naive to have the knowledge



base that will allow her to distinguish between what she should truly believe and what she should discard.

In *The Summer Before the Dark*, Kate Brown's role as an audience member at the Russian play, *A Month in the Country*, demonstrates another, earlier use of the theater as a mirror of the self in Lessing's fiction. Just as Sarah Durham makes connections between herself and Julie Vairon in *Love, Again*, Kate had at an earlier time in her life been able to relate herself to Natalia, the female protagonist of the production. In this extensive theater scene, Kate is already at a latent point of her madness in the novel when she views the production, thus developing another, more negative result when the theater is used as an aesthetic mirror of the self. Kate finds herself unable to see herself reflected in this character as she had in the past, even though this was "the sort of play where one observed people like oneself in their recognizable predicaments" (*Summer* 153), according to the novel's narration. As Kate views the production, she searches for the truths about herself, which had before seemed so obvious to her in previous trips to the theatre, prior to her summer away from home:

She kept trying to shake herself into a different kind of attention, or participation, for she could remember her usual mood at the theatre, and knew that her present condition was far from that. It really did seem as if she looked at the creatures on the stage through a telescope, so extraordinary and distant did they seem from her in their distance from reality. Yet the last time she had sat here she had said of Natalia Petrovna, that's me. She had thought, What person, anywhere in the world, would not recognise her at once? (*Summer* 154)

Kate acknowledges that she has changed since her last encounter with Natalia and

*A Month in the Country*. As circumstances in her life have changed, Kate's perception of the play's protagonist has changed. What had once before seemed an accurate representation of her life now showcases, in Kate's mind, that she had been living a lie. Kate compares the protagonist's situation with her own, developing in her thoughts her newfound realization of the contrast between herself and Natalia:

Natalia Petrovna . . . was supposed to be twenty-nine . . . but she was behaving and thinking like--was being acted by--a woman of fifty. A woman who thought of herself as getting old, grabbing at youth. Obviously the nineteenth century . . . aged women fast. You couldn't image a woman of twenty-nine behaving like that now; she wouldn't regard falling in love with a student as an expense of spirit, far from it. (*Summer* 154)

The narrator's reference to time's instigation of the changing role of women, supposedly advancing in independence, develops a foil between Kate and Natalia. After spending her summer sans husband and children, Kate views the play *this* time with new eyes. Kate had previously viewed Natalia as her double, performing similar if not identical life experiences:

Four years before she had squirmed, she had felt personally criticized; she had been full of discomfort at the self-deceptions and the vanity of the lovely lady, the mirror of every woman in the audience who has been the centre of attention and now sees her power slip away from her . . . . It was a farce and not at all a high-class and sensitive comedy filled with truths about human nature. The fact was that the things happening around the world, the collapse of everything, was tugging at the

shape of events in this play and those like them, making them farcical. (*Summer* 155)

After Kate's summer fling and time away from home, her new interpretation of the play demonstrates her feelings of how marriage and motherhood had prematurely aged her. Natalia represents her former self, an identity that Kate now views negatively. Thus Kate's review of this performance, calling it a "farce" rather than demonstrating "truths" about human life, and her lack of a connection to the play's protagonist are both elements that aesthetically mirror her attitudes about aging and her role definition(s) as a woman.

At the intermission and directly following the conclusion of the play's production, Kate's disgust with the play's revelations about herself extends into distorted views of the masses of people around her, whom she now sees as animals:

Kate went to the cloakroom, where she was not surprised to see that a monkey [herself] looked back at her from the mirror. The attendant was a fat old pig, and women coming in for a wash or a pee were cats and dogs . . . . Was this how that old artist had always seen humanity? It had been no fancy of his, but he had lived always in the state she was in now? He had been served in shops by pigs and monkeys, had loved women with the faces of cats and little bitches, had evaded wolves, looked into mirrors hoping that one day a human face would at last appear there, dissolving the animal mask that always confronted him, no matter when and how he crept into the glass, trying to take himself by surprise, hoping that the light of an early morning, or a break in his sleep, or a sudden turn away from his easel or sketchbook would

let him see the face of man with the eyes of a man looking back  
into his? (*Summer* 157-58)

Kate's frustrations with the changes of her perception of the play triggers her distorted view of humanity in this scene. The narrative reference to mirrors in this description of Kate's perceptions develops Lessing's recurrent use of art as a mirror of life. Just as Kate had before seen the play as representative of life, in this scene, Kate's mind still connects the play to life, but this time demonstrates her perceived distortion in both. What had once been such a beautiful example of life in art is now ugly, as life is now in Kate's view.

Lessing's use of the theater as an aesthetic, mirrored representation of Lessing's protagonists in *Love, Again* and *The Summer Before the Dark* involves their personal connections to the dramas as audience members. When Julie Vairon's life is reenacted on the stage, Sarah views these experiences from the standpoint of an audience member and can therefore mentally compare Julie with herself. Kate duplicates this method of reflection when she compares herself with Natalia. However, Sarah's role in composing the art form with which she compares herself results more positively. This performance is more of an affirmation of truths with which she already has acquainted herself; after all, Sarah wrote these truths. Kate's revised interpretation of Natalia (the protagonist of the Russian play) is confusing and disheartening, since her new view of the character reveals, in a form more tangible than inner thoughts, Kate's own feelings of inadequacy. Interestingly, as it is for Sarah, this too is an affirmation of self-truth for Kate, but the result is more negative in its revelations about the novel's protagonist. As a figurative mirror, this art form reflects for Sarah and Kate what they already know about themselves. The dramas are tangible representations of their mental reflections about themselves.

### Connecting the Figurative Mirrors

Lessing's motif of figurative mirrors in the forms of character foils and art forms allows her female protagonists devices beyond an actual glass mirror to aid in their self-studies. Comparing the protagonists with their character peers in *Love, Again*, *The Summer Before the Dark*, and *Martha Quest* reveals more mirror patterns in Lessing's fiction. Stephen and Donovan show extreme representations of male society in their interactions with their respective foils, Sarah and Martha. Flat, background characters as bystanders in Kate's life represent society as a whole. And art in the form of drama and literature are figurative mirrors representing life experiences to varying degrees for these three women. Martha Quest's view of the world is represented by what she reads in books; for Martha, books mirror the world. Kate Brown and Sarah Durham use drama to reaffirm their mental reflections.

As with the other types of mirror motifs discussed previously, the use of the figurative mirror in self-study provides Sarah with a more positive result than Martha and Kate's. Martha's interaction with Donovan negates her self-identity, and she uses books for knowledge about the world without the ability to sort what she should believe from what she should discard. Kate's comparisons of herself with the people around her instill feelings of doubt about her past, confusion about her present, and doom for her future as she ages. Furthermore, her viewing of the play brings to light her realization of a lack of self-identity, and she reacts in a rage. Sarah is the only one of the three protagonists who has the ability to use her figurative mirrors positively. Her friendship with Stephen allows the nurturing element of her personality to surface and she consequently nurtures herself as the two experience similar emotions. Sarah's written production and viewing of *Julie Vairon* provides her the opportunity to view her self-truths three-



dimensionally through comparison of life and life represented through art. In essence, Sarah's figurative mirrors positively reaffirm her inner self-knowledge, as these mirrors center on her self-reliance. Martha and Kate's figurative mirrors exemplify their concern with how the two women are viewed by others, whether by society as a whole or by individuals. Once again, the age of the protagonist of *Love, Again* impacts her self-reflection.

## Conclusion

### *Memory*

*One had a lovely face  
And two or three had charm,  
But charm and face were in vain  
Because the mountain grass  
Cannot but keep the form  
Where the mountain hare has lain.*

W.B. Yeats

Doris Lessing's inclusion of this William Butler Yeats poem within the first page of *Love, Again*, prior to the beginning of the first chapter, indicates this contemporary British novelist's thematic intentions in her composition of this novel. Of course, the title of the poem applies to Sarah Durham's experiences. Sarah's memories of her past years as a child, an adolescent, a young woman, a middle-aged woman, and finally to her present age prompt all of her contemplations throughout the novel. This poem alludes to the female experience: Sarah's conflict between her inner spirit versus her outer, physical form. The "mountain grass" in the poem represents the inner spirit's view of the past that will "keep the form" or stay the same only in memory. Essentially, the poem notes the existence of change despite the remembrance of the past. The memory is what allows women to self-reflect.

Despite the negative implications of Sarah's mother's death and despite the seemingly pessimistic tone in the last few pages of *Love, Again*, Lessing's reader may actually interpret a sense of optimism about Sarah's discovery of her

identity. In the final mirror scene of the novel, Sarah notices a dramatic change in her appearance:

Sarah is looking into her mirror, just as on the evening when we first saw her. At first glance, she has not much changed but a closer look says otherwise. She has aged by ten years . . . . She has acquired that slow cautious look of the elderly, as if afraid of what they will see around the next corner. Sarah has changed, and so have the rooms she lives in. (*Love* 349).

Sarah has cleaned out the “junk” from her cluttered rooms in an attempt to remove the clutter from the past. But is this a change for the better? This is only one of several questions that Lessing leaves in the mind of the reader at the end of this novel. Another issue to consider is Sarah’s success in discovering her identity: does she become a well-rounded woman, content with her roles?

In comparison with the great number of Lessing’s other female characters who go insane or become obsessed with someone or something at the end of other works, Sarah’s identity search and its inconclusivity are far more positive. This Lessing pattern is described by Shirley Budhos: “The attempt to escape from . . . roles becomes the flight from consciousness which is the vehicle of change and freedom but which, in turn, results in ironic and self-limiting enclosure again” (ix). Budhos notes the themes of “loss of will, self-destructiveness, and fragmentation” that arise in the conclusions of *The Summer Before the Dark* and the novels of *The Children of Violence* series, which includes *Martha Quest* (11).

Sarah does limit herself at the end of the novel, since she chooses not to become romantically or sexually involved with Harry, but since her attractions to both Bill and to Harry were based more on lust than on love, this may be read as a positive end. The clearing of the clutter from her room proves that Sarah will not

suffer the same fates as her literary predecessors. She will continue reflecting on her identity and defining herself, and she has accepted this as a recurring act for herself, if not for all women, as she continues changing. She also has an advantage that these other women in Lessing's novels do not possess--her friendship with Stephen, which Sarah frequently utilizes as a margin for comparison, a "mirror foil," with her own woes about life and love. Stephen's tragic suicide brings Sarah to grief, and she truly suffers his loss, yet there is a positive side to this. Though a male, Stephen takes on Lessing's traditional role of the emotional and consequently self-destructive female. Sarah learns from him that obsessive love with no concrete basis brings nothing but self-destruction. Sarah will probably continue her role as the matronly, widowed 65 year-old, but her experiences highlighted in this novel have taught her more about who she is and what she wants. Even if she never acts upon those desires, she has remained true to herself through her honesty about herself.

This novel is not the first in which Lessing has tackled the struggle of women in shaping their socially defined roles in contrast with their personally-desired identities, yet this addition of several types of mirrors as motifs of this conflict takes this study of the female experience a step further. The female protagonist is given a chance to view the different dimensions of her roles and the opportunity to weigh her options. She asks herself which roles are realistic enough to be upheld and which are simply results of her fantasies. Sarah Durham is a woman of character at the end of the novel. Her choice to rid herself of her boundaries (symbolized by the "clutter" in her life) and to take on others proves an element of female strength in the end. Her aging outer shell as viewed in her mirrored physical reflection will never give justice to her inner strength and vigor.

If Lessing were to write no more female exploration novels than those currently in print, her readers may be satisfied with her production of *Love, Again* as a final statement on female self-reflection. This novel seems to explore, more positively and more decisively than any of her previous works, how and why contemporary Western women reflect on themselves so deeply. Through her depiction of Sarah Durham, Lessing has accurately identified female strength and the sources that attempt (but do not completely succeed) to stifle it. Lessing places her women in situations that may be defined as realistic because of her lifelike portrayal of the two sides of the mirror: the positives and the negatives, for, in truth, nothing exists without at least a little of both.

As do women in real life, Lessing's Sarahs, Kates, and Marthas all compare themselves to the people they see, whether or not they know them. As do women in real life, Lessing's women experiment with their roles and identities and, even after extensive self-discovery, are never quite content with all that there is in the world that they have yet to discover in their lifetimes. As do women of all ages, Lessing's varying protagonists struggle with thoughtful decisions and rash actions.

Pulling out Martha, Kate, and Sarah as protagonists representative of a progression of mirror motifs in Lessing's fiction makes possible these conclusions. From teenage years to middle-age to elderly life, Lessing presents possible paths in the progression of womanhood as demonstrated by these particular three protagonists. Mirrors impact teenage self-reflection by providing the adolescent the means by which to set goals for who she wants to become. She also charts her progress through self-reflection. The middle-aged woman reflects on who she has become so she may compare the results with the original goals she set for herself in youth. The elderly woman uses mirrors in order to study



who she has been in her years thus far and what she has accomplished. This stage has proven to be the most positively productive and important result of female mirrored reflection, since at this age, the woman possess the ability to truly decide how she feels about who she was and who she is, and to decide which segments of these identities she wants to keep for the remaining years of her life. To varying degrees, these reasons for and results of mirror self-reflection overlap and repeat themselves in the three stages, allowing women to revisit and revise their studies of themselves over and over again as they change, inside and out.

The most profound mirror of all that may be discovered by reading Lessing's fiction is the novel's mirrored representation of true life itself. *Love, Again* mirrors the aging woman's past and the young girl's future.

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