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PhD thesis

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**THE POWER TO DESTROY FALSE IMAGES:  
Eight British Women Writers and Society  
1945-1968**

**Marja Arendina Louise Anderton**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Sociology, University of Glasgow

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## Acknowledgements

As this thesis was written over several years and in a period of great change in my life, I feel that at this point I ought to express my gratitude to the people who encouraged me not to give up.

First of all, of course, this is my supervisor, Barbara Littlewood, who very kindly helped me wherever she could in spite of the great distance between us for most of the time.

Secondly, I would like to thank Iris Murdoch, Penelope Mortimer, A.S. Byatt, and Margaret Drabble for allowing me to use their correspondence here.

On the personal level I would like to thank my mother and Nick, my husband, for providing me with financial back-up as well as with information relating to the period under discussion here.

Last but not least I would like to thank Tommy and Edwin, my sons, for giving me such a useful insight into the trials and tribulations of motherhood ...

In memory of my father, prof. drs. Harry ter Heide, socialist and realist

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree...

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig a wonderful picture beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and off-beat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest ...

from: Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (1963)

Just before the war, women were supposed to be tall, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped, long-legged. 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 ... This dress, however, had the power to destroy these false images ... She knew that the moment this dress clothed her body she would be revealed to herself, and to others, as something quite new, but deeply herself. That dress was made to clothe the person she knew herself to be ...

from: Doris Lessing, Martha Quest (1952)

## Summary

This dissertation aims to oppose the assumption underlying many studies that the immediate post-war period was a "silent" time in which there were no signs that women were not generally content to follow the ideal of femininity, and that the feminist movement started suddenly in 1968. This thesis focuses on the dissenting voices which could be heard both in society and literature before 1968.

Part I deals with the position of women in society between 1945 and 1968. It concentrates particularly on women at work and in the family. The fact that more married women than ever before entered the labour market after World War II contradicts the idea that British women in the '50s were mostly housewives. Furthermore, in spite of the apparent coming into existence of the so-called "affluent society", women had many reasons to feel dissatisfied. Women were mainly found in low-status and low-paid jobs, and in the family women had very little power, especially sexually and financially. This part of the thesis also deals with women in society who were expressing the discontent they felt. First of all, there were middle-class journalists (e.g. Stott) and sociologists (e.g. Gavron, Klein) who were registering women's dissatisfaction in their publications. Secondly, an outlet for grievances for women was formed by The Guardian's women's page (especially the letters section) which discussed many controversial issues.

Part II deals with another group of middle-class women who turned to the problematic position of women in society in their publications, eight British women novelists who started writing in this period. This part discusses the lives of Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Penelope Mortimer, A.S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, Edna O'Brien and Beryl Bainbridge, with particular reference to their emergence as writers. The biographical section refers to interviews as well as to letters to the author.

The final part of the dissertation discusses several novels by each writer. There are three main themes which recur again and again in these novels, the search for an identity (a female form of the Bildungsroman is very popular), the restrictive influence of the family on the heroines, and the importance of work for the self-esteem of many of the female characters. In these novels women do not have to choose between marriage and a career as in many earlier novels, but, like many of their female contemporaries in society, they are trying to combine both.

The writers discussed here thus had an avantgardist function - they touched on many issues the post-1968 feminist movement was to return to and was to put in a theoretical framework.

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# INTRODUCTION

The idea that art and reality are related in some way is certainly not a new one. Plato and Aristotle already philosophized about the exact nature of this relation. In The Republic Plato concluded, rather pessimistically, that literature is but the shadow of what really happens. To him the world itself is only an imperfect copy of some ideal existence beyond this world. Literature is thus two steps removed from the truth. Through the ages this concept of literature as mere imitation of reality developed into the theory that literature reflects reality or society in one way or another. In the twentieth-century this basic assumption underlies the thoughts of such diverse people as, for instance, D.H. Lawrence, Lionel Trilling and Roland Barthes. Hundreds of pages could be written explaining in detail the differences of opinion among them, but here a short summary of the most important lines of thought will have to suffice to provide an overview of twentieth-century ideas on the nature of the relation between fact and fiction, between society and literature.

D.H. Lawrence thinks that literature, and especially the novel, is part of a closely knit bond with "life" as he calls it. To him the novel is the only form which gives a true insight into reality:

The novel is the only bright book of life. Books are not life. They are only tremulations on the ether. But the novel as a tremulation can make the whole man alive tremble. Which is more than poetry, philosophy, science, or any other book-tremulation can do. The novel is the book of life.<sup>1</sup>

As becomes apparent in this quotation he assigns a rather presumptuous, almost divine, Romantic role to the novelist, the only human being who can paint a complete picture of reality and has a true insight into it.

Richard Hoggart in his essay "Literature and the Study of Society" takes a Laurentian view. To him literature performs a special task in that it recreates life. If people are only willing to be open-minded, they can enrich their lives with a moral insight which only literature can provide. He mentions another, minor, reason why social scientists ought to be interested in literature: "contemporary novels can give social scientists a fuller sense of representative detail and of the movements in taste that detail carries".<sup>2</sup>

Lionel Trilling can be grouped with Lawrence, because he also sees that the novel and

society are particularly closely related. He describes that special relation thus:

The novel, then, is a perpetual quest for reality, the field of its research always the social world, the material of its analysis being always manners as the indication of the direction of the man's soul.<sup>3</sup>

He has one advantage over Lawrence in that he does not believe the novelist to be all powerful and unfailling. He discerns a quest for reality, a reality which might sometimes be grasped and which at other times eludes the novelist. To him British writers seem to be more successful at this than their American colleagues. He sees the British novel as filled with "thick social texture".<sup>4</sup> All Trilling's critical writing draws upon the firm belief that literature and society are both part of one and the same culture and that they cannot but influence each other. Although these general assumptions seem to be credible, it is a pity that Trilling does not go further than this and that he fails to make clear what the essence is of the fact they are both part of the same culture. Trilling's theory stops short of providing a complete and exact explanation, and remains in the land of well-meant but impotent vagueness.

A completely different set of ideas is voiced by structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes. Barthes, and some of his English followers such as David Lodge, depart from linguistic concepts, first voiced by De Saussure, in their discussion of literature. They see language and its structures and systems as the connecting factor between reality and literature. Although this movement has a philosophy which might look attractive at first, the relevance of structuralist analysis is often rather questionable. By the insistence on language, these critics often seem to lose sight of both the reality and the text under discussion. In <sup>4A</sup> Elements of Semiology, for example, Barthes is so deeply involved in his discussion of linguistic concepts (sign, signifier, speech, language) that he does not refer to literature at all. In The Modes of Modern Writing Lodge gives some rather more down-to-earth analysis of structuralist theory, and also gives a few examples of structuralist criticism. Although his critiques on occasion provide clarity, they unfortunately tend to remain on the metaphor/metonym level, without providing a deeper insight into the total significance of the text as a whole. A further problem with structuralists is their anti-subjectivist stance. They are interested in uncovering underlying structures, and turn away from the subject, or the producer of a work of art to the object, the work of art itself. To them the author does not consciously put a specific meaning into a text, which can be deduced if we know more about the author. It is true

that it is rather limited to rely solely on the author's intentions for an explanation of a text, but it is equally limited to do away with the author altogether, as the structuralists do. There are many different facets which make up the total message which a text conveys, but surely one of them is related to the author. The author's socio-historical circumstances, for instance, account for a significant part of the meaning of a text (cf. also Goldmann, below). As we shall see, in the case of the novels under discussion here, it is rather enlightening to see the books in relation to the authors.

For feminist critics the nature of the relation between literature and "reality" has also been important. They have shown that the "reality" which is depicted in traditional historical and sociological accounts often leaves out the woman's point of view and woman's experiences. It is often when one turns to literature that the voices of women can be heard. A good example of this is the historical interpretation of seventeenth century Dutch life. Until recently this period was generally thought of as a male story of success: male burghers trading and earning large sums of money, male painters like Rembrandt dominating the cultural scene, etc. However, feminist scholars have in the past few years unearthed many female literary figures, who were very influential in society at the time, but who were later totally neglected in historical accounts of seventeenth century Holland. The most significant of these was the poet Anna Maria van Schurman (1607-1678) who was a major cultural force in her time, influencing philosophical and religious thought. Thus, feminist scholars have contributed to enlightening women's point of view which was hitherto neglected. The woman's voice can thus be added to the array of facets which make up the total meaning of a work of art or literature.

Trilling's and Lodge's views are a far cry from Marxist analyses such as Raymond Williams provides. Although it is true that all these lines of thought acknowledge that literature and society are related, Williams, drawing upon Marxist ideas, gives a completely different account of this relation.

Although Marx and Engels wrote only occasional passages on literature, later Marxist theorists have tried to make up for this oversight by their masters. Reading in between the lines of what Marx or Engels did write on the subject, critics such as Lukács have created their own theories. Marx claimed that literature is a mirror of society. Georg Lukács takes this even further

and claims that the novel is "the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today".<sup>5</sup> According to Lukács what literature mainly reflects is the dialectic nature of our society and especially the class struggle between the various social classes. It is not surprising that one of the main novelists discussed by Lukács is Balzac, the nineteenth-century French writer in whose novels there is a very clear distinction between the classes. Whether such an approach would be equally successful when applied to a different period in literature is doubtful. In post-war British literature, for instance, one could speak of a class struggle in the novels by the so-called Angry Young Men (e.g. John Braine, Room at the Top), but in novels by women writers of this period there are no signs of an interest in fighting one's sisters who happen to come from the other end of the social scale.

Terry Eagleton occupies a position which is a development of the traditional Marxist view as personified by Lukács and structuralist thought. John Hall in The Sociology of Literature therefore classifies him as a Marxist structuralist. Eagleton resembles Lukács in that he sees literature as being part of a larger social process, especially the class struggle.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand Eagleton, like Lawrence, makes an exalted claim, namely, that art can provide us with a true view of these social processes. It "begins to move us towards that full understanding of ideology which is scientific knowledge".<sup>7</sup> However, Eagleton, unlike Lawrence, does not think literature can reveal "reality, but to him it reveals ideology".

Raymond Williams developed his own set of ideas within the Marxist perspective. Being an expert on drama, some of his most interesting books and essays are those which deal with the theatre (e.g. Drama From Ibsen to Eliot, 1952), but he has also covered a large number of other subjects. He is more cautious than Lukács when writing about the relation between literature and society, and does not see it as being limited to a portrayal of the dialectic nature of society:

between an enclosed kind of study of a body of writing marked off as 'literature' and a reduced kind of study of political, military, economic and generalized social facts marked off as 'history', there is an important and neglected area of evidence and questions.<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere Raymond Williams is rather more precise: he claims in his book Culture (1981) that the idea of reflection should be replaced by the notion that a text or a work of art is a

mediator between society and imagination. He mentions three ways in which a work of art can be such a mediator. Firstly, mediation by projection - i.e. something is not described directly but projected into an alien world. Secondly, mediation by means of an "objective correlative". This notion was developed by T.S. Eliot who argued that plot, characters and form in general should be made up in such a way that it generates the same emotion which first inspired the artist. Thus the artist and reader end up with the same idea or feeling. Thirdly, mediation as a function of the fundamental social processes of consciousness. This means that the work of art or text illuminates "the nature of a whole epoch, of a particular society at a particular period, or of a particular group within that society at that period".<sup>9</sup> Terry Lovell also stresses its social nature:

art is a social phenomenon ... it is produced and consumed within particular social relations, it depends upon particular social conditions, and has particular social consequences.<sup>10</sup>

Goldmann gives the reason why it is rewarding to adopt a sociological rather than a psychological approach to literature:

The true subjects of cultural creation are, in fact, social groups and not isolated individuals; but the individual creator belongs to the group, often by birth or social position, always by virtue of the objective significance of his work, and occupies in the group a place that may not be decisive, but is certainly privileged.<sup>11</sup>

Goldmann's premise applies to the eight women novelists who will be discussed here, i.e. Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Penelope Mortimer, Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt, Edna O'Brien, and Beryl Bainbridge. It will be shown that these writers, who all belong to a particular social class (white, British, middle-class, female, heterosexual), focused in their novels on the portrayal of the particular problems this social class had at the time. Thus Williams' idea of mediation seems to be the most appropriate one of all the ones discussed above, as it allows for a particular relationship between society and fiction, without assuming that this relationship is a one-to-one relationship, i.e. is pure reflection. Williams' third type of mediation is of special relevance here, for he refers to the fact that this process of mediation takes place in cases where society has a problem in dealing with an issue. According to Williams in this third type of mediation:

certain crises which cannot otherwise be directly apprehended are 'crystallized' in certain direct images and forms of art - images which then illuminate a basic (social and psychological) condition.<sup>12</sup>

This dissertation aims to show that this is precisely what happened in the case of the eight women novelists discussed here. In this case "the crisis" originates from the position of women in society between 1945 and 1968 (see Part I). The women writers were able to transform the problems many women had at the time into fiction, thus "illuminating a basic (social and psychological) condition".

A further purpose of this dissertation is the contradiction of the assumption made by many people that the '50s and early '60s formed above all a "silent" time in which women did not find a voice in which to express their points of view. Many other writers on this period have particularly stressed this difficulty women had in finding a voice in which to express themselves. David Bouchier, for instance, mentions 1968 and the Ford Dagenham strike as the start of the feminist movement in Britain, and writes about the time before 1968:

From the stifling bonds of the Victorian family to the unshackling of women in the First World War and the political triumphs of the suffragettes in the 1920s, women's lives had come almost full circle. Depression and renewed war had halted their economic and political progress, and after 1945, women had become the victims of a new ideology of domesticity and motherhood which served both to stabilise the damaged social structure and to provide a passive class of consumers for renascent industry.<sup>13</sup>

Thus Bouchier sees women in the '50s and early '60s as brainless consumers. Others give a similarly depressing impression of this period. Elizabeth Wilson in her study Only Halfway to Paradise emphasizes the "silence" of these decades, e.g.:

my main intention has been to describe how a particular coincidence of economic and political forces in that period created a 'culture'... in which it was difficult to articulate or to know about any oppression of women.<sup>14</sup>

And: "The most significant things about women were not said at all, but were represented by a silence".<sup>15</sup>

It certainly was difficult for women in the period 1945 to 1968 to find an appropriate means of expression and Williams' condition for his third type of mediation that "direct apprehension" of the crisis should be problematic in society also applies here. Yet certain women in society, and the eight women novelists (via Williams' third type of mediation) managed to find a way of expressing themselves between 1945 and 1968. Without underestimating the influence of silence-inducing factors in this period (in particular, those engendered by the concept of

femininity which requires women to be passive and compliant, cf. Part I Chapter IV), this dissertation aims to show that the period 1945 to 1968 was not as silent as it is often made out to be. Various texts such as newspapers, magazines, memoirs, sociological studies and novels by women writers will be examined to show that there is evidence of the existence of a female voice, that is, the expression of the dissatisfaction women felt with their situation at the time.

More and more evidence is coming to light of how women manage to speak up, Michelene Wandor has compiled a book containing the life-stories of many British and American women who are now professional writers and journalists, who relate their struggle to find a voice. Cora Kaplan's contribution is particularly illuminating. She writes how at the early age of 11 months she spoke her first words, and how she has had the strong desire to speak out ever since:

This first gratifying experience of public speaking ... seemed to set a pattern which allowed me the courage forever to break through the patriarchal convention that enjoined women to deferential silence.<sup>16</sup>

One of the first means of expression she tried was acting. Coincidentally, this was also tried by two of the novelists under discussion here, that is, Margaret Drabble and Beryl Bainbridge. Interestingly, several of the other novelists have shown a similarly strong desire for expression and have chosen "vocal" professions next to writing novels, especially teaching/lecturing (e.g. Murdoch, Byatt).

Although nobody before has interpreted the work of these post-war women writers in the way it is done here, other critics have adopted a similar attitude when discussing other writers. Bobbye G. An in his article "Contemporary Novels: A Reflection of Contemporary Culture" analyzes the work of the American writers Bellow, Malamud, Vonnegut, Styron and Updike in relation to the specific problems of contemporary American culture. He argues that Bellow's main theme, "the discovery and affirmation of the self",<sup>17</sup> is not such a surprising one when seen in the context of American society in which almost everybody is an immigrant. Another example is Vera Brittain who in Lady into Woman (chap. 14) discusses the relationship between women writers and the women's movement until the time of publication, i.e. 1953. She shows, for instance, that women writers have furthered the cause of the women's movement in at least three ways. A first group of writers showed that women could achieve success by doing what they wanted, writing, without letting themselves be hampered by men. A second group of writers dealt

in their writing specifically with the problems of life for women (e.g. Woolf, West). And a last group of writers have just by chronicling events provided an accurate picture of "the sheer process of change".<sup>18</sup>

Whether the nature of the relationship between contemporary British women writers and the women's liberation movement is similar to what Vera Brittain describes is one of the questions which have to be answered in the following pages.

There is one critic, Elaine Showalter, who also sees contemporary women writers as a group with their own characteristics. She does not, however, relate them to "a particular group within that society at that period", that is, relate them to the contemporary social and historical situation, as will be done below, but she views them in relation to previous generations of women writers. To her women writers throughout the ages form a subculture and therefore show the same characteristics as other subcultures. Showalter defends her choice thus, stressing above all the positive nature of this approach:

One of the great advantages of the women's-culture model is that it shows how the female tradition can be a positive source of powerlessness; it can generate its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition.<sup>19</sup>

It is worth noting that Showalter takes a rather pessimistic point of view, not recognizing the power women have shown, only their "powerlessness".

Groups of subjected people tend to go through three phases in their development towards independence. In her book on women writers, A Literature of Their Own, Showalter uses this assumption as her starting-point and divides the tradition of women writers in three phases. Firstly, there is the imitation of the dominant culture (the feminine phase in Showalter's terms, 1840s-1880). Secondly, a phase of rebellion which she calls feminist (1880-1920). Lastly a phase of self-discovery, "a turning inward freed from some of the dependancy on opposition".<sup>20</sup> This last phase is subdivided into the female aesthetic period, when novelists like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf tried to create a special female form (1920-1960), and a post-1960 female phase in which the women novelists, according to Showalter, enter a new phase of self-awareness. Showalter clearly thinks this last phase the most laudable. It is most of all in this phase that women writers do not merely conform to cultural expectations, but make their own

creative contribution to literature as women.

Although the female phase should indeed show the triumph of Showalter's theory it is above all in this phase that her theory encounters serious problems. Perhaps she realized this herself, because she devoted only 21 pages to contemporary novelists, whose complex situation would certainly have warranted some more attention.

Showalter's discussion of contemporary novelists appears to be rather paradoxical in several respects. She argues that in the female phase novelists enter "a new stage of self-awareness" - a suitably vague and problematic phrase. Most of the women writers who according to her belong to this phase started writing, not in 1960, but shortly after the Second World War. Doris Lessing's first novels, to mention one example, do not show less of a remarkable insight into women's lives than her post-1960 novels. It is not 1960, but the end of the war which seems to herald the arrival of a new brand of writers. Also, when she mentions the concept of self-awareness she seems to refer to the fact that women novelists come close to attaining their independence from their subjection to a male culture. Yet her analysis of, for instance, Drabble shows that she resembles and draws upon previous generations of women, nineteenth-century feminine women novelists, in particular.<sup>21</sup> And, thus following Showalter's analysis, she should, like the feminine writers, also be subjected to male culture. One cannot but conclude that Showalter's theory is self-contradictory. Furthermore, what apparently is so striking in Showalter's eyes hardly seems to be a novel development, for women writers in the past have often made use of the achievements of their female and also male predecessors. It would be difficult for any author not to do this to some extent. Even the most individualistic genius has to make use of, for example, forms or themes which others have explored before. Indeed this seems to be a common feature of literature in general as T.S. Eliot has shown in his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent".

The problem is that Showalter only highlights those characteristics which are particularly relevant to her case, but which are not necessarily the most distinguishing features of the group of post-war women writers she deals with. Of course it is true that contemporary women novelists are similar to previous women writers. A case in point is their use of various forms of irony, something to which Showalter does not refer to at all. A comparison of Jane Austen, Muriel Spark

and Iris Murdoch, for instance, would be interesting in this respect. Yet it is also true that they resemble their male contemporaries, especially in their use of realism. Almost all post-war British male and female novelists make use of the traditional realist form of the novel. Finally, Showalter does not refer to the individual interests each writer has which fall outside any male or female tradition. Although Doris Lessing's early novels generally have a white female protagonist who has the point of view, the novels also show a deeper concern with race relations for which it is difficult to decide whether it is a typical male or female characteristic. It seems to be an interest which is not destined to be bound to the sex of the author at all. These are all matters which need some further attention and they are among the issues which will be discussed below.

When a comparison is made of a large number of contemporary British female novelists, it will become clear that they have much more significant factors in common than the way in which their work resembles earlier women writers. The most striking of these features are related more to contemporary social and cultural developments than to the past. These developments are characterised by a turning away from previously accepted standards and rules of behaviour, particularly in the '60s and '70s. Arthur Marwick calls these developments in his book British Society Since 1945 the opening up of "the roads to freedom". Certain movements such as the students' movement, peace movement, civil rights' movement, and the women's movement played a crucial role in attaining these new freedoms. The novels by the British women writers under discussion here seem to voice some of the concerns which were later to be part of the women's movement. Both women novelists and "real life" women show an impatience with the feminine role prescribed in a particularly strict way for women in '50s. Doris Lessing, for instance, in her interest in the position of women in present day society in Martha Quest (1952) paves the way for the women's liberation movement. There are numerous examples which can be found in the work of the eight British women novelists discussed here. Margaret Drabble's interest in motherhood also reflects a particularly topical issue in the day and age when many women struggled to combine career and children and often in the mean time forgot about the man in their lives (e.g. in The Millstone the man is conveniently gay).

It has to be concluded that Showalter's analysis does not lead to a very satisfactory interpretation of the novels of post-war women writers. It is even questionable whether it is useful

at all to consider women novelists as a subculture. Firstly, it can be argued that during several periods in literary history women novelists actually wrote the most interesting and widely appreciated novels, that is, formed the mainstream in novel writing: a male counterpart of Jane Austen has not been found yet, let alone one who surpasses her. And Dale Spender in Mothers of the Novel argues that the novel form was actually invented by women. Secondly, Lovell in Consuming Fiction argues that in one woman writer both acceptance and rejection of the dominant culture can be found. She mentions Mrs Gaskell, who adhered in many ways to the domestic ideology but who in her writing also explored the limitations and contradictions of domesticity. Lovell says: "the ideology set the terms within or against which women had to negotiate their sexed identity and their social relationships".<sup>22</sup> As we will see, the ideology of domesticity of the feminine mystique, as Friedan called the dominant ideology in the post-war period, also functioned in this way for the women writers to be discussed here. In their novels these writers portray female characters who have difficulty living within the feminine mystique, and who can only be truly fulfilled if they step outside this ideology and follow their own ideas. The rebellion against the feminine mystique in these novels often takes the form of rebellion against marriage: e.g. "It was not the voice of Mary, the individual (who after all really did not care so much about the bath or whether the native stayed or went), but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that" (GS, p. 83). Work is seen as positive and, perhaps unrealistically so, as the main road to self-gratification. The novels reflect the writers' own experiences: most are divorced, but have found fulfilment in their work. Finally, the term "subculture" Showalter favours also implies a degree of self-conscious opposition to or at least a difference from the mainstream and dominant culture, and this is not the case in all women novelists.

It will perhaps be more rewarding to adopt a more complex approach and regard male and female novelists as equals, responding to certain developments in society in a way which does vary depending on, among other things, gender, social background, or individual interests.<sup>23</sup> Sometimes, as in the post-1945 period, gender difference becomes the significant distinguishing factor and male novelists go their way and translate their desire for freedom in the formation of The Angry Young Men, and some women novelists try to free themselves from social constraints

by providing in their writing overwhelming evidence of the problems and stresses involved in being a woman in post-war Britain.

Finally, it has to be mentioned again that Showalter has paid but little effective attention to the eight post-war writers to be discussed here. No one else has produced a detailed comparative study of their lives and work and role in society either. One of the objects of this thesis is to make good this omission.

Part I, *British Society 1945-1968*, is concerned with the most important post-war socio-historical developments. The focus is on how demands at work and in the family create tensions for women. There is a historical limit: 1945-1968. 1945 has been chosen because it is the end of the Second World War, and 1968 is generally seen as the year in which the women's liberation movement first broke through in Britain. Pre-1968 issues of The Listener, New Society, The Guardian, and various women's magazines, will be discussed to get an impression of how women's grievances about their roles at work and in the family were dealt with in the media.

In Part III, *Female Fiction 1945-1968*, it will be shown that many of the concerns of feminists in society after 1968 already take up an important place in pre-1968 novels by British women novelists. In this respect these women novelists could be said to be part of a group of avant-garde writers and activists of mainly middle-class backgrounds, e.g. Vera Brittain, Dora Russell and Mary Stott, who before 1968 argued the impossibility of the demands placed upon women. It is therefore not surprising that we can see that some of the same issues which concerned these activists can also be found in the fiction of this group of women writers. By providing a feminist reading of these texts, by linking the issues which concerned the activists and the novels of these women writers, we can come to an illuminating interpretation of these texts. Issues such as the myth of the idea of femininity and the conflicting demands of the functions of mother, wife and worker are just as crucial in these novels as they were in society (cf. Part I). These issues have therefore been selected for detailed discussion. It will also be shown that it is above all where these issues are concerned that this group of novels by British women writers stands apart from all other contemporary fiction.

Part II deals with the authors themselves. The group discussed is basically the one Showalter identifies in A Literature of Their Own, that is, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Iris

Murdoch, Muriel Spark, A.S. Byatt, Penelope Mortimer, and Beryl Bainbridge. Edna O'Brien has been added because, as will become clear, she belongs to this group of writers, although Showalter in her apparent preference for English writers rather than ones with a more widely British background omits her.

Of course these eight writers form but a fraction of the women writers who were writing at the time. Space limitations prevent a discussion of all the writers who were writing in a similar vein, and thus the discussion will have to remain restricted to this core of eight writers, who by Showalter, by the reading public, and by contemporary critics have been identified as the core. These writers have had the most response judging from, for instance, sales (many reprints in paperback of their books written in this period) and the number of reviews written (reviews of these novels came out in most major publications - see e.g. II.2 The Reception Process). These writers do not form a group in the traditional sense, in that they are part of a closed set of people. Rather they are part of a network of like minded women who were working in several fields (also sociology, e.g. Gavron, Klein) and voiced women's dissatisfaction with their position.

A comparison will be made of the social background of the writers and their careers. Unlike their male contemporaries most of these women writers come from a rather comfortable background. Interviews will be referred to to find out how they themselves view their position in society and their position as women and writers. In Part II we will see that the social background of these writers is very clear-cut: they are all British white middle-class heterosexual women. And it is also the specific experience of this group which forms the basis of their fiction. It was only after the '60s that, for instance, black and lesbian writers would be published. The limitedness of the social background of these writers, however, proved at the time to be an advantage - for, these novelists indeed managed to get their books published, which rather more controversial writers would certainly have found more difficult at the time. Their more advantageous social position made it easier for them to have access to publishers and generally eased the whole process of writing (see for example the renting of "a room of one's own" to write in by Bainbridge and others).

It is important to bear the social background of these writers in mind specifically when they are seen in the context of the whole feminist movement, which was in Britain initially also a mainly

middle-class affair. Michèle Barrett:

It is undoubtedly the case that - certainly in the early years of the present movement - feminist political struggle was disproportionately engaged in by women who were highly educated.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, in Britain middle-class women were both in literature and in society the first who were able to find a voice to express their grievances. But, as Barrett also rightly shows, the feminist movement has since moved away from being entirely middle-class and women's literature has also become far less restricted in its outlook. Yet, apparently, in the immediate post-war period only middle-class women were able to take the first step on the road to women's liberation. The middle-class background of these writers is perhaps responsible for the fact that these writers were not as overtly political and radical as later writers, who were often working class or black. These eight writers all led relatively comfortable lives and did not want or need the radical approach later writers advocated. Yet, these early writers deserve recognition for the fact that they were able to open up the discussion (precisely because of their middle-classness and easier access to institutions which were at the time still dominated by traditional ideas, e.g. publishing houses, the media) and pave the way for more radical ideas to come.

Barrett claims that women have much in common, and that the division between the classes is not as great as it might have been expected to be. She argues that in capitalist society all women are burdened with the same responsibilities. "Male employment is predicated upon the assumption that domestic and childcare responsibilities are unimportant for them, and this holds true in all classes."<sup>25</sup> Cora Kaplan argues, like Barrett, that this basic situation is the same for all women. In an essay on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem Aurora Leigh she mentions nineteenth century society's being "committed to the absolute necessity of maintaining social control over females, and its corollary, the sexual division of labour."<sup>26</sup> This common denominator might be an explanation for the fact that the novels of these 8 writers although so decidedly British, middle-class and post-war, are still being read by many women from many different backgrounds all over the world. A further case in point is the recent publication of several collections of international short stories by women writers, for example, Hermione Lee's The Secret Self (1985) and especially Close Company: Stories of Mothers and Daughters (1987). In the latter collection stories by writers with an enormous variety in social, and class, background (e.g. Colette, Zhang

Jie, a Chinese factory worker, and Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian) combine quite naturally to form a thematic whole. It is interesting to see how close these stories are to each other in their approach to the theme of mothers and daughters. Mothers and daughters apparently mean virtually the same all over the world - especially the socializing function the mother has and the effect this has on the daughter who knows she will be a mother one day, stands out as an almost universal concern.

All in all, this dissertation aims to provide a feminist reading of certain texts which have not been read in this way before. The legitimacy of such an approach is supported by recent feminist theory, as found in the work of, for instance, Mary Jacobus. As she writes in Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism:

More recently, feminist criticism has concerned itself with the woman reader - with woman as the producer of her own system of meanings; meanings that may challenge or subvert patriarchal readings and undo the traditional hierarchy of gender.<sup>27</sup>

Kolodny substitutes the concept of reading anew with the term "re-visionism". Like Jacobus, however, she sees this exercise of reappreciation as all important:

What Rich and other feminist critics intended by that 're-visionism' has been the subject of this essay ... it would allow us to appreciate the variety of women's literary expression, ... to read the world, our literary texts, and even one another anew.<sup>28</sup>

This dissertation provides a new reading of the writing produced by women in the '50s and early '60s - by emphasizing the way in which it formed a convincing female voice in times which are often seen as being marked by silence. The texts will be discussed in relation to expressions of dissatisfaction of middle-class women which could be found in society at the time, but which are generally overlooked. The specific forms these expressions of discontent took (e.g. letters to The Guardian) will be discussed in Part I Chapter IV, below.

Dale Spender in Mothers of the Novel provides an interesting insight into the first women critics who attempted to introduce a new way of reading. They differed from their male colleagues in that they placed "almost as much emphasis on the life of the writer as on the text" - according to Spender it is "refreshing and rewarding to see a woman's circumstances and the conditions in which the writing was undertaken accorded almost as much attention as the writing

itself".<sup>29</sup> However, the fate of these first "new readers" was rather unfortunate:

They have linked themselves with the women writers not simply by their efforts to assess the quality of women's work - but by coming to share much the same fate as the women they wrote about: oblivion.<sup>30</sup>

Lovell has a possible explanation for the neglect of these writers. Because these women writers were addressing mainly women readers and discussing women's issues, they were neglected when literature became a 'respectable' male business in the nineteenth century.

Jacobus distinguishes between Anglo-American criticism (e.g. Showalter) and French criticism (e.g. Cixous, Kristeva). Anglo-American criticism, according to Jacobus, assumes that "one can with a little extra labor identify a woman's text, a woman reader, the essence of female culture".<sup>31</sup> French criticism, writes Jacobus, "asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of the sex".<sup>32</sup> Jacobus summarizes both standpoints - the American view supposes the question: Is there a woman in this text? and the French point of view demands: Is there a text in this woman?<sup>33</sup> Both approaches have had some interesting results over the past years, with the American one resulting especially in empirical studies which try to distinguish the specific female quality of a text (e.g. Ellen Moers, Literary Women; Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic), and the French one resulting in an emphasis on the production of texts, and the encouragement thereof (through, for instance, the foundation of the magazine des femmes en mouvements).

Here the concern is with both aspects, that is, with the woman in the text as well as with the text in the woman. Attention is paid in Part III to what are argued to be specifically female aspects of the novels. The women in these texts have, for instance, problematic family relationships, which are caused by the impossible demands placed upon women in their position as family member (cf. Part III Chapter II). In Part II the dissertation focuses on the production process, with specific reference to the process through which these women managed to produce published texts. This question is particularly interesting in the case of these eight women novelists, because of the silence-inducing factors which were omnipresent in the so-called "feminine fifties". Rita Felski in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics has stressed the importance for feminist criticism to "relate the literary text to its conditions of production and reception".<sup>34</sup> According to Felski it is only when a text is seen in the context of its conditions of production and reception that it obtains its

full meaning: "Writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice which creates meaning rather than merely communicating it; feminist literature does not reveal an already given female identity, but is itself involved in the construction of this self as a cultural reality."<sup>35</sup> The novels under discussion here constructed a new female identity, and that was perhaps the reason why many of the initial reviewers were so puzzled by the novels (cf. also II.2 The Reception Process, below).

**PART I**

**BRITISH SOCIETY 1945-1968**

# CHAPTER I

## CHANGES IN BRITAIN 1945-1968

Britain emerged from the Second World War as one of its victors, and the euphoric feeling of hope and optimism pervaded British society until 1968. The 1951 Festival of Britain was one of the products of this feeling. A positive atmosphere prevailed on the home front in spite of various political and economic setbacks. A paradoxical situation lay at the basis of post-war British society until 1968: there was a general feeling of optimism and the idea that progress was doing away with pre-war anomalies, but if one looks below the surface one can see clear signs that all was not well with Britain.

The loss of its former pride, India, in 1947 was an indication of Britain's fading political influence abroad. More and more colonies followed suit until the Colonial Office was abolished in 1966. Hereafter the British ministry dealing with foreign matters was, however, not just known as the "Ministry of Foreign Affairs". The term "Commonwealth" was inserted to show that Britain could not quite part with its fond remembrance of things past, and Britain maintained strong economic ties with its former colonies. Britain did not realize yet that it would be wise to find strength in unity with equals: although the European Coal and Steel Community was formed in 1951, Britain only joined what was by then called the European Community in 1973.<sup>1</sup>

30 October 1956 is another date which shows the decline of the British Empire. During the Suez crisis Britain wrongly assumed that it still had the stamina of a world-power. However, its military stewardship was letting it down. The attempt of Britain and France to intervene in Middle Eastern politics misfired and the European powers had to withdraw. In the book Guilty Men, 1957 Michael Foot and Mervyn Jones blame the Tory party for this debacle, rather than Britain as a nation. They refer to the vote in parliament on the matter during which the Labour MPs voted against intervention. This vote was won by the Tory party.<sup>2</sup> Although they point their accusing fingers at the Tories, the rest of the world did not see that the landing crafts arriving in Suez were Tory rather than British ones. The role of international umpire and meddler in other people's affairs was slowly but surely taken over by the Americans. They could infiltrate into, for instance,

a Vietnamese civil war, without much opposition, on the pretext of protecting their own interests. In August 1964, after a US destroyer was attacked by the North Vietnamese, President Johnson was given a mandate by Congress to provide open military support to South Vietnam. It was only many years later that America was to lose as much respect over Vietnam as Britain did over Suez.

Next to having political and military problems, Britain appeared to miss out on the economic front. Although it, like the rest of the world, experienced an economic boom, affluence seemed to come to Britain later and in a weakened form in comparison with America and European countries such as Germany. The main problem was that Britain, despite having won the war, was not at all well off financially. It had enormous war debts to America for material received (£3,000 million), its export was one third of the pre-war level, and domestic capital had also decreased enormously.<sup>3</sup> On the face of it Germany was even worse off at the end of the war, with all its major cities destroyed, all its top civil servants and politicians imprisoned and awaiting trial, and the German mark a non-convertible currency. Germany made a remarkably quick recovery ("Wirtschaftswunder") under the leadership of Konrad Adenauer and with the help of all the dollars the Americans were prepared to pay through the Marshall Plan to keep the communists at bay. In 1950 while in Britain most articles of clothing and food were still rationed (food-rationing stopped in 1954), Honor Tracy described the new capital of Germany, Bonn, as follows:

The shops are full of everything anyone could possibly want: bulging sausages, mountains of meat, piles of chocolate, much of it English, nylon stockings (English again or American), and handbags and clothes and luxury goods of every kind.<sup>4</sup>

To restore the atrocious state of the balance of payments Britain adopted the policy of exporting goods abroad which the people themselves could hardly do without. Tale-telling is this example of a "Recipe for the Housewife" printed in the same Listener as Honor Tracy's account of her visit to Bonn.

Protein from Little Meat

Here there are some of the ways in which I use extra protein foods to make attractive meals ... When you can spare an egg to beat in, do so.<sup>5</sup>

## I.1 One Side of the Coin ...

In spite of the above-mentioned loss of international political power and initial economic hardships there seemed to have been very little obvious dissatisfaction at home. Instead there was the happiness of having won the war and people had hopes of a more egalitarian society, which resulted in an enormous Labour victory in 1945. This was Labour's first absolute majority in history. The soldiers who had fought abroad and the women who had worked hard at home did not want to return to the same society they had left behind in 1939. The electorate realized that although Churchill had been excellent as a war leader, the Labour Party would be more inclined to bring about social change along the lines of the 1942 Beveridge Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services. The social change which was taking place is reflected in the legislation which was passed in the period. It seemed as if a more egalitarian society was really coming into existence, judging by the number of acts with a social bias which were passed. The 1944 Education Act, still installed under Churchill's rule, marks the beginning of the reforming laws. In 1946 the National Health Service came into existence. Thus free medical treatment was provided for everybody. In 1949 a Legal Aid Act was passed which made it possible for people to have a divorce even if they could not afford legal assistance. All through the '50s discussions in society and parliament were held about the possible introduction of further liberalizing laws concerning abortion, homosexuality and divorce. The Abortion Act and an act making homosexual contacts between consenting adults legal were finally ratified in 1967. The Divorce Reform Act was introduced in 1969. The death penalty was abolished in the Murder Act of 1965.

All in all, because of the long stretches of Labour government, 1945-1951 and 1964-1970, and the strength of the Labour Party during Conservative governments, the emphasis was on state interference with social issues. Again the thought was that this policy could not fail to bring about a more egalitarian society. New towns were built and suburbs extended under government schemes to solve the housing shortage after the war as quickly as possible (e.g. 1947 Town and Country Planning Act). Nationalization of various industries, e.g. coal and steel, took place with the idea that a management controlled by the government would be better for the workforce than a management which owes allegiance to a capitalist individual. The 1946 National Insurance Act made a start with the idea that the state would have to provide adequately for the sick, the poor,

people with more than two children (family allowances payable to the mother) and the old. The 1965 Redundancy Payments Act took care that no person who was involuntarily unemployed would have to go without an income. The general governing principle was that those who were better off would have to pay more to the state and those who were worse off would receive more. By the time the Conservative government of Churchill took over again in 1951 many of these welfare state principles were established in law and in practice, and the Conservative policy did not differ significantly from Labour in this respect. In the view of Arthur Marwick the people in '50s and '60s were benefiting from government policies:

The British were reaping the fruits of compromise between collectivist welfare, sponsored by Labour and accepted by Conservatives, and the element of free enterprise and respect for the consumer fostered by the Conservatives.<sup>6</sup>

At first sight, there were indeed indications that Britain was economically healthy. It was not only an effective government policy which gave the country to some extent an air of well-being and prosperity in the late '50s and '60s. There was a world-wide economic boom which after the initial post-war hiccups also broke through in Britain. There was a great demand for consumer goods. First of all, goods which were destroyed by the Second World War had to be replaced. Secondly, great progress was made in technical innovations, which were used especially for the production on a mass scale of new household goods such as televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, and cars. In 1956 only 8% of British households owned a refrigerator, in 1967 this was 33% and in 1971 69%. Televisions were a novelty in the 1940s but by 1961 75% of British families owned one. In 1965 9,131,000 people owned a car.<sup>7</sup> Even though consumerism took off less quickly than in America, these figures are still remarkable. And they show the validity of Kenneth Galbraith's description of the affluent society. More and more people were able to afford a comfortable life-style and even the working classes were not doomed any more to the poor houses to which they were eternally condemned by the economic theories of Malthus and Adam Smith. The combination of a consumer economy and Labour social policy distributed wealth among a larger number of people and this prosperity was no longer obtained by working in conditions and for wages unfit for human beings. Galbraith's condemnation of public squalor and private wealth had been put in practice successfully. Innovations created a lot of clean jobs and rising production made it possible for workers to

obtain more than adequate wages. Even when taking inflation into account most people became a lot better off in real terms. Prices rose 15% between 1955 and 1960, and 63% between 1955 and 1969. But average incomes rose thus: 1951 £8.30 per week, 1961 £15.35, 1966 £20.30, 1968 £23.00, i.e. between 1951 and 1968 by almost 300%.<sup>8</sup>

One reason for the increase in wages was the fact that there was full employment, i.e. demand exceeded supply on the labour market. Firstly, this was caused by the large demands for goods and services. Secondly, the shortage of labour was also caused by a faltering supply. The school leaving age was raised to 15 in 1944, and later to 16. Also pupils tended to stay in education longer of their own free will. The 1944 Education Act had made it possible for them to gain easier access to different forms of higher education.

Immigration helped to relieve part of the overstrained labour market. In the 1950s and 1960s 25,000 Irish people per year immigrated to Britain. About 1 million people from Britain's ex-colonies who had Commonwealth passports and could therefore enter the country quite easily settled in Britain.<sup>9</sup> Most of the people took on the lowest paid jobs which were vacated by the British people themselves who became more and more educated and were therefore able to take on better positions. The social mobility which became possible for a large number of British citizens through better education did not generally extend to these immigrants.

The unions on the whole did not abuse the power they had as possessors of that valuable commodity: labour. In the 1950s they displayed "remarkable responsibility and exercised considerable constraint".<sup>10</sup> Even the wage-freeze introduced by Harold Wilson in 1966, necessary to cool down the high inflation and unhealthy balance of payments and to rescue the pound, was, be it grudgingly, accepted by the TUC. However, one of the signs that all people were not as satisfied as they were supposed to be was the large number of strikes in the period. In 1965 the Donovan Royal Commission to investigate the position of the trade-unions was appointed. The government was not worried about the strikes because it wanted to find out what the grievances of the people were. No, the problem with the strikes was that they caused an even further lack of trust in the pound which was losing more and more value against other currencies. The Seamen's Strike (1966) and the Dock Strike (1967) were particularly bad for Britain's exports and general trade. In an effort to stop the strikes Barbara Castle, the Employment Secretary,

went even further than Donovan proposed, and produced a White Paper, In Place of Strife, in 1968, introducing measures intended to curb future strikes through a ballot of members in cases of impending strikes and the possibility of controlling strikes by means of the law. The TUC refused to approve this bill. In 1969 Harold Wilson and Barbara Castle managed to make a narrow escape out of this deadlock when the TUC General Council gave them the promise that member unions would not support unofficial strikes. This promise was rather empty, since the leadership had no means of imposing anything like this on their member unions, but Wilson and Castle could at least pretend that they had come to some agreement with the unions.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to see what the actual workers themselves thought about the changes which affected their lives. Most of the contemporary studies stress the satisfaction the workers felt. In 1961 F. Zweig researched the changes in values and customs of working-class men. The results of his survey were that 85% of his sample of men owned a television and 29% a washing machine.<sup>12</sup> In fact, these acquisitions fitted in very well with the trend of "family-mindedness and home-centredness" which Zweig noted among these men.<sup>13</sup> They hardly seemed to be interested in politics, let alone the class struggle. They were more interested in saving so that they could buy their own house and so that they could give their children a decent education. In fact he concluded that the working classes seemed to be taking over values which were up to then considered to be purely middle-class. In this he noticed a significant difference with the previous generation. The typical man seems to Zweig to become "more and more of a homemaker allround, much more than his father was".<sup>14</sup> The men seemed to be spending their new riches on more ulterior aspects such as the home and the children, rather than private pursuits such as visits to the pub or cigarettes.

For the middle classes too there was some change on the job front. Not so much perhaps in the amount of money earned - the professions were always and are still held in high esteem and relatively well-paid - as in the nature of the work to be done. Because of the coming into existence of the welfare state new kinds of jobs were created. Work which used to be done by volunteers and was regarded as charity was now taken over by paid professional workers such as social workers. Also, many new service sector jobs were created, especially white collar jobs. In spite of the supposed material well-being of people, difficulties were numerous. Psychiatrists

and therapists were in great demand to try and guide people towards happiness. Another middle-class profession which was in demand was teaching. This was mainly due to a steady increase in population. Shortly after the war there was a "baby boom", with a peak in 1947, caused by people being united after the war. Hereafter the birth rate continued to rise through the '50s and '60s, because people married earlier and more babies survived because of improved medical care. The birth rate only became lower again in the '70s. The result was that the population of the U.K. grew by about 10% between 1951-1975.<sup>15</sup> Added to that the aforementioned extension of the school leaving age and the stimulation to attend higher education, it becomes clear that there was a real need for more and more teachers. Crash courses and retraining courses were started to try and solve the problem.

The quest for greater material wealth went hand in hand with the desire for personal expression and happiness. This for instance became apparent in a turning-away from the traditional spiritual guidance provided by the established churches. Some people started to look towards non-western philosophies for explanations. Furthermore, the idea was that a wider and more satisfactory perspective on life could be obtained when "high" on soft, and later, hard drugs. Whereas in the nineteenth century cocaine and morphine had only been available to the privileged few, in the sixties marijuana became easily available to many.

One of the most striking effects of the search for personal happiness was in the area of sex. In the fifties Victorian standards were still the norm: women were supposed to be virgins on their wedding day and sex was not talked about openly, only performed in private with as its main purpose the production of children. Unlike women, men benefited from the double standard which allowed them to have one or two adventures before (and during) marriage. Various American studies such as the Kinsey reports (cf. below, Chapter III) which recorded sexual habits and problems made a start with bringing sex out in the open and under discussion. Sexual happiness became all important in the sixties, even if this meant having pre-marital or extra-marital sex. Dozens of books and booklets were produced to show how sexual satisfaction could be achieved by both men and women. For women it became less risky to have sexual experiences because of improved methods of contraception. The pill was invented in America in 1954, but it was not until the sixties that it became widely used in Britain. In 1968 husbands

valued something completely different in their wives from what they claimed to appreciate most in 1951, which was "the possession of appropriate feminine skills".<sup>16</sup>

Marwick sees the change of attitude towards sex as part of a so-called "Cultural Revolution", which was supposedly taking place:

The characteristics of the Cultural Revolution I take to be: self-expression, participation, joy and release from social controls which had held British society in thrall since Victorian times; more directly, this meant dislocation, though not destruction or transformation, of class, of race, of relations between the sexes, and between the youthful and the middle-aged; above all it meant a new style in which Britain genuinely led the world in many aspects of creative endeavour.<sup>17</sup>

In the late '50s and '60s the young were large in number and had more purchasing power than any working-class generation before or after them. It is therefore not surprising that they were the main instigators of the cultural changes. The young working-class male first showed his power and his determination to be different from the establishment in the early fifties in his disguise as "Teddy Boy". They continued to develop their own taste, in for instance music, which influenced the whole culture of the "swinging sixties". These young people liked Rock and Roll music and thus a vogue for popmusic was born, especially after the Bill Haley tour of 1957. The Beatles were of course the most important British contribution to this phenomenon. Originally poor Liverpoolians themselves, they personified the rise of the young worker. Role models were also successful soccer players and other professional sportsmen, who again often came from modest backgrounds and suddenly became millionaires because they possessed a particular skill which their peer group admired (e.g. George Best).

In addition to music, fashion was also geared towards the likes and dislikes of teenagers in the sixties. The reason was that "the 15-19 age group, which had constituted a tiny fraction of the buying market in the mid-fifties, accounted for almost 50 percent of all clothes bought".<sup>18</sup> One of the most striking signs of this development was the introduction of the mini-skirt in 1965. This is a type of dress showing the influence of the young and beautiful. It is not something which can be worn without physical discomfort by a sixty-year old. Yet the idea of youth dominated society so much that even elderly women wore rather short skirts by the end of the '60s. Britain was a trendsetter in the world of fashion with designers such as Mary Quant, boutiques such as Biba, and for the fashion-conscious male, Carnaby Street. The aim was to look as young and slender

as possible. This led to extremes such as models like Twiggy, whose skinny body and child-like face became an ideal for mature women to imitate. On the other hand some aspects of fashion made life more comfortable for women. For the first time in history it became acceptable for women to wear trousers on almost any occasion. Tights were invented in 1960, and they took the place of the awkward stockings and suspender belts.

In the late sixties an up and coming group which expressed their own identity through the clothes they wore were the hippies. They were influenced by American groups of young people who "pursued a policy of anti-fashion. Clothes were thrown together at random, their colours clashing wildly. It represented a deliberate challenge to the ideals of consumerism".<sup>19</sup> They were not only anti-consumerism, but anti everything western society had achieved. Ironically, they were the ultimate result of the optimism which started after the Second World War: the successes were not enough for them and they wanted an even freer and more egalitarian society than had come into existence. Their answer to the slogan "You have never had it so good" was that it should be even better. They organized mass demonstrations and sit-ins to stress their point.

Changes were taking place in the arts and literature, too. They did not start immediately after the war, however. As there was a shortage of everything in 1945, there also was a shortage of paper. Publishers therefore did not want to waste their precious paper on newfangled books which might not sell. They continued to publish literary classics, and war memoirs, e.g. Churchill's, were also popular. Even after the rationing of paper was abolished, some writers continued to write in the style and on the subjects they had been writing about since the thirties. These novels were often set in country houses and a favourite topic was the loss of childhood innocence. Robert Hewison in In Anger calls this the Mandarin tradition. He mentions Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, and Evelyn Waugh as members of this group. Hewison sees the climate of the Cold War as mainly responsible for the continuing traditionality and lack of experimentation which lasted until well into the fifties. Although the Cold War was less influential in Britain than in America, it still created "an atmosphere in which there was safety in conformity, and no encouragement at all to think freely".<sup>20</sup> In Britain there was a slightly dampened form of

the mass hysteria which could be found in America. Yet J.B. Priestley wrote in 1948 that many people believed "in enormous elaborate plots ... sometimes involving hundreds of people, to kidnap or murder them".<sup>21</sup> Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1948) in which Britain is portrayed as being dominated by the dictatorship of Big Brother also fits in with the Cold War persecution complex.

The first signs that changes were to take place in literature too could be found in the field of poetry. On 1 October 1954 an anonymous article appeared in The Spectator called "In the Movement". It was a discussion of a new group of poets, who were henceforward called Movement poets. Poets such as Philip Larkin, Tom Gunn, and Ted Hughes were "attacking the cult, as they saw it, of post-war neo-romantic poetry and its exclusive bohemian trimmings".<sup>22</sup> The Movement poets used simple and contemporary language and dealt with everyday subjects. A. Alvarez in his introduction to The New Poetry describes the function of the poet as The Movement poets saw it. They want to "show that the poet is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary he is just like the man next door - in fact, he might even be the man next door".<sup>23</sup> The attack on Romanticism is sometimes not performed with the best of taste. In Kingsley Amis's "Something Nasty in the Bookshop", for instance, women poets are, rather arbitrarily, singled out as the main producers of romantic poetry and severely criticized for that. It is only in the last stanza of the poem that Amis makes some room for the inclusion of feelings in poetry.<sup>24</sup> The main anthologies in which the poetry of The Movement is collected are D.J. Enright's Poets of the 1950s and Robert Conquest's New Lines (1956).

Another characteristic of The Movement poets is that they are interested in their audience and have a specific audience in mind while writing poetry. This audience, like most of the poets themselves, originally came from a lower middle-class background but has since advanced in the world.<sup>25</sup>

The next change took place rather suddenly in the theatre. John Osborne's play Look Back in Anger, first performed in May 1956, set the new trend. In it a young man, Jimmy Porter, voices his anger with the rest of the world in no uncertain terms. He makes a "political and cultural

protest ... against the Bomb, Sunday newspapers, marriage, T.S. Eliot, the Church, and Mummy".<sup>26</sup> This play and others which followed opened the road to a stage career for a whole new group of actors, e.g. Alan Bates, who replaced the previous generation of gentlemanly actors. Before Look Back in Anger the theatre had suffered from a lack of initiative. Shakespeare's plays had been performed for the umpteenth time. Another favourite of the '40s and early '50s, T.S. Eliot, produced plays in the "Mandarin" vein, e.g. The Cocktail Party (1949).

On analogy with the mood expressed in Look Back in Anger some novelists who were first included in The Movement were called "The Angry Young Men". Their novels were a complete reversal of those written before the Second World War. They were consciously anti-modernist. There was no experiment in form whatsoever. The novelists used the traditional nineteenth-century realist form. The experiments of novelists such as John Wain, John Braine, and Kingsley Amis were more in the area of subject matter. As Malcolm Bradbury shows in Possibilities, William Cooper had paved the way for this kind of writing in Scenes from Provincial Life.<sup>27</sup> Like this novel the novels by the so-called Angry Young Men were concerned with everyday life in England, especially in the provinces. A new type of protagonist was introduced who often was a working-class or lower middle-class man who rises in the world (e.g. Room at the Top by John Braine). He is often an anti-hero, like Jim Dixon in Lucky Jim, who is at odds with the world he lives in or who feels somehow outside society (Colin Wilson, The Outsider, 1956). Not surprisingly, the novels often have a university setting: education was one of the major roads into a higher social class, one of the ways up for the ambitious young man. Whether the hero is desperately intent on success, as in Room at the Top, or whether he could not care less, as in Lucky Jim, he always wins the battle with the middle classes and achieves social recognition.

Women in these novels are only seen in relation to the hero and are therefore not very well developed as characters. They are often of a higher class than the men, and personify the status the hero hopes to reach.<sup>28</sup> They are also seen as embodying conventional morals which hinder the hero's wish for freedom. In the last chapter of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning by Alan Sillitoe (1958) the hero feels as if he is being caught in a net like a fish when he thinks of his impending marriage.

Ironically, when the hero has reached the top, he is not always happy. In Room at the Top the hero looks back on his career and regrets a certain innocence and honesty which he lost on the way. George Orwell's Coming up for Air (1939) about a man who returns to his roots in a small village, shows the same sense of loss and can therefore be seen as one of the predecessors of this aspect of the novels by The Angry Young Men.

In 1957 a collection of essays was published called Declaration in which several people associated with the new movement in the arts expressed their opinions. Tom Maschler, the editor, explains that the ideas which these writers have mark a real change in British society: "a number of young and widely opposed writers have burst upon the scene and are striving to change many of the values which have held good in recent years".<sup>29</sup>

## **I.2 Another Side of the Coin ...**

Some of the new ideas and developments of the '50s and early '60s were rather skin-deep. The Angry Young Men, for instance, only seemed to be too eager to join the establishment when they had become famous. The idea which first originated from the hippie movement that the changes in society had not been radical enough was later taken over by others. Towards the end of the sixties and in the seventies sociological studies started to be published in which the myth of a prosperous and satisfied Britain was partly destroyed. It was then shown that underneath the surface of the "swinging sixties" for certain groups of the population some real social problems and hardships were hidden which had not been recognized earlier.

Ken Coates, for example, in Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen (1970) makes a study of two working-class estates in Nottingham and asserts that the symbols of affluence in the fifties and sixties (e.g. washing machines and cars) were so admired that the poverty which still existed was overlooked by most people.<sup>30</sup> He mentions Peter Townsend as one of the first people who rediscovered poverty and who already in 1952 questioned the way in which poverty was measured. In particular Townsend attacked the study by Seebohm Rowntree and G.R. Lavers, Poverty and the Welfare State (1951), for taking too little into account when drawing up their list of necessities against which poverty was measured. Another study mentioned by Coates is Titmuss's Income Distribution and Social Change (1962) which showed that although everybody,

including the working class seemed richer, a real distribution of income between the classes had not taken place.

In a further study made by Peter Townsend together with Brian Abel-Smith in 1965 it was shown that in 1960 7.5 million people, that is 14% of the population, was living in poverty. Of these 7.5 million 3 million were people from families with several children and low wages, 2.5 million pensioners, 750,000 people of families with a disabled parent, and 500,000 of families with an unemployed father.<sup>31</sup> These authors took as the poverty line: 40% above the National Assistance Board scales. This because the National Assistance Board scales seemed to them to be over-stringent. The Board itself apparently realized this because it went on to give further assistance up to 40% over the basic scales.<sup>32</sup>

Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen illustrates the fact that poverty had not disappeared at the end of the sixties (the research took place between 1966-1968), even in an apparently affluent city like Nottingham. A striking example of poverty which was found in the St. Ann's quarter of Nottingham concerns housing:

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		%		%
Lavatory	Inside	9.0	Outside	91.0
Bathroom	Yes	15	No	85
Hot-water system	Yes	45.5	No	54.5

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source: Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen, p. 73.

The authors of the studies propose a national minimum wage which would enable people to support themselves and their families, a more generous system of family allowances, adequate supplementary benefits, and participation in and control over the affairs of the neighbourhood by the people themselves. Later reports argue that solutions will not be so easy to find. Michael Young's Poverty Report, for instance, shows "just how complex even in concept, let alone in action, the task of abolishing poverty is". Yet it also could not "be more worthwhile for a

government to perform".<sup>33</sup> He mentions six relativities between benefits and other factors which should be balanced in such a way that poverty no longer exists. Poor, to him, is anybody whose income is less than 35% of the average earnings in a country.<sup>34</sup> The six relativities he refers to are: relativity of benefits to average earnings, to the national income, to inflation, between the sexes, of children to parents, and the full amount of benefit people are entitled to ought to be claimed. Optimistically, Young predicts that if this course of action is followed poverty could be overcome in five years.<sup>35</sup>

As with poverty, the problematic situation women found themselves in was not generally appreciated. There was some awareness that women often found it difficult to cope (hence the quite substantial amount of studies on e.g. women at work, women as mothers), but the solution was seen in trying to get the women to adjust better to the status quo. Women were just told to be better mothers, for instance, but the function of the role of the mother in society as such was not questioned. There were no proposals for drastic changes in society to accommodate women. The problems women encountered at work and in the family will be focused on extensively in the following chapters below.

One of the early political attempts to do something more thorough and cause a more fundamental change was made by Perry Anderson in 1964 in his article "Origins of the Present Crisis". In it he draws up a list of features of British society of which he strongly disapproves, and which the newly elected Labour government should alter to provide a "new transformation of English society".<sup>36</sup> He attacks Britain for being "archaic" and showing symptoms of decline, i.e.

a torpid economy, a pinched and regressive education, a listless urban environment, a demoralized governing class, a wretched cultural provincialism.<sup>37</sup>

This underground feeling of dissatisfaction grew more and more until it erupted in 1968. In 1968 the students went out on the streets, not only in Britain but all over Europe, with demands for democratization of the education system. The first Civil Rights March was held in Londonderry. There was the first big demonstration against Vietnam on Grosvenor Square, which resulted in violent clashes with the police. 1968 saw one of the worst monetary crises so far. The devaluation of November 1967 did not have the necessary effect and the London Gold Market had to be closed in March to save the pound.<sup>38</sup> One strike followed another and the TUC voted

against further restrictions on wages. Even the building policy of the government seemed to have come to nothing: in East London a complete towerblock collapsed. And in 1968 the women's liberation movement started in Britain. A group of fishermen's wives organized themselves in Hull and demonstrated in favour of improved safety conditions on trawlers. In June sewing machinists at the Ford plant in Dagenham went on strike for equal pay. Both these actions were supported by middle-class women and together they formed the Equal Rights Association.<sup>39</sup>

## CHAPTER II

### WOMEN AND WORK 1945-1968

Life changed for women in the period after the Second World War which is under discussion here. There are two main areas in which these changes were most obvious and which influenced the position of women in society most of all. The first change is the way women's position as a worker changed. Second is the relation between women and the family, which is the subject of Chapter III, below. Jane Lewis sums up the three ways in which life for women changed at home and in the family. Firstly, the rise of the percentage of married women in paid employment, secondly, the rise of the divorce rate, and thirdly the rise of illegitimacy.<sup>1</sup> She argues in her book that only the latter trend was instigated by women themselves, and that the other two were in reaction to social changes, i.e. women thus having but a limited control over their own destiny. It is important to obtain a good insight into the position of women in British society at the time the eight novelists who are the subject of this thesis were writing, for, as we will see in Part II and Part III, below, it is above all when the novels are seen in relation to the society in which they were produced that they obtain a special significance.

During the Second World War women had through necessity become accepted as workers outside the home, especially in munition factories, but also on the land to replace farmers who had been drafted, and as a military back-up at home. Many women joined the Wrens, for instance the writer Barbara Pym, or were employed in intelligence services (decoding messages, etc.). Muriel Spark, for example, worked in the Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office.

After the Second World War all these special war-time activities became unnecessary and women were dismissed from these positions. This did not happen overnight, but was more of a gradual process. The Women's Land Army which had been formed in 1939 to help out on farms where the men were away was only disbanded in 1950. At its peak, in 1943, it contained 77,000 women, but it slowly petered out until 15,000 women were working on farms or sometimes running one single-handedly in 1949.<sup>2</sup>

After the war women were, according to many writers on the subject, expected to be

satisfied again with staying at home and letting the men do the work outside the home. Elizabeth Wilson paraphrases the developments rather aptly: "The theme of 'the housewife's home is her factory' was part of the broader theme of 'homemaking as a career' so popular after the war".<sup>3</sup> The home started to look a bit like a factory indeed with all the new gadgets such as washing machines and mixers which arrived in Britain in the '60s. Women were generally expected to spend the whole day working in their "mini-factories" just like their husbands did in their "real" ones. Housework was clearly thought of as a woman's job, and other options, e.g. dividing the work between various family members, were hardly considered. According to Wilson there had been the idea shortly after the Second World War of starting an extensive social services network to take over domestic chores from women. But this did not get off the ground at all.

The full implementation of the welfare state after the war foundered on the inability of the state to make provisions for domestic work. As a Daily Telegraph journalist put it in 1956: 'the welfare state is based on the drudgery of women'.<sup>4</sup>

Vera Brittain's abhorrence of the situation is very clear in the chapter "The Married Women's Struggle" of her book Lady into Woman. Although she herself was always able to employ enough staff so that she did not have to fall victim to the housework trap, she realized that many other women were not so fortunate. After the war

the scarcity and increasing cost of domestic help meant that most middle-class wives had to work harder than ever before, and this penalised especially the gifted woman whose talents demanded a measure of freedom from trivial anxieties.<sup>5</sup>

She launches the idea that every professional woman should be allowed to have a sabbatical year, not to write a book like her male colleague, but to be able to bear a child without damaging her career. Brittain's insistence on the "hardships" of the middle-class woman who had to do without a servant sounds rather archaic and snobbish in the 1990s, but at the time she was one of the few women who were questioning a woman's duty with regard to housework.

Ruth Adam in A Woman's Place claims that the 2 million women who went back to the kitchen sink after the war had more positive reasons for staying at home. She argues that many women because they had been forced to do jobs they did not like in the war were "quite willing to stay at home, while the breadwinner turned out in the cold morning dusk, and have an extra cup of tea before she started the housework".<sup>6</sup>

There was another reason why women were expected to go back to their homes after the war: they had been expected to do that for generations. The idea that women should only do domestic work in their own homes is not one which suddenly emerged after the Second World War. This idea developed through a gradual process which started after the industrial revolution. Before the industrial revolution, in the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century, men and women, husband and wife, both worked, often together in, for instance, farms or bakeries. Cotton and wool were produced by whole families, including children, working at home. There were also numerous trades which were almost completely run by women: breweries, inns, and spinning by the so-called spinsters. Furthermore, women could be found in such unlikely jobs as blacksmith, moneylender, and contractor to the Army and Navy.<sup>7</sup>

Viola Klein mentions a threefold influence of the industrial revolution. Although women in the initial stages of the industrial revolution were often employed in e.g. the textile industry, they later became and felt less and less useful because, firstly, the centre of production was moved from the house to the factory, secondly, individual workers rather than whole families were employed, and thirdly, a range of services which were formerly provided within the home were to become part of the production process outside the home.<sup>8</sup> The most important of these was the industrialization of the production of cotton and wool which started after 1750 in England. Factories were able to produce better results in a fraction of the time it had taken up to then. At first men, women and children were all employed by these factories. But when they became more and more efficient in the nineteenth century, a smaller workforce was required and part of the women became superfluous. At the same time, around 1841, the credo that married women should stay at home for moral reasons, to look after the house and the small children, gained influence. Married women seemed to have become above all the victims of industrialization. Scott and Tilly in their article "Women's Work and the Family in Nineteenth-Century Europe" conclude this from available data. In 1831 in the Lancashire cotton mills, for example, most female workers were between 16 and 21 years old. And in London in the 1880s the female labour force was also largely between 15 and 25 years. In 1911 69% of single women in Britain worked, and only 6.9% of married women.<sup>9</sup> Although there is of course a large margin of error in these early statistics, these figures are still a clear indication of the process which had taken place.

Similar moral objections were found at the end of the nineteenth-century against child labour. The line of thought was that it was better for small children to be educated first at schools to provide a more useful workforce. The result was that it was harder for a married woman to work, for she was expected to look after the children. All this meant that a division of labour by sex had taken place: the men working in a factory (working classes) or running one (middle classes) and the women of both classes, but especially the middle-class ones, staying at home to manage the household. This process was interrupted in the First and Second World Wars, when suddenly there was a high demand for female labour due to the lack of availability of men.

Thus, on the one hand there was for various reasons a strong pull drawing women back into their homes after 1945. But if we look at the facts and figures of women's employment after the Second World War, we discover that, in fact there were large numbers of women who went out to work, albeit not in the same jobs and professions as in the war. (This could of course hardly be expected since a lot of the jobs were indeed specific war-time jobs.) Looking at these figures it could be argued that after the Second World War the tendency of a century to attract more and more women to housework was finally reversed and that it became slowly but surely acceptable for women, with a few exceptions, to work outside the home. One of the exceptions is the group of mothers with small children for whom work was still considered undesirable. Yet even this group of women did not fail to enter the labour market completely, as will be shown below.

The Ministry of Labour Gazette of 1945-1968 provides a wealth of information on the employment of women during the period under discussion. If we look at the figures at five yearly intervals the gradual increase in women's employment becomes apparent.

Total Working Population (in thousands)

	Nov. 1945	Dec. 1950	Dec. 1955	Dec. 1961	Dec. 1967
men	14,814	15,921	16,124	16,401	16,363
women	6,320	7,304	7,896	8,368	8,951

source: Ministry of Labour Gazette of the relevant year.

There are a few notes to be added to this table. The Ministry of Labour introduced two new Standards of Industrial Classification, which slightly distorts the statistics. The post-1948 figures are relatively higher because until 1948 domestic labour was not calculated because servants were not covered by national insurance. The second change was introduced in 1958 and results in a rather smaller labour force than before.

These statistics present a striking picture of the relatively high increase in women workers in this period. While the male labour force increases only marginally, there were about 40% more women working in '67 than in '45. The Ministry of Labour itself noted this and remarked already in 1951: "the considerable increase in the number of women in the working population reflects the tendency for women to return or remain in employment".<sup>10</sup> The period shortly after the war and the post-1961 period show the most significant increases. These figures include both full-time and part-time workers, and it would be interesting to see how the increase in women working is divided over full-time and part-time work.

Women in Part-Time Employment in Britain (less than 30 hrs per week)

	1950	1955	1960	1961
000	324.1	337.7	371.8	390.7
% of total women employed	11.8	11.4	13.2	13.7

source: Ministry of Labour Gazette, December 1962, p. 458.

These figures show that contrary to what might be expected the women do not generally work part-time. One of the reasons is perhaps that there were few such jobs available. It was only in 1968 that the Ministry of Labour realized that part-time work, although on the face of it attractive to women, also has its problems. In 1968 HMSO published a booklet called 'Part-time Employment its Extent and its Problems'. In it calls are made for the provision of child care so that women can have a "free choice between working and giving up work entirely".<sup>11</sup> In the same year

HMSO published a study by Nancy Seear who urges employers and the government to make more effective use of female employment, if only for their own sakes because there is likely to be full employment for a long time to come (!).

The percentages of single and married women who work are also significant. While in 1911 86% of working women were single and only 14% married this changed completely after the Second World War.

#### Married Women Working

age	1951		1961		1967	
	000	% of w.w.	000	% of w.w.	000	% of w.w.
15-19	30	2	49	3.7	68	5.7
20-24	300	26	364	34.9	787	43
25-29	370	48	865	66.9		
30-34	360	60			1,066	82
35-39	410	62	1,181	76.4		
40-44	440	63			1,460	81
45-49	380	60	1,170	70.4		
50-54	290	55			1,126	70
55-59	170	44	363	56.0		
60+	<u>100</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>218</u>	<u>45.0</u>	<u>331</u>	<u>66</u>
Total	2,840	45.6	4,210	52.8	4,838	58

source: Ministry of Labour Gazettes.

The conclusion which can be drawn from this table is that there is a marked increase in the share of married women in the female labour force from 45.6% in 1951 to 58% in 1967. This increase is above all significant in the 30-50 age group. Research carried out by the TUC Women's Advisory Committee in 1963 defines these figures further by saying that almost all part-time workers are

married. The TUC research shows not only that women did return to work after their thirtieth birthday, but that the young, presumably childless, woman under 24 also made up a large proportion of the female labour market. There is a marked low in the 25-34 year age group, which is the most popular childbearing age.

Proportion of Women Workers in each 100 of their Age Group

	1953	1963
under 20	77.1	71.5
20-24	66.2	62.2
25-34	38.6	38.4
35-44	37.6	45.4
45-54	37.0	47.0
55-59	29.9	39.7
60-64	15.4	21.3
65+	3.8	4.8
Total	35.6	38.7

source: TUC Women's Advisory Committee Report, 1965.

In 1963 there definitely is a return to work for the 34+ age group, whereas this is not yet the case in 1953.

## II.1 Married Women and Work

As there is such a marked increase in married women working in the period under discussion here, we will discuss this particular group in more detail. Various studies were conducted on the subject of married women and work. Audrey Hunt interviewed 10,000 households in 1965 on behalf of the Ministry of Labour. The findings were published in 1968. The main purpose of the study was to find out why women, and married women in particular, do or do not decide to take a job outside the home. A second aim was "to find out how far women in employment were employed to their full capacity, with regard both to the hours worked and to their qualifications and training potential".<sup>12</sup> Underlying the report the wish of the government to

make use of untapped labour in the days of full employment can be detected. In short, the government wanted to discover the motives behind the figures concerning women's employment.

Hunt found that the women in her study gave three basic reasons for going out to work: firstly, the financial advantages, secondly, among younger women, boredom, and thirdly, among educated women, to make use of the qualifications obtained. The birth of the first child rather than marriage as such was given as the main reason for giving up work. Yet there were some women who remained working even when their child was very small. There was a large group of women who were very interested in returning to work and who therefore formed the main potential addition to the female workforce:

responsible for	working women	practically certain to return	likely to return
child(ren) 0-2	4.3%	48.0%	44.2%
child(ren) 3-4	4.6%	36.0%	33.2%
child(ren) 5-15	26.8%	48.5%	50.3%

source: A Survey of Women's Employment, p. 89.

Furthermore, it was found that women who had to look after children were mainly working part-time. 17.7% of full-time and 53.2% of part-time workers were responsible for at least one child under 16.<sup>13</sup> Asked about their ideas on women with children who go out to work

nearly nine women out of ten asserted the right of a married women without children to go out to work. Less than two-fifths would grant the same right to a married woman with children of school age and less than one in twenty to one with children under school age.<sup>14</sup>

Thus there was a bias among the women themselves against women who had small children and who still worked.

Next to having the main responsibility for their children, a large number of working women were also housewives. Three quarters of all working women had the main responsibility for the

house. These tasks added together form a heavy burden and Hunt, not surprisingly, more than once gives the following advice to the government: "Future employment policies will undoubtedly have to take account of these domestic responsibilities".<sup>15</sup> At the moment of Hunt's investigation it was neither the government nor the husbands who were apparently willing to share the burden. Grannies seemed to be the ones who were always willing to help out. Rather to the point Hunt wonders what will happen when the present working women will be grannies and according to statistical predictions will still be working. The one disadvantage of work which was mentioned most often by the women was the difficulty of caring for the children. Second came the difficulty of looking after the house. And thirdly the problem of looking after their husbands. The last item was mentioned much less often than the other two, though, which indicates that husbands were more and more willing at least to look after themselves.<sup>16</sup> It is unfortunate that the family situation did not seem to be more geared towards married women working, because Hunt found that the money women earned was only in a small number of cases used for women's own luxuries. In the large majority of cases the whole family benefited because a higher standard of living was achieved.

Thus, in answer to the question posed at the beginning of the survey Hunt found that more women would be willing to work if only the proper child care facilities were available. She also found that women who did decide to go back to work after having children had little trouble in finding a new job. Especially highly educated women had little difficulty in returning to an appropriate position, according to Hunt. Only  $\frac{1}{5}$  of all women of this study could not find the job they would have liked. Hunt modifies this finding by saying that women on the whole seem to be satisfied very easily with their jobs, even if they are less attractive. Women seem to be very ready to accept "adverse conditions".<sup>17</sup>

Several non-government studies were also made between 1950 and 1968 about the relation between women and work. First of all, these studies were concerned with the problems married women workers had to face (especially working-class ones). Secondly, some of the studies paid attention to the kind of work women did. In this respect the case of the educated woman proved to be an interesting one. It is worthwhile noting that most of the studies focused on how married women coped with the situation as it was, i.e., the studies did not generally

research a possible alternative work/social situation which could have made life easier for women.

One of the reasons why a large group of studies dealt with married women workers was the simple fact that a large majority of women were married. There was no "surplus" of women as in the nineteenth century, and in 1951 75% of women could be expected to be married by their twenty-fifth birthday. By the late fifties the average age of marriage in Britain was 22.<sup>18</sup> The trend for earlier marriage continued through the fifties, as the following table shows:

Percentages of Women Married

age	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	65-59
1951	4	47	76	82	83	81	77	74	66	67
1958	6	56	81	87	86	85	81	76	68	70

source: C.M. Stewart, "Future Trends in the Employment of Married Women", p. 4.

Women also lived longer and were able to work for a longer period of their lives because they bore fewer children. Alice Amsden recognizes a further development of "replacement of familial values by individual ones".<sup>19</sup> By this she means that women in earlier times had many children who would all contribute to the family income. These children were in the fifties and sixties less and less numerous, and were also less inclined to have their wages used for the good of the family. Furthermore, children left home early to get married themselves and to set up their own home. Thus the post-war woman could hardly count on any extra income from her children.

One of the earliest post-war studies on women and work was carried out by F. Zweig in 46 factories in the North of England and London from 1950 to 1951. In the foreword he speaks rather condescendingly about his topic and apologizes for researching such an apparently uninteresting subject. He decided to carry out this research after investigating male working-class attitudes to work for several years. Unlike Hunt, he found that the main reason women gave

for going out to work was boredom, and that this also concerned women with children.<sup>20</sup> He also mentions that housing conditions of these women were in many cases so poor that it would have been very depressing indeed for them to stay at home all day.

One of the advantages of married women going out to work, according to Zweig, is that it gives the women self-confidence and changes the husband-wife relationship, because the wife is no longer economically dependent on the husband. This trend is reversed, however, if women for some reason stop working: "When she has to stay at home the adjustment will involve in many cases a greater submission to the husband and a greater dependence on him, not only in economic terms".<sup>21</sup>

In The Worker in an Affluent Society Zweig recorded a lot of approval of working wives by working-class husbands. They like the larger income in particular. On the other hand, they do complain about a lack of comfort, and a lack of proper care for the children. Some of them also sense the loss of status, of having a wife who "has" to go out to work because her husband cannot provide for her adequately.<sup>22</sup>

In Women's Life and Labour Zweig claims that he found that the women did not have a primary interest in their work. Their main interest was still at home and with their families. What Zweig noticed, for instance, was the apparent lack of female involvement in the unions. The few women who were active in a union were often single. The married woman has "a smaller sense of work solidarity, because work itself is only a sideline to her, or a stopgap to her marriage. She has not the same interest to defend or promote as her brother has; she has not the same class consciousness".<sup>23</sup> What Zweig does not mention is that one of the reasons married women are not often involved in union activities could be mere lack of time. They work, look after the children and house and do not have the spare time or energy to put into extra activities at work.

Like Hunt, Zweig concludes that the person who mainly helps the working mother with the care for her children is not the husband, but the grandmother on the mother's side. He refers to other possibilities of child care which were available at the time, but argues that they are insufficient. Firstly, the professional childminder seemed to be disappearing. Secondly, he discusses various types of children's nurseries. A small number of factories had their own nurseries, which was of course very convenient for the women. Then there were the nurseries run

by the Ministry of Health. These were purely childminding facilities and did not educate the children in any way. The advantage was that also younger children were accepted here. The Ministry of Education also controlled some nurseries. They were aimed at 3-5 year olds. They did provide education, but the disadvantage was that they closed at 3.30 pm. Women with a full-time job or women working in shifts could therefore not find much benefit in the latter nurseries. Apart from the disadvantages attached to these various types of nurseries, there were just not enough for every child of a working mother, and certainly not enough for those women who would have liked to go out to work if adequate child care had been available.

The next major study on married women and work appeared in 1962. Pearl Jephcott carried out this research in the Peek Frean's biscuit factory and in Bermondsey. The work was carried out in two phases: 1954-1956 a study of married women's employment at Peek Frean, and 1956-1959 a study of family life in the Bermondsey area. Peek Frean was selected because it had a rather dramatic history of employment. Before the war the management had refused to employ married women workers, while during and after the war the factory had come to rely almost entirely ( $\frac{2}{3}$ ) on married women workers, because it could not obtain any other labour. This is the only study which researches the facilitating effect of changed working conditions on the working married woman. It is the only study which does not take the status quo for granted.

Jephcott in her introductory discussion refers to the controversial aspects of the topic. By 1962 working married women is not any more the uninteresting subject it was considered to be in 1952 when Zweig published his work. Jephcott refers to the public debate about whether a married woman ought to work. By this time Bowlby's study (cf. Chapter III, below) on delinquent children had been published, and many people thought working mothers produced delinquents and rebellious children. Jephcott, rightly, noticed that here were two tendencies which clashed:

Society itself has created a dilemma by developing on the one hand a greatly increased concern for children's happiness and health ... on the other, by emphasizing women's freedom as individuals and their right to compete for jobs and status with men.<sup>24</sup>

Jephcott found that the woman most likely to be working was 40-49. 73% of the interviewees in this age group were in employment. Of the mothers with children there was a clear division between those mothers with children under five and mothers with children of

school age. The results here were more marked than in Hunt's survey. In Jephcott's Bermondsey sample only 25% of mothers with children under five worked, whereas 65% of those mothers whose youngest child was between 5 and 10 worked and 78% of those with youngest children between 11 and 14.<sup>25</sup> The women who had young children and who worked were not disapproved of as in Hunt's survey, because such a large number of women in the same area worked.

Because a large number of the employees worked part-time, the factory was run on the basis of one full-time shift per day (7.30 am - 5.30 pm), and four part-time shifts (7.30 am - 12.30 pm, 1.30 pm - 5.30 pm, 9.30 am - 4.00 pm, and 5.45 pm - 9.30 pm.) Obviously it was rather difficult to coordinate all these different shifts and the management did not seem too pleased. They particularly disapproved of the 9.30 am - 4.00 pm shift, as the machines lay idle for two hours in the morning and 1½ hours in the afternoon.<sup>26</sup> This was, however, exactly the shift the women workers themselves preferred above all, because it coincided with the school hours of their children. It also seemed to be the women who worked in this shift who seemed to be most satisfied with their working arrangements.<sup>27</sup>

The management at Peek Frean seemed to be willing to respond to the particular demands of their workforce. Women were allowed to transfer to a more appropriate shift during school holidays, and they were granted unpaid leave in domestic crises. Still Jephcott had to conclude that there was a very high absentee rate among the married women workers, and that there also was a high labour turnover, because the women thought they could easily get another job elsewhere. The quality of the work as such done by married part-time workers did not differ from that done by full-time workers.<sup>28</sup> The women interviewed by Jephcott all seemed to prefer part-time work, but this was not available on a national scale in the same way as in this particular factory.

Again, the largest obstacle to work was formed by the children. Although husbands get much praise from Jephcott for making a substantial contribution to the housework which needed to be done, they were not much help with the children. Other relatives, especially the grandmother, were the main people who looked after the children when the mother was at work. Bermondsey seemed to Jephcott a particularly close-knit community and most of its members

were born and bred in the same area. This provided the working mothers with sufficient relatives to help her out. In this respect Jephcott mentions the new towns because of which whole communities are uprooted as unfortunate developments.

Jephcott did not find any evidence that the children suffered any harm because their mothers were out working. She did not find any signs of physical neglect and the medical records were similar to those of children from mothers who stayed at home. She did not discover any educational disadvantages either. Not enough evidence was available on the subject of working mothers and delinquent children, but Jephcott concludes that there does not seem to be any sign that serious delinquency problems are caused by married women working. The husband-wife relationship is not adversely affected either. Like Zweig Jephcott claims that a working wife actually works positively. There is more partnership, and both husband and wife enjoy the advantages (e.g. car, holidays) of a larger income.

The last major book on women and work in Britain in the period under discussion appeared in 1965. Viola Klein's Britain's Married Women Workers is not just a study of one particular area or factory, but aims to provide a sociological analysis of the developments. The main change, according to Klein, which has taken place in our society is that work "from being considered a necessary evil has become a means of self-expression and a condition of personal fulfilment".<sup>29</sup> This exactly explains the feeling of confidence Zweig found among women workers. Even the work they were doing in the factories, which must have been at first sight rather repetitive or unsatisfactory, provides these women with a sense of identity. Klein sees this feeling of self-worth which work provides in our society as one of the main attractions of a job for women (cf. the discussion in Part III, below, with regard to the importance of work for the female characters in the novel).

Part of Klein's book gives the results of a Mass Observation survey carried out in 1957. This survey is particularly valuable where it distinguishes between classes when describing work patterns for women. One of the ways in which the social classes differ is in the reason women gave for wanting to work. The survey found that the "lower the social class the higher the proportion of married women who give money as their main reason for outside work".<sup>30</sup> The social class also seems to influence the husband's attitude to his wife's work: an important factor

in many cases:

The higher the social class, the greater is the percentage of married men approving, both conditionally and unreservedly, of married women being gainfully employed.<sup>31</sup>

This attitude represents a total change from the nineteenth century. In 1851 1 in 4 working-class women worked, whereas middle-class women were thought too weak to work, and their husbands considered a wife at home a necessary status symbol.<sup>32</sup>

Klein stresses again and again that women like work. The women in the survey who worked were satisfied and 40% of full-time housewives would like a part-time job if it were available. These are impressive figures. Yet, Klein recognizes that the reason behind it is not a feminist wish for emancipation: the wish to work "is not due to an urge for emancipation. There is no trace of feminist egalitarianism - militant or otherwise - in any of the women's answers to our questionnaire".<sup>33</sup> If one philosophizes further on this topic one could argue that it is rather the other way round. Conditions were created after the Second World War which enabled more and more women to go out to work. The difficulties and adverse conditions women encountered when they entered society as workers, made them realize that they had not been completely liberated yet when they had gained the right to vote and that a lot more had to be changed to make women equal members of society. Thus one of the factors which triggered off the start of the women's liberation movement in 1968 was the dissatisfaction over working conditions and pay (cf. Chapter IV, below).

Klein concludes that in 1957 when the survey took place "women's lives, today as much as ever, are dominated by their role - actual or expected - as wives and mothers ... All other occupations are subordinated to this central function".<sup>34</sup> She even goes a bit further than Zweig and Jephcott who made similar assertions, when she adds that most women although they do like their work when they have a job do not consciously plan to go out to work:

It seems, then, that the taking up of employment by married women is not 'premeditated', i.e. it is not part of the plans they make for their future, but is done under the impact of circumstances most of which were unforeseen, though perhaps not unforeseeable.<sup>35</sup>

Joyce Joseph reacted to this particular statement by an inquiry into adolescent girls' aims for the future. Six hundred girls from 14 to 16 year old were asked to complete a questionnaire

and in an autobiographical essay they wrote down their prediction for their future. From this it appeared that 61% of these girls intended to work after marriage, and 50% intended to return to work when their children were old enough.<sup>36</sup> This clearly contradicts Klein's conclusion. Yet Joseph also concludes that for these girls marriage and especially children are indeed of great interest. Children seem to play a large role in the girls' predictions. In their essays many of them have their husbands die young, while they live happily ever after with their children on the money the husband has left. This irrelevance of the husband and preference for the children also features in the lives of the novelists under discussion here (cf. Part II, below) and also matches the wish of many of the female characters in the novels (cf. Part III, below). Still, the majority of girls who answered Joseph's questionnaire realised that they would have to work for a great part of their lives.

Apart from the improvement of child care which has been referred to above, there are other factors which could contribute to better working conditions for women. One important aspect is the attitude management takes to married women working. Part-time work was and still is for a lot of women the only realistic way of working, if they want to work at all, with the child care facilities as they were in the sixties (and still are now). The Peek Frean study shows that management even if it cannot get any other labour is not satisfied with a labour force made up almost entirely of part-time workers. The conclusion of the research seems to be that the management put up with them because they had to, but were not too pleased. Zweig, in Women's Life and Labour, also concludes that part-timers are not often appreciated very much by the management. He notes the exception of the hotel and restaurant trade, which does realize that the advantage of part-time workers is that you only have to pay them when they are needed.

Viola Klein's Britain's Married Women Workers is in the second half of the book concerned with management's attitude towards working women. Questionnaires were sent off to 10% of the members of the Institute of Personnel Management in 1960. At the time of the survey 25% of married women in manufacturing industry worked part-time. As in the Peak Frean study married women, and particularly part-time ones are seen to have disadvantages, *in spite of the fact* that there was full employment and married women workers were the only relatively untapped labour pool. Viola Klein concludes:

One is left with the general impression that in most firms the employment of married women is accepted as a necessary expedient to tide over a period of labour shortage. Few managements ... have yet accepted the idea that married women workers have come to stay ... It will presumably need a longer period of full employment and industrial expansion before employers can be persuaded to regard married women as a substantial and useful part of their normal personnel, for whom working conditions will have to be created which will enable them to pull their full weight.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps this is the moment to take a step back and use the vantage-point of the 1990s to look back on the problem of married women working which formed such an important issue in women's lives in the '50s and '60s and is a problem which is still not entirely solved. The main reason why the problem has not been solved even now is that even though changes in attitude have taken place since the research mentioned above was carried out, there has not been the necessary fundamental change in attitude in all concerned, that is, management, husbands, women themselves, and society as a whole. Many women are still expected to think of a career as only a second aim in life, and to a large number of managers women are only a second choice for a job.<sup>38</sup> There are various ways in which society could escape this vicious circle and finally benefit from a good source of labour which lies wasted now. The period of unemployment in which society is at the moment is in fact one of the best periods to start such a fundamental change. What could be simpler than to divide the jobs which are still left between men and women equally, and divide housework and care for children likewise? In a period of full employment this would put too great a strain on the labour market, but now the working week could easily be brought down to, say, 20 hours to leave a similar amount of hours for working in the house and child care for each person. Of course, this asks for a significant change in the attitude of husbands and partners, who would have to feel equally responsible for housework and children as women feel now. Women would have to change their attitude in that they would have to regard a job as of at least equal importance, and not just secondary to, their home life. Finally, managers would have to consider operating factories, shops, schools, and offices solely on the basis of various part-time shifts. This, and other practical solutions to the problem would be easy to find if only the wish were there to consider the subject of women and work seriously.

Anne Phillips in Hidden Hands, for example, provides a detailed description of how matters can be improved. She demands three things: firstly, a shorter working week, secondly, changes

in tax and social security systems, because underneath them lies the assumption "that men are the breadwinners and women the dependants", and thirdly, a legal minimum wage.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, however, ideas like these were far from being considered in the period under discussion here.

## II.2 Occupational Distribution

Next we turn to the kind of work women performed between 1945 and 1968. From research, particularly among educated women, it becomes clear that even if women managed to overcome the problems mentioned above and did find a job, this was very often a low-paid and low-status one.

The 1965 TUC report gives a detailed description of where women were employed in 1953 and 1963. It shows that domestic work is becoming less and less popular. In 1963 only 10% of women workers were employed in domestic work in hotels, canteens or privately. The main increase in employment was in the retail trade (shops) and in the professions (mainly teachers). Also a large number of women were working in manufacturing industry. The TUC report noted that although in 1963 almost three million women worked in manufacturing industry, only 5.580 women per year were given apprenticeship training. The management probably did not think it worthwhile to give more women training. Jephcott in Time of One's Own notes that many girls (15-19 year olds) were disappointed that they did not get more training. They "were disillusioned about the little they had learnt and disillusioned about work in general".<sup>40</sup> Jephcott strongly recommends more training and remarks:

It is a shocking waste of manpower to underrate the abilities of girls at a time when the shortage of skilled labour is absolute. As far as industry is concerned the root of the matter stills appears to be prejudice.<sup>41</sup>

Both Klein and Hunt also conclude that most women work at the lower end of the scale. Klein noted that the majority of married women (60%) is in unskilled work.<sup>42</sup> According to Hunt most women are in junior non-manual positions, for instance clerks or shop assistants. She also says that the fact that women can often only work part-time because of other responsibilities limits the choice of jobs. Part-time work is often not highly skilled.<sup>43</sup> Hunt argues in this section of the survey for better educational opportunities for girls. She found that the higher educated a

woman is the more likely she is to get a better job (but not often such a good job a man with the same education would have had) and the more likely she is to be working at various stages in her life.<sup>44</sup>

British women employed, 1953 and 1963 (in thousands)

	1953	1963
manufacturing: non metal using	2006	1816
manufacturing: metal using	861	968
professional and scientific	1172	1744
distributive trades	1548	
services	1118	1061
government	361	383
transport	245	328
agriculture, mining	170	196
entertainment	121	116

source: TUC Women's Advisory Committee Report, 1965.

Terminal education age of women

	-14	15	16-18	19 and over
working full-time	25.4%	38.8%	40.8%	48.9%
working part-time	23.8%	11.8%	13.6%	13.5%
economically active at all	52.0%	52.7%	56.7%	64.1%

source: Hunt, A Survey of Women's Employment (1968), p. 27.

Although, as shown in Chapter I, the 1944 Education Act aimed to provide a better education for everybody, many girls did not persevere with their education to the same extent as boys. Hunt provides a comparative table with figures for both men and women.

1965 Educational Level in England and Wales (unless otherwise stated)

	Males	Females
taking GCE O-level	268,770	217,790
taking GCE A-level	89,632	53,749
% of population aged 16-18 who were still at school	16.2%	13.4%
% of insured population under 18 attending day release (GB)	31.6%	7.4%
attending grant-aided establishments for further education:		
full-time	95,948	73,874
part-time	535,048	144,713
sandwich	16,702	504
attending universities (GB)	124,087	44,520

source: Hunt, A Survey of Women's Employment (1968), p. 16.

Thus, Hunt concludes that it is certainly worthwhile for the government to try and educate women more, if only for the selfish reason that this would lead, apparently, to a larger potential labour force.

Hunt also noticed that especially among highly educated women there was apparently the feeling that marriage and a career were difficult to combine: "An interesting sidelight is that more highly educated women were less likely to be married: this is possibly a relic of the days when the choice had to be made between marriage and a career".<sup>45</sup>

Terminal education age of women

	-14	15	16-18	19+	Still attending	Total
marital status:						
married	81.7%	70.5%	67.8%	64.6%	3.1%	73.9%
single, widowed, divorced	18.3%	29.5%	32.2%	35.4%	96.9%	26.1%
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

source: Hunt, A Survey of Women's Employment (1968), p. 27.

One major study appeared which was entirely concerned with the plight of the educated woman: Judith Hubback's Wives who went to College, which was first published in 1957. She sent questionnaires to 2,000 married women graduates in 1953. 1,165 (58%) answered the questionnaires. Hubback realizes that she is concerned only with a small proportion of all women: only 8% at the time of her research was both married and graduated. She is above all interested in to what extent women use their degrees, because, as she says, "to be as happy and useful as possible, women as well as men should use all their capacities to the full".<sup>46</sup>

Hubback's graduates married between the ages of 21 and 25. They got their children later in life, but often ended up having more children than the average population. They seemed to get more third and fourth children than the average population. Of the age group 35 to 39 26% of the graduates and 16% of the average population had 3 children and 17% of the graduates and 7% of the average population had 4 children.<sup>47</sup> The birth of the first child was the main cause for the ending of the career, and the second most important reason was marriage. 64% of the graduates were full-time housewives, 19% were full-time workers, and 17% were part-time workers.<sup>48</sup> Even those graduates who worked full-time, i.e. those who made most use of their qualifications, had a very limited range of jobs. Few were able to break through to male professions such as medicine.

Hubback remarks that the sample contains but a small number of women writers:

There are undoubtedly some very outstanding writers among women; but they will never be more than a very small minority of married women. The creative energy which flows for some years into child-bearing and rearing can be generated anew for creative writing, but by the time there are children it is difficult for a woman to be a full-time writer.<sup>49</sup>

It will be interesting to see in Part II, below, how the women writers under discussion here combined their professional and married life and which motives led to their choosing this difficult and hazardous career, for contrary to Hubback's statement all the eight women writers under discussion here have been "wives" for at least part of their lives.

## Main Paid Work by Married Women Graduates

	full-time	part-time
teaching, coaching, examining	51%	16%
writing, translating	1%	6%
medicine, psychology	6%	3%
university teaching	11%	2%
civil service, administrative work	17%	2%
business	1%	1%
legal work	2%	-

note: the majority of married women graduates who are occupied part-time, in fact do voluntary, i.e. unpaid work; these figures have not been included in this table.

source: Hubback, Wives who went to College, p. 46 and p. 49.

Hubback claims that it is even more difficult for educated women to combine work and motherhood than it is for others. It is more problematic to take a few years off to be a mother, for the graduate will often have to accept an entirely different or inferior job on return to work. There are less part-time jobs available among the professions, which makes the choice to return more difficult too. Finally, she argues that mental work requires peace and quiet and is therefore hard to combine with motherhood. Hubback concludes that this had led to the situation that valuable "woman-power" is wasted unnecessarily. The answer is not, she says, to cut down on education of women for that reason, because even if women become housewives the skills they learned at university will still be useful. Hubback's advice is that education should "prepare for variety".<sup>50</sup> Women should be well-equipped for all eventualities.

If on the subject of education Hubback is perhaps too willing to let the girl's education be adapted to society's expectations of her, she is very much aware of the inequality of the situation where motherhood is concerned: "Fatherhood does not cause such a radical disturbance of a man's life as motherhood does of a woman's".<sup>51</sup> It is so disturbing that the woman graduate is withheld from "the fulfilment of a wider personality".<sup>52</sup>

If it would be easier for educated women to work this would not only benefit the women

themselves, but also their children. There would be no danger of what later was to be called "Momism", that is, overprotective mothers who are unwilling to let their children lead their own lives. "If she has a certain amount of life of her own, she should be able more readily to understand her sons' and daughters' desire for independence".<sup>53</sup>

There are examples of professional women who managed to be successful in spite of all the difficulties they encountered. Edith Summerskill in her autobiography, A Woman's World (1967), describes her life as a doctor, a Labour MP, and a Member of the House of Lords. And Mary Stott in Before I Go, her memoirs, shows again and again how persistent she had to be to succeed in her profession. Quite apart from any further responsibilities she might have had at home, she had to fight harder than any man and overcome more unnecessary disappointments just because she was a woman. When she was working for the Manchester Evening News, for instance, she was told by the editor that she could not make promotion because she was a woman: "the succession had to be safeguarded and the successor must be a man".<sup>54</sup> The same man later admitted in a letter that Mary was in fact no worse than a man, and an excellent journalist: "Mary wanted to sub hard news in a tough man's world. I threw the stool, the bucket and the lot at her, made her a splash sub and she loved it ... She thrived on it all".<sup>55</sup>

A study appeared in 1967 which dealt with the few married women who had managed to be successful in their jobs. By this time some women had shown that they were able to be married and successful at the same time. M.P. Fogarty saw signs that society was trying to come to terms with this new feature:

"Many employers are only now beginning to have to think about how best to employ the married woman with qualifications at graduate level who expects a career after her time of childbearing as well as before."<sup>56</sup>

Fogarty is rather optimistic in his predictions of where this will lead to:

For a number of reasons it seems likely that in future it will be more open to husbands and wives to choose the pattern that suits them, and that society may come to treat a wide range of patterns as acceptable.<sup>57</sup>

He thinks it will be women in responsible posts who will be largely instrumental in bringing about this change. It is interesting that Fogarty assigns the role of social leader to the successful woman. In fact this is exactly what happened in the case of the eight novelists under discussion

here: they were all successful novelists and through their work they managed to open up the discussion concerning women's position in society (cf. Part II and Part III, below).

The professional and other women who overcame all problems and found themselves a suitable job often ended up being paid much less than men. In October 1950 women's average wages in manufacturing industry were 53% of men's.<sup>58</sup> This is partly due to the fact that men have more skilled jobs than women, but even when men and women on the same job were compared women were paid at least 20% less than men. Zweig summarizes the reasoning behind these wage differences. First of all, the argument goes, women do not have to support a family. Secondly, men do not want women to earn the same because they feel superior. Thirdly, there is more absenteeism among women and a higher turnover of female labour, which makes women less attractive as workers. If they would be paid the same they would be out of a job because men perform the same job better.<sup>59</sup> This line of argument disregarded women who had to support a whole family, e.g. if the husband was an invalid or unemployed, and it also does not allow for the fact that many women had to look after children and do housework as well. Should women be punished financially because some of them find it difficult to be perfect performers of all the roles society has assigned to them?

Hubback mentions another disadvantage which lowered women's real incomes. At the time of her research women's wages were added to their husbands' incomes. Thus the woman would always pay tax over the full amount of her income. This did not encourage women to go out to work.<sup>60</sup>

The Ministry of Labour Gazettes provide a picture of the wage developments in the whole period under discussion, 1945-1968. The table below shows that the working week shortened and the wages rose for all groups concerned. The fundamental internal relation between the four groups remained more or less the same, however, with the men working the longest hours and getting the highest hourly wage by far, and thus getting the largest weekly wage. In 1945 the women over 18 earned almost 50% more than the boys under 21, but in 1967 they earned only 14% more. Thus, the average mother would earn in 1967 marginally more than her son who perhaps would only just start out to work.

## Average Hours worked per Week and Wages per Hour

	Men		Boys (-21)		Women (16-21)		Girls (-18)	
	hrs	d.	hrs	d.	hrs	d.	hrs	d.
July 1945	49.7	29.3	45.6	12.0	43.3	17.5	43.5	9.7
April 1951	47.9	40.1	44.5	18.0	42.0	25.0	42.7	15.7
April 1956	48.6	58.1	45.0	26.8	41.5	34.6	42.4	22.2
April 1961	47.9	75.5	44.1	36.9	39.9	45.9	40.8	29.4
April 1967	46.1	107.1	42.2	56.6	38.2	64.1	38.9	42.8

source: Ministry of Labour Gazette of relevant years.

It is interesting to see what the various studies predicted about how the trend of women workers would develop in the future. Viola Klein (1965) predicted that more and more married women would go out to work, especially as she thought women would become more and more educated and would be less willing to stay at home. The latest figures she had (of 1963) were that 55% of all married graduate women were employed, although this was at the time mostly part-time. Klein does recognize that it would make a great difference whether the government is willing to take action in support of this trend. She hopes the government will be moved into action by the social necessity for it: "It certainly is one way out of the social isolation from which so many urban and suburban housewives today suffer".<sup>61</sup> Another factor is, according to Klein, whether public opinion will permit mothers with young children to work. She does not find any reason why they should not be allowed to go out to work.

C.M. Stewart in "Future Trends in the Employment of Married Women" (1961) also concludes that women should be encouraged to work. He takes the economic view that women will be necessary as workers:

If the 1958 percentages of married and other women at work are unaltered, then in 1973 industry may be short of about 200,000 women workers; if the expansion of industry continues, the shortfall will be even greater.<sup>62</sup>

Of course he was not to know about the 1973 oilcrisis and the recession it was to cause in the

economy.

Actually, very little was to change over the next decades. Although 40% of the labour force is formed by women, 2 out of 5 are working part-time and 3 out of 4 women are employed in service jobs, according to 1983 information.<sup>63</sup>

### II.3 Signs of Dissatisfaction

In conclusion it is worthwhile to refer to those people who did recognize at the time, in the '50s and '60s, that women were asked to perform the almost impossible task of making a choice between a career or being a housewife and mother, or trying to combine the two. There were several, especially middle-class, women who saw, even before the women's movement officially started, that whatever option women chose or were made to choose, no alternative was ideal and that this problem caused a lot of concern among women.

The public awareness of dissatisfaction among women seemed to have been stronger in America than in Britain. William Chafe in his book The American Woman looks back on the period and sees that a large number of women was entering the labour market which made them realize that there were many possibilities open to women, but also that none of these were easy options.

Women were already [in the '50s] in the process of creating a new sphere for themselves ... And the growing frequency with which women accepted the prospect of entering the world beyond the home created the backdrop against which the drive for equality would revive in the 1960s.<sup>64</sup>

A demand for change would only be the inevitable result:

Fundamentally, then, woman's discontent was rooted in the changing definition of their sphere and the only solution was to create a new concept of woman's place which would give as much recognition to her economic role as to her family role.<sup>65</sup>

The main catalyst in his process was Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique which was published in 1963 and which for the first time voiced ordinary women's grievances, the grievances of the women who had chosen to become a housewife. The suburban housewife who had been the dream image of all American women opened her mouth and complained that leading a "feminine" life of looking after husband and children and the suburban home did not prove to be satisfactory. "The problem that has no name"<sup>66</sup> was allowed to become a "real" problem at last. Before Friedan's research women if they felt unhappy thought it must have been

their own fault: "If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought".<sup>67</sup> Friedan's main conclusion is that women's obligation to be completely "feminine", i.e. the feminine mystique, limits women's identity too much. Friedan found that the only women who were really happy pursued an outside career or training: 16 out of 29 housewives were in psychotherapy.<sup>68</sup> Many used extra-marital affairs as one way of having an independent identity. Friedan's advice: abandon the feminine mystique, combine marriage and a career, and don't overglorify marriage and the importance of housework.

Friedan mentions work outside the home as one of the main factors which can improve women's lives, whereas the British studies on women and work discussed above concluded that that was not an easy option in the prevailing climate either. There is an earlier American study by Mirra Komarovsky, Women in the Modern World (1953), which looks at all the options open to women in a realistic way. She compares graduates who are married and stay at home with graduates who work and are married. She mentions several types of homemakers. First of all, the happy homemaker. This is often somebody such as a minister's wife who is a housewife but who has many extra responsibilities which keep her occupied. Secondly, the overworked mother, who most often seemed to complain about the lack of freedom and who viewed motherhood as somewhat frustrating, but still did not want to see her basic situation changed. Thirdly, the most dissatisfied group of housewives, who would prefer a career but who are not able to pursue it because of their children. Among the working wives she also recognizes three types: the happy career wife (with no children), women with a problematic marriage (difficulty of combining children with a career) and the new-style feminist whose husband supports her as much as possible and who is therefore able to pursue a career. She concludes that although career wives have less leisure time the option of career and marriage is still to be preferred.

This study relates the various troubles women in different situations might have and it is one of the earliest studies which does this so clearly.

One of the earliest articles which deals with unhappiness among American working-class wives appeared in 1960. Patricia Sexton says in "Wife of the Happy Worker" that a working-class wife's life can be described as being "quietly desperate".<sup>69</sup> According to Sexton middle-class

women have more scope in entertainment. For many working-class women the only recreation is the television and visits from relatives and neighbours, and this can create problems: "she is almost helplessly dependent on the neighborhood folkways and mores - what 'other people would think' and, especially, her husband".<sup>70</sup> She compares women to black people because both groups are suppressed and unorganized. This is a significant remark in retrospect, for black people and women both started to organize themselves into movements in the '60s, the women's movement following many tactics taken from the black and students movements.

In Britain there were also some women who were registering the dissatisfactions women felt. Next to the studies by Jephcott, Hunt and others referred to above, there are some more publications worth mentioning in this context. In 1947 several women met from various walks of life and started to discuss women's position in society. Olwen Campbell wrote down the findings of this group in The Feminine Point of View (1952). At the basis of their thoughts lies the old dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. Unlike Friedan these women do not want to abolish the concept of femininity, they want it to be exalted to its proper place in society. They argue that the feminine principle (i.e. compassion, intuition, selflessness, aversion to violence) would improve society tremendously. They mention several reasons why the influence of women in society has not been able to expand so far: lack of self-confidence among women, lack of economic power, poverty of employed women, and the difficulty of combining the roles of housewife and career woman.<sup>71</sup> To increase the influence of the feminine principle Olwen Campbell thinks some rather fundamental changes are required:

There must be a change in social attitude, men's attitude to women and women's attitude to themselves, and a better adaptation of society to women's needs and abilities.<sup>72</sup>

So, Campbell uses the principle of femininity to make some rather feminist demands (in line with nineteenth-century so-called "domestic feminism").

A second British study was suggested by the International Federation of University Women. It investigated the reforms needed if women are to reconcile family and professional demands. Myrdal and Klein first of all state, like Friedan, that there is a lot of unease among housewives:

The widespread discontent among urban housewives to-day bears witness to the

fact that looking after one man and a family of two ... is under present conditions not enough to fill the many years of a woman's life and to give her the satisfaction of feeling that she is pulling her weight.<sup>73</sup>

They go on to show that it is not easy for a woman to combine her two roles. "The pull in two directions goes on practically throughout a woman's life".<sup>74</sup> Whatever decision a woman takes at certain points in her life, there will always be feelings of guilt or discontent.

The authors do not seem to find a solution to answering both pulls when a woman is a young mother. Because a mother's care, according to Myrdal and Klein, is better than an outsider's care they "support the view that mothers, as far as possible, take care of their own children during the first years of their lives".<sup>75</sup> As mentioned above, Klein later revised her opinion on this matter in her 1965 study Britain's Married Women Workers.

Like Myrdal and Klein, Hannah Gavron also focuses on the woman's point of view, rather than the point of view of the employer or the children, as so many other studies at the time did. In this, like the writers under discussion here, these sociologists adopt a proto-feminist approach. Gavron in The Captive Wife (1966) also sees woman as being caught between conflicting demands. She shows that this situation has some serious effects. She remarks that there is a higher incidence of neurotic illness among women than men and that several of the mothers she interviewed were "suffering from nervous strain".<sup>76</sup> This was particularly the case among the working-class non-working mothers she interviewed:

Although the middle-class mother may encounter psychological difficulties concerning her role as an individual with her first baby, she very soon makes a deliberate effort to assert her rights as an individual. The working-class mother who sees motherhood as inevitable is in fact less prepared for the ties of children and is less able to cope with the isolation that follows.<sup>77</sup>

The major problem seemed to be that they did not feel they were doing something useful: "They had no importance either to themselves or to the outside world".<sup>78</sup> This is what made them insecure and confused.

Gavron makes a clear demand at the end of her book: "What is needed above all is some deliberate attempt to re-integrate women in all their many roles with the central activities of society".<sup>79</sup>

Uneasy feelings about the position of women at work and unhappiness about the conflicting demands of the positions of woman worker and wife seemed to have been

widespread among women, as becomes clear from the studies performed by e.g. Gavron, Klein and Hunt, but there is little evidence of the contexts into which post-1968 feminism was to put the issue (e.g. capitalism, patriarchy). It will be shown in Part III that most of the major British women writers of the time were also aware of the extent of this problem. One of the recurring themes in the novels under discussion is the role of work in a woman's life. On the one hand there is Martha Quest who is intelligent but who does not know how to use this intelligence other than in her search for the right man, and therefore finds it difficult to complete her "quest" for happiness. On the other hand there is the shining example of Rosamund in The Millstone who after overcoming many problems becomes a successful mother and academic.

## CHAPTER III

### WOMEN AND THE FAMILY 1945-1968

The aim of this chapter is to record some of the most obvious signs of discontentment among women originating from their position in the family between 1945-1968. Special attention will be paid to sociological studies and personal accounts (letters, diaries) of the time in this respect. The family as a source of dissatisfaction for women if it was recognized at all as such by sociologists and others at the time, was not connected with the other dissatisfactions women felt. The registration of women's unhappiness did not yet lead to a feminist interpretation of the woman's role in the family as it would after 1968. A view such as the one by Barrett and McIntosh in The Anti-Social Family that the institution of the family as the basis of society is responsible for the repression and restriction of women was not yet voiced. The protests against women's position in the family which are recorded here lack a theoretical framework as supplied by e.g. Barrett and McIntosh. Theories connecting all the signs of dissatisfaction only started to appear after 1968.

Just as the position of worker was a source of dissatisfaction for women in the period under discussion here, the demands on women made by their positions as wives and mothers also caused considerable problems. One of the main reasons for this was not that women's capacities were underestimated as in the case of the woman worker, but that expectations were too high. Much was expected of the results a perfect mother and wife would produce, and also of the personal fulfilment being a wife and mother would bring to the woman concerned. If the results did not turn out to be satisfactory, the wife and mother became the main scapegoat rather than the position she was in. Thus, if a child turned out to be a teenage troublemaker, it was the mother's fault. If a woman was unhappy about her sex life, it was suggested that perhaps she did not understand the nature of the female orgasm. Even if a woman did not find the personal fulfilment she was supposed to find in being a housewife and mother, she blamed herself for that: "What kind of a woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfilment waxing the kitchen floor? She was so ashamed to admit her dissatisfaction that she never knew how many other

women shared it".<sup>1</sup>

### III.1 Woman as Wife

The Registrar General's Statistical Reviews for 1945-1968 and the first issue of Social Trends provide basic practical information from which we can get a picture of women's position as wives. It was already indicated in Chapter II above that the trend was for more women to get married and also for women to get married at an earlier age. The following table shows the popularity of marriage and the decline in age at marriage throughout the fifties and sixties:

#### Marriage (Great Britain)

	1951	1961	1966	1968
total (in 000s)	402	387	426	452
average age for spinsters	24.6	23.3	22.7	22.7
average age for bachelors	26.8	25.6	24.9	24.7

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 56.

Especially when these figures are compared to pre-war figures, it becomes clear that many more women were married after the war than before.

#### Female Population Marital Status (Great Britain)

% of females in each age group who were ever married	1931	1951	1961	1968
20-24	25.5	47.3	57.4	57.1
25-29	58.4	77.5	84.3	85.7
40-44	81.4	85.3	90.1	91.7

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 56.

Although more women were married at some point in their lives, wifehood apparently became less of a permanent condition. First of all, there is the relatively large number of divorces in the post-war period. These were made possible through the reforms in the divorce laws. If

before the war people had disagreements within marriage, it was only in extreme cases such as desertion or proven infidelity that divorce was possible, and people had to pay for the legal costs themselves. The 1949 Legal Aid Act made it possible for people to get a divorce even if they could not afford the legal costs. The result was that especially shortly afterwards and in the sixties the divorce rate rose considerably.

Divorce (Great Britain)

	1931	1951	1961	1968
England and Wales	3,668	28,265	24,936	45,036
Scotland	560	1,928	1,808	4,758

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 57

People apparently found it less and less objectionable to obtain a divorce even if they had children:

Dissolved marriages where there were children, as % of all divorces (Great Britain)

	1951	1961	1966	1968
	65.6	68.3	71.8	73.1

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 57.

The second cause of the dissolution of a marriage, death, appears at first sight to become less important, for the death rate was going down.

Death Rate per 1,000 persons U.K.

	1951	1961	1966	1968
	12.6	12.0	11.8	11.9

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 54.

Yet, there is also a change here which influences a married woman's position: men seem to die earlier than women, and therefore more women become widows. The overall effect of the divorce and death rates is that although there is indeed a larger number of women who marry, there also is a substantial minority who is either divorced or widowed. Together with the single women they form in fact the majority of women in post-war Britain. The statistics for a year just selected at random, 1956, show that the majority of women do not actually have a husband.

Estimated population by sex, age, marital condition - mid 1956 (England and Wales)

total	single	married	widowed and divorced
<b>Males (in 000)</b>			
21,669	9,382	11,477	810
<b>Females (in 000)</b>			
23,152	9,048	11,522	2,582

source: Registrar General's Statistical Review, England and Wales (Civil Section), 1956, p. 5.

It is rather surprising in view of this data that most discussions in the fifties and sixties did not seem to be about how single, widowed, or divorced women should cope with life, but mainly how married women should behave. Marriage was clearly the norm against which everything else was measured. It was only much later, in 1983, that somebody was able to recognize the relative importance of marriage, and describe it rather objectively: "Marriage is an important socio-economic transaction which many enter, some do not, and many leave by various means".<sup>2</sup>

Within the discussion about marriage, it was one particular aspect which seemed to attract most attention: sex. Sexual codes of behaviour came under discussion, and were thought to be controversial. Sex became so important that in The History of Sexuality the French philosopher Michel Foucault even re-interpreted European social history, especially since the nineteenth century, as being first and foremost based in sexuality. In his History of Sexuality he states that

in the nineteenth century sexuality was sought out in the smallest details of individual existences; it was tracked down in behavior pursued in dreams ... But one also sees it becoming the theme of political operations, economic interventions (through incitements to or curbs on procreation), and ideological campaigns for raising standards of morality and responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Jeffrey Weeks in Sexuality and its Discontents traces the development of the study of sex in the past century. He indicates how the interest in the subject grew after the war: "If the history of recent sexuality can be seen as an explosion of speech around sex then [sic] the 1960s experienced a decisive, qualitative escalation of the volume. Sex today is spoken about, written about and visually represented as never before".<sup>4</sup> Sex as an issue resurfaced after the war, in 1947, in America, when Lundberg and Farnham wrote their book Modern Woman: The Lost Sex. In it they argued that woman had lost part of her femininity because she tried to pursue a career instead of being a full-time housewife and mother. To them "the pursuit of a career ... is essentially masculine because it is exploitative".<sup>5</sup> To Lundberg and Farnham this has the result that women make it difficult for themselves to find sexual satisfaction: "Increasingly we are observing the masculinization of women and with it enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children (if any) dependent on it, and to the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification".<sup>6</sup> Only by becoming truly feminine again can women have a successful sex life. The American writer Mary McCarthy in "Tyranny of the Orgasm" (April 1947), a book review of Modern Woman: The Lost Sex, attacks the authors in a rather sarcastic way, pointing to the to her obvious absurdity of their theory. She ridicules the ideal of Lundberg and Farnham, the truly feminine woman and the truly masculine man. And, she points out, anybody who does not conform to this image automatically ends up in the "junkyard of society": "This junkyard is the national eye sore, a vast dump disfiguring the suburbs of the well-regulated community, presided over by the truly feminine mother and the fully genitalized male".<sup>7</sup> Her attack goes beyond ridicule when she seems to get very angry and writes that "no jot of evidence is brought forward to support the crucial proposition, that the large family and the orgasm are interdependent".<sup>8</sup> She ends her review with a final statement which is rather effective. She points the reader's attention to the front cover of Modern Woman on which there is a picture of a woman who hides her eyes, according to McCarthy this is because she is ashamed to be on the cover of such a book.

In this and many of her other essays written in the fifties and sixties Mary McCarthy attacks convention and the expectations people have of women. It will be shown in Part III, below, that in Britain it were middle-class women writers, McCarthy's British counterparts, who showed especially in their novels the problems theories such as the one of Lundberg and Farnham cause for women. In The Pumpkin Eater, for instance, Penelope Mortimer portrays a woman who takes this theory very literally. She thinks she can only be happy when she is producing children. She is sterilized after having had an enormous amount of children from various husbands, when she realizes that only now will she be able to enjoy love and sex:

I realized that for the first time in my life I could make love without danger. Danger? for the first time in my life I could make love. It was an amazing thought, as though I suddenly had the gift of tongues, the ability to fly. (PE, p. 111)

In 1953 Alfred Kinsey published his Sexual Behavior in the Human Female which further investigated the matter of the female orgasm. Kinsey's findings in some ways disprove Lundberg and Farnham's theory. He considers three factors which influence the incidence of the female orgasm. Firstly, the length of marriage. He found that the older a woman was and the longer she had been married, the more likely she was to achieve orgasm. In the first year of marriage 63% of intercourse resulted in orgasm for wives, in the fifth year of marriage this was 71%, and in the twentieth year of marriage this was 83%.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Kinsey asserts that women differ from each other. Some are just more orgasmic than others. Thirdly, the result which is most incongruous with Lundberg and Farnham's findings: "The number of females reaching orgasm within any five-year period was rather distinctly higher among those with upper-educational backgrounds".<sup>10</sup> Another finding which must have been rather embarrassing for the American male ego of the time is the fact that Kinsey found that there was a higher incidence of orgasm in lesbian relationships than in heterosexual relationships. Techniques of lesbian lovemaking are more effective for women, according to Kinsey, and women can thus achieve "orgasm without the interruptions which males ... introduce into their heterosexual relationships".<sup>11</sup> Of course research like Kinsey's presumes that people never tell lies about their own sexual behaviour (as Kinsey could only note what people themselves reported) and this is highly unlikely. However, it is still laudable that somebody actually set out to check up on the Lundberg Farnham theory.

It is interesting to see what the contemporary reactions were to the Kinsey reports (Kinsey

had published one on male sexual behaviour in 1948). Lionel Trilling in The Liberal Imagination is the voice of the wounded American male pride. He claims it is stupid just to count orgasms without taking the emotional aspects of sex into account. He says that people value other matters than anamalistic performance. He concludes that the Kinsey report on the male "spreads confusion".<sup>12</sup> The collection of essays on the Kinsey report, Sex Life of the American Woman and the Kinsey Report, edited by Ellis, takes a more positive view. Gladys Hoogland Groves, for instance, stresses the way the Kinsey reports have done away with prejudices among the general public. Edwin Hirsch claims in this collection that the Kinsey reports have caused a sexual revolution in the U.S.. According to him, magazines such as the Ladies Home Journal are now even answering questions on sex.<sup>13</sup> E.M. Schur in a preface to another collection of essays on sex and American society, thinks that "a profound change" is taking place in post-war society as compared to pre-war society, but that this is gradual rather than sudden.<sup>14</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich in Re-making Love sees the publication of Masters and Johnson's The Human Sexual Response (1966) as the real breakthrough. Up till then the idea of the vaginal orgasm as the only real one pervaded, according to Ehrenreich's analysis. Masters and Johnson's conclusion was that the real orgasm was in fact the clitoral one. In the late '60s feminists saw this as a true liberation, because they thought they were not dependent any more on men for sexual satisfaction.

Thus, the post-war debate on sex first started in America. It is therefore not surprising that the main research which was done into British sexual habits and marriage was undertaken by Geoffrey Gorer, who had first studied the American's behaviour. Furthermore, Exploring English Character, his first survey, was first published in America and only five years later in Britain. He held two surveys by means of questionnaires: the first one in 1951 and a follow-up in 1969.

Gorer has a rather blind optimism and he minimizes the effect of sexual problems on women. The subject of the female orgasm which caused so much discussion in America is a good example of this. In 1951 Gorer was not allowed by his publishers to ask any direct questions about orgasm, and he therefore posed various questions which indirectly illicit responses on the subject. 55% of men and 39% of women disagreed with the statement "Most women don't care much about the physical side of sex".<sup>15</sup> 39% of men and 57% of women disagreed with the statement "Women tend to enjoy sex more than men".<sup>16</sup> These figures show

that women felt much less satisfaction about their sex life than men thought they would. It is not too unexpected, therefore, that Gorer goes on by saying that "many women find disillusionment, at least on the physical level, in marriage around the age of 35".<sup>17</sup> Instead of trying to analyze the situation Gorer just notes the facts. In his 1969 survey Gorer did ask a direct question about female orgasm: "When a man and woman are making love, do you think that women have a real physical climax to the act of lovemaking in the same way as men?". 77% of men and 59% of women agreed with this statement. Again, as in 1951, men seem to have higher expectations of women's sex life than women themselves. 41% of women apparently do not know what a female orgasm is, or have never experienced one. In 1969 Gorer has a rather remarkable theory to explain this difference. Instead of concluding that women seem to have an unsatisfactory sex life, he argues that the importance of the orgasm for female sexual satisfaction is a myth created by men, and that women seem to get on quite happily without it.<sup>18</sup> At least even Lundberg and Farnham do recognize that there is a substantial dissatisfaction among women (although they blame the poor women themselves for it). Gorer goes so far as to claim that the female orgasm is "not basically founded on the imperatives of female anatomy",<sup>19</sup> i.e. not natural, and is therefore not necessary for women.

Another matter to which Gorer pays considerable attention in both surveys is the desirability of sexual experience before marriage. In 1951 Gorer found that 52% of the sample was against men having any sexual experience before marriage, and 63% against women having any sexual experience. Reasons given were: marriage should be a new experience, it is morally wrong, and for women the dangers of pregnancy and the loss of virginity were added.<sup>20</sup> In 1969 26% of married men said they were virgins at marriage, whereas 63% of married women had been virgins.<sup>21</sup> Already in the 1951 survey Gorer, although he applauds the high moral standards of the English, recognizes that these cause problems. After quoting from many answers to the survey he concludes that they "strongly suggest that ignorance particularly on the part of men, is a major hazard in English marriage".<sup>22</sup> Judging from the responses Gorer quotes in his 1969 survey women themselves do not seem to favour pre-marital sexual experience for women. They seem to think that a loss of virginity before marriage would reflect badly on their good name, and also there is, although to a lesser extent, the fear of unwanted pregnancies. Although

contraceptives were available for married people it was still difficult for single people, especially single women, to obtain them. The Family Planning Association in its report Family Planning in the Sixties (1963) confirms this when it firmly states its commitment to family planning, rather than contraceptive advice as such. Its

primary function is to advise on fertility regulation within the context of family life - that is to advise the married and those about to marry. A voluntary body much in the public eye and seeking official support cannot afford to expose itself to the suspicion of "encouraging immorality".<sup>23</sup>

Earlier they pronounced their commitment to the cap and other female contraceptives (e.g. they applaud the arrival of oral female contraceptives), but with the statement quoted above they make it clear that they would not just provide it to any girl who turned up at the door. Mary Stocks, who founded one of the first family planning clinics outside London, in 1926, argues along the same lines in The Guardian in 1962. A "Talkback" letter from a single woman rightly shows the restrictions this attitude imposes upon young single women: some single women

believe they need to try themselves and discover themselves sexually, as in other ways, in order to develop and achieve control over their own personality, if only in getting a sense of proportion about sexual experience ... it is all too easy to marry mainly to satisfy sexual curiosity.

This woman, who signs her letter with "spinster" maintains self-knowledge would be more useful to her than the advised practice of self-restraint.<sup>24</sup> It was only in 1966 that the FPA changed its guidelines and made contraception freely available to single women.

Perhaps if women would have had an easier access to contraceptives they would have had more control over their own sex life. Sex mainly seemed to have been a male-dominated affair in Britain in the '50s and '60s, with female orgasms dismissed as irrelevant and men firmly in charge of birth control. The FPA namely concluded that "the British Family Planning scene is one of strong preference for masculine birth control methods"; 70% of people married between 1950 and 1960 used contraception, of which 49% used condoms, 15% the withdrawal method, 13<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>% the Dutch cap, and 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>% the douche.<sup>25</sup> In Gorer's 1969 survey male contraceptive methods are also most widely used, although the pill is a rising star among younger people and the higher income groups. 57% of Gorer's sample (which included single and old people) practised birth control, 29% of the sample used condoms, 19% the pill, 5% withdrawal, 3% coil,

and 1% safe period. The pill was then only available on paid prescription, in contrast to condoms, which provided another obstacle to its use. Gorer notes the belief, particularly among the working class, "that it is the husband's prerogative to determine whether birth control should be used and that it is unseemly, almost unwomanly for the wife to take the initiative".<sup>26</sup> Thus, the average woman in this period was not in control of her own productive organs.

Yet, the FPA concludes that there is reason for some optimism, for many Family Planning clinics came into existence during the '50s and '60s. They regret the fact, however, that GPs are not as well informed as they could be: "Britain may be going the American way, but we are still far from the point at which most general practitioners would be able and willing to give this service effectively".<sup>27</sup>

Next to pre-marital sex, Gorer also discusses extra-marital sex, especially in relation to divorce. Although the '60s are often seen as the period of the sexual revolution (cf. Chapter I, above), on closer inspection this idea is largely a fallacy. Gorer's findings, and the FPA's but cautious optimism indicate that for women in particular not that much had changed by the middle sixties.

Of Gorer's married informers only 8% has been sexually unfaithful, or rather, owns up to being sexually unfaithful in marriage; the actual incidence might have been slightly higher. 22% of married people said that they had kissed somebody other than their spouse seriously.<sup>28</sup>

Gorer's sample of divorced people was relatively small, so he did not want to take the percentages of the answer to the question about the reason for divorce too literally. About  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the divorced mentioned infidelity and adultery as the main cause for their marriage breakdown. Thus, although only a relatively small percentage of married people (8%) had affairs,  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the divorced people's marriages broke down because of adultery. This suggests that if people were adulterous they took their affair seriously and got divorced. People did not just have one affair after another without taking the consequences, something which would be expected in a really promiscuous society.

Fletcher in Britain in the Sixties (1962) shares the view that adultery and divorce were not as widespread as was generally believed. He notes that the institution of marriage as such has not been damaged:

The institution of marriage remains firm and stable for the great majority of people, and, whatever the condition of modern marriage may be, more and more people appear to desire it.<sup>29</sup>

Fletcher quotes the amount of divorced people who remarry and who apparently have not lost their faith in the institution of marriage as proof that this institution is not dead:

Percentages of Divorced People remarrying

Year	Persons	Men	Women
1951	76.8	80.3	73.2
1952	67.9	69.9	66.0
1953	72.5	74.7	70.7
1954	74.9	76.9	72.9
1955	79.6	81.3	77.9
1956	77.3	78.9	75.7

source: Fletcher, Britain in the Sixties, p. 143.

Gorer stresses that there are other reasons for divorce than infidelity:

the relatively major role played by ignorance; ignorance of the spouse's character when marriage is based on a very short acquaintance; ignorance of birth control techniques when marriage is forced by an unwanted pregnancy; and in some cases one cannot help suspecting ignorance of the technique of heterosexual intercourse.<sup>30</sup>

Between 1951 and 1969 there were some interesting developments in what Gorer's total sample thought was the cause of divorce. This indicates how values in society as a whole changed.

What do you think tends to wreck a marriage?

	1951	1969
lack of trust	33%	6%
selfishness	28%	25%
no house of one's own	21%	4%
temper; fighting	20%	10%
sexual incompability; fear of		
no/more children	22%	10%
lack of affection	6%	7%
poverty; money; wives working	25%	17%
bad communication	15%	30%
infidelity; jealousy	14%	25%
conflicting personalities	8%	12%
drunkenness	10%	7%

source: Gorer, Sex and Marriage in England Today, p. 84.

In 1951, the period of enormous housing shortages, having one's own home is seen as a prerogative for a happy marriage. Many people probably suffered from stress in their marriage because they were living with in-laws. In the sixties when marriages became somewhat more egalitarian, lack of trust was not so much a problem as the fear of adulterous relationships (although as indicated above, in fact, but relatively few people had affairs). Finally, bad communication with one's partner is an appropriate point of worry in 1969 when the American passion for improving relationships by visits to a psychiatrist or marriage councillor was about to blow over to Britain.

It was not only people's behaviour which did not change too much, the laws which were introduced, especially in the fifties, did not really give women more freedom either. Carol Smart in "Law and the Control of Women's Sexuality: the Case of the 1950's" shows how legal measures were taken to control women in particular. She mentions the 1959 Street Offences Act which was introduced on recommendations made in the Wolfenden Report (1957), as well as the 1956 Sexual Offences Act, both of which to her confirm woman's status as victim. The latter Act forbids sexual relationships with women under sixteen, but does not refer to boys under sixteen at all.<sup>31</sup>

Barbara Ehrenreich sees Beatlemania as the beginning of women's attempt to gain control

over their own sexuality. Beatlemania, according to her, started on 13 October 1963, when the Beatles gave a concert at the London Palladium, and was at its peak in 1964 and 1965. For the first time men were objects of desire and women were the attackers, letting loose fierce sexual feelings. Of course these girls were well aware that they would never be able to marry any of the Beatles. But Ehrenreich argues that that was precisely one of the main attractions, because "to publicly advertise hopeless love was to protest the calculated, pragmatic sexual repression of teenage life".<sup>32</sup> Women had namely been expected to trade bits of affection for engagement rings and marriage. The clever girl's tactic in the '50s and early '60s had been to measure carefully the allowance of kisses and petting according to the relative likelihood of marriage (no wonder women in Braine or Amis were often portrayed as accomplished sexual teasers). Greater sexual freedom for women started with young single girls in the city, who had easier access to contraceptives after 1966. In the seventies it spread to other parts of the population.

Of course other aspects than sex are important in marriage. Again observers in the '50s and '60s seem to have been very optimistic about the marital relationship as a whole, and again a lot of this optimism seems to have been rather ill-founded when one takes the actual facts into account. Gorer, for instance, notes that the 1950s marriage in which the partners complemented each other, the man the worker and the woman the domestic angel in the house, has in 1969 been replaced by what he calls "a symmetrical marriage". This is "an ideal of equality, of husband and wife doing everything together, of minimal separation of interests or pursuits outside working hours".<sup>33</sup>

Fletcher in Britain in the Sixties (1962) is also very optimistic about marriage and the family in general. He realizes that many people blame the contemporary family for causing social evils:

All ills from which our "sick" modern society is suffering - crime, delinquency, the disreputable behaviour of some teenagers - are laid at the door of the "growing instability of marriage", the "continual increase of divorce", and the "decline" of the family.<sup>34</sup>

He does not agree with this axiom at all and his book wants to prove that the family and marriage are in excellent shape. He mentions eight aspects of the typical British family which to him have particularly improved the position of the wife after the war: the family is founded at an early age; is consciously planned; is small; is separately housed; economically self-responsible and self-

providing; its partners have equal status; it is democratically managed; it is child-centred and public provisions help to improve its position.<sup>35</sup> He does not question or even mention the restrictions there still were on wives at all.

There is even a study which regards the typical marriage of the '50s as egalitarian. In a 1956 study of East London Young and Willmott happily note the what they call "emerging partnership" between husband and wife, with the husband and wife sharing the household tasks and especially the responsibility for the upbringing of the children. They see the family generally as a much more stable unit than it used to be. One reason for this in their view is the fall in the death rate, which to them far surpasses the influence of the rise in divorce: "There has been a fall in the number of broken homes almost entirely as a result of the drop in the death rate, whose importance quite dwarfs the divorces and separations".<sup>36</sup> Another positive feature of the '56 society, according to Young and Willmott, is that couples seem to spend more time together in their comfortable homes, rather than the husband trotting off to the local pub at every opportunity. What they seem to gloss over is that progress is but relative to the point of comparison. They compare the Bethnal Green of 1956 to the Bethnal Green as Helen Bosanquet found it in 1896. It would have been rather sad if there had not been any progress at all in those 60 years.

Reading between the lines, there are clear indications that marriage was not such a terribly democratically managed institution at all, that some were still more equal than others. Most of all it becomes clear who actually held the reins when we look at the question of money. Even Young and Willmott themselves realize there is a problem here when most wives they interviewed answered "don't know" to the question of how much their husbands earned. The husbands themselves did not even want to reveal their earnings to the interviewer in the presence of their wives. Most wives just had to accept the amount of housekeeping money they got, without being able to judge whether this was a reasonable amount in view of the husband's wages, let alone have an equal share in financial decisions. This does not seem to have been just a working-class problem. Among Guardian readers, who could have been expected to have been somewhat more enlightened, wives seemed to have had little more say in the marital financial affairs. No wonder Mary Stott writes in "Women Talking to Men" (1964) that it makes her "hopping mad" to

see that some women do not even get a personal allowance from their husbands, and, in fact, have no financial possessions of their own. She even mentions two teachers who give their whole salary to "the head of the house".<sup>37</sup> She argues that women are not considered to be full adults if they are not thought to be responsible enough to handle their own money. She thinks husbands are frightened that if they give their wives financial leeway, they would become more independent in other respects as well. The letters to the editor which come as a reaction to this article are also revealing. There are a few letters from couples who share the available money equally and have equal access to it, but they form a minority. The rest of the letters are of wives who complain about the severe financial restraints put upon them, or of husbands who fear that their wives will go on spending sprees if they arrange their financial affairs differently. The point is that the person who controls the purse also controls the whole relationship, as some of the letters prove. One woman who had three children in three years writes: "My planning was not made easier by the fact that I never had the ready cash for contraceptives or examinations".<sup>38</sup> Small things such as the buying of books and clothes become enormously difficult. A wife: "If I need a new coat or a new dress my husband comes into the shop with me and writes a cheque. This I find galling and as a result have very few clothes".<sup>39</sup>

The working-class wives in Young and Willmott's study do not complain about the financial arrangements, but middle-class women found a way to voice their grievances even before 1968. In 1964 Margaret Wheeler wrote an article in The Guardian, the "Tale of the Five-Bob-A Week-Wife", in which she relates how difficult she found it to relinquish her status as an independent career woman in charge of her own financial affairs when she married. After 30 years of married life she compares herself to an unpaid domestic servant:

My unpaid domestic service after more than 30 years of it, is now absolutely taken for granted as well as my willingness to spend the rest of my life doing it ... whether I could do something more socially useful or not, just doesn't count; because my husband controls the purse-strings and wants things that way.<sup>40</sup>

Gorer's figures of his 1969 survey support the impression that most couples of all social classes still operate with the principle of housekeeping money for the wife. It also shows the custom in some Northern working-class communities in which the husband hands all his weekly wages to his wife. The most democratic system Gorer could think of, the joint back account, is

only used by a minority even in middle-class circles. He does not even consider the situation which would be most egalitarian: husband and wife having their own bank accounts through which they can arrange their financial affairs themselves, earning and spending money according to their own insights. Total financial independence of a wife just did not enter Gorer's head.

Financial Arrangements in Marriage (totals add up to less than 100%)

Registrar General's Class	Give/Receive House-keeping	Give/Receive Whole Paypacket	Joint Bank Account
AB	51%	2%	31%
C1	45%	6%	23%
C2	57%	15%	8%
DE	47%	18%	3%

source: Gorer (1971), p. 90.

Financial inequalities were not only kept in existence by unrelenting husbands, but also by laws and customs in society as a whole. Banks did not easily provide a married woman with her own bank account without her husband's permission, unless she had substantial assets herself. Also, the law in England did not recognize the married woman's rights to her husband's earnings. Thelma Hunter wrote an article in The Guardian about the poignant situations this created, especially in the case of a divorce. A woman who had been a housewife all her life, while her husband pursued his career could not claim anything the husband had earned during the marriage. Most divorced women were therefore left with very little, whereas the husband possessed any goods which were acquired during the relationship. Other inequalities which made a married woman's financial position precarious could be found, for instance, in the tax-system. Dora Russell in "In a Man's world: The Eclipse of Women" mentions a pamphlet published by the National Council of Civil Liberties which lists, among other things, the financial disabilities women have to face.<sup>41</sup>

Young and Willmott followed their study of working-class Bethnal Green by a study of the

middle-class suburb of Woodford in 1959. They conclude that there is a greater difference between husbands and wives in Woodford than there was in Bethnal Green, where both partners often worked. In the suburb Willmott and Young came across the species of the "absentee husband", the husband who spends a lot of time working hard, while his wife sits at home and looks after the children. They show how a couple, Mr and Mrs Matthews, spend their respective days by means of a diary in which they have asked them to note every 45 minutes what they are doing. This indeed provides an insight into the very different functions husband and wife have:

Obviously it is not easy for Mr and Mrs Matthews to share their interests together in the way they would if they ran a farm together ... Sometimes the split between the lives of husband and wife has been driven so far that they hardly seem to inhabit the same world.<sup>42</sup>

A further problematic development the writers discovered was that the little time the husband spend at home was often used to redecorate the house. In some cases the home seemed to have become a bit of an obsession which was attended to much more than the wife who also lived in it. They see the "people-centred spirit" of Bethnal Green replaced by the "home-centred spirit" in Woodford.<sup>43</sup> There are signs that the Woodford housewives seem to be rather puzzled by the purpose of their lives, but the attraction of the happiness a nice home is supposed to bring in the end overcomes all doubts. A Woodford housewife writes:

I often feel at the end of the day that all my efforts have been of no avail. I remember all the polishing and cleaning, washing and ironing, that all have to be done all over again, and like many other housewives I wish that my life could be a bit more exciting sometimes. But when the evening fire glows, when the house becomes a home, then it seems to me that this is perhaps the path to true happiness.<sup>44</sup>

One can almost hear the sigh of relief of Willmott and Young when they read the final line of hesitant submission to fate of this woman, for they are able to conclude that things are not so bad after all, and that there are no signs of "dangerous dissatisfaction".<sup>45</sup> They might enjoy the false sense of security that all's well, but the symptoms of underlying stress in the typical marital relationship in the '50s and '60s in Britain cannot be overlooked so easily. The sexual and financial submission of the wife prove to be particular sore points in the eyes of the post-1968 women's movement. Before 1968, like some of The Guardian woman's page journalists and readers already referred to in this chapter, some British novelists also saw this dependence of a

wife on her husband as troublesome. In The Golden Notebook (1962) Doris Lessing stresses the importance of financial independence for women in particular. The seven other novelists discussed in Part III, below, are equally concerned with the problematic position of women in the family.

Barbara Ehrenreich in The Hearts of Men (1983) shows that the situation, although perhaps advantageous for men, also limited men's possibilities of development. The breadwinner ethic, as she calls it, also made men suffer. She shows that male unconformity, especially the preference to remain unmarried, was frowned upon in the '50s. She is particularly concerned with America and shows that in America men found their own way of rebellion against the demands made upon them: they founded Playboy (loves women, but hates wives), they rebelled in the Beat Generation (Kerouac, Ginsberg), and, according to Ehrenreich, they also used the heartattack to rebel against the too great demands of the breadwinner role. In Britain one could give the example of the Angry Young Men who had their own form of literary rebellion against the role assigned to them in marriage, but the women novelists discussed in this thesis show a distinct lack of interest in "male problems" and almost entirely focus on the woman's point of view.

In conclusion it is appropriate to mention Drusilla Beyfus's book The English Marriage (1968). In it she interviewed married couples to get an impression of their relationship and how it has been affected by the social changes which have supposedly taken place. These changes are according to her: "Breakdown of class barriers; decline of parental influence; spread of affluence; the growing permissiveness of social attitudes; the retreating hold of religion".<sup>46</sup> And the result of this apparent social upheaval: nothing much has changed:

I found that some marriages have been radically changed by the ways in which the partners have responded to the new challenges. Others, and I dare say the majority, have been touched only marginally by specifically modern conditions.<sup>47</sup>

### III.2 Woman as Mother

Perhaps the most controversial role of all the roles women performed was the role of mother. Almost everybody who was not a mother seemed to have a definite opinion about what a mother should look like and how she should behave. "Good" mothers were mothers who stayed

at home with their children. This would make her children "good" children and would also leave her fulfilled, because she was doing what a woman was meant to do, what she was born to do: look after her children. Enigmatically the thoughts of the mothers themselves on their role as mother seemed to have interested people much less, because it is rather difficult to find evidence of how the performers of the most discussed job in the world actually experienced their lives. Here and there a mother speaks up for herself, and that is often long after the event, such as in the case of Adrienne Rich who published her experience of motherhood in the '60s in 1976 in Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and as Institution. Some sociological studies of the time also registered specific problems, with motherhood, such as unmarried motherhood.

Denise Riley in War in the Nursery investigated the reasons behind the pro-natalist attitude after the war. She concludes that there was a

despondency and alarm over the low birth rate, both past and as anticipated by demographers, which took the solution to the problem to be encouraging women to have more children; four per family was a widely agreed target.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after the Second World War the government in particular had been afraid that the birth rate would be too low to rebuild the country. A Royal Commission on Population was installed which reported in 1949 that motherhood should be facilitated:

We believe that the instinctive desire for a family and the realisation of its lasting satisfactions may be relied upon, given reasonable social conditions, to ensure that families will be of sufficient size to replace the population from one generation to another. The problem is to create those social conditions on the assumption of a further spread of the practice of deliberate family limitations.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, shortly after the war this commission realized that the government would have to take some positive action, such as keeping the war nurseries open, make better access to obstetric care possible, and have reasonable family allowances to encourage women to become mothers. Although the government took the advice of the commission in some matters, it did not keep the war nurseries open. As becomes clear from the statistics quoted below, soon after the war the birth rate was rising more than satisfactorily so that special encouragement from the government's point of view became unnecessary.

Birth Rate U.K. (live births per 1,000 persons of all ages)

1951	15.8
1961	17.8
1966	17.9

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 54.

If these figures are analyzed more, it becomes clear that families do not only become larger throughout the period, they are also completed earlier.

Average Family Size Great Britain (number of live births)

	Year of marriage				
	1946	1951	1956	1961	1964
Av. number of births at marriage duration:					
up to 5 years	1.27	1.20	1.34	1.48	1.45
5-10 years	0.56	0.67	0.72	0.64	-
10-20 years	0.36	0.35	0.30	-	-
completed family size	2.21	2.22	2.36	-	-

source: Social Trends (1970), p. 55.

During the '50s and 60's the example of the war nurseries was used (or rather misused) to stress the need for mothers to stay at home with their children.<sup>50</sup> Further studies apparently supported the view that a working mother cannot be a good mother. One of the most influential studies which showed the negative effects of a child's separation from its mother was John Bowlby's Child Care and the Growth of Love, a study which he made for the WHO in 1950. He studied homeless and "problem" children in various European countries. One of the conclusions he draws from research into

102 persistent offenders aged fifteen and eighteen years in an English Approved School, showed clearly how anxieties arising from unsatisfactory relationships in early childhood predispose the children to respond in an anti-social way to later stresses.<sup>51</sup>

It is particularly the relationship with a child's mother which is crucial to the later development of

the child in Bowlby's view. Bowlby does not look into the children's relationship with their father, because he does not consider the father's relationship with the child as vital as the mother's. It is the mother's ultimate responsibility whether the child will grow up to be a happy, healthy and "normal" human being: "what is believed to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother".<sup>52</sup> The latter assumption in particular received a lot of publicity, and mothers were warned that if they left their children even for a short period of time in somebody else's care, for instance to go out to work, this would damage the child's personality. It was unfortunate that Bowlby's findings which were based on a study of special groups of children in special circumstances (e.g. many children were parentless or homeless because of the war) were used to warn ordinary mothers and children against the danger of maternal deprivation. It was only in 1972 that one of Bowlby's associates, Michael Rutter, qualified some of Bowlby's statements:

The term [maternal deprivation] is misleading in that it appears in most cases the deleterious influences are not specifically tied to the mother and are not due to deprivation.<sup>53</sup>

Rutter also shows that a child can have intense relationships with other people than its mother: "the chief bond need not be with a biological parent, it need not be with the chief caretaker and it need not be with a female" and "a less exclusive focus on the mother is required. Children also have fathers!"<sup>54</sup> Finally, Rutter is of the opinion that most children are not so emotionally unstable that a separation from their mothers needs to be traumatic: "separation need not involve bond disruption".<sup>55</sup> However, these results were only published in 1972, and all through the '50s and '60s the idea prevailed that a mother should spend as much time as possible with her child.

It is slightly ironical that the family who emerged in the fifties as the ideal family, the model for everybody to imitate, the Royal Family, had a mother whose prime responsibility was to her country in her role as queen. This role in fact overshadows every other role she might have, but she was often portrayed in the media as just an ordinary wife and mother.

Most of the evidence of what a heavy strain the supposed permanent responsibility of motherhood put upon most women at the time only surfaced after 1968, as a result of the women's liberation movement. Adrienne Rich, an American poet, published the diary she wrote in which she recorded her experience as a mother in the '60s only in 1976. This diary gives a good

insight into an intelligent woman's private thoughts about motherhood. Most pronounced are her sense of guilt, of not being a perfect mother, and her wish to be free from the responsibility which burdens her:

Journal November 1960

Their voices wear away at my nerves, their constant needs, above all their need for simplicity and patience, fill me with despair at my own failures, despair too at my fate, which is to serve a function for which I was not fitted ... There are times when I feel only death will free us from one another, when I envy the barren woman who has the luxury of her regrets but lives a life of privacy and freedom ...

May 1965

To be caught up in waves of love and hate, jealousy even of the child's childhood; hope and fear for its maturity; longing to be free of responsibility, tied by every fibre of one's being.<sup>56</sup>

Things were made extra difficult for her because her husband took Bowlby's point of view that babies were not the father's responsibility:

Like so many women, I waited with impatience for the moment when their father would return from work, when for an hour or two at least the circle drawn around mother and children would grow looser, the intensity between us slacken, because there was another adult in the house.<sup>57</sup>

She finds Bowlby's ideal state of one woman spending almost all her time looking after her children particularly oppressive. Because of the total demands of the role of mother on her time and energy her other roles suffer. Her husband does not mind because he thought her "struggles as a writer were a kind of luxury".<sup>58</sup> She realizes that only if she has no more children she will be a whole person again, and then she will be able to pursue her other interests without the all-demanding pressure of motherhood swallowing her personality: "I was beginning to look to a time, not too far off, when I should again be free, no longer so physically tired, pursuing a more or less intellectual and creative life" (diary entry August 1958).<sup>59</sup> After having had 3 sons Adrienne Rich finally made up her mind and had herself sterilized.

Another American poet, Sylvia Plath, who was living in England during the greater part of her motherhood, experienced a similar conflict of demands. The poet and critic A. Alvarez describes the even to him astonishing disparity between the self-effacing housewife and mother whom he meets when he visits Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and their children, and the strong, gifted and articulated woman he meets when he reads her poems.<sup>60</sup> Plath was able to combine the roles of mother and poet through very hard work and self-sacrifice. She wrote her collection of

poems Ariel early in the morning before her children woke up. By this time she was living with her two children, separated from her husband. She aptly described the demands of motherhood and her profession when she wrote that she felt "like a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment".<sup>61</sup> She could only fulfil both roles by not following Bowlby's advice for she had a nanny to "help with the babes mornings so I can write ... nights are no good, I'm so flat by then that all I can cope with is music and brandy and water".<sup>62</sup> Sylvia Plath committed suicide on 11 February 1963. Phyllis Chesler in her book Women and Madness, uses Plath's life to give an insight into how too many demands on a woman can drive her mad. This was one factor which Bowlby had not taken into account, by placing so much emphasis on the child's mental health, he forgot the mother's sanity. Chesler remarks that in America in 1968 62% of all people in outpatient mental clinics were women and that 60% of all people in psychiatric wards were women.<sup>63</sup> She describes the reasons for this prevalence of madness among women, and the process through which Plath and many other intelligent women tried to cope and rebelled:

For years they denied themselves - or were denied - the duties and privileges of talent and conscience. Like many women, they buried their own destinies in romantically extravagant marriages, in motherhood and in approved female pleasure. However, their repressed energies eventually struggled free, demanding long-overdue and therefore heavier prices: marital and maternal "disloyalty", social ostracism, imprisonment, madness and death.<sup>64</sup>

In The Female Malady Showalter focuses on the psychiatric treatment of women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the chapter on the post-war period she focuses on the relationship between madness and women's position in the family, and the role of R.D. Laing in this respect. Laing, a close friend of Lessing, thought the institute of the family was largely to blame for the large numbers of schizophrenics in post-war British society: "Laingian theory interpreted female schizophrenia as the product of women's repression and oppression within the family".<sup>65</sup>

The British writer Mary Keene shows in the thinly disguised account of her own childhood, Mrs Donald (1981), how one mother's frustration can influence her daughter, whose frustrations with the role of mother again influence her daughter and so on. Mirra Komarovsky in Women in the Modern World describes the process through which a mother unconsciously "teaches" her

daughter how to be a mother.<sup>66</sup> This forms another argument in favour of paying more attention to a woman's sanity and personal happiness rather than concentrating all efforts on the child as Bowlby did.

One British woman who has particularly attacked the demands made upon mothers is Ann Oakley. In various studies she has shown that what Bowlby and others expected of mothers in the '50s and '60s required a superhuman effort. In the article "Normal Motherhood: An Exercise in Self-Control", for instance, she shows that what generally is regarded as "normal" motherhood requires in fact an abnormal amount of self-denial. She describes the way the woman's influence over herself and even over her child is minimized: doctors and an enormous amount of advice literature tell her what is good for herself and her baby.<sup>67</sup> In Housewife Oakley relates how motherhood in western society "reiterates and affirms traditional forms of behaviour" and is therefore a basic necessity to this society.<sup>68</sup> The vicious circle of thought which is used to retain women in the role of mother goes like this: all women need to be mothers; all mothers need their children; children need their mothers.<sup>69</sup>

There were a few contemporary sociologists who also realized that the burden placed upon mothers was too great. In 1949 Lewis and Maude, in The English Middle Classes, mention the plight of the middle-class mother for whom they feel particular sympathy. The middle-class wife and mother, according to them, faces a greater task than the working-class woman (e.g. middle-class children receive a more extensive education at home; middle-class people eat meals which are more complicated to cook), and has less resources than the upper-class woman who will always be able to afford servants, whatever the cost may be. According to the authors the middle classes are formed by 35% of the population, the working classes are 64%, and the upper class a negligible 1%. Lewis and Maude are particularly concerned with the problems this 35% of people have in getting domestic servants. They subscribe to the "right" of these people to servants to lighten their domestic burden.<sup>70</sup> The Ministry of Labour set up a National Institute of Houseworkers in 1945. The aim was to turn domestic service into a skilled trade, and thereby attract more people back into these jobs. Lewis and Maude are very sceptical whether this will have the desired effect, especially as they have calculated that the minimum amount of hours anybody would need a servant for would be 60 (!), whereas the Institute recommended a working

week of 48 hours. They see the drafting of foreigners into domestic service, or tax reduction for people with servants as the only way to solve the problem of the overworked middle-class woman and the only way to give her some life of her own: "if the husband and wife with children are to get out into the world at all, this sort of life can be lived only with the aid of a modest amount of domestic service".<sup>71</sup> Although Lewis and Maude's solution sounds rather archaic, they at least realized that there was a problem and were prepared to try and find a solution which would prevent women, be it from a certain class, from being turned into servants to their own husbands and children.

About twenty years later, in 1967, M.P. Fogarty also realized that most British women would like to be a mother and a full person at the same time. He suggests 6 points of change which would enable women to have children and also pursue outside interests:

- 1 - institutions should be more flexible (e.g. the family)
- 2 - a higher valuation of the role of the father in the home
- 3 - a higher valuation of the contribution to the home of the mother's work outside it, and less urgency about her continuous presence in it
- 4 - stress the damage to both sexes by one-sided training in male - female roles
- 5 - higher priority for leisure; less over-valuation of work
- 6 - a more flexible pattern of social responsibility for bringing up children.<sup>72</sup>

He does warn, however, that these measures should not be implemented too rashly.

Finally, various contemporary and later studies point out that not only women, but also fathers and even the children themselves lose out because of the way the role of mother has been defined. Most of these are American studies. Jules Hevy conducted research into the families of institutionalized children. In Pathways to Madness (1965) he discusses five American families and their behavioural patterns in detail. He shows that certain behaviour in families can cause a mental disorder in a child. In "Fatherhood as a Precipitant of Mental Illness" William Wainwright argues that the birth of a child is often overlooked when psychiatrists search for the causes of mental illness in men. He compares the experience of 10 men who were all put into a mental hospital shortly after the birth of their first child. These men often felt more tied down because of the birth of their child, especially if the mother had stopped working. Wainwright

notices that if a wife's career is interrupted "she may become a less supportive and less tolerant mate to her husband".<sup>73</sup> Other difficulties which arise because of a baby's birth and which have a bad effect on the new father he mentions are: the father may be jealous of the child who takes up most of his wife's time; if he has a baby son this may aggravate any homosexual conflict which has gone on inside him; and the relationship with his own parents is brought back in his memory. All these factors, according to Wainwright, need not cause mental illness in all men, but this will happen especially if the man is already slightly unstable before the birth of his child.

In the wake of Bowlby's research there were several studies which investigated the education of children, especially parents' methods of rearing children. John and Elizabeth Newson wrote a series of books on the same group of 700 children who were growing up in Nottingham. Their first book Infant Care in an Urban Community was written when the children were one year old in 1965. A follow-up study, Four Years Old in an Urban Community, was made in 1968. They note that in most cases the mother has the final responsibility for the rearing of her children, and that she feels pressurized by the community into this behaviour:

the mother still knows that it is she who is "shown up" by the child's bad behaviour or untended appearance; she who is to negotiate for free time, while the father may take it of right. Mothers themselves are extremely conscious of the basic difference in their situation vis-à-vis the child.<sup>74</sup>

Unlike Bowlby, they do think it important that the father also has his share of caring for the children. But as mentioned above, they accept that the mother has the final responsibility. They find that, in general, the higher the social class the family belongs to, the more involved the father is in the children's upbringing.

#### Father's Participation in Children's Care

class	I/II	III white collar	III manual	IV	V	all
participation:						
high	64%	59%	48%	44%	49%	51%
fair	32%	36%	42%	42%	41%	40%
little or none	4%	5%	10%	14%	10%	9%

source: Newson, Four Years Old, p. 548.

Some American studies were conducted to find out what influenced the amount of a father's participation in a child's upbringing. Kohn and Carroll supported Newson's findings that middle-class fathers are more involved with their children. This in spite of the fact that middle-class fathers are more often away for the weekends or evenings than working-class fathers. Working-class fathers tend to see their role more as providers of money, and leave the actual child care to their wives.<sup>75</sup> L.W. Hoffmann investigated into the family life of 324 families in Detroit, trying to find out whether a working mother made a difference to the way tasks were divided between mother and father. In "Effects of the Employment of Mothers on Parental Power Relations and the Division of Household Tasks" Hoffmann concludes that although the power relation between husband and wife as such did not change significantly, the father did help more with household tasks and child care if his wife worked.<sup>76</sup>

Yudkin and Holme's Working Mothers and their Children (1963) intended to investigate the effect of enforced separation on mothers and children. They slightly modify Bowlby's point of view. They divide children in pre-school and school age, and think it unwise for mothers of pre-school children to go out to work:

Full-time work by mothers of children under 3 is undesirable, partly because of the difficulty of finding good substitute care, but also because it does not give the mother a chance to develop her own relationship with her young child.<sup>77</sup>

Older children, however, can accept a good deal of separation without any harm being done, according to Yudkin and Holme. They also find that in their research most women seem to accept this situation, although it does not make life easy for them: "Women's fight for emancipation and the 'right to work' played an important part in the changes in the past but is not evident now in the views of mothers who take jobs outside their homes".<sup>78</sup>

A few years later, in 1967, Simon Yudkin realizes that for some women there is very little option but to work for, for example, financial reasons. He refers to the special group of separated, unmarried, widowed, and deserted mothers who have hardly any adequate financial resources. He concludes that there is insufficient care available for children of such mothers. Ruth Adam in A Woman's Place shows that because of this problem many mothers just leave their children in homes. Under the Children Act (1948) children could be put into homes while the

parent(s) were able to sort out the problems they had. This had the undesired effect that some women, especially working-class ones, thought their children were well-looked after and did not think they could do any better.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to Yudkin, there were some other sociologists who realized before 1968 that there were some special "problem" cases who needed more attention than other people and who did not benefit from the new "Welfare State". These studies were able to register the failings of the theory that all was well after World War II. Virginia Wimperis assembled material for her book The Unmarried Mother and Her Child between 1950 and 1958. She compares the position of the unmarried mother in many different countries in the world. Britain had a relatively high number of illegitimate children and it is therefore not surprising that this subject seems to have attracted particular attention. In 1950 England and Wales had 35,250 illegitimate births, in 1955 31,145 and in 1958 36,174.<sup>80</sup> After a drop in the mid-fifties the number of illegitimate births rose again, until it reached the 50,000 in the mid-sixties. Wimperis says that, in fact, 1 in 8 babies were conceived outside marriage in the fifties, but many couples decided to marry after the conception. The main reasons Wimperis found for non-marriage was the father being a married man and the unsuitability of the partners. Wimperis does not only pay attention to the difficulties the child might have because of its being born outside wedlock, but also pays a lot of attention to the mother's situation in a chapter called "The Mother's Struggle". The average age of the unmarried mother in the '50s was 20. Wimperis does not call these youthful mothers irresponsible or stupid, but, what is rather unusual for '50s publications, her sympathy seems to be firmly on the mother's side. The mothers often lose their jobs when it is discovered that they are pregnant. Another difficulty is housing. Not many landlords accepted unmarried mothers. Wimperis relates the life stories of two mothers and stresses the difficulties they face. They had to resort to leaving their children with foster parents for long spells. One of the mothers feels so disconcerted by what has happened to her that she concludes that it would have been better if her son would have been adopted in the first place:

If I were to go through the same thing again I would not keep my baby. I think girls should not be encouraged to keep them unless the "encouragers" can see a way of settling her with a right and proper milieu where she and her baby can find happiness and security.<sup>81</sup>

The problems the mothers have to face are enormous, while the fathers in most cases do not have to help at all, not even financially: "the law asks little indeed of the father of an illegitimate child and it enforces less".<sup>82</sup>

The picture Wimperis paints of the unmarried mother is very disturbing, yet it is only in special quarters, in the more liberal corners of society that the general public shows its concern with the problem. In the article "Fifty Thousand and One" published in The Guardian (1963) a mother tells the story of her daughter who is unmarried and pregnant. The plan is to have the baby adopted, even though both the mother and her daughter apparently found that a difficult decision. The mother condemns society which is full of "prejudice and hypocrisy" and makes a girl like her daughter suffer for the rest of her life just because she once "loved recklessly".<sup>83</sup>

Angela Hopkinson's study on single mothers in Scotland which was researched in 1971-1972 confirms the impression Wimperis' study conveyed. This post-1968 book focuses even more than Wimperis on the mother's situation. Most of the mothers Hopkinson interviewed were between 16-19 years old, single, and from a working-class background. The financial responsibility still seems to be firmly with the mother:

#### Maintenance Order of the Whole Sample

	Number	%
no order obtained	58	62.4
order, paid regularly	10	10.8
order, paid sometimes	3	3.2
order, never paid	4	4.3
married/cohabited with father	16	17.2
father died	2	2.2

source: Hopkinson, Single Mothers, p. 57.

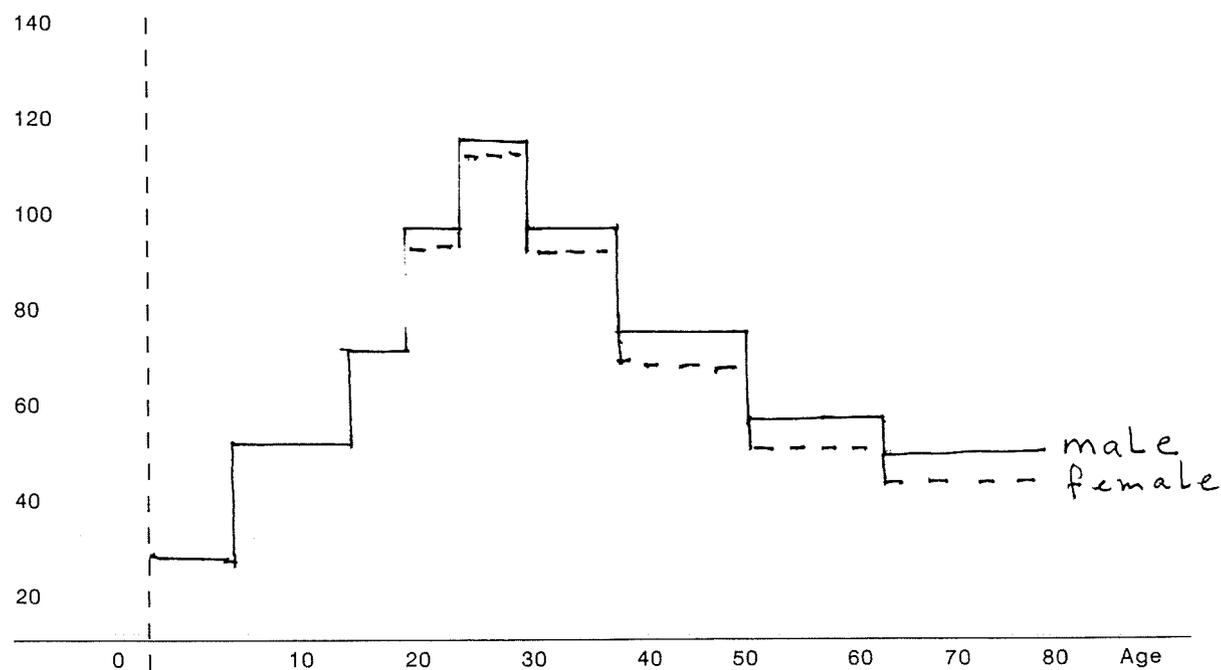
Wimperis sees the irresponsible attitude of the fathers as the cause of the illegitimacy of the birth in the first place. She argues that men do not feel obliged to marry the girl they "got into trouble", as they would have done in pre-war days. The social pressure on men has decreased because most communities have become less closely knit.<sup>84</sup> What she does not mention is that by the

same token women also felt less obliged to marry the father of their child, just because he happened to be the father of the child, if they did not want to prolong the relationship. Hopkinson indicates that most of the unmarried mothers regarded the relationship with the father as a closed episode, and did not want to have anything to do with him.<sup>85</sup>

Dennis Marsden interviewed 116 fatherless families in 1966, not only unmarried mothers, but also divorced and widowed ones. He stresses the precarious financial situation: the average income of the families he considered was only half of the income of the average couple with children.<sup>86</sup> He also realizes the extent of the emotional strain: a quarter of the mothers he interviewed had had a nervous breakdown, and 1 in 9 had tried to commit suicide.

Margaret Wynn also started her career with a book on single mothers and their problems, Fatherless Families (1964). It is only in 1970, however, that she is able to put the whole issue in perspective and realizes that the single mothers are not such a very special case in that many of the so-called "normal" families with both parents alive and one parent employed also sometimes live at subsistence level. She tells the story, for example, of a teacher who in 1967 had to take a second and even a third job in a bakery to support his family.<sup>87</sup> What is needed, Wynn concludes, after reviewing the 1945-1968 period, is a family policy by the government which helps families in need and takes care that they at least have the minimum requirements. One of the purposes of Wynn's book is to devise a minimum standard of living, based on human needs, which should be the foundation of this family policy. She uses a special diagram to show that human needs vary according to the circumstances of the individual.

### The Rise and Fall of Minimum Human Needs (34 - 54 years = 100)



source: Wynn, Family Policy, p. 67.

These curves show that there cannot be one minimum income which should suffice for everybody. Wynn maintains that the problem is that it is not generally recognized that babies and children have their own needs which affect the family's living standard: "the standard of living of parents falls when their children arrive and the standard of living of a family falls as each new baby is added".<sup>88</sup> Wynn does not share the optimism of people such as Marwick (cf. Chapter I, above) who point to the importance of tax as a social leveller, for as she rightly remarks, small and large families are taxed equally. Wynn also shows that the distribution of small and large families among the social strata is not as straightforward as might have been expected.

Mean Family Size by Socio Economic Group (mean family size = 100)

1961	mean family size
employers and managers - large establishments	88
employers and managers - small establishments	90
professional workers - self-employed	104
professional workers - employees	89
intermediate non-manual workers	87
junior non-manual workers	88
personal service workers	100
foremen - manual	95
skilled manual workers	101
semi-skilled manual workers	106
unskilled manual workers	121
non-professional workers on own account	94
farmers - employers	118
farmers - on own account	109
agricultural workers	110
armed forces	108

source: Wynn, Family Policy, p. 286.

Her final advice to women is to make sure that it will never be possible for them to become poor, whatever situation they might find themselves in: "By improving women's employment opportunities, education greatly reduces the chances of women ever becoming poor, even if they are so unfortunate as to become lone mothers".<sup>89</sup>

Again, a woman on The Guardian's women's page illustrates the problem families face. Betty Thorne, a mother of six children, describes vividly in "The Bad Spell" (1962) how difficult it sometimes is for her to find the money to feed and clothe her children.

Like other families in our circumstances we "pay at the weekend". Earlier on, other money troubles have arisen and we have obtained credit from the local shops - what the "haves" call an account, but we call running up a bill.<sup>90</sup>

It was only after 1968 that the government acknowledged the seriousness of the problems which affected families. On analogy with the survey Audrey Hunt held on women's employment in 1965, she was commissioned by the government in 1970 to undertake a detailed research into families. The two volume report containing the results of this survey, Families and their Needs

with Particular Reference to One-Parent Families, was published in 1973.

The other side of the coin of Bowlby's theory, maladjusted children, formed the focus of attention for some of the British researchers of the time. Two women published books on the way adolescent people spend their spare time. This particular topic received a relatively large amount of attention for the reasoning was that young people if they cause trouble they are likely to do that in their time off work.

Mary Morse was part of a team of social workers who secretly mixed with young people to record their behavioural patterns. Morse's book supports Bowlby's theory that ill-adjustment to society often follows a breakdown in family relationships: "The finding to emerge most often was that while the social and economic background of the unattached varied considerably, a breakdown in family relationships was a common factor in all cases". She cannot conclude, however, that the children must have been suffering from "maternal deprivation", for it is the relationship with the father which seems to be most stressful. After saying that the relationship with the parents was often troublesome, she states that "this was particularly true of the relationships with the father; the breakdown in relationships there could be described as acute, while somewhat happier relationships were enjoyed with the mother".<sup>91</sup> This indicates a somewhat ironical failure of Bowlby's theory. He discarded children's relationships with their father as being of financial importance only, while Morse's results show that the main disturbances children have seem to relate to their inability to communicate effectively with their fathers.

Pearl Jephcott investigated the use of leisure time by 15-19 year olds in and around Glasgow between 1964 and 1966. She recognizes other reasons than a family's breakdown for disturbed behaviour. The "risk groups", as she calls them, are children with a low IQ, youngsters who have suffered serious social disabilities as children, children from unusually large families, from households where one parent is ill, from incomplete homes, and shy children.<sup>92</sup> She also mentions the fact that the new estates seem to house an enormous amount of adolescents, who can team up easily and form a gang. Girls, according to her, are more "at risk" with regards to wasting their leisure time or getting into trouble, because the girls she studies had even less formal education than the boys and also led a less regular life because they changed jobs very

often. This perhaps indicates the use of a double standard on the part of Jephcott, for it is highly unlikely that the girls in actual fact showed greater signs of delinquency than the boys.

### III.3 Women in the Extended Family

In earlier days the extended family formed an effective support system which helped the busy wife and mother as much as possible. After the war it was only in particularly close-knit areas, for instance in the countryside or in East London, that these ties survived. Several studies of the time were concerned with the break-up of the extended family, and tried to monitor what exactly was going on. Fletcher in Britain in the Sixties sees this as a positive development, because, according to him, there will be less tension between the different generations.<sup>93</sup> He proudly mentions all the functions the nuclear family has gained, but does not seem to realize that these extra responsibilities could also cause tensions, especially for the women in a family. Young and Willmott (1957) give a good impression of how positive the links between mothers and daughters can be, when they discuss one of the last remaining close-knit communities, Bethnal Green. All generations often live but one or two streets away and are at home in their parents' and children's homes. Mothers value the help they get from their mothers, especially in looking after the children, which becomes a less lonely and arduous task than it is elsewhere in the country. The grandmother herself feels still useful in the community, and is not as lonely as she might otherwise have been. Young and Willmott see less close ties along the male line. While all mothers and daughters share the same experiences as wife and mother, fathers and sons, who before the industrial revolution often had the same jobs, mostly have unconnected work. It is understandable that Young and Willmott advise the government to try and keep the larger social groupings in tact when they move people to the new housing estates.<sup>94</sup>

In their study of the middle-class community of Woodford, Willmott and Young find a much less supportive network. They conclude that here the nuclear family is much more important than the extended family, and that Woodford people think it is not good for children to live too close to their parents after marriage.<sup>95</sup> The tie between mother and daughter is still relatively strong, but it is more likely that the daughter is a help to her mother, for instance in the case of illness of the mother, than vice versa. The grandmother is not involved with the upbringing of the children for

the daughter takes care of them by herself. It is the bond with her husband which is more important to the young wife than her relationship with her mother. Perhaps because there is a less close tie between mothers and daughters, women have to make a special effort to meet other women. Women's clubs and the Women's Institute seemed to flourish in Woodford. In general, because there is a lesser involvement of one generation with another, help to another generation seems less natural to people. Willmott and Young mention the day-to-day care for old people which forms a real problem, both when they are living with their children and when they try and live on their own.<sup>96</sup>

Colin Bell in Middle Class Families (1968) explains why the nuclear family is so much more important than the extended family to the middle classes. The focus-point in middle-class families is the career of the husband and father and everything else is subordinated to it. This career often demands geographical and social mobility and ties with the extended families are therefore regarded as hindrances. By giving three examples of christening services Bell shows that the further removed, both geographically and socially, a couple is from their parents, the less contact they have with these parents and the rest of the extended family. Bell argues that the ties never become completely cut off, and that there is a particular bond between fathers and sons. He disagrees with Willmott and Young that the mother-daughter link is more significant. Middle-class fathers often help their sons financially: "the male link is the means by which the elder middle-class generation channels financial aid to the next generation".<sup>97</sup>

#### **III.4 Signs of Dissatisfaction**

Family relationships seem to have been a likely source of dissatisfaction for a woman between 1945 and 1968. Seen from a woman's point of view, there is a darker side to the general developments affecting the family in the '50s and '60s which are normally regarded in an almost unreservedly positive way (cf. Chapter I, above). Although the '50 and '60s show a step in the right direction in comparison with what went before, women in particular did not have much reason to be too jubilant.

Just as with the problems women had in their role of worker (discussed in the previous chapter), the problems women had as wives and mothers were often not recognized at the time.

To some extent Elizabeth Wilson's statement that "the most significant things about women were not said at all, but were represented by a silence"<sup>98</sup> holds true. Nevertheless, evidence about what lived underneath this silence emerged. As shown above, a few sociological studies bring some of the problems to light. A few women themselves voice their grievances, notably on The Guardian's woman's page. And, further signs of dissatisfaction will be examined in Chapter IV From Femininity to Feminism. Furthermore, as will be argued in Part III, below, British middle-class women novelists formed one of the most powerful voices, relating women's point of view of life. These women were able to produce novels which were true "mediators", in Raymond Williams terminology, between society and the world of the imagination.

It is only after 1968, however, that women not only analyze the problems they face, but are also able to put them in a larger theoretical framework and are thus able to suggest radical solutions for them. For Adrienne Rich it was only in 1976 possible to give a full interpretation of the problems with motherhood which she experienced in the '60s. She examines countless interpretations of the concept of motherhood through history and in many cultures and concludes that the particular form the role of mother takes in our society is "essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers".<sup>99</sup> In 1976 she also has a vision of what it could be like if women had the power to decide their own destiny:

We need to imagine a world in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence in a new relationship to the universe.<sup>100</sup>

Ann Oakley sees the solution especially in a greater solidarity between women. Furthermore, she calls for a radical change in society: "The housewife role must be abolished. The family must be abolished. Gender roles must be abolished".<sup>101</sup>

Betty Friedan in The Second Stage supports Oakley's theory that women can only be happy in a family after a fundamental change in the structure of society. She realizes that it is not women themselves who are the problem, but society. What is needed, according to Friedan, is not just a women's movement, but a "sex-role revolution" which will bring the world in the second

stage of women's liberation:

In the second stage, when women and men share the work of their days, on the job and at home, with new equality and autonomy, authentic feelings, on the part of both women and men, will replace the role-playing and the torturous stifling masks imposed by that excessive dependence, need for dominance, and the resulting buried hostilities in the family.<sup>102</sup>

## CHAPTER IV

### FROM FEMININITY TO FEMINISM

So far some key areas of possible dissatisfaction for women have been identified. It has already been indicated that the unhappiness caused by problems at work or in family arrangements often lived an underground life, and although felt by women of all classes, were mainly voiced at the time by certain women, notably middle-class intellectuals. The outlet this unease found in literature will be discussed in Part III, below. In this chapter the expressions of dissatisfaction in society will be investigated further, in particular the way these pre-1968 expressions relate to the post-1968 women's movement. It will be shown that the post-1968 women's movement provides a logical continuum rather than a sudden break with what went before.

#### IV.1 Expressions of Discontent, 1945-1968

After the full franchise had been obtained in 1928 there was a certain optimism among the generation of feminists who had striven to gain the right to vote. It seemed to them that their goal had been achieved. It was only slowly but surely that some women started to realize that the vote on its own was not effective in creating equality between men and women. In the period between the wars the gradual realization of women that all their goals had not been achieved yet translated itself in a growing concern with social issues, such as maternity benefits.<sup>1</sup> The feeling of awareness that what was necessary was an economic and social equality was growing in the period 1945-1968. In The Guardian in 1957 Kay Collier wrote one of the first post-war articles, "Towards Full Equality", in which this sentiment is voiced. She argues that the right to vote has merely been "a necessary stage in the general movement towards greater social equality".<sup>2</sup> She realizes that "true equality has still to be achieved" and that "full equality is more difficult to establish than women's franchise".<sup>3</sup> Many articles followed in The Guardian all through the sixties claiming that full citizenship had not been reached yet, not even in politics (e.g. Thelma Hunter "After 40 years, 28 women MP's", 1959).

Elizabeth Wilson in Only Halfway to Paradise seems rather surprised that she has to

acknowledge at the end of her study that there were signs of feminism between 1945 and 1968.

She grudgingly acknowledges that:

feminism did not die in the years after the war. There continued to be women's organizations that made feminist demands, even if there was no movement to combat the general oppression of women, and there were certainly many women who struggled as feminists, although they often felt isolated.<sup>4</sup>

In There's always been a Women's Movement this Century Dale Spender goes much further when she emphasizes the continuity of the women's movement. She discusses for instance the lives and works of Dora Russell and Mary Stott to show that feminism was alive in the immediate post-war period. In both Spender's and Wilson's analyses of the situation it does become clear, however, that certain strong-minded well-educated women kept feminist ideals alive, and that it was not yet a mass movement before 1968. Another difference with the post-1968 period was that the expressions of feminism which were uttered often seem to take the form of complaints or dissatisfaction with the situation as it was. They did not go one step further, i.e. they did not suggest comprehensive and feasible alternatives to the current situation. An example is Dora Russell's article "In a Man's World: The Eclipse of Women" (1965). In it she complains that women are not powerful enough in society, e.g. they never get the most responsible positions. She also argues that there is too much dominance of male concepts such as sex without love, a low status for the person who bears and rears the children. Yet, she does not demand a radical change, but suggests that parenthood should also be seen as very important and that female concepts should be taken more seriously.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time as the need for more feminist action became clear to more and more middle-class intellectual women as the years progressed towards 1968, the influence of the concept of femininity gradually decreased. This influence was largest in the early fifties, and never completely lost its appeal to most women in the period under discussion here. The concept of femininity played a large role in society, and formed a prescription for life for women. Adhering to the rules of femininity was seen as the only valid way for women to happiness. In Thinking About Women Mary Ellmann describes the impact of the idea of femininity. Ellmann shows how the use of the sexual stereotypes of masculinity and femininity pervades society as well as literature: "The dichotomy was established. The dominant and masculine mode possessing the

properties of reason and knowledge, the subsidiary and feminine mode possessing feelings and intuitions".<sup>6</sup> Women, according to Ellmann, are supposed to be connected with emotions and feelings. Women are also thought to have more religious feelings than men. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to relate to the world by means of their reason. Another stereotype Ellmann refers to is: "Range is masculine, and confinement is feminine".<sup>7</sup> Because the male is seen as being able to understand the world rationally and because he has a wider experience, the female is supposed to submit herself to this higher relation the man has with the world. Other stereotyped feminine characteristics Ellmann mentions are formlessness, passivity, and instability. The Birmingham Feminist History Group has made a study of how this idea of femininity pervaded all aspects of society, for instance, education, family life, and sexuality, in the '50s. Being feminine, i.e. passive, submissive, non-intellectual, and intuitive, was what was required of women in this ideology. In their conclusion the Birmingham Feminist History Group states that: "Girls and women were surrounded by representations of themselves which focused on the satisfaction they would achieve through their marriages and their children".<sup>8</sup>

Femininity was the way to a woman's identity. If she conformed to the feminine ideal she was "good", if she rebelled she was "bad". Susan Brownmiller has made a rather apt analysis of the effect of femininity on women, the reasons for its appeal, and the way it limits women's outlook:

The fear of not being feminine enough, in style or in spirit, has been used as a sledgehammer against the collective and individual aspirations of women since failure in femininity carries the charge of mannish or neutered, making biological gender subject to ongoing proof. The great paradox of femininity, as I see it, is that a judicious accession here and there has been known to work wonders as protective coloration in a man's world and as a means of survival, but total surrender has stopped women point-blank from major forms of achievement.<sup>9</sup>

The attraction is that it makes one "normal" and "accepted" as a member of the female race; the disadvantage is that it is restrictive.

It is therefore not surprising that Betty Friedan used the concept of femininity in her attack on women's position in society. In The Feminine Mystique (1963) she tried to show that the concept of femininity does more harm than good and that it makes many women miserable. She especially pointed to the situation of the suburban middle-class housewife, the "green widow",

who had not much to fulfil her in her everyday life. She realizes that "housewives of all educational levels suffer the same feeling of desperation".<sup>10</sup> She blames the mass media, advertising, and the adherents to Freudian thought for the wide acceptance of the idea of femininity.<sup>11</sup> The Feminine Mystique played a large role in identifying what exactly made life more difficult than necessary for many women. Its main purpose was to "name" the problem, as Friedan calls it. Friedan, like many British feminists of the time, did not design a detailed plan of action of how things could be changed. The only thing she did was advise women to have both a job inside and outside the home to keep them sane. It was only after the publication of The Feminine Mystique, after she had been overwhelmed with reactions from women all over America, that Friedan realized that a more fundamental course of action was needed. This significant break in attitude occurred in America in 1966. One of the letters Friedan received urged her to do more than just identify the problem:

It's not enough just to break through the feminine mystique and realize that women are people and have the same right as other people to develop to their full potential as individual human beings. Something has to be done about the barriers that keep women from participation in every single field in our society.<sup>12</sup>

Friedan, and, among others, some women who had been a member of the President's Commission on the Status of Women (which had been installed on 14 December 1961) founded the National Organization of Women on 29 October 1966. This organization was committed to doing something for women.

The Feminine Mystique, Friedan's analysis of women's position in society, appealed to British women and seemed to spark off signs of recognition. Eleanor Timbres in her review of The Feminine Mystique in The Guardian (1963) mentions that "the boredom and dissatisfaction of intelligent housewives" is also a feature of British society.<sup>13</sup> One of the first full British analyses of women's situation in society appeared in the New Left Review in 1966. Juliet Mitchell in "Women: the Longest Revolution" complains first of all that the liberation of women is not really incorporated in socialist theory, and that it is often regarded by socialists as not very important. She goes on to mention four key points on which women are exploited. They are not admitted to the production process, the reproduction and socialization processes are seen as an exclusively female concern, and sex is used to suppress women. She concludes that "a general solution can

only be found in a strategy which affects all structures of women's exploitation".<sup>14</sup> After the publication of Mitchell's article some more articles were published on the role of women in socialist thinking in the New Left Review and a debate was thus started.

Socialists and communists were by no means quickly converted to the idea of a separate revolution for women. Tricia Davis analyzed the attitude of the Communist Party towards women in the post-war period, and she concludes that the communists failed to see that women had different problems from men. In their ideology women's troubles would automatically be solved after the revolution had taken place for everybody. If communist women felt any sympathy for the feminist cause they often felt they had to suppress this because they would have been regarded as disloyal to the greater cause of liberation of all mankind by their male comrades. The Daily Worker's women's section therefore mainly contained traditional subjects such as fashion and cooking, and did not educate women into greater self-awareness of their situation.<sup>15</sup>

Not all women who experienced difficulties coping with the demands upon them turned these troublesome experiences into positive action. Some resorted to what more or less amounted to self-destruction. Phyllis Chesler's study of women's madness is worthwhile referring to again in this respect. After conducting 60 interviews among female psychiatric patients, she concluded: "Only a minority of these women experienced what I would call genuine states of madness. Most were simply unhappy and self-destructive in typically (and approved) female ways".<sup>16</sup> Madness as a way out for women became the topic of a relatively large number of novels, especially in novels by American women writers in the sixties. Notable examples are I Never Promised You A Rose Garden by Hannah Green (1964) and The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath (1963). In 1987 Alison Corob provides further evidence for the suggestion that a strict belief in a feminine identity drives some women into madness and depression: "The theories seem to suggest that women who have internalized societal descriptions of female behaviour and those who fulfil stereotypically female roles are especially vulnerable to depression".<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Rose also argues that psychoanalysis shows that women do have difficulties adjusting to their role "Psychoanalysis becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women".<sup>18</sup> In the fifties and sixties, however, these truths were often not recognized yet by most

psychiatrists, and madness was not seen as one of the side-effects of the feminine mystique.

## IV.2 Dissatisfaction Reflected in the Media

Middle-class women have been referred to before as forming the backbone of the opposition against femininity before 1968. Articles and books by women such as Mary Stott, Dora Russell, Vera Brittain and Katherine Whitehorn are examples of this. To get an impression of how exactly women's discontent was expressed before 1968, it might be useful to analyze in detail some of the products of the media between 1945 and 1968. Several sections of the media will be looked at to find out where the dissenting voices were strongest in publications meant for the general public. At the time of publication these obvious signs of the failure of the feminine mystique to make women happy were largely overlooked, but as we will see, they were significant enough to indicate to us that even before 1968 women were not satisfied. Special attention will be paid to the way The Guardian, The Listener, New Society and a range of women's magazines dealt with the emerging dissatisfaction of women. These have been chosen because they together give a reasonable picture of where and how discontent found an outlet.

### The Guardian

The Guardian has been referred to before in previous chapters as containing an important source of information about women's problems with their position in society. During the greater part of the period under discussion here The Guardian contained a women's page in its Wednesday and Friday editions. It was specifically meant for women readers and paid attention to women's issues in articles. The Guardian readership generally consists of educated, middle-class people with liberal ideas, thus people with the same social background as the eight writers to be discussed here (cf. Part II) and also resembling Stott, Whitehorn and Brittain in this respect. These people were all part of the same phenomenon: educated, middle-class women were the ones who found it easiest to find a way to express their unhappiness about the situation they found themselves in. The Guardian's women's page played a key role in bringing together women with the same ideas. In 1961, for instance, the Housewives Register was set up after a wave of letters to The Guardian from housewives dissatisfied with their lot.

Looking at The Guardian in detail, it is remarkable to see what a variety of topics relating to

women was discussed. In the fifties the tone of the articles was still light-hearted, but underneath this light-heartedness some serious complaints were voiced. In the fifties and early sixties the women's page was called "Mainly for Women". In the late sixties it was just marked by the symbol for woman.

A typical month of Guardian articles on women in May 1959 shows an interest in a variety of unconventional topics related to women. The issue published on 29 May 1959 contained an article called "Spreading the Fragrance of Peaceful Coexistence". In it the female author relates her experience of living in Belgrade and argues (at the height of the cold war!) for better mutual understanding. On the same page there is an article written by a reader who argues that life need not always follow the conventional path. She met her husband through a marriage bureau and is still married after 10 years. The fact that she only signs the article with her initials ("K.P.") rather than with her full name indicates the sensitivity of the topic at the time.

The article published on 22 May 1959 is particularly interesting. In "Contemporary Portrait of a Lady's Man" Monica Furlong ridicules the unrealistic qualities of women's magazine fiction. Through her comments on the magazine stories Furlong criticizes the convention of femininity. She writes that in the magazine stories "marriage, no matter to whom, is the criterion of all success, the childless are, after spinsters, the supreme failures, and if a career woman loses her man it is no more than she deserves".<sup>20</sup>

The Guardian also shows women at work and it is clear that they are enjoying it. The May 1959 issues have articles on women working abroad, e.g. a teacher working at an American school in Holland tells about her experiences. In The Guardian the working woman is one who is to be admired.

In the sixties the criticism becomes much less light-hearted. Serious letters, often even with a decidedly angry tone, complain about the situation. A letter by a reader:

What our critics fail to realize is that although the young married women of to-day has gadgets - instead of the Mrs Palmers - to help her with the work around the house, this does not solve the problem of caring for her children ... in fact, we have very little spare time in spite of our labour-saving equipment.<sup>21</sup>

On the same page there is a letter from a reader who has founded the Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Pregnant Women. In her letter she complains about the state maternity hospitals are in:

"Our maternity hospitals are often unhappy places with memories of unhappy experiences. They are overcrowded, understaffed and inhuman".<sup>22</sup>

The more the sixties progress the more The Guardian women's page tries to play an active role in bringing like-minded women together. There were issues, for instance, containing pleas in favour of playgroups.<sup>23</sup> And on 6 September 1964 The Guardian published a rather revealing article on the menopause. The article entitled "The Difficult Years" by Dorothy Chapman states that life gets much easier if you can at least share your problem with somebody else. The author of the article for a long time had nobody to talk to about her problematic menopause "since we were all, I suspect, basically keeping up the same front".<sup>24</sup> Of course women were not supposed to have problems if they lived their lives according to the feminine idea, so it is understandable that it was quite difficult for women to take the first step and talk about their problems. This is exactly what Chapman did. She wrote a letter to her friend and her friend was very glad when she received it. She wrote back: "I know so little about the menopause really, and no one talks about it ... thank goodness you have brought the subject up".<sup>25</sup> The articles on women's issues in The Guardian had the same effect as these letters: they played a large role in opening up ways for the expression of discontent, and the possibility of discussion. The women's page of The Guardian was one of the few places in post-war Britain where one was allowed to complain publicly.

In the late sixties there was also a large number of articles and letters from readers who advocated a women's right to work, and stressed the positive influence of having a job on a woman's life. This idea of work as the solution for all problems is also, as we will see (cf. Part III), strongly present in the novels to be discussed here, and is perhaps not a very realistic attitude to take, as women who worked also faced discrimination and other problems (cf. Chapter II, above). An example of a letter which sees work as the way out is the one from a mother and housewife who wants "a fuller and more stimulating life than the domestic round can offer".<sup>26</sup> That 1967 issue of The Guardian contained several similar letters. On 5 July 1967 one of the letter writers states that she does not "hate being feminine" but that she is one of those "energetic women who love their homes and still have room in their lives to practise a profession".<sup>27</sup> This reader still feels she has to make a bow in the direction of femininity before she can reveal her opinion.

Finally, it is worthwhile ending this discussion of the role of The Guardian by comparing it to another daily newspaper The Times. The Times had a women's page in the sixties, but it only dealt with traditional topics such as fashion and cooking. One of its issues in 1964 published an interview with a working woman, but the whole trend of this article was against her, for this interview, with a Japanese woman journalist, mainly centred around the question of how tired she felt all the time!<sup>28</sup> No serious questions were asked at all.

### **Women's Magazines**

Secondly women's magazines will be discussed. These magazines especially produced for women, and getting response from many women from all over the country, particularly through the letters page, could have been a potential mode of expression of dissatisfaction.

Marjorie Ferguson carried out research to find out how the women's magazines related to femininity. In the results published in Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity she concludes that women's magazines are firmly on the side of femininity and that they perform an important task in "teaching" women femininity. They are crucial instruments in making women adjust to the feminine role. Their aim is to provide feminine role models for the readers to follow. She concludes: "Women's magazines collectively comprise a social institution which serves to foster and maintain a cult of femininity".<sup>29</sup>

Cynthia White who conducted a similar study on the women's magazines published between 1939 and 1968 comes to the same general conclusion. She does mention various instances, however, in which women's doubts were expressed. She says that in spite of the fact that, for instance on the problem page, letter writers were firmly guided onto the right track, there appeared to have been a significant and persistent trickle of "uneasy" letters which were being published. It is worthwhile to quote one of the letters to My Weekly written in the 1950s:

Do other women have moments of sheer panic when they think of all the places they have never visited, the hundreds of books not yet read, the plays, films, ballets and concerts unseen and unheard, while they are tied to the sink, ironing board and cooker? I do, but perhaps to be the mother of two lovely little girls like mine is more than adequate compensation for all those other things I'll never be able to do, or see, or have.<sup>30</sup>

This letter writer's attitude sounds familiar to readers of Young and Willmott. In Chapter III, above, it was shown that they quoted one of the women of Woodford who felt just as uneasy as

this woman and who also hesitantly said that she supposed "real" home life made up for everything. White quotes other instances of troubled women who fear that being a housewife makes them too narrow-minded. In Woman's Own the editor tried to take all these doubts away by saying that being a wife and mother is the most important job in the world.<sup>31</sup> Any dissenting comments thus became suppressed.

Unlike Ferguson, White stresses the varying degrees of adherence to the creed of femininity of each individual magazine. White mentions that shortly after the Second World War, in 1946, some magazines were not yet firm believers in the virtues of femininity. Good Housekeeping, for instance, expressed the hope that women would have more choice as to what to do with their lives after the war than before. Another sign that femininity had not yet pervaded all corners of society was that especially magazines at the top of the market, e.g. Lady, discussed some rather controversial social issues such as women prisoners and adoption. This social concern disappeared later with the advance of femininity. Other magazines which were different in their approach are some of the ones which were first published in the period under discussion here. She, for example, was started in 1955. The first editor, explaining why it was different from others, said that not all women are 100% feminine:

The women's magazines of the time just didn't reflect women as I knew them. Of course women have softness, but they are also funny, vulgar and tough. They are in touch with the harsh realities of life. No-one who undergoes child-bearing could be anything else.<sup>32</sup>

She dealt in the fifties and sixties with many subjects others would not discuss at the time, such as abortion, breast cancer, infertility, menstruation, and hysterectomy. She did not obtain such a large circulation as its more conventional rivals. She's circulation in the '60s was around 300,000, while Woman's Own sold in the same period around 2 million copies per week.

Another new title, Nova, was launched in 1966 when research carried out in 1964 by Dr. Ernest Dichter showed that there was a "movement towards greater independence, responsibility and social mobility for women".<sup>33</sup> Nova tried to appeal to this new trend among women. Nova was meant for the more intelligent and educated woman and its aim was to limit the traditional women's magazine topics (e.g. cooking, sewing, household matters) to the absolute minimum, thus, like She, taking decisive steps away from the feminine ideal. One of the regular contributors

was the writer Penelope Mortimer.

The so-called service weeklies, notably Woman and Woman's Own, had the widest appeal to women of all backgrounds. White divides the readership according to social class and shows that these magazines are popular all over the social scale. 60% of classes ABC<sub>1</sub> read service weeklies, 71% of class C<sub>2</sub>, and 63% of class DE.<sup>34</sup> The editors of both Woman and Woman's Own clearly set out to attract the largest possible readership and therefore restricted themselves to the subjects which they thought formed the largest common denominator among women. Working women, for instance, were certainly not seen as admirable in women's magazines. Mary Grieve, one of the post-war editors of Woman, wrote in her autobiography published in 1964, Millions Made My Story:

Woman should concentrate on those interests which are generally held, rather than on minority interests. And sad though it is, there are fewer women strongly drawn to subjects like equal pay and racial problems than to practical skills, personal relationships, and increased self-confidence.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the ideal of femininity was still seen to be held by a majority of women. The "service" these weeklies provided consisted in helping women to adjust to the feminine ideal rather than strengthening their self-confidence to enable them to break away from it as later magazines such as Spare Rib were to do. White sees this service of making it easier for women to cope with the existing society as one of the most important functions of these weeklies:

women's magazines can be important instruments assisting in the social and personal adjustment of women of all ages, helping them towards happier and more fulfilling lives. This is not simply a matter of showing them how to cook well and dress attractively, but of helping them to cope with the everyday problems of life in a complex and demanding society.<sup>36</sup>

Ferguson made a detailed analysis of the content of Woman, Woman's Own and Woman's Weekly between 1949 and 1974. She pays special attention to feature articles, the problem page and the fiction in these magazines. She distinguishes between various messages, or themes as she calls them, which keep recurring in all sections of these magazines. One of the most dominant of these themes was "Getting and Keeping Your Man". Marriage and family life were seen as of the utmost importance for women, and thus it follows that the person who is expected to provide the insurance against unhappiness through marriage is equally significant. The weeklies showed that if women only tried, they could all look attractive to men, and the

magazines instructed women how to achieve this prettiness. Wives were told that the only way to keep your husband was to devote yourself entirely to him and your home: "dutiful wives were urged to value domestic skills above booklearning, and warned against straying from first duties to Him and Home".<sup>37</sup>

The second most important theme, according to Ferguson, was the "Happy Family" theme, emphasizing that true happiness for women can only be obtained in family life. Women were urged to think positive and try and solve their problems. Ferguson summarizes this advice as: "be a better mother, be a better lover, be a better cook, be better dressed and be better looking".<sup>38</sup> One message which featured especially in the fiction of women's magazines of the fifties and sixties was the warning to follow one's head rather than one's heart in matters of love. In particular it was shown that it pays for girls to remain sensible and not to indulge in premarital sex. Finally, especially during the '50s the theme "the Working Wife is a Bad Wife" was prominent. Especially in advertisements woman's role as housewife was reinforced. In the fifties and sixties the developments discussed in Chapter II above, i.e. the growth of the female input on the labour market and the difficulties this created for women more or less completely passed by the women's magazines. These magazines were firmly on the side of women as housewives and mothers, rather than as workers. It was only in the seventies that the tensions created by these conflicting roles were openly discussed in women's magazines.

It can be concluded that women's magazines only in rare cases made room for the feelings of discontent which lived among women. On the contrary, the main aim of these magazines was to make it easier for women to follow the feminine ideal.

### The Listener

Radio and television gained enormously in popularity between 1945 and 1968. The Listener is a weekly magazine aimed at the general public which contains articles on programmes which have been broadcasted on radio and television. An analysis of the 1946 to 1968 issues could therefore give a good impression of the topics which were prominent in people's minds in this period, and the attitudes which were taken on these matters. Although the magazine is meant for men and women it also contains special interest sections for women. Of

special interest to women are, apart from the feature articles dealing with women, the women's page, and regular articles on topics which were discussed in Woman's Hour. In the analysis below these sections and the feature articles dealing with women are used to give an impression of what The Listener thought would be of interest to women between 1946 and 1968.

The Listener carried a special interest page for women on one of the last pages of every issue until 1966. The character of this page changed over the years, mirroring the developments which were taking place in society. In 1945 this section was called "Recipes for the Housewife" and mainly advised women on how to make do with what they were allowed to use under the rationing system. Most recipes dealt with traditional British food. On 6 March 1951 this feature was renamed "Advice for the Housewife". From then on it covered not only recipe problems but also others which might crop up, e.g. what to do with warts, how to convert hats into modern models, and how to wash ties. Thus this women's page came to resemble the women's magazines very closely and also had the same function of helping women to cope with everyday life. On 13 October 1955 the feature was amended again and part of it became taken up by "Broadcasts from Woman's Hour". The issue of 13 October 1955 deals for instance with women who are working in the legal profession. In 1957 the title of the whole feature is changed again to "Suggestions for the Housewife", a slightly less patronising name than the previous one. The content remains more or less the same, but reader's questions are also answered now. Again, this relates to the problem page or letter page one would find in a women's magazine. Here the questions and letters mainly deal with demands for practical advice. Some of the concerns seem rather trivial in retrospect. One reader asked what the best way would be to stop pears from going red when cooking them. In the following issue there is a letter from a husband, which clearly shows how power relations were at the time: the husband commanded and the wife had to follow his wish: "My wife had better not serve them up brown or pink, I like them white, nice creamy white, and that's how they must be".<sup>39</sup>

In the late fifties "Suggestions for the Housewife" appears to have become more and more varied. The message seems to be that people started to get interested in how to cook different things, or how to make food look attractive, rather than the '40s and early '50s idea of making the best of what you have got because of rationing. Recipes also started to be more outlandish, e.g.

Sole à la Meunière, presumably because more people could afford to travel and wanted to try foreign delicacies at home. Other modern topics include: how to store wine, and "Using a Refrigerator Wisely".

In the second half of 1960 the title changed once again, to "About the House", leaving out the term "Housewife" altogether, implying that the matters in these articles should also interest others than housewives. One article in December 1960 dealt with how to keep babies warm, because a doctor on the "Today's Doctor" advisory programme on the radio had mentioned that cot deaths were caused by excess cold. In the second half of 1961 this feature stops having a special name, but there continues to be a specifically female topic on the last page but one of every Listener. In 1961 there is, for instance, a series on "Home Dressmaking", which resembles the tips on beautifying prominent in women's magazines. The writer of this series guides women in the "right" direction: "When choosing a pattern look for a design that will be flattering to your figure, but not too difficult for your talents as dressmaker".<sup>40</sup> In 1964 crosswords and bridge are introduced to this page. In 1966 the special women's interest page ceases to exist, women's wish for prescriptive advice along the lines provided by The Listener apparently having been exhausted.

The articles which did not appear on the women's page but still had women as the subject were more varied than those which appeared on this special page. They resembled the women's magazine style much less, and many topics were introduced, i.e. divorce, or delinquent children, which showed that life in Britain was not a bed of roses.

One of the main concerns shortly after the war seems to have been the problems which were created because of the food, housing, and book shortages. One of the articles in this genre is published by the Ministry of Food, "Food and the Housewife in 1946". These articles mainly seem to have been intended to pacify housewives by saying that "international developments" are to blame and that matters will improve in the spring. In March 1948 a Woman's Hour interview with a Dutch woman is published. She gives her views on the shortages. There was more food available to her than in Britain, but housing seems to have been a major problem too. The woman is very pleased with what she has got, because at least her country is not occupied any more. This article serves to show how women can overcome adverse conditions and resembles the

tales of difficulties overcome which often feature in women's magazines. In the Listeners of this period views on the food shortages are also given by others than the consumers of food, i.e. farmers and greengrocers, who complain that housewives are often too choosy.

A second concern immediately after the Second World War was the birth rate. Roy Harrod in an article on the Royal Commission on Population's census seemed to have been very worried about the low birth rate: the atom bomb is not so disastrous, he says, but "the decline in the birth rate is far more likely to cause the extinction of the human race".<sup>41</sup> He points an accusing finger to women, for he claims that the lower birth rate was caused by "education and by the emancipation of women".<sup>42</sup> A female reader reacts to this in a letter by saying that women are not to blame, but that two wars and a long period of unemployment have made people decide to take less children. This defence of women is also published in The Listener which, except on its women's page, often tried to give the two sides of the story, rather than merely the feminine ideal for women. In 1947 another article on the lower birth rate expresses the fear that intelligent people will become an extinct race. Sir Cyril Burt urges the higher social classes to produce larger families. In 1948 the government published a booklet, Matters of Life and Death, in which the higher birth rate of the previous years is applauded, but people are warned that families are still not big enough. Ironically, an article discussing the booklet appears in The Listener on 10 June 1948, while on 29 July of the same year the article "Britain has too many People" was published, suggesting mass emigration as the only solution to the overcrowding of Britain. In the fifties fears have turned around completely and several publications recommend birth control as a way to higher living standards (e.g. "Limiting the Population", 5 June 1952; "Population and Family Limitation", 30 July 1953). The irony is complete when "The Shadow of the Bulge" (5 December 1957) warns that the children who were born during the peak year of 1947 are starting school and will before long be entering the labour market, and that this will create problems. In the '40s and '50s the "experts" seemed to have been very eager to advise women reading The Listener on how many children to bear, but they did not appear to have been too well informed about the actual developments taking place.

The Listener at times displays a curiously paradoxical attitude towards women, lamenting their independence sometimes, but at other times giving them scope to argue their point of view.

A comparison of some of the articles appearing in the '40s points to this disparity. On 28 March 1946 a piece appeared in which James Laver regretted the disappearance of hats from the street scene. He blames this on emancipation: "what we are witnessing is nothing less than the collapse of the patriarchal system, with consequences which, as yet, no-one can foresee".<sup>43</sup> Another article which is nostalgic for the good old days is "The Passing of the Perfect Lady" in which a man argues that the Victorian Lady perhaps had to lead an artificial life-style, but that it is to be regretted that she has disappeared because she made society so much more "civilized". Both men disapprove of the passing of time, and the changes which have taken place, especially among women. About two weeks later a discussion is held on Woman's Hour between representatives of the National Union of Domestic Workers, middle-class and working-class housewives on the question of domestic help. This was a democratic discussion to which each group of women contributed. The passing of time, the disappearance of large numbers of servants, is perhaps lamented by the middle-class housewives, but they are quite prepared to enter into discussion and work together towards a new solution. The domestic workers voice their complaints, too: they do not like living-in, being told how to dress, the lack of status, and the long hours. They all come to the joint conclusion that it would be a good idea to create an institute which would guarantee good working-conditions to the employees and able staff to the employers. The Labour Government, in fact, also wanted to follow this idea, but, as was shown in Chapter II, above, failed to implement it.

Another popular point of discussion seemed to have been the question of how feminine women should be. Opinions range from women favouring independence to warnings that women should not become too masculine. One of the first programmes which appeared on this theme was a talk by Antonia Ridge in Woman's Hour entitled "Meek Wives".<sup>44</sup> In it she says that husbands nowadays think themselves very generous because they "help" around the house. She argues in a tongue-in-cheek manner that the housework should be shared equally among husbands and wives, because both have a regular share in causing dirty dishes, etc., in the first place. This talk is one of the few which portrays the view that the emancipation of women has not gone far enough yet. There is a larger number of talks which represents the view that emancipation has been achieved, e.g. Violet Markham "Women in Our Changing Society" (8 March 1951),

and Mary Scrutton "A Letter to Posterity VIII: the Woman's Point of View" (27 March 1952). The talks by Florida Scott-Maxwell held in 1955 are examples of the large group of articles which represent the third point of view, namely, that emancipation has gone too far. Judging by the readers' reactions this position also seems to appeal to a large group of readers.

Although the bias in articles seems to be in favour of the traditional image of the feminine woman, there is a whole special group of articles and programmes which counteracts this force. This type of article normally deals with strong, individually minded women who have achieved something special. A definite admiration for these strong women speaks from these articles. Unfortunately this kind of article stops short of discussing contemporary British women; it always deals with strong women from another era, or women who live in another country. It almost seems as if it would be too dangerous to suggest that post-war British women could also be strong, strength of character being a masculine characteristic. Articles on these strong women appear throughout the period. Examples of interviews, programmes, etc., dealing with these women in The Listener are:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Subject</u>
"A Proud and Militant Suffragette"	9.1.'47	interview with Ada Flatman, who tells about her experience as a suffragette
"Women and the Universities"	2.6.'49	centenary of Bedford College
"The First Woman Mountaineer"	1.2.'51	the first woman who climbed the Mont Blanc
"Heart and Home: the Position of Women in America"	28.6.'51	American women are more powerful than their husbands
"Good, Bad and Emancipated"	23.10.'58	Arab women are the most powerful figure in the family
"Mr and Mrs Mill on Liberty"	10.9.'59	J.S. Mill was influenced enormously by his wife Harriet
"Blue Angels of Italy"	28.4.'60	Italian women are admitted to the police force
"Ceylon's Woman Prime Minister"	28.7.'60	on Mrs Bandaranaike
"Bicycling Days"	20.7.'61	the bicycle introduced greater freedom to 19th C. women
"Women in World Politics"	10.8.'61	interview with Mrs Pandit, High Commissioner to U.K. for India
"Eating and Drinking Greek"	21.5.'64	Helen Cam, Prof. of History, relates how she was educated at home

The articles which do deal with contemporary British women (e.g. "The Measure of Emancipation", 19.7.'62, interview with Lena Jeger, MP between '53 and '59) indicate that it has

not been easy for them to achieve what they have. Examples of articles along these lines are "Girl in Fleet Street", in which Olga Franklin warns that it is very difficult for a woman to have a successful journalistic career, even if she is able to organize her home life satisfactorily (8 Sept. 1966). In "On becoming a Woman Proof-Reader" a woman proofreader claims that it is almost impossible for women to become proofreaders (31 Jan. 1952). Another indication of the forces women were up against is revealed in the article "Housewives in Paint" (18 September 1958), in which a man reviews an exhibition of paintings made by women. The man says women will never be able to be outstanding painters as well as wives and mothers. The paintings to him are only second-rate, and he argues that it is best that if women, if they want to paint at all, try to stick to the subjects they know, such as ones which feature the home.

Especially in the '60s The Listener occasionally tried to make it easier for at least some women to achieve what they wanted. Contemporary women writers were given the opportunity to publish their work. Several poems by Sylvia Plath were published in 1962 and 1963, for instance, and Edna O'Brien had one or two short stories published in The Listener in the same period.

The Listener reflects a development which was taking place in society: a growth of social awareness. Whereas in the '40s and '50s most articles had an economic or political flavour, in the '60s much more space is devoted to social issues such as divorce and the family. This development is also present in the type of television programme which appeared to have been popular. The late '50s and '60s show an upsurge in more socially aware documentaries. A documentary programme called "Man Alive" was introduced on TV in 1966 and it was to deal with social problems only (e.g. child molesting, and marriage bureaux). Also, drama on television becomes more socially orientated and reflects contemporary life in the family. On 19 June 1958, for example, the BBC broadcasted on television a modern version of Romeo and Juliet in which Romeo was a truckdriver and Juliet engaged to an Oxford don, reflecting contemporary class divisions. At Christmas time in 1958 Thora Hird made an appearance as a keeper of a home for difficult children. The play, "So Many Children", was unconventional and reflects society's concern about delinquent children. The editors of The Listener were aware of the influence television can have on social matters. In an editorial to celebrate 21 years of television it says:

Television has become one of the most potent social instruments of the new age

that has been born, with its ability to spread ideas, to create personalities, to mould the very fabric of family life, to do immense good and evil.<sup>45</sup>

The Trends in Viewing and Listening which were published regularly in The Listener show clearly how this influence increases, by the sheer growth in numbers of people watching television and the amount of hours they watch per week. In 1963 6.7 million people watched BBC television for an average of 7.2 hours per week, and 7.7 million watched ITV for an average of 8.3 hours per week (total average number of hours = 15.5 per week).<sup>46</sup>

An example of one of the programmes through which the BBC tried to influence society was "A Second Start", which was first broadcasted in 1966. The aim of this programme was:

to help and encourage married women who might be thinking of entering or returning to the teaching profession.<sup>47</sup>

It was later extended to include other professions, such as social work.

There is a curious dichotomy in The Listener between the ideal and the real. The ideal family, as personified by the Queen and her relatives, features prominently. There are pictures of the British Royal Family whenever a birth takes place, or whenever somebody marries. Yet at the same time there is the growing social awareness referred to above, in particular the concern that all is not well with the average family. In fact, among the social topics for articles the break-up of the family and the growth of the number of divorces seem clear favourites, e.g. "The Break-Up of Family Life" (18 October 1951). Already shortly after the war there was the fear that family relationships were seriously disrupted. This fear was so great that there was even a new radio programme called "Family Relationships" which tried to deal with all the problems. One of the suggestions shortly after the war was that perhaps marriages formed in registry offices were less likely to be successful than ones blessed in church, because the church ceremony was thought to be more impressive ("Mr Mullins on Marriage", 1 April 1948). There were many articles discussing the pros and cons of divorce, with most people, be it reluctantly, in favour of an easier divorce. The various legal angles were discussed extensively, such as, for instance, what happens if people married to foreigners want a divorce. The Listener did not seem to be the only one recognizing the necessity of divorce. On 29 June 1961 it carries an advertisement for The Observer's women's page which, according to the advertisement, gives Katherine Whitehorn's "ordinary clear-headed woman's point of view" and which features a series called "Miserable

Married Women".

The care for children and especially the mother's role in this respect is a second favourite topic. An advertisement of 1951, for instance, praises the Salvation Army's "School for Mothers", in which mothers who harm their children because they are "ignorant" or "inexperienced" can try to mend their ways. An article which puts the blame on the parents rather than on the children is "The Problem Parent" (7 June 1962). It advocates a seventh form for parents in which they can learn how to become more interested in their children.

Perhaps unexpectedly, in a respectable magazine like The Listener, sex also takes up an important place. In 1960 there are several articles on the Lady Chatterley's Lover trial. In the '60s there are also various articles on homosexuality, and the new law on homosexuality. Other articles are, for example, one on birth control (10 February 1966), and one on the earlier sexual maturation of girls (13 October 1966).

Finally, there was a whole range of different social topics which got attention in various issues between 1945 and 1968. Examples are articles on family income policy (25 March 1965), women prisoners (13 September 1957), the large number of bachelors living in London (22 January 1962).

The Listener thus provides a picture of a curious mixture of different female images. Although the feminine woman often appears to be the favourite, she is certainly not the only option for an identity offered to women in The Listener. The bias in the '40s and early '50s seemed to have been towards the feminine woman, while in the late '50s and '60s the image seemed to have been less narrowly defined. Throughout the whole period, however, articles can be found which indicate that woman's position as worker and as member of the family are not without problems.

### **New Society**

In 1962 the liberal journal New Society was founded. As its title indicates its editors wanted to offer a different view of society. The journal was aimed at social workers, sociologists, others with a particular interest in social affairs, as well as the general public. Of all the publications discussed here it was thus most specifically aimed at a particular audience. New Society seems

to have been most susceptible to the fact that women did have problems, particularly in the fields of family and work, and that these problems were social ones, rather than ones which were just peculiar to individual women. As we saw, The Guardian also registered women's complaints to a large extent, but New Society goes one step further and tries to put these phenomena in a theoretical framework (see below).

New Society displays a completely different tone of voice from what could be found in either the women's magazines or in The Listener. There is no complacency about the problematic situation of women in society, nor are there the attempts to make women adjust to this situation which could be found especially in the women's magazines. On the contrary, New Society often urges women to see that things need to be changed, that the changes which have taken place in the past are not enough. Whereas the women's magazines failed to discuss the subject of emancipation altogether and concentrated instead on the feminine woman, and The Listener heralded past achievements without relating them to the present, New Society, like The Guardian, makes it clear that the ideal of women's emancipation has not been fulfilled yet. Hannah Gavron, author of The Captive Wife, for instance, reviewed a book called Women: Fancy or Free? In this review she concluded that the suffragettes have not been totally successful:

Girls today are certainly born free, but the married woman is still in chains, shackled to her home by an antiquated notion of what constitutes family life.<sup>48</sup>

Here she voices exactly the sentiment which forms the basis of the growth towards a new woman's movement (also referred to above). John Barr's article "The Modern Suffragettes" notices the dissatisfaction which existed among many women: "a vast number of women in Britain today are nonetheless (in spite of the vote) sincerely aggrieved, more often than not justifiably, by the inequalities, injustices and anomalies which their sex still suffers".<sup>49</sup> He goes on to mention the areas which cause this discontent among women. He mentions examples of legal, moral, and economic inequalities. He also remarks that it is mainly middle-class and some upper-class women who express their grievances. Such clear statements on the discontent among women can easily be found in New Society between 1962 and 1968, while they are only present in a disguised form, if at all, in the women's magazines and copies of The Listener discussed above. An indication that there is a lot of truth in the observations by Barr and Gavron is the fact

that many readers' letters agree with this analysis and supplement it with examples of discrimination which they themselves have experienced. In a later article (17 March 1966) Barr analyzes the interest political parties take in women, especially in wives of politicians. He claims that all the three main parties are not interested in women. Rather than concentrating on how feminine women should be, New Society stresses that women should become more feminist (or suffragette, as Barr calls it). The feminine idea is not pictured as an ideal, only as something which causes inequality for women.

The articles in New Society published between 1962 and 1968 clearly point out where the crucial trouble spots are: in the positions of women as worker and as family members, and especially where these clash. The one item which receives most attention over the years is the trouble women encounter when they try to combine these two positions. Yet, a combination of these is certainly seen as the most ideal situation, and attempts are made to try and urge the powers that be to facilitate this combination. Viola Klein compares the situation of working wives in various countries in Europe in an article based on her book. She concludes that "economic conditions will have to be created ... in which married women have a truly free choice whether or not they wish to go out to work".<sup>50</sup> An article entitled "Beauty, Housewifery, or Good, Hard Work?" reports on the "vaguely uneasy" feelings of housewives who lack "the self-confidence and higher prestige of the working wife".<sup>51</sup> In "Women Power needs a Policy" Nancy Seear argues that because many women stay at home to look after children a lot of valuable labour is lost. Her advice to the government is to amend its policy in such a way that women will be able to work and have children at the same time. Numerous other articles stress the need for qualified labour (esp. doctors and teachers, but also secretaries and architects), and the supply which can be found among married women. Articles on these matters are for instance "The Wasted 400" (9 June 1966), "Wasted Women" (15 October 1964), and "Is it worth educating Women?" (19 August 1965), which stress the loss of valuable labour for society. These articles argue in favour of employment because of ulterior motives, rather than that it would be beneficial for the women.

There are also various items which report on the women who are trying to go back to their jobs, and the difficulties they encounter. "The Married Returner" (26 October 1967), for instance, stresses the particular problems of women who want to take a refresher course before they start

work again (these are not always available), or want to continue a study or training which was interrupted by childbearing.

There are also a large number of articles which deal with the effects of working mothers on their children, and the short supply of child care. Throughout these articles the sympathy is firmly with the mother who combines both positions. D.H. Stott in "Do Working Mothers' Children Suffer", for example, even goes so far as to argue that it is much better for the children if the mother works, and that research has proven that these children are better adjusted than children of non-working mothers (19 August 1965). Thus, the working woman is seen as a feature of contemporary society and the various problems these women have to face are stressed.

Women's role in the family as such also gets a lot of attention. Articles discuss, for instance, problems of teenage marriages, sex, contraception, birth, and poverty among families. In total contrast with The Listener New Society firmly takes the mother's side in conflicting situations with children. In "The Baby as Dictator" it is shown how difficult and demanding babies can be, and that battered babies have become more common because tensions can become very great for mothers who have to combine

a search for identity with an attempt to create or to preserve a deep, sensitive and fully-conscious marital relationship, and to complicate matters with the various neuroses caused by the frustrations of these aims.<sup>52</sup>

Another example of the fact that sympathies lie with the mothers rather than with anybody else is provided by the article "Childbirth Ritual" (31 December 1964), in which the author shows how little power women have over their own pregnancies and confinements. The author, a man, says that the main reason for this is that men are jealous that they cannot bear children themselves, and want to take over all the responsibilities from women.

On the whole New Society's articles on the subjects of women and work, and women in the family point to all the major problems outlined in Chapters II and III, above, and thus seem to be one of the most important means of expression of dissatisfaction of the forms of journalism discussed here.

There are two further popular subjects of articles which show that New Society prefers the feminist side of the argument about women's position in society to the feminine one. The first group of articles deals with deviant behaviour. In "Stress from Social Pressures" (15 December

1964) it is argued that mental illness is often caused by socio-economic conditions. The high rate of mental illness among women and especially among housewives is given as an example.

The second topic is particularly relevant because it concerns women's magazines. Every so often in the issues of New Society under discussion here an article appears which discusses the function of women's magazines in society. The main aim of these articles seems to be the condemnation of the conservative character of these magazines. In "Women, Fiction, and Reality" Thelma Heskell examines the short stories which appear in Woman and Woman's Own and concludes that they are not very realistic:

No married couple ever seems to worry about money, in-laws, lack of prospects or whether their children will pass the 11 plus ... In many ways the fictional world is still a long way removed from the reality of readers of 1963.<sup>53</sup>

In "Women's Weeklies" it is argued that it is not so much the fiction which interests most readers, but that the everyday advice which these magazines give is the main cause for their enormous popularity. The writer sees that the aim is to give women advice on how to deal with society as it is and recognizes that they are firmly "resistant to change".<sup>54</sup> The author condemns their support for the established society and their refusal "to advocate institutional change".<sup>55</sup> In an analysis of teenage magazines, "Love Comics", Connie Alderson shows that these are also not very realistic. Controversial topics such as drunkenness, illegitimacy, race, divorce, etc., are taboo. And the stories all seem to develop along the lines: girl gets the right boy. She concludes that they are full of traditional stereotypes (30 March 1967). A final example. Claire Rayner in "Problem Pages" (21 December 1967) discusses her by then 18 months' experience of working for a problem page. She says that the majority of questions she gets are either medical, sexual or deal with relationships. She does not think it very appropriate that a women's magazine should solve all these problems, which should, according to her, be solved by professional workers.

As with the other expressions of dissatisfaction, e.g. in writings by middle-class women, and on The Guardian's women's page, New Society is mainly an organ for middle-class dissent. Likewise, the novels to be discussed in Part III, below, are also products of unsatisfactory middle-class experiences of womanhood in post-war Britain. Thus, one can now conclude exactly where these novels fit in - the women writing to The Guardian, the women writing in New Society, and the eight women writers under discussion here were all engaged in expressing their

dissatisfaction with the situation of women in their society. These middle-class women were thus paving the way for the start of the feminist movement, and formed as it were a pre-feminist consciousness, rejecting femininity and moving towards feminism. It is interesting to note that writers were having difficulties finding a term for the new development with regards to woman's issues. In those days the term "feminist" was still firmly linked with the suffragettes. Barr tries to circumvent this problem in his articles in New Society by calling the new feminists "modern suffragettes". Sheila Rowbotham when looking back in Woman's Consciousness, Man's World (1973) also remembers the difficulty of giving a name to her beliefs. To her feminism was also linked to the demand for the vote at the beginning of the century. Thus, it is not surprising that the writers, when asked in interviews, also seem to find it difficult to call themselves feminists (cf. Part II).

### **IV.3 The Start of the Women's Movement**

Out of expressions of discontent such as recorded above the women's movement started in the late sixties. The movement in the beginning focused above all on the issues women in previous decades had felt unhappy about.

#### **America**

The women's liberation movement started first in America and this movement influenced its British counterpart in many ways. It is therefore relevant to see what was at the basis of this American movement and what caused its coming into existence. Various reasons have been given by theorists for the fact that the second feminist movement of this century started in America. There is, for instance, a group of authors who think that the character of the American woman is different from her European counterpart. Both Carl Degler and David Potter see the American woman as stronger minded and more independent than the European one. This, according to them, is because American women had to be more active and independent in the past, and have a frontier mentality like American men. Because women were scarce, they also used to be more highly valued than in Europe. Signs of this early respect for women can be found, for example, in the education system. Colleges such as Vassar and Smith were already founded during the Civil War era.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from these perhaps undefinable influences of the past, there were some other factors which influenced the emergence of the women's liberation movement in America. One hypothesis might perhaps have been that dissatisfied women started to look to the earlier movement for ideas to help them out. This, however, did not happen because although both movements started out of discontent, they had quite different purposes, i.e. the gaining of the vote and the gaining of equal rights in all respects, respectively. Both movements started in similar circumstances, i.e. they "arose following a period during which women's discontent, or sense of relative deprivation, was gradually aggravated".<sup>57</sup> Yet, the ideas of the first movement did not directly influence the ideas of the later movement:

The twentieth century movement's founders report personally that they did not draw their inspiration from their nineteenth-century predecessors. They began to examine the earlier movement's ideas only after their own movement was established. The contemporary movement owes its existence far more directly to the radical ideologies of the 1960s, than to the feminist ideology of the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

The radical movements of the 1960s indeed provided a set of favourable circumstances for the emergence of the women's liberation movement, because women, especially middle-class ones, were being politicized. Even if they were not yet active on their own behalf, they did get a taste of what radical action might achieve. Juliet Mitchell in Woman's Estate compares the founding of the women's liberation movement to the Civil Rights, student and hippy movements which started before it. Like blacks women suffer from economic poverty, like students women are victims of ideological manipulation, and like hippies women feel society's exploitation of sexuality.<sup>59</sup> Various early articles which appeared in the women's liberation movement in America also stressed the similarities between women and blacks in particular.<sup>60</sup>

Next to this ideological similarity between the women's movement and the other movements, the women's movement is more directly linked to them, because one of the direct causes for its coming into existence was women's dissatisfaction with the treatment they got from their fellow male radicals. In organisations such as the Students for a Democratic Society (founded 1962) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (founded in 1960), and Civil Rights organisations, women learned the effectiveness of radical techniques such as sit-ins and marches, but they also soon found out that they were never allowed to take on any

managerial functions within these movements. Their role was often limited to making cups of tea and looking after the children while the men went into battle with the establishment. At the same time these political movements gave women a suggestion for a way out of their situation:

Like most of these political movements, Women's Liberation started with a series of complaints - complaints against the society and against the radical groups that were supposed to be challenging this. In forming itself one of its earliest tasks was to transform these complaints into a political challenge to the social institution, and to develop an organization that in its form and content would eradicate the relevant faults of the other preceding radical groups.<sup>61</sup>

Women's involvement with the radical movements worked as a catalyst. It made it possible for women to act upon the dissatisfaction they had been feeling for decades. Whereas before women were able to complain about certain situations which they did not like, it was only after other political movements had started that women found the means to bring about the necessary changes. This constitutes the main difference between the pre-women's liberation period, in America up to 1966 (cf. below), and in Britain up to 1968, and the period afterwards. The main difference between these two periods is not that women were satisfied before and suddenly changed their minds, but it was only after 1966 and 1968 respectively that they were able to find solutions for their problems and tried to get these solutions implemented in society.

In 1966 Betty Friedan founded the National Organization of Women, and this is generally seen as the beginning of the organized women's movement in America. Betty Friedan very much represents the moderate wing of this movement. An example is that men were allowed to be members of N.O.W., and about 10% of its members have always been men. N.O.W. was founded especially for the middle-class women Friedan described in The Feminine Mystique. In 1967 N.O.W. adopted a Bill of Rights for women which clearly states its aims. The aims focus above all on the barriers women had come across in the combination of their roles of housewife and mother. Although an Equal Pay Act had been accepted in 1963, this was not thought to be sufficient. N.O.W. developed the complaints into a plan of action: 1. Equal Rights Amendment; 2. banning of sex discrimination in employment by law; 3. maternity leave rights; 4. tax deduction for child care; 5. child care centres; 6. equal and unsegregated education; 7. training opportunities for women; 8. the right for women to control reproduction.

Next to this organization some more radical groups came into existence. The first

independent group was formed in Chicago in 1967. Jo Freeman circulated its newsletter called Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement. Shulamith Firestone, another member of the original group, later went to New York and formed another group there. These groups used consciousness-raising techniques to make women aware of the situation they were in. These, and other radical groups, also used stunts to attract attention. Especially in 1968 these stunts attracted a lot of media attention. On January 15 New York Radical Women staged a "Burial of Traditional Womanhood". On 7 September 200 women protested at the Miss America contest. Bras were thrown into dustbins, which started the newspaper stories that women were burning their bras. On 31 October, Halloween, the WITCH manifesto, proclaiming the power of women was promoted when women invaded the New York Stock Exchange. Rather than advocating real demands these public actions seemed primarily aimed at showing the importance of women. The WITCH manifesto states for instance: "Witches have always been women who dared to be groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformist, explorative, independent, sexually liberated, and revolutionary".<sup>62</sup> Other examples of radical activity and groups were The Redstockings, the Bitch manifesto, and SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men), which caused some uproar when Andy Warhol was attacked by Valerie Solanas in the summer of 1968. Other more serious early results from the radical corner of the feminist movement are, for example, Kate Millett's Sexual Politics (1970), an analysis of how sexism influences culture, and Anna Koedt's paper "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm" (June '68).

## Britain

After the Second World War one of the most impressive theoretical works to be published in Europe proclaiming the need for action to improve women's lives was Simone de Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe (1949). She does not agree at all with the then dominant view, even among women, that equality had been achieved when the right to vote had been gained:

The women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being.<sup>63</sup>

In her book De Beauvoir gives a most extensive account of women's position in our society and culture. To De Beauvoir the basic condition which needs to be changed to improve women's

situation is her economic position, but that alone, she realizes, will not be enough:

We must not believe, certainly, that a change in women's economic condition alone is enough to transform her ... until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear.<sup>64</sup>

Even though the two volumes which comprise Le Deuxième Sexe were first translated in English in 1953 they had surprisingly little effect on the coming into existence of the women's movement in Britain. It was only after this movement had started that British women began to examine De Beauvoir's ideas.

The main fuel on the feelings of dissatisfaction which had been present among middle-class women for some time was the emergence of the American women's movement. David Bouchier in The Feminist Challenge has a plausible theory why this American phenomenon should influence women so much more than De Beauvoir's The Second Sex. David Bouchier shows how since the Second World War many social developments came from America. Consumerism was imported from America, and was seen as the ideal way to a happy life. As Bouchier calls it, America was "a model of the new affluent culture".<sup>65</sup> A country such as Britain which followed America's cultural model in many ways also looked to America for solutions when this model ceased to satisfy, as in the case of the dissatisfaction women felt with the ideal of femininity. Sheila Rowbotham who herself was closely involved with the emergence of the women's movement in Britain describes how the first "vague rumours" came from America.<sup>66</sup> Articles such as "The New Feminism" by Ruth Adam in The Guardian (1970) which reported the successes of N.O.W. in America helped to stimulate the interest in what was going on in America.

Although Juliet Mitchell wrote what is generally seen as the first British feminist article, "Women: The Longest Revolution", in the November/December issue of the New Left Review (1966), both Bouchier and Mitchell herself see 1968 as the official start of the movement: "The first whisperings of the Women's Liberation Movement in England were in late 1967; by 1968 it was a named and organized movement".<sup>67</sup> Those first whispers were, for instance, overheard by female students of the London School of Economics who met to discuss matters. The first important political action did indeed take place in 1968. In Hull in the spring of 1968 fishermen's wives protested against unsafe trawlers. Middle-class women supported this action and formed

the Equal Rights Association. Further industrial actions by women in 1968 were instigated by the demand for equal pay. In June sewing-machinists at the Ford plant in Dagenham went on strike for three weeks to obtain equal pay. Women also went on strike at the Halewood plant in Liverpool. Furthermore, bus conductresses went on strike in 1968, demanding to be allowed to become drivers. Thus, job-related grievances created the first impetus which urged women into action. At the very beginning working-class women and students were active, later it mainly became a middle-class movement, and much later working-class and radical women formed their own wing. In the wake of the first industrial actions, various different groups were formed all over the country, with a firm base in London though, which started to discuss different matters, the most important ones of which concerned work, family, legislation, unions, education, culture, and sex.<sup>68</sup> In London 70 of these groups united to become the Women's Liberation Workshop, which brought out a magazine called Shrew. In 1970, at a conference in Oxford, representatives of all the various developments which were taking place came together, and this could therefore be called the official start of a nationally organized women's liberation movement in Britain. At this conference it was decided to focus all demands on four issues: "Equal pay, improved education, 24-hour nurseries, free contraception, and abortion on demand".<sup>69</sup> As in America, the demands mainly centred on trying to resolve the problems which existed for women at work and in the family, exactly those issues which, as we have seen above, created the feelings of discontentment before 1968.

The British women's liberation movement differed in two important aspects from the American one. First of all, although the aims were similar, the means used to try to achieve the goal of equality were very different. In America stunts were used to attract media attention, but in Britain more relatively orthodox methods, such as marches, petitions, and sit-ins were thought to be more effective. Secondly, many British feminists originated from the Labour movement, and found it difficult to view the feminist movement as separate from socialism. Sheila Rowbotham, for instance, describes in Woman's Consciousness how she was first involved in Marxist groups, and later in the women's movement.<sup>70</sup> The result was that British feminism never became as extremely anti-male as the more radical sectors of the American movement. Bouchier sees this as positive:

In part because of their close ties with male-dominated organisations, they tended to focus less sharply on sexism and male power than on the exploitation of women by capitalist bosses and government.<sup>71</sup>

Rowbotham, on the other hand, regrets that the British movement never gained the inner strength the American one had:

In contrast to America where the movement in some places became very inward-turning because of exhaustive consciousness-raising, in England we rather overreacted against this and have never built up the independent strength they achieved.<sup>72</sup>

Next to attempting to achieve a better economic and legal position for women, the women's liberation movement in Britain also presented a new cultural appraisal of womanhood. Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch (1970) is a good example of this. Greer distances herself from the kind of feminism which alies itself to socialism, and instead sees a reappraisal of womanhood as a basis for change:

The housewife who must wait for the success of the world revolution for her liberty might be excused for losing hope ... she could begin not by changing the world, but by re-assessing herself.<sup>73</sup>

In her book Greer discusses numerous aspects of womanhood and tries to give them a new meaning. Another book which tries to do this is Connexions by Joy Groombridge (1971). Groombridge uses photographs of women in everyday life situations, and in advertisements and films, to show how much the idea of femininity has penetrated into society. She also shows examples of women who are not playing their expected social roles.

The women's liberation movement has since its start developed into various directions, and has perhaps therefore lost much of its strength. In Subject Women Ann Oakley lists 10 main tendencies in the women's movement, with often conflicting goals and methods, ranging from what she labels "Traditional Marxist" to "Cultural Feminist".<sup>74</sup> Several other recent publications, e.g. Coote Sweet Freedom (1982) and Gelb "Feminism in Britain: Politics without Power?" (1986) regret that the impact of the women's liberation movement has only been limited:

The British feminist movement has succeeded in changing life-styles and consciousnesses, as well as creating a host of alternative services and community-based women's activities in (primarily) urban centres ... with regard to the other measures of 'success' - those related to the larger society and policy outcomes - the movement's achievements have been less impressive.<sup>75</sup>

Yet, if one were to use the perspective of a '50s or '60s woman one could be certain that she

would rejoice that at least some fundamental improvements have been made, notably equal pay, and the free supply of the pill and other contraceptives. At least some of the more crucial obstacles to women's enjoyment of her work and family have been removed.

Women in the sixties, however, did not look that far ahead yet. They were already pleased if they could actually express what they felt. Leila Berg in her article "All We Had Was a Voice" remembers exactly this sentiment of joy about being able to express herself:

The sixties [was] a time of elation. Elation because people were at last speaking aloud their private thoughts and all the separate voices became in a most astonishing way a choir of creative activity.<sup>76</sup>

## INTERLUDE

In the following two parts of this dissertation we narrow down our discussion by focussing on women who expressed their dissatisfaction by writing novels. It is useful therefore to pause for a while and consider some critical theories of women's writing.

There are many theories about how, or even, whether, men's writing can be distinguished from women's writing. Opinions range from the type of criticism practised for instance by Norman Mailer in his "Prisoner of Sex",<sup>1</sup> which is often referred to as "phallic criticism", to feminist literary criticism. The Mailer type of attitude assumes that men and women are different, and that the writing they produce is therefore different too, and will always remain so. In this point of view women are seen as inferior, and their fiction is also seen as inferior or minor. Needless to say, this point of view is rather static and undervalues women's achievements.

The second mainstream theory is androgynous criticism and this is practised, for instance, by Carolyn Heilbrun, who states:

I believe that our future salvation lies in a movement away from sexual polarization and the prison of gender toward a world in which individual roles and the modes of personal behavior can be freely chosen. The ideal toward which I believe we should move is best described by the term 'androgyny'.<sup>2</sup>

The ideal of androgyny assumes that each man and each woman possesses a random mixture of feminine and masculine characteristics. The problem with androgynous criticism is that it would be a good way of discussing literature if all writers subscribed to this idea and all books show evidence of it. This is not the case, except in certain periods in literature. Heilbrun shows, for instance, the strong androgynous bias in the literature written during the turn of the century. She refers, for instance, to male writers of the time who portray strong female characters.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this theory has little practical value because it departs from the ideal rather than from the existing situation. In this it is exactly opposite from the Mailer type of criticism which only looks at a particular view of the present situation. Both theories provide a limited point of view.

Thirdly, there is feminist criticism. The first feminist criticism after the Second World War was mainly concerned with a thorough analysis of what was wrong with existing male interpretations of culture and society. Examples are Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) and the angrier, American Sexual Politics by Kate Millett (1969). Since then feminist

criticism has progressed towards the presentation of alternative theories and interpretations of culture and society. Alternative theories, plural, because since the united expressions of anger in the late '60s and early '70s individuals and groups have sought their own, often conflicting evaluations. French feminist critics such as Hélène Cixous concentrate on celebrations of the feminine. Cixous is of the opinion that the feminine consciousness is completely different from the masculine. According to her, it is much less singular, much more comprehensive and therefore superior. She compares the masculine consciousness with male sexuality which in her view merely focuses on the penis, while female sexuality encompasses the whole body. She goes on to draw conclusions from this for women's writing:

Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours ... she lets the other language speak - the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death ... Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, she argues the superiority of l'écriture féminine. Although Cixous's philosophy is interesting in itself, it is of rather limited value when used in the practical criticism of texts. How is one to judge fiction written by women which does not show these 1,000 tongues, but which shows enclosure, limitations? This theory does not allow an appreciation of the latter type of texts which, perhaps unfortunately, makes up the majority of women's writing.

In contrast to the French preoccupation with the feminine, British and American feminist critics are more concerned with providing an appropriate interpretation of women's relation to culture, history, and society. This view has resulted in, for instance, the attempts of Elaine Showalter (A Literature of Their Own) and Ellen Moers (Literary women) to find a women's tradition in literature which has developed separately from the male canon (cf. discussion of A Literature Of Their Own in the Introduction, above). Juliet Mitchell, for example, has reinterpreted women's relation to history in "Women: The Longest Revolution". The views of Lillian S. Robinson represent a radical American position. Robinson thinks feminist criticism should not stop at redefining women's relation to history, culture or society, but feminist criticism should be "about fundamentally transforming institutions". She goes on to say: "In our struggle for liberation, Marx's note about philosophers may apply to cultural critics as well: that up to now they have only interpreted the world and the real point is to change it".<sup>5</sup> Thus Robinson argues in "Treason

Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon" (1983) that feminists should not limit themselves to discussions about the female literary tradition, but that they should reconsider the whole literary canon, and that preference should be given to texts by women over texts by men in the canon. Although Robinson's ideas sound rather limited in theory because of the refusal to consider any texts by men worthwhile reading, her practical criticism has produced some enlightening interpretations. A notable example is "Why Marry Mr Collins?", in which she discusses the importance of the subtle differences in class which influence the female characters' view of society in Pride and Prejudice.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is the type of feminist criticism described by Josephine Donovan as follows:

Feminists believe that women have been locked off in a condition of lesser reality by the dominant patriarchal attitudes and customs of our culture. We find these attitudes and customs reified in the institutions of literature and literary criticism. Feminist critics - like feminists in every area - are engaged in negating these reifications.<sup>7</sup>

Donovan's idea that women's writing is influenced by woman's special position in society seems very appropriate. Of all theories dealing with women's writing this one seems the most useful as it includes both the present situation and has room for developments, for a way out of the present situation. There is a problem, however, with the way Donovan describes the condition women are in: the use of the word "lesser" is dangerous and could easily lead to a view of women and women's writing as minor or less important, although, hopefully, Donovan would not have wanted to imply such an easy dismissal of women's writing. Also, it is perhaps not entirely right to claim that women have been locked off from men's experiences completely. It is much better to use a more positive phrase, namely, the following: throughout history women have been faced with a complex reality which in important ways has distinguished itself from men's experience of life; this situation was instigated and has been perpetuated by the dominant patriarchal attitudes and customs of our culture and society. When we use this approach in the study of literature, particularly when discussing women writers, we find that women writers produce a kind of literature which is remarkably different from the literature produced by men. Thus a feminist critic will always be on the look out for those particular qualities which feature in a woman's writing which are there because the text was produced by a woman. For instance, the

particular problems which women encountered in British society outlined in Part I (with work, in the family, identity problems) form the thematic base of the novels discussed in Part III. A male contemporary, with a different social experience because of his male identity, would select a totally different set of themes for his writing.

Taking this modified feminist point of view as the starting point, we can now come to a clear understanding of the relation between fact and fiction in the case of women novelists. It is argued here that society influences women's fiction, that society cannot but do so because of the particular situation women find themselves in of having a complex but distinct experience of life. Of course I do not want to argue that being a woman is the only characteristic which influences a woman's writing. Aspects such as class, race and the literary tradition of the time are also important influences on the final product. The eight women novelists discussed in Part III below, for instance, are all white, middle-class, and British, and they use the realist literary form which was also popular with their male contemporaries. Yet, as we shall see there are also certain significant characteristics in their writing which are there because the authors were women, and they therefore used a specific female point of view on the society in which they lived.

It is maintained here that the crucial influence on women's writing is the particular situation in society in which women find themselves, and that this is what distinguishes a certain writer or group of writers from contemporaries and predecessors. It is not the biological difference which distinguishes men from women, but their social position in the world, which influences their outlook on the world as well as their writing. As Jessie Bernard writes: "the world women experience is demonstrably different from the world men experience".<sup>8</sup> Departing from this view feminist critics have an important and relevant task to perform. Recently feminist critics have used such an approach for earlier women's writing and have been able to uncover some enlightening material. Dale Spender, for instance, in Mothers of the Novel, found that women's particular situation in the <sup>eighteenth</sup> century turned them, and not men as Ian Watt had claimed in his classic The Rise of the Novel, into the first novelists. Women had to write to survive:

Most of the eighteenth (and seventeenth) century women novelists worked at writing to support themselves and their families ... with virtually every profession closed to them, these women did not have much choice about the work they could do.<sup>9</sup>

Through their writing they became, as Spender calls it, "the connecting medium for the experience of women",<sup>10</sup> because the greater majority of their readers were also women. The subject matter of the novels was directly related to the situation these first novelists were in: "what is contained in these more than five hundred novels is a record of women's consciousness, a documentation of women's experiences as subordinates in a male-dominated society".<sup>11</sup>

Likewise, Michelene Wandor in her introduction to On Gender and Writing acknowledges that she is influenced by her gender in her writing. She answers claims that this limits her writing by saying: "there is so much potential for women writers at the moment, that I see it as an expansion in horizons and options, not a contraction".<sup>12</sup> To her, writing is a way of enlarging the scope of women's fictional domain. In this collection of essays by women writers Margaret Drabble also gives her point of view. Drabble argues that fiction is the ideal medium for women in which to discuss their situation in society. She mentions contemporary women's writing as an example:

the large amount of fiction written by women in the last decade, since the highly significant publication of Doris Lessing's Golden Notebook, bears witness that a lot of women started to worry about the same things at the same time, and turned to fiction to express their anxieties - not only because, they still had nowhere else to turn, but also because fiction is ideally suited to such themes.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Drabble argues that in the case of these post - Golden Notebook writers being a woman was an essential pre-condition for the production of the specific texts they wrote. These texts emerged out of these women's own concerns and position in society. In fact, this theory seems not only to apply to the specific novelists Drabble refers to, but to most women writers. The process of the production of texts by women writers and the influence of these women's particular position in society on the production process in the case of the writers we are dealing with here will be discussed in Part II, below. In Parts II and III the benefits of a more sociological rather than a purely literary approach to these novels will become clear: these texts are not unrelated novels which just happen to be produced at a certain time, but they gain their significance especially if one considers them in relation to each other and in relation to the society from which they emerged. It will be shown that the general social situation as described in Part I is at the basis of the lives of the individual women novelists. For instance, these women

novelists will be seen to have experienced problems in, particularly their family, but also their work situation similar to the ones which caused feelings of unease in many other women in the '50s and '60s. In the majority of cases the feeling of unease seems to have been at the basis of the decision of these women to become writers. One of the points on which Part II will focus is why these eight women chose writing as their profession rather than anything else. The situation in which these women found themselves also influenced the themes and the form of the novels they wrote (cf. Part III). The novels voice in a fictional form the feelings of dissatisfaction the writers were feeling themselves.

Part II and Part III trace the development of a new group of women writers, whose writing was a clear result of the frustrating situation women were in at the time. In this case the fact that these women were leading complex and problematic lives, distinct from their male contemporaries, in the final analysis has led them to make an impressive and original contribution to literature.

Before going on to Part II to discuss the eight novelists who are our main concern, it would be a good idea to have a closer look at the specific problems women novelists have been known to encounter in the writing and publishing process, i.e. to consider what makes a woman writer's situation different from a male writer. The specific case of the eight women novelists can then be discussed bearing these observations in mind.

Throughout history women's complex position in western society, i.e. of being the other, "the second sex" (Simone de Beauvoir), of being excluded from the main public bastions of power can be said to have had a two-fold effect on women's writing in the western world. First of all, it has had, perhaps in a rather strange way, a positive effect on women's writing. Women were virtually excluded from public means of expressing themselves, especially since the seventeenth-century. They could not easily take up influential positions in society which would have enabled them to change the condition in which they found themselves. Writing was often one of the few options left to women if they wanted to express themselves and if they wanted to gain some independence.<sup>14</sup> Terry Lovell in "Writing like a Woman: A Question of Politics" provides support for the attraction of writing, and novel writing in particular, for women. It is something which can be done at home, and is thus convenient for women: "Novel writing is a form of domestic

production. Here, home and workplace have never been separated".<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, she notes that the subject matter of novels is ideally suited to women: "Fictional worlds have been largely restricted to the sphere which is conventionally and ideologically assigned to women, or for which women are assumed to have special responsibilities - that of personal relations".<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, of course, there is also a whole range of negative effects on women's writing which originates from women's special position in society. For if writing were merely an easy option, a far larger number of women writers would have emerged throughout history. In Silences Tillie Olsen answers the question why, according to her statistics, only one woman for every four men publishes a book, and only one woman for every twelve men is generally considered to be worthy of inclusion in the literary canon.<sup>17</sup> According to Olsen there are many reasons for this enormous unfulfilled potential:

We must not speak of women writers in our century (as we cannot speak of women in any area of recognized human achievement) without speaking also of the invisible, the as-innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances - diminished, excluded, foundered, silenced.<sup>18</sup>

Olsen mentions many reasons why some people and many women in particular, have not produced any novels, or even the amount or quality of work which could have been expected of them. In short, why they have remained "unnaturally silent" as Olsen calls it.

The first variation of silence she mentions is censorship silence. She distinguishes between official censorship and self-censorship. The latter has been employed by women in particular because they know there are certain subjects or themes which they are not supposed to discuss. An example is: "Telling the truth about one's experiences as a body, forbidden, not possible, for centuries ... Telling the truth about one's body: a necessary, freeing subject for the woman writer".<sup>19</sup> A second reason for a silence might be the sheer enormity of the task ahead and the sense of one's own inadequacy in relation to it.<sup>20</sup> A third reason for an unnatural silence might be lack of time, most commonly because one has to work at another job to earn a living. A fourth reason can be if the whole literary situation is not conducive to or supportive of the work a writer produces, i.e. for a long time women's writings were not taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> Another example of a silence inducing factor which has affected women's writing in particular is a clash of female roles. In the nineteenth century women writers were often unmarried or had no children. Women have

often felt that they were forced to make a choice between having a family and being a writer. This was not an easy choice. Virginia Woolf's diaries testify of the struggle which went on inside her: "... and all the devils came out - heavy black ones - to be 29 and unmarried - to be a failure - childless - insane too".<sup>22</sup> The few who were mothers in the nineteenth century struggled equally to combine their roles. Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1841:

Our children are just coming to the age when everything depends on my efforts. They are delicate in health, and nervous and excitable and need a mother's whole attention. Can I lawfully divide my attention by literary efforts?<sup>23</sup>

Related to this particular silence is the idea of the "Angel in the House", the idea that women should be available for service to everybody. Katherine Ann Porter in 1970:

You're brought up with the ... curious idea of feminine availability in all spiritual ways, and in giving service to anyone who demands it. And I suppose that's why it has taken me twenty years to write this novel: it's been interrupted by just anyone who could jimmy his way into my life.<sup>24</sup>

The account of Sylvia Plath's life in Sylvia Plath: A Biography reads as an ongoing struggle against many silence inducing factors. The demands of American society that in the '50s women should either choose marriage or a career; the impossibility of being a mother, wife, a first-class poet and writer, and at the same time attempting to preserve one's own identity. The result in Plath's case, many illnesses, breakdowns, and depressions, finally culminating in self-inflicted death is only too understandable. Sylvia Plath in a letter to her friend Marcia Brown on 2 January 1963, a month before her death:

I have been so utterly flattened by having to be a businesswoman, farmer - harvesting 70 apple trees, stringing all my onions, digging and scrubbing all my potatoes, extracting and bottling my honey, etc. - mother, writer and all-round desperado that I'd give anything to be alone. I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon ...<sup>25</sup>

In the end, rather tragically, it was when Plath was nearing her breaking-point, in the last year of her life, that she was most prolific and was able to write her most poignant poetry and her only novel. She really had to reach the depth of despair before she could disregard all conventions and write truly original literature.

An example of a writer who has never been able to blossom to the full given by Olsen is Rebecca Harding Davis. She wrote a promising novel published in 1861 called Life in the Iron Mills. This novel was unusual for its time in that it dealt with working-class life. A major feat on the

author's part, because she lived in a town with a mill but was of middle-class origin herself. By the time this novel was published Rebecca was 30. She was living at home, looking after her father after a short spell at a finishing school. C.L. Davis, a journalist, was so impressed with her novel that he wrote her a letter which started a correspondence. They eventually married. Ironically, this marriage which was the direct result of her writing prevented her from producing further high quality material. For her husband did not earn very much and Harding Davis provided for the family, mainly by writing novels in serial for a journal. On top of this, Harding Davis had to look after her two sons, and was living in the house of her sister-in-law, who had five children, during the first years of her marriage. Her son went on to become a famous writer in his time (Richard Harding Davis). By the time she died people had already forgotten the literary qualities she once possessed. The headline for her obituary was: "Mother of Richard Harding Davis Dies at Son's Home in Mt. Kisco, Aged 79".<sup>26</sup> Olsen's discussion of Life in the Iron Mills in Silences sparked off a renewed interest and the novel has since come back into print.

In Part I, above, it was shown that although the '50s and early '60s on the face of it seem silent decades, in Olsen's sense of the word, there is evidence of underground rumbling which disrupts the silence. The novels of the eight women novelists to be discussed in Part II and Part III, below, are examples of such silence breaking texts. It will be shown in Part II how these novelists managed to find a voice through literature, in spite of all the silence inducing factors which worked against them.

In Part II not only the production, but also the reception of these texts will be discussed. The reactions of reviewers and readers to the breaking of the silence will be examined. This is a particularly interesting question in the case of these writers where the material they were offering required a, for that time, unusual way of reading, namely, a special sensitivity to the woman's point of view. Thus, these novels necessitated, in structuralist terms, the construction of an audience rather than the addressing of a pre-constituted one. Were people amazed or confused that these texts were written, that these women gave their point of view on their current situation? Or were readers and reviewers more inclined to gloss over the importance of what was happening? Reviews and reactions from readers can have a positive or negative effect on the production of the following novel. It can be off-putting or encouraging to read what people think

of one's book. Charlotte Brontë experienced the effect of the biased reviews her books received: "You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex" (1849).<sup>27</sup> Margaret Atwood and some of her students recently conducted research into reviewers' attitudes towards novels written by women. They found several problem areas which distinguished reviews of books by men from reviews of books by women. One important bias Atwood discovered confirms Brontë's suspicions. Books by men, according to Atwood, are more likely to be reviewed in male terms, i.e. the style is described as bold, forceful, vigorous, whereas books by women are more likely to be reviewed in "feminine" terms, i.e. confessional, neurotic, vague, or subjective. This in spite of the actual qualities of the text itself. Atwood called this the Quiller-Couch syndrome.<sup>28</sup>

A second problem, according to Atwood, is the "Lady Painter Syndrome": "This is a pattern in which good equals male, bad equals female".<sup>29</sup> This means that if a woman writer is considered to be good by the reviewer, she gets male status, i.e. she writes like a man is the highest compliment in this respect. Atwood does not mention a variation on this theme which can also be found quite often. The variation sounds like this: she is a good writer, for a woman. This kind of statement implies that in the second-rate category of writing which women produce it is very good, but of course it cannot be up to the standard of male writing.

A third aspect of reviews of books by women writers is that reviewers often refer to what the woman looks like, as if that has any bearing on the books she has written. It is used to make the achievement of the book seem somehow less important: "There was but little feminine charm about her, and of this fact she was herself uneasy and perpetually conscious ... I believe she would have given all her genius and all her fame to have been beautiful".<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Atwood also found a bias as far as the discussion of the themes was concerned. Reviewers often concentrate on the domestic themes which can be found in women's novels, disregarding any other themes. This is often followed by a lamentation that it is such a pity that the woman writer uses such a limited number of themes.

In the discussion of the reception process in Part II, below, special attention will be paid to these biases in reviews, to see whether they also feature in the reviews of the novels under discussion here and in how far any bias influenced the subsequent reception of the novels. In this

discussion a distinction will be made between the reactions of reviewers and general readers, who might perhaps be less inclined to possess any of the prejudiced attitudes referred to by Atwood.

Thus Part II and Part III hope to show the validity of my particular approach, as applied to the discussion of the novels by eight women novelists. These parts will demonstrate how these eight women novelists like their middle-class contemporaries referred to in Part I (e.g. Stott, The Guardian and New Society readers and journalists) succeeded in speaking up for the silent majority of women. This group of writers who spoke up in their novels for many female contemporaries who were in the same situation, paved the way for more radical women writers who were able to use a more obviously feminist approach in their novels (e.g. Fay Weldon).

**PART II**

**EIGHT WOMEN NOVELISTS**

## Introduction

The eight women writers under discussion here were selected for their contribution to literature as well as to society. All eight of them spoke up, mainly through their writing, for all the women who were not satisfied with their position as housewives, mothers and/or workers. This important function of these writers has been largely overlooked by commentators. Wilson's Halfway to Paradise has been referred to before in this respect. She has made an comprehensive study of post-war society, and the position of women in this society, but she concludes that women's voices were largely muted during the '50s and '60s: "a particular coincidence of economic and political forces in that period created a 'culture' ... in which it was difficult to articulate or to know about any oppression of women".<sup>1</sup> Segal in an article entitled "Look Back in Anger: Men in the Fifties" takes up a similar point of view, regarding this period above all as a silent period for women. What is lacking in this period, she writes, are "public forms of rebellion ... from women".<sup>2</sup> Segal quotes Jean McGirdle who puts this in even stronger terms: "I don't know why women were so absent, so silent - there was a pathological absence of women, silencing of women, in those days!".<sup>3</sup>

However, as we have seen in Part I, above, this period was not a completely silent time, and definite signs of dissatisfaction can be found, esp. in the writing and research of middle-class women (e.g. Stott, Gavron, Klein), which highlighted the problems of the position of women in post-war society. A discussion of the lives and work of Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Beryl Bainbridge, A.S. Byatt, Penelope Mortimer, and Edna O'Brien will likewise refute the argument that the pre-1968 period was above all a silent time. In their writing these women are especially concerned with the problems women were facing at that time. And, as was shown in Part I, above, they were not the only ones who were complaining, they only chose a different form from the women who were writing letters to The Guardian or who were keeping diaries (e.g. Plath): these women turned to writing fiction to express their grievances. In this part of the dissertation we will focus especially on the writers' lives to see how they managed to find a voice, and why they chose the form of expression they did.

The following chapters will concentrate on several areas of interest. First of all, the social background of these eight women writers who all published their novels shortly after the Second

World War will be focused on, especially the way in which they coped with being a professional writer, in view of the particular problems for working wives and mothers which were outlined in Part I. Secondly, the way the women and their work were received when their novels were first published will be discussed to see how critics and readers reacted to this new brand of women writer which was coming into existence.

Starting with the social background of the writers, it will soon become clear that these eight writers have much in common. All of these writers come from a British middle-class background. Most of their fathers had respectable professions (e.g. engineer, barrister, vicar) or jobs (e.g. farmer, banker), while most of the mothers stayed at home. It is interesting from a psychological point of view that the mothers of these writers often felt frustrated because they could not make sufficient use of their training and fulfil their ambitions. Examples are: the mother of A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble who was trained as a teacher but did not practise her profession after having children and consequently suffered from depression; Doris Lessing's mother who felt wasted in the middle of nowhere in deepest Africa; and Edna O'Brien's mother whose finishing school did not come to much use in rural Ireland. All the daughters show signs of not wanting to fall into the trap their mothers fell in. It is significant that the first victim of the desire of these women writers to fulfil their full potential was often the husband, rather than the work or the children. All the women writers under discussion here were married at some stage in their lives, but all but one (Iris Murdoch) were divorced from their first husbands. Margaret Drabble emphasizes this: "You can't get the three most important things in a woman's life all to the same level of perfection ... Husband, work, children: you can have two out of three, but not all three".<sup>4</sup> It is striking that in six cases out of eight the husband, rather than the work or the children, is seen as the less essential item. One of the exceptions, Iris Murdoch, although writing novels at the same time as being married, has no children, thereby also providing evidence for Drabble's statement that the three positions cannot be combined satisfactorily. Ironically, the real exception to the rule is Drabble's sister, A.S. Byatt, who has been married without intermission (divorcing one husband and immediately marrying the next) and has had four children (one of whom has died), but she has been one of the least productive writers of this group.

These women writers are the first generation of novelists who en masse return to the life-

style of the first women novelists as described by Dale Spender in Mothers of the Novel. The novelists Spender describes often had children and frequently wrote to support their children, e.g. Eliza Haywood (1693-1756). Until Spender started researching her book these novelists were unknown and had been replaced in the literary canon by later women writers who led a different kind of life. The nineteenth-century writers who did manage to establish themselves in the canon, such as, the Brontës, George Eliot, and Jane Austen, led largely the kind of life which is associated in most people's minds with women writers: spinsters without children. It is only in the eight writers under discussion here that we find a return to an attempt to combine all roles. They follow the trend as it was registered in Part I, above, i.e. the entry of more and more married women into the labour market. Furthermore, these writers show an exaggerated form of a development which was also taking place in society: in Part I it was shown that, in contrast to the feminine myth, most women in this period did not have a husband; these writers, likewise, mostly did without a conventional live-in husband.

Another aspect which some of these writers have in common is the way in which they reacted to their position in society. A substantial number of the writers seems to have suffered from some form of depression during their lives because of their failure to achieve their potential at a particular stage. Examples are Muriel Spark, Penelope Mortimer and Doris Lessing who have all sought psychiatric treatment. In this they resemble many other women living at the time, and they conform to what Phyllis Chesler found in Women and Madness about the ways women rebel against their situation (cf. Part I Chapter III, above).

Another factor which unites these writers is that they are all well-educated and well-read. Iris Murdoch, A.S. Byatt, and Margaret Drabble actually have a university degree, and most of the others have had some post-grammar school education or professional qualification and experience (Bainbridge was a professional actor before becoming a writer; Muriel Spark did intelligence work in the Second World War). Doris Lessing of all the writers under discussion here is the one with the least formal education. She missed large parts of her secondary education through illness, and more or less educated herself at home by reading any book she could get hold of.

The older generation, i.e. Lessing, Spark, Murdoch, and Mortimer, seem to have a

somewhat more international background than the younger ones. Lessing was born in Persia and raised in Rhodesia. Spark spent her married life in Africa. Mortimer lived in Vienna with her first husband and in Italy for a while with her second. And Iris Murdoch worked in Belgium and Austria during the war. This international background features notably in the early novels and stories of Spark and Lessing. Yet the younger writers also started to widen their horizons once they became famous. Drabble and Bainbridge, for instance, are both active on behalf of the British Council.

Of the younger generation, Drabble and Bainbridge have an interest in the theatre in common. They were both actors before becoming writers.

In their social background these writers differ rather significantly from their male contemporaries, the so-called "Angry Young Men". These male writers were mostly from lower-middle class or working-class backgrounds, and had little international experience. In fact, one of the main characteristics of the novels written by these male writers at the time is that they only deal with lower-middle class or working-class life in England. Thus they pictured their own social background in their writing, the way these eight women writers pictured theirs (cf. also Part III, below). There is a further comparison with the Angry Young Men. These writers as well as the Angry Young Men rebelled against the position they were in. Segal, like many others, mistakenly contrasts the rebellion of the Angries with the silence of their female contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> In fact, these eight women writers show an equal impatience with the condition in which they found themselves.

The particular social background of these eight women novelists provided them with the confidence and the tools to speak out and voice the dissatisfaction many women were feeling at the time. In her treatise A Room of One's Own Virginia Woolf already stated the importance of some independent means and an independent frame of mind for any woman who wanted to become a successful writer:

If we have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; ... if we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone ... then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down.<sup>6</sup>

Women from a less privileged background would have found it much harder than these novelists to overcome the obstacles to becoming a published writer at the time, which has resulted in the fact that the majority of published women writers at the time were from middle-class backgrounds. Of course there are some exceptions, e.g. Shelagh Delaney and Nell Dunn.

Some of the novelists discussed here also seemed to have been particularly interested in what "ordinary" women were thinking, and tried to stay in touch with them. Mortimer, for instance, had a regular column in the '50s in the Evening Standard on bringing up children. Later she covered a wider range of subjects in her articles in Nova. Drabble wrote articles on motherhood for The Guardian throughout the sixties.

Not only the social background and lives of these writers have so much in common, but also the novels, as we shall see in Part III below, that it is not presumptuous to consider them a movement. The eight writers discussed here could be said to form the core. There are some further writers who seem to be operating on the periphery. Olivia Manning (1915-1980), for instance, shows in her writing such a compassion with contemporary womanhood that she could be said to be one of these fringe members by virtue of her series of novels Fortunes of War. Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) is linked to the group by her novel The Bell Jar, which was first published in Britain in 1963. Finally, Barbara Pym (1913-1980), like Manning, Plath, and the eight novelists under discussion here, of middle-class origin, deals in her novels with an aspect of womanhood which none of the others focus on: spinsterhood.

The group of eight writers discussed here is seen as being part of significant social changes in the position of women which were taking place in the post-war period. This group takes up an important part in the process and can in many ways be seen as a catalyst for developments which were to come. Therefore we will also, in the next chapters, concentrate on how these novelists were seen at the time. Were reviewers, for instance, aware of what was happening? Were the writers themselves aware of the significance of their work? Did they consciously choose to express themselves in this way, or did they regard their work just as a means of earning some money? It will also be interesting to note whether the individual members of this group felt any affinity with the other writers, and whether they were influenced by each other in any way.

The following chapters will deal with the eight women writers, going into the details of their personality and their lives as writer, bearing in mind that they were not operating alone, but belonged to a group of women who were all part of the same social process: the liberation of women from the constraints of femininity.

## CHAPTER I

### PORTRAITS OF THE WRITERS AS WOMEN

#### I.1 Muriel Spark

Muriel Sarah Camberg was born in Bruntsfield, Edinburgh on 1 February 1918. Her father was Bernard Camberg, an engineer, and her mother was Sarah Elizabeth Uezzell, who came from Hertfordshire, England. Her father was Jewish and a rather solitary man. Her mother, a music teacher, was a more outspoken character. Velma Bourgeois Richmond describes her thus: "more sophisticated, rather flamboyant, fascinated by the arts, and a lover of elegance".<sup>1</sup> Her mother came from a family of strong women. The grandmother of Spark had kept a shop near Watford and was independent. This grandmother had also been a fervent suffragette. Spark was sent to the James Gillespie School for Girls in Edinburgh, a respectable Presbyterian institution. She later used this school as a model for the school in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Spark describes the regime of the Gillespie school as follows: "We were fed the Border Ballads and the Old Testament, and they had a huge influence. All that sudden death, no weeping over the grave. Death is death: that struck me early in life".<sup>2</sup> Already at an early age Spark was writing poetry. When she was at James Gillespie's she won a poetry competition held in honour of the Sir Walter Scott centenary, and was ceremonially crowned queen of poetry, with her picture in the local papers. It was only later that she was converted to the novel. Her dark sense of humour bordering on sarcasm which is so much in evidence in her writing also seems to have been a feature from her early life onwards. She related in an interview to Alex Hamilton in 1974 how she used to write letters from an imaginary boyfriend to herself and put them in a place where she was certain her mother would find them. This just to upset her mother. Practical jokes such as this one seemed to have been played by her on other people quite frequently when she was young.<sup>3</sup>

Spark was qualified to go to university but she did not take up this option. Alex Hamilton reports in an interview: "She didn't go to university, she says, because she was in a hurry to get married, and she was in a hurry because marriage then was the only way to get sex".<sup>4</sup> In a later interview Spark also cites another reason: she had wanted to go to university but her mother

opposed it.<sup>5</sup> In her autobiography, Curriculum Vitae, she quotes another important reason: lack of money. She went to Heriot Watt College instead and also worked in an Edinburgh department store. In 1937 Spark became engaged to Sydney Oswald Spark. She joined him in Rhodesia where they were married. She has one son from her marriage, Robin, whom she supported financially after her divorce, but who was actually raised by her parents. Muriel Spark is reticent about this marriage, referring to it in very negative terms: "the marriage didn't last",<sup>6</sup> "her marriage had gone sour", "her worst experience",<sup>7</sup> "it was a disastrous choice".<sup>8</sup> In fact, S.O. Spark had serious mental problems and soon after their marriage he had to stay in a mental hospital. Spark remained in Africa until 1942, when she was able to go to Britain on a troopship. Her son remained in Rhodesia till the end of the war, after which he went to live in Edinburgh. She has fictionalized one striking incident of her married life in the short story "Bang, Bang, You're Dead": the day her husband shot her in the leg. She is also reticent about her subsequent private life, referring to several non-lasting and one longish relationship in the Barber interview, without going into details. Even in Curriculum Vitae Spark is careful not to mention too many details about her sex life. One of the reasons Spark wrote this book is because several of the men involved have been less reticent. Derek Stanford describes in Inside the Forties how he met Spark when she was the editor of The Poetry Review and he came to ask her for some review work in 1948. He claims that Spark "literally had to fight off these amorous solicitations".<sup>9</sup> Spark enjoyed all the attention she got from the male poets: "She had, like most pretty girls, a tendency to fairly harmless flirtation in which she exercised and gratified her power to captivate the male".<sup>10</sup> Stanford's own relationship with Spark lasted until 1958. Spark does not like Stanford's revelations calling them "lies".<sup>11</sup> Alex Hamilton's interview in 1974 provides a close insight into the kind of people Spark associated with in later years. He mentions in this interview that her two closest companions are a shady French baron and an Irish writer named Guy Strutt of 37 years old who is said to "travel with her". Hamilton relates how he goes on various excursions with the trio and attends a few dinners with them. To the reader these men look as if they have just escaped out of one of Spark's novels. They seem to be rather flamboyant crooks, and not the kind of people one would have expected a respectable novelist of mature age (at this time Spark is 56) to associate with. But then, this might well form part of Spark's defence mechanism: if you

do not have a boyfriend, think up a very bad one to upset your mother; if you do not have a husband, use a pair of fake "husbands" to protect you from the outside world.

Since 1968 Spark has had another close companion, a woman about 30 years her junior called Penelope Jardine, who lives with her and acts as a secretary and general dogsbody. From the Barber interview it transpires that Spark feels obviously at ease living with Jardine, and feels she is not really suited to marriage at all.

Whatever the reason for Spark's choice of companions, she definitely classifies love and sex as of secondary importance to her main occupation in life: her novels. It is her writing which gives her most satisfaction, and which provides her with an identity:

My mother's criticism of me was that my head ruled my heart ... I have a calling. Writing is a thing I have to do. Not many men will suffer for that and people do come before books, so it's best not to have people in your life - I'm willing to subordinate an enormous amount for my work. They say sacrifice, but sacrifice for a pleasure makes it more pleasurable. If you took away the writer from me, I believe I would not exist at all.<sup>12</sup>

Writing takes up such an important place for Spark that it completely dominates her existence. The tension between work and family is resolved by Spark by choosing clearly for her work after having found out after an unhappy marriage that the traditional woman's role of wife was not to her taste.

Although Spark was committed to writing from an early age, her road to becoming a novelist was a rather long one. It was only in 1957 that her first novel, The Comforters, was published, and by then she was 39 years old. When she returned from Africa in 1942 she was recruited to work for the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at Woburn Abbey. This prepared her for writing novels, as she herself says:

We were supposed to be a German radio station, broadcasting subversive material to their troops ... It fascinated me because it's very much the way one writes novels. A bit of fact. A bit of truth.<sup>13</sup>

Spark had been writing poetry since her youth, but decided in 1944 after an unexpected visit to Louis MacNeice's house to become a professional. She relates the experience of how she found shelter in his house for one night during the war on the invitation of his lodger in "Footnote to a Poet's House" (1988) and the short story "The House of the Famous Poet" (1952). This stay in MacNeice's absence brought home to her the reality of the writer's profession, i.e. that it is

actually possible for people to earn their living by writing.

For a long time her efforts remained concentrated in the field of poetry rather than the novel. Living in London, from 1947-1950 she edited The Poetry Review. In 1950 there was a lot of opposition to Spark in the Poetry Society and she was thrown out of the Society at an AGM. The main complaint of the old guard of poets was that Spark had introduced too many young poets into the journal, and also paid them too much (her idea had been that if you want a professional journal, you also have to pay professional fees). Many people supported Spark and left the Society with her. Among them was Derek Stanford with whom she collaborated on many publications after she left the Society. They founded their own little magazine, Forum. But it only survived for two issues because of lack of funds. Among the other works they published together are Tribute to Wordsworth (1950) and Letters of John Henry Newman (1957). After she left The Poetry Review, Spark devoted her time to literary criticism. She edited and wrote books on Mary Shelley (1951 and 1953) and Emily Brontë (1952, 1953, 1954). In 1951 her short story "The Seraph and the Zambesi" won The Observer Christmas Story competition. Macmillan, the publishers, were so impressed by this story that they invited her to write a novel for them. She was at that point not capable, however, of forsaking her poetic interests, and her first volume of poems, The Fanfarlo and Other Verse, was published in 1952.

It was only when Spark became interested in religion that she turned to novel writing. She described the process in the article "My Conversion". She relates how she had as a child strong religious feelings which she associated with art and poetry. Her parents, although religious in their own ways, did not go to church or synagogue regularly, so Muriel Spark's rather personal kind of faith more or less petered out during her schooldays. In the '50s she became interested in the ideas of Newman. She first joined the Anglo-Catholic church in 1953. In 1954 she decided to become a Roman Catholic. This emotionally demanding process combined with her use of dexedrine as an appetite suppressor resulted in her becoming very ill and having a nervous breakdown: "I think it was the religious upheaval and the fact that I had been trying to write and couldn't manage it. I was living in very poor circumstances and I was a bit under-nourished as well".<sup>15</sup>

After she recovered she found that she could take up the challenge Macmillan had provi-

ded: "suddenly I found I could write, things were taking shape as if there had been a complete reorganization of my mind".<sup>16</sup> She moved to Aylesford to live in a small cottage owned by the Carmelite Friary. She called the cottage, rather pessimistically, "St. Jude's Cottage", after the patron saint of hopeless causes. Macmillan had given her a small advance to write a novel, and friends and benefactors provided the rest of the money to keep her alive. One of these was Graham Greene who, informed by Stanford about Spark's plight, was so impressed with her work that he offered her money without ever having set eyes on her. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism had provided the basis for her to work from. The block which she had felt for a long time had been removed and replaced by a sense of security that she could write. Paradoxically, she found "her own voice" by becoming Catholic.<sup>17</sup> Spark does not always agree with the Roman Catholic Church's dogmatic stance on certain issues. Birth control is an example: "We are told to fight against nature, but when it comes to birth control, that is a sin against nature. I don't understand their jargon".<sup>18</sup> And: "Perhaps I would feel a different sort of Catholic altogether if I was obliged to get married and obliged to have a large family".<sup>19</sup>

After Spark's first novel was finally published in 1957 she could afford to give up her work as an editor and devote her time completely to writing novels and poetry. In 1965 she went to live in New York at the invitation of The New Yorker which had asked her to write some short stories for them. Previously The New Yorker had first published her most successful The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. When published as a novel in 1961 it brought fame and acceptance by the literary establishment to Spark. She became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1963, and received an OBE in 1967.

In 1967 Spark moved to Rome, and now lives in Olivetto. She lives with Penelope Jardine, a maid, and a few cats. This is a background rather far removed from her birthplace Edinburgh, both geographically and emotionally. She still relies on Edinburgh for at least one thing: rather superstitiously she always orders the same size of grey exercise books from James Thin, finishing a novel when the exercise books are full (what will happen now Thin's have gone out of business remains to be seen!). In an interview with The Scotsman in 1962, appropriately entitled "Muriel Spark Prefers to Hide in the South" (at the time of course referring to London rather than to Italy), she states that she prefers to live outside Scotland in "a hidden identity".<sup>20</sup> She does

own up to being indebted to Scotland in other ways, however. The use of irony and paradox which form the very basis of her work, she herself claims she has learned in Edinburgh:

I have started the preceding paragraph with the word 'nevertheless' and am reminded how my whole education, in and out of school, seemed even then to pivot around this word ... I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea.<sup>21</sup>

She also enlists her Scottishness to explain why she has followed her wish for independence so much in her life, pursuing a career in spite of being a divorced woman with a son:

I was born free, being a Scot ... The strong independent woman is the thing. The only other type I can see is the English rose - so very boring.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 Penelope Mortimer

Penelope Ruth Fletcher was born in Rhyl, North Wales on 19 September 1918. Her father was the Reverend Arthur Forbes Fletcher and her mother was Caroline Maggs. In an article about her mother's life entitled "She should have attacked, alone with a camel", Mortimer describes her mother as having a strong and determined character. Her mother worked as a kind of social worker *avant la lettre*, helping people in a small village called Redstocks for a few years after her eighteenth birthday. She seemed to have found great satisfaction in helping this village full of "degenerate drunks, slatterns, and their diseased children".<sup>23</sup> After the death of Caroline Maggs's father, who seemed to have been very supportive, she became prone to depression and related illnesses, "probably most of them symptoms of a rebellious and frustrated spirit" according to Mortimer.<sup>24</sup> She was sent to Switzerland to recuperate, and afterwards went to live at home again. She decided to marry Arthur Fletcher when she was 33. By this time Penelope's father, who was his wife's junior by five years, was a Methodist minister. Mortimer's mother followed her husband to his various postings, but never completely resigned herself to the role of vicar's wife. It seems that only after her husband, Mortimer's father, died that the strength from her youth came back and at the age of 80 she was able to look after Mortimer's children, while Mortimer was, as she says herself, running "about the world belatedly 'finding myself'".<sup>25</sup>

Mortimer's father also seemed to have been somebody who was rather frustrated in his ambitions. He had wanted to make a living by trying to become a clergyman in various religions, Roman Catholicism and Unitarianism among others, both before and after his period of Metho-

dist preaching. In the end he managed to get a position as a Church of England vicar in the village of Chilton, Oxfordshire, shortly after Mortimer was born. By this time, however, he had lost all faith in God and never regained it again. Also, Penelope's mother refused to have any further sexual relationships with him after the from her point of view totally unsatisfactory rape-like experiences which had resulted in Penelope and her older brother, and the difficult birth she had experienced as a 42 year old bearing the 10.5 pound baby Penelope.<sup>26</sup> She had long-lasting lesbian relationships instead.

From Mortimer's point of view the unconventional domestic arrangements of her parents had several effects. First of all, she saw very little of her four year older brother who might have been a useful companion and ally to her, because their mother sent him to boarding-school the moment Penelope was born. He was to be prepared to take his place in the Maggs dynasty who had founded United diaries. Secondly, the dilemma of Penelope's father of being an atheist vicar, who from time to time tried the validity of other theories such as theosophy, caused the family to move around a lot so that she was sent to about six schools, one of them being St. Elphin's School for Daughters of the Clergy. Furthermore, Mortimer was subjected to sexual assault by her father from an early age. Mortimer was 8 years old when he first assaulted her, and 18 when he finally stopped. In her autobiography Mortimer shows a rather surprising lack of hatred for her father. After a very frank description of what happened to her, she says: " I am not surprised that he couldn't keep his hands off his daughter; and I sincerely believe that he suffered more than I did. I at least had a future; he didn't even have a past".<sup>27</sup> Reading About Time one is left with the impression of a young girl who is biding her time until she is grown up enough to achieve what she wants. Throughout About Time Mortimer seems to use the imagery of the ugly duckling fairy-tale to convey this message. The fat ugly duckling who has to wear glasses is to be transformed in adulthood into the beautiful powerful swan. The experience of being abused by a 16 stone frustrated man who was her "daddy" seems to have made Mortimer even more determined to make up for this in adult life. Her personal motto at the age of 8 was: "Venture Valiantly Towards The Goal You Have Set Before You".<sup>28</sup> It also soon became clear to her that she would have to achieve this alone, that she could not rely on other people. Her mother seemed to turn a blind eye to what was happening: "My mother's abhorrence of sex made it impossible for her to talk to

me, and impossible for me to talk to her".<sup>29</sup>

At 17 Mortimer went to take a secretarial course in London, because her father thought that would be a good profession for a woman. She lived in a Hostel for Girls in Cromwell Road. Mortimer had been writing poetry for some time and had published a short story at the age of 8 in a periodical called The Review of Reviews, but Mortimer herself describes this now as "sickly stuff".<sup>30</sup> However, in the relative freedom of the hostel she could devote a lot more time to writing, staying in London even at Christmas to devote her time to writing.<sup>31</sup> At this time her brother was studying at Oxford and for the first time in their lives brother and sister were able to get to know each other. Her brother introduced her to some of his friends and one of them called Kadi became her first real lover.

Mortimer soon became bored with her secretarial course and persuaded her father that it would be a good idea to take a course in journalism at University College London. She soon became bored with this course as well and ended up spending the rest of the year taking Modern English Literature classes. Her father did not want to spend any more money on this, so Mortimer had to look for another occupation. She became more and more interested in becoming a writer, but also wanted to be financially independent. She took a job as publicity manager of Butlin's Holiday Camps, and tried to go on writing in the evening. She did not like this job at all, however, and decided that marriage would after all be preferable. Thus, like Spark, Mortimer rushed into marriage at an early age. On 6 November 1937 she married Charles Dimont, a journalist, a son of a canon who she thought would be able to give her the security she lacked. In fact this marriage did not bring much security. Dimont was always off to report the dangerous political situations in Europe, often not surfacing for a long time. Mortimer, who was soon pregnant with their first child, followed him to Vienna in 1938. In spite of the dangerous political situation she was quite happy and enjoying her pregnancy until her mother came to help her during her last months of pregnancy. Her mother immediately took over, telling Mortimer what to do, and, her mother who had never felt any pleasure in being a woman destroyed Mortimer's enjoyment of her femaleness. As Mortimer writes: "From then on I didn't want to go out; pregnancy became an illness".<sup>32</sup> Her baby, Madelon, was born after a difficult birth (she also weighed 10.5 lbs) without any help, because the gynaecologist, who was Jewish, could not be found after he had been thrown out of

his office by the Nazis. After a short visit to Prague to visit her husband who was reporting on the Munich agreement there, Mortimer and Madelon returned home to the vicarage of her parents because it was too dangerous to stay in Central Europe. Her husband eventually followed them back to Britain and they set up home in London.

Penelope Mortimer had four daughters with Charles Dimont. In spite of all the work this involved Mortimer remained decided to somehow reach her goal of becoming a writer. Her first novel, Johanna, was published in 1947, and her children have memories of their mother desperately trying to work. Caroline, the second daughter, for example, was sent to boarding-school when she was 5. She clearly recalls the reason for this: her mother "was very ruthless and always trying to work and never managing to".<sup>33</sup> Yet, she bears no grudge against her mother because she felt her work never took her away from the children completely: "There was always a typewriter and Mum tapping away, and when we came home from school she'd stop".<sup>34</sup> Mortimer also remembers being very driven to achieve her aim:

I would put the baby in the pram for four hours and write ... I never worked as hard as I did when the children were small.<sup>35</sup>

Mortimer herself is not as positive about the situation as her daughter Caroline is, however. In a recent letter she writes: "My daughter Caroline may say I coped well. So does a bull-dozer. The final result, for all concerned, is questionable. I can still see no alternative".<sup>36</sup>

Penelope Mortimer met her second husband, the lawyer and writer John Mortimer, for the first time during the war when he came to see her husband to ask him some advice. John Mortimer said she struck him at the time as "a dark young woman of remarkable beauty".<sup>37</sup> It was not until after the war when Penelope was in the process of being separated from her first husband that they met again. Penelope Mortimer's marriage to Charles Dimont was dissolved in 1949, and she married John Clifford Mortimer, who is five years her junior, on 27 August 1949. She had another daughter in 1950 and finally one son in 1955.

In Clinging to the Wreckage John Mortimer describes the financial and emotional difficulties of living in a family which consists of two writers and six small children. Penelope Mortimer fictionalized her account of this stage in her life in The Pumpkin Eater (1962), the first novel to provide financial security for its author. One of the main problems at first was indeed the financial

one. John Mortimer was just starting off in his career as a lawyer, following in the footsteps of his father who was a divorce-court lawyer. This career never became very successful from a financial point of view for John Mortimer. It was only when he created his fictional counterpart "Rumpole of the Old Bailey" that the money started coming in. Thus, rather reluctantly, he turned more and more to writing about lawyers than practising the law himself. Penelope Mortimer also took up a job to make some money. From 1954 to 1956 she was the agony aunt of the Daily Mail answering letters under the pseudonym Anne Temple. She later referred to this time as "two ghastly years".<sup>38</sup> She was to take up journalism again and again: she was The Observer's film critic from 1967 to 1970, and regularly contributed to many journals and magazines, for instance The New Yorker and Nova, as a free-lance journalist.

There were not only financial problems. In Clinging to the Wreckage John Mortimer describes how he felt that he had lost his youth when he married an older woman who had an established family. The couple also found it difficult to find time to relate to each other, often having to escape to a pub to have a serious talk. Penelope Mortimer often felt depressed because of all the pressure from different sides which she had to face. She says in an interview with Olga Franklin that although the world has the idea that she is a strong woman who can easily cope with everything, in fact, she often feels confused and undecided. Penelope Mortimer:

The image, I think, is that I am completely in command of the situation, rather hard, sophisticated. The reality is the absolute opposite. I'm muddled, desperately shy and spend a lot of my life in a sort of terror about one thing or another.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, even an apparently strong middle-class woman like Mortimer has her fears and doubts. Yet, Mortimer was in the end able to conquer her insecurity, again not without difficulties, however. Elsewhere Mortimer has described how she received electric shock treatments to deal with periods of severe depression in 1960 and 1971. This treatment, as she says, does not look at the cause of the depression but merely treats the symptoms. The second round of treatments, in 1971, especially caused damage to her memory, wiping out whole sections of her past. Mortimer: "I don't thank those doctors, however well-meaning they have been, who deliberately erased those personal reminiscences from my mind".<sup>40</sup> It left her with a fundamental insecurity: "It is much more difficult to absorb the future with confidence if one's grasp of the past has been weakened".<sup>41</sup> Electric shocks were the acceptable way of dealing with female rebelliousness and

dissatisfaction, as not only Mortimer but also Sylvia Plath and many women in the post-war period found (cf. Part I Chapter III, above). In Mortimer's case, as in probably most other cases, the result was that the world took on a rather more ambiguous aura, and an acceptance of a feminine identity was certainly not achieved.

One positive result from all this was that Penelope Mortimer's most prolific period as a novelist was when she was married to John Mortimer. They also found time to travel, and in 1957 they published their joint account of their two month stay in Italy, With Love and Lizards, a positive and optimistic book.

However, this marriage, which ended in 1972, has left a bitter taste with Mortimer. When Terry Coleman interviewed her in 1971, when she was separated, she had a picture on her wall entitled *The Death of Mortimer*.<sup>42</sup> In an article published in 1973 Mortimer takes a most pessimistic view of marriage: "Marriage, that most artificial of human institutions, fertilizes an enormous amount of erroneous images".<sup>43</sup> In this article she mainly regrets the way women are immediately associated with their husbands. If a woman is married to a successful man, she is seen as successful. If a woman divorces this successful man, he keeps the image of success, and she becomes a dowdy "Mrs Ex".<sup>44</sup>

To Katherine Whitehorn, a journalist who like Mary Stott also raised "women's issues" in the pre-1968 period, Mortimer relates how for the first time in her life she really feels happy now she is finally able to live her life in the way she wants.<sup>45</sup> Mortimer has lived alone in a cottage in Gloucestershire for the past years, writing and especially gardening (her garden featured in The Sunday Times, in 1988),<sup>46</sup> and travelling abroad when the fancy takes her. She spent some time in a writer's colony in 1973. In 1979 she travelled to Saudi Arabia for a television programme. Her first major trip after her separation, however, was a visit to Russia with her son in 1971. She had been in Russia in 1966 with her husband and had then been treated as a VIP. In 1971 she travelled as a tourist and was so appalled by the treatment she received that she wrote an open letter to Kosygin, "Thank You for Having Us, But ...".<sup>47</sup> This perfect example of the treatment of people being geared towards their image rather than to what they really are was met by a characteristically decisive answer.

### I.3 Iris Murdoch

Jean Iris Murdoch was born in Dublin on 15 July 1919. She was the only child of Wills John Hughes Murdoch and Irene Alice Richardson. Her mother was born in Dublin and was a singer (a soprano), who, like many of the other mothers of these writers, could not pursue her career. Murdoch's mother married at 18, which virtually ended her career. Murdoch's father was born in County Down, and he joined a territorial unit of the army during World War I. In the army he had to visit Dublin regularly, where he met Murdoch's mother. After the war Murdoch's father became a civil servant and they moved to London. Murdoch describes her family unit as a "perfect trinity".<sup>48</sup> She felt close to both her father and her mother, but she was influenced by her father in particular where her interest in literature is concerned: "My father was an extremely good and clever man, and we used to discuss books when I was very young, The Alice books and so on".<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere she stresses the same influence: "Egged on by my father, I read an immense quantity of stories, including the grown-up ones, as a child".<sup>50</sup> Murdoch clearly identifies herself with her parents' Anglo-Irish background and what it stands for. She states that the Anglo-Irish have a tradition of philosophers and writers and sees this as a further link:

This is a particular kind of race, as it were - the English settlers in Ireland - and a very talented race, if I may say so, full of writers and philosophers and so on, I feel a certain attachment to this group in a kind of sentimental way, though I scarcely know that world at all, not having lived in Ireland enough.<sup>51</sup>

In fact, she mainly lived in London as a child and only went to Ireland on holiday.

Her Anglo-Irish background gave Murdoch a strong religious base as a child. She liked the security of a big organisation like that even as a child. Murdoch:

I was brought up inside religion, I prayed as soon as I could speak and felt the presence of God as a child and knew all about Christ ... In this sense I am deeply based inside Christianity in the Anglican Church. But I was without any intensity or anxiety: I never worried about it.<sup>52</sup>

Later in life she lapsed from this strong belief, but a wish for a guiding moral principle remained present, making her search for various possible replacements (Buddhism among others).

Murdoch went to the Froebel School in London and was one of few to get a scholarship to go to Badminton School near Bath. She was an academically gifted child, and also knew from a very early age what she wanted: "I knew as a child that I wanted to be a writer. I always knew that I would do something else as well ... I started writing stories when I was about nine or ten, and I

always knew that this was what I wanted to do".<sup>53</sup> It was to be some time, however, before Murdoch published her first novel in 1954.

After school she went to Somerville College, Oxford, where she read classics, philosophy and ancient history. She graduated in 1942 with a first class honours degree in the humanities. During her time at Oxford she became politically active and joined the Communist Party, as so many intellectuals did at the time. Looking back now she relates how she took this social commitment very seriously at the time and thought of making that the basis for her future: "I thought I might do politics or social work or international work of some kind".<sup>54</sup> As it was, she started off her career as a civil servant. From 1942 to 1944 she worked as an assistant principal in the Treasury. As she relates in a letter, men and women were both drafted to work in certain places during the war, so that there was very little choice for either sex.<sup>55</sup> Towards the end of the war she worked as an administrative officer with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. This work took her for long spells to Belgium and Austria, where she worked in a displaced persons camp. While in Europe Murdoch encountered the new idea of existentialism, and was very impressed by it. She even met Sartre himself, and it is therefore not surprising that her first published work was a critical study of Sartre (1953). Sartre's ideas gave her the main impetus for concentrating her efforts on the study of philosophy. She felt that the return to academic work after the experiences of the war required some effort: "I had to spend a lot of time re-educating myself, re-reading the philosophers, etc".<sup>56</sup> In 1948 she became a Fellow of St. Anne's College and a tutor in philosophy. She became an Honorary Fellow of St. Anne's College in 1963, and she lectured at the Royal College of Art in London between 1963 and 1967.

Throughout Murdoch's life both philosophy and novel writing have remained her main professional interests. She had to wait a little bit longer for the success she had in the field of philosophy to be followed by the success as a novel writer, however. Although Murdoch had started writing for the Badminton School magazine in 1933 and finished her first novel when she was 20, she did not see her first novel published until she was 35. One reason was the impact of the war: it "took seven years out of my life. One was working so hard on other jobs".<sup>57</sup> Another reason was that Murdoch herself discarded the first four manuscripts of four potential novels, and Faber and Faber rejected another one in 1948. Finally, her first novel, Under the Net, was

published to high acclaim.

Her first fiancé died in the war, and after several disastrous love affairs Murdoch met John Oliver Bayley, who is six years her junior, in 1953 in Oxford and married him in 1956. He is a novelist and a critic, and was until recently Professor of English at Oxford. She seems to have found the perfect mate in him, because even thirty years later she is able to express her satisfaction with the married state: "I am very fortunate that I approve of monogamy and have a happy experience of it".<sup>58</sup> In "Mad Don and English Man" Bayley reveals some of the more eccentric aspects of their set-up: "Dust we ignore on the whole" and "any food that had been prepared had a tendency to come out as green slime".<sup>59</sup> In the interview Bayley appears to be an interesting and friendly man. Crewe describes him as "courteous, funny, charismatic and completely endearing ... He is an old-fashioned gentleman of letters, in the best sense".<sup>60</sup> Murdoch herself is pleased that she did not rush into marriage at an early age. She thinks that if a woman binds herself sexually to a man at an early age this can have a stultifying effect: "I think early sex is particularly hard on girls. It means that when a girl should be getting to know lots and lots of chaps, she is cornered by just one".<sup>61</sup> It is as if she sees sex as a dangerous force which if not guided properly into the right channels could easily spoil a woman's life: "Sex is a very great mystifier, it's a very dark force. It makes us all do all kinds of things we don't understand and very often don't want to do".<sup>62</sup>

Bayley and Murdoch do not have any children, and thus Murdoch has the benefit of the security of a stable relationship without the distraction to her writing which children might have provided. In this she is in a unique situation compared to all the other novelists under discussion here. Yet, the large number of Murdoch's activities provide a view of a life which is perhaps just as divided among different interests as the other women's lives. Apart from having to split her time between writing novels, critical and philosophical works, and teaching, Murdoch also paints, likes travelling, is politically active (e.g. during the Vietnam war), practices Japanese sword fighting, and sees learning languages as a challenge. In a recent interview Murdoch stresses that she is very happy that she has been able to combine work and marriage. That both aspects have been essential for her identity. Angela Lambert asks her what the most important thing in her own life has been. Murdoch answers:

Two things. One, being happily married, and the other, being able to use my mind creatively, in philosophy and in writing novels ... I have learnt a lot and derived satisfaction from pursuing these two trades.<sup>63</sup>

Iris Murdoch has definitely joined the literary establishment, having received a CBE in 1976 which was turned into an OBE in 1987, and she can even call herself Dame Iris Murdoch now.

#### **I.4 Doris Lessing**

Lessing is currently working on her autobiography, but unfortunately has not published the first volume yet. The outline presented here is compiled out of the facts of her life made public to date. Doris May Tayler was born in Kermansha, Persia, on 22 October 1919. Her parents were Captain Alfred Cook Tayler and Emily Maud McVeagh. Her father was a bank clerk, leading a rather poor but cheerful existence until the start of the First World War. He was wounded in Belgium and his leg had to be amputated, but in a way he was lucky because this happened just a few weeks before Passchendaele at which his whole company was killed. The war left him shell-shocked and completely changed in character. Doris Lessing writes in "My Father": "I do not think these people [who knew him in his youth] would have easily recognized the ill, irritable, abstracted, hypochondriac man I knew".<sup>64</sup> Lessing's mother was a nurse at the Royal Free Hospital where her father was convalescing. Emily McVeagh's mother had died very early and she was raised very strictly by her father and stepmother. Doris Lessing describes her mother thus: "my mother was over-dutified and inhibited, but in her was imprisoned a gay affectionate woman".<sup>65</sup>

During the first years of their married life Lessing's father worked for the Imperial Bank of Persia. He had decided to leave Britain because it was too claustrophobic a country after the First World War, and he also felt that people in Britain did not understand what he had gone through in the war. For Lessing's mother the stay in Persia between 1919 and 1925 was a relatively happy time, because she could express the gregarious side of her character, socializing with other Britons abroad. Lessing's father, however, found Persia just as stifling as Britain after a few years. In 1924 the family was on leave from Persia in Britain and saw the stand for Southern Rhodesia in the Empire Exhibition. The whole family, Lessing by then had a little brother called Harry, went to Rhodesia with high hopes. In fact, reality proved to be very different from what the Exhibition had shown them. Their farm was in the middle of uncultivated land, and although the farm was very large (3,000 acres), the maize which Lessing's father tried to grow was not the safe

investment he had expected it to be (prices fluctuated, crops failed). Lessing's mother became frustrated with her lonely life and developed a neurotic illness. She had expected her Persian social life to continue in Rhodesia taking "curtains from Liberty's, clothes from Harrods, visiting cards, a piano, Persian rugs".<sup>66</sup> In fact the nearest neighbours were 4 miles away. Lessing says about her mother that she felt "desperately sorry" for this woman who had chosen to look after an invalid (Lessing's father), rather than pursue her career, and who felt her life was wasted.<sup>67</sup>

For Lessing herself there seemed to be a positive and a negative side to her life in Rhodesia, and she appears rather nostalgic for it now. In articles in which she describes her first visit for thirty years to Banket, her old home village in Zimbabwe, nostalgia is the main sentiment.<sup>68</sup> In African Laughter she describes her visits to the country since independence, and again the strong bond she still feels with Zimbabwe stands out. Lessing had a rather unorthodox childhood, hardly influenced by the normal socializing pressures of school and peers. She says: "My time was spent reading or walking through the African bush".<sup>69</sup> She was sent to a Dominican convent school in Salisbury when she was 7, but she felt very homesick, and did in fact spend very little time at the school. Lessing: "I was always being neurotically ill, because my mother wanted me to be brilliant. I went underground to save my soul".<sup>70</sup> She used the same protest-mechanism as her father, who developed diabetes and became an hypochondriac in his forties, because he could not handle the life he was leading. Lessing's brother Harry has developed in a totally opposite direction from his sister. He died recently but he was until his death a farmer in Zimbabwe, and disapproved of his sister's use of early autobiographical material.<sup>71</sup>

Leaving school at 14, Lessing worked in Salisbury as a nursemaid. She went back to the farm to try and write a novel after two years in Salisbury. She wrote two novels which were never published, and went back to Salisbury to become a telephone operator. She married Frank Charles Wisdom, a civil servant (later a master of the High Court in Salisbury), at the age of 19 in 1939. Philippa Berlyn, a childhood friend of Lessing's says that Lessing's marriage was an attempt at escape from her parents' influence on her life.<sup>72</sup> Lessing and her first husband had one son (John) and one daughter (Jean). The marriage was dissolved in 1943, the children remaining with their father in Africa. John, a farmer, is living in Zimbabwe to the present day, and Jean lives in Cape Town at the moment. In 1944 Lessing got married to a Jewish German

refugee, Gottfried Anton Nicholas Lessing (later East German ambassador to Uganda and as such killed by Idi Amin's troops in 1979). She had another son, Peter (1947), who came back to Britain with her after the war. Her second marriage was dissolved in 1949. Through her second husband, a communist, Lessing became involved in a communist group. There was no Communist Party in Rhodesia, so Lessing only joined the official Communist Party when she came to London in 1949, and left it again in 1956 because of the Soviet invasion of Hungary.<sup>73</sup>

Lessing soon realized in both cases that marriage was not an ideal state. She takes a lot of the blame for the failure of her marriage upon herself: "I can't blame the people I've been married to - by and large I've been at fault".<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere she has said that she "had been happier living with someone than being married: marriage is terribly difficult".<sup>75</sup> Later on in life Lessing realized that marriage was not all that important to her anymore:

I acquired the qualities to be married rather too late and by that time I'd lost interest in the whole business of being married. I was much too impatient and always fighting about something.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, in Rhodesia the pressures on a middle-class girl like her to get married had been very great, and Charles Wisdom was the appropriate respectable candidate. Lessing's choice of a second husband shows her moving away from the accepted code of behaviour: marrying a German in war-time, mainly to give him a British passport, was not one of the most accepted things to do.

Lessing's refusal to have anything to do with marriage after her return to England was not an easy decision for her to take. She seemed to have partly internalized the codes of behaviour of her youth:

Living as I do, being alone, being free in the way I live, is, in a way, living against all my natural feminine instincts, which are to have the emotional security of being married. From time to time I collapse into nervous exhaustion - it's something I have to accept as the price of living my kind of life.<sup>77</sup>

Lessing has had Jungian therapy for long spells because she had conflicting feelings: she felt that she ought to be happy in a permanent relationship with one man, preferably in marriage, while, in fact, she knew that she would never be happy in that way. She herself realizes that her form of neurosis is based on a form of dissatisfaction and rebellion: "For the last twenty years I have been closely involved with psychiatrists and mentally ill people ... Madness can be a form of rebellion".<sup>78</sup> This rebellion is specifically related to how male and female roles are defined in

society. It is a very understandable reaction in view of the problems which existed with the definition of woman's position in society (outlined in Part I, above). Lessing uses a certain kind of dream landscape to alleviate the pressure:

I created this impersonal, idealized landscape, with male and female figures in certain relations with each other. Both were responsible for their own realm, they were neither better nor worse than each other and they were engaged in this magnificent enjoyable fight which, if it is going well between the sexes, is one of the great pleasures, after all of sex and of love.<sup>79</sup>

In the '50s and early '60s Lessing was particularly influenced by the ideas of R.D. Laing, who was a close friend. During the same time she had a stormy relationship with the American journalist and writer Clancy Segal fictionalized in The Golden Notebook (Saul Green).<sup>80</sup> After this relationship ended Lessing's search for ideas led her to Sufism.

Doris Lessing's first novel was published with great success (seven reprints in five months) in 1950, and she has been able to live off her writing ever since. Lessing did not only continue to write novels and short stories but also wrote some plays and various articles. Because of her success as a writer she could give up the job as a secretary which she had taken up on arrival in London. Largely self-educated she did not feel she was accomplished enough to take up teaching, a job which most of the other writers have had at some time or another, when it was offered to her at City College.<sup>81</sup> Thus, her lack of formal education has left her with a insecurity towards certain institutions, although she is tough and single-minded in other respects. In 1956 Lessing went back to Rhodesia as a journalist, to write a series of articles on the country for the Soviet news agency Tass. Her experiences were published in Going Home.

One example of Lessing's single-mindedness is her continual involvement with political causes. She was a prohibited person in Rhodesia from 1957 to 1980, because she wrote an honest account of her return to this country in Going Home.

Lessing has spent her life since 1949 in London, moving at least once a year, and dividing her time between writing novels, her son Peter, her foster daughter Jenny, and her political causes. As in Murdoch's case Lessing's novels have become part of the canon, and she herself has become part of the literary establishment, although she does not have an OBE. She herself put the literary world to the test when she wrote a novel under the pseudonym of Jane Somers in

the eighties. No publisher wanted to accept this book at first, which normally, if it would have had "Doris Lessing" on its dustjacket would have seen several publishers fighting over it.

## 1.5 Edna O'Brien

Edna O'Brien was born in Scariff, County Clare, Republic of Ireland, on 15 December 1932. O'Brien's date of birth seems to be a matter of some confusion, possibly caused by the writer herself. In World Authors 1950-1970 her date of birth is given as 1932. In the 1982 edition of the International Writer's Who's Who 1936 is given as her date of birth. Darcy O'Brien in "Edna O'Brien: a Kind of Irish Childhood" implies that her date of birth is 1930 or 1929 when he states that O'Brien wrote A Pagan Place (1970) in her "fortieth year".<sup>82</sup> Conclusive evidence in the form of clear dates in the biographical blurb on the dustjackets of her novels is not to be found. 1932 seems the most likely date, however. It is adopted by Elaine Showalter in A Literature of Their Own, in Margaret Drabble's edition of the Oxford Companion to English Literature, and in the 1988-1990 edition of The Writer's Directory.

What is more certain is that her parents were Michael O'Brien, a farmer, and Lena Cleary. Unlike Murdoch who comes from an Anglo-Irish family, O'Brien's relatives are traditional Roman Catholic Southern Irish. She is also always described by interviewers as looking typically Irish: a pale skin, red hair, and green eyes.

O'Brien's youth was in many ways typical for her surroundings. She herself describes her childhood as "rather lonely and fervoured".<sup>83</sup> She has two sisters and a brother, but she does not seem to feel very close to them. What has remained with her most is the prescriptive nature of the Roman Catholic religion (she went to a convent school). Most books apart from bibles and cook-books were banned, books by the Brontës being a notable exception. Later in life she does not regret this lack of access to literature. She feels that if she had been in contact with major world literature at an early age, this would have influenced her writing too much. Rather than being influenced by other literature her mind was full of religious symbols, especially the guilt of not being able to live up to the strict rules imposed by this religion:

I think as a race, we Irish people have more covert guilt than, say, the English. And a very great deal of it is to do with sex. I was sitting in a chapel in Limerick, that holy city of spires and gossip, and a woman leaned over - she was doing the stations of the cross - and she said: 'Do you realize that Our Lady blushes every

time a young girl crosses her legs?' and I quickly uncrossed my legs. Well, there's the guilt of that - everything one does is wrong.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout her life sex remained associated with guilt in O'Brien's mind. As she herself says: "The themes of one's childhood last throughout life".<sup>85</sup>

In spite of her oppressive childhood O'Brien went back to Ireland very regularly in her adult life to visit her relatives and friends (in the '70s this was still at least once a month).<sup>86</sup> There seems to be a twofold emotion in her attitude to Ireland: on the one hand the awareness of the conservative nature of society and the effects of this on its inhabitants, and on the other hand the attraction Ireland holds for her: she uses words like "supernatural" and "mythological" to describe Ireland, for instance.<sup>87</sup> An example of this paradox is her opinion on birth control. On the one hand she applauds the freedom the liberalization of Irish laws would provide for people, but on the other hand she claims that Ireland would then lose some of its old-fashioned innocence and would become "another tired sauce-bottle society like Britain".<sup>88</sup>

O'Brien associates the more positive aspects of Ireland with her mother, and the more negative, fear-invoking aspects with her father. In an interview with Philip Roth she refers to the aggressiveness, the unreasonable anger, and unpredictable sexual demands of her father, and elsewhere she has invoked her early thoughts about her father: "I wished that I were a man and could kill my father or at least fight to defend us, the women".<sup>89</sup> Her father inherited a rather large farm with a nice house, but he squandered the whole estate on drink and gambling. The family had to be given clothes by their American relatives to survive.<sup>90</sup> In 1976 O'Brien wrote an account of her memories of Ireland, Mother Ireland, in which she expressed many of these feelings towards Ireland.

O'Brien's childhood resembles Lessing's in some ways: both novelists were farmer's daughters and both spent their childhood in rural isolation. Both women lacked a structured literary education for which they made up by drawing on their own imagination. Lessing started writing early, and O'Brien, too, sees her wish to be a writer rooted in her youth: "It was a religious background, in a very small community, a hamlet, and it was very fertile for writing because you knew everyone's life and everyone's stories. And any kind of throttling or repression makes one more eager".<sup>91</sup> O'Brien's childhood also resembles Mortimer's in the figure of the tyrannical father. Both women escaped from their fathers in an early marriage, perhaps not such an obvious

step to take, but to both women this was the only option which could provide them with a total independence from their past.

After leaving the convent school (the Convent of Mercy, Loughrae, County Galway), O'Brien went to the Pharmaceutical College of Ireland in Dublin, at the same time working in a chemist's shop. In Dublin she met the Czech emigré novelist Ernst Gebler. She eloped with him to County Wicklow and married him in 1952. O'Brien says about Ernst Gebler:

I eloped with a man who was obviously a father figure. He had been married before, though he was separated by the time I met him, and he was everything my parents were bound to disapprove of - a foreigner (he came from Czechoslovakia), a self-confessed Marxist, a writer, already married, an agnostic.<sup>92</sup>

The marriage was not without its difficult patches, e.g. O'Brien fell in love with somebody else after four years of marriage. They had two sons, Carlo (1952, now a journalist), and Sasha (1954). O'Brien ran away to London in 1959. At first she was not given custody of the children, because she had "abandoned" them. However, she was officially divorced in 1964 and was then given custody of the children, whom she has since raised on her own, being a single mother for most her life, like Lessing, Spark, Drabble, Mortimer, and Bainbridge. From an interview given in 1968 it becomes clear that she obviously enjoyed looking after her children:

The boys always have a lot of their friends coming here. I cook for them, different dishes for each child, just like a restaurant. They often, I think, want to stay because it's different. For one thing there is no Dad around. It's more liberating. Not that they consciously express this ... They just expect you to be there, like a rock, safe, providing.<sup>93</sup>

O'Brien actually enjoyed raising the children by herself. In this she resembles Margaret Drabble very much, as we shall see later. Drabble and O'Brien did not experience the feelings of loneliness or financial hardship which made the single mothers discussed in Part I such pitiful characters. O'Brien has stressed the pleasure of being a single parent again and again:

Bringing up the children was glorious, because think of the idealness - you have no husband or wife to argue with you and say, 'They must wear a blazer', 'They mustn't wear a blazer', 'They must go to that school!' I was totally my own authority in that way.<sup>94</sup>

Elsewhere she relates that she found it difficult to be married because of the married state as such as well as the particular person she was married to:

I am not so good at living with other people, that is one of my crosses ... I was, once in my life, married to quite a dictatorial person, who used to insist on what he

called 'silence periods'. Well, that made everyone hysterical.<sup>95</sup>

Since her divorce O'Brien has had various love affairs but has never married somebody or lived with somebody for any length of time. O'Brien has a rather paradoxical attitude towards men. On the one hand she could not live with a man, but on the other hand she still sees romantic love as the great ideal: "I am not eager to live with someone again. I don't want their reality or their shirts. I am not really equipped for continuity. I only want excitement or madness or surprise".<sup>96</sup>

Like the other writers discussed above, O'Brien has an independent mind, and a character which makes her persevere in whatever course of action she has chosen to take. In an interview with The Times she calls herself "fiercely independent".<sup>97</sup> And in an interview on BBC television with Bishop Richard Holloway (9.8.88) she talked of her "total determination" to achieve what she wanted. Catherine Stott in an interview with O'Brien also notes how well she is able to look after herself, and how much she likes living completely on her own.<sup>98</sup> Elsewhere O'Brien herself relates how she has this voice inside her which urges her on to do her own thing: "I have this lacerating voice inside which says 'get better, get better, get better' not in a competitive sense or I would be a rich woman but in learning".<sup>99</sup>

O'Brien wanted to be a writer already from an early age:

When I was young, I always wanted to be a writer and since then I have realized this dream. It's some sort of ache or dissatisfaction which makes me go on. It's something terribly intangible - almost like seeing something superb in the sky, in behaviour, or in the land and seeing it is not enough. You have to somehow set it down for someone else to see, even though that sounds arrogant.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, to O'Brien writing has a certain educative aspect, telling people about the world and about the dissatisfactions which she feels. Like some of the other writers O'Brien has known periods of depression, which have not affected her writing badly, on the contrary she says: "happiness deems writing to be a dull bedfellow".<sup>101</sup> In Talking to Women (1965) O'Brien talks about a time in 1963 when she felt so depressed that she stole a scarf from a shop: "It was a time when I felt very, very deprived, not just of goods, but of contact, and it did give me a new - when I thought about it afterwards - a new insight into stealing".<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps because of their notoriety O'Brien's novels, collections of short stories, and plays have always sold well, making her financially independent. O'Brien told Bishop Richard Holloway in a television interview how she found one copy of The Country Girls in her mother's house after

her mother's death in which all the outspoken passages had been crossed out by her mother.<sup>103</sup>

Writing is all important to O'Brien: "My marriage and my mistress has been my writing. It has had to be. I love writing. I always have. I think it's the greatest nourishment in my life".<sup>104</sup> Although, as shown above, she is equally pleased about being a mother, the combination of the two she finds difficult: "It think constantly that it's impossible but live through it ... being a writer is being a writer constantly". She envies the Victorian women writers, few of whom were married or had children: "the ones who have now, like for instance the author of The Pumpkin Eater [Mortimer] find it a fierce battle".<sup>105</sup>

## 1.6 Beryl Bainbridge

Beryl Margaret Bainbridge was born in Liverpool on 21 November 1934, and spent her youth in Thornby, just outside Liverpool, near the coast. Her parents were Richard Bainbridge and Winifred Baines. Bainbridge has returned to her parents' life story many times in interviews and in fiction. In the article "Bringing Hitler to Liverpool", for example, she says that she based the Hitler character on her father "a minor dictator in his own way".<sup>106</sup> In an interview with Yolanta May she relates how her parents met. Her mother was first attracted to somebody else, but decided to marry her father because he was doing very well in business at the time. At first when his business was doing well they lived in a large house, but after a few years he went bankrupt and they became much poorer when he went to work as a salesman. Bainbridge's mother then became totally dissatisfied with her life, even leaving her husband a few times, but always coming back in the end. Like Lessing's mother Bainbridge's mother, who had been to finishing school and came from a middle-class background, had expected great things from life and in her disappointment transferred her ambitions to her daughter. Bainbridge's sympathies seemed to have been with her mother for a great part of her life, only later understanding her father's position. Her father was a rather violent man who suffered from inexplicable (to the child Beryl) changes in moods. Bainbridge was already at an early age prepared to fight back: "when I was ten or eleven I would leap upon my father's back, my knee in his ribs, my arm round his throat and get him to the floor".<sup>107</sup> Bainbridge has one brother. He used to take a completely different attitude, rather than matching attack with attack he would escape and leave the house for long spells. Later in life

Bainbridge began to understand her father, who died when she was 17: " I never realized what the poor man had to go through, what a dreadful life he had. He was very generous to me and my brother: he loved us".<sup>108</sup> Bainbridge now sees the situation like this: he not only loved his children but also his wife, and did not get any response from her after his bankruptcy, after he had failed in her eyes. All through her youth her father created a lot of fuss, but it was her mother who really decided what happened. One of her mother's favourite songs was: "When this man is dead and gone, We'll go dancing down the street, Kissing everyone we meet".<sup>109</sup> Bainbridge takes a rather cynical view of her difficult youth and feels she has overcome its effects, but: "If I had done it twenty years ago, I wouldn't have been neurotic for twenty years and I wouldn't have written".<sup>110</sup>

Bainbridge was educated at a private school, Merchant's Taylors' School, Liverpool, and at the Arts Educational School, Tring, Hertfordshire, a ballet school. From an early age Bainbridge was very interested in both acting and painting, and her parents encouraged her in this. She was a child actor for the BBC radio in Manchester and worked in repertory theatre from 1949 to 1960 (mainly in the Liverpool Playhouse, but also in Salisbury and Dundee). She has always continued painting. Some years she has turned out 20 or 30 paintings a year. The paintings were selling quite well even before she became a famous author.

In 1954 she married a painter, Austin Davies. She had first met him when she was 16, but had wanted to avoid falling into the trap of marrying him, even turning to Roman Catholicism to achieve this. They had one son, Aaron (1957) and two daughters, Joanna (1959) and Ruth (1965). When they got married they moved to Toxteth, a district of Liverpool of which Bainbridge says: "my parents were embarrassed to tell their neighbours my new address".<sup>111</sup> The remarkable anecdotes which make up Bainbridge's life continued here. Her mother-in-law was disturbed at a certain point in time and Bainbridge was just able to push the gun away otherwise she would have been killed by her mother-in-law. One of the children's nursery school teachers died in class. Bainbridge turned the first occasion into art: she retold the story both on canvas and in her novel The Bottle-Factory (Bainbridge herself was working in a bottle-factory at the time of the incident in 1970). In 1959 Bainbridge got a divorce from Davies, but they still remain close. She moved to London because he wanted to be nearer to the children, and their third child was born

in London after their divorce. She talks about her marriage as "a period of neurosis".<sup>112</sup> There was little money, little security, and her husband was rather an absentee husband, leaving her alone for long spells. She has low expectations of family life, and does not seem at all surprised that her marriage turned out the way it did: "anybody's family life must be horrific".<sup>113</sup> It did not seem to be the person Davies she dislikes as such, however. Even many years after her divorce she still kept up friendly relations with her ex-husband. During an interview with Alex Hamilton in 1974, for instance, her husband is just painting her house.<sup>114</sup> After her divorce Bainbridge continued to live with her children, and her eldest daughter's husband and son lived with her for some time in the '80s as well. She seemed very happy after her divorce: "I've never been so contented in my life as in the last few years".<sup>115</sup>

Since Bainbridge has become famous as a novelist she has travelled much around Europe and Britain lecturing on her work. She was, for instance, invited to travel to Israel in 1977, and to Moscow in 1979. One of the visits organized by the British Council in 1985 led her to Vienna. Afterwards she gave an interview with the British Council staff magazine Connect in which she doubted the value of such tours which seemed to imply "that Austrians did not have novelists of their own to be interested in".<sup>116</sup> Sodate British Council employees were thoroughly shocked to find that anybody could fail to value the importance of their work, and they wrote angry letters which were published in subsequent issues of Connect. Bainbridge has further idiosyncratic methods of dealing with everyday issues: she has a stuffed Buffalo in her hall, and she pays the electricity bill only when electricity is about to be cut off. In spite of all this she definitely joined the establishment in 1978 when she became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

## **I.7 A.S. Byatt**

Antonia Susan Byatt was born in Sheffield on 24 August 1936. She was the eldest daughter of His Honour John Frederick Drabble, QC, and Kathleen Marie Bloor. Her father, a judge who wrote in his spare time, and her mother, an English teacher who stopped working when her children arrived, were both graduates from Cambridge University. Byatt's parents became Quakers when she was young and she was sent to the Mount School in York, a Quaker school. Byatt enjoyed reading from an early age and started to write in notebooks when she was at the Mount

School. She was stimulated in her literary interests by both parents. Byatt received a first-class honours degree from Newnham College, Cambridge. She went on to study at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania for a year in 1957-1958, and she went to Somerville College, Oxford, for the following year.

In July 1959 she married Ian Charles Rayner Byatt, an economist who later obtained a senior position at the Treasury. In an interview given in 1966 Byatt gives her motives for getting married: "Antonia Byatt says that as a child she swore she wouldn't be a writer, but a don. 'The decision to get married was really a decision not to become a proper woman don - though I do teach".<sup>117</sup> Now, however, she clearly regards her writing as her first priority: "Absolutely without wavering, more a novelist".<sup>118</sup>

Byatt chose a similar type of man as Lessing for her first husband: a solid civil servant. Yet Byatt, like Lessing, was not prepared to adopt the role of housewife and hostess which is normally the fate of the woman who marries such a man. Byatt very clearly wanted to pursue her own career but also at the same time prove she was a "real" woman: "I was afraid of not going on as a writer or not being a woman".<sup>119</sup>

Byatt and her husband moved to Durham where their first child, Antonia, was born in 1960. Their second child, Charles, was born in 1961. Charles was killed in a car accident in 1972.

Byatt divorced her first husband in 1969 and more or less immediately married Peter John Duffy in the same year. She had two children by her second husband, Isabel (born 1970) and Miranda (born 1973). Of all the novelists under discussion here Byatt is the only one who has managed to combine all three female positions: wife, mother, worker, for more or less all her life, be it that she has not been married to the same person all her life. One obvious sign that this combination is not an easy one, is that Byatt is by far the least prolific novelist of all the writers discussed here. Although Byatt has written many one or two page articles and reviews, which could be written in between doing other things, she has written few novels, which require a longer spell of concentration. Byatt has written five novels published in 1964, 1967, 1978, 1985 and 1990. No wonder Byatt said in an interview in 1967:

I'd give anything for six months off; to get on with my new book. I feel bothered about the amount of energy needed to reach those deeps into which one must often dredge for one's material.<sup>120</sup>

Apart from being a novelist Byatt has also pursued an academic career. She has written some literary studies, e.g. Degrees of Freedom (1965) on the novels of Iris Murdoch, a novelist whom she particularly likes. From 1962 to 1983 she also lectured. From 1962 to 1971 she was an extra-mural lecturer at the University of London. She got a permanent lectureship at University College, London in 1972, which was turned into a senior lectureship in 1981. She became an Associate of Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1977. She gave up her academic work in 1983.

A.S. Byatt is the sister of Margaret Drabble and people seem to be tempted to make comparisons between their lives and their novels. Although they come from the same family, there are differences between them, both as far as their novels are concerned and as far as their characters are concerned. Byatt seems to be more academically minded, and rather more quiet and thoughtful, giving fewer interviews than the verbose Drabble. Byatt herself thinks this may be because she was asthmatic as a child and was "forced to be still for much of the time and to observe".<sup>121</sup> Pat Williams, the interviewer on this occasion, sees Byatt as "slower, more reticent, shyer".<sup>122</sup> Whereas Drabble can write a novel in a few weeks, Byatt takes years and years to complete a novel. Yet both sisters have led a similar life-style: "Both sisters have tailored their lives to accommodate the demands of family and work".<sup>123</sup> In fact this is perhaps what unites them most of all: "When Drabble sisters meet, they talk about the children".<sup>124</sup>

## **I.8 Margaret Drabble**

Margaret Drabble was born in Sheffield on 5 June 1939. She was the second daughter of John Frederick Drabble and Kathleen Marie Bloor and had the same stimulating background as her elder sister. Drabble says: "It was very tolerant, liberal, middle class, professional".<sup>125</sup> Their father was a self-made man who first worked in his father's sweet-making business, and then went on to study at Cambridge. Drabble's parents met each other at school. Now Drabble realizes both the positive and also the negative influence of her demanding parents:

I felt very pressurized as a child, which is probably why I never consciously put any pressure on any of my children when they were growing up. All Drabble children were expected to be academic high-achievers. We went to Cambridge as Father and Mother had done ... There is something sinister about the way my siblings have been so docile to my parents' wishes and never thought of doing anything else.<sup>126</sup>

Both Drabble's younger brother, a barrister, and younger sister, an art historian, also went to Cambridge.

Drabble is not as diplomatic as Byatt, who when asked if The Game was about her relationship with Drabble always answers that it is pure fiction. Drabble does admit that the relationship between the two sisters in A Summer Bird-Cage, her first novel, is based on her relationship with Byatt:

My sister was not very nice to me - my big sister. I used to tag along after her and she was always ... well, she used to play with me a lot when we were little ... I think this is what went wrong. I used to expect her to go on playing with me ... I always felt that I had been shut out, rejected by her.<sup>127</sup>

Drabble went to the same school as her sister A.S. Byatt, the Mount School in York, a Quaker school. She also followed her sister to Cambridge to study English. She graduated in 1960 with a double first. During her time at Cambridge Drabble was very active in the Amateur Dramatic Club. Clive Walter Swift, who was on the audition committee when she became a member, fell in love with her at first sight. They married three weeks after Drabble's graduation in 1960. Drabble's time at Cambridge was taken up with studying and socializing, and she did not write much fiction, in spite of moving in literary circles where she met Sylvia Plath, among others. Drabble:

I found the atmosphere there very forbidding and very destructive. In fact, anything I wrote I kept very, very much to myself. I didn't show anything to anybody till the year after I came down from Cambridge.<sup>128</sup>

After Cambridge Drabble decided to follow her husband to Stratford-upon-Avon, where he was working with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Having liked acting on an amateur basis at Cambridge, she decided to make a career for herself in acting. She was in fact offered some minor parts in Shakespeare plays, even understudying Vanessa Redgrave on one occasion. The decision to become an actress was a very brave one because Drabble had had a severe stammer when she was young. She had conquered this stammer through acting. The first time she did not stammer in her life was when she played the leading role of St. Joan at a Mount School performance of the play.<sup>129</sup>

Margaret Drabble and her first husband had three children: Adam (1961), Rebecca (1964), and Joseph (1965). The eldest two children went to Oxford, where Adam still works. The youngest, Joseph, has a shop in London selling oriental clothes, thus breaking with the academic

tradition. Drabble and her husband got divorced in 1975 after growing apart and starting to live their own lives more and more. Drabble herself sees the breaking point in 1966 when she was given a travel grant by the Society of Authors to travel to Paris: "My husband was in the theatre in Chichester, and I suppose that was really the parting of the ways in a sense, because I decided he's not going to come with me and I'm damned if I'm turning it down, simply because he's not going to come with me".<sup>130</sup> When Drabble and her children came back from Paris from their six months' stay there they moved to London, to Hampstead Heath, where she has lived ever since. Drabble began to feel more and more that the children were really important to her and that her husband was rather inessential in comparison: "I began to feel that my life with them was a sort of unit and that was where I had to be for the next 10, 15 years".<sup>131</sup> The children still kept contact with their father, and Drabble still kept contact with her in-laws: "My former husband is Jewish ... I loved my husband's family. Sometimes I think I really married them".<sup>132</sup> Her in-laws are the opposite of her own parents, very practical rather than intellectual.

Thus Drabble consciously made her own life for herself. In contrast to what a single mother and three children often symbolizes, poverty, misery, loneliness, Drabble, like O'Brien, prefers this way of life to any other: "I don't like being tied to anything. I don't like having to answer to any one".<sup>133</sup> In 1982 she married Michael Holroyd, the biographer, but they have continued to live in their own homes. Drabble still prefers the company of her children to the company of a husband: "It would have seemed all wrong to bring another husband into this house. I didn't want the children to feel their lives had been invaded".<sup>134</sup>

One of the main reasons why Drabble has been able to influence her own way of life so much is that she was able to support herself by writing relatively easily:

The first book made hardly anything. The second book did better. And by the third book I was sort of doing a bit of journalism, radio, television, that kind of thing ... by the fourth novel, I was really doing quite well, and beginning to think that I could be independent.<sup>135</sup>

Drabble wrote her first novel when she was pregnant with her first son because she felt, like Bainbridge, that it was impossible to combine a career in acting with having children. Thus Drabble ended up in a profession which she liked, but which was also convenient:

In some ways I think I was driven into what I happened to be good at but what was

certainly the most convenient thing for me at the time. It would have been harder to have children and be, say, a barrister or a doctor. I always feel it's cheating being a writer because you can do everything so conveniently. I'm not employed; I can just pick it up or pack it up.<sup>136</sup>

In "My First Book" Drabble describes how the idea of writing a novel came to her more or less as a matter of course in her circumstances: "My husband was out every night and most days, rehearsing for a heavy repertory season. We had no money, no television, and a two-bar electric fire. So I sat down in front of it and started to write a book".<sup>137</sup> Drabble finally stopped acting altogether when her daughter was born and after she published The Garrick Year which was written during her second pregnancy.

Drabble was able to produce the unending stream of publications, at least one book or novel a year in the '60s when her children were small, firstly, by being an efficient writer and secondly, by having a practical mind. When her children were young Drabble often only had a few hours per day at her disposal to write. Later she rented a flat in Bloomsbury to which she could retire to write and here she could write without being interrupted. Her hours were still limited however, and she developed her own way of writing: "I've always been short of time. I've always been saving up the time to work so that by the time I actually get to the typewriter I usually have a very good idea of what I've got to get through".<sup>138</sup> There are some extraordinary anecdotes about the way in which Drabble copes, which she enjoys relating herself. Her first three novels, for instance, were all written during her three pregnancies. And she wrote her book on Wordsworth when she was in hospital after Joseph was born:

I took my typewriter into hospital - I sat in the ambulance clutching it saying, 'Don't take that away'. My baby was born ten minutes after I got to the hospital. And the minute I got into bed I got my typewriter and was able to get on ... Still, it's not really worthwhile having another one just to get ten days off - I suppose?<sup>139</sup>

Drabble managed to combine her life as a mother and a writer in such a way that the children hardly realized that she was a writer. In a recent interview Joseph Swift, her youngest son, says: "It was only when I reached secondary school I became aware of Mum's fame ... I was never aware of her work when I was small. I suppose she wrote when I went to bed or when I was at school".<sup>140</sup> Almost like the Brontës who had to hide their work when visitors came in, Drabble had to hide her work from her children and pretend to be a "real" mother who devoted her time to her children for 100%.

Next to writing non-fiction books and novels, Drabble has developed a variety of other activities over the years. She started to lecture for evening classes in 1969, which she continued to do for a long time. She became very interested in the work of the British Council for which she has travelled all over the world. Her first trip abroad organized by the British Council was in 1969 when she went to Czechoslovakia. Drabble has also developed an active political interest, writing articles in The Guardian and The Independent against the Thatcher ideology of the '80s. Perhaps, surprisingly, in view of her political allegiance, Drabble recently paid a visit to South Africa. She made the visit with her husband (who was researching Shaw's journey through the country) in order to find some more information for a book on Angus Wilson (his mother was from Durban).<sup>141</sup> Her closest interest, however, is still in her children: "I see motherhood in such positive terms that I feel almost embarrassed to state it. I think it's the greatest joy in the world".<sup>142</sup>

Thus, these eight writers show remarkable similarities in social background, as well as in the kind of life they have led over the years (largely single mothers, but coping relatively well). All the writers also show signs of being really committed to the profession of author, many of them choosing to become a writer at an early age.

## CHAPTER II

### PORTRAITS OF THE WOMEN AS WRITERS

#### II.1 The Production Process

Felski's argument referred to above in the Introduction that feminism constructs new meanings will be applied here. What is offered in this dissertation is but one particular way of looking at these writers and their work. But it is an original interpretation in that it is inspired by the particular historical and social position of these novelists and their writing.

As was shown in Part I, many women in the post-war period had reasons to be dissatisfied. Yet, there was only a select group of journalists and writers, such as Mary Stott, who were registering this development and making it public before 1968. As we shall see, the eight women novelists under discussion here formed an equally select group who used fiction to break the public silence maintained by many women. These eight novelists did this by each focusing on a particular aspect of the female predicament. Each writer's particular angle on the subject can often be traced back to their own situation, i.e., it is generally rooted in autobiography. The theme which connects Penelope Mortimer's novels, for instance, is the thwarted expectations of mothers and wives. Beryl Bainbridge's books concentrate on the cruelty of family life, Edna O'Brien's novels on male/female relationships, and Doris Lessing on the personal and the political.

There is really more than just a passing resemblance between the authors' lives and their novels. For example, Edna O'Brien's trilogy which starts with The Country Girls deals with two Catholic girls who grow up in Ireland and then move to London. The childhood of these two girls is spent in a small village similar to the one in which O'Brien grew up. In the following chapters and in Part III of this dissertation it will become clear again and again how much these novelists have drawn upon their own experience for their writing. They selected the novel as a vehicle for relating their own experiences, dissatisfactions, etc., giving their view of life. In fact, Dale Spender's assessment of eighteenth-century women's writing, that it became "the connecting medium for the experience of women"<sup>1</sup> also holds true for the novels of these eight women

writers. Through their novels these women writers were able to communicate with other women, their readers.

One might argue that writers always draw upon their own lives for their writing, but the extent to which these women writers use their own lives is rather significant. Also, there are numerous examples of women writers in particular who denied various aspects of their own lives in their writing. An obvious example is the discussion of female bodily functions, which really only ceased to be a taboo subject for writers in the twentieth-century. An interesting case of a twentieth-century woman writer who still suppressed much of her own experience in writing is Barbara Pym. Her novels generally deal with single women who are involved in church work, the type of women she herself classified as "women with sensible shoes". After her death, however, her diary and letters appeared under the title A Very Private Eye. This book revealed a woman whose life had encompassed far more than just a regular cup of tea with the local vicar. From A Very Private Eye she emerges as all but prim and proper: e.g. she joined the Wrens during the Second World War, which took her to Italy, among other places, and she was involved in various stormy relationships with men, during which she nevertheless managed to maintain her own independence.

In "Tell it Like It Is: "Women and Confessional Writing" Elizabeth Wilson shows how the autobiography and the novel developed from a common root: the tradition of letter writing. She also discusses a special variety of autobiographical fiction which was used by feminist writers in the 1970s, so after our eight writers wrote their first novels. She calls this: "the feminist confessional - an account of struggle, a moral tale, the exemplary charting of woman's 'born again' progress".<sup>2</sup> In this type of autobiographical writing woman comes out as having achieved her goals of independence and happiness, whereas in novels such as The Golden Notebook and The Country Girls there is a focus on woman's dissatisfaction with her life, without a solution to her problems being provided. The majority of the characters in these novels never find the complete fulfilment and happiness they look for, and continue at the end of the novel much the same as they did at the beginning. The main purpose of these novels is to show that there is a problem and possible courses of action are reviewed but no easy solution can be found. This was, of course, the position these earlier authors found themselves in when writing their novels: their main aim was to express their own thoughts and ideas; they were not so optimistic as to presume

that all their problems could be solved in one go. Looking back, Margaret Drabble takes up exactly this position: "I now see myself more as a social historian documenting social change and asking questions rather than providing the answers about society".<sup>3</sup> Thus, these novels are paving the way for the later truly feminist confessional novel of the '70s and '80s (e.g. Fay Weldon, Praxis (1980), Ann Oakley, Taking It Like a Woman (1984)).

In this section we will try and answer the following questions: How did these writers manage to find a voice in literature? What was the particular incentive which made each writer decide upon writing rather than anything else as a career? Did they get any help in this respect from any other women?

## **Muriel Spark**

An analysis of Muriel Spark's progress towards becoming a professional author shows that there were several factors which stimulated her in her wish to become a writer, but that there were also various silence-inducing barriers which she had to overcome. First of all, Spark seems to have resorted rather naturally to the written word as a means of expression. She started writing poetry when she was very young, and even won prizes when still at school. This must have provided a great boost to her confidence. Yet it took Spark a long time to take the step from writing poetry to writing novels. One of the reasons for this was that Spark thought novels were less of an art than poetry. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism discussed in Chapter I was one of the factors which gave her the strength to try this hitherto alien form. Her first novel, The Comforters, is therefore, not surprisingly, above all an exploration of the novel technique. If she had not been more or less forced by Macmillan's to write a novel after she had won the Observer Short Story competition, she might perhaps have never written one at all: "I was asked to write a novel, and I didn't think much of novels - I thought it was an inferior way of writing. So I wrote a novel to work out the technique first, to sort of make it alright with myself to write a novel at all - a novel about writing a novel".<sup>4</sup> She discovered that the novel form was ideally suited to her, but she has still kept this sense of guilt, of having chosen the "easy way" out:

I soon found that novel-writing was the easiest thing I had ever done - far easier than writing a short story or a poem or a piece of criticism. I found that the novel enabled me to express the comic side of my mind and at the same time work out some serious theme. But because it came so easily I was in some doubt about its

value. I still have the decided feeling that anything worth while is done with difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

After Spark had discovered the suitability of the novel for her she became very prolific and she has published a novel at least every other year.

Thus Spark's silence as a novelist up till 1957 was largely through choice, and self-imposed. However, other, outside factors played a role as well. As a divorced woman she had to support both her son and herself, and, in contrast to the rather uncertain adventure writing a novel would have been the editorship of The Poetry Review for instance, brought in regular cash even if it was not very much. At the same time this job brought her in contact with literary people, such as Derek Stanford, the critic, who were earning money by writing and encouraged her to do the same. Nevertheless, she now looks upon the time she did not write novels as wasted: "my writing is probably just a justification for the time I wasted doing something else. And it is an attempt to redeem the time, you see".<sup>6</sup> Now she regrets that she had to reach her late thirties before she could write fiction.

A collaborating factor in Spark's wholehearted embrace of the novel form is that she discovered that one can make money by writing novels. She spends the money she earns by writing novels lavishly on herself. She claims that she buys a piece of jewellery for every book she writes: "Every time I'm paid for a book, I buy a piece of jewellery. Otherwise, money ... it's just a figure. It pays the rent, the housekeeping, but it doesn't mean quite as much as having one thing to say 'I earned this with this book'".<sup>7</sup> Spark also spends large amounts of her income on gambling and fur coats and other expensive clothes. It is typical that Spark, who for years had to struggle to make ends meet, is so extravagant in her expenses. It looks as if she wants to wipe out the past in which paying the rent did cause major problems. Five years prior to the above interview Spark stressed the importance of money to her in an interview with Mary Holland: "the only motive she will admit to for writing is a solid, preferable cash, incentive".<sup>8</sup>

Spark did not rely on female support during her journey towards becoming a writer. After Spark was recovering from her breakdown Stanford organized what he calls "A Save Muriel Fund". He contacted many living writers asking them to contribute so that Spark could start writing her first novel.<sup>9</sup> This plan worked and she did get help mainly from established Roman Catholic writers such as Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Greene gave Spark substantial

financial support to write her first novel, and Waugh wrote enthusiastic reviews about her novels, e.g. on The Comforters (see also in II.2.2, below). Of course it was a boost for a young writer's image to get such open encouragement from authors whose works firmly belonged to the literary canon. Spark herself, however, does not shun books written by women. She stresses that she particularly likes Iris Murdoch of her contemporaries.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of having taken her first steps in novel writing with the help of Waugh and Greene, Spark has not had any desire to become involved in the literary scene. On the contrary, she has lived in a self-imposed exile in Italy since 1967, where she has no contact with writers at all: "Many of her friends there don't know she is a writer," which is refreshing', she says. 'It means that I never bore them, otherwise why would they ask me to their parties? That's their criterion'.<sup>11</sup> She also claims that her writing is not influenced by other literary works. She relies on truly contemporary material: "I don't read many novels. I love the glossies and the newspapers and film mags; and that's where I find a lot of my material".<sup>12</sup> The Bachelors, for instance, was inspired by a newspaper article which stated that there were 660.000 bachelors living in London in 1959. Spark sees her role as writer very much rooted in contemporary society: "I think that the novelist is out just to say what happened".<sup>13</sup> Spark does not mean here that she literally records, like a chronicle, what is happening outside, but what her novels try to say have a definite bearing on society: "I don't claim that my novels are truth. I claim that they are fiction, out of which a kind of truth emerges".<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere Spark has specified this idea further, by saying that she would want her readers to be strengthened by her novels so that they will be able to pursue their own way of life, will be able to stand up for themselves as individuals: "I hope I make people feel it's good to be alive, to be what you are".<sup>15</sup> By mainly portraying people who do not conform to the norms set out by society, e.g. bachelors, single women, murderers, etc., she shows that one does not have to conform to expectations to lead a valuable life:

Don't you think that as writers our real job is to bring about an environment of honesty and self-knowledge, a sense of the absurd and a general looking - lively to defend ourselves from the ridiculous oppressions of our time? <sup>16</sup>

## Penelope Mortimer

Like Spark, Penelope Mortimer has written from an early age. In her youth Mortimer wrote

both poetry and prose, and her first short story was published when she was only eight years old. This must have boosted her confidence and her determination to become a writer. The difficult circumstances of her youth also made her more determined to reach the goal she wanted. Unlike Spark, Mortimer was able to overcome the silence-inducing factors which were abundantly present in her life at the earlier age of 29, when she published her first novel. Even so, there were periods of despair before she published this first novel. In About Time Mortimer describes how she felt during the early years of her married life: "I, author of the unfinished novel and the unfinishable poetry, a dilettante in embryo, a collection of rather bleak adolescent patchworks ...".<sup>17</sup> Mortimer needed to move away from the romantic and "sickly stuff", as she calls it herself, which she wrote in her youth.<sup>18</sup> The material to which she finally turned was the fabric of her own life: "The function of the early novels was to show what life was like for me".<sup>19</sup> Her first novel, Johanna, deals with an English couple who are living in Vienna shortly before the war, exactly the time Mortimer and her first husband, Charles Dimont, were living in Austria. One of the main characters, Hans, is obviously based on a resistance worker and close friend of Mortimer in Austria. Johanna's dissatisfaction with her early married life and her alcoholic husband form the main focus of the novel.

Mortimer did not get much outside help to achieve her goal. She did not know any male or female novelists. Even now she, like Spark, does not mingle with the establishment: I "have little contact with the 'literary world'".<sup>20</sup> Mortimer only identifies with her female contemporaries to some extent. She claims she reads very few contemporary novelists, but she professes to liking the work of Molly Keane and Elizabeth Jolly, and having a particular dislike for the work of "Edna O'Brien and her genre".<sup>21</sup> Perhaps Edna O'Brien's work reminds her too much of the way she used to write when she was young. Yet, she has some sympathy for the feminist movement, although she distances herself from the more radical elements, just like Murdoch and Lessing do. She says:

Women's Lib is a very, very worthy and inevitable movement ... It has my entire sympathy, provided it is serious and realistic. But I am violently against the sort of lunatic fringe ... They indulge in an absurd taking it out on men which I think is utterly ludicrous.<sup>22</sup>

This attitude reflects rather well the place of these novelists in literary history as we are trying to

define it here. Their pre-1968 novels pave the way for mainstream feminism, while the more radical section of feminism only develops later and also originates from different sources such as working-class, lesbian or black women, for example.

After her first novel was published Mortimer did not embrace the profession of writer with the same enthusiasm as Spark. While Spark published a novel almost every year, Mortimer only published six novels between 1947 and 1968. Yet this is still remarkably prolific for somebody who at the same time pursued a career as a journalist and raised six children. Yet, Mortimer states that she does not think of herself as a professional novelist.<sup>23</sup> Of course it depends on how one defines the notion "professional novelist". If it is meant to refer to somebody who spends day and night scribbling away without doing anything else, hardly any woman would be considered a professional author, since most women lead part-time existences, i.e. are part-time mothers, wives, and do various paid or voluntary part-time jobs. Mortimer herself is a good case in point: she was a part-time mother, wife, journalist, short story writer, film-critic, and novelist. The remarkable thing is that all these various occupations did not in fact prevent her from being a professional novelist, that in spite of all these obstacles she still managed to produce a substantial number of published novels, which provided a useful supplement to her income from other sources. Mortimer herself writes that writing to her has always been something which was ideally suited to such a part-time existence:

Writing has always been a suitable occupation for the home-bound woman (regardless of talent). Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who had 8 children, used to lock herself in the bathroom to write. There is no other profession I can think of - except possibly plumbing - in which this would be possible.<sup>24</sup>

## **Iris Murdoch**

Like Spark and Mortimer, Iris Murdoch already displayed an interest in writing at an early age. And like Mortimer Murdoch is now rather dismissive of her early writing:

I started writing when I was nine. I wrote my first complete novel when I was about twenty. I didn't publish anything till later on. I wrote a lot of bad stuff, most of which indeed I didn't even attempt to publish.<sup>25</sup>

Murdoch shows in this statement that one of the reasons for her lengthy initial silence was the high standard which she set herself. Before Murdoch's first novel was published when she was 35

she did a lot of contemplating on the form her novels should take: "I can't remember a time when I wasn't reflecting on it".<sup>26</sup> One of the early stimulations in her life was her father who taught her to read when she was still very young, and discussed books with her.<sup>27</sup>

After the war which according to Murdoch's own admission also prevented her from writing, she was able to lead a more settled existence. Her war-time encounter with Sartre and his ideas culminated in the publication of her first book in 1953, Sartre: Romantic Realist. Finally in 1954 her first novel was published. Under the Net is a book which superficially resembles much of the work of the male French writers of the period. Murdoch mentions that she admired Sartre's novels and that she was writing to imitate Beckett and Queneau in her first novel (see Part III for a discussion of the form of the novels).<sup>28</sup> Thus Murdoch's entrance into the profession was in the end positively influenced by her male contemporaries. Like Spark, she did not rely on female authors to help her out. However, from this first novel which in many ways perfectly fits in with the male literary scene of the time (cf. review section in II.2) Murdoch more and more developed her own style.

One of the characteristics of Murdoch's novels is that there are always many characters who are related, especially twins feature often. Murdoch has her own explanation for this:

'I'm very keen on twins' she said, grinning as if detected in a favourite vice.' I'm an only child, and I think this is connected with my interest in sibling relationships - I haven't any siblings except imaginary ones. There's the element of family, of company, in writing. When I finish a novel, there's an extraordinary sense of solitude. One has been communicating with these people over a long period, and suddenly they're gone and there's a gap in one's life'.<sup>29</sup>

Murdoch, who has neither siblings nor children, feels the need to fulfil the female role of the family member through her writing. One can understand her wish to recreate this imaginary family again and again. Thus Murdoch has turned out almost a book a year since her first novel appeared. All these novels are remarkably similar in style and content, again perhaps understandable, who would want to change a satisfactory family? Critics have commented on the limited stock of Murdoch characters. Hugh Herbert in "The Iris Problem", for instance, notes that all Murdoch's characters are firmly middle-class. Murdoch's answer:

I wish I could break out of this circle ... but one can't. One constantly finds oneself creating people that are like the people one knows, or else people like those in one's previous novels. I'm very traditionalist as a novelist. I don't want to make

extreme experiments.<sup>30</sup>

Murdoch herself is certainly not bored by the repetitiveness of her writing: "I enjoy it, I write when I can".<sup>31</sup> Judging by her sales figures, her readers do not seem to be too bored by it either: all her novels since 1954 have had many reprints in paperback.

Why?

Like Spark, Murdoch prefers writing novels to any other kind of writing she has ever done. In an interview she relates how she is struggling with a book on Plato she is writing at the time: "It's about Plato's view of art, but it's terribly difficult, much more difficult than writing a novel".<sup>32</sup> However she does not regard novel writing as just a hobby. See for instance the answer she gives to the following question by John Haffenden:

'Is there a sense in which writing novels is therefore a relaxation for you?' IM: 'No, writing novels is my job, and it is a serious undertaking'.<sup>33</sup>

Murdoch has confessed that she does not really like contemporary fiction. She says: "I'd rather read nineteenth-century novels".<sup>34</sup> She also claims that she keeps away from writers as much as possible in her private life: "I don't know many novelists".<sup>35</sup> One of the exceptions is A.S. Byatt, who is her friend. Byatt's and Murdoch's novels have been compared by reviewers and they have each reviewed each other's books (cf. II.2, below), so their friendship does extend from the private into the professional world. Byatt and Murdoch also appeared in a radio interview together in April 1968. Furthermore, Murdoch does seem to like some of her French female contemporaries. She has written articles on Simone de Beauvoir's novels (e.g. "The Existential Hero", The Listener, 23 March 1950, pp. 523-524), and she says she was influenced by Weil's ideas when she was writing The Unicorn.<sup>36</sup>

Murdoch claims that she does not write for any sex in particular. According to her, women do have as much access to society as men in Britain and therefore do not need a special approach in literature.<sup>37</sup> In an interview with Jack Biles, Murdoch takes a stance on feminism which is similar to Mortimer's:

I'm not very much interested in the female predicament. I'm passionately in favour of women's lib, in the general, ordinary, proper sense of women having equal rights. And, most of all, equal education ... We want to join the human race, not invent a new separatism.<sup>38</sup>

In the same interview she defends her choice of always having a male narrator or a male

protagonist who has the point of view in her novels: "as a main explanatory narrating consciousness, especially in a first-person novel, I find I prefer to be male!".<sup>39</sup>

## Doris Lessing

Like many of the other authors discussed so far, Lessing already thought of herself as a writer at an early age. Her mother was instrumental in kindling her interest in reading and writing. Her mother took out a subscription to the British publication The Children's Newspaper especially for this purpose. When Lessing was 14 she became a nursemaid in Salisbury, 70 miles from Banket where her parents lived. Telling stories to the children she was stimulated to write them down: "I wrote stories and watched events that could make novels; I tested and tasted words".<sup>40</sup> After having worked in Salisbury for two years Lessing went back to her parents' farm and wrote two novels, both remaining unpublished to date. She continued to practise her writing skills after her first marriage. She remembers: "I was always hatching some idea, and I began and half-finished novels".<sup>41</sup> At first she concentrated more on short stories, and she sent many to magazines in South Africa. She had several of these short stories and also some poetry published (e.g. in Trek published in Johannesburg). She now looks at this early work in a rather negative way and describes one of the stories as "a rather false sophisticated story".<sup>42</sup>

Lessing was working as a typist for parliament, a so-called Hansard typist, when she started working on The Grass is Singing in 1946. She had hit upon the idea which lies at the basis of the novel some time before:

I had kept a newspaper cutting about a black man murdering a white woman. No motive! I had spent years wondering why black servants did not murder neurotic, nagging, contemptuous housewives. Soon I was able to see those women as pathetic.<sup>43</sup>

Lessing had not initially conceived this novel as particularly stressing a woman's point of view. At first Lessing gave Dick Marston, the man newly arrived from England into the district, the point of view. The murder of the woman was to be seen through his eyes. This novel turned out to be three times as long as The Grass is Singing was to be, because it also related other experiences of Marston. When the novel was rejected by various publishers Lessing realized that it was too long and she cut out most of the sections dealing with Marston. Also she had begun to feel more and more understanding of the importance of the woman's position in the saga, and felt that it

needed to form the focus of attention.

Finally, Lessing managed to find a publisher in South Africa who seemed interested in the book. She signed a contract, but the publisher did not publish the book, nevertheless keeping the rights to publication. In 1949 she came to London, where she sent several short stories to various publishers; thus she came into contact with Juliet O'Hea who acted as an agent for her. O'Hea managed to withdraw Lessing from the contract with the South Africans and sold the rights of the novel to Michael Joseph. Michael Joseph bought the novel on the recommendation of Pamela Hansford Johnson, herself a novelist, but who was at the same time a reader for Michael Joseph. Thus Lessing is the first writer in the discussion so far who managed to get her first novel published mainly with the help of female support. Lessing also acknowledges further female support: she says that several women writers had an influence on her. She mentions Olive Schreiner's An African Farm as being of particular importance to her.<sup>44</sup> In her 1968 afterword to one of the editions of Schreiner's novel Lessing relates how she read the novel when she was 14, and what a great impact it had on her. Yet most reviewers did not see The Grass is Singing as dealing with a specific female dilemma when the book first came out. Alan Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country had just been published and people saw Lessing's novel as also dealing with the same theme of the "colour bar" (cf. Part III for a comparison of these two novels).

Like Spark, Lessing was also stimulated into her desire to become a writer when she met various writers when she worked for a journal. In 1949 Lessing worked for the communist newspaper, The Guardian, in Cape Town, South Africa. Although she was just a typist, it gave her, as in Spark's case with The Poetry Review, the chance to come into contact with writers: "I also met quite a few artists in that time, and that was for me - a very raw girl from the sticks - absolutely marvellous".<sup>45</sup>

After Lessing's first novel was published she had not really decided that the novel form would be her main form of expression from then on. She wrote a play, Play with a Tiger, which was performed, but although Lessing owns up to liking the theatre very much, she is also aware that it is not a very appropriate form for her:

It suddenly occurred to me that the energy I put into the theatre was really unbelievable, and it never really came out right. I thought why, when I can write novels and have it all my own way, why do I torment myself like this. But it's been a hard

decision.<sup>46</sup>

The novel has clearly proved to be the form for Lessing. Proof of this is the apparent ease with which Lessing has produced a steady stream of novels since the publication of The Grass is Singing. Lessing herself is even amazed at how productive she was, particularly in the '50s and '60s: "you know I wrote The Golden Notebook in a year. I can't believe it now, but I did".<sup>47</sup> This productive fire was kindled by Lessing's need for money: "Well, I've written more than I should because I needed money and anyway I'm naturally prolific; I enjoy writing".<sup>48</sup> Like most of the women writers in this group, Lessing had to combine her work with raising children. This influenced the amount of time she could spend on her writing, but did not in the end hinder her too much at all: "I had a child to bring up, I couldn't do this nine to five thing, which some men writers can do easily. I haven't found yet a woman writer who writes regularly every day".<sup>49</sup>

At first, Lessing was totally unaware of the impact her novels were to have. She was not consciously doing anything "new" either. She felt that she was just giving her view of the world, as she and her friends were experiencing it:

I wasn't conscious of doing anything new, when I wrote down what Martha [of the Children of Violence series] and her friends were thinking. I simply wrote down what the women I knew said and thought.<sup>50</sup>

Of course this is precisely what is one of the most important functions of Lessing and her colleagues: the fact that they did not just grumble in private or suffer in silence, but that they publicly related their experiences outside the circle of women friends a woman would normally confide in. Looking back Lessing is able to explain the significant role an author plays in society in this respect:

If you are a writer and try to write truthfully, in accordance with what you're thinking, you'll automatically represent other people, because we are not so different from other people. A great advantage is that we are able to express what other people are thinking. Sometimes people aren't able to express it all, or perhaps they are afraid to express it, because we live in a world in which people lose their jobs for saying what they think.<sup>51</sup>

Talking about The Golden Notebook, Lessing explains its idea in this context: "I was recording what I'd experienced. I think a great deal of the kind of things that women were thinking at that time apparently were not generally known, otherwise people wouldn't have been so surprised at what came out in The Golden Notebook".<sup>52</sup> Lessing clearly believes that she is a connecting me-

dium through which thoughts can be expressed which are alive in society. She realized the importance of this role especially after writing The Golden Notebook and she is now of the opinion that "I don't believe any more that I have a thought. There is a thought around".<sup>53</sup>

One way in which Lessing managed to link up with the pool of silent thought which was around, was through letters from women. Mortimer through her work as problem page editor had a similar contact with women's experiences. In Lessing's case it worked in a direct and an indirect way. When she was working on The Golden Notebook Lessing had a female friend who was writing articles in a trade-union magazine. As a reaction this friend "got hundreds of letters from women every week in such despair".<sup>54</sup> Lessing also read those letters. The more widely read Lessing's novels became, the more she herself also received this kind of letter: letters "asking me 'what to do with my life', the most dreadful letters".<sup>55</sup> Thus Lessing was in direct contact with what was, as we have seen in Part I above, one of the means to express dissatisfaction for women in the '50s and early '60s: the letter (see discussion of letters to The Guardian and women's magazines).

Lessing also uses real women's lives as the basis for a novel. Mary, the main character in The Grass is Singing, is based on somebody she knew in Salisbury who "at the age of nearly forty was like a young girl and lived the life of a young girl".<sup>56</sup> Anna in The Golden Notebook is inspired by an Austrian friend who had only written one book and could not write any more. Through The Golden Notebook Lessing wanted to explore the reasons for this silence.<sup>57</sup> The Martha Quest series is largely based on her own life. In interviews she has sometimes difficulty in keeping the two apart: "interviewer: 'It also interests me that I keep talking about 'Martha' and you talk about yourself. Perhaps it's easier that way?' Lessing: 'Well, its easier'".<sup>58</sup>

Like the other women writers Lessing is very hesitant to acknowledge her affinity with other contemporary women writers. She does make an exception for Margaret Drabble, though. In an interview with the American author Joyce Carol Oates in 1973 Lessing states that she likes Drabble's work very much.<sup>59</sup> In an interview with Lessing Drabble analyzes why Lessing in particular was able to write a novel like The Golden Notebook which shows the complexity of women's lives: 'From 1950 onwards, she has been successful, courted, attractive, free: and therefore she has been able to report on an area of life that is largely unrecorded'.<sup>60</sup>

In the same interview Drabble asked Lessing about her view on women's liberation, in how far she aligns herself with the goals of this movement. In this interview, Lessing, according to Drabble "is in favour of the liberation of women, and thinks that it has not yet come about".<sup>61</sup> She is also said to be "aware of the implication of being a woman writer" and that for her this means that she necessarily has to cover new ground if she wants to be true to herself. In this respect Lessing "feels herself to be new, to be in a new situation".<sup>62</sup>

Yet in later interviews and lectures Lessing distances herself from the women's liberation movement. Susan Brownmiller reports in "Best Battles Are Fought by Men and Women Together" how Lessing renounced feminism in front of a New York audience of women who expected, having read her novels, a sympathetic ear for their problems. Lessing, making remarks such as: "I'm sorry there are so many unhappy women. But there are a lot more important battles than the sex war"<sup>63</sup> created real confusion among her audience. Elsewhere Lessing has taken a similar stance, reminiscent of the positions Mortimer, Spark and Murdoch occupy (e.g. in her introduction to The Golden Notebook which was added to the 1972 edition). In a German interview in 1981 she said: "Ich habe gelernt, mehr und mehr von den einzelnen Menschen aus zu denken. Nicht unterteilt in Frauen und Männer. Ich bin interessiert an Individuen".<sup>64</sup> And in the 1986 Stephen Gray interview she completely denies that the fact that she is a woman is of any consequence at all:

I don't feel at all when I'm writing that I am a woman writing. I don't think it's a good thing to do that. I know, you see, that there's this matter of great bitterness among women writers. Their argument is that it's absolutely essential to write as a woman as long as you are persecuted ... It's another prison to think I am a woman writing this. It means that you deliberately narrow all your sensibilities.<sup>65</sup>

Thus Lessing's attitude has undergone a remarkable change. In the '50s and early '60s she was writing as a woman about her own experiences and she apparently saw that as the natural thing to do. When the enormous response her novels were getting dawned upon her, she realized that she did not want to be compartementalized, nor wanted to be responsible for taking on the burden of so many other women. Also, she had apparently come to terms with her own position in life and did not regard that as a problem any more. She was ready to move on to something else. Her change in attitude corresponds with her move away from the confessional and auto-

biographical nature of her writing in the '50s and early '60s to the more distancing mode of her science fiction novels in the '70s.

## Edna O'Brien

Like most of the other writers discussed so far Edna O'Brien already became interested in writing during her childhood. Although many books were banned in Ireland during O'Brien's childhood her teacher at primary school still encouraged her to write about three or four compositions a day, to be read by the other children in the class. It was the same teacher who first helped to stimulate in her "this love of writing and fairy tales and narrative, the love of the legendry".<sup>66</sup> She has tried to describe exactly what urged her to become a writer:

When I was young, I always wanted to be a writer and since then I have realised this dream. It's some sort of ache or dissatisfaction which makes me go on. It's something terribly intangible - almost like seeing something superb in the sky, in behaviour, or in the land and seeing it is not enough. You have to somehow set it down for someone else to see, even though that sounds arrogant.<sup>67</sup>

Thus O'Brien stresses the "showing", didactic element of novels: writing as a means of communicating one's view of the world to other people. This resembles Lessing's idea of the writer as recorder and interpreter of events to other people.

When O'Brien was in Dublin, working as a pharmacist, she met various Irish literary figures who stimulated her and published some of her work in their magazines. Benedict Kiely, at the time literary editor of the Irish Press, who came from a similar background as O'Brien herself, published some of her first articles and short stories. Paedar O'Donnell, editor of the Dublin magazine The Bell, also published some of her material in his journal and generally encouraged her to go on writing. O'Brien had to rely on male literary figures for support. She was a pioneer, being one of the few Catholic Irish women writers to break through in the literary scene at the time. And, in fact, she could only do that by leaving Ireland. All her books were banned in Ireland when they were first published, and the parish priest of O'Brien's home village destroyed the four copies of The Country Girls which he found in the village. Again, like the other writers, O'Brien is not very impressed with her early work, with what she wrote while she was still in Dublin: "I wrote very badly - strings of adjectives, and always the same theme, the waiting woman, the hero, the hero coming, love, the hero going, the waiting woman for ever".<sup>68</sup>

Her life in Dublin enabled her to read books which were not available in the village where she came from. The first book she bought was Introducing James Joyce by T.S. Eliot.<sup>69</sup> She read more of Joyce after this, and also enjoyed Chekhov and Scott Fitzgerald, for instance.

One habit which has greatly helped O'Brien in her journey to becoming a professional writer is the fact that she has always kept a diary. Her diary is as it were the attentive and understanding reader to whom she can relate perfectly:

When she's not inside a novel or a play, she is talking to herself in her diary. Her diary is a living thing into which she pours her daily thoughts and reactions and bits of dialogue and weather reports. She quotes from it, as if it were a real person she's just been talking to.<sup>70</sup>

This again stresses O'Brien's view of writing as one of the best means of communication between people.

O'Brien's move to London provided a feeling of freedom and release for her, the feeling "that nobody was looking over my shoulder".<sup>71</sup> Thus she was able to examine her experiences in Ireland in a way which would have been impossible if she had still been in the country and if she would have had to stick to its norms and regulations. Paradoxically, by leaving Ireland she could get closer to an understanding of it: "Something happened and I saw and missed Ireland in a way I had never known myself capable of".<sup>72</sup> She met Ian Hamilton shortly after arriving in London and he advised her to write a novel. And she was also inspired by a lecture on Hemingway and Fitzgerald given by Arthur Mizener to tone down her previously more romantic style to a more realistic level, as she says herself.<sup>73</sup> She wrote The Country Girls in record time. O'Brien recalls: "It came like a song. It was effortless".<sup>74</sup> O'Brien still considers this novel to be her most successful one.

Like Lessing, O'Brien wrote a series of related novels. And like the Children of Violence series O'Brien's trilogy monitors the development of a girl into a woman. As in Lessing's case, O'Brien's series of novels follows the course her own life has taken. Kate and Baba go to a convent school and move to London where they marry. Kate marries somebody whose character and even his name (Eugene Gaillard) resemble O'Brien's husband Ernest Gebler. O'Brien is aware of how closely she relies on her own experiences for her writing: "It's inescapable that a subjective writer, like myself, writes of things that are happening in her own life. My work is very

close to my life - not necessarily to the smaller events but to the main story".<sup>75</sup> O'Brien's writing, perhaps for that reason, makes a very honest impression: it is as if a real woman is talking to the reader about her real life and problems; it is not as if somebody has thought everything up in an ivory tower or in a study far removed from everyday life. Again like Lessing, O'Brien gets many letters from readers who want to reward this openness by relating their own life stories. O'Brien: "I write so much from a first person point of view, that it seems secret and confiding. Like things said in the dark. I get letters back saturated with the same intimacy".<sup>76</sup>

Although O'Brien writes so much out of her own experience, and The Country Girls came relatively easily to her, she still feels a basic insecurity about her capacity as a writer. She rewrites everything up to twenty times before she sends any material to the publisher and she also says: "I write every day. I have a fear of forgetting it, letting it fall away like an egg dropping out of its shell".<sup>77</sup> Since this interview was published in 1968 O'Brien has experienced a long period of silence. In fact 11 years went by in which she produced some plays, but she did not produce another novel. This silence was broken in 1988 by the publication of The High Road:

It was sheer hell. I hadn't written a novel for such a long time. I just didn't have anything to say ... I spent nine years thinking about the idea, letting it simmer, waiting for it to come through. A novel comes through in moments ... The actual writing took 18 months and right up to the last minute I was rewriting and changing things.<sup>78</sup>

Like Spark, O'Brien is a Roman Catholic. Because she was steeped in Catholic dogmas from an early age, they have stayed with her and have influenced the framework in which she writes: "words like 'Hell', 'Heaven', 'Purgatory', 'Limbo', 'Paradise' ... are very much in my mind".<sup>79</sup> The female characters in her books are equally aware of what the Roman Catholic church stands for, and are either trying to escape from its oppressive set of rules (like Kate and Baba) or are living within its norms (e.g. Kate and Baba's mothers). In the novels the R.C. church personifies all that restricts a woman's development. The use of the Roman Catholic church in the novels thus extends beyond a narrow meaning with which only R.C. initiates could sympathize to the use of it as a wider symbol for society's repressive forces.

Although O'Brien in her writing shows such an understanding of and compassion with women's position in society, she has distanced herself in interviews from too great a solidarity

with contemporary women and female novelists. O'Brien displays an attitude which is as ambiguous as Lessing's or Murdoch's. She does mention some names of women writers she likes, but immediately follows this up with a rather derogatory remark: "The women writers I most identify with are the Brontës and they were very passionate and foolish women".<sup>80</sup> On the one hand she concedes in her interview with Philip Roth that it makes a difference whether you are a man or a woman writing: "I believe that it makes a difference whether you are a man or a woman. A whole procession of women is waiting behind the scenes for men: potential wives, mistresses, muses, nurses. Women writers have to do without this bonus".<sup>81</sup> But elsewhere she has also claimed that it is difficult to change power relations between men and women because "a woman's need to be circumferenced by a man is as strong and as biologic as ever".<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, she claims that she does not have any natural feeling of sympathy for other women:

I have some women friends, but I prefer men. Don't trust women. There is a built-in competition between women. The real friendship and almost love which two men can have is impossible between women under the age of 60.<sup>83</sup>

Yet O'Brien's latest novel, The High Road, deals specifically with such a strong friendship/love attraction between two women.

## **Beryl Bainbridge**

Again, Beryl Bainbridge started writing when she was still young. She was encouraged in this by her mother, who wanted to stimulate her daughter so that she would achieve something, because she felt disappointed in her own life. Bainbridge remembers that her mother was "buying me little exercise books and sharpening my pencils for me. I was always writing".<sup>84</sup> When she became older, however, interest in books was discouraged, presumably because her parents thought she would read "unsuitable" material: "Reading was encouraged when I was younger, but as I grew older it was frowned upon. I think they locked up the bookcase and threw away the key".<sup>85</sup> Writing thus disappeared from her centre of attention, and Bainbridge first made a career for herself as an actor and painter.

It was only when Bainbridge was 33 years old, in 1967, that a novel was accepted for publication. A Weekend with Claude was published by Hutchinson. Bainbridge decided to abandon her career in the theatre when she was pregnant with her first child in 1956. Coincidentally,

Drabble wrote her first novel under exactly the same circumstances. Bainbridge resembles Lessing in that her first novel was inspired by a newspaper cutting. She read a story in a newspaper about two schoolgirls in Australia who had murdered the mother of one of them, and this intrigued her so much that she decided to write a novel focusing on these two girls. The result was Harriet Said .... She sent the manuscript to various British publishers who were so shocked by its subject (the novel deals with two young girls who seduce a married man and kill his wife in the summer holidays) that they refused to publish it. One of the publishers wrote to her that the girls were "repulsive beyond belief" and that the book was "too indecent and unpleasant even for these lax days".<sup>86</sup> The manuscript of the novel was subsequently mislaid and Bainbridge only retrieved it in 1971, when her literary agent came across it. While working for Duckworth, the publishing company (between 1971 and 1973), Bainbridge met the wife of the director. She was very impressed with the novel when Bainbridge showed it to her. After advising Bainbridge to make some minor changes, she showed the manuscript to her husband, Colin Haycraft, with the recommendation that it was a "brilliant book".<sup>87</sup> Haycraft also recognized the appeal the novel would have: "Fiction tends to be read (and written) more by women than by men, but here was a writer whom men too could read."<sup>88</sup> Thus it was the potential appeal to male readers which finally made this novel accepted for publication. Harriet Said ... was published by Duckworth in 1972. A Weekend with Claude and Another Part of the Wood which were originally published by Hutchinson were revised by Bainbridge and republished by Duckworth in 1979.

When writing Bainbridge does not just refer to outside sources such as newspaper cuttings, but in fact relies heavily on her own experiences: "I live mostly in my own past and try to stick something out of my own life into the middle of what I am writing".<sup>89</sup> Her main aim is to relate what has happened to herself: "her desire to tell people about her far from easy childhood, and to sort out for herself in the process her attitude to the various events in her life, her own views and emotions".<sup>90</sup> Like for O'Brien writing for Bainbridge is a rather therapeutic experience, and the most effective means of expression.

Although Bainbridge's novels have a rather chequered publishing history, writing itself comes relatively easily to her. She thinks about a theme for some time, but once she starts writing she finds it difficult to stop, even forgoing sleep. Of course a single woman with three

children, as Bainbridge has been for most of her life, cannot but work in patches of time. To give herself the longest possible stretch of time to work in Bainbridge normally works at night, starting at ten pm and going on till about four am. To get absolute peace and quiet Bainbridge has been known to rent a special room in London to which she retires to work.<sup>91</sup> This room also provides a sense of having a real job to go to, because women's work in the house is often seen as not valuable, as not professional, but is regarded as more of a hobby. This might be the reason why more women writers resort to this method, e.g. Drabble during certain periods in her life also had a room of her own outside her house. Like Drabble and Bainbridge, Byatt also has a room outside her home in which she writes. She has had this room since 1983 when she stopped lecturing. She is lucky in that the room is provided by her publishers. Byatt was frightened that being at home would stop her from writing: "When I left and started working at home I had a total panic about becoming a housewife".<sup>92</sup>

Bainbridge's attitude to other women and women writers was for a long time just as ambivalent as the attitude of the other women writers discussed above. Bainbridge has an explanation for this:

My mother whom I adored till I was ten or eleven, turned against me the moment I reached puberty. It was as if I disappointed her in some way, simply by growing up. When I decided I must break away from my mother, I began heartily to dislike women.<sup>93</sup>

It was only after her mother died that Bainbridge could take a more objective view of her mother, and consequently also of all other women.<sup>94</sup> But Bainbridge is still wary of reading books by other contemporary women writers: "The only person I ever read is Graham Greene ... I don't read other people because I don't want to copy them".<sup>95</sup>

## **A.S. Byatt**

Looking back on her life, Byatt now sees herself as above all an author. She says in a letter that "the academic career was almost an accident - I like thinking, I like teaching, I was offered a job. But I had already decided that writing came first, and it always did".<sup>96</sup> She has written comparatively few novels, however, and at the same time pursued an academic career until 1983. Byatt's life as a writer shows some classic examples of silence-inducing factors.

Byatt was interested in writing from an early age. The Drabble family, in a way reminiscent

of the Brontës, were all involved in writing when they were children. The whole family wrote some plays together, for instance. Byatt herself kept notebooks in which she wrote regularly, and when she was about seventeen she thought it would be a good idea to write a novel. Yet, it was only through a specific incident that she was stimulated to actually write this novel. When Byatt was at Somerville College, Oxford, working on her dissertation, she happened to mention to Helen Gardner, her tutor, that she was thinking of writing a novel. Gardner's reaction was very negative, saying that no real academic should waste time on a novel. This made Byatt so angry that she abandoned her dissertation and wrote Shadow of a Sun (1964) instead. After this first novel, however, it was three years before Byatt published another novel, The Game and another 12 years after that before her next novel was published.

Byatt is clearly aware of how these silences came about:

I used to say - well, I will write three or four fewer books than I might have done, and have the children - but I do now regret the unwritten books.<sup>97</sup>

The combination of having to look after her children and her academic position, which she took up for the money, but also because of the sense of independence it gave her ("I value my job as a form of independence, because I am a woman. It means a lot to me to have a salary and an office and a desk and adult company during the day"<sup>98</sup>), resulted in long silences. It is interesting to note here that Byatt did not think that writing alone could provide her with this sense of independence. Byatt finds it difficult to regard writing as a real job:

I liked the university job because it was a good way of observing much larger groups of people than I would have done if I were still being a housewife, or even a writer, which is a bit being a housewife with a pen.<sup>99</sup>

Underlying this assumption is the same feeling which made Mortimer say that she is not a professional author and made Drabble, Byatt, and Bainbridge go out of their homes to another place to write: the feeling that working at home is not "real" work. "Real" work apparently has to have the paraphernalia normally associated with high-powered managerial positions usually occupied by men, e.g. an office, a desk, a regular salary, etc. These women writers are inclined to undervalue the amount of work which does go into writing, or into looking after children and a house, for that matter. As was shown in Part I, above, this is exactly the opinion which is prevalent in society, so it is not surprising that these writers show signs of having internalized the

dominant mode of thought. Male writers, on the other hand, do not have any problem regarding writing as "real" work, for is it not true that any work done by a man is "real" work and deserves recognition as such? Images come to mind of a writer like Evelyn Waugh sitting in his imposing study with his wife keeping his numerous offspring at bay with a hushed and admiring voice for "Papa is working".

Byatt also thinks her novels have become different from what they would have been had she devoted all her time to writing: "Those I have written are more slow-moving than I would like, because they've been written in small bits and scraps of time, at long intervals".<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, Byatt concludes, like Mortimer, that writing is one of the few jobs which can easily be combined with the other tasks women usually have.

Contrary to some of the other writers discussed here, Byatt does read novels by women writers, and enjoys reading her contemporaries. Among the ones she likes in particular are Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, and Mary McCarthy. She seems closest to Iris Murdoch, who is a good friend, but she also keeps in touch with Doris Lessing. Byatt has written a critical study of Murdoch's novels entitled Degrees of Freedom. In this book Byatt analyzes Murdoch's novels in terms of the concept of freedom. The way in which Byatt claims Murdoch uses freedom in her novels is particularly interesting. According to Byatt at the basis of Murdoch's novels lies the tension between freedom and the social world. The characters are free to a certain extent, but also at the same time are bound to the mores of the world they live in. It is rather significant that two women writers should recognize this paradox, because it is especially in a woman's life that this tension becomes most apparent. Interestingly, Byatt sees literature as a means of escape from the constraints of being a woman: "Literature has always been my way out, my escape from the limits of being female".<sup>101</sup>

Byatt has the same ambiguous attitude towards feminism as the other writers. On the one hand, as her discussion of Murdoch's novels and her interpretation of her own silences show, she is aware of the specific problems there are involved in being a woman. She also feels sympathy for some of the women who were advocating women's rights in the early sixties:

The feminist I most admire is Betty Friedan, because The Feminine Mystique was written for my generation, who had been brainwashed into thinking that a woman's place, whatever her training and talents, was back in the home, bringing

up children.<sup>102</sup>

Elsewhere, she has expanded on this theme: "Child psychologists like Bowlby made you feel that you ought to be with your children all the time, whereas Betty Friedan did try to get women back to work, and I believe in the right to work".<sup>103</sup> Yet on the other hand she also states that she finds too great an emphasis on "women's issues" limiting.<sup>104</sup> In fact, she makes a distinction between herself as an artist and as a woman in "real life": "Although as an artist I don't want to be part of the women's movement, I am a back-to-the-wall feminist on things like tax, divorce laws, equal pay, married women's property, even abortion".<sup>105</sup> However, she does have a sense of communicating something important when she writes. Writing to her is not a Romantic spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. On the contrary, she focuses on the readers to whom she wants to convey something. Asked why she writes novels she answered: "I write them for readers".<sup>106</sup> Olga Kenyon, who has interviewed Byatt concludes: "Byatt, together with Murdoch and Lessing, refuses to be pushed into being a spokeswoman".<sup>107</sup> Without wanting to become a representative of a group or a type of woman, Byatt still feels her own experiences as a woman are relevant to other people, and therefore worthwhile *exploring in fiction.*

## Margaret Drabble

Like Bainbridge, Drabble first tried to pursue a career as an actress. When she was pregnant and could not act anymore, she had time to consider her own situation. Like Lessing, Drabble started writing urged on by the desire to express herself, rather than with a clear readership in mind:

Millions of women were in exactly the same position, but I didn't think about that at the time. I just thought about me, about my own babies ... it was about my own children and my own spot in time.<sup>108</sup>

Unlike Byatt, she did not feel hindered by having children. On the contrary, they in fact inspired her to write:

In a way the writing sprang very much out of having children, because I started to write when the children were very small ... It was my way of refusing to be sentenced, because I was prevented from doing a lot of other things through being pregnant and having small children.<sup>109</sup>

This has influenced Drabble's view on literature, for she believes that literature should be read in its social context:

I see it as social context. Also I see it a lot in terms of a writer's personal biography. I was taught not to pay any attention to it, but I find it increasingly interesting ... It seems to me ridiculous to isolate a text, almost meaningless.<sup>110</sup>

Once Drabble finished her first novel, A Summer Bird-Cage, she decided to send it to Weidenfeld and Nicolson. She did not hear from them for a few months and decided to contact them. She had lunch with Barley Alison, fiction editor at the time, who promised to publish the book if Drabble would make some minor changes. Drabble was amazed at the ease with which she had become an author: "Even in recollection, it seems something of a dream".<sup>111</sup> Afterwards she realized that something which seemed perfectly natural to her at the time, was in fact an innovative and important step to take: "I and most women are writing about things that have never been written about, really".<sup>112</sup>

One of the ways through which she has come to realize that her novels relate to more than just one woman's life story, is through the large amount of letters she receives:

I get feedback from the strangest people, all over, both sexes and of all ages, but I suppose the majority, the largest single group, is of women of about my own age who identify with (or hate and resent!) the histories of my characters.<sup>113</sup>

She has also stressed the amount of identification she feels with those letter writers: "There is a certain type of woman that I get letters from: she's an intelligent housebound housewife and I know what they're all about, I really do".<sup>114</sup>

Drabble mentions two female authors to whom she feels particularly indebted: Simone de Beauvoir and Doris Lessing. She remembers reading The Second Sex and how it impressed her. She connected this book with her own life, and realized that she could use it: "This seemed to me to be wonderful material and so important to me as a person. It was material that nobody had used and I could use".<sup>115</sup> Of The Golden Notebook she says that it is "an absolutely marvellous book and it has profoundly affected me".<sup>116</sup> Drabble interviewed Lessing in 1972 and subsequently wrote "Doris Lessing: Cassandra in a World under Siege", in which she expresses her admiration for Lessing. Drabble is also one of the few writers in this group who really openly align themselves with the tradition of women writers:

I read Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own for the first time two or three months ago and I felt so in sympathy with everything she said about the tradition of women writing and where it's going. And I know that's what I'm part of ...<sup>117</sup>

In her letter of 3 February 1989 Drabble mentions that she is in contact with several of the

writers of this group: Lessing, Murdoch, and Bainbridge in particular. Also, she was at Cambridge at the same time as Sylvia Plath and met her there.<sup>118</sup> She has spoken about one particular series of meetings with Murdoch which seemed to her significant. One week she was shopping in the area where she lived and she met Iris Murdoch by accident in one of the shops. The following week she happened to be in Oxford and quite accidentally again met Murdoch.<sup>119</sup> This does not only indicate their geographical nearness, but also points to the proximity of their "lebensraum", of their particular world, and consequently of the world they create in their novels which is largely based on their own experiences. The same also applies to the other members of the group. Between 1945 and 1968 most of the writers lived in a remarkably small section of England, the majority of them in London. In the way Bloomsbury was the home of Virginia Woolf's circle, Hampstead could be called the alma mater of this group of writers.

Yet, Drabble also distances herself from a too close association with other women: "I am a 'cautious feminist' in that I think that there is no way of producing revolutions overnight."<sup>120</sup> She even claims that she sometimes consciously tries to pretend that she is not a woman:

When I am writing I don't think of myself wholly as a woman but partly as a writer. And indeed in some of my books I've tried to avoid writing as a woman because it does create its own narrowness.<sup>121</sup>

## Conclusions

From these biographies it becomes clear that all the writers take their profession seriously and often have been dedicated to it since they were young. This, perhaps, explains the apparent reluctance of these writers to align themselves with other women writers: they think women are often not taken seriously in their profession, and they want to avoid this. They insist therefore on being compared with male writers of equal standard rather than with their female contemporaries. In the younger writers of this group, such as Drabble, signs of pride in her womanhood can be found which are lacking in the older writers. The writers are generally at great pains to show that they are "real" writers and not just "scribbling housewives". Another possible reason why these women writers seem very reluctant to be called feminists is that they were primarily turning away from the feminine ideal, and they were perhaps therefore not too keen to subscribe to another theory straight away. Both the novelists and their heroines (as we

shall see in Part III, below) are fiercely independent and protective of their newly found individuality and separate identities. A further problem is that the term "feminism" was at the time in a particularly fluid phase. As we saw in the discussion on New Society above, feminism was still largely associated with the suffragette movement. And the main impetus for the establishment of a formal new feminist movement was still to come. Thus these writers were in a kind of limbo, at the beginning of a new movement without the necessary interest in theorization and the formulation of larger ideas to look ahead to what was to come. Most of the writers seemed at first to be positively amazed (e.g. Drabble) that their writing struck such a strong note of recognition with so many other women. Each writer had only considered herself, and had not realized that there were so many women in the same position. Later women definitely recognised the proto-feminist qualities of the texts produced by these novelists and were inspired in their own feminism. We will return to this aspect in the next section, the Reception Process.

## II.2 The Reception Process

In this section the development of the attitude of reviewers to the writers of this group will be traced. The material in the novels was different from what readers and critics were used to, and this required a reading of the novels focusing on the female consciousness underlying the novels. The problem for specially the reviewers seemed to have been that these novelists were not addressing a pre-constituted audience but were rather constructing one. Felslin sees this as one of the most positive characteristics of women's literature: "the function of literature is not to reflect passively the already constituted needs of a female audience; on the contrary, literature and art can help to create new perceptions and new needs."<sup>122</sup> Although some reviewers seemed to have been puzzled, particularly initially, by what they read, most of the novels received fairly positive reviews and were reviewed in major serious journals. Even if they did not quite understand what the novel was all about reviewers still were able to recognize the obvious quality of the novels which were being published. One of the problems which prevented reviewers from gaining a proper understanding of the novels was that they missed out the significant fact that these were women writing about issues which concerned them. Many critics seemed to suffer from "The Lady Painter Syndrome or She Writes like A Man" referred to in the

Interlude above. They appreciated the books because they at first only recognized the aspects of the novels which made them resemble novels by male contemporaries. Iris Murdoch, for instance, was seen as part of the Angry Young Men movement. Doris Lessing herself encouraged, perhaps unconsciously, a view of herself as a member of the "angry" movement by contributing the essay "A Small Personal Voice" to the collection *Declaration* (1957), which included pieces by John Osborne, Colin Wilson and John Wain. This perceived connection with the "Angries", however, did not always generate positive interest. In a review article published in 1958 Anthony Quinton and Frank Kermode, among others, regret the fact that this new movement (they include Murdoch), has not brought any truly "great" novelists.<sup>123</sup>

Reviews of the later books pinpoint more and more the specific female qualities which unite the novels by these writers, and comparisons started to be made with other budding women writers. At the end of the period under discussion here an awareness had grown that these writers somehow belonged together, but by this time individual reviewers still felt uneasy about the place of one or two particular writers in the scale of events. One of the most comprehensive contemporary appreciations of the writers along those lines appeared in Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Student's Guide to Contemporary Fiction* (1967). Burgess divides most of the well-known British authors of the time in small groups, according to a specific aspect which these writers have in common. In this way he includes O'Brien, Murdoch, Mortimer, and Spark in a chapter entitled "Yin and Yang". He recognizes two characteristics which unite these women writers. Firstly, he claims that in the novels by these women writers men are often despised: "It is very rarely that any of our contemporary women novelists have much respect for the yang [the male principle]".<sup>124</sup> He mentions Edna O'Brien's novels as an example: "Man is represented as a weak, self-regarding creature, sexually demanding and near-impotent at the same time. Male readers are intended to wince, but soon they grow mutinous".<sup>125</sup> Secondly, he sees the thematic concerns of these women writers as innovative: "The new willingness ... of women novelists to discuss the physical and emotional needs of their sex finds many strongly individual manifestations".<sup>126</sup> And, "some of our women novelists are content to follow old paths in technique (paths older than those first trodden by Henry James), but this does not necessarily detract from the freshness of the fictional message".<sup>127</sup> Thus Burgess categorizes these novels as writ-

ten by women for women and dealing with an exclusively female perspective, and he is generous enough to see this as the main strength of these novels. In 1967 Burgess was able to give an adequate impression of what was generally thought most significant about these women writers and of their specific strengths. As we will see in this chapter, however, most critics took some time to reach this position, before they recognized the significance of the novels which were being written.

Even Burgess' analysis does, however, have its weaker points. First of all, he does not include sexuality and personal relationships in his "political" section. Secondly, he does not include Lessing in his chapter on women writers. He includes Lessing in a chapter with writers who record political and social processes. He calls these writers "crusaders". He does not like the novels of this kind of author, because he claims they look like political pamphlets. He mentions The Golden Notebook and "The Children of Violence" series as examples of propagandistic prose: "The crusader's best medium is the manifesto, which is not quite the same thing as a novel".<sup>128</sup> As it happens, Lessing wrote a propagandistic novel in 1956, entitled Retreat to Innocence. Since its first publication, however, Lessing has realized her mistake in writing this novel and has refused permission for further publication. All her other novels are hardly more or less "crusading" than any of the novels Burgess discusses in his Yin and Yang chapter, where he seems to admire the message post-war women writers have to convey.

Towards the end of the era under discussion here other critics also started to see more and more similarities between some of the women writers. Most of these concentrate on a specific link between two women writers. The juxtapositions which occur most of all are the Murdoch-Byatt comparison and the Lessing-Drabble one. These comparisons were partly instigated by the writers themselves, as each has stated a particular indebtedness to the other in interviews. Byatt by writing Degrees of Freedom cemented a further bond with Murdoch. Books by the two of them were often reviewed together in the late '60s. A review of Christopher Salvesen appeared, for example, in New Society in 1965, in which Murdoch's The Red and the Green and Byatt's Degrees of Freedom were discussed simultaneously. Salvesen commented on the excellent insight and affinity Byatt shows she has with Murdoch's work.<sup>129</sup> Malcolm Bradbury makes a similar connection between Byatt and Murdoch in a review of The Game. He calls this "an ob-

vious comparison" to make.<sup>130</sup> He mentions Byatt and Murdoch in a group of women novelists which, according to him, includes Spark and O'Brien. He contrasts this group with Virginia Woolf, whom he sees as less "tough". He refers specifically to Woolf's unwillingness to deal with the down-to-earth. Like Burgess he prefers the "newer women novelists", as he calls them, because they do not repress their emotions and are willing to discuss any subject which might have been considered taboo by Woolf and her contemporaries. Bradbury sees the novelists as fulfilling a deep need in this respect:

We see ourselves as living in an unrepressed age, but there are clearly whole bodies of emotion that we have repressed, for reasons as much to do with the history of class as the history of feeling.<sup>131</sup>

Byatt and Murdoch and the others he calls "tougher performers" than Woolf who do venture into these difficult areas and who "do seem to catch something we value".<sup>132</sup>

The Drabble-Lessing comparison largely arises out of Drabble's own account of how she admires Lessing. She writes how compelled she was, particularly by The Golden Notebook: "I remember the sense of shock I felt when I first read The Golden Notebook".<sup>133</sup>

In this chapter the reception of several novels of each writer will be discussed to see how the literary world reacted to the publication of each novel. As Doris Lessing says: "You can occasionally get useful advice from reviews, but you can always learn a great deal about a current literary climate".<sup>134</sup> To achieve a sense of chronology, of how the reaction towards these novels developed over the years, the first published novel of each writer will be discussed, as well as one or two of the later ones. As was shown in section II.1, most of these women novelists wrote directly out of their own experience, many of them thinking initially that she was the only one who experienced life as she did. Through the reaction of the public to these novels apparent from e.g. the sales figures, it became clear that they were part of a social process which was taking place: they were turning out to be one of the main instruments in Britain in the naming of the "problem that has no name", in finding a means of expression for the discontentment of women with their position in society, which was after 1968 to lead to the demands of the women's liberation movement.

## Penelope Mortimer

The very first novel by this group of writers to appear was Mortimer's Johanna in 1947. The review of Johanna which was published in The Times Literary Supplement is indicative of how reviewers reacted to the first novels in the new vein. The review shows a mixture of admiration for the writer as a craftsman and genuine bewilderment about what she has to say. The reviewer is not able to grasp what exactly is going on in this novel:

The effect of Johanna is intensely irritating ... it is made bewildering by two conflicting themes - Johanna's personal difficulties in relation to her child and to the unbalanced egoist she has married, and her conscientious determination to leave some mark of herself in the political struggles of Vienna in the years leading up to the war. These two problems continually throw each other out of balance, leaving the reader wondering just what it is all about ... But at least she [the author] has something to say and says it forcefully though confusedly.<sup>135</sup>

Although the reviewer pinpoints the conflict which lies at the basis of the novel, he or she (the review is anonymous) does not realize that this refers to the conflicting demands of the female positions of wife, mother and, in this case, political worker. The reviewer recognizes that there is a conflict but is confused as to what it is about. It is interesting that this theme, which was to play such a prominent role in the novels by the women writers of this group, could create such confusion at first.

More people must have been confused by Johanna, because it did not have any reprints, is still out of print, and was generally forgotten about by the time Mortimer published her next novel, A Villa in Summer in 1954. Most critics took A Villa in Summer to be Mortimer's first novel because Johanna had been published under the name Dimont, the name of her first husband. Positive reviews of A Villa in Summer appeared in The Times, The Spectator and the TLS, all established publications. The TLS review remarks how cleverly Mortimer incorporates everyday household items in her novel and the irritation they can cause when they are unobtainable or out of action, as frequently happens in this novel, because the characters have decided to move from a luxury flat in London to an old cottage in the countryside. The reviewer in The Times is most impressed by the insight Mortimer gives into middle-class married life, and sees her skilful portrayal of it as one of the great assets of the novel:

A Villa in Summer is a bold first novel which attacks one of the most challenged fortresses in fiction: the spiritual and physical relationship of married life. The attack is brilliantly successful ... In itself it is common place, but the manner in

which Miss Mortimer maintains it at two levels describing both the ruffled surface of frustration, worries, and temptations, and also the deep undercurrents of love and interdependence, is masterly in its technical skill and imaginative truth.<sup>136</sup>

Mortimer's most successful novel to date, The Pumpkin Eater, is also unfortunately, with My Friend Says It's Bullet-Proof which was reissued by Virago in May 1989, the only of her '50s and '60s novels which is currently still in print. In this Mortimer has been unlucky, because the majority of novels under discussion here are not only still in print, but also retain good sales figures (most have been published in paperback and still require reprints quite regularly).<sup>137</sup> Perhaps the fact that Virago has started republishing one of her early novels indicates that a renewed interest in Mortimer will be forthcoming. When The Pumpkin Eater first appeared in 1962, the review in The Times was again the most complimentary. First of all it puts the author of this novel in the same league as Murdoch and Spark. The review also specifically refers to the appeal it is expected to have to female readers. At this point in time critics have become aware of the group of women novelists who have started to be published, and the reviewer does not view Mortimer as a bewildering eccentric as in the review of Johanna, but sees her as part of the community of women and her novels as of significance to other women:

Piece by piece the whole of the woman's life from childhood on is put together: not to explain away or resolve her dilemmas but to communicate in its dreadful fulness the nature of an hysteria far too many women - and indeed their husbands - will recognize. The Pumpkin Eater is one of the best novels of this year.<sup>138</sup>

## Doris Lessing

Doris Lessing's first novel, The Grass is Singing, was published in 1950, three years after Mortimer's Johanna. Unlike Johanna which received favourable but uncomprehending reviews and did not sell too well, The Grass is Singing was an immediate success both with readers and critics. The book had to have several reprints in quick succession and sold 19,000 copies in the first few months after publication.<sup>139</sup> In the U.S.A. Lessing reached equal heights of popularity and appreciation and the The New York Times Book Review's discussion of the novel at the time said: "It is seldom that a first novel, one so sensitive and so powerful comes to hand".<sup>140</sup> Lessing herself thinks the reason for its instant success was the time it came out: "Well, it was the second book on those parts [Africa]. The first one was Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country - that had just come out, and then came mine. I was just extremely lucky in my timing".<sup>141</sup> She remembers that

at the time she did not realize at all that it was such an exceptional success:

It was an instant success, but the joke was I didn't know it. I was so raw and green, and in any case I had so many problems at that time, that when they used to ring me up and say we've printed again, we've printed again, I thought it happened to everybody.<sup>142</sup>

Lessing also claims that although the reviews were relatively favourable, she would not have cared much if it had been otherwise:

The reviews were on the whole good. They did not affect me. The long process of sticking it out in Rhodesia gave me a tough skin ... I am sad when I see young writers being affected by reviews.<sup>143</sup>

As Lessing herself mentioned, there was a strong bias in the reviews towards a comparison of The Grass is Singing with male authors, particularly with Paton. The New Statesman reviewed Lessing's novel as one of a group of novels, which included Cry, the Beloved Country, which dealt with racism.<sup>144</sup> Bernard Bergonzi even compared Lessing with Lawrence and called the novel "a Central African Lady Chatterley's Lover".<sup>145</sup> Other reviewers, however, saw a connection with Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm. This view was mainly inspired by the setting which in both cases is a farm in Southern Africa:

In a way, it is a new story of a South African farm that Doris Lessing has written - not as broad or profound as Olive Schreiner's classic work, but belonging as integrally to the South Africa of our time as Olive Schreiner's book belonged to hers.<sup>146</sup>

Others thought Lessing was Schreiner's equal:

The Grass is Singing by Doris Lessing (Michael Joseph, 9s 6d) is a book so authoritative that one has to judge it at once on its merits and not on its promise. I do not think it extravagant to say that here is a work comparable, not only in theme, but also in handling, with Olive Schreiner's Story of an African Farm ... I believe that this book will attract much attention.<sup>147</sup>

In general, though, reviewers seemed to agree that the most impressive aspect of the novel was the portrayal of Mary Turner, the female protagonist. The TLS summarized the novel as follows: "the book is in no sense a detective story, but a serious study of a woman's moral disintegration ... a powerful and bitter book".<sup>148</sup> The Spectator and Nation were equally complimentary on Lessing's female protagonist. Nation, in particular, firmly classified the heroine's problems as the main focus of the novel, rather than the anti-racist stance. Jones sees the attention as being mainly on the woman's character development rather than on Moses, the black

servant, and therefore he does not give undue emphasis to the anti-racist theme in the novel: "The Grass is Singing, a first novel, abounds in local color, a South African farm - but does examine carefully the eclipse of a dim soul, a townswoman who a bad marriage and years in the veld drive to madness and death".<sup>149</sup>

By the time The Golden Notebook was published in 1962 the emphasis had shifted completely from the view of Lessing as a writer on race to Lessing as a writer on women's issues. Richard Taubman's review in the New Statesman entitled "Free Women" is typical of this attitude. He immediately recognizes the main significance of this book, and also realizes that it will have a great impact:

It is not a creation but a document ... Simply as a record of how it is to be free and responsible, a woman in relation to men and other women, and to struggle to come to terms with one's self about these things and about writing and politics, it seems to me unique in its truthfulness and range. Its interest will certainly be felt; it is the sort of book that determines the way people think about themselves.<sup>150</sup>

In the same review Taubman highlights the fact that the book seems to him to be autobiographical, and for that reason particularly impressive: "The book's striking quality is not that it is difficult in a profound or original way, but rather the reverse - the conviction it carries of being a close transcription of actual experience".<sup>151</sup> The TLS made a similar observation: "so exact and unerring is her documentary eye that her work is very close and immediate".<sup>152</sup> These reviewers recognized that Lessing was not just telling a fairy-tale story which bore no obvious resemblance to real life, but that she painted a very accurate picture of contemporary society, and, in particular, of women's position in this society. Lessing's novel seemed to strike an immediate cord with people in every corner of the former British Empire. The Purple Renoster, for instance, an off-beat Johannesburg magazine also stressed the importance of this novel in relation to women's position in society: "The experiences described are patently personal, but cannot fail to be of enormous meaning to the thousands of housewives quietly going mad".<sup>153</sup> Reviewers also realized that Lessing's novel dealt with subject matters which were not normally discussed in such detail before The Golden Notebook:

In the case of the woman writer, however bold, the use of four-lettered words, descriptions of the orgasm, etc., is dangerous territory. Or has been until The Golden Notebook, perhaps Doris Lessing's greatest effort and contribution is to the breaking down of the unspoken restrictions under which the woman writer

works.<sup>154</sup>

Others, however, disapproved of Lessing's direct approach in these matters: "Mrs. Lessing sometimes uses words where blanks are more customary".<sup>155</sup>

Few of the critics saw the unusual form of The Golden Notebook as Lessing's main pre-occupation. An exception is formed by Ray Mathew's review in the London Magazine. He states that "The Golden Notebook is obviously preoccupied with form, with the effort to impose order because Miss Lessing cannot create it".<sup>156</sup> Lessing herself later regretted the reviewers' bias towards an interpretation of the book as a "woman's novel". In the Introduction to The Golden Notebook which Lessing wrote for the 1971 edition, she tries to explain that she had not meant it to become a "women's liberation novel": "the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly that we must not divide things off, must not compartementalize" (GN, p. x). She goes to great lengths to explain her own novel, to write her own review as it were. She stresses the importance of Anna, the artist, for example, and the fact that Anna has a writer's block. In an interview in 1962 Lessing also showed a similar impatience with the reviews she had received on The Golden Notebook: "interviewer: 'Do you feel that the reviewers of The Golden Notebook understood the central theme of the book?' Lessing: 'No, I don't. Reading the reviews I was appalled by their frivolity and amateurishness'".<sup>157</sup> Lessing also had to face particular criticism because she was a woman:

They said I was a man hater, a balls cutter, particularly Americans. I noticed enormous pressure on me to be feminine and to be good and to be kind and sweet.<sup>158</sup>

The problem with Lessing's attitude to The Golden Notebook is that by the time the novel was published Lessing had progressed beyond the problems the novel focuses on. Actually, the writing of this novel helped her in many ways to find a new perspective on her own life, and solve her problems. The writing of the novel was a learning process for her. She did not realize that many of her readers and critics still had a long way to go on the road to emancipation, and that reading her novel helped them tremendously.

Later several of these readers wrote down what The Golden Notebook meant to them and what an impact it had had on their lives. Thus, the reaction of the readers to The Golden Notebook forms a good example of how these novelists constructed their own audience. I have

already referred to Drabble's feeling of "shock" when she read the novel. Drabble also acknowledges the avant garde role Lessing played: she wrote about the possibility of women's liberation avant la lettre: "it was in a sense published too early, for its tone is not at all explanatory: it assumes its readers will know what is meant. The movement came later".<sup>159</sup> There are more writers who have related their experiences as readers of The Golden Notebook. Adrienne Rich, for instance, remembers: "The Golden Notebook at that time seemed a very radical book ... it talked about things that had not been talked about in literature before".<sup>160</sup>

Joyce Carol Oates states:

Yet it is natural, I suppose, for her not to know or to guess how much The Golden Notebook (predating and superseding even the most sophisticated of all the 'women's liberation' works) meant to young women of my generation; how beautifully the craftsmanship of her many short stories illuminated lives, the most secret and guarded of private lives, in a style that was never self-conscious or contrived.<sup>161</sup>

Elizabeth Wilson compares the impact Lessing had on her with Simone de Beauvoir's influence.

Both writers provided women with role models to follow:

Had there been a women's movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, women might not have needed to relate to them [Lessing and De Beauvoir] in the way they did, as heroines and exemplars, and they themselves might not have needed to present themselves - sometimes intentionally, sometimes not - in this way.<sup>162</sup>

Whether Lessing had wanted it or not, The Golden Notebook caused a breakthrough in the way novels by women writers were discussed in reviews. Suddenly reviewers had been made aware that here was definitely something new going on, and they started looking for symptoms of a similar preoccupation with women's issues in other novels. As we have seen, The Pumpkin Eater, which appeared later in the same year, was immediately recognized as another novel which had an important statement to make on women's position in society. The reviewers had awoken to the fact that a new type of women writers had come into existence, who were making valuable and innovatory contributions to literature and society.

## **Iris Murdoch**

When Murdoch's first novel, Under the Net, appeared in 1954, it was seen as being part of the 'new' kind of novel which was being published at the time. Her novel, like the novels which had just been published by Amis, Wain and Cooper, had a male protagonist who felt slightly at

odds with the society in which he found himself. The review in the New Statesman is fairly typical of how Under the Net was seen at the time:

Miss Murdoch is a notable accession to the ranks of young dons who write picaresque novels: her books follow hard on Mr Wain's Hurry on Down and Mr Amis's Lucky Jim.<sup>163</sup>

The reviewer, however, immediately makes the comment that it is unfortunate that Murdoch's novel is not quite of the same standard as Amis's or Wain's: "Alas, it hasn't the genuine high spirits of the first, nor the compelling sleaziness of the second".<sup>164</sup> The conclusion of the review is that Murdoch tries to imitate her male contemporaries, but somehow does not quite make it. The implication is clearly that this is because she is a woman: the reviewer thinks that Jake is too soft to be a credible male character: "in Miss Murdoch's loving hands he is no more than a wraith of a whimsy".<sup>165</sup>

Male contemporaries and colleagues were given a chance to express their opinion of the new writer who had supposedly joined their ranks. Angus Wilson reviewed Under the Net in The Observer, and Kingsley Amis himself discussed Under the Net in The Spectator. Amis compares Murdoch to male writers, but concludes, contrary to the New Statesman reviewer, that, in spite of the fact that she is a woman, she is still able to portray an impressive male character:

Under the Net is a winner, a thoroughly accomplished first novel ... To start with, it is some sort of triumph for a woman writer to carry off a first person male narrator without either implausibility or knowingness.<sup>166</sup>

Whereas the New Statesman reviewer presumes that no woman can write as well as a man, Amis takes the view: she is good, because she writes like a man. Both reviewers by comparing Murdoch to these "Angry Young Men" fail to appreciate the real value of Under the Net.

Malcolm Bradbury, himself part of the new generation of male writers, was one of the first to state on several occasions that Murdoch should not at all be seen as an imitation male writer. The first of these re-appreciations of Murdoch appeared in 1962, the year Lessing's The Golden Notebook was published. Bradbury wrote:

It must by now appear to us rather curious that, when Iris Murdoch's first novel, Under the Net, appeared in 1954, it was hailed as part of the 'angry' movement of the period and closely associated with such books as Lucky Jim, Hurry on Down, and even Room at the Top ... Yet the book in fact stakes very little on its accuracy or its power to depict the world of the Welfare State and the Butler Education Act; it is dominated by an imagination of a strikingly different order from that of the

other 'angries'.<sup>167</sup>

In 1965 he repeated this argument:

Iris Murdoch's reputation as a novelist is high: but surely not as high as it was. The shift in critical opinion derives in part from what seems to me an initial misapprehension about the kind of novelist she was when she began writing, and a consequent disappointment in the way she has developed.<sup>168</sup>

He claims that people have failed to recognize that she actually is a "romantic" novelist, and that her main concern is with "love relationships".<sup>169</sup> This new interpretation must surely have been influenced by Bradbury's awareness of other women writers who were writing at the time and in whose work "love relationships" play a prominent role (e.g. Lessing, O'Brien).

There is even a development away from Murdoch as "the honorary male" which predates Bradbury's re-appreciation. An example of this kind of portrayal of Murdoch as a person, which is as it were a preliminary move for a different view of her novels, appeared in the Sunday Times in 1959. The basic idea behind the article is: isn't it amazing, Murdoch is far more feminine than we thought! The article stresses her "sympathy, understanding" and commitment as a teacher to young people (implying that although Murdoch is not a mother she still has a mothering instinct):

Ask any friend of Iris Murdoch, professional philosopher and highly successful novelist, what qualities first spring to mind at the mention of her name, and the answer will come pat: not intellect, cleverness, inventiveness, wit - but kindness, warmth, concern.<sup>170</sup>

The article claims that it is especially her more "feminine" characteristics which dominate the novels:

Nobody, having read these [her novels] could possibly continue to entertain the notion of a severely academic lady of unimpeachable intelligence. From the start imagination, fancy, fun and perception flowered in them.<sup>171</sup>

Murdoch herself seemed to have been little perturbed at all by the discussion her novels engendered: "She cares little for critical response. 'A bad review', she has said, 'is even less important than whether it is raining in Patagonia'".<sup>172</sup>

The novels following Under the Net were much less enthusiastically received: "None of the later novels, though they have been well received and though we admire them can afford as much pleasure and entertainment as Under the Net".<sup>173</sup>

By the time The Italian Girl appeared in 1964 some Murdoch reviewers seemed to have given up trying to place Murdoch in a slot. The Spectator called her "an idiosyncratic author", but

does not belittle her literary value: "What matters now is that a new novel from Miss Murdoch deserves rather more attention than most fiction published today".<sup>174</sup> There seemed to have been genuine confusion as to what Murdoch meant with her novels, especially when it had been agreed that she did not belong to The Angry Young Men. The reviews in The Times and The Guardian of The Italian Girl, for instance, were almost in total contrast to each other. The Times is very flattering:

Miss Murdoch's new novel, The Italian Girl, is again a subtle, quirky tale, brushed everywhere with the fabulous and set in a richly pictorial scene ... The reading is as fascinating as ever. All emotion may be softened and idealized in this near-dream universe; but Miss Murdoch knows what she is doing, and a wrinkled bit of hard truth is picked, as before, out of every one of her shapely and exotic tableaux.<sup>175</sup>

The review by Anthony Burgess in The Guardian entitled "Iridectomy", on the other hand, is abusive in tone and derogatory about Murdoch's achievements. He refers to the "flabbiness" of her novels, thus making use of Murdoch's gender in a very denigrating manner.<sup>176</sup> The rest of The Guardian review continues in the same vein, e.g. referring to Murdoch's alleged female preoccupation with sex as an easy way out:

If you can't make your characters generate life and individuality, well then, impose the great horrors of sex on them and call the result a fable or a myth. It is time to call Miss Murdoch's bluff. Her reputation is grossly inflated; this book should help to prick it.<sup>177</sup>

Yet, there was also the odd reviewer who valued Murdoch's newly discovered womanhood. Dorrie Pagones' review in the Saturday Review was very positive especially because Murdoch, according to Pagones, favours the woman's point of view. Pagones writes: "How agreeable it is to open a novel with the certainty that it will be all pleasure from start to finish".<sup>178</sup> And:

Several points recur in connection with her work: Most importantly, the men always come off badly. Unlike the women, they rarely have any insight. They talk weakly and act like bumbling idiots. Edmund and Otto are typical ... All decisive action is initiated by the women.<sup>179</sup>

The last of Murdoch's novels published in the period up till 1968 is The Nice and The Good (1968). This novel still received some abusive reviews but they were in the minority. One of the negative reviews worth mentioning is Martin Seymour-Smith's one in The Spectator. Talking about this novel he claims that "the effect, especially of the clothes, 'scenery', and pet notes, is

that of a serial in a women's magazine; but worse, because more pretentious".<sup>180</sup> Note that this reviewer also makes use of the fact that Murdoch is a woman to attack her novel. A more appreciative review appeared in New Society under the title "Love and Evil". The reviewer tries to defend Murdoch by saying that "people dismiss Iris Murdoch too easily".<sup>181</sup> He wonders why people do not recognize her importance and thinks it is a pity:

Why is it that she fails to arouse a vital interest - especially since she is one of the most patently serious of our writers, a formidable intellectual woman who knows all about novels?<sup>182</sup>

This reviewer does not merely place Murdoch in a ghetto of men or women, but he calls her a serious writer, no sex indicated. The most thorough and understanding review of this tenth novel by Murdoch is A.S. Byatt's "Kiss and Make Up" which was published in the New Statesman. Byatt recognizes that Murdoch's concern with love and sex is not an aberration, but serves a specific purpose:

The Nice and The Good is much more simply concerned with the pleasures and pains of sexual love than its immediate predecessors ... Morally, like many of Iris Murdoch's other novels, it is about the inextricable relationship between love and power, and the almost automatic pain and damage this combination causes.<sup>183</sup>

Apparently, it is only somebody who is a woman writer herself who can provide an effective review of a Murdoch novel.

## **Muriel Spark**

Over the years reviews of Spark's novels have been generally favourable, but there were some reviewers who were as puzzled by Spark's novels as others were by Murdoch's. One reaction was to try and avoid having to provide a deeper understanding of the novels at all. Frank Kermode, for instance, in his "House of Fiction" interview regarded Spark purely as a formalist. He is therefore able to concentrate exclusively on the form of the novels, without tackling the content. After looking at the varied reception Spark's novels have had over the years Patrick Parrinder concludes that "What it suggests, I believe, is that Spark is a genuinely disturbing writer ... and that her case is by no means easy to judge".<sup>184</sup> Another feature of Spark criticism is that people seem to dwell unduly on her appearance: "As women writers go, she must be one of the prettiest".<sup>185</sup> This seems to imply that there is a contrast somewhere between Spark the writer

and Spark the beauty. The title of one of the more recent interviews with Spark is also indicative of this trend: "The Spiritual Strength Beneath a Stylish Surface".

Spark herself feels uneasy about reviews. She appears to relish success and is rather apprehensive about reading reviews of her work, in case they turn out to be negative: "Publication is a nervous time. I usually go away and then someone cables and says the reviews are all right and I read them all at once".<sup>186</sup> She herself sees Memento Mori as the breakthrough, as the novel which established her as a writer:

The best thing about success is that it relieves the pressure about success. There comes an awful time for a writer when you just can't go on being promising for ever. Every book becomes one more awful milestone and you wonder whether this one will make it so that you'll be an established writer. I was really rather lucky because my third novel, Memento Mori, made the breakthrough. After that no book is ever so worrying again.<sup>187</sup>

It was also less worrying because Memento Mori not only provided a critical breakthrough, but the novel was also a financial success. An anecdote from Derek Stanford's memoirs illustrates rather well how important success is to Spark:

We were walking on a cold late autumn day in 1957 in Kensington Gardens, a month or so prior to the appearance of The Comforters. 'If only people knew how famous we were!' she observed with a sly innocent-eyed laugh.<sup>188</sup>

Muriel Spark's first novel, The Comforters (1957), received positive reviews. Evelyn Waugh wrote one of the most complimentary reviews in The Spectator. He mentions that he has just finished a book on a similar theme himself, i.e. The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold, and therefore is able to appreciate the novel. The review is entitled "Something Fresh", and he describes the book as "complicated, subtle, an intensely interesting first novel".<sup>189</sup> The publishers were apparently also quite eager to promote the novel's association with the Waugh novel, because the first edition of The Comforters carried a recommendation by Waugh on its dustjacket. The Times and TLS published equally encouraging reviews.

There were also other reviewers, however, who managed to disregard the superficial similarities with Waugh's novel and concentrated on the female protagonist, Caroline Rose, instead. Mary Scrutton, for example, wrote in the New Statesman "the girl herself with her cosy habitual, mildly neurotic ways is excellently drawn".<sup>190</sup> John Updike has also voiced his particular admiration for the character of Caroline Rose:

Where else, in the fiction of the fifties, do we find a heroine whose heterosexuality is so calmly brought forward and assigned a secondary priority, whose determination to value her own intelligence and spirituality is so levelly announced, whose own so-called neuroticism is so cheerfully embraced? <sup>191</sup>

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, when it first appeared in 1961, received rather mixed reviews, which is ironical in view of the fact that the book turned out to be one of Spark's most popular novels and was even turned into a film. The reviews which still see Spark as belonging to the Waugh set are negative. The TLS review, for instance, is rather scornful and dismissive: "Is it coincidence, or something connected with the satirical temper subjected to Roman Catholic conversion, that Mrs. Spark, like Mr. Graham Greene and Mr. Evelyn Waugh, chooses to write these rather enigmatic little entertainments ...".<sup>192</sup> The New Statesman review compares the novel to one of Murdoch's novels, and is far more positive:

The wit is ripe and treacherous, the whole effect that of a long, light, negligent and elusive joke. In this respect, and because of its postman's-knock-like sexual permutations, it may recall Miss Murdoch's Severed Head.<sup>193</sup>

Reviews of the later Spark novels more and more stress the similarity with other novels by women rather than Spark's allegiance to the Waugh set. Some reviewers see Spark's perceived femininity as a negative trait. In the same way that "flabbiness" was used to describe Murdoch's The Italian Girl, The Times used the words "to flirt" and "flippant" in connection with Spark's novels:

She has in fact flirted with enormous success, flirted with beliefs, flirted with thriller plots, flirted with style, flirted even with the accepted novel form ... but she remains inconsequential, flippant to the end.<sup>194</sup>

A rather more positive connection with womanhood is made in the TLS. It relates Spark's own fame to the actress in The Public Image who is trying to find a way of coping with her exposure to the press, with her public image. The reviewer makes the point that Spark, but also other women novelists such as O'Brien, who had by then reached a fame or a notoriety which bordered on stardom, have to deal with the portrayal of their work and private life as if they were film stars: "Much is owed to the circumstances of Muriel Spark's new life as an international star novelist, with a public image of her own to bear".<sup>195</sup>

The most appreciative review of The Public Image which comes into the review category "Spark as a woman writer" appeared in the New Statesman. This journal asked A.S. Byatt to write

a review of the novel, apparently thinking that she, as a woman writer herself, would be an appropriate judge. The review is complimentary both of the form and of the content of the novel:

In a series of dry aphorisms and brittle dialogues Mrs. Spark builds an ambiguous picture of the real conflict between the public and private images of the pair.<sup>196</sup>

Byatt especially recognizes the importance of the end of the book where Annabel takes the decision to disregard her public image and chooses a real rather than a publicly fabricated life for her and her baby. The empty shell of the public image is thus replaced by a strong and vibrating personality, Annabel's own. Annabel is seen leaving the country, caring for her baby, while the press is still discussing the scandalous suicide letters her husband Frederick has written, which Annabel has released to them on purpose (so that she would not have to succumb to blackmail). Byatt particularly appreciates this ending which she sees as a celebration of the strength of womanhood:

At the end of the book the unthinking animal reality of mother and child is brought together with Frederick's vulgar image of the hollow shell into a new and haunting image of the continuity of life.<sup>197</sup>

Rather uncannily, Spark found herself in a similar situation to the fictional one she had created, when some of her love letters were offered for sale.<sup>198</sup> This kind of incident, of course, only increased the disreputable features of her own public image.

## Edna O'Brien

O'Brien's critics throughout the sixties agreed at least on one thing: that she was worth discussing. The reviews of The Country Girls (1960), her first novel, all seemed to say: this is a noteworthy writer, and in 1968 Hunter Davies was able to describe her as "a successful writer".<sup>199</sup> In the intervening years much discussion did indeed take place, mainly about the content of the novels, which was often seen as scandalous, and which stimulated, as in Spark's case, an interest in the person of the writer herself.

The reviews of The Country Girls especially stressed the new quality of this novel: "In fact, it is Caithleen's - and Miss O'Brien's - evident enjoyment of life, disappointments and all, that gives the book its fresh, youthful quality".<sup>200</sup> Kate and Baba became established literary figures, and one could almost say household names, when the second novel in the series appeared, Girl with

Green Eyes (1962).<sup>201</sup> The third novel dealing with the two women, Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964), was seen as having a totally different tone of voice from the other two novels which were still regarded as relatively innocent in comparison. Sean McMahon remembers how this third book was received:

It proved to be so different from the first two books that readers were startled. The two girls ... had lost their girlish laughter. The book's title was seen to be bitterly ironic and the London life of Cait and Baba was sordid .... Miss O'Brien seemed in places to be writing a kind of neo-feminist propaganda.<sup>202</sup>

Interestingly, the only term McMahon could find to describe O'Brien's way of writing, "neo-feminist", sounds rather quaint in retrospect. Of course McMahon was not to know that a new feminist period would officially start in 1968, and that what he was witnessing was not the rumbling after a thunderstorm had taken place, but rather the pre-warning of one still to come. However, at least he is aware that some sort of movement was taking place among women writers. He notes there are similarities between O'Brien, Spark, Murdoch, and Lessing, among others.<sup>203</sup> But, unfortunately, he interprets this as a backlash to what has taken place before, rather than relating it to what was still to come.

It was not only McMahon who was taken aback by O'Brien's writing. All her books were banned in the Irish Republic, which provided her with instant notoriety. Other countries at different periods also considered banning her books. August is a Wicked Month, for example, was banned in South Africa because it was regarded as "indecent, obscene, and obnoxious".<sup>204</sup> This novel, which had as its cover a picture of the author taken by Lord Snowdon, was also considered for banning in Australia, but after much deliberation it was finally passed for sale.<sup>205</sup> The result was, as McMahon rightly indicates, that many people made the following equation: "O'Brien = Sex".<sup>206</sup> This did not put off the readers, however. When O'Brien was in Limerick in April 1966 answering questions posed by a large audience, she asked how many of them had actually managed to read her books and a big show of hands followed.<sup>207</sup> O'Brien herself shows understanding of the reason why her books were banned, because she realizes in what way her books and way of thinking could have provided a threat to the established society; how her books could have brought about changes in women's perceptions and ways of thinking:

The root of it is fear. If my books circulated in Ireland ... then girls reading these

escapades of other girls might cease to be as devout and as Roman Catholic and, I think, as inhuman, as devout Catholics have to be, to abide by their faith. And I think that's the reason why I'm not angry about it. I understand it.<sup>208</sup>

The infamy of O'Brien's novels reflected back on the person who had written them, especially as her novels seem to follow the course her own life has taken very closely. Thus the critics focused both on the novels and on the person behind them. Invariably the reviews of the later novels carried implicit or explicit references to O'Brien's private life as it was viewed in the media, with the stress on O'Brien as a "loose" woman primarily interested in sex. Even the respectable TLS falls into this trap. The review of August is a Wicked Month (1965), "Girl Meets Men", states that:

A great deal of nonsense has been written in gossip columns and glossy magazines about Miss O'Brien as a militant spokesman of her sex, voicing in her novel all the perplexity and savagery said to be felt by women today.<sup>209</sup>

A descriptive term with certain connotations which was used in connection with Murdoch's The Nice and the Good occurs again, this time in The Times review of August is a Wicked Month. The Times writes about this novel: "her prose coos with all the lovesickness of a women's magazine story".<sup>210</sup> The term "women's magazine" is used to indicate that the reviewer does not think this is "real" literature, that it is but some minor form of writing.

Some reviewers could be persuaded to regard O'Brien's later novels as fictional products, rather than as pure gossip. These reviewers clearly realize that there is a link between O'Brien's novels and the novels of some of the other women writers who had emerged. After 1962 the comparison with Lessing is the one which is made most often. The New Society review of August is a Wicked Month called the main character a Doris Lessing style "free woman".<sup>211</sup> The Spectator also placed the book side by side with Lessing:

Miss O'Brien is one of a small emancipated company - along with Mary McCarthy, Doris Lessing and Simone de Beauvoir - demolishing the precept of special queasy sensitivity for women writers. Claudel's definition of love as a 'sword through the heart' is replaced by the probe through the gynaecological tube. But I'm not sure that I need, in the interest of authenticity, to be taken with a torch over the cartography of knicker stains.<sup>212</sup>

New Society's statement that "the book is disgusting, sexually and emotionally" takes the same line.<sup>213</sup> Lessing's and O'Brien's use of realistic sexual description seems to be what remained with these reviewers as the most striking characteristic of the novels. They do not really seem to

go beyond their feeling of shock to ask themselves why these writers chose to describe this particular aspect of life. New Society named its review "Adrift without a Lighthouse", implying that a nostalgia is felt for the "decency, happiness or health" of Virginia Woolf's novels, which cannot be found in these novels.<sup>214</sup> Drabble's The Millstone (1965) is discussed in the same review and Drabble is put on a par with Lessing and O'Brien, calling Rosamund "a sad case" because "full human involvement is not within her capacity".<sup>215</sup> Instead of admiring Rosamund's strength of character shown in the way she is able to cope with an unwanted pregnancy and the way in which she converts her feelings into love for her baby, the reviewer regrets the fact that Rosamund cannot have "full human involvement", with which he presumably means marriage in this case.

O'Brien's last novel of the period, Casualties of Peace (1966), again received much attention. The reviewers seemed to be mainly disappointed: The Guardian called it "an odd novel".<sup>216</sup> The Spectator claimed that "the whole is spoiled and even cheapened by her unnecessary concentration on sex".<sup>217</sup> And The Times referred to it as an "artificial contrivance".<sup>218</sup> The TLS voiced the general feeling of regret that O'Brien had not stayed with the more "innocent" characters of Kate and Baba:

Assured of substantial sales and star treatment - if not unanimous approval - by reviewers, Miss O'Brien could have used the same formula (Irish-feminine-feminist-sex) over again ... The formula worked because it seemed not like a formula, but a fresh and somehow innocent expression of great talent, concentrating on the endlessly fascinating subject of what it is actually like being a woman in a man's world.<sup>219</sup>

## Margaret Drabble

Nowadays some female critics see Drabble's novels, and her female characters in particular, as not strong enough, not feminist enough:

Her biography is a veritable women's liberationist exemplar, but she antedates the women's movement and depicts females who are, at worst, stereotypically inept and, at best, flawed in typically human ways.<sup>220</sup>

When Drabble's first novels appeared in the sixties, however, she was considered to be an avant-garde woman and her novels were thought to relate directly to the situation of women in the contemporary society.

Drabble's first novel, A Summer Bird-Cage, appeared in 1963, so after Lessing's The Golden Notebook had caused a reappraisal of women writers. Perhaps therefore reviewers seemed to concentrate above all on the female protagonist of the novel. The Guardian called her a "clever young woman narrator".<sup>221</sup> One of the most complimentary reviews along these lines appeared in the New Statesman. Walter Allen wrote:

What is really impressive in it is the continual sense of the heroine's efforts to achieve genuine relationships with other people and with the world about her, efforts high-lighted in the contrasting account of the failure of her beautiful and predatory elder sister's marriage, which is the heart of the book. A Summer Bird-Cage seems to me very close to the grain of immediate contemporary life. We shall be lucky if the year produces another first novel as good.<sup>222</sup>

An accusation which is often levelled at Murdoch, i.e. that her range of characters is too limited, too middle class or academic (e.g. P.N. Furbank on the setting of The Italian Girl: "a fabulous alternative kingdom, to which no ungowned mortal has the key"<sup>223</sup>) surfaces also in David Lodge's review of A Summer Bird-Cage in The Spectator. He writes: "The novel interestingly betrays (rather than reveals) the inability of the beautiful, clever and successful to contemplate those who are not beautiful, clever, etc."<sup>224</sup> In contrast with the Angry Young Men, who were portraying lower-middle class or working-class life in their novels, Drabble and Murdoch et al. stuck to the upper-middle classes and were therefore often labelled elitist, especially by somebody like Lodge who aligned himself with the male literary movement of the time (his own novels are all comedies in the vein of Lucky Jim).

Drabble's third novel, The Millstone (1965), proved to be both very controversial and successful. Perhaps, as in O'Brien's case, the controversy which surrounded the novel was partly responsible for its success. Looking back at the reception of The Millstone, Drabble writes in "Publish - and if You're a Woman, You'll be Damned":

When my novel, The Millstone, which deals with the same theme [unmarried motherhood] was broadcast on Woman's Hour in the 1960s, I had to broadcast a defence of myself for allowing my heroine even to contemplate abortion.<sup>225</sup>

In the late sixties things had changed somewhat and in 1969 the novel was even turned into a film called "A Touch of Love".

However, the majority of reviews of The Millstone were enthusiastic. Regrets à la Lodge that Drabble seems to concentrate on one type of woman only are turned into admiration for the

way in which Drabble portrays this kind of woman. The TLS:

the form of Margaret Drabble's cool and lucid novels is becoming familiar. She takes a clever, classy, arty but essentially self-contained modern girl and treats us to an exposition of her very reasoned and inward musings. She has captured the essence of a certain kind of intellectual miss: half scholar, half woman ... Rosamund is utterly convincing.<sup>226</sup>

The TLS also admired Drabble's portrayal of society in this novel: "Almost in documentary form we have the workings of the National Health mother and child services".<sup>227</sup> The Guardian contained an equally complimentary review: "Miss Drabble, only 26, must surely be one of the most promising of our younger novelists".<sup>228</sup> The Times, however, takes the same view of Drabble as it did of O'Brien (cf. "women's magazine story"). It describes The Millstone as a typical women's novel of an inferior kind:

there is a disappointing lack of thought behind the theme ... There is no consideration of what life might be like for the fatherless child, no ethical evaluation of Rosamund's purposeful avoidance of marriage, no explanation for the inadequacy of all the male characters. Therefore, though well-written, The Millstone is no more than a special kind of woman's novel.<sup>229</sup>

Both New Society and The Times take the view that marriage would have been preferable for Rosamund, although the novel itself gives a convincing account of why Rosamund herself prefers single motherhood to marriage. These reviewers were apparently not ready yet to accept social norms which differed from the status quo.

Drabble's last novel of the period, Jerusalem the Golden (1967), made less of an impact than The Millstone, perhaps because its subject was less controversial than the previous novel's. The TLS again is the most positive: "If people in fifty years' time want to know what it was like to be a young woman in London in the 1960s, this novel, like her others, will tell them".<sup>230</sup> Thus the TLS stresses the social quality of Drabble's novels. The Times sees in Clara a slight shift away from the typical Drabble heroine and claims that she has Murdochian qualities, in particular in the way in which Clara appears to fall in love with the whole Denham family.<sup>231</sup>

By 1967 Drabble's reputation was firmly established and it was mainly based on her female characters, who were seen as having a special quality, and as being a very realistic portrayal of a specific kind of woman.

## A.S. Byatt

Nowadays A.S. Byatt is above all seen as an intellectual writer. A recent interviewer called Byatt: "one of this country's most intellectual novelists".<sup>232</sup> And she herself has stressed the importance of thought in her novels:

I entirely dislike the kind of literature that says you must trust the human, the animal and do away with reason and do away with intellect. I would give up in a world where the word intellectual was a synonym for the word pretentious.<sup>233</sup>

Seen in this context, early reactions to Byatt's novels were rather amazing, because far from stressing the cerebral quality of Byatt's novels, they focused on the femininity of Byatt's writing.

The TLS wrote after Shadow of a Sun, Byatt's first novel, was published in 1964:

She is a very feminine writer, careful to give us not only the visual detail (which she does very well) but also the emotional correlations behind each utterance of her characters; which a tougher, more experienced writer would have pruned.<sup>234</sup>

The Times characterized Shadow of a Sun as one of those "romantic stories set in impressive English country houses and featuring eccentric writers and lovelorn maidens".<sup>235</sup> Thus The Times also implicitly referred to Byatt's perceived femininity.

Byatt's second novel, The Game, was published in 1967. The reviewers seemed to have been almost unanimous as to where to place this particular novel. They all still agreed that Byatt was a typical woman writer, but they went one step further than in the case of Shadow of a Sun and saw Byatt as a second Murdoch. Some of the reviewers approved of Murdoch and therefore applauded this similarity, whereas the majority of reviewers, by now thoroughly confused as to what Murdoch's specific merits were, regretted the Murdochian traits of Byatt's writing. One of the few positive comparisons with Murdoch appeared in The Spectator:

The novel uses literature to create literature, although the authoress has an intelligent insight into the social worlds of Oxford, Quakerism and television; her novel is good in the way that the novels of Iris Murdoch are good.<sup>236</sup>

Most reviewers, however, take up a more negative point of view and claim to be as confused by Byatt as they were by Murdoch: "As with the later novels of Iris Murdoch (the influence is unmistakable) one is frequently dazzled, less often convinced".<sup>237</sup> The most aggressively antagonistic discussion of The Game as a pseudo-Murdoch novel was Robert Nye's review "Chip off the Modern Block" which appeared in The Guardian:

With A.S. Byatt we have again the phenomenon of a potentially distinguished

talent going gleefully down to swim (and in this case, drown) in someone else's sea. The Game is fairly saturated with Iris Murdoch, right through to the plain bad writing ... Mrs Byatt stops short of indulging her characters in Miss Murdoch's game of Sex as Musical Chairs; otherwise, the depth is all too plausibly on the surface and you can't see the wood for the symbols.<sup>238</sup>

It is noteworthy that in this case, as in some of the previous reviews which have been discussed, it is not necessarily the more progressive publications, e.g. The Guardian or New Society which were most sympathetic to these women writers. Although, as we saw in Part I, The Guardian provided an outlet for women's feelings of dissatisfaction on its women's page, the other pages of the publication often carried a different perspective. The other sections of the newspaper (among which also the literary page) came under a different editorial heading and therefore were not necessarily particularly sensitive to women's interests. Mary Stott's responsibility remained restricted to the women's page in the period under discussion here and she could not influence what appeared in the rest of the paper.

The lengthiest comparison of The Game with Murdoch's work appeared in "On from Murdoch" by Malcolm Bradbury. As we have seen in the Introduction to II.2 The Reception Process, Bradbury places Murdoch and Byatt in the context of a new group of women writers which also encompasses Spark and O'Brien. He sees as their most attractive feature that they are more down to earth than Virginia Woolf and dare discuss some subjects which were "unmentionable" to Woolf. The idea of this group of writers as a contrast to Woolf also appeared in New Society's discussion of O'Brien's August is a Wicked Month, where the reviewer regretted the absence of Woolf's lady-like qualities. Thus, this perception of these authors as anti-Woolf is another indication that by the end of the period under discussion here, many reviewers can clearly discern a new type of women writers. Bradbury sees this new kind of novel as a development within what he calls "the novel of sensibility",<sup>239</sup> or the novel of personal relationships, which he mainly sees as a woman's domain. These new writers have, according to Bradbury, cut out a great deal of unnecessary sensitivity and resort more to sense.

## **Beryl Bainbridge**

Bainbridge first published a novel in 1967. And even then the reviews of this novel, A Weekend with Claude were far from enthusiastic. The Times wrote:

Beryl Bainbridge has moments of eloquent recall and a lively sense of tactile detail, but her skill is wasted on those self-absorbed and doltily wayward misfits.<sup>240</sup>

And, the review continues to state that she does not convince us "that their relationships have any more significance than, precisely, fading faces in a snapshot found in an old desk".<sup>241</sup> The Times reviewer could not summon any sympathy for Bainbridge's "misfits" and did not realize that those peculiar characters make Bainbridge a significant writer. The TLS carried an equally unappreciative evaluation of the novel: "the final effect is blurred ... the interest is dissipated over too many people, and their relationships are not clearly enough defined".<sup>242</sup> Although sales of this novel were not particularly bad, and Bainbridge's novels have sold progressively better over the years,<sup>243</sup> there were some readers who were also genuinely puzzled by Bainbridge's novels. One reader wrote of Another Part of the Wood (1968):

The plot, the behaviour of the characters, the dramatic ending are all unnatural; they are reminiscent of a whimsical theatrical performance which has no point to it besides demonstrating the arbitrariness of the author's tastes.<sup>244</sup>

Bainbridge's reaction to these uncomprehending reviews is one of wonder of why her characters are so misunderstood, because to her they are true to life:

I myself find it very strange when reviewers say, What extraordinary characters, how weirdly they behave ... the world these girls inhabit was the world I grew up in.<sup>245</sup>

Bainbridge made this particular remark with particular reference to the reviews she received for Harriet Said .... This novel was finally published in 1972, only after the period of pre-feminist writing under discussion here had ended. It was only then that this controversial book could be accepted for publication at all. Bainbridge herself has called Harriet Said ... "a kind of Lolita in reverse".<sup>246</sup> It also received quite a large number of positive reviews, which indicates that by 1972 the climate had definitely changed. The Guardian wrote for instance: "It is written with a knowing, matter-of-fact innocence that strikes exactly the right note".<sup>247</sup> Even Auberon Waugh in The Spectator is admiring rather than disapproving of Harriet. To him she is

a totally evil child, probably a psychopath, and the narrator is completely under her spell ... the book's preoccupations are a trifle eccentric ... but Miss Bainbridge's description of the psychopathic Harriet is totally convincing ... a really good horror story.<sup>248</sup>

The TLS is perhaps the most praising of the reviews: "The book is tightly written, full of spiky

thoughts and unexpected pockets of exactly reproduced feeling ... It is a very good first/third novel indeed".<sup>249</sup>

By 1972 women writers had suddenly become a big hit. After the second feminist wave had officially started in 1968 everybody suddenly realized that here was a new social movement and anybody who was seen as part of this movement was thought to be worthy of attention. Most indicative of this change of mood is the following quotation from a review of Edna O'Brien's Night (1972), especially in relation to some of the reviews her novels had received in the sixties:

The fact is that what the Brontës and George Eliot saw as a disadvantage [that they were women] is today the biggest single sales boost in the fiction business. In these days of frank charts about sex the fastest little hot cake on the tray is a woman's voice, provided only that she's giving us the word about the density and the glory of orgasms.<sup>250</sup>

## Conclusions

The eight women writers who formed the focus of the discussion in Part II were not merely the exponents of a literary phenomenon which just happened to arrive on the scene between 1945 and 1968. These writers could not have written the novels they wrote at any other point in time or in any other society than the British one. The reason for this is that, as we will see in more detail in Part III, the concerns of the novels are exactly those which made life so dissatisfactory for women in Britain in this period. As we have seen in Part II these concerns of work and family and the conflicting demands on women in their lives were also part of each writer's particular biographical make-up. Many writers felt the way Sylvia Plath must have felt when she used the symbol of the fig-tree: how to combine all the different demands which were placed upon them? Each writer translated the dilemma she had experienced in her own life into fiction.

We can now begin to form a more exact picture of the working of Raymond Williams' idea of the text as a mediator between society and the imagination (referred to in the introduction to the dissertation above). In the case of these women writers the novels they wrote do not only form a link between society and the imagination of the author, but also between society and the imagination of the reader or the reviewer. It has been shown that the imagination of the reviewer was often not ready to link up with the text, so that a proper understanding of its meaning and function could not always be reached. Many ordinary readers, however, recognized the pro-

blems which were being portrayed as their own, as is indicated for instance by the fact that most of these novels achieved several reprints and were published in paperback within the period 1945 to 1968. Thus, it is especially Williams' third type of mediation which applies here, that is, "mediation as a function of the fundamental social processes of consciousness", for the novels illuminate the position of a particular group within society at a particular time.

These women writers took the step of transforming their private consciousnesses into a public consciousness. Doris Lessing has illustrated that this is a far from easy process:

What women will say to other women, grumbling in their kitchens and complaining and gossiping or what they make clear in their masochism, is often the last thing they will say aloud - a man may overhear.<sup>251</sup>

These women transferred their private "grumbings" into works of fiction. Margaret Drabble answers the question as to why she turned to fiction and not to any other means of expression, either private or public (such as politics). Drabble:

Women have causes still - plenty of them, as the growing interest in Women's Liberation demonstrates. And the novel is the ideal place to voice them, discuss them, try them out.<sup>252</sup>

As we have seen, many of these women writers also chose writing because it was one of the few forms in which they could in practice express themselves given the demands of their personal circumstances.

Finally, it is worthwhile referring to Helene Cixous who has paraphrased how in a period of transition such as the one in which these women novelists operated, writing can perform an important role:

Writing is precisely the very possibility of change. The space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.<sup>253</sup>

**PART III**

**FEMALE FICTION**

**1945 - 1968**

## Introduction

After having drawn a picture of British society in the 1950s and 1960s in Part I, and having concentrated on the lives of eight British women novelists in Part II, we now turn to a discussion of the novels written before 1968 by these authors. The shift in focus from Part II to Part III develops almost naturally, for, as was already indicated in Part II, most of these women writers took their own lives as the starting-point for their fiction. As we shall see, all the writers put particular stress on the problems caused by the position of women in the family, but they see woman's wish to work as her road to happiness. For this assumption they draw heavily on their own experiences, because, as we saw in Part II, these writers all had problems living in a conventional family situation, but were successful and found gratification in their work. In this respect their experiences, and the experiences of their heroines go directly against the "Feminine Mystique" which expected women to find fulfilment in the family. As we shall see in Chapter II, below, the heroines have a basic difficulty reconciling themselves to the institution of the family and the demands it places upon them.

In this part of the thesis we will see which particular aspects of their lives these women selected to fictionalize. As we saw in Part I, above, women in society faced particular problems because of the concept of femininity, and because of their position at work and in the family. It is therefore logical to focus on these particular aspects in the discussion of the novels. It will become clear that indeed these particular themes are crucial concerns in the novels. Thus, Chapter I, below, concentrates on the search for an identity by the heroines and how this quest influences the form of the novels. This is a particularly difficult quest as the heroines often find themselves in a position in which they have to decide whether or not they should stick to the demands of the concept of femininity. Chapter II focuses on the role of the family in the novels, and Chapter III on what the theme of work symbolizes in the novels.

First of all, however, it is a good idea to take a step back and try and place these women novelists in the wider literary scene. How have other literary critics placed these women writers? Female literary critics in particular have discussed the work of these writers, and have noticed significant similarities between these novels. In Part II it was shown that the reception of these novels by contemporary critics was not always marked by a real understanding of the true nature

of this writing, perhaps because they had certain expectations as to what "lady novelists" should be writing about, and these novelists did not match these expectations. Since that time, however, some studies by, above all, female critics have been published which contain a more worthy analysis of these writers and their work. Although, unfortunately, none of these critics has attempted to include a similar spectrum of authors to what is discussed here, it is still worthwhile to see what importance other critics have given to these writers, and in which context some other critics have placed the publication of these novels.

To start with, there are those critics who discuss the novels by some or all of these writers specifically from the point of view of the disadvantages women writers have over male writers. Several articles refer to these post-war authors by stating that women still have a limited experience in comparison with men, and that consequently their writing also cannot but be restricted. Joanna Russ comments on Doris Lessing's work in her article "What Can a Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write" (1972): "In the novels of Doris Lessing, an authoress concerned with a great many other things besides love, the heroines still spend most of their energy and time maintaining relations with their lovers ...".<sup>1</sup> Russ argues that this limitation is unavoidable for women writers: "There is nothing the female characters can do - except exist, except think, except feel".<sup>2</sup> She proposes a specific strategy to circumvent this, to actually make positive use of this alleged inability to take action. Women should make the most of the situation they find themselves in, according to Russ, and use "lyricism" as she calls it, that is, "the organization of discrete elements (images, events, scenes, passages, words, what-have-you) around an unspoken thematic or emotional center".<sup>3</sup>

It is a pity that Russ takes such a negative view of women's position in the world. As we saw in Part I, above, women's options were restricted in the '50s and '60s in Britain, but that did not mean that women had no choices at all or that most women just subsisted at the level of a plant, as Russ seems to imply in her argument. In fact, many women did not just take the given situation for granted, but voiced their dissatisfaction with it (see e.g. the letters to The Guardian and the work of Mary Stott, among others, referred to in Part I). The eight women writers were also of this same stature. In their own lives they took positive steps to better their individual positions, and specifically used the writing of novels as a means of asserting themselves and

their points of view.

In "If She Writes, Must She Be A Lady" (1961) Pamela Hansford Johnson also stresses the disadvantages of women writers over men: "Many women have believed for so long that there is something special they only, as women, can bring to the novel, that they have persisted in bringing to it their narrow specialities, and these alone".<sup>4</sup> She mentions three specific experiences which women have and men do not: "Childbearing, infant-rearing and the female side of the domestic routine".<sup>5</sup> She sees a description of these aspects as *limiting a novel*, rather than enhancing the quality of it. It is sad to see that Hansford Johnson refers to these experiences, which were indeed in the '60s still very much a woman's domain rather than a man's, *in a negative way*. She could also have argued that because women have these experiences which men do not have, they can add something valuable to their novels which the work of male novelists nolens volens must lack. This argument holds especially if one places the novels of our eight novelists in the context of the time in which they were written. At the time some of the subjects these authors wrote about were original: they had not been discussed in literature in such a way before. Examples are the way in which they discussed female bodily functions e.g. menstruation (Lessing), childbearing (Drabble), sex (O'Brien, Lessing), as well as the kind of heroine they favoured (ordinary middle-class married women living middle-of-the-road lives). The heroines Beauman discusses in A Very Great Profession are also often ordinary middle-class women, but they are often seen retreating in domesticity and an acceptance of marriage is seen as a happy ending. The eight novelists also differ from other women writers such as Rosamund Lehmann and Jean Rhys. Although Lehmann and Rhys have written some very impressive novels of women at odds with conventional society, they always seem to focus on the extraordinary rather than the commonplace (e.g. Lehmann focuses on a particularly cruel mother in The Ballad and the Source). Their characters are eccentrics rather than everyday English women. Thus, these eight writers by showing ordinary women rebelling in fact *introduced new subject matter*. To bring this point home one could refer to the 1969 landing on the moon. Nobody ever asks: Why did they just go to the moon? Couldn't they have also visited Mars and Venus at the same time?

Margaret Drabble takes a more positive viewpoint towards the position of women writers.

She noted in 1968 that in the preceding years many young women writers, herself among others, had started to write what she calls "gynaecological literature", which she describes as literature written by women which is concerned with the facts of life.<sup>6</sup> She refers to the <sup>innovative</sup> aspect of this literature, saying that women started to concentrate on their own private experiences, especially those linked to bodily functions, in the novel. Up till then this had mostly been a taboo subject, perhaps precisely because men did not have experiences like menstruation and therefore did not want to see them included in literature.

Female critics seem to agree that contemporary women writers bring something to literature male writers do not, but there is no agreement, as has become clear from the above argument, as to what exactly it is in which contemporary women writers differ from their male colleagues, or indeed even whether this difference should be regarded as something positive or negative. Some critics have invented complicated theories to show what women novelists of a particular period have in common. The theory Elaine Showalter voices in A Literature of Their Own (1977) has already been referred to before (cf. Introduction to the thesis). Suffice it here to give a short summary of her theory with regard to contemporary women writers. According to Showalter women writers entered a new phase in 1960 - the start of the female phase with "the emergence of a new period of self-awareness". This new period also has many characteristics of previous periods in it:

Like the feminine novelists, they are concerned with the conflicts between art and love, between self-fulfilment and duty ... Like the feminist novelists, contemporary writers are aware of their place in a political system and their connectedness to other women. Like the novelists of the female aesthetic, women novelists today, Lessing and Drabble particularly, see themselves as trying to unify the fragments of female experience through artistic vision, and they are concerned with the definition of autonomy for the woman writer.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Showalter makes the paradoxical statement that these women writers are at the same time innovatory as well as imitative. In fact, Showalter mentions a larger number of aspects in which they, according to her, resemble earlier authors than the one factor of "new self-awareness" which should indicate the originality of these writers. Showalter has with "self-awareness" selected a conveniently vague term which could encompass much. In her book she also does not give any convincing examples as to what she really means with this term. One gets the

impression that behind Showalter's neat theory there is very little to substantiate the part which deals with post-war women writers.

Another critic who has developed an extensive theory about the novels by (contemporary) women writers is Annis Pratt. She uses the concept of the archetype, quoting Jung in support, to state that special systems of ideas can be found in women's fiction. Pratt: "Archetypal patterns ... represent categories of particulars, which can be described in their interrelationships within a given text or within a larger body of literature".<sup>8</sup> According to Pratt these patterns spring from the unconscious, where they are stored. To mention an example of her approach: in contemporary novels women, according to Pratt, are often classified as outsiders. Several instances of this role could be found in various novels.<sup>9</sup> She traces the various patterns she has found back to Greek mythology:

It gradually became clear that women's fiction could be read as a mutually illuminative or interrelated field of texts, reflecting a pre-literary repository of feminine archetypes, including three important archetypal systems - the Demeter/Kore and Ishtar/Tammuz rebirth myths, Arthurian grail narrative, and the Craft of the Wise, or witchcraft.<sup>10</sup>

Although Pratt discovers some striking similarities between various novels, her theory presupposes a very static view of literature and mankind. If all literature could be retraced to some texts which were written hundreds of years ago, what is the use of writing new novels? One might as well read the "original" texts rather than the "imitations" which are being produced today!

A more useful approach can be found in Rosalind Miles' The Fiction of Sex: Themes and Functions of Sex Difference in the Modern Novel (1974). She is of the opinion that gender difference is especially important for the attitudes "of the writer towards his characters and themes, and of the readers towards the writer".<sup>11</sup> She refers to "the traditional Anglo-Saxon culture of female subordination",<sup>12</sup> which has influenced most women writers and has restricted their vision. However, Miles claims that contemporary British women writers are different in that they have been subjected to other cultural influences besides the Anglo-Saxon one. This makes them less prone to the Anglo-Saxon mode of thinking and therefore enables them to express themselves more openly than they would otherwise have done. She mentions the examples of

Lessing (African), Murdoch (Irish), and Spark (Jewish/Scottish/African). Murdoch, for instance, has stressed that she feels herself to be outside British society because of her background.

We [Murdoch and parents] settled down in London where we knew nobody - and I grew up as a Londoner, and it's only lately that I've imagined how strange that was. I never had any family apart from this perfect trinity [of myself and parents], and I scarcely know my Irish relations. I feel as I grow older that we were wanderers, and I've only recently realised that I'm a kind of exile, a displaced person. I identify with exiles.<sup>13</sup>

Murdoch showed her solidarity with displaced people, for instance, when she worked with them shortly after the Second World War (cf. Part II).

Miles recognizes a break away from traditional writing in contemporary women authors. According to Miles the second half of the twentieth-century has seen: "new expressions in form": "women's new social freedoms, their adventures, mental and especially physical, have provided totally new material for writers".<sup>14</sup> She also refers to "the great breakthrough of the nineteen-sixties".<sup>15</sup> Although Miles makes all these positive and relevant remarks about the special characteristics of post-war women writers, she later retreats somewhat and extensively discusses the limitations of contemporary women's novels, resulting in the fact that these women writers find themselves in "a ghetto of their [women writers'] own making".<sup>16</sup> A second drawback of Miles' argument is that she only sees the "new" writing as emerging in the sixties. She therefore does not include the early novels of, say, Lessing and Spark among the new developments. This seems a rather artificial and arbitrary division to make. Lessing's or Spark's '60s novels differ not in such a crucial way from their earlier novels that this would warrant an inclusion in separate literary periods.

In The Female Imagination (1976) Patricia Meyer Spacks does not make allowances for a special post-1945 development in women's writing. In contrast to Showalter her aim is to show a coherence between publications across various centuries. She concludes that "a special female self-awareness emerges through literature in every period".<sup>17</sup> When she discusses post-war women novelists this is to make a general point about all women's writing. She uses an analysis of Martha Quest, for instance, to show that female adolescent heroines deviate from male ones in books by male writers.<sup>18</sup> Her purpose is not to make distinctions within a female literary tradition, which there certainly are, as we shall see later on in this Introduction.

Sydney Janet Kaplan concentrates entirely on female characters in novels in Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel (1975). Kaplan thinks that "feminine consciousness is a literary device: a method of characterization of females in fiction".<sup>19</sup> Again, like Spacks, Kaplan does not want to separate contemporary women writers from earlier ones, but only considers the similarities between all novels by women where characterization is concerned.

Olga Kenyon in her book on Drabble, Byatt, Figs, Murdoch, Brookner and Weldon, takes up an intermediary position. She thinks that these writers mainly write as individuals, but that they also have some features in common:

The novelists in this study have not been chosen for their homogeneity. Nevertheless there are some features they all share, they all experiment responsibly and excitingly with literary language, they are committed to rethinking its use ... they take love as central ... Marriage is problematic, but the capacity to relate to others is a value by which their 'characters' are judged - and most of the men found wanting; They are respected by critics and have achieved public recognition.<sup>20</sup>

Carol Seiler-Franklin singles out characterization as a characteristic feature of post-war writers. She discusses the novels of Drabble, Lessing and Murdoch in this respect. Seiler-Franklin concludes that these novelists have the following in common: "their female characters' happiness is precariously balanced, endangered above all by their lack of independence".<sup>21</sup> She also sees as a similarity between the female characters in the novels that "women cannot accept themselves as women and this is the basic problem. Because they are afraid of their femininity, they are incapable of being men's equal partners".<sup>22</sup> She does not see any common ground in "plot, settings, form and style".<sup>23</sup> These three conclusions, unfortunately, are inadequate. Seiler-Franklin's first statement reveals her reasoning about why many female characters feel unhappy: their lack of independence. Yet if one considers the novels one has to conclude that this certainly cannot be said to apply to all or even to the majority of female characters in the novels Seiler-Franklin refers to. In her book she discusses e.g. Dora (The Bell), Martha Quest ("Children of Violence"), Anna (The Golden Notebook) and Rosamund (The Millstone). As far as I can judge these characters do not show a lack of independence at all. In fact these characters try very hard to find a solution for their unhappiness or dissatisfaction with life and gain independence in the process. In spite of what Seiler-Franklin claims, their independence actually helps them to deal with life. They do not solely lean on other people to help them (although e.g. Anna does go to Mrs

Marks, the psychiatrist, to help her at one stage in her life). They themselves initiate actions to solve their problems. Rosamund, for instance, deals with her unwanted pregnancy in a very clear-headed way, and creates her own life-style, which, though unconventional, fits her personality and makes her happy. Martha, in "Children of Violence", also sets out her own course in life. Notwithstanding her heavy reliance on men from time to time, she always breaks loose from them in the end to pursue her own ideas.

Seiler-Franklin's second statement, concerning the characters' acceptance of their womanhood, is also wide off the mark. The characters do accept that they are women. Many characters even actually enjoy being a woman. Motherhood, especially, comes out as a redeeming feature, for instance in Drabble's novels. What they often do not accept, however, is society's demands which are placed upon women in the institution of the family.

Finally, Seiler-Franklin's third point also fails to recognize the resemblances in setting and form which can be found in these novels. Almost all these novels are set in England, particularly in London. This in spite of the multi-cultural background of the writers Miles refers to. Notable exceptions to this rule are Lessing's early novels which are set in Africa, but which still often contain English protagonists, and O'Brien's early novels which are set in Ireland. The form of the novels is also remarkably similar: most of the novels are written in the traditional realist form - there is hardly any experiment with form (except in e.g. The Golden Notebook) and most novels have a clear beginning, middle and a conclusive end.

Niamh Baker's book Happily Ever After? concentrates on "women writers who fall into that imprecise area between 'literature' and 'popular' fiction, sitting uneasily on the borderlines".<sup>24</sup> She does not discuss "literary" writers, as she calls them, such as Murdoch, Spark, and Lessing, because she thinks that a greater dissenting voice could be found in the more popular kind of fiction rather than the purely literary one.<sup>25</sup> However, as the discussion later on will show, Baker is wrong in the assumption that the more literary women writers of the period did not show any dissatisfaction with women's position in society.

Elizabeth Wilson's Only Halfway to Paradise also includes a section on women writers. Her book contains one of the most interesting analyses to date as it puts women novelists in the context of the contemporary society. Wilson makes some noteworthy points: "Nonetheless,

women could, even without the support of an active movement, rebel against the cultural images of themselves with which they were increasingly bombarded".<sup>26</sup> Wilson argues this in connection with what she calls the few "feminist writers" of the '50s and '60s. Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Hannah Gavron and Viola Klein, among others.<sup>27</sup> Yet, Wilson only considers this group to form an isolated incident, and she concludes at the end of her book that if one looks at the whole society one finds little evidence of rebellion:

My main intention has been to describe how a particular coincidence of economic and political forces in that period ['45-'68] created a 'culture' ... in which it was difficult to articulate or to know about any oppression of women.<sup>28</sup>

Wilson includes the women novelists of the time in the latter conclusion. She devotes a chapter to these post-war women novelists, with particular reference to Lessing, in which she views the novels of the time as non-rebellious. First of all, Wilson describes the authors as being mainly concerned with "the essentially 'feminine' predicaments ... romantic love, sexuality, childbirth".<sup>29</sup>

Wilson goes on to belittle Lessing's achievement:

Doris Lessing has turned wholly away into the private experience of the individual, and in that respect her work remains, not a prefiguration of the women's movement, but very much a body of work from before the women's movement, reflecting the atomized mad world of the sixties.<sup>30</sup>

It is a pity that Wilson does not take the step of putting the British women novelists on a par with De Beauvoir and Friedman et al., for this is where they should be placed, as forerunners of the feminist movement proper which started in 1968. The discussion in the following chapters will show that this is their rightful place, and that these women writers are not as "feminine" as Wilson made them out to be.

Lorna Sage in a chapter entitled "Female Fiction: the Women Novelists" in Malcolm Bradbury's and David Palmer's book The Contemporary English Novel (1979) makes a comparison between the novels of Lessing, Spark and Murdoch. She departs from a point of view which is in total contrast with Showalter's. While Showalter states that women writers have always forced a subculture, Sage argues that women writers have always been an integral part of English Literature - that they have always had a decisive voice in the shaping of the accepted literary tradition: "women writers are at the sensitive centre of English fiction" and women have played a great part "in determining the characteristic form of the English novel".<sup>31</sup> She

consequently takes the viewpoint that novels by post-war women writers constitute one of the most significant developments in the literature of the period. She compares the novels of Spark, Lessing and Murdoch and concludes that these women writers do not have a limited perspective, but a broad one. These authors "operate in a world ... where the novelist's task is inevitably a metaphysical task".<sup>32</sup> According to Sage these women do not just write little personal novels with no relevance to the outside world. It is to be regretted that lack of space must have prevented Sage from developing this particular point. She might have discovered that these writers have indeed painted a convincing analysis of the times in which they live. In her book on post-war women writers, Women in the House of Fiction, Sage discusses a wide variety of novelists from different countries. The book serves to show the different preoccupations of the various writers, rather than stressing the characteristics all these writers might have in common.

To conclude this overview of critical interpretations of these post-war women novelists it is worthwhile referring to a male critic who has written on the subject. In In Anger: Culture and the Cold War 1945-1960 (1981) Robert Hewison deals with all forms of cultural expression of the period. As far as the novel is concerned he distinguishes between two separate streams. Firstly, the Mandarin tradition, which continued along the lines of pre-war writing and which includes Waugh, Greene and Compton-Burnett. Secondly, the "Angries" amongst whom he places Amis, Wain and Murdoch. He is of the opinion that these so-called "Angries" were not as rebellious as they were thought to be, but rather paved the way for new developments to come. Hewison prefers to call them "the Realists":

The Realists of the 1950s took a hard look at the forms of society they had inherited, and in destroying the conventional acceptance of an ordered homogeneous Mandarin culture at least opened up the possibility of future change. Anger, however confused, is a more positive response than nostalgia or despair.<sup>34</sup>

It is unfortunate that Hewison mainly refers to male authors and thus overlooks the new developments which they instigated. It is still relevant here to consider his idea of paving the way for future change and relate it to the women novelists of the period. These women novelists entered upon a new course, they started on the road towards feminism, but did not become fully fledged feminists. They themselves are very wary of being called feminists (cf. Part II) and their

novels, too, are not yet 100% feminist, as we shall see in the discussion of the novels below.

The question comes to mind as to what would then be the most appropriate term for these authors, if they cannot be called feminists. The correct place in the literary tradition might be found if these novelists are placed in perspective against the background of other twentieth-century women writers, that is, earlier and later ones. If one compares these women's novels to novels by female authors which were published after 1968, a clear distinction becomes apparent - many of the post-1968 novels show a much more radical view of woman's position in society and also have much more far-reaching suggestions as to what ought to be done about it. Fay Weldon is a good example of this kind of British woman novelist. Her The Life and Loves of a She Devil (1983), for instance, has a woman who consciously sets out to revenge herself on her husband who has deserted her. Fay Weldon's work is in many ways a direct follow-up of these earlier writers, but her characters are much less conventional than the heroines under discussion here. Fay Weldon's use of form underlines her more radically feminist position, too. Her use of satire perfectly matches the message she wants to convey. In comparison, Muriel Spark uses irony to give her view of life, and Penelope Mortimer is also a master of the use of irony. Both writers sometimes use a harsh variety of irony (as e.g. in The Pumpkin Eater), but they never approximate Weldon's satire.

Turning to the beginning of the century, the novels of Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson stand out. These writers attempted to develop a special female form which women could use, for, they argued, the traditional novel form had too many male connotations for women to feel comfortable in using it. Thus Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925), for example, is a monologue which by means of associative thought processes tries to make the form of the novel similar to the working of a woman's mind. The eight novelists under discussion here differ in their approach to form from these novelists of the female aesthetic. They make use of the traditional realist novel form, and apparently do not have any problems with this form. An exception is perhaps Doris Lessing, who experimented with form in The Golden Notebook, and later went on to write science fiction, abandoning realism altogether. In further contrast to the novelists of the female aesthetic, such as Woolf and Richardson, whose subject matter is fairly conventional (Woolf's speciality seems to be society ladies), these novelists introduce innovatory themes and

morals. Particularly crucial in this respect are the way female bodily functions feature (periods, childbirth, sex), a radical approach to the theme of family relationships (the institution of the family is found unsatisfactory, cf. Chapter II, below), and the obvious references to personal experiences. Novels such as The Golden Notebook, A Summer Bird-Cage and The Game, for instance, tread a thin line between the novel form and the autobiography where their content is concerned. Thus these eight novelists accept the realist tradition in their use of form, but rebel in their use of content.

Enid Bagnold is a good example of the kind of novelist who followed Woolf. The Squire (1938), for instance, deals with a woman who is pregnant with her fifth child. There is little down-to-earth experience of the pregnancy and birth to be found in the novel, that is to say, there is no blood, dirt, or tiredness, as there would be in Drabble or Lessing. On the contrary, this novel abounds with ecstatic descriptions echoing the feminine mythology about these experiences. This is what the heroine supposedly thinks while she is pregnant:

From her present sea-deep content two things were absent now - the horror of the ultimate departure, and the need to express herself before the end. The baby seemed to swim and strike like a dolphin. 'It is a mystery', she said. 'Women bearing children, bulbs becoming hyacinths, acorns ... sheep - lambs. She stared between the apple trees; hypnotised, drugged by that sea-deep peace; wonder drifting weedly in and out. She was a vase, a container, a split oak for a gnome to live in, a slit oak, a hollow elm.'<sup>35</sup>

The flowery language only reiterates the impression of femininity which is being conveyed.

So, finally, we can ask the question again: what would be the best term to use for this group of novelists? They are not feminine in the sense of Bagnold, not overtly feminist like Weldon (they are dissatisfied with their lot, but do not propose radical social alternatives), nor do they advocate a new female aesthetic along the lines of Woolf and Richardson. As we will see in the following chapters, their strength lies in the way they portray female experience in a time when this female experience was more often than not undervalued in society. It would therefore be best to classify these women as novelists of female experience. By using this classification their place in a long line of women writers is emphasized, for they are placed after the female aesthetics and before the feminists in twentieth-century fiction.

It is also useful to see these writers in contrast with their male contemporaries. Thus the

following chapters will also occasionally refer to the significant differences with their male colleagues. It will become clear that both groups of writers were "angry" about what was happening in society. However they were "angry" about totally different aspects of the society in which they were living.

The following three chapters will each focus on a characteristic aspect of the novels. These factors often relate to the problem areas in society identified in Part I above. Chapter I Looking for an Identity is concerned with one of the major themes of the period: which identity should be chosen? What kind of woman should one be? Mother, housewife, worker, and/or lover? Chapters II and III deal with the stance of these novelists on the subjects of family and work. Both issues have proven to be particularly problematic for women in the society of the '50 and '60 (cf. above). Through this discussion it will become clear that these novels are true mediators in Raymond Williams' sense of the word: functioning in and relating to both the real and the fictional world of the period 1945 to 1968 in Britain.

# CHAPTER I

## IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY

This chapter deals with the major theme of the period: Which identity should be chosen? How to cope with what is expected of women in society? The myth of femininity which was so pointedly unmasked by Friedan in 1963 and which caused dissatisfaction throughout the '50s and '60s in Britain (cf. Part I), prescribes that women can only be totally happy if they subject themselves to a man and spend their time bearing children and serving their family. Friedan found that, on the contrary, being a housewife is often far from a prerequisite for happiness. And, furthermore, as we saw in Part I, in spite of what is generally assumed, many women did not just fulfil the role of housewife but were workers too. It is often thought that women in this period were quite happily fulfilling the demands of femininity, but we found that this was clearly not the case. Even analysts who at the time realised that there was a problem had difficulty in understanding how deeply rooted the issue of women's unhappiness really was. Myrdal and Klein in their book Woman's Two Roles (see also Part I) cheerfully advised a combination of part-time housewife/part-time worker as the best solution, but they did not realize that this would not right the basic imbalance there was in society.

The novels under discussion here appear to relate directly to the actual situation, and show women taking up other positions than just the feminine one. They present the reader with possible alternative female identities. In the novels the concept of femininity is often set against other ways of life women can select, for these eight women novelists often provide their heroines with alternative role models from which they can choose. The choice, however, is not an easy one, and the heroine generally faces a struggle when she has to decide what she wants to make of her life. Again, it has to be stressed that, like Myrdal and Klein, these novelists do not propose a total reappraisal of society as the answer to all problems. Rather, they are trying to show heroines who are working out different options within the given system.

There are two basic formats these novelists use in order to be able to put their protagonists in a position so that they are faced with a dilemma concerning their identity. The first format

which is omnipresent among these novels is the novel in which a girl is developing into a woman, and therefore has to decide what kind of woman she is going to be. This form is thus very appropriate for the major point of discussion at the time: What should a woman do? What should she be? In this so-called "Bildungsroman" or, literally, educational novel, both the heroine and the reader learn about the choices there are in society for women. Doris Lessing herself has referred to the "Children of Violence" series as a Bildungsroman (in the last novel of the series). The other novelists do not go so far as to classify their own novels, but many of their novels also bear the characteristics of a Bildungsroman, Pratt argues that women writers often use the form of the Bildungsroman in a specific way:

In the woman's Bildungsroman tension between the hero's desires and society's dictates results in archetypal narrative patterns of pursuit and submission, accompanied by images of suffocation, dwarfing, and mental illness.<sup>1</sup>

These novels under discussion here do not, however, conform to the typical woman's Bildungsroman as defined by Pratt, in that most of the novels do not end with submission or a dwarfing of the female personality. Most heroines do go through a phase in which they try to submit to the feminine ideal, but this attempt, which is often a source of unhappiness, is generally overcome by the heroine's own efforts at rearranging her life and selecting a different social position for herself. The novels often end with the heroine having found a new identity, which gives her the independence she needs, or with the heroine having learned how she will be able to achieve this at a later stage.

The Bildungsroman, first practised by Goethe in Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship (1795-1796), has been an accepted literary form in England literature ever since. The heroines of the Bildungsromans to be discussed here thus have to make their choice of role within the boundaries of a traditional framework. <sup>A part from one or two exceptions (e.g. GN and TC), these</sup> eight women writers do not propose a radical change in the form of the novel, and, on analogy one could say, in society, but they just want to show their heroines' struggle within the given society. They themselves work more or less within the form provided by previous generations, and their heroines are coping with society as it is. Even Lessing's The Golden Notebook which is atypical in that there is experimentation with form, belongs to a special form of Bildungsroman, and thus aligns itself with tradition in this respect. The Golden Notebook is a so-called Künstlerroman representing: "the development of a novelist

or other artist into the stage of maturity in which he recognizes his artistic destiny and achieves mastery of his artistic craft".<sup>2</sup> Anna, suffering from a writer's block, has to grow so that she is able to write again.

Felski in Beyond Feminist Aesthetics discusses the prevalence of the feminist Bildungsroman in post-1968 novels, but fails to mention the appearance of a female form of the Bildungsroman in the immediate post-war period. This omission is to be regretted especially as her feminist Bildungsroman has many of the characteristics of the female Bildungsroman of the earlier period, notably the central theme of the search for a female identity. There are several more characteristics which the pre-1968 female Bildungsromans have in common with Felski's feminist novels of self-discovery. For example, the beginning of the text often introduces a negative model, a symbol of female alienation. Martha Quest, for instance, starts with Mrs. Van Rensburg and Martha's mother talking on the stoep, with Martha feeling to a large extent out of place. Felski also notes the recurring factor of the need for separation from heterosexual relations to gain selfknowledge. This development is also very much present in the pre-1968 models. Many of the female characters feel the need to separate from their husbands/lovers, and even if they do not really want this, the author often forces them to go through a period of separation or abandonment so that the heroine can feel freer to discover her own identity. In Girls in Their Married Bliss, for instance, Kate is at first very upset about losing her husband, but later on she has gained both her independence and a sense of self-worth. Finally, the end in both Felski's novels and the female Bildungsromans signifies no definite closure. More often than not the end of the novel is reached when "the protagonist is at least temporarily free to explore questions of gender identity".<sup>3</sup>

Next to the Bildungsroman, the second basic format of the novels dealing with the search for an identity, is the novel in which an adult woman is suddenly, through various circumstances, made to realize that the position she was in up till then has become too limited and unsatisfactory. Like the heroine in the Bildungsroman, this woman also goes through a process of growth which in the end enables her to live a life, and opt for a position in society which is better suited to her personality. Characteristically, this choice involves a move away from an acceptable, conventional life-style to a more idiosyncratic way of life which makes the heroine

happier. This type of novel and the Bildungsroman as it is used by the eight writers show the readers that less conventional, more independent behaviour leads to more personal happiness. None of the heroines in these novels are so-called "happy housewives". They all search for a position in society which could bring them happiness. The heroines who eventually find the happiness they are looking for are the ones who dare to step outside the expected, conventional behaviour and who select an alternative life-style, as we will see in the detailed discussion of some of the novels below. This is where these novelists show a marked difference from some earlier women writers. In earlier, pre-1945 novels heroines were often punished at the end of a novel for taking up an independent stance. This did of course not mean that the author necessarily endorsed this punishment. In fact, the punishment at the end was often just a device used so that the author could show the independent behaviour at all. Nineteenth-century heroines in particular were prone to being "punished" in this way for their behaviour. An example is Lady Audrey in Mary Braddon's Lady Audrey's Secret (1862), who is "punished" for being an opportunist and committing bigamy and is brought to a Belgian mental institution at the end of the novel, where she dies.

From the discussion of the novels it will also become clear that these novels are closely related to the women writers' own lives as related in Part II. There are various correlations which can be mentioned. Firstly, the stock of characters in the novels mirrors the authors' own social circle, i.e. the characters are generally middle-class, educated and intelligent women in the early years of their lives (the part in which most choices are made). Male characters feature, but they hardly ever receive the author's full attention, as is apparent from *the fact that they are mostly flat characters.* The exception to this rule is Murdoch, who often uses a male protagonist who is *the narrator.* ; she even makes frequent use of a hero speaking in the first person singular. Secondly, the novels often cover events which have happened in the authors' own lives (e.g. Irish girls in O'Brien, mastectomy in Mortimer), which reinforces the autobiographical atmosphere which pervades these novels. This happens throughout almost all the novels, but especially in the novels of development discussed in this chapter, in which the writers often hark back to their moments of choice. This has the effect of involving the reader deeply in the novel: it is as if a good woman friend is talking to the reader about her intimate problems. Most likely this

contributed immensely to the popularity of these novels.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that the form of most of the novels is the conventional realist mode. With this I mean that the novel is restricted in form to traditional realism, resembling nineteenth-century novels in that the novels have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and generally have an omniscient point of view or third person narrator. According to Abrams the purpose of this form is "to give the illusion that it reflects life as it seems to the common reader".<sup>4</sup> This is certainly one of the goals of these writers: they want to inform the reader of their view of life, without wanting to bother too much with innovative literary forms. Form is not what is important to them, but content is, and they are therefore quite willing to accept the convention of realism. Unlike modernist novelists such as Woolf and Richardson these writers do not generally experiment with form, they do, however, experiment with the content of the novel, concentrating, as we shall see below, especially on quest-like journeys to find a position in society in which they can combine all their wishes. The realist form is well-suited to accommodate these quest-like journeys in search of an identity and the development of the heroine's character with the passing of time, the two main formal concerns in these novels. And the reader gets the illusion that here is a "real" woman talking and acting, a woman like herself, a woman she can relate to. The realist form, devoid of any of the Brechtian alienation devices which can be found in modernism and post-modernism, thus is able to construct a sense of community for these middle-class women readers of which they were badly in need. Felski explains the use of the realist form by many contemporary women writers thus:

The use of the realist form in feminist fiction ... denotes a concentration upon the semantic function of writing, rather than its formal and self-reflexive component ... realist forms ... encourage a functional and content-based reading.<sup>5</sup>

## I.1 Female Bildungsromans

Four novels will be discussed in detail to show typical uses of the Bildungsroman by the women novelists of this period. These novels are, in order of publication: Doris Lessing Martha Quest (1952), Edna O'Brien The Country Girls (1960), A.S. Byatt Shadow of a Sun (1964) and Beryl Bainbridge Harriet Said ... (published in 1972, but written in 1956).

In America in the same period the Bildungsroman was equally popular with women writers.

American Bildungsromans of the time, such as Hannah Green's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (1964), and Mary McCarthy's The Group (1963) resemble novels such as Martha Quest in that they deal with adolescent girls who are on the verge of making a choice, selecting an identity in life. As in Britain the popularity of the Bildungsroman was probably due to the appropriateness of this form for showing that there are more choices in life than the generally accepted option. These writers are saying as it were: you do not have to become a housewife and a feminine woman if you do not want to.

Furthermore, among the female characters in the British as well as the American novels (not just the Bildungsromans) by women writers of the time there is a large incidence of madness, often, but not necessarily, resulting in death or suicide (e.g. Mary Turner in The Grass is Singing and Kay in The Group). In both British and American novels the author is firmly on the "mad" heroine's side, judging society to be at fault rather than the female character. Madness is often the only way out of a situation for heroines of the time, because a truly egalitarian society with choices and options open to all is non-existent. Madness in the novels tallies with a development in society. As Showalter shows in The Female Malady, schizophrenia was widespread among women in the post-war period (cf. also Chesler Women and Madness discussed in Part I, above), and several of the novelists themselves also experienced mental breakdowns (e.g. Spark). R.D. Laing saw the cause of this madness as lying in the institution of the family:

Laing and Esterson concluded that schizophrenia was not an organic disease to be treated with psychosurgery, drugs, and shock, but a social process, that was comprehensible as a response to family 'transactions' and 'interactions'.<sup>6</sup>

In view of this statement it is not surprising that in the novels under discussion here madness is especially present when a female character encounters problems with her role as family member (numerous examples, see e.g. Kate in Girls in Their Married Bliss, and Chapter II below).

Yet, there is also a difference between the treatment in British and American novels of this phenomenon. The British novels do not focus so much on the madness itself, but more on its causes, whereas the American novels tend to follow the "mad" woman's progress as a patient and her contacts with various medical establishments. None of the British "mad" characters end up in a mental hospital, whereas most of the American ones do. In The Grass is Singing Mary Turner's descent into inertia and madness is followed closely, whereas in I Never Promised You A

Rose Garden and The Bell Jar the stress is on the heroine's experience of the various treatments and her journey from one ward of a mental hospital to another.

Male writers also used the Bildungsroman in the '50s and '60s, but these novels certainly are a far cry from the ones written by the eight women writers, Kingsley Amis's Take A Girl Like You (1960), for instance, is, superficially, a Bildungsroman in which a girl comes to terms with her own sexuality. But this novel, like most of these novels by contemporary male writers, favour the male perspective. Jenny, the girl in question, is really only an object to be conquered, or at best a "silly" girl who does not realize that it is "better" to give in to the hero, Patrick, than to stick to her own defences.

### Doris Lessing Martha Quest (1952)

Doris Lessing, like the other women writers in this group, uses the form of the Bildungsroman in a special way, following the development of a girl into a woman rather than from a boy into a man as in the German tradition (Goethe). This is one of the reasons why a German critic, Rotraut Spiegel calls Martha Quest an anti-Bildungsroman or a parody, rather than a Bildungsroman proper. Whereas in a conventional Bildungsroman, for example, marriage usually symbolizes "achieved perfection", this is certainly not the case in Martha Quest.<sup>7</sup> Ingrid Holmquist further defines Lessing's deviation from the accepted code of the Bildungsroman:

in Children of Violence Lessing may be said to give the Bildungsroman a female structure. Female experiences such as the relationship between mother and daughter, for example, are made central to the formation of the identity of the heroine and are projected from within a woman's consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Female Bildungsromans also existed in the eighteenth century in Britain and Virginia Tiger connects Martha Quest with this female tradition in literature: Lessing is like the eighteenth-century women writers *Spender discusses*, because she "creates a confessional heroine whose defining characteristic is the capacity to think".<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note this connection of Lessing with earlier women writers in her use of the Bildungsroman, but it is also good to see, however, how she has adapted the form so that the novel is able to show Martha exploring the many different facets contemporary life holds for women.

Throughout the whole "Children of Violence" series of which Martha Quest is the first instalment, Martha explores the different roles which are open to her. Martha Quest shows some early

attempts of Martha at finding her niche. It is as if she tries on identities like one would try on dresses in a department store: trying on one dress, rejecting it, turning to another.

When the novel opens Martha is fifteen years old and is listening to the conversation of her mother and Mrs Van Rensburg. Martha, reading a book, is sitting near them, yet she is not really part of the little group. It is as if the author wants to show that Martha is in two minds about her female identity. Martha feels removed from the women, but is also somehow related to them:

Martha

frowned, and from time to time glanced up irritably at the women, indicating that their gossip made it difficult to concentrate. But then, there was nothing to prevent her moving somewhere else: and her spasms of resentment when she was asked a question, or her name was used in the family chronicling, were therefore unreasonable. (MQ, p. 7)

Incidentally, in this passage the role of the narrator in this novel also becomes clear. The narrator is an omniscient, intrusive narrator who comments on Martha's behaviour and explains matters to the reader, having more insight in Martha's character than Martha herself at this early stage in her life (e.g. also: narrator's comment on p. 9 "if she could have expressed what she felt").

One of the most distinguishing features of Martha is the paradoxical nature of the choices she makes. Martha is not a "free woman" in that she has complete freedom of choice as to what she wants to be. Martha's main problem seems to be that she has internalized many of society's expectations and that she follows these, in spite of herself. There is a small part of Martha which is "free", her conscience, which plays up when she follows these expectations rather than her own wishes. Early on in the novel it is asserted that the traditional feminine positions of housewife and mother are not for Martha. Both Mrs Quest ("My daughter will be somebody, whereas yours will only be married", MQ, p. 10) and Martha herself ("Marry young? Me? I'd die first. Tie myself down to babies and housekeeping ...", MQ, p. 19) want her to be a career woman rather than a housewife. Yet, Martha proceeds to miss her exams, leaving her without any qualifications, and she continues to try and attach herself to one man after another. She does this in the full knowledge that this is not really what she wants:

What was so frightening was this feeling of being dragged, being weighted. She did not understand why she was acting against her will, her intellect, everything she believed. It was as if her body and brain were numbed. (MQ, p. 31)

Martha continues to disregard her own conscience, but it lets its presence be felt again and again. Martha chooses Donovan rather than one of the Cohen boys with whom she has much more in common, as her first romantic attachment. Although Donovan initially appeals to Martha as an attractive partner, her conscience soon tells her he is not the right kind of man for her. Donovan wants to turn Martha into a doll of his own making, "Donovan kneeled below her and worked on the white dress. He was quite absorbed and she turned passively between his hands like a dummy" (MQ p. 160). Donovan is not interested in Martha as she is, only in what he can make her into. Donovan selects all her clothes for her and she lets him do this, but she cannot betray her own personality for long and her inner self starts to assert itself. Donovan:

'But, Matty, you know you must have my personal supervision. I saw that dress this morning, and really, Matty, you should have learned better by now. It's very pretty and womanly and all that, but it's not smart. Now don't worry. I'll come home with you, and you'll see I'll make you the belle of the ball.' She laughed, and after a moment submitted herself to him, and felt grateful; for a moment, however, she had felt the beginnings of something very different, a strong resisting dislike of his pressure on her. (MQ, p. 157)

In this book femininity is above all symbolized by Martha's desire to please men, and be what they want her to be. There is a struggle going on inside her between the hold men have over her and her wish to assert her own independence and separate identity. Martha lets passive feminine submission guide her for a long time, but in the above quotation we see one of the eruptions of her wish to assert her own identity. And she herself keeps believing that she will one day find a way in which she can be herself. The dress Donovan so strongly disapproves of has become a symbol of independence and happiness to Martha. Unfortunately this ideal is as yet unattainable for Martha:

This dress, however, had the power to destroy these false images, and she examined it with love, almost with physical pain, for the shop was closed, and now she would never buy it. She knew that the moment this dress clothed her body she would be revealed to herself, and to others, as something quite new, but deeply herself. That dress was made to clothe the person she knew herself to be. (MQ, p. 157)

In her sexual relations with men Martha also wavers between self-assertion and self-denial. With Perry (MQ, pp. 191-192) she indignantly speaks out about his immature love-making which leaves her sexuality out, but she decides to give Adolph the benefit of the doubt while he is making love to her, rearranging his actions to fit the image she has of what they should be like,

without taking any positive steps herself to change his behaviour: "she arranged the facts of what was occurring to fit an imaginative demand already framed in her mind" (MQ, p. 202).

At the end of this novel Martha has made many attempts at finding a role in life which could bring her satisfaction. She finally opts for marriage to Douglas, a thirty-year-old serious-minded civil servant. Paradoxically, she does what she set out not to do: get married young, for she is marrying at 18, pregnant already (as will become clear in A Proper Marriage), stuck with somebody she felt attracted to at one point but whom she does not like any more by the time her wedding day dawns: "Martha woke with the feeling of a prisoner before execution, and said to herself that she would ring him up and say she could not possibly marry him" (MQ, p. 251). Of course Martha acts again in a typically Martha-like way and goes ahead with the marriage against her own premonitions. At the end of the novel Mr Maynard, a magistrate of the old-fashioned liberal school, is left to put Martha's story in a larger perspective: Martha is only one of many who choose an early marriage while war is approaching:

He hoped there would not be war, he knew there would be. Suddenly he found himself thinking, Poor kids, let them enjoy themselves while they can ... Four more weddings to get through. Well, he thought cynically, that would be four divorces for him to deal with, in due time. (MQ, p. 271)

In the four remaining books of the "Children of Violence" series Martha continues along the same lines. These books closely follow Lessing's own life story. A Proper Marriage (1954) is devoted to the break-up of Martha's marriage and her abandonment of her little daughter, whom she leaves with her husband when she decides to go. A Ripple from the Storm (1958) deals with Martha's war experience, especially with her involvement in a communist group, and her marriage to the German refugee Anton Hesse. This second marriage is again a relationship which Martha gets into without too much conviction. The fourth novel, Landlocked (1965) sees Martha deciding to leave Africa and waiting for an opportunity to put this decision into action. The final novel, The Four-Gated City (1969), shows the beginning of Lessing's involvement with science fiction and also shows Lessing moving away from purely women's to more global concerns. Martha is now in Britain, and the country is hit by nuclear disaster. Martha and a group of her friends survive for a while on a small island off Scotland. Martha spends her time there mainly looking after the children of the group. The last thoughts of Martha we get an insight into before

disaster strikes, still shows a Martha unable to convert her wish for happiness into action:

She thought, with the dove's voices of her solitude: Where? But where. How? Who? No, but where, where ... Then silence and the birth of a repetition. Where? Here. Here? (GC, p. 607)

The "Children of Violence" series by focusing on Martha, who is unable to reach her full potential in the end, gives a good insight into which factors prevent women from achieving their aims. In these novels Lessing shows Martha battling with conventions and her own internalized version of society's expectations of what men and women ought to be like. In many ways The Four-Gated City is the most pessimistic novel of all. The other novels end on a high note with Martha reaching out for a new future. Even though there are always already some indications that her hopes are unrealistically high, the reader is still left with the idea that perhaps finally Martha has found what is looking for. At the end of Martha Quest there is her marriage to Douglas, at the end of A Proper Marriage her growing involvement with the communist group, at the end of A Ripple from the Storm there is at least peace and sleep (which she more or less did without during her period of political activity) and at the end of Landlocked she is about to go to Britain. But at the end of The Four-Gated City there is no hope at all for Martha as she is dead. The Four-Gated City written at the very end of the period under discussion here (July 1968) could therefore be said to be a much more radical novel than the previous ones in this series. In the pre-1968 "Children of Violence" novels Lessing apparently still had the illusion that Martha would be able to find her niche within the existing boundaries of society. In this last novel of the series, however, Lessing realizes that more fundamental changes will be necessary before somebody like Martha could find a position in society which satisfies her. The timing of this novel with this message is rather appropriate as it appeared just when the feminist movement was gathering momentum in society. After apparently saying to women for decades that, be it with difficulty, one can assert oneself if only one follows one's own insights, Lessing is now telling her readers that a more radical change in society is necessary before a woman can be "deeply herself".

In Lessing's work the death of the heroine often points to the fact that the protagonist is unable to live in the position assigned to her in society. At the end of The Grass is Singing Mary dies because she feels totally unfulfilled as a lonely housewife (see Chapter II, below), and in the 1963 short story "To Room Nineteen" the heroine, Susan, commits suicide because she lacks

personal space in a demanding family.

## Edna O'Brien The Country Girls (1960)

Like Martha Quest O'Brien's first novel of a trilogy, The Country Girls, also marks the start of a quest by the heroine, Cait. Lotus Snow in "'That Trenchant Childhood Route?': Quest in Edna O'Brien's Novels" calls it a "quest for 'radical innocence'".<sup>10</sup> This is a rather unfortunate statement by Snow, for, as we will see below, this novel deals especially with the opposite: a move away from innocence by the heroine towards a greater self-knowledge and a better insight into the demands women are faced with in society.

This novel starts, as Martha Quest did, with the point of view of an adolescent girl, in this case Caithleen, who is 14. As in Martha Quest the relationship of the girl with her mother is one of the first focal points of the novel. Unlike Martha, however, Cait at the beginning of the novel completely identifies with her mother, even to a very physical degree. They sleep in the same bed and Cait obviously feels very close to her:

I went over and put my arms round her neck and kissed her. She was the best Mama in the world. I told her so, and she held me very close for a minute as if she would never let me go ... 'Old mammy palaver', Hickey said. I loosened my fingers that had been locked on the nape of the soft white neck and I drew away from her, shyly. (CG, pp. 6-9)

It is only when Hickey, the farm worker, intervenes that Cait becomes self-conscious and lets go. Cait does not have much sympathy for her father, who in the first few pages is only referred to as "he", and not by his name. The reader is left to surmise that it must be her father she is talking about. Thus at the beginning of the book there is this image of a warm female world, which, however, can be disrupted at any time by men: father coming home drunk, or Hickey who lives downstairs. Later on in the novel after the death of her mother this image *becomes like* an utopia for Cait for which she continues to long and to which she continues to refer back. Yet, although the novel is even dedicated to O'Brien's own mother, the mother figure does not only carry positive connotations. Her conventionality, her obsession with being frugal are also stressed throughout the novel. The mother figure in this way also represents Cait's own conventionality.

Caithleen has another female person she is close to, her friend Baba. Baba is the opposite

of Caithleen's mother. She is rebellious and outspoken. She represents another role model for Caithleen. Throughout the novel Caithleen moves more and more away from the conventional femininity of her mother to the unconventionality of Baba. At the beginning of the novel Baba is already Cait's closest friend, but she also feels threatened by Baba: "Coy, pretty, malicious Baba was my friend and the person whom I feared most after my father" (CG, p. 17). Edna O'Brien explains the relationship between the two like this:

I think I did have school friends who were the opposite of myself, and they were extrovert and mischievous, more mischievous. I was drawn towards them as I always am towards opposites. But now I think that it was partly my other person, my alter-ego. I had a sort of streak of submersed rebellion in me always, which I never let out, unfortunately; I was really too frightened, too meek.<sup>11</sup>

Caithleen's journey of education in this Bildungsroman progresses from the total identification with her mother at the beginning of the novel towards a feeling of sympathy for Baba's rebelliousness and also towards the recognition of nonconformism as a source of her personal happiness. Caithleen moves from being attracted to the warmth of her mother, whose life also had a reverse side to it (the father's irresponsibility and alcoholism and the dependence on him), to the independence of mind of Baba. For a long time Cait hovers between the two female options these characters represent, the one of submission and the other of relative independence.

In the beginning of the novel Cait's allegiance to her mother is stressed again and again. When Cait and Baba go to the convent school, Cait feels she is doing the right thing, for her mother had wanted her to be a nun: "Will you be a nun when you're big?' Mama asked me. She would have liked me to be a nun, it was better than marrying. Anything was, she thought." (CG, p. 75). Jack Holland who was in love with her mother and who has his eyes on her father's farm also stresses her similarity to her mother: "And, my dear Caithleen, who is the image and continuation of her mother, I see no reason why you shall not return and inherit your mother's home and carry on her admirable domestic tradition" (CG, p. 90). After being at the convent school for three years Baba devises a plan so that they might be expelled: she leaves a dirty note in the lavatory. Cait is not in favour of the idea but goes along with Baba. Yet, when it comes to the crunch she is glad to leave. It is as if she has been given courage; after taking one anti-establishment step she dares to take another. After being expelled from the convent Cait for the

first time really stands up to her father: "'I hate you', I said, suddenly and vehemently" (CG, p. 117). She also defends Baba now, and feels she is on Baba's side: "'I like Baba, Mr Brennan. She's great fun and she doesn't mean any harm'. It was true" (CG, p. 118), which further symbolizes Cait's move towards independence.

At this stage Cait is moving away from her mother's life-style. Yet she is still aware of what her mother's position would have been on certain subjects. She does not, however, live by those rules any more: "'What'll I drink' I asked, and distantly somewhere in my head I heard my mother's voice accusing me, and I saw her shake her finger at me. There were tears in her eyes. Tears of reproach" (CG, p. 157). Yet she accepts the gin which is offered her.

Caitleen moves to Dublin with Baba, where they share rooms. She is now as physically close to Baba as she once was to her mother. Moving to Dublin makes Cait geographically, socially, and financially (she works in a shop) independent. She tries to make use of this opportunity to pursue her relationship with the middle-aged Mr Gentleman. Like Martha Quest Cait now has to go through various relationships with men before she realizes that she should not solely rely on men and the role of lover/wife for an identity either. Mr Gentleman is from the same village as Cait and he comes to visit her regularly now she is away in Dublin. He invites her to come to Vienna with him, so that she can really become his lover. Cait is waiting for him, but he does not turn up, having become frightened of the consequences. His telegram to her reads: "Everything goes wrong. Threats from your father. My wife has another nervous breakdown. Regret enforced silence. Must not see you" (CG, p. 187). So, at the end of this first novel in a series of three on Baba and Cait, Cait is left alone in her bedroom. Like Martha she has also not reached the traditional happy end of the Bildungsroman: a satisfactory marriage. But she has gained insight into the various options which are open to women, and has, although she is only 18 years old, tried out various traditional and less traditional possibilities and found them wanting.

### **A.S. Byatt Shadow of A Sun (1964)**

Like the two girls previously discussed, the heroine of this novel, Anna, has to make a choice in life. The growth of Anna's character thus forms the basis of the whole novel.

At the beginning of the novel Anna is seventeen years old, and has been made to think rather badly of herself: "She was seventeen, the elder of the Severell children by five years, and had always been much the less prepossessing, a fact of which she was aggressively aware" (SS, p. 18). After the above quotation there follows a rather lengthy description of Anna's untidy and unattractive appearance. It is stressed that Anna looks like this because she has not made up her mind yet as to what kind of person she is going to be:

It was all right for Jeremy [her little brother] to take part in a family tableau as one of the children, he was young enough, he could carry it off, but for her it was a mockery, it made her even less certain of who she was. (SS, p. 20)

Anna's insecurity is enlarged because her father, Henry, is famous and revered, and he always has to have priority over the rest of the family. The outside world also regards her mainly as Henry Severell's daughter. She literally lives in the shadow of the sun, her father.

The first step Anna takes on her road to adulthood is to fall in love with Michael, a young man she has met at the stables she goes to for riding. Michael kisses her, but afterwards seems to have lost interest in her. For Anna, being in love with Michael, even if the relationship is mostly in her own mind, helps her to relate to the world:

He became a way of seeing, a way of possessing by incantation the things seen which had so distressed her ... Michael was a way to a first tentative sense of power. She relaxed on her bench and considered the cornfields through the blurred and dusty glass, seeing the lanes across his imagined face and his hair in all the reticulated gold of the corn, and she had a first faint, wary sense of having her place in the world, a way of taking possession of the bright things seen, and she was elated and afraid. (SS, pp. 30-31)

Like Martha and Cait, Anna first turns to men to help her interpret the world. All these characters thus initially take a feminine course of action: they rely on men. However, these female characters have to find out that these men are not very useful guiding lights. Like Martha and Cait, Anna has to go through several attempts at relying on men/prospective lovers, before she learns to follow her own insight.

Some time later when Oliver Canning, her father's colleague, has started to take an interest in Anna, she sees the world through his eyes. When she meets Michael again, in Oliver's presence, she does not disapprove of the rather nasty questions Oliver, like a jealous lover, asks the much younger Michael. On the contrary, she now takes Oliver's side:

She sat in an agony of rage and embarrassment, hating, not Oliver for his rudeness but Michael for his inability to stand up for himself, for his rapid disintegration into a very young man with an unsteady voice. (SS, p. 92)

Anna has started to like Oliver because he gives her ego the boost it needs: "He thinks I'm someone, he thinks I'm too good to leave alone ... And he's a clever man, he should know, I'd better be nice to him, she thought further, as she fell asleep" (SS, p. 115). Oliver is Anna's Donovan, Anna's Mr Gentleman, the more experienced man whom she thinks can introduce her to life and love.

In most of the Bildungsromans by these women writers men seem to play a very dominant role indeed in especially the first stages of the search for an identity. Men are initially perceived by the girls as being more in contact with the real, adult world, and they therefore first turn to them for an introduction to this world. In spite of this initial trust which is displayed in men, most of the heroines have to discover during their journey of education that these men cannot really supply them with a satisfactory identity. It is they themselves who have to make their own choices. In view of the writers' own life stories this is an understandable point of view. Most of the writers were married rather early in life, like their heroines in search of an identity, but were disappointed, for most of the writers (except for Murdoch) were divorced soon after (cf. Part II).

In Part III of Shadow of a Sun Anna is a year or two older and studying at Cambridge. Here she meets Peter Hughes-Winterton, a student from a rich background. He is genuinely in love with her, whereas Anna is making up her mind - she regards him as not really essential but not really dispensable either:

Peter remained a protector, an opener of doors, a bringer of flowers, a provider of coats against the rain and cushions in punts, and Anna laughed at his punctiliousness, admired him for it and came t<sup>o</sup> rely on it, all at once. (SS, p. 170)

After a party at Peter's college Anna coincidentally meets Oliver again, who takes her to a friend's place where they make love. For Anna it is the first time. She is of course attracted to Oliver, but she also uses him to find out what sex is all about. As she says to him: "I wanted to know. I only wanted to know" (SS, p. 186). This is another obvious example of the use of a man to gain access to knowledge about the world and herself by Anna. After her encounter with Oliver Anna feels she has taken a big step forward, leaving behind "the state of curiosity" (SS, p. 188).

Throughout the novel Anna gains confidence with every relationship. When her father

comes to see her in Cambridge, she has gathered the strength to step out of his shadow and she makes her own choice in favour of Oliver, against her father's wish: "I belong with him. Not with you. I can never see things your way" (SS, p. 234).

Next we find Anna waiting for her period. Byatt gives a good description of Anna as she would normally be, in a state of PMT (SS, pp. 251-252). This month things are different for Anna is pregnant. She lets Peter take care of her and decides that the best thing would be to let him marry her, which he is quite willing to do. Oliver, however, informed by Anna's parents that she is pregnant, rings her at Peter's country house and asks for a meeting. Anna decides to leave Peter without committing herself automatically to Oliver. For the first time she decides to rely on herself rather than on a man. After taking this decision she experiences an enormous sense of freedom and a feeling of finally being in control of her own life. In her farewell letter to Peter she writes: "I have suddenly come to see that I must do things for myself" (SS, p. 334).

However, Anna does decide to meet Oliver and after waiting for him for a long time, she is just about to leave when he enters the hotel, their meeting place. The end of the novel stresses that total independence is not possible for Anna. She herself says: "What I always do, she thought, is run not quite far enough" (SS, p. 335). When she does go off with Oliver it does not mean that Anna's independence is a thing of the past. On the contrary, the authorial comments indicate that this is not a conventional ending of the hero and heroine living happily ever after. At the end of the novel it is indicated that Anna, in a way similar to Martha Quest, will soon make another attempt at finding a more satisfactory choice: "This really was the feared and expected end. At that time, she was surprisingly content" (SS, p. 336). The implication obviously is that although Anna might be content at this moment this will not always remain the case, because she will always continue to want an identity which does not deny her separate personality. It is clear that she would never want to live in the shadow of a sun again.

The focus of this Bildungsroman is Anna's growing decisiveness and increasing ability to act on her own behalf. Faced with rather limiting female role models in her early life (her mother and Margaret, for instance, who are both totally devoted to their men and have no life of their own), she is looking for something else. She tries out various options, such as student, mistress of Oliver, wife-to-be of a country gentleman (Peter). At first she refuses to be a mother and tries to

organise an abortion. Nevertheless, after the moment of feeling of independence referred to above, she realizes she must give her baby the chance of leading its own life, she cannot decide for the baby as others cannot decide for her: "Let it be born then; it must live its own life, as she must, it was not really a part of her, it was itself" (SS, p. 334). Hereby she acknowledges the importance of having one's own separate identity.

### **Beryl Bainbridge Harriet Said ... (1972)**

This novel is included here because it was written in 1956. It also fits in with the fifties from a thematical point of view. Harriet Said ... is Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita (1955) turned upside down: a thirteen-year old girl sets out, with the help of her friend, to seduce a middle-aged man.

Although this novel only covers one summer out of the heroines' lives it can still be called a Bildungsroman, for the first person narrator, one of the two girls, goes through a metamorphosis. The narrator is never given a name - this underlines the narrator's insecurity about her own identity. Her friend, Harriet, is named and her name is dominant in the book and title. In fact, the two girls bear a remarkable resemblance to O'Brien's Cait and Baba, for there is one rebellious and one meek girl.

Harriet Said ... slightly deviates from the purely realist novel in that the novel really only starts with the second chapter. The first chapter is a flash forward to the end of the novel.

At the beginning of the story (i.e. in the second chapter) the narrator is totally dependent on Harriet for her identity. Without Harriet she is nothing, and she cannot decide things for herself:

Without Harriet I was irritable and bored. I did not have any other friends, partly from inclination and partly because none of the families I knew sent their children to boardingschool. I was a special case, as Harriet observed. (HS, p. 10)

Like Anna, Harriet and the narrator are engaged in a quest for more experience, especially sexual experience:

A year ago, to be called a Dirty Little Angel would have kept us going for months. Now it was not enough; more elaborate things had to be said; each new experience had to leave a more complicated tracery of sensations; to satisfy us every memory must be more desperate than the last. (HS, p. 38)

The narrator feels herself to be totally outside the world of childhood innocence, symbolized in

the novel by her mother and her sister Frances having tea together on the lawn and enjoying themselves. Harriet and her friend take part in some of these afternoon teas, but only pretend to be children on these occasions.

In the beginning the narrator really feels fairly sympathetic towards Mr Biggs, the middle-aged man they are pursuing. She enjoys his attention and even the kiss he gives her. Then she becomes more and more aware of the weakness and shallowness of Mr Biggs' (nicknamed the Tsar) character. The girls become particularly aware of the Tsar as an underdog when they spy on him and his wife and see them making love:

Under the monstrous flesh of Mrs Biggs, the Tsar lay pinned like a moth on the sofa, bony knees splitting the air, thighs splayed out to take her awful weight ... Like an oiled snake, deep delving and twisting, Mrs Biggs poisoned him slowly, rearing and stabbing him convulsively. (HS, p. 63)

The narrator now becomes to Mr Biggs what Harriet is to her. She is able to dominate him. When they are locked inside the church together she makes a plan for the escape and gives him instructions, just the way Harriet normally does:

The effort of moving the Tsar into position, the strain of compelling him to carry out my plan made me realize the power and drive Harriet needed to be always manipulating and coaching me along the lines she desired. (HS, p. 95)

She has gained an enormous amount of confidence: "The thought that I had achieved so much without Harriet to guide me filled me with exhilaration" (HS, p. 97).

They meet again when Mrs Biggs is away and Mr Biggs makes a fool of himself again. The narrator comments: "I knew I could comfort him; I could be kind and good and heal him; but I would not ... so I just sat there and stored up the experience inside me" (HS, p. 120). Now she has gained strength to reject feminine submission in favour of female independence of mind. She just uses the older man to learn about the world, and is not misused by him for his purposes. In this respect this girl - middle-aged man relationship clearly resembles the Cait - Mr Gentleman and Anna - Oliver relationships, but in this case the girl has total power over the man. Being able to command the Tsar gives her a sense of power:

It was delicious to be in a position that Harriet alone had enjoyed - to have someone meekly follow wherever I chose to go. I wanted to shout commands, to have the Tsar do tricks to satisfy my vanity. 'Sit up and beg', I wanted to cry; 'balance on your head'. (HS, p. 141)

This is why she lets him make love to her; not because the thirteen-year old is seduced by the experienced man as in Lolita, but because he is at her mercy and she wants to experience what it is like to have sexual intercourse. The actual experience, predictably, is rather disappointing:

Pinned there raptureless, a visit to the doctor, nothing more, and a distant uneasy discomfort of mind and body as if both had been caught in a door that had shut too quickly. (HS, p. 140)

The acquisition of power is for the girls accompanied with a feeling of identification with Mrs Biggs. The narrator understands for instance why Mrs Biggs is so irritated by Mr Biggs smoking cigarettes (HS, p. 138). After having intercourse with the Tsar this feeling of identification with his wife is complete:

Mrs Biggs, in her sandals and her groping search after love, came alive. She breathed heavily in the darkness, whispering softly, rapidly in my ear, 'He's selfish, he's so selfish. I told you so'. (HS, p. 140)

When Harriet finds out that her friend has taken control of Mr Biggs in her own way, she feels jealous and wants to reassert her own authority over her, by telling her to hit Mrs Biggs on the head. The narrator desperately tries to preserve her independence (she does not want to kill Mrs Biggs as she has come to identify with her), but fails:

I struggled to preserve my independence as Mrs Biggs stood in the porch, battled my will against Harriet's and as the key fitted in the lock and the wife of the Tsar leaned her weight against the door, Harriet pushed something in my hand. 'Hit her', she said softly, 'hit her'. (HS, p. 154)

Harriet then devises a ploy to put the blame for the murder on the Tsar: they are to run away acting "as if we were little girls" (HS, p. 7). They are supposed to scream and pretend that they were molested by the Tsar and that he has also killed his wife - in fact they are to proclaim publicly the Lolita version rather than the truth. It would seem that at the end of the novel the narrator has fallen back into her old role of being Harriet's sidekick. However, if we turn back to Chapter I, the real end of the story, the narrator is the more mature and is able to hold her independent stance, whereas Harriet is overcome by it all:

Harriet suddenly found her voice and shouted very loudly, 'I'm frightened', and she was. I looked at her face all streaked with tears and I thought, poor little Harriet, you're frightened. (HS, p. 8)

Thus, summarizing, one could say that in Harriet Said ..., as in the other Bildungsromans discussed above, the heroine needs to escape from the restricting influence of her friends and

parents to gain knowledge about the world, and to be able to achieve at least a certain measure of independence. This is why in these Bildungsromans the focus is on father-daughter, mother-daughter, and husband-wife e.g. lover-lover relationships - the heroine has to outgrow the pressure these people put on her to behave in a conventional way, so that she can gain knowledge of alternative female identities.

## 1.2 Female Novels of Formation

This group of novels deals with the adult woman who is made to rethink her social position, often because of specific events which have happened to her, such as divorce. George Festerling in Die Frau im Zeit Genössischen Englischen Roman (1953-1975) recognizes this phenomenon too:

es sind meist ältere Frauen, die aufgrund einer gescheiterten Ehe oder des Todes ihres Partners sich aufgefordert finden ihr Leben in eigener Verantwortung zugestalten.<sup>12</sup>

He concludes, rather surprisingly, that for most female characters in the novels of the period 1953 to 1975 marriage is still considered to be the best solution.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, this is definitely not the case. Most of these characters are married or were married at some point in their lives, but the quest for a new identity often involves a move away from marriage as the main source of identity, for the institution of marriage is found wanting.

Again, as with the Bildungsromans, there are American novels by women writers of the period which show the same basic device. Mary McCarthy's The Company She Keeps (1942) deals with a divorced woman who tests different roles. The protagonist in this novel is consciously trying out various options, like in the British novels under discussion here, but there is a much more cynical tone to the novel than to the British ones. It is as if the woman herself does not take her own actions seriously and does not really believe in the reality of the society she is testing. Another American novel of the time, Sue Kaufman's Dairy of a Mad Housewife (1969), deals with a housewife who becomes aware of the limitations of her role and revolts. Again the tone of the novel is much sarcastic and radical than one would find in a novel by one of the these eight British women writers.

In the novels by British male writers of the time adult female characters normally do not

have enough power and vision to be able to change a course once embarked on. Married female characters do have affairs (e.g. Saturday Night and Sunday Morning) but this does not give them extra freedom. On the contrary, they now also have to submit to their lovers as well as to their husbands.

### **Iris Murdoch Under the Net (1954)**

There has been a lot of debate among critics about the function of Murdoch's male narrators, for all Murdoch's novels have a male narrator and are apparently written from the point of view of a male consciousness. Added to this Murdoch's own comments that she identifies "with men more than with women",<sup>14</sup> and one could almost think that Murdoch's female characters are of no consequence at all in her novels.

Yet, if one takes a closer look at her narrators, it becomes clear that these narrators are not as 'trustworthy' as they seem at first sight: they are in fact fallible narrators. A fallible narrator has the point of view in a novel, but the reader soon finds out that he/she cannot trust this narrator's judgement because it is faulty:

The fallible or unreliable narrator is one whose interpretation and evaluation of the matters he narrates do not coincide with the implicit beliefs and norms of value held by the author, and which the author expects the reader to share with him.<sup>15</sup>

Famous examples in literature include, among others, Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal.

According to Olga Kenyon the device of the male narrator enables Murdoch

to use dominant cultural discourse ... Murdoch's writing can be read as a 'double-voiced discourse' (describing women's ability to use patriarchal language and the muted female voice). If we pay less attention to the dominant plot, a female subtext emerges.<sup>16</sup>

Kenyon uses the example of Dora in The Bell to illustrate her point. Gary Goshgarian puts it even more clearly: "The Murdoch Man is a blurry-eyed Ulysses lured onto the rocks of his own fantasies".<sup>17</sup>

Jake in Under the Net is the prototype of Murdoch's fallible narrator. In Under the Net it is not so much the female characters who undergo a change from being feminine women to being women who have chosen their own female identity as is the case in the novels discussed up to now in this section, rather it is a man's, Jake's, appreciation of them which makes a turnabout. At

the beginning of the novel Jake thinks Magdalen, his landlady, is a typical feminine woman:

Her exertions are directed along the lines suggested to her by women's magazines and the cinema, ... Women think that beauty lies in approximation to a harmonious norm. The only reason why they fail to make themselves indistinguishably similar is that they lack the time and the money and the technique. (UN, p. 10)

It is clear that in passages such as these we readers are not supposed to agree with Jake. The outrageousness of his statement already indicates that we are meant to think: this is what Jake says, but is it really true? This is of course how the system of the fallible narrator works. In the two pages following Jake's statement there are further indications that he is wrong. Madge, the landlady, throws Jake and his friend Finn out of the house, for she is not so passive and conventionally feminine as he thought, and she is certainly able to look after her own interests.

There are also other female characters in this novel who are at first regarded with condescension by Jake, but who later turn out to be much more independent than he thought. The most notable one is Anna. Jake has some highly romantic notions about Anna. He calls her "deep" and "a sweet blackbird" (UN, p. 29). Throughout the novel he tries to charm Anna, who is clearly not interested in him. Jake has to go through some picaresque events to cleanse him, as it were, of his condescending attitude towards Anna and other women. He is locked in a flat by Anna's sister, Sadie, wanders all over London, steals a dog, and lives through the destruction of the theatre of his friend Hugo Bellfounder. Finally, he ends up working in a hospital, cleaning and mopping floors, a traditional occupation for women. Having done this work, which as it were enables him to get a better insight into the female position in society, he is allowed to know what Anna is like. Hugo tells him that Anna does not like him, Jake, at all and that she had in fact been after Hugo. Jake is astonished when his myth is shattered: "I was struggling to recognize in this frenzied maenad the Anna that I knew, the coolly tender Anna" (UN, p. 129). A little later on in the novel when it has sunk in what Hugo has told him, he realizes that Anna is an individual who will not just do what he wants her to do, but who has got her own ideas about her own life:

I had no longer any picture of Anna. She faded like a sorcerer's apparition: and yet somehow her presence remained to me, more substantial than ever before. It seemed as if, for the first time, Anna really existed now as a separate being. (UN, p. 239)

The last image of Anna in the novel is of Anna as a separate being, fulfilling her most favourite

role, that of worker: Jake is listening to Anna performing as a singer on the BBC radio (UN, p. 253). Thus the novel ends in a similar way to My Friend Says It's Bullet-Proof. In both novels the heroines are at the end happily pursuing their careers. The role of worker in these novels serves to underline that these women have found their own identity (cf. Chapter III, below).

### **Muriel Spark The Comforters (1957)**

In this novel Spark deals with one of the turning-points in her own life: her conversion to Catholicism and her mental breakdown (cf. Part II). When the novel opens the main character, Caroline Rose, has just broken off her relationship with her lover, has converted to the R.C. Church, and is hearing voices. The voices, accompanied by the sound of a typewriter, are repeating exactly what she is saying or thinking. These voices really point to the fact that Caroline is in a novel. Ruth Whittaker has compared the effects of Caroline's conversion to her being in a novel:

The difficulties experienced by the heroine on her conversion to Roman Catholicism are paralleled by the resentment she feels at being a character in a novel. Both roles entail a loss of freedom, or rather, a redefinition of freedom as part of a divine and structural coherence.<sup>18</sup>

Although this statement holds true to some extent, I do not think the purpose of this novel is to show Caroline accepting strict rules. On the contrary, in the novel it is stressed again and again that Caroline has choices left, if only she were aware of this. One could say that the restrictions put upon Caroline (the rules of the Church; the rules of the novel) are a symbol of the female predicament. Women have to live within a maze of written and unwritten rules which restrict their actions. Spark wants to make the point that even in this situation a strong woman can live a life which suits her talents and personality.

Right at the beginning of the book Caroline escapes from a convent where she has gone to get some peace and quiet, having found there anything but rest. Even where being in the novel is concerned Caroline can still assert her own identity. She is not only manipulated by the writer, she in her turn also manipulates the novel, as the following passage shows:

It is not easy to disperse with Caroline Rose. At this point in the tale she is confined in a hospital bed, and no experience of hers ought to be allowed to intrude ... When her leg was not too distracting, Caroline among the sleepers turned her mind to the art of the novel, wondering and cogitating, those long

hours, and exerting an undue, unreckoned, influence on the narrative form from which she is supposed to be absent for a time. (IC, p. 137)

The pain of the leg in itself convinces Caroline that she is still independent: "This physical pain convinces me that I'm not wholly a fictional character. I have an independent life" (IC, p. 160).

All her experiences have the effect on Caroline of making her realize what she wants. It gives her confidence to know that she can act for herself and make things happen. Caroline, who has reached her thirties and was dissatisfied with her former life, has at the end of the novel found a new aim in life: she sets out to write a novel.

The form of this novel is very different from all the other novels in this category. In many ways The Comforters is a parody on a conventional realist novel with an omniscient narrator. A good example of how this parody works is the use of the character of Mrs Hogg. Mrs Hogg, an example of a flat character, i.e. showing only one feature, is evil. She is not disguised as a real person, as would have been the case in a realist novel, but she is shown for what she is: "as soon as Mrs Hogg stepped into her room she disappeared, she simply disappeared. She had no private life whatsoever" (IC, p. 156). Mrs Hogg is clearly a character deliberately put in the way of Caroline by the author to test her willpower. And thus it is that only after Caroline has fought under water with Mrs Hogg - an incident in which Mrs Hogg is killed off by Caroline - that Caroline has become strong enough to know which identity suits her best, to pursue her own goal: the writing of a novel.

### **Edna O'Brien August is a Wicked Month (1965)**

Ellen, recently divorced, goes off on a holiday to France leaving her son with her ex-husband. The divorce has left her confused about her identity. Her old identity she summarizes as follows:

Irish, cottage, poor, typical, pink cheeks, came to be a nurse in London, loved by all the patients, loved being loved, ... met a man who liked the nursemaid in me, married him in a registry office, threw away the faith, one son soon after. Over the years the love turned into something else and we broke up. Exit the nice girl. (WM, p. 107)

In France Ellen goes from one sexual encounter to another, without really finding what she is looking for. When her son gets killed in Wales, where he is on holiday with his father, and she catches what she thinks is VD, her guilt at having left her husband reaches its peak. However, the

VD turns out to be just an ordinary infection and she also realizes that even if she had stayed with her husband she would still not have been able to protect her son completely:

Even when he was alive she was only a mother some of the time. She doted and hovered over him for months and then of a night she would have a wild longing to go through the town and do delirious things and not bear the responsibility of being a mother, for hours, for days, for weeks. (WM, p. 137)

In the novel Ellen is not "punished" for having these "unfeminine" thoughts. On the contrary, the awareness of the limitations of her own character gives her the peace of mind she needs: she knows her role in life is not to be a full-time wife and mother and she can accept this fact. At the end of the novel we see Ellen happily returning to her work, and to her life as a single woman. She has tested various identities, and found the one which suits her best.

### **Margaret Drabble The Millstone (1965)**

Drabble uses the theme of motherhood to show the capacity for growth in many of her heroines. Rather than stressing the limiting influence that having a baby has on a woman's life, Drabble focuses on the stimulating aspects of motherhood. For Drabble herself motherhood has had a positive effect and she projects the following view in her novels, particularly in The Millstone:

You learn to conserve your energies, and to use them properly. Whereas a lot of people I know who haven't had children have just got lazier and lazier; their lives have never taken any shape. They go on saying, 'tomorrow will do', and go off to the cinema at a moment's notice. Having children is good for one, really.<sup>19</sup>

Thus in many of Drabble's novels motherhood is one of the female roles women cannot do without. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese regards Drabble's interpretation of the theme of motherhood as the main organising principle of all her novels:

the female theme becomes a female voice (a particular, not universal female voice) that organizes experience in inflexible if deceptively confidential patterns.<sup>20</sup>

Being pregnant and having a baby is the event of Rosamund Stacey's life which makes her rethink her identity. The novel opens with Rosamund relating her position: she is a successful scholar, but she is not able to love somebody or truly care for another person. She first had a male friend when she was 19, but the relationship never developed into a fully sexual one: "When Hamish and I loved each other for a whole year without making love, I did not realize that I had

set the mould of my whole life" (TM, p. 7).

Thus Rosamund, who does not even know how to make an appointment with a doctor, is faced with quite a dilemma when she falls pregnant the first time in her life she makes love, to an acquaintance whom she thought was gay. At first she tries to induce an abortion by taking a hot bath and drinking gin, but after this fails she decides to accept the situation as it is. At this stage in the proceedings she does not actually like the idea yet, but she is prepared to consider herself to be a woman for the first time in her life: "I couldn't pretend I was not a woman, could I, however much I might try from day to day to avoid the issue" (TM, p. 16).

Although having children is seen as a positive experience in Drabble's novels, this does not mean that the heroines who have children are full of starry-eyed happiness like the heroine in The Squire (1938) by Enid Bagnold, for example. In Drabble's novels the menial and exhausting aspects of parenthood are omnipresent. In Rosamund's case it is especially these mundane matters she is now forced to cope with which are seen as contributing to the growth of her personality and which help to give her a new identity. Being in a doctor's waiting room, for example, full of people she would not normally meet, already is a great eye-opener to Rosamund:

That visit was an initiation into a new way of life, a way that was thenceforth to be mine forever. An initiation into reality, if you like. (TM, p. 36)

A later passage in the novel, when Rosamund visits the maternity clinic, shows an even more detailed description of the stresses of motherhood:

One hears much, though mostly from the interested male, about the beauty of a woman with child, ... but the weight of evidence is overwhelmingly on the other side. Anaemia and exhaustion were written on most countenances: the clothes were dreadful, the legs swollen, the bodies heavy and unbalanced. (TM, p. 57)

Another image of the strains of being a mother is presented by Rosamund's sister Beatrice in the novel. Her sister, a graduate who has had three children and has not made any use of her degree, writes a letter to Rosamund to advise her to have the baby adopted. Beatrice writes: "You can have no conception of what it means to have a child, of the responsibility and the worries and the financial anxiety and the not being able to get out or do anything without planning" (TM, p. 78).

Yet for Rosamund motherhood is to be a positive experience. After a relatively fast labour

Rosamund holds her baby daughter in her arms:

She put her in my arms and I sat there looking at her, and her great wide blue eyes looked at me with seeming recognition, and what I felt it is pointless to try to describe. Love, I suppose one might call it, and the first of my life. (TM, p. 102)

It is as if the academically gifted but emotionally immature Rosamund has grown and has become humanised, or "femalised", for it is for the first time that she feels like other women do:

if all other women did feel it, then that was precisely what made it so remarkable in my case, as I could not recall a single other instance in my life when I had felt what all other women feel. (TM, p. 103)

Again, it is not as if Rosamund is all starry-eyed about motherhood, but it does seem to agree with her. There are detailed descriptions of e.g. Rosamund's problems with breastfeeding and Octavia's illness, but Rosamund cherishes Octavia and the new outlook on life she has given her.

Rosamund's work does not suffer, because she makes adequate arrangements for child care and just does not allow her work to deteriorate: "I suppose I must have a rock-like confidence in my own talent, for I simply did not believe that the handicap of one small illegitimate baby would make a scrap of difference to my career" (TM, p. 112). Virginia Beards calls this determination of Rosamund "male":

a common middle-class 'female' reaction to motherhood is to use it as an excuse not to succeed outside of the home or, indeed, to go out of the home at all. Significantly, Rosamund defines herself in relation to values other than the male-superiority/female-dependency ones of patriarchy.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps it is better not to call this aspect of Rosamund's character male as this would prevent Rosamund's position from being seen as acceptable for a woman. For this is of course what Rosamund achieves: she chooses a for her perfect combination of two female positions, i.e. she is a mother and a worker.

A third role, of lover, is still not Rosamund's forte and she remains uninterested in men. She meets George, the father of her child, and invites him to her flat. Although she is tempted to tell him that he is Octavia's father, she decides against it, because she feels so closely bound to Octavia, and feels the baby is hers. Motherhood has changed her completely:

It was no longer in me to feel for anyone what I felt for my child ... George, I could see, knew nothing with such certainty. I neither envied nor pitied his indifference, for he was myself, the self that but for accident, but for fate, but for chance, but for

womanhood, I would still have been. (TM, p. 172)

Critics have made adverse comments about Rosamund's devotion to motherhood. Dee Preussner, for instance, writes that Rosamund by tying herself to motherhood goes against the "central tenet of feminism that a woman should be free to construct an identity for herself instead of absorbing an identity from a man or from that prescribed by a patriarchal society".<sup>22</sup> In fact, the above discussion has shown that Rosamund does precisely what a good feminist should do, and what many feminists since her have done (Michele Barrett, Elizabeth Wilson etc. have all consciously chosen to be single mothers): she selects her own identity, and identity in which she feels truly fulfilled. A combination of motherhood and scholarship is what gives her most satisfaction, and she should be allowed to make that choice.

### **Penelope Mortimer My Friend Says It's Bullet-Proof (1967)**

This novel opens with a stewardess in a plane demonstrating the use of a life-jacket. The life-jacket forms the image of a pair of "yellow breasts" (ME, p. 7). This is a significant comparison, for the main character of the book, Muriel Rowbridge, has just had one breast removed. She discovered a lump in her breast and her breast was removed without her knowledge when they were examining her under anaesthetic (ME, p. 148 ff.). This operation changed life completely for Muriel and forced her to review her identity. After the operation she felt that her lover, Ramsey, would only stay with her out of a feeling of pity. She prefers being alone to being with someone who is with her out of a sense of duty. Ramsey, married to Flora and lover of Muriel, had never been able to make a choice and Muriel says to him:

You couldn't ever make yourself choose. Now it's impossible, don't you see? I just feel ... you're sorry for me, there isn't any real choice any more. ... If he had been capable of including her, she might not have shut herself out. (ME, p. 122)

Throughout the novel we see Muriel feeling herself to be an outsider and making an effort to belong again. Her boss exhorts her, before Muriel leaves on her trip to America to above all "well, join in, won't you? Don't go wandering off in one of your Virginia Woolf fits. Join in - you know?" (ME, p. 9).

The mastectomy has hit right at the centre of Muriel's being: her female identity. She says that after the operation "I didn't know who I was - man or woman, young or old. When they let me get dressed, I wore camelhair trousers, a soft sweater from the men's boutique across the road"

(ME, p. 13). Muriel writes a column for a woman's magazine and that heightens her confusion. She does not fit in with texts like the ones she encounters in her work which prescribe what a woman should feel:

Life in the 1960s offers exceptional opportunities to the female of the species and as she crosses new thresholds she expresses her delight by choosing clothes that .... (ME, p. 34)

During the novel, which covers Muriel's stay in America on a business trip, she tries to re-establish her female identity, tries to join in again, mainly by testing herself against men, seeing how men react to her new body. After several encounters with different men she meets Robert who gives her confidence again by advising her to take the artificial breast off. Muriel's feeling of liberation is overwhelming:

She felt very free without the armour, able to move naturally inside her clothes. After a while, a simple question began to interest her: why if you have one breast, is it necessary to pretend to have two? (ME, p. 172)

Muriel is able to question convention now and Robert totally supports her in that by stating to her "I prefer you as you are" (ME, p. 172). Being valued for herself by one person gives her confidence, and the strength to develop a new identity:

The sensation was unknown to her, she could not recognise it. It had the appearance of a bird breaking slowly out of its shell ... She was growing. She was materialising, becoming re-embodied. She was visible, She could be seen ... When you aren't seen, hidden within a protective shell, you live always in secret, alone, the world's eyes give back no reflection. You have only your own knowledge of your existence to keep you alive, and even that may be illusory. The sense of liberation came with this plain corroboration of her being: 'I prefer you as you are' ... The implications came crowding in on her with the impact of light, air and sound after a long imprisonment. Boldness and freedom were both available. She could do anything she wanted to do. (ME, pp. 172-173)

As in The Millstone the woman goes through an experience which is normally seen to be a bad one (i.e. illegitimate child, mastectomy, respectively), but which in fact gives the heroine the chance to step outside convention and enjoy a much happier life, having chosen a life-style for herself, and not being merely directed by society's demands.

Although Robert is instrumental in helping her to gain this new identity and he is offering to marry Muriel, she feels she does not really belong with him. She prefers the "unknown and terrifying" future (ME, p. 208), which life on her own means, rather than the false sense of security marriage would give her. This novel does not end with the marriage of the heroine. On the con-

trary, the novel ends with Muriel well set out to live out her newly found identity. She is now able to do what she had always wanted to do, that is, write a novel:

Her eyes were full of tears, and yet there was an expression on her face that was not entirely sad; the expression, perhaps, of someone who has just been moved by a sad and true story which they will never entirely forget. After a little while, the tears still wet on her cheeks, she unclipped the pen, opened the notebook and began to write. (MF, pp. 223-224)

### I.3 Conclusions

In all the novels discussed above, the search for a satisfactory female identity is crucial. It is this search which binds together characters as different as Martha Quest and Rosamund Stacey, and which unites novels as diverse as Under the Net and The Country Girls.

The identity which in each of these novels is regarded as the most appropriate is the one which the female characters have selected themselves to fit their own situation and psychological make-up. In these novels it is above all stressed that women do have a choice and do not have to live by prescribed rules. Be it as mothers, or as workers, be it living alone or with somebody else, women can be happy as long as they are allowed to choose their own identity.

These novels do not see a total reorganisation of society as a precondition for women's feeling fulfilled in life. The reason for this is that in spite of initial setbacks the writers themselves (cf. Part II) were all in the end able to find a modus vivendi which suited their needs and which enabled them to write, and thus they were rather optimistic about their heroines' attempts at doing the same. The heroines in several of the novels, however, do not quite achieve the ideal of living by their own choices (e.g. Martha). In the end several of them have to submit at least partly to society's conventions. However, they have become aware of the necessity of independence, and have taken their first steps on the road to a satisfactory identity. The main function of these novels is to indicate to women that there are various alternatives one can choose from and that one does not have to accept the status quo. Felski sees especially the Bildungsroman as having an important function vis-a-vis what is going on in society. The Bildungsromans are of course not a direct social reflection of what is actually taking place: "Nevertheless, such stories are profoundly revealing at the level of the 'social imaginary', the symbolic frameworks of representation through which cultural meanings are produced and disseminated."<sup>23</sup>

## CHAPTER II

### THE FAMILY

As was shown in Part I Chapter III one of the stumbling blocks for women in post-war British society was women's subordinate position in the family. In Part I we found that the approach advocated by Lundberg and Farnham in Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947) that both for the woman's health and happiness and her family's well-being she should live the feminine ideal of subordination was in Britain above all present in, for instance, women's magazines and in popularized sociological studies of the time (esp. Bowlby). Women with doubts about their position in society found the idea of femininity reiterated in much of the advice which they were given in the course of their day-to-day living. Friedan noted that this was the main way of silencing women's complaints. Women were to understand that it was abnormal to be dissatisfied: "If a woman had a problem in the 1950s and 1960s, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought ... I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst's couch, working out their 'adjustment to the feminine role', their blocks to 'fulfilment as a wife and mother'".<sup>1</sup> We saw in Part I above that in reality many women did not get the satisfaction expected from being family members, and that there were often financial difficulties to cope with too.

What view of women's position in the family do these novels convey? How did these women writers reflect on the role of the woman in the family in their novels?

These women writers mainly concentrate on female characters who are part of a family, be it as wives, mothers, or as a member of the extended family. There is one notable exception, though. Muriel Spark's The Bachelors (1960) deals exclusively with single people, particularly single men. These bachelors are strongly aware of the social pressure on them to get married, and therefore each finds his own defence mechanism. One of the single men, Walter, for instance, has made up a story of a past unhappy love-affair as an excuse for his unwillingness to become seriously involved with a woman:

'She was anxious to marry me ... She was a bourgeois little bitch with her savings in the post office'. The memory of Sybil, though in fact she had never existed, was

so fiercely implanted in Walter's mind through frequent elaborations of his imagined affair with her, that he was always thoroughly incensed by her. (TB, p. 70)

By means of Walter Spark makes fun of Sillitoe's and Braine's heroes, who often set out to marry one of these "bourgeois little bitches".

When Patrick, another of Spark's bachelors, is asked about his single state he mentions some convenient concepts which he clearly thinks of as an appropriate defence, but which do not reveal his real motivation (which is, apparently, an innate fear of being bound to a woman):

man-made laws, suppression of the individual, relics of the Victorian era ... Patrick's thin voice died out, 'and all repression of freedom of expression and self-fulfilment ...' It sounded good-class reading-stuff. (TB, p. 91)

These men are fully aware of the norm in the society in which they live, but they do not want to assimilate. Apart from being bachelors the male characters in this novel all have other characteristics which make them "abnormal". One of them suffers from epileptic fits, others are heavily involved with spiritualism, and another is in the process of murdering his girlfriend. The bachelorship of these male characters serves to underline this unconventionality of the characters.

It will become clear that in most of the novels discussed below women's position in the family is viewed as problematic. Again, there is one notable exception. In Drabble's The Millstone, discussed above, the heroine is seen actually gaining confidence and happiness when she becomes part of a family, i.e. becomes a mother. In most novels, as we will see, however, motherhood is seen as a restricting rather than a fulfilling experience, and they thus question the validity of the Lundberg and Farnham axiom. It is worth remembering that even The Millstone does not advocate the role of housewife. Rosamund can only be a good mother because she has a career.

This chapter is divided in three sections, relating to the discussion of women in the family in Part I Chapter III, above. The three sections are concerned with female characters as wives, as mothers, and with the role of the extended family in the novels.

As we will see in this chapter the heroines almost all have problematic family relationships. There is hardly a happy marriage to be found, parenthood is generally associated with anxiety and guilt, and in the extended family there are further problems. The writers do not seem to lay the blame of this at a particular person's door, i.e., the particular husband, mother, etc., is not

really to blame, but the institution of the family which gives other people so much control over women. In The Grass is Singing, for instance, it is suggested that although more comfortable circumstances might have alleviated Mary's situation to some extent, the basic problem is that Mary does not feel at ease in the institution of the family, neither at home with her parents, nor with her husband. The happy marriages which do feature can normally be found in the previous generation (mostly in the mother of the heroine) and it is shown that this so-called "happy" marriage was achieved through the sacrifice of the wife's own personal goals (e.g. in Jerusalem the Golden Clara's mother).

I have chosen these three subjects for further discussion as they have proved particularly troublesome for women in society (cf. Part I), and it would be interesting to see how these novels were dealing with these problems, how these novels voiced discontent.

## II.1 Wives

The typical female character in these novels has at least at some point in her life been a wife. This tallies with the situation in the '50s and '60s in Britain when more and more people than before got married. Friedan stressed the idea that in the '50s women were better off than their mothers and grandmothers for they should be happy now, since all problems regarding their position in society had supposedly been solved: "Nobody argued whether women were inferior or superior to men; they were simply different. Words like 'emancipation' and 'career' sounded strange and embarrassing; no one had used them for years".<sup>2</sup>

However, as we saw in Part I, marriages did not always last as long as before and the divorce rate was rising. The novels also show female characters who are not really satisfied with their position as wives, and divorce features as one means of escape from an unpleasant situation for the heroines. In Part I Chapter III it was concluded that if one looks beyond the surface of cosmetic changes, such as more lenient divorce laws, one can see that many women felt trapped in their marriages and felt subjected to their husbands. The realisation that as far as married women were concerned life was not as happy as it was supposed to be in this period, takes up a central place in the novels. These novels mainly focus on the more suppressive aspects of being a wife.

Unlike the earlier (1914-1939) heroines Beaman considers in her book A Very Great Profession, these female characters are not very likely to be abandoned, rather they are the ones to take the initiative to end a marriage. These heroines are more and more able to depart from the traditional axioms which combines love, sex, procreation and security in marriage, and they make a choice to combine one or more of these aspects, mostly outside a conventional marital relationship.

As was shown in Part I above, in the '50s and early '60s one of the main problems for married, and subsequently divorced women was their poor financial situation. In the case of married women the women were often left with barely sufficient housekeeping money, and with little influence over or access to money, for other purposes. In the case of divorced women poverty was found to be even more of a problem as maintenance was often not paid by ex-husbands, and a job difficult to find because of child care problems.

Perhaps not surprisingly, in view of the novelists' own experiences, financial problems do not play such a prominent role in these novels. Although some of the novelists might have been relatively poor at one or two points in their lives (e.g. Lessing arriving penniless in Britain), they were able to come out of this situation with relative ease, and none of them have had to suffer prolonged poverty. Even after their divorces the novelists managed to earn their own living or received adequate funds from their ex-husbands. There are moments of financial trouble in the novels, but they do not take up the prime place in the characters' thoughts it must have taken up in many real-life women's minds. In Girls in Their Married Bliss (1964), for instance, Cait, after being thrown out of the house by her husband, although she has to work in a laundrette, can support herself. And she has the contacts, through e.g. her friend Baba, to find herself a house to live in without too many problems.

The Grass is Singing is one of the few exceptions to the rule: the heroine, Mary, suffers hardships because of lack of money. Money would not have solved her problems, but it would certainly have made her burden less heavy. A regular holiday, a comfortable home (esp. protection from the heat), and adequate food and clothing would have made her life more bearable.

## Doris Lessing The Grass is Singing (1950)

Lessing's first novel concentrates on the pressure there is on women to get married. At a time when the average age of marriage was 24 and was getting lower, and 85% of women had at least been married once by the time they were 44 (cf. Part I Chapter III), the main character in this novel, Mary, who in another day and age would have been quite happy to spend her life as a single woman, feels she must find herself a husband. She does this not so much for her own sake, as because of the social pressure on her. It is worthwhile at this point to note that although this novel is set in Southern Africa, many of the social pressures on white women were remarkable similar to the influence of British society on women in the period.

Roberta Rubinstein in The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness also sees Mary's character as being largely influenced by society: "Mary Turner's character slowly emerges as a result of the dialectic between her personal situation and the larger societal forces which create her personality".<sup>3</sup> Rubinstein stresses that it is the society in which Mary lives, which makes her marry: "To be thirty and single in a white colonialist society is almost a form of heresy".<sup>4</sup>

Mary has never really been at ease in a family situation:

she was sent to boarding school and her life changed. She was extremely happy, so happy that she dreaded going home at holiday-times to her fuddled father, her bitter mother, and their fly-away little house that was like a small wooden box on stilts. (GS, pp. 35-36)

Mary's father is an alcoholic, her mother is embittered by her own life, and her two siblings died early in life because of dysentery. She is much happier in a larger institution, such as the boarding school, the office where she works as a secretary after her twentieth birthday, or the girls' club where she lives for a great part of her life, than as part of a nuclear family. In comparison to her married friends Mary is leading an ideal life, and she does not suffer from the complaints they suffer from: "The truth was she had no troubles ... She was a most rare phenomenon: a woman of thirty without love troubles, headaches, backaches, sleeplessness or neurosis. She did not know how rare she was". (GS, pp. 39-40)

Unfortunately for Mary this ideal situation is not to last, and she is to become like other women. As the narrator of The Grass is Singing indicates: "But all women become conscious, sooner or later, of that impalpable, but steel-strong pressure to get married" (GS, p. 41). Mary

inadvertently overhears her friends gossiping about her, saying that it is strange that she is not married yet, although she is over 30. This shocks Mary out of her prolonged girlhood, and she decides that perhaps she had better start looking for a husband. As she says when she looks back: "people made her get married" (GS, p. 102). Mary feels so harassed by the small town society's apparent condemnation of her that she is not very selective and more or less accepts the first proposal which comes her way. Two weeks after meeting Dick Turner she is married to him, and is living on his small farm in the middle of nowhere. She has always hated the countryside ("the veld"), because that was where she used to live with her parents. Thus she lands herself in a situation which is not really of her liking: she is in a small house in the countryside, married to somebody she hardly knows and does not love. She feels she is back leading the only family life she knows, the life of her parents:

she began to feel ... back with her mother, watching her endlessly contrive and patch and mend ... suddenly possessed with the thought that her father, from his grave, had sent out his will and forced her back into the kind of life he had made her mother lead. (GS, pp. 56-57)

At first Mary is still relatively content, trying to make the best of things, but the loneliness and emptiness of her existence gets her down, and again and again she feels like her mother:

It was not the voice of Mary, the individual (who after all really did not care so much about the bath or whether the native stayed or went), but the voice of the suffering female, who wanted to show her husband she just would not be treated like that. In a moment she would begin to cry, as her mother had cried on these occasions, in a kind of dignified, martyred rage. (GS, p. 83)

When Dick asks her to run a shop for his black workers, that reminds her even more of her home, where there was also such a store (GS, p. 100 ff.).

To give herself some hope in the situation she is in, Mary tries one option her mother also chose: a child. Mary realizes now what she must have meant to her mother, "a safety-valve" (GS, p. 143), and Mary thinks that a daughter might also help her to cope with her life. Dick, however, says there is not enough money for a baby. Thus all means of escape from her situation fail: Mary cannot go back to her old job (she tries, but they do not want her, because she looks like a poor farmer's wife now), she cannot have children, and it is far too hot to do much work in and around the house. The result is that Mary becomes more and more apathetic.

In fact the only person she can still relate to, with whom she spends most of her time, is the

black servant who works for her. At first she tries to take revenge on the men, and she has a whole procession of them who leave one after the other, fed up with being scapegoats. Finally, another black man, Moses, comes to work for her. He is better educated than the others, and is also very handsome. His personality is stronger than hers, and he takes charge of her. In spite of her fear of him, a relationship builds up. Towards the end of the novel Mary has shut out the whole world, and only Moses is still real to her. This situation is not as "abnormal" as it perhaps seemed to critics and readers, esp. African ones, at the time. In fact the situation Mary is in, is just the situation many women find themselves in. Being a housewife is a lonely existence because it prevents a woman from instigating relationships and activities she might otherwise have taken up. To the woman who is wealthy enough to have a servant, this servant is often the one person she shares the greater part of her life with. In Mary's case Moses is more important than Dick and he becomes like a husband to her. he even helps her to dress:

She stood up and held out her arms while the native slipped her dress over them from behind. When she sat down again, she shook out her hair from her neck with both hands, with the gesture of a beautiful woman adoring her beauty ... The attitude of the native was one of an indulgent uxoriousness. (GS, p. 197)

Note that the word "uxoriousness" is normally only reserved for the husband-wife relationship, meaning "excessively fond or submissive to a wife" (Longman, Dictionary of the English Language).

At the end of the novel Mary is murdered by Moses, because she and her husband are to go off on a six-month holiday, and she has had to send Moses away. Moses feels jealous and kills her on the last morning before they are to leave. Mary experiences her death as follows: "And then the bush avenged itself: that was her last thought. The trees advanced in a rush, like beasts, and the thunder was the noise of their coming" (GS, p. 218). To Mary it does not feel as if she is murdered by the person Moses, but she feels that the whole bush which surrounds her house is attacking her (Moses was hidden in the bush, and advances from that direction). This image is reminiscent of experiences of other lonely women, resembling the British housewife's feeling that the walls of her flat are closing in on her. In Mary's case the bush surrounding her house is just as restrictive as the four walls of a small flat.

Mary's story is the story of how an intelligent and lively woman can be destroyed by

marriage. That the agent who gives the final stab, Moses, is a black man is incidental rather than essential to the novel. Of course the theme of race relations is important in the novel, especially as it features in the gossip of the neighbours about the Turners, but it is not the main focus of the novel. Mary is the central consciousness of the novel and her decline is the essential focus point. One gets the impression that if Moses had not killed Mary, she would have withered away and died anyway, because that was the way things were going shortly before the murder.

This is the reason why this novel cannot be really put in the same category as Paton's Cry, the Beloved Country (1947) as contemporary reviewers did (cf. Part II). In Paton's novel the main focus is race relations, while in Lessing's novel race is only of secondary importance. In Cry, the Beloved Country black people actually have the point of view. The novel concentrates on their experiences, their view of life, whereas in The Grass is Singing the reader does not really enter Moses's mind. His thoughts are only recorded on the odd occasion, such as shortly after the murder has taken place. The end of Paton's novel, for instance, clearly shows this difference. The novel ends with the thoughts of the elderly black man Kumalo:

For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret.<sup>5</sup>

Although Lessing definitely takes an anti-white settler stance in The Grass is Singing, the novel does not provide much of an insight into black people's lives. Black characters only feature as servants in white people's homes, or workers on white people's land. In Paton's novel, however, the reader is supplied with an intimate view into black African customs, language, and experiences. Most importantly, Lessing's novel makes the reader identify with and feel sorry for Mary, rather than for Moses, while Paton's book invites sympathy for the black characters in the novel.

As in the case of Martha Quest the death of Mary symbolizes the novel's pessimistic attitude towards society's ability to accommodate women's needs. Mary regresses from a position of relative independence to total dependence and loss of her own identity. In this the novel is more pessimistic than most novels of the period, for in most novels there is a quest like journey towards greater independence and the search for a female identity (cf. Chapter I, above).

## Edna O'Brien Girls In Their Married Bliss (1964)

In this novel the story of Kate and Baba continues. It is the third in a sequence of novels on the two women. A major difference with The Country Girls is that in this novel Kate and Baba both have the point of view during the novel, for the point of view alternates between them. In The Country Girls Kate's voice was the one most heard. We will return to a discussion of the significance of this shortly.

This novel, the title is obviously ironic, follows the disintegration of the two women's marriages. But whereas Mary Turner had no means of escape nor could rely on other support than that of Moses, Kate and Baba have each other and are strong enough to survive.

This novel shows the advantages of the relaxation of the divorce laws while at the same time making clear that women are still victimised. In this novel marriage as well as divorce are portrayed as problem areas. Lotus Snow sees Girls In Their Married Bliss as marking the death of marriage in O'Brien's oeuvre.<sup>6</sup> In subsequent novels the heroines are not seeking marriage, just relationships with men or sex. Hereafter O'Brien's heroines have lost all faith in the institution of marriage. In Girls In Their Married Bliss Cait and Baba initially both have a go at marriage, but soon find it less than satisfactory.

Kate is in this novel far more decisive than she was in The Country Girls. The pretty, obedient girl image is definitely gone and is replaced by the mature, worldly-wise woman. When the novel opens Kate's marriage has gone sour, and she has a lover. Her husband finds out about the lover, and leaves notes around the house telling her what he thinks of her: an example is "Now and then he thought all women could not possibly be bitches, but not for long, reality was always at hand" (MB, p. 31).

To Kate, and to the other married heroines in these novels, there are three popular routes of escape from the confinement of marriage: firstly, a lover, secondly, divorce, and thirdly, mental breakdown. Kate tries all these options. The lover, Duncan, was the first step of escape for Kate from a marriage in which her husband always humiliated her. She feels valued by Duncan and thinks she can communicate with him. This is more important than the sexual aspect of the relationship for they never make love. The second step of escape is taken when Kate takes Cash, her son, and flees to Baba. The femininity associated with Kate in The Country Girls in particular,

where she is submissive and reluctant to speak up for herself, is abandoned completely when she decides to leave her domineering husband. In the novel as a whole a non-feminine approach is favoured, for Baba's character is given much more weight than in The Country Girls. It is shown here that Baba's approach is the one women have to use if they want to survive. Kate's initial view of marriage was highly romantic. At the beginning of the novel there is a flashback to Kate as a newly-married woman. Baba received the following letter from her: "there is something about having a child and being in a valley, and being loved, that is more marvellous than anything you or I ever knew about in our flittery days" (MB, p. 9). As we have seen, in spite of this earlier optimism Kate becomes very disappointed with her marriage, and the marriage leads to divorce. Baba's attitude on the other hand, is much more down-to-earth, and it is rewarded in the novel. Baba's attitude is to give up waiting for "Mr Right":

I sat on the chair thinking of the eighteen months in London, and all the men I'd met, and the exhaustion of keeping my heels mended and my skin fresh for the Mr Right that was supposed to come along ... I know that people liking you is an accident and is to do with them and not you, That goes for love too, only more so. (MB, pp. 11-12)

When Baba marries she does not expect too much, only in fact the creature comforts she craves for, but she knows to value those. She gets rewarded for her realistic expectations. Baba falls pregnant by another man, and Frank, her husband, who is infertile is willing to take care of the child. Baba has selected a form of marriage which is based on sympathy rather than on romantic love, and it gives her the support she needs in times of trouble.

After the break-up of her marriage Kate has to go through some more harrowing times before she has found a new place in life. She realizes that she will never again be able to act like she did when she was first married to Eugene. She cannot pretend that she still believes in feminine behaviour, that she still believes the myth of "married bliss":

She was branded in a way that other men would spot a mile away, and though still young, she had not the energy to coax, and woo, and feed, and love, and stroke, and cosset another man, beginning from the very beginning again. (MB, p. 98)

After realising this Kate breaks down, because her feminine approach has become impossible, and she does not know yet what to replace it with. Kate is found beating up a weighing machine and is taken to a hospital. Luckily she has Baba to whom she can turn, and thus she comes out of

her depression.

Yet Kate still feels embittered at the end of the novel. Her ex-husband has abducted their son, and she does not have the means to get him back. Kate has herself sterilised "to eliminate the risk of making the same mistake again" (MB, p. 160). Nevertheless, there is also some hope for the two women at the end of the novel: Baba invites Kate to come and live with them permanently, thus replacing feminine expectations by friendship between women.

In Girls In Their Married Bliss, as in The Grass is Singing, conventional marriage is seen as disastrous for the female characters. The only way a woman can survive this relationship is with outside, particularly female support.

The whole sexual debate which was so typical in this period also features in this novel. It seems to be rather difficult for the heroines in this novel, and the other novels of these writers, to find sexual satisfaction. Paradoxically, however, many heroines seem to put up with this rather easily, almost as if they cannot expect anything better. Mary in The Grass is Singing is not interested in the sexual advances of her husband. It is hinted that she has rather romantic notions, which she thinks cannot be found in a real man. After making love for the first time she thinks:

It was not so bad, she thought, when it was all over, not as bad as that. It meant nothing to her, nothing at all ... she had expected nothing in the first place - at any rate, not from this man, who was flesh and blood, and therefore rather ridiculous - not the creature of her imagination whom she endowed with hands and lips but left bodiless. (GS, pp. 57-58)

Like Mary, Rosamund in The Millstone is not interested in sex either, and is perfectly happy without a sexual relationship. And, as we saw above, even O'Brien, who in the media was portrayed as a "sex puss" does not live up to her reputation. Kate has a lover without having a sexual relationship, and Baba consciously renounces the possibility of sexual satisfaction when she marries the clumsy lover Frank.

Yet there are other female characters in the novels by these eight women writers who do not give up so easily. The most obvious one is of course Anna in The Golden Notebook. Anna is not looking for marriage, but she is in search of a permanent relationship which is also sexually satisfying. The two requirements, permanent and satisfying, seem to be almost mutually exclusive, for Anna tries out many men, but they all lack either the one or the other condition. Anna's

sexual requirements are in direct contrast to Mary's dreams. While Mary wishes that a man could only have hands and lips, Anna prefers the vaginal orgasm to the clitoral one:

there is only one real female orgasm and that is when a man, from the whole of his need and desire, takes a woman and wants all her response. Everything else is substitute and a fake, and the most inexperienced woman feels this instinctively. (GN, p. 216)

Lessing's stance on the clitoral versus the vaginal orgasm issue caused some controversy among women who, having just discovered the right to the clitoral orgasm, did not want it to be taken away again. However, as indicated, Lessing also allows for the opposite response, in Mary in The Grass is Singing. In fact, from the novels it became clear that there is a diverse range of sexual wishes which can be found among the female characters. The common denominator seems to be that whatever the desire, satisfaction is difficult to find.

## II.2 Parenthood

As we saw in Part I Chapter III there was a significant rise in the birth rate in the '50s and '60s in Britain. In the novels many of the adult female characters are mothers, particularly in Margaret Drabble's novels. In Drabble's novels motherhood is generally seen as a positive experience for a woman. In most of the other novels by the other writers, however, the view of motherhood is not as optimistic.

### Penelope Mortimer The Pumpkin Eater (1962)

The heroine of this novel has lived the feminine ideal to the full: she has devoted her life to the production of a whole army of children. But when the novel opens she is being analyzed by a psychiatrist because she had a breakdown in Harrods (similar to Kate in Girls In Their Married Bliss). She says to the psychiatrist that she feels as if she is useless. It feels to her as if she has just let life happen to her. She has never consciously made a decision to do something. She does not really know why she has had so many children and husbands: "Thirty-one years old, healthy and whole, married to a fourth husband (why four?) who loved me, with a bodyguard of children (why so many?)" (PE, p. 32) and to top it all: although motherhood does not really give her satisfaction she does the only thing which she knows makes her feel purposeful, that is, she gets pregnant again.

Her husband convinces her that it would be much better to have an abortion. She does not only have an abortion, but also has herself sterilized. The sterilization has an unexpectedly positive effect on her: "I began very tentatively, to believe in myself. It was as though I were feeling my own face with my fingertips in the dark" (PE, p. 108). Her newly-found confidence is shattered again soon after, however, because her husband turns out to have had many affairs, almost in the way she has had her children, by just letting things happen. His current lover turns out to be pregnant by him, ironically, just when she cannot get any children anymore.

In this book children are portrayed as identity providers to women, but they are not seen as providing a positive self-image. Rather, they are seen as restrictive for a woman. This becomes most clear at the end of the novel. The heroine has finally taken action herself and has run away from home first to one of her ex-husbands, and then to the tower, their house in the countryside. She has finally realised that she must take charge of her own life: "it's arrogance that keeps one alive: the belief that one can choose, that one's choice is important, that one is responsible only to oneself" (PE, p. 150). Unfortunately, this moment of glory is but short-lived. She has to realize that she cannot escape from the responsibilities of motherhood, and her husband makes use of that by sending all the children to the house she is hiding in. They look like an advancing army out to capture her, an image reminiscent of Moses advancing from the bush in The Grass is Singing:

They came up over the brow of the hill spread out, like beaters. In the first second I saw only one child; then they rose up from every part of the small horizon, advancing through the mist, breaking it down, coming slowly on up the stony hill with their heads lowered and their short, strong legs moving like pistons. I must hide, I thought - hide ... they were surrounding me ... I had been waiting for Jake. I could have bargained with him. I could have made some effort to defend myself, however useless. But what could I do against my children? (PE, pp. 156-157)

The Pumpkin Eater has many elements of Mortimer's own life in it: the large number of children, the younger husband, the poor start to their life together followed by financial success. The author's epitaph at the very end of the novel also indicates that Mortimer wanted to relate her own experiences. Furthermore, she also realizes that these experiences do not conform to existing, conventional expectations about women, but that they will be thought-provoking to other people:

I have tried to be honest with you [reader], although I suppose that you would really have been more interested in my not being honest. Some of these things happened, and some were dreams. They are all true, as I understood truth. They are all real, as I understood reality. (PE, p. 158)

### **Margaret Drabble Jerusalem the Golden (1967)**

This novel portrays two families with opposing values. It is as if the author wants to say: if you handle motherhood in the right way it is not restrictive, but provides warmth and possibilities for growth. Many critics have stressed the importance of motherhood for Drabble's female characters. Ann Rayson states that in Drabble's novels "motherhood provides the conflict, plot and theme".<sup>7</sup> This statement certainly holds true for Jerusalem the Golden, as we shall see below. Drabble's kind of motherhood, however, is not the typically feminine one. Her best mothers do not only devote themselves to motherhood, but their feeling of security in their motherhood often gives them the confidence to branch out. As Rayson writes: Drabble's most successful mothers find "that counter to the conventional choice of either career or children, children enhance rather than detract from her professional role".<sup>8</sup> Rayson concludes that Drabble provides an original approach:

a new version of womanhood which is not self-destructive, but able to cope quite successfully with both the demands of motherhood and the necessity for establishing an individual identity.<sup>9</sup>

The family in this novel which shows an embittered mother and which is an example of failed family-life is Clara Maugham's family. It is particularly her relationship with her mother which is focused upon and which is contrasted with Clelia Denham's relationship with her mother. Clara's mother does not show any love and support for Clara when she is small, only resentment: "some of her most frightful memories were of her mother, grim-faced, ill concealing her resentment, as she flipped through these predictably shining school reports" (JG, p. 18). And why does her mother not like her good marks? One would expect a parent to be proud of a child's achievements. The answer is an indication of the reason for her mother's bitterness. The point is that Clara's mother has had to suppress her own intelligence to fit in with the expectations of the community she lived in. Clara

doubly resented her mother's resentment [of the high marks], for her mother herself was no fool, she had never herself possessed the lovely blessing of stupidity: she had merely crushed and deformed and dissembled what gifts she

had once had, in deference to what? To a way of life perhaps, to a town, to a suburb in a town in the North of England. (JG, p. 3)

Clelia's mother, on the other hand, has pursued her own intellectual development (she is a writer), and has also created a warm home. Being fulfilled and confident as a person, she has been able to be a successful mother. As Clara remarks, "She had never in her life seen or heard of such a mother, a mother capable of such pleasant, witty and overt concern" (JG, p. 108). She has always enjoyed her role of mother to her five children, and her children enjoyed their childhood because of her. Clara notices the following about Clelia's room:

she got round to thinking that one of the most charming features of Clelia's room was its sense of prolonged nursery associations. The childhood objects were not only lovely in themselves, they were a link with some past and pleasantly remembered time, a time not violently shrugged off and rejected, but a time to be lived with, in happy recollection, a time which could well bear remembering. (JG, p. 92)

Needless to say, this portrayal of the two mothers directly opposes Bowlby's axiom that only a full-time mother can be happy and produce a happy family.

Through her contacts with the Denham household Clara realizes that it can also be loving:

Babies, mothers and fathers had hitherto been for her the very symbols of dull simplicity. She saw that she had been wrong about them, and possibly therefore about other relations of her life. (JG, p. 22)

Clara goes even further and thinks that she has found the Jerusalem the Golden of the following hymn in the Denham family:

Jerusalem the Golden, With milk and honey blest, Beneath thy contemplation,  
Sink heart and voice oppressed, I know not, oh, I know not, What social joys are there,  
What radiancy of glory, What light beyond compare. (JG, p. 32)

This family to her is the perfect social unit, thus it is only after Clara's encounter with the Denham family that she can really be part of society, experience the "social joys" for which her own family has left her ill-equipped.

It is not as if Drabble in this novel by embracing the virtues of the family so wholeheartedly also welcomes the myth of femininity. On the contrary, she shows how a life led by the feminine myth, a denial of the self (as in the case of Clara's mother) can lead to a state of unhappiness, while a situation in which a woman feels fulfilled (Clelia's mother) leads to her being able to be a good mother. Also, it is hardly as if Mrs Maugham shows signs of being a feminine woman (e.g. her house is not obsessively clean, but is rather chaotic). Drabble shows that women, if they are

fulfilled at work, are better mothers than the ones who crush their own ambitions in favour of full-time motherhood. Drabble's argument goes against the "feminine mystique" in this respect, but Drabble's work also at the same time still embraces one aspect of femininity: the fulfilment that motherhood, according to Drabble, brings. Drabble is thus clearly, like the other writers, a writer in a transition period, i.e., her pre-1968 novels do not fully embrace feminism, but still reject much of what the idea of femininity stood for.

It is not surprising that Clara seeks to become part of the Denham family. In Murdochian fashion she falls for Clelia's brother Gabriel mainly because he closely resembles his sister, and Gabriel also likes Clara's friendship with and resemblance to Clelia. The whole relationship is a celebration of the closeness of Denham family life. Clara is well aware of this aspect of her relationship with Gabriel: "'All your family', said Clara, 'always seem to me to be in love with all the rest of your family ... I like it'" (JG, p. 170). It is this involvement with the Denhams which makes it possible for Clara to rise out of her own repressive background. The novel ends with Clara's mother at her deathbed and Clara well-equipped to face the world:

Her mother was dying, but she herself would survive it, she would survive even the guilt and convenience and grief of her mother's death, she would survive because she had willed herself to survive, because she did not have it in her to die ... they would not get her that way, they would not get her at all. (JG, p. 206)

Clara will make sure that she will not like her mother deny the greater part of her personality, and she intends to live her life true to her own self rather than in denial of it.

### **Beryl Bainbridge Another Part of the Wood (1968)**

In this novel there is a total break-up of family life. As is normally the case with Bainbridge, the consequences are catastrophic, especially for the children concerned. Bainbridge often highlights the cruelty of family life, and here a father-son relationship is the focus of her attention.

A group of people spend a weekend together in a remote part of Wales. They are not related except for father Joseph and son Roland, who do not normally live together because Roland lives with his mother. Yet, for this weekend they become a mock family: father Joseph, his girlfriend ("mother") Dotty, the elder "brother" Kidney (a mentally retarded boy more or less adopted by Joseph), and "youngest son" Roland. At the outset everybody is of good will and Joseph plans a real father and son adventure for Roland: to climb a nearby mountain together.

But of course the problem is that they are not a happy family, not even for one weekend. Joseph is more interested in himself than in anybody else, and does not really have it in him to care properly for his son or Kidney. Dotty explains the problem in relation to Kidney:

every gesture he [Joseph] makes is just a monotonous repeat of a gesture he's made somewhere else. You see, Kidney really thought Joseph was interested in him. Really thought he cared. (PW, p. 19)

Dotty shows signs of being more caring than Joseph, but she instinctively checks her impulses to look after Roland, for fear Joseph might think her interfering.

In this novel the adults behave like children and the children like adults. The adults play monopoly in the evening, and when the adults are too busy with their own arguments, Kidney decides to take over Joseph's role and looks after Roland. It is Kidney who takes Roland up the mountain, not Joseph. That there is a wider significance to this action becomes clear from the following conversation between Roland and Kidney:

'Abraham in the Bible took his only son up a mountain', Kidney said. 'Oh, I know that one' ... 'He only used a ram - only a ram in the end' ... 'My dad would never sacrifice me', shouted Roland. 'He doesn't believe in God'. (PW, p. 135)

The implication is that if Joseph would have been a caring father, he would have taken Roland up the mountain like Abraham. In fact, by not taking Roland Joseph sacrifices him, for Roland gets hold of Kidney's tranquilizers and swallows a large number of them. That night Joseph is angry with Roland for whining (of course he is very sleepy because of all the pills) and another guest has to take the little boy to bed. Joseph is punished for his acts of carelessness for the following morning Roland is dead. It is Balfour, a handyman who visits the estate regularly and helps the owners out in his spare time, who finds Roland. This is rather appropriate in the novel's terms, for Balfour is the only one who realizes the importance of family ties:

There was family, and blood ties, and sticking up for your dad even if you did think he was a right yob of a bastard, and not letting on you had no underpants and telling the rent man your Mom was out when all the time she was hiding behind the back door, and when it came down to the centre, the core, all the feuding and protecting was pride, in your own flesh and blood - well, maybe not pride, but loyalty: there wasn't anything else. But somewhere along the line Joseph and Dotty and the rest of them, old George too, had cut themselves free from that sort of thing, gone out on a limb. They didn't really feel they belonged to anyone anymore. (PW, p. 145)

Furthermore, it is significant that Balfour is a working-class man. He works in a factory, and

has a stutter, while the rest of them are middle class and successful. Balfour the factory worker has the right values, whereas Joseph the educator does not know how to look after people. Such a statement against middle-class life-styles is rather unusual among the eight writers under discussion here. Most novels only deal with a middle-class vision and experience, whereas it seems as if this novel wants to make a Young and Willmott like comparison between middle-class and working-class family life. The divergence from the sole concern with the middle-classes in this novel is perhaps explainable by Bainbridge's own background, which is not as solidly middle-class as that of some of the other writers.

In this novel it is not so much a mother's influence on a child which is the point of discussion, but a father's influence. This novel is a powerful argument against Bowlby's stress on the all importance of mother love. Bowlby does not refer to a father's love in Child Care and the Growth of Love (cf. Part I Chapter III), but Another Part of the Wood shows what a father's neglect could lead to.

This novel is in fact one of the few novels in this period which examines the influence of the father so closely. In the other novels the father is mostly an absentee landlord who takes few responsibilities with regards to housework and child care (see e.g. The Garrick Year in Chapter III, below). And this position of the father in the family is not really questioned in the novels but taken for granted. The mothers in these novels often seem to cope very well without the support of a husband/father figure. In The Millstone there is no father whatsoever and the heroine actually seems rather content without a husband/father figure. The older generation of fathers, i.e. the fathers of the heroines do crop up, esp. in Shadow of a Sun, but here the father is an anti-role model, i.e. somebody the heroine wants to escape from (cf. also The Country Girls).

### **II.3 The Extended Family**

In Part I Chapter III it was shown that the ties between members of the extended family in post-war Britain were much more loose than previously, and that this placed an added burden on the woman in the nuclear family, who could not call upon help from the extended family if she needed it. In the novels contacts between members of the extended family are often limited, and if they do take place they are frequently a cause of friction or worse (see particularly Iris

Murdoch's novels). Drabble and Byatt are sisters and in some of their novels relationships between adult sisters are focused upon. These relationships are not a source of strength but of frustration, jealousy, etc. (cf. The Game and A Summer Bird-Cage discussed below). Murdoch, who lacks an extended family herself, is intrigued by family-relationships and family encounters often lead to violence, incest or murder, in the same way as the nuclear family is the seat of death and destruction in Bainbridge's novels.

### **Margaret Drabble A Summer Bird-Cage (1963)**

While for Drabble the nuclear family, and especially the mother-child relationship is stimulating, the extended family in her novels is subject to many a conflict.

The central theme of this novel is the relationship between two sisters. Arnold Davidson in his article "Pride and Prejudice in Margaret Drabble's A Summer Bird-Cage" compares this novel to Austen's book (there are many references to Austen, e.g. the sisters are Bennetts). However, he also, rightly, concludes that in contrast to Austen, in Drabble's novel the relationships of the sisters with their men is "peripheral" and "The central concern ... is the question of what kind of a relationship will be established between the sisters, which represents a significant reordering of traditional priorities".<sup>10</sup> The two sisters in this novel, Sarah and Louise, are in constant rivalry. The younger one, Sarah, feels like a typical younger sister, bossed around by Louise. Sarah meets her older sister just before Louise's wedding:

The usual envy filled me as I took note of her beautifully pinned and coiled hair, the clear beige and neatness of her jersey, and uncreased look of her linen trousers. I was wearing linen trousers too, but mine were of the baggy at the knee variety, and I suddenly felt shabby and travel-stained, reduced to a schoolgirl with twisted belt, mac down to ankles, and one plait undone. She always does that to me. Always. (SB, p. 14)

Sarah feels even while she is an adult that she cannot live up to her big sister. During the novel the relationship between the two women progresses towards being more egalitarian. And it is only when each sister regards the other as her equal that a really meaningful and supportive relationship can develop.

Sarah's first reaction when she leaves home to go to Oxford is to try and have as little as possible to do with her family and her sister Louise in particular: "It was at Oxford that I began to

forget her: I didn't think about her for whole days together" (SB, p. 21). She is forced to reconsider her relationship, however, when her sister asks her to be her bridesmaid. Even though Sarah is Louise's bridesmaid there is no real intimacy between them. Sarah does not even know why Louise is marrying the unlikely Stephen Halifax (prattish, but rich).

However, later on, Sarah starts to feel more sympathetic towards her sister. A few months after the wedding Sarah is invited to a party at her sister's flat. The flat looks more like a museum or a film set designed by Stephen than a home. Sarah starts to feel sorry for Louise who has to be on show all the time:

I ended up totally unenvious of Louise's new ménage, and somehow strangely sympathetic towards her ... I felt that it was she that was suffering. I don't know why, but it was only then that I began to realize she was vulnerable. (SB, p. 127)

Then Louise asks Sarah to come around for a drink and they have a lengthy chat over the phone in which they agree that they have in fact quite a lot in common (especially being middle class and liking financial security, another Austen characteristic). After this conversation Sarah thinks the following:

I had an extraordinary conviction that my emancipation from her was drawing near: I felt that shortly it would all be over, that I would no longer feel strange and angry at the sound of her voice, or plain and dull in her presence ... I felt nearer to understanding her than I had ever been: even her meaningless marriage threatened to float within my vision. (SB, p. 167)

Sarah's moment of equality with her sister arrives when her sister needs her assistance, rather than the other way around, for the first time in her life. Louise is locked out of her flat by her husband, Stephen, who has unexpectedly come home, finding his wife in bath with her lover, John. Louise now realizes that her sister is in fact the only one she can turn to:

'I couldn't tell anyone else, I really couldn't ...' 'oh, come off it, Louise, we're not exactly intimate friends, are we?' 'You're my sister', she said, bleakly ... 'I said you couldn't come', I said. I enjoyed, in a simple way, the feeling of power. (SB, p. 191)

Later Sarah herself has to acknowledge that "blood is thicker than water" (SB, p. 192). Louise comes to Sarah's flat and she breaks down crying when she tells her sister of her marital problems. For the first time in their lives the sisters experience a feeling of true intimacy in their relationship. Louise asks:

What shall I do now? Whatever shall I do now?' 'I don't know', I said. I didn't like

her to ask me. It seemed a kind of incest, just to watch her cry, so unfamiliar was any true proximity. (SB, p. 207)

And so, at the end of the novel the sisters are able to relate to each other in a positive way, having discarded their earlier rivalry. Sarah comments:

The oddest thing of all is that she seems to have forgiven me for existing. She's so nice to me now, so genuinely nice: she tells me all sorts of things. She even said once that in marrying Stephen she was trying to stop me overtaking her. (SB, p. 208)

In this Drabble novel relations within an extended family are seen as essentially problematic (e.g. neither of the sisters likes to go back to visit their parents). However, the novel also indicates that if a family relationship can develop in a positive way (as at the end of the novel), it can become a reliable source of support: husbands and lovers come and go, but sisters will always be sisters. Again, Drabble thus ultimately makes a pro-family stance, in which she differs from most of the other writers.

### **Iris Murdoch The Italian Girl (1964)**

This Murdoch novel, like Under the Net, has a male narrator. and, as in Under the Net, this male narrator has to revise his opinion of several women. Flora, his niece, Isabel, his sister-in-law, and Maggie, the Italian servant, all turn out to be less innocently feminine than Edmund, the narrator, had thought them to be.

More relevant to the current discussion, however, is the fact that The Italian Girl focuses, even more than other Murdoch novels, on family relationships. In this novel the relatives become so closely involved with each other that this leads to semi-incestuous and adulterous relationships.

At the centre of the novel there are the two mother figures who have dominated the family over the years: Lydia, who has just died at the beginning of the novel (she is the mother of two adult sons, Otto and Edmund) and Maggie, the Italian governess, the last in a whole procession of Italian servants. As Edmund says: "I had always had, as it were, two mothers, my own mother and the Italian girl" (IG, p. 18). Lydia's relationship with her two sons had always been intense and the two men had never been able to escape from her influence. The relationship had certain sexual qualities. Edmund explains:

My mother's name was Lydia, and she had always insisted that we call her by this name ... My mother's affections had early turned away from her husband and focussed with rapacious violence upon her sons, with whom she had had, as it were, a series of love-affairs, transferring the centre of her affection to and fro between us: so that our childhood passed in an alternate frenzy of jealousy and suffocation ... Of course I had never really escaped from Lydia. Lydia had got inside me, into the depths of my being, there was no abyss and no darkness where she was not. (IG, pp. 15-17)

During the novel Edmund, who had been away from home for a long time before this visit, discovers that it was not only his own relationship with his mother which was unnaturally close. The whole household turns out to be involved with each other: Lydia and Maggie had been having an affair, Otto who still lives in his mother's house, has been having a relationship with the sister of his apprentice, while his wife and daughter have both become pregnant by the apprentice, David, who is really in love with Otto himself. Even the relationships of the various family members with David and his sister Elsa are explained using family terms, so that they all become one big family. Otto, for instance, says of Elsa: "I am father, brother, son, lover to her" (IG, p. 76).

Even the saintly Edmund succumbs to the temptations of this household, as he first tries to kiss his niece Flora (IG, p. 11), and later goes off with Maggie. At the end Edmund feels that by becoming involved with Maggie he reconnects himself with his mother: "I thought of Lydia and of Lydia's mystery which I was now in some sense inheriting, and I knew that at some time in the future the Italian girl would speak to me Lydia's true epitaph" (IG, p. 170). Steven Cohan concludes that Edmund finds in Maggie what he was looking for in his own mother: "in Maggie he finds the perfect, energetic, and willing sexual mother".<sup>11</sup> Otto also remains connected with Lydia, because his daughter Flora is going to stay with him and she has begun to look like his mother: "'I'm going to stay here now', she said in a high voice. 'I'm going to look after pa'. She looked, she sounded, like Lydia" (IG, p. 158).

Thus in this novel the breakdown of a marital relationship (Lydia and her husband) which causes Lydia to turn to other members of her family for affection, breeds a whole series of disastrous family relationships. The extended family relations have to suffer because of the fact that the relationship at the core of the nuclear family was unsatisfactory. In contrast to A Summer Bird-Cage where a closer relationship with a family member is applauded at the end of the novel, The Italian Girl applauds those characters who are eventually able to break away from the seduc-

tions of this family. One of the few characters who succeeds in breaking away from the family at the end of the novel and who is able to start her own life is Isabel, Otto's wife. She decides to leave Otto and her daughter and for the first time in her life she is her own person: "the new Isabel seemed not fallen apart but more centred, more human, more complete" (LG, p. 161). So Isabel is one of the few characters in this novel who is allowed to become truly herself, and therefore happy, and this is only possible outside a family situation:

Now she was filled out into the complete Isabel. The sun, shining in a luminous blue sky, sent a long beam through the window and kindled her bright face and her hair as she bent over the suitcase. Millions of golden points moved about her in the sunny haze. (LG, p. 162)

### A.S. Byatt The Game (1967)

This novel, like Drabble's A Summer Bird-Cage, focuses on the relationship between two sisters. And there is just as much rivalry, jealousy and misunderstanding between these two sisters as between Sarah and Louise. It is as if Byatt a few years after the publication of Drabble's novel decided to portray her view of the situation. However, this novel is much more pessimistic about family relationships than Drabble's A Summer Bird-Cage, for it does not see the sisters working towards a better understanding of each other. On the contrary, The Game leads towards the death of one of the sisters, indirectly caused by the other sister.

The last journal entry of Cassandra, the sister who commits suicide, points to the reason for her decision. Her sister has written a novel about her and she feels her sister has taken over her personality:

So have I become a doll to stick pins in? Or a mirror on the wall to be asked what she, what either of us, means? At first I felt simply dirtied. My shoes, my nightdress, my pens, my papers, little dirty details of me lifted. Pinned out. Oh yes, even my underwear - like a limp doll to be fitted with puffs of her breath. (TG, p. 230)

Julia, the sister who wrote the novel about Cassandra is surprisingly matter-of-fact about her sister's suicide. She feels that by committing suicide her sister is trying to manipulate her, the way she did when they were children. Julia, however, refuses to feel guilty, refuses to succumb to Cassandra's scheme. Julia says: "She always made the rules. She planned the story, and I fitted in, I carried it out ... She wanted it this way. Why should I be guilty?" (TG, p. 233). In fact, Julia,

the younger sister, feels an enormous sense of relief at being freed from Cassandra's domination of her life. By being released of oppressive family ties Julia, like Isabel in The Italian Girl, can now live her life according to her own insight, and is able to choose the life-style she wants:

Whatever the rights and wrongs of it, she meant to live, now. She meant to be harder. She would not depend on other people's thoughts of her ... She would come to grips with things and write better books ... Now it would come from herself, but a detached, a judging, a discriminating self. (TG, p. 237)

In contrast to her sister, Drabble, Byatt thus sees the influence of the family as overwhelmingly negative.

## II.4 Conclusions

In the novels discussed above, traditional family relations are viewed as troublesome, oppressive to the individual, and to women in particular. The characters in these novels are involved in a large variety of family relations, but hardly any of these relations bring pleasure or satisfaction. This is in direct contrast to the "Happy Housewife Heroine" Betty Friedan discerned everywhere, for instance in advertisements and films and many popular magazines of the time (Chapter 2 of The Feminine Mystique). In opposing the happy housewife myth these novels relate to the undercurrent of dissatisfaction with family life in society, of which we have seen evidence in Part I (Chapter IV in particular). These novels show heroines who are unable to live in the institution of the family.

As we have seen above, the subjects of love and family life recur again and again in many of the novels by these writers. One of the most popular themes is the repressive quality of family life. In novels by male writers family life is also seen as repressive, but this is expressed in a totally different way. In those novels the protagonist himself is mostly unmarried, and has an absolute fear of being "enslaved". The repressive quality of family life in novels by male writers of the time is mainly associated with women. In Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958) marriage is regarded as the hook which is hidden behind the bait which is the woman, and is seen as the institution in which the woman ultimately triumphs over the man:

As soon as you were born you were captured by fresh air that you screamed against the minute you came out. Then you were roped in by a factory, had a machine slung around your neck, and then you were hooked up by the arse with a wife.<sup>12</sup>

The women writers discussed here would not agree at all that the woman is the captor. They see the woman as the captive of the institution of the family.

Yet, most novels (except for The Grass is Singing) are not so pessimistic as to conclude that women cannot but accept the given situation. By showing heroines who are trying out various forms of relationships within and outside the institution of the family, the novels try to encourage women to look beyond the convention of the traditional family for the satisfaction of their needs. Rosamund, for instance, finds happiness as a family member, but, as a single parent, not in a traditional nuclear family.

## CHAPTER III

### WORKING HEROINES

Nicola Beauman notes in A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-1939 that generally in pre-twentieth-century fiction by male and female writers alike, there is little interest in the humdrum of married life. Pre-1920s novels which deal with marriage tend to end rather than begin with the heroine's marriage. As Beauman notes: "The marriage ceremony is the novel's conventional happy ending. But the ensuing domestic bliss is an unfruitful topic for fiction, presumably because it is even-tempered, everyday and therefore dull".<sup>1</sup> Beauman's argument holds true to some extent, but in her eagerness to assign a new function to "her" writers she fails to notice that marriage is discussed in nineteenth-century novels in particular. The heroine tends to marry at the end of the novel, but during the course of the novel there is often a kind of selection of different kinds of marriages which the heroine encounters, so that she can make up her mind as to which marriage she would prefer. Ellen Moers's chapter "Money, Job, Little Women: Female Realism" in Literary Women is relevant in this respect. Moers mentions the example of Pride and Prejudice in which Elizabeth Bennet at the end of the novel marries, but during the novel a scala of marriages is portrayed, ranging from the happy marriage of the Gardiners to the dead end the marriage of her own parents has reached. What is perhaps unusual in Beauman's novels is the attention paid to domestic detail, such as household matters. As Beauman says: "during the 1920s, women writers gradually began to write about basic, everyday middle-class female occupations such as married love, the bringing up of children, the finding and keeping of domestic help".<sup>2</sup> For these pre-war middle-class writers, however, "basic everyday middle-class female occupations" did not include work outside the home. Beauman's middle-class married heroines stayed at home and devoted their lives to "domesticity" as she calls it.

If one looks at previous generations of women writers one occasionally does come across a female character who works. However, these are often unmarried women, and they regret this fact. One of the most famous examples of these working spinsters is Jane Eyre, the poor orphan who had to go out to work as a governess to earn a living. In her case, as with most heroines of

the time, it was clearly an either/or situation: she was unmarried, so she could (in her case, had to) work, but there is no doubt that if the right marriage proposal were to come along she would gladly abandon her chosen career. In the novel this is particularly clear in the short episode during which Jane works in a village school as a teacher. There is a long description of how successful she is at her job, and how much satisfaction it gives her, e.g.: "The rapidity of their [the pupils'] progress, in some instances, was even surprising; and an honest and happy pride I took in it: besides, I began personally to like some of the best girls".<sup>3</sup> But after this passage it is immediately made clear that she would still prefer marriage to Rochester:

At this period of my life, my heart far oftener swelled with thankfulness than sank with dejection: and yet, reader, to tell you all, in the midst of this calm, useful existence ... I used to rush into strange dreams at night ... dreams where, amidst unusual scenes, charged with adventure, with agitating risk and romantic chance, I still again and again met Mr Rochester ... the hope of passing a life-time at his side, would be renewed, with all its force and fire.<sup>4</sup>

And, of course, in the end Jane gives up her own career, and her independence, to look after a blind and ailing Rochester. Marriage is seen as more satisfactory than work, and the satisfaction Jane found in her work is easily discarded in the novel.

Again, it is worthwhile referring to Moers's chapter dealing with this subject in Literary Women. In it she argues that nineteenth-century women novelists such as Austen, Eliot, the Brontës and Mrs Gaskell are concerned very much with money and how this money is acquired in their novels. The main reason for this is that the woman's status and comfort in life largely depended on the man she married. Thus what these novelists are above all interested in is "man's work and man's money".<sup>5</sup> There are a few exceptions to this rule. Moers mentions, for instance, Charlotte Brontë's posthumously published novel The Professor in which the hero's wife at the end of the novel goes out to work with the consent of the hero. This novel, however, is the exception rather than the rule and generally the focus is on the male characters and the acquisition of money.

Penelope Mortimer in an article entitled "Powerful Women are Frightening, not only to Men, but to other Women" notes with dismay the scarcity of working women in fiction and in the media. She mentions the example of Doris Day films, which like Jane Eyre and the fiction in women's magazines all follow the same pattern:

you could have successful career women in fiction - provided they gave up their careers. They were usually Doris Day. The stories were all the same, and ended with DD selling her department store, or advertising agency or whatever, and melting into the supporting arms of Rock Hudson.<sup>6</sup>

Mortimer equates work with power and argues that fictional heroines and women in real life are not really allowed to be powerful, unless, as she writes, "they are old and ugly".<sup>7</sup>

Mortimer herself in her novels does in fact portray women who are working. In My Friend Says It's Bullet-Proof, for instance, the main character works for a women's magazine and attends a conference abroad. One of the interesting focus points in this novel is how the heroine experiences being the only woman at an all-male conference.

Mortimer and her contemporaries are specifically focusing on the enjoyment of work by female characters. The eight novelists discussed here have moved away from the automatic acceptance of a woman's job as but second best compared to marriage and motherhood. In their novels the Jane Eyres and Doris Days are allowed to keep their jobs when they marry. They might work part-time or they might have an interrupted or checkered career, but being a worker is seen to be a realistic and attractive option by many female characters. There are also many female characters who prefer a career to a marriage and they do not have to relinquish their point of view during the course of events as Doris Day and Jane Eyre had to do (cf. Rain Carter in The Sandcastle).

Some of the heroines are not too successful at the jobs they have, but at least female characters are for the first time in literary history allowed to work without being forced to look upon the position of worker as less important than the position of wife or mother. And even the success rate improves as time marches on. In Spark's The Public Image, the last novel to be discussed in this chapter, the main character is a highly successful and powerful film actress.

Most of the work the characters in the novels do, is fairly attractive (e.g. teachers, artists, writers). It is not surprising that the professions are over-represented in these novels, since the writers themselves are middle-class and write mainly about middle-class jobs. There is also a Guardian like belief in the salvation work can bring about - salvation from the feminine mystique. Yet, a substantial minority of less attractive jobs feature in these novels, for instance Kate in Girls in Their Married Bliss works in a drycleaner, and Lessing's Martha Quest works as a typist in a typing pool. Both characters have to take these jobs, just to earn a living.

It is logical that these eight women writers, who are all professional novelists and who have all held other jobs as well (Drabble and Bainbridge: actresses; Byatt and Murdoch: academics; Mortimer and Lessing: secretaries; O'Brien: chemist; Spark: editor), should attach such an importance to work. They all at some point in their lives reached the position of being financially independent and they know what that means. These writers fit in well with the general trend in society (as outlined in Part I Chapter II), i.e. the growth in employment of married women outside their homes.

This chapter concentrates on what work means to the female characters in the novels. Do the characters work because they yearn for economic independence, or do they work because they cannot do without the power Mortimer associates with paid employment? As we will see, there is a variety of reasons why the heroines in these novels think going out to work is important for them. The heroine of Johanna regards work as a means of self-fulfilment, and she also works for political reasons. Rain in The Sandcastle is a painter, and to her painting is a way of life which she cannot do without. And Miss Jean Brodie needs an aim in life after losing her fiancé in the war. All these characters, however, regard their work as being very important to them.

Another question which will have to be answered is how the characters regard their work experience. Are they able to find the satisfaction which they could not find in their family relationships in their jobs? Several studies performed in the '50s and '60s showed that working women obtained an increased confidence because of economic independence (cf. e.g. Klein, above). Studies performed in America in particular stressed the positive aspects of paid employment, while British studies were less optimistic about the magic work could perform, since there was also discrimination against women at work. Attention was paid in Part I Chapter II to the low-status and bad-pay characteristics of most jobs women had. Problems with child care facilities and the added burden of housework which was still largely done by the working woman also contributed to women feeling less happy than they might otherwise have been at work. Baker in Happily Ever After? notes that female characters often have underpaid and low-status jobs in the kind of non-literary or sub-literary texts she discusses.<sup>8</sup>

So, what about the characters in these novels? Is the working woman in these novels free from problems?

## Penelope Mortimer Johanna (1947)

Johanna is the earliest novel of all the novels discussed here. The novel, however, has the same basic structure as the others discussed here: the heroine has a strong desire to go out to work, but is met by a hostile environment. Johanna does not automatically relinquish all thoughts of a job when she gets married. And, although she goes through some hard times, her attitude is rewarded at the end of the novel. Johanna knows what she wants, but has great difficulty in achieving her aim as society, and above all, her husband, expect her to limit herself to one thing: being a wife. Johanna's husband Peter is so possessive of her that she is not even allowed to spend too much time with their child, let alone take up paid employment. This is the more ironical in view of the fact that they met while she was his secretary. Johanna outlines her position at the beginning of the novel:

When she had wanted a job, he had told her she wasn't a wage-slave; when she had wanted to look after the child, he had told her she wasn't a drudge; even when she had wanted to love him he'd said she must be his wife, not his whore ... (J, p. 11)

When Peter's play fails to get any positive reactions they go back to Vienna, where they come from. Johanna now sees her chance as they need money (J, p. 41). However, instead of finding a job she finds a lover: the rich, aristocratic officer Von Brachenau. During the greater part of the novel Johanna wavers between her two options: a job or a lover. The novel is set around the time of the invasion of Austria by Hitler in 1938, and Johanna has several contacts in the underground resistance movement. Her lover, like her husband, does not approve of the work she does for the underground socialist movement, but Johanna defends herself:

I wasn't brought up to think only of marriage, children, love. I knew I should have to work for my living. My father knew it too. He taught me to think, to know what was going on, to fight for my bit of the world. (J, p. 111)

Yet, Von Brachenau manages to persuade Johanna to go and live with him. Von Brachenau's counterpart in the novel is the resistance worker Hans Müller. While Von Brachenau unites all the bodily pleasures (he enjoys good food and is an excellent lover), Müller is an intellectual whom Johanna regards as her guru. She has known Hans all her life (he was a friend of her father who was shot by the nazis) and trusts his judgment. Thus the two men stand for Johanna's two options of having a lover and being a worker, and the difficulty she has in

combining the two.

Child care does not seem to be a problem in Johanna's case. In the beginning of the novel she is wealthy enough to employ a nanny for her son John, and later on when she goes from lover to job and vice versa, there is always miraculously a neighbour or a good friend who is willing to look after her child. Even for months on end. Of course this is rather unrealistic, as most people would not take too kindly to suddenly being burdened with somebody else's child.

When Von Brachenau asks Johanna to marry him she momentarily succumbs to the attractions of life with him. She even considers divorcing Peter who is in Buchenwald at that moment: "I'll marry him, she thought suddenly; we shall have children; we'll grow old. I'll divorce Peter, even if he is in Buchenwald and can't fight back" (J, p. 216). Yet she also realizes that it is not enough for her to be merely somebody's lover or wife:

Hans's love affairs were so ridiculously unimportant; her own was the only that mattered, everything else depended on it. But you know that isn't true, she said to herself derisively. Why fool yourself? (J, p. 180)

When Von Brachenau dies soon after, Johanna can go back to doing secretarial work for Hans's resistance movement.

Frederic's death is very convenient in the novel. For now Johanna can dedicate herself to her work. Frederic, like Peter, did not really approve of her work, and she would have had to give it up if she had married him. Through the device of Von Brachenau's death the author makes it possible for the heroine to have the best of both worlds: she has had her perfect love, and now she can go back to working for Hans. Johanna ideally would like to be a married woman and a worker at the same time, but that is not possible for her yet. Her lover allowed her to go to work when they lived together, but would not have allowed her her work if they had been married. Through the device of Frederic von Brachenau's death Mortimer reverses the Doris Day plot: the heroine does not give up her job to get married at the end of this novel, but the hero of the novel has to die so that the heroine can go back to work.

### **Iris Murdoch The Sandcastle (1957)**

As with the other Murdoch novels discussed above, this novel functions through the thwarting of conventional expectations. At the beginning of The Sandcastle there seem to be two

women in two typically feminine positions: the housewife and mother Nan and the working unmarried Rain Carter. During the novel, however, both these women prove to be much less conventional than they first appeared. Nan turns out to be not happy as a housewife and mother and wants more out of life, and Rain is quite happy to be an unmarried worker, and not so keen at all to attach herself to a man.

As usual with Murdoch, these women are mainly viewed through the eyes of a male character who has the point of view. In this case it is Mor, husband of Nan and would-be lover of Rain. But, untypically, especially for Murdoch's early novels, the reader is given a large amount of insight into the two women's characters by the women themselves. In large sections of the novel either Nan or Rain has the point of view.

In the first chapter of this novel Nan is portrayed as a woman of strong character who nevertheless appears to be satisfied to lead the life of a wife of a schoolmaster with two children. She seems to have very little interest or ambition outside her current position. When the reader first comes across Rain, seen through Mor's eyes, we see a young, romantic-looking girl. Mor uses the following phrases to give his first impression of her: "a very small woman", "like a child", and "a very short youthful-looking girl, with boyishly cut dark hair, and darkly rosy cheeks, wearing a black cotton blouse, an elaborately flowered red skirt, and a necklace of large red beads" (TS, pp. 24-25).

As the novel progresses Nan turns out to be less happy in her role of matron than Mor had painted her in the beginning, and Rain proves to be a decisive, hard-working woman who is highly successful and finds satisfaction in her career (that of a painter).

Nan has the point of view in chapter 12, and that is when we find out what kind of person she really is. When Nan discovers her husband's involvement with Rain, Nan allows herself for the first time in her married life to feel dissatisfied. In the past, as the following quotation implies, she has felt unhappy, but she has always pushed the feeling away:

She had never in her life allowed Bill to cause her real unhappiness. There had been, there could be, no occasion for this. In her situation, that of a successfully married woman, unhappiness of that sort would have been merely neurotic. (TS, p. 172)

For the first time Nan realizes that she cannot pretend to be the happy housewife. Then she does

something which would have seemed entirely out of character if judged by the personality Mor sketched at the beginning of the novel: she goes to Tim Burke, whom she knows is in love with her, to ask him for advice. He, however, tells her to go back to Mor.

At the end of the novel we see Nan perform a desperate act. She announces in an after dinner speech that Mor has decided to become a Labour MP for a nearby safe seat, and that they are about to move to London. For this Mor would have to relinquish Rain, as Nan puts it:

The tide now turns for my husband, and for myself and for our children. We have discussed the matter and are at last agreed that there is no other bond or tie which can prevent us from adventuring forward together. (TS, pp. 269-270)

This announcement, which comes as a total surprise to Mor, makes it impossible for the conventional Mor to go against his wife in public. This, Nan's only way of keeping her husband, is in fact against her own wishes, for earlier on in the novel she had declared several times that she did not approve of Mor's political ambitions. Thus, at the end of the novel Nan has tied the knot with her husband for the second time, but she cannot get the illusion back that she is a happy wife. The last image of Nan in the novel is that of a broken woman: "She looked very tired and like an old woman" (TS, p. 286).

The way the character of Rain is perceived also changes drastically during the course of events. At the beginning of the novel Rain is seen as an innocent, sad girl who has just lost her father. Of course it is Mor who tells us this, and like most Murdoch men he has a fallible point of view. Mor is so overcome by her girlishness that he cannot believe that this is a working woman: "He found himself wondering if she could really paint" (TS, p. 25). Mor's, and the reader's, opinions of Rain require rapid adjustment when it becomes clear that Rain is a confident and successful woman. One of the first indications that Rain is not so child-like as she seemed to Mor is the following:

Mor realized with a shock of surprise that the big green Riley which stood at the door must belong to Miss Carter. It seemed to him amazing that such a small woman should own such a large car. (TS, p. 73)

As in the case of Nan, a real insight into Rain's character is given in a chapter in which Rain has the point of view (Chapter 7). Rain proves to be a very professional painter, who is first and foremost interested in her work:

Nor was she thinking about William Mor, although that was a subject which had preoccupied her for a while before she retired to bed the previous evening. She was completely absorbed in what she was doing. Early that morning Rain had found herself able to make a number of important decisions about the picture, and once her plan had become clear she started at once to put it into execution. (TS, p. 93)

The greater part of the chapter in fact consists of an explanation of Rain's method of painting, and it gives her thoughts when she makes decisions about her work.

Rain's success at her work is further stressed when she takes Mor to an exhibition of her work. He realizes then that her paintings obtain a good price, and that she owns a luxurious villa overlooking the Mediterranean Sea (TS, p. 220). In fact, Rain is a bit of a celebrity:

Rain's appearance created a mild sensation in the room above. She was known to the girl who sold the catalogues and to two art dealers and the owner of the gallery, who were chatting in the middle of the room. One or two other people, who were looking at the pictures, turned to watch. (TS, p. 126)

Thus, Rain is a confident woman who is successful at her job. This leaves her in a rather strong position when Mor tells her that he cannot but follow his wife's plan and go to London with his family to become a MP. To Rain a relationship or marriage is but of secondary importance to her painting. Of course she does mind that she and Mor will have to split up (perhaps surprisingly she genuinely seems to care for him), but it is not the end of her world. She even realizes that Mor might not have liked living with her, because she would continue painting, whereas he would not have a job:

'You would be happy with me for a short while', said Rain, 'but then what would happen? It's all dry sand running through the fingers. I can wander about the world and wherever I go I can paint. If we were together my work would continue. But what about yours?' (TS, p. 275)

The last image of Rain in the novel is Rain working determinedly to finish the picture she is painting (TS, p. 277).

Nan's unhappiness as a housewife, and the strength and satisfaction Rain finds in her work have an effect on the next generation. The daughter of Nan and Mor, Felicity, of whom it was said at the beginning of the novel that it would be nice for her to become a secretary (TS, p. 12), is now going to get the chance to embark on a more promising career:

'Need I go on that secretarial course?' said Felicity. 'I wasn't sure before, but now I think I'd much rather stay at school for the present'. 'You shall stay at school then', said Mor, 'and later on perhaps you'll go to a university'. (TS, p. 285)

This novel thus voices a very strong pro-work attitude, and in fact, sees work as the main source of fulfilment for women.

### **Muriel Spark The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961)**

In this novel the main character is, like Rain, most of all devoted to her work and puts relationships with men in the second place.

Jean Brodie is a teacher at an Edinburgh girls' school, and is very dedicated to her work. Her aim is to turn her pupils into special human beings: "I am putting old heads on your young shoulders', Miss Brodie had told them at that time, 'and all my pupils are the crème de la crème'" (JB, p. 8). She is so dedicated to her work that she does not want to get married:

You girls are my vocation. If I were to receive a proposal of marriage tomorrow from the Lord of Lyon King-of-Arms I would decline it. I am dedicated to you in my prime. (JB, p. 23)

Nevertheless, this does not prevent her from forming attachments to two male colleagues. The relationship with the art teacher, who is married, is platonic, but the relationship with the music teacher is fully sexual.

In a long passage Spark provides a context in which to put Jean Brodie. She is one of the women left behind as spinsters because of the First World War (her fiancé died), and she needs a cause to replace marriage:

There were legions of her kind during the nineteenthirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art and social welfare, education or religion ... The vigorous daughters of dead or enfeebled merchants, of ministers of religion, University professors ... who had endowed these daughters with shrewd wits, high-coloured cheeks, constitutions like horses, logical educations, hearty spirits and private means. (JB, p. 42)

Thus, Jean Brodie places her work at the foreground, but not to the exclusion of relationships with men. The novel stresses the positive side of this attitude (as in the passage quoted from p. 42 above), but it also ridicules the fanaticism with which the teacher devotes herself to her pupils. At several points in the novel the result of her dedication is shown. The girls who were her special pupils turn out to be no better than anybody else. Her fanatical insistence on a "special" education for these girls (e.g. knowing which soap is best) is ridiculed in the novel. For the girls all excel in something, but the achievements they are said to be "famous" for are not very

remarkable:

Monica Douglas was a prefect, famous mostly for mathematics which she could do in her brain [all the other girls count on their fingers], and for her anger which, when it was lively enough, drove her to slap out to right and left ... Rose Stanley was famous for sex ... Eunice Gardiner, small, neat, and famous for her spritely gymnastics and glamorous swimming ... Sandy Stranger ... was merely notorious for her small, almost non-existent eyes ... Mary McGregor ... whose fame rested on her being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame. (JB, pp. 6-8)

Moreover, it is in the end one of Jean Brodie's own "disciples", Sandy, who gives the headmistress the suggestion of how she could get rid of her unorthodox teacher: Miss Brodie sympathizes with the Italian and German fascists (the novel is set in the '30s). This leads to Miss Brodie being fired from her job. Sandy takes the step of betraying her teacher because she thinks Miss Brodie misuses her position to influence other people's lives too much (e.g. one of her pupils flees to Spain to support Franco and is killed). Miss Brodie's schemes reach even further. Miss Brodie, who is really in love with the music teacher, is denying herself an affair with him, firstly, because he is married and secondly, because she dedicates herself to her pupils "in her prime". However, she wants Rose to be a substitute for her and manipulates Rose so that she will have an affair with the music teacher instead. Sandy realizes this and offers herself to the man. As Sandy thinks about Miss Brodie: "She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end" (JB, p. 120).

The novel, however, does not condemn women who are committed to their work, only the fanaticism with which Jean Brodie misuses the power entrusted to her. When one of the girls is accosted by an exhibitionist, and is subsequently interviewed by a female police officer, this woman becomes a role model for the girls, because she is in a powerful position:

The question of the policewoman was inexhaustible, and although Sandy never saw her, nor at that time any policewoman ... she quite deserted Alan Breck and Mr Rochester and all the heroes of fiction for the summer term, and fell in love with the unseen policewoman who had questioned Jenny. (JB, p. 67)

### **Doris Lessing The Golden Notebook (1962)**

The form of this novel is rather unusual: there are fragments of four notebooks interlaced with chapters of a conventional novel. All these fragments together, however, in the end combine into one figure, the female protagonist of the novel, Anna/Ella. Critics have above all stressed the

fragmentedness of Anna's personality, e.g. "The female protagonists in Lessing's major work are complex human beings, their personalities the embodiment of that fragmentation and chaos which the novelist sees as a fundamental feature of modern life".<sup>9</sup> Critics have generally failed to pay attention to the fact that all these identities of Anna (past/present, lover, worker, mother, psychiatric patient) in the end make up one woman. In fact, Lessing shows us through her formal device of fragmentation that one woman has to take up many different positions in society, and that one woman has to face many conflicting demands upon her. Lessing herself stresses that Anna achieves unity in the end: the different characters of The Golden Notebook

have also reflected each other, been aspects of each other, given birth to each other's thoughts and behaviour - are each other, form wholes. In the inner Golden Notebook, things have come together, the divisions have broken down, there is formlessness, with the end of fragmentation - the triumph of the second theme, which is that of unity. (GN, p. vii)

Regarding this novel from the point of view of unity it becomes less far removed from the other novels discussed so far. Anna has exactly the same problem as the majority of heroines we have encountered so far: how can a woman satisfy all her own and society's demands.

Anna is showing a particular preference for a certain combination of demands (cf. also below). She wants to have a relationship with a man, which is satisfying as well as permanent and she wants to be a writer. It is this combination which is particularly troublesome. As Sharon Spencer writes: "If she [Anna] publicly undertakes the task of self-dramatization and self-exposure, she is likely to confirm the suspicions ... that she owes her success as a writer to her inadequacies as a woman or - worse - to her masculine qualities".<sup>10</sup> It is appropriate here to bear in mind Lessing's statement quoted above that she was accused of being a "balls writer" when she published The Golden Notebook.

As we shall see, in the golden notebook Anna can relate successfully to a man and also starts to write another novel. In fact, she needs a man to make her write again. Like for some of the heroines discussed in the previous chapter (e.g. Martha in MQ and Anna in SS) an initial feminine dependence on men leads to a certain amount of female independence later on. In fact, in Lessing's novel the positions of lover and worker are inextricably bound together, and the heroine needs both for true fulfilment.

At the centre of this novel there is a female character with a specific work-related problem. The writer Anna cannot write another novel. She cannot write a conventional novel, but she can put her thoughts on paper. Anna keeps four notebooks which each points to a reason for Anna's writer's block. She describes her four notebooks as follows:

I keep four notebooks, a black notebook, which is to do with Anna Wulf the writer; a red notebook, concerned with politics; a yellow notebook in which I make stories out of my experience; and a blue notebook which tries to be a diary. (GN, p. 475)

The first notebook, the black notebook, deals with Anna's African experiences and the publication and filming of her first novel Frontiers of War. The novel was written out of a genuine urge to write: "I remember very clearly the moment in which that novel was born. The pulse beat, violently; afterwards, when I knew I would write, I worked out what I could write" (GN, p. 63). The novel was a success and Anna has lived from the royalties ever since. However, she finds it difficult to create something fictional again, for she is now more interested in "facts" and feels that conventional fiction does not relate sufficiently to the way she experiences life. Therefore a large part of the black notebook shows Anna's attempt at writing down the "real" events which she experienced which went into the making of her first novel. Of course she has to give up in the end, for no writing can be entirely objective, as it is shaped by the human mind (GN, p. 153). All in all the publication of Frontiers of War has left the writer Anna with a sour taste, particularly the Hollywood synopsis she wrote for the film version of the novel: "I feel sick when I look at the parody synopsis, at the letters from the film company" (GN, p. 63). Anna concludes that she cannot write any more.

The second notebook, the yellow notebook, which she uses side by side with the other ones, is Anna's attempt to write a second novel: "The yellow notebook looked like the manuscript of a novel for it was called The Shadow of the Third. It certainly began like a novel" (GN, p. 169). The novel deals with a long-standing relationship the protagonist, Ella, has, and which is broken off by the man, who is married. The situation is similar to the Michael-Anna relationship in the blue notebook (see below) and the yellow notebook is a different version of the same story. However, at the end of this notebook, when her writing deteriorates more and more into pastiche, Anna comes to the same conclusion as at the end of the black notebook, namely that she really

cannot write another novel.

Another notebook, the red notebook, deals with Anna's involvement in politics, with the British Communist Party in particular. Her involvement with politics is an excuse for not writing, for she thinks that in the CPGB she can deal with the "real" issues she misses out on when she is writing a novel. However, she soon finds out that there is as much fiction in this party (about Stalin's activities, for example) as anywhere else, and of course she is upset when she finds out. Anna says to her fellow party members: "you've got to learn to tell the truth and stop all this hole-and-corner conspiracy and telling lies about things" (GN, p. 297). In fact the writing she comes across in the course of her work for the party is more like propaganda than anything else. An example is the story in which a British teacher is asked to advise Stalin, with Stalin very polite and grateful for the help given to him (GN, pp. 303-305). In the end Anna realizes that her political work has been to no avail. In contrast to what she expected it has not given her the feeling that she has really done something useful: "Not for the first time in my life I realise I have spent weeks and months in frenzied political activity and have achieved absolutely nothing" (GN, p. 446).

Thus novel writing and political activity are abandoned as unsatisfactory at the end of the black, yellow and red notebooks. In the blue notebook Anna turns to another option. She keeps a diary and hopes this might form a true reflection of events and experiences in her life. In this notebook Anna works as a reader for a publishing house which is CP controlled, lives with her daughter Janet from her marriage, and for some time she has a relationship with a married doctor called Michael. The notebook largely covers one day in her life: the day she hands in her job, and Michael breaks off their relationship. On pages 331 to 368 she gives a blow by blow account of her day, commenting on exactly how she feels during the whole day. To give an example of her thoughts in the early morning:

'the housewife's disease' has taken hold of me. The tension in me, so that peace has already gone away from me, is because the current has been switched on: I-must-dress-Janet-get-her-breakfast-send-her-off-to-school-get-Michael's-breakfast-don't-forget-I'm-out-of-tea-etc.-etc. ... I learned that the resentment, the anger, is impersonal. It is the disease of women of our time. I can see it in women's faces, their voices, every day, or in the letters that come to the office. (GN, p. 333)

It is passages like these which give a clear insight into women's thoughts which were regarded as

the most innovatory at the time the novel was published. Anna is an effective spokesperson for the women of her time and clearly conveys the dissatisfaction women were feeling. Anna herself, however, is not yet satisfied with this form, for she concludes this section of the notebook with a short, conventional diary entry for the same day, which leaves out all the personal details (such as having a period).

At the end of the blue notebook the American writer Saul comes to live with her, and together they go through a period of breakdown. This makes Anna finally realize that she has a writer's block and that she really has been trying to run away from this all the time. Saul said:

'Instead of making a record of my sins in your diary, why don't you write another novel?' I said: 'I could give you a dozen reasons why not ... but the real reason is that I have a writer's block. That's all. And it's the first time I've admitted it'. (GN, p. 604)

After this admission Anna is able to buy a golden notebook in which she feels she can express herself on paper: "all of myself in one book" (GN, p. 607).

In this golden notebook she decides that she will just accept the limitations of the conventional novel form, because none of the forms she has tried out were really successful in conveying what she wanted:

Words. Words. I play with words, hoping that some combination, even a chance combination, will say what I want ... The fact is, the real experience can't be described. I think, bitterly, that a row of asterisks, like an old-fashioned novel, might be better. (GN, p. 633)

When Saul tries to make Anna write by giving her the first sentence for a new novel, she feels reconciled with the limitations of the novel and she complies with his wishes. The novel she writes is "Free Women" which appears interspersed with the notebooks in The Golden Notebook.

The Golden Notebook is unified by the quest for self-expression through work by the heroine. She is looking for the best way to express herself and is finally able to do this by writing a novel. A further level of meaning can be added to the novel if one takes another step back and sees that it is Lessing herself who also expresses herself through her work, through The Golden Notebook. This novel is Lessing's most autobiographical one, as it closely follows the various routes her own life has taken (cf. Part II).

Of all the novels discussed here this novel gives the most comprehensive account of

alternative female identities. The end of the novel stresses the importance of unification, however, the need to accept all the different facets of a woman's life. While in many of the novels the choices put to the readers are either/or choices, Lessing stresses that a woman, like a man, ought to be able to combine all aspects of life.

### **Margaret Drabble The Garrick Year (1964)**

Francois Bonford argues that the essence of The Garrick Year is that: "life, for her [Drabble's] heroines, derives its emotional and existential significance from childbirth and motherhood".<sup>11</sup> As mentioned before, the theme of motherhood indeed plays an important role in Drabble's novels. However, The Garrick Year also shows that this is but part of the story: the heroine cannot be happy when she is just a wife and mother, she needs more to fulfil her completely. Emma aims to combine the positions of mother, wife, and worker, but has difficulty in doing so. During the greater part of the novel she is a housewife and does not have paid employment, but she continues to think of work as essential for the development and sanity of her own personality.

The novel opens with a woman in an advertisement on television. It is Sophy, who later turns out to have been Emma's rival in love, both for her husband David and the play director Wyndham. Sophy was an aspiring actress, but now she is in an advertisement for chocolate cake. Nevertheless, Emma does not think negatively about this work, for "in any case she [Sophy] would have earned a lot of money from that tantalizing moment" (GY, p. 10). Emma has come to the stage that she regards any work better than no work. The rest of the novel is a flashback explaining how she comes to this point of view.

Emma used to work as a fashion model, but now she does not have any work. She has two small children. Although Drabble in this novel, as in all her novels, sets great store by motherhood, she also makes it clear that Emma cannot be completely happy if she does not also have some outside interests, and work is particularly important in this respect.

David and Emma both toy with the idea of finding lovers, but at the end of the novel they realize that they actually have more in common than they thought. It is especially their daughter Flora who makes them aware of this. She falls in a pond, and David and Emma react exactly the

same way to the incident:

When he asked her what she had been doing, she said, 'Ducks', and then she started to yell once more, 'Water, water', whereupon both David and I, to stop her getting into her full vocal stride, said simultaneously, and in almost the same words, 'What a clever girl, fancy going for a swim with your clothes on'. The thought arrested and distracted her: and the terrifying unison of our response made David and me exchange a look of awestruck fright. (GY, p. 153)

Thus it is parenthood which unites these two at the end of the novel.

However, it is stressed that Emma does not have to be satisfied with motherhood alone. At the beginning of the novel Emma has just been offered a job which appealed to her, but her husband wants to act in Hereford for one season. It is made clear what this job would have meant to her:

The nation would have been impressed by the news as read by me. And I for my part would have enjoyed reading it: I have always had a passion for facts and a mild yearning for notoriety, and I could imagine no more happy way of combining these two interests. And after three years of childbearing and modelling maternity clothes, I felt in serious need of a good, steady, lucrative job. (GY, p. 10)

The job would have meant the answer to a deep inner need for Emma. A little later on she again stresses the importance of this job:

It seemed such a perfect answer to everything, as it involved a good, steady wage, ... It would have kept me happy, and I would not have had to leave the babies for more than fifteen hours of their waking lives; this seemed to me to be so nearly fair a bargain that I was in despair at the thought of losing it. I knew that I would never again have so adequate a chance of satisfying my conflicting responsibilities. (GY, p. 14)

It is stressed that Emma can only be a good mother because she knows that she will be able to return to work: "the thought of those three evenings at work, in a large impersonal building where no cries could reach me, had kept me going through the exhausting business of pregnancy, birth, and sleepless nights" (GY, p. 14). Yet, Emma does give up this job to follow her husband to Hereford.

In Hereford Emma is not satisfied with being a housewife and mother. She feels she has to have her own identity away from her family. Emma says I was "beginning to feel an obscure need to establish myself as something other than the housewife she clearly hoped I might be" (GY, p. 60). She feels that she has neglected herself, has neglected the part of her which yearns for a job:

I thought of David, and Flora, and Joseph, and myself, and with each step I realized more clearly that for the last few months, for the last year, I personally, I myself, the part of me that was not a function and a smile and a mother, had been curled up and rotten with grief and patience and pain. (GY, p. 90)

In Hereford, a small town, there is no suitable employment for Emma which might have fulfilled that need. And so, she turns instead to the director of the festival's plays, Wyndham, for a half-hearted affair.

At the end of the novel Emma is reconciled with David, but she still does not have a job. This is why at the end of the novel Emma cannot be 100% happy (GY, p. 172).

### **Muriel Spark The Public Image (1968)**

The main character in this novel, Annabel Christopher, is a successful film actress, and the novel mainly concentrates on how difficult it is for a woman to be accepted as being successful at her job by those around her.

Annabel is active in three different spheres of life. She is married, has a small baby, and is an actress. She has recently become a famous actress after an Italian director thought up the image "English Tiger-Lady" for her, implying that she is a lady in public and a tiger in private. This image is highly dependent on her husband's cooperation, who has to vouchsafe for the truth of this image. She is now much more successful than her husband, who is also an actor, and he is jealous of her success, putting her down whenever he can: "Please do not talk of 'significance', because you are insignificant yourself" (PI, p. 16). Annabel, however, is very happy with her position. She is the breadwinner of the family, employs a nanny for her baby and some more staff to look after the house. She does not feel there are any problems: "Her new professional life had indeed sharpened her wits. She found it exciting" (PI, p. 13).

Frederick finds it so annoying that he is part of Annabel's public image (he being the dependable husband of the Tiger-Lady in the eyes of the press) without being valued for his own professional qualities that he sets out to attempt to destroy the public image on which her popularity as an film actress is based. He invites people to their flat for a party, while he commits suicide elsewhere. He leaves suicide notes behind saying that Annabel is uncaring. His aim is to wreck her career by making it known that Annabel was hosting "an orgy" while her husband was in trouble. And, indeed, Annabel's first thoughts when she hears of his death are not so much

about the man himself as what the effect of his death will be on her career: "The abomination Frederick had brought down on her. He had sent that party, that intolerable party, to be blood on her hands, blood on her public image ..." (PI, p. 58). She arranges a press conference which she handles skilfully, trying to minimize the damage to her career. She tries to turn her husband's story around by spreading the rumour that he had many girlfriends and that this led to his death. It is important to her that her name is cleared so that she can continue with her career. It is only when she is working, as in the following quotation when she is reading a new film-script, she is truly happy: "She flicked it open and focused her mind upon the page. It was like coming home after being stuck for many hours in a traffic jam" (PI, p. 91).

Nevertheless, she feels obliged to destroy her own image, and thereby her chance of continuing with her career, when her husband's friend threatens to show Frederic's suicide letters to the press. She prefers to make these letters public herself rather than be at the mercy of a blackmailer.

At the end of the novel Annabel is seen leaving the country, completely unnoticed by other people, because she is expected to be at the courthouse where the inquest into her husband's death is being held. The wording used by Spark to convey what the destruction of her career means to Annabel is rather appropriate. The last image of this novel is of Annabel feeling only a mother now, and feeling that nothing is left of her former public image:

Nobody recognized her as she stood, having moved the baby to rest on her hips, conscious also of the baby in a sense weightlessly and perpetually within her, as an empty shell contains, by its very structure, the echo and harking image of former and former seas. (PI, p. 125)

## Conclusions

The wish to work is strongly present in many of the female characters in the novels discussed above. Work to them is an opportunity for self-expression, and provides a chance to obtain a positive self-image. This clearly relates to what Viola Klein found in Britain's Married Woman Workers. Married as well as unmarried characters value work very highly. They are not made to disregard the satisfaction they find in work as in many earlier novels such as Jane Eyre. The authors clearly approve of their characters' urge to work. This attitude heralds from the novelists' own experience of work, and the importance of writing for them in particular. It even

seems as if the novelists in their wish to portray the positive aspects of work, have gone out of their way to clear some of the obstacles women would encounter in real life: appropriate jobs are not too hard to come by, etc.

However, for the married women in these novels it often remains problematic to combine the positions of worker and family member. The husbands of the heroines seem to be particularly intent on making this combination difficult for the female characters (e.g. Johanna, The Garrick Year). Life seems to be much easier for them when the husbands are not there to trouble them, especially since many of these characters do not need a husband for financial reasons (e.g. The Millstone, Johanna). Again this matches the novelists' own life-stories as the majority of them are divorced.

Contrary to what we found in "real" society, the women in these novels are not prevented from working by inadequate child care. The majority of heroines, perhaps because of their decidedly middle-class status, have easy access to nannies and servants who can be conveniently called upon at all times.

On the whole, these characters do not seem to suffer too much from the problems encountered by their working contemporaries in society. It is as if the writers do not want to question too much their newly-found way to freedom through work in case it proves to be inadequate and women are left with no way out of their situation. Clearly, work has a function the family cannot have for these female characters: it provides financial independence, confidence and happiness. Thus the novels form a direct counterattack on the idea of femininity which states that women can only be happy as wives and mothers.

## CONCLUSIONS

The British feminist movement did not just start all of a sudden with a bang in 1968. Before it a long process of growing awareness of the necessity of more radical social changes to accommodate women's needs had taken place, especially among educated, middle-class women. At the time this process was not part of the public awareness, so it seemed when feminism arrived in the public eye in 1968 that it arrived suddenly and without warning. By the '50s feminism had become an old-fashioned concept, associated with the movement for the right to vote, and it was regarded as a closed chapter by many. The younger women who were feeling dissatisfactions in the '50s and '60s were not particularly interested in political equality, but rather in equal social, work and personal relationships. In this sense these women were proto-feminist in that they were, unconsciously, paving the way for the '70s and feminists like Kate Millett whose interest lay precisely in personal relationships and their implications (Sexual Politics). One of the main stimulants for this process seems to have been the fact that although the "feminine mystique" was at its height in the media in the fifties, more and more married women than ever before went out to work and therefore lived lives which clashed with the ideal of the feminine mystique, namely the "happy housewife". And work related grievances, such as demands for equal pay, in the end formed the direct impetus for the start of the post-war women's movement in 1968.

Thus, even in the fifties women did not follow the feminine ideal as passively as is often assumed. As was shown in Part I of this dissertation, there were certain areas where the dissatisfaction with women's lives was most outspoken - in the writings of middle-class journalists and intellectuals (e.g. Klein, Whitehorn, Hunt) published in books or in journals such as New Society, and in letters by middle-class women readers to The Guardian. Even in some women's magazines the occasional dissenting voice seeped through, which was however immediately squashed by editorial comment. In most of the sociological publications of the time it is recognized that women face difficulties, but women are generally seen as "problems" which have to be studied. In these studies it is generally assumed, that women should adapt to society, rather than vice versa (see e.g. Zweig, Young and Willmott). Bowlby's infamous attempt "to teach" women how to be "better mothers" is a case in point.

For the eight writers discussed here in their publications (mainly novels, but also short

stories, poems, non-fictional articles) the ideology of femininity was a central idea to be dealt with both in their work and in their lives. As Felski has noted these kind of ideologies often have a mediating function - pervading fiction and "reality". In this case the novels show heroines working out a strategy for themselves of how to deal with femininity. They still find some attractions in it (e.g. esp. Lessing's heroines show, in spite of their apparent independence, a strong desire to be loved eternally by one man), but mainly try to find ways away from it. The heroines are, as it were, the fictional counterparts of Friedan's unhappy housewives. They do not feel totally certain about where this will lead to - feminism as such does not feature as the clear end of the road. In retrospect the reader can see that this is what these novels are bound to lead to, but the heroines themselves are seldom turned into 100% feminists overnight. Rather, they are exploring different options from the man identified one which the feminine mystique prescribes.

The writers were mainly drawing upon their own experiences as women, and this appealed to a large number of female readers, who were struggling with the same issues at the time. The fact that these women were middle-class, white and heterosexual did not seem to affect the general appeal of the novels they wrote. Rather they paved the way for women from a wider background (e.g. working-class, lesbian, black) to publish their experiences at a later date. The privileged background of the authors and their protagonists makes for rather optimistic novels. For them progress was possible within society as it was, and they did not see the need for a social revolution. (Later feminists have criticized this unrealistic optimism a la Friedan). The writers show the heroines thinking on their feet to find individualistic solutions for their problems. In most novels, however, there is a definite, be it often implicit, social criticism, particularly of the institution of marriage. Marriages do not just go wrong when a heroine accidentally marries a Mr Wrong instead of a Mr Right, as happens in earlier novels. No, most marriages are seen as unsatisfactory for the heroine, and, furthermore, in many cases one therefore sees a heroine rejecting the institution of marriage, typically at the end of a novel (this contrasts sharply to the marriage of the heroine which often forms the happy ending of earlier novels by women writers, e.g. Austen). Examples of this rejection of the institution of marriage are Martha Quest (after two failed marriages) in A Ripple from the Storm, and Kate at the end of Girls in Their Married Bliss.

The realist form which these novels took underlined the immediacy of the novels - the

feeling that here was one woman talking to another. The traditional realist form most of the novelists used was effective because the author was able to show the characters exploring in great detail the contradictions and possibilities on offer. The reader, in the realist form, is not estranged from the protagonist and is able to feel empathy with her as she struggles to find her "truer" self. Spark, for instance, sees this ability to communicate experiences in writing as the main function of the novelist: "the novelist is out to say what happened."<sup>1</sup> The Bildungsroman is one of the most popular forms of the realist tradition in these novels. The writers adapt the traditional Bildungsroman so that it becomes a female form: The protagonist is always a woman; the novel does not generally end with marriage, but begins with a given marital relationship; the "social imaginary" (as Felski calls it) is altered (e.g. the heroines often leave their men, and are not made to feel unhappy about this). Thus the apparently traditional Bildungsroman undergoes radical changes. Felski:

The important and widespread reappropriation and reworking of such textual models indicates that the project of modernity is indeed an unfinished history, that concerns with subjectivity and self-emancipation encoded within narrative structures possess a continuing and often urgent relevance for oppressed social groups.<sup>2</sup>

So, there were a large number of like-minded, mainly middle-class women (they had easier access to the media, publishers, etc.) who were discussing the position of women in post-war Britain in writing. There were contacts between the various sections of this group, for instance: individual friendships (Murdoch - Byatt), Drabble and Mortimer both wrote for newspapers and women's magazines for years, and O'Brien and Lessing, among others, mention that they were in contact with their readership through the many letters they received. However, the members of this group valued above all else their independence, their newly-found ability to speak up for themselves and therefore showed a reluctance to being labelled feminist (cf. e.g. interviews with Lessing, Drabble, Murdoch, etc.). The significance about these eight women writers is that although each writer at the time wrote from her own perspective, their works combine into a web of interrelated meanings. What we see here are not eight isolated dissenting voices. Reading these eight writers alongside each other reveals to the reader the combined weight and influence of these novels. Although the separate voices at the time did not realize it, the combined effect of

their work would eventually result in a general social movement and a feminist community in Felski's sense. Felski, when discussing post-1968 feminist novels recognises the coming into existence of "a feminist counter-public sphere",<sup>3</sup> which forms the basis of this second wave of feminism:

it has become apparent that the process of identity formation in feminist literature is crucially indebted to a concept of community. The individual subject is viewed in relation to and as a representative of a gendered collective which self-consciously defines itself against society as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

The products this community has brought forth, for instance the novels of the eight writers discussed in Part III above, are remarkably similar in their themes and characterization of the heroines. This underlines the existence of a de facto community. The main concern of these writers was the portrayal of alternative female identities to the reader, different from the feminine one which confined women to the home and which was omni-present in the media. These novels managed to destroy the false image of femininity by presenting more attractive alternatives to the reader. The heroines are seen testing out different courses of action, especially with regards to work and family relationships.

Work, especially, like in the letters and articles published in The Guardian of the time, is seen as the salvation for women. In the novels the heroines see work as a way out for housewives, and the heroines who do work indeed get a large amount of job satisfaction, just like their creators, the novelists, who by their own admission, feel writing brings them fulfilment. This insistence on work for women is a rather unusual feature in pre-1945 literature. Earlier female characters, such as Jane Eyre, cherished their work on a temporary basis, but had to see "sense" at the end of the novel and get married. Nineteenth-century novelists occasionally showed female characters who were able to work while being married (e.g. Mrs Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë), but these remained rarities. In the novels discussed there there are a far larger number of female characters (married or unmarried) working than before. Many of the heroines in the novels discussed here are not happily married, but are happy at work, or think they would be happy if only they could be working. Work is associated with independence in these novels. The way work is represented in these novels is rather unrealistic in that the female characters do not encounter any of the problems normally experienced by women at work - low-pay, low-status,

few chances of promotion, sexual harassment.

In contrast with the way work features in the novels, women are seen to have highly difficult family relationships. The female characters are all middle-class, heterosexual, white women who do not feel at ease in the traditional nuclear family. Again they are seen testing out various possible alternatives in the novels. Several of the characters do succeed in finding a satisfactory family relationship, but this only outside the convention of the traditional family (e.g. Rosamond is happy as a single parent). The restrictiveness of the traditional family is, however, stressed above all, so that for many others there is no hope at all (e.g. the death of heroines such a Mary in The Grass is Singing).

The male characters are not seen as having the same difficulties coping with traditional family life. They are generally portrayed as favouring a traditional set-up (e.g. the male characters in Martha Quest). Perhaps for that reason the focus of the novels is not on men at all, and they are mainly just flat characters, part of the decor against which the heroine acts out her selection procedure to acquire a new female identity. In this the eight writers discussed here differ markedly from their male colleagues, the so-called Angry Young Men. The male writers of the time focus on a man's experiences in society and particularly on his struggles with the constraints of society as personified by a woman, whereas these eight writers take the woman's point of view and regard men as restrictive influences on women. Ironically, each blames the other for, what is often, their own adherence to social codes.

On the whole, these writers and their novels do not advocate radical changes in society to accommodate women's demands, rather they seem to exhort individual women to use their creativity to step outside the boundaries of convention. When the reader leaves the heroine at the end of a novel, typically a moderate optimism is conveyed to indicate that the heroine will be able to lead a more satisfactory life with the new female identity she has found and the relative freedom from traditional social constraints that this provides. However, this optimism might prove to be ill-founded for many of the female characters, as they will undoubtedly find out that although they have found a new identity, their position in society has not changed radically and they are still basically regarded as the "second sex", economically, politically, as well as socially. But an awareness of the need of deeper social changes was only to be developed later, by more

radical feminists, after 1968, who departed from the view that men and women are differentiated in terms of power.

A picture emerges of a community of women who were pre-feminist, paving the way for feminism to come, for, firstly, there is a preoccupation with women's issues, but without feminist demands being voiced, and secondly, there is a community of like-minded women, but they do not draw upon each other for support and for an identity. In many ways the year 1962 with the publication of The Golden Notebook was a catalyst which brought feminism much closer. As we have seen in the reactions of the readers and reviewers at the time, it started to dawn upon them that The Golden Notebook was the epitome of something that had been going on for some time. Readers and reviewers who had not woken up yet to the changes taking place, became aware of them then.

By now the validity of providing a feminist reading of these pre-feminist texts has become apparent. One cannot but conclude that the novels written by these eight writers, and the other publications which have been looked at were not as devoid of female dissent as they are normally made out to be (Wilson, Bouchier). The silence was not suddenly broken in 1968. If one adjusts one's hearing-aid one can hear the rumblings of the oncoming thunder in the pre-1968 period, which was to develop in a full thunderstorm later on.

Jane Lewis in the Introduction to Women in Britain since 1945 stresses that out of all the social changes taking place in the post-war period which affected women, there is but one which women themselves instigated: to choose in favour of bearing an illegitimate child, rather than marriage to an unsuitable candidate or adoption of the baby.<sup>5</sup> So women in post-war British society did very little out of choice. It is a feature of the lives of these eight novelists that they made choices outside the trodden paths. They generally chose for their careers and for their children, and not for traditional family life or for the "happy housewife" image. And they were able to portray female characters taking their own decisions and trying to find their own identities, even if it meant going against the conventional norms of behaviour. Thus Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Penelope Mortimer, Edna O'Brien, Beryl Bainbridge, A.S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble deserve most credit for giving their readers hope of a less feminine and a more feminist life ahead.

## APPENDIX

### Questions sent to Byatt

1. Are there any novels by women novelists you particularly like or dislike? Are you in close contact with any of your female colleagues?
2. Who do you think constitute the readership of your novels? Do you think this has changed over the years?
3. Do you regard yourself more as an academic or as a novelist?
4. Did and do you find it difficult to combine so many different roles, i.e. mother, wife, lecturer, writer, novelist? Do you think any of these roles have suffered or do you think you have been able to devote as much attention to each aspect of your life as you wanted?
5. Do you think it is difficult for a woman to be a novelist in relation to the other demands she has to face, family life in particular? Do you think things have changed in any way in this respect since the Second World War?

February 1st 1989

Dear Dr. Anderson,

I took your letter with the questionnaire & the London Library tucked into a copy of Balzac's Splendeurs et Misères and lost it. I telephoned the lnd - library three times over last week: no luck: but tonight they telephoned to say it was there - save me yr. V Unfortunately I'm off to the Nantes Book address. Fair tomorrow - back on Thursday - they are keeping the book for me, so I shall be able to answer yr. letter - who return. I am sorry - I didn't want to see you made when you are careless. Yours sincerely AB Byatt

37 Rusholme Road,  
Putney,  
London SW15 3LF.  
Tel: 01-789 3109

March 13<sup>th</sup> 1989.

Dear Dr. Anderson,

I am sorry this letter has taken so long in reaching you. I went abroad to a Book Fair and came back to chaos - we have dry rot, - all the bedrooms are ripped out, my study wholly full of my daughter's clothes - books - & I had to go to a hotel for a time as I'm very allergic to the treatment. And my publishers want my new novel by Easter - I am trying to put 560 pp of manuscript onto the word processor at about 20 pp per day - it can't quite be done. However. Here are my best answers to yr. questions.

①. Novels by women (particularly) like or dislike. Among the dead, George Eliot & Willa Cather. Among the living, Iris Murdoch above all, and also Doris Lessing (particularly The Golden Notebook) <sup>McCullough</sup> ↓  
Muriel Spark, Angela Carter, Elsa Morante, Christa Wolf. The Group.  
I can't think of novels I dislike - I don't like what I mean of as female complaints (The Women's Room?) as opposed to novels with some sort of structure of thought. I see Iris Murdoch regularly (we write) and know Doris Lessing & like - also Angela Carter. I talk a great deal to Elaine Feinstein whose work I admire, but as poet - novelist, & who reads as I do.

②. Readership of my novels. I write them for readers I hope exists, readers like myself, who like books & also ~~the~~ everything else. I know I have several different kinds of reader - people who do identify with the characters and landscapes - & also professional literary people. I have letters from people who recognise Southland and weep for Stephanie, - letters from people discussing my discussion of Foucault - taxonomy. I also worry because I meet readers who are thrown by literary references they can't place, as tho' the novels were crossword puzzles or exams, well. In fact all how I see them. I sometimes think intellectual male novelists are

cated with less suspicion.

I dislike the word 'elitist'.

More an academic or more a novelist.

Absolutely - without waver, more a novelist. The academic career was almost an accident - I like teaching, I like leading, I was offered jobs. But I had already decided that writing came first, - always did - I read in order to learn how to write. My novels aren't academic exercises - they are more like Proust & Thomas Mann, in intention - in my own hopes.

Convincing roles. No one asks a man if he finds it difficult to be a father & a stockbroker or a professor. Yes, it has been difficult, at times frighteningly so. The strain comes with children - I worry constantly about my children & whether they are talked or nurtured. My own mother was housebound & screaming; I never saw that as an option. I used to say - well, I will write three or four more books than I might have done, & have the children - but I do now regret the unwritten books. Those I have written are more slow-moving than I would like, because they've been written in small bits & scraps of time, at long intervals.

I should never have had the university post which I gave up in 1983. I did it for money, & colleagues, & as a challenge. But I wasn't sure I should, & now I have given up, I know I shd. not have done it. I feel I am just beginning -

Q. Is it particularly difficult for a woman to be a novelist?

A novelist is possibly the easiest thing for a woman to be, given family life etc. etc. And there have been many since the C19 (tho' most of the good ones childless.) I think the absence of servants has made it harder since the second world war (for those who might have had them.) On the other hand, the feminist movement has changed the climate of expectations, about women working. On the other hand again, the feminist movement has tended to make women prize privilege and foreground "women's issues, women's problems" etc. which I find limiting, tho' obviously they concern me greatly.

I hope this is helpful. I am so sorry it is so late - I hope not too late.

Yours sincerely

AS Byatt.

## Questions sent to Drabble

1. Are there any novels by contemporary women novelists you particularly like or dislike? Are you in close contact with any of your female colleagues? If so, do you discuss your writing with any of them?
2. Who do you think constitute the readership of your novels? Do you get feedback from a particular group of readers, for example? Is there any difference between the '60s and '80s in this respect?
3. Were you amazed your novels appealed to so many people right from the start?
4. Was it difficult for you to combine so many roles (mother, writer, lecturer, etc.) when your children were younger?
5. There is a marked difference between 19thC women novelists who were often single and had no children, and post-World War II women novelists, like yourself, who have children whom they often raise without the help of a live-in husband (e.g. P. Mortimer, Lessing, Bainbridge). Could you comment on this development?

MARGARET DRABBLE  
24 HEATH HURST ROAD, LONDON. NW3 2RX  
01-435 6643

Dear Marja Anderton

Feb 3, 89

I do hope you will think a short response better than none! I seem to reply to dozens of letters a week and never catch up...

1. I particularly admire Lessing. I enjoy Murdoch and Weldon and many others. I know some of them personally (most of them to speak to) but don't really talk about writing with them. I have sometimes discussed my work with my friend Nell Dunn, whose work I like very much, and with Beryl Bainbridge. But I also talk about my work with men- Angus Wilson, David Cook, Julian Mitchell, Christopher Hampton, Arnold Wesker, and many others.
2. I get feedback from the strangest people, all over, both sexes and of all ages, but I suppose the majority, the largest single group, is of women of about my own age who identify with (or hate and resent!) the histories of my characters. But I get a lot of letters from the USA. Also from Scandinavia. I get the best feedback from my eldest son.
3. I suppose I didn't think all that much about readership. I was amazed to get the first book accepted. But I suppose I've always thought that any life, any story is interesting.
4. yes, it was almost impossible to combine so many roles. I was very bad at some of them and frequently irritable and tired, I fear.
5. I think the change from 19c to 20c women has something to do with the fact that in the 19c no other professions were open to women. Now they are and the seriously ambitious enter them. But all women are now more highly educated, so have higher expectations, and are more literate. Hence the continuation of women's writing.

Hope this is some help!  
All good wishes -  
Margaret Drabble

### Questions send to Mortimer

1. In About Time you mention you were writing poetry in your teenage years. When did you start writing fiction, and what influenced your decision to become a professional novelist? How do you regard the profession of novelist in comparison with other professions a woman could have taken up in the '40s and '50s? In this respect it is interesting that your daughter Caroline in an interview (Sunday Times, 25 February '83) says you were coping very well with being a mother and a novelist at the same time. Did you experience it in the same way yourself?
2. Are there any contemporary women writers you feel any affinity with? Are there any novels by women writers you particularly like or dislike? Are you in close contact with any of your female contemporaries?
3. In an interesting article you wrote in Nova (April '73) you say that you could not imagine any heroine in a novel going out to work. Yet in the '50s and '60s more and more (married) women entered the labour market, and many more would have liked to (see e.g. Hannah Gavron, The Captive Wife). Do you think there was a certain discrepancy between fact and fiction in this period in this respect? Do you think one of the functions of your early novels was to show what life was like for women in those days? If yes, did you consciously set out to do this?
4. How did the social changes which were starting to take place in the '50s and '60s especially the ones with regard to women, influence your life and your position as a writer at the time, if at all?

Penelope Mortimer  
The Old Post Office  
Chesham,  
Milton-in-March,  
GL56 0SU  
060 874 242

- 1a) I always wrote prose as well as poetry (first story published in a periodical called 'The Review of Reviews' at age 8) but it was sickly stuff. I didn't 'decide' to become a novelist, & have never regarded myself as 'professional' - i.e. I have never been entirely financially dependent on writing, and have little contact with 'the literary world'. b) Writing has always been a suitable occupation for the home-bound woman (regardless of talent). Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who had 8 children, used to lock herself in the bathroom to write. There is no other profession I can think of - except possibly plumbing - in which this would be possible. c) my daughter Caroline may say I coped well. So does a bull-dozer. The final result, for all concerned, is questionable. I can still see no alternative.
- 2) Molly Keane. Elizabeth Jolly. b) Particularly dislike the work of Edna O'Brien and her genre. But very seldom read contemporary novels anyway, whether by women or men. c) No.
- 3) I think I said that I had never written about a woman who went out to work (except in MY FRIEND SAYS IT'S BULLETPROOF) - or, indeed, any woman who worked. This was intended to show the basic discrepancy between my protagonists and myself. The function of the early novels was to show what life was like for me; though of course, as I was writing the things, it wasn't accurate.
- 4) Consciously, not at all.

I hope this is of some help.

Best wishes,  
Penelope Mortimer

### Questions sent to Murdoch

1. In the Shenandoah interview with W.K. Rose you say you started writing very early. Why do you think it took you relatively long to get a novel published? (all your novels have always been very successful from the sales point of view, so why didn't the publishers recognize your potential earlier?)
2. Many of your contemporaries have one or more children which they had to look after when they were at the beginning of their careers (e.g. Spark, Lessing, Penelope Mortimer). Do you see it as an advantage that you did not have to cope with the demands of children, or do you think children would not have made much difference?
3. Are you in close contact with any of your female contemporaries? Are there any contemporary novelists you particularly like or dislike?
4. Most of your novels have a male narrator or a male protagonist who has the point of view. Do you think your novels are still of interest to women? What do you think for instance of the theory of Gary Goshgarian (Revue des Langues Vivantes, 40, 1974) that although you often use male protagonists or narrators these are generally fallible in that they have to be taught a lesson, whereas the women are always more in touch with the 'real' world?

New  
address  
—

68 Hamilton Road  
Oxford  
Dec 3

Dear Dr Anderson,

Thank you for your letter.

1. Your questions: I grew up into the war and ~~experience~~ was employed first as a civil servant (like Treasury) working 5 1/2 days a week, with two weeks holiday a year, then in UNRRA, mostly in a refugee camp in Austria, working 7 days a week. Coming back to the academic world in 1948 I had to spend a lot of time re-reading myself, re-reading the philosophers etc. (Books were censored, or were went, during the war, one could not choose a "lived" life.)
2. I don't think there's much difference. I did a full time teaching job ~~for~~

for about fifteen years (after the refugee period).

3. I don't know many socialists. A. J. Byatt is a friend.

4. I hope my work is still of interest to all sorts of people including women. I write often, mainly serious works, not directed at either men, or women. I don't think women, in an act of fiction, are more or less in touch with the 'real' world than men are, obviously is the point, and in many instances men, women are deliberately deprived, ~~of access~~ by them, of free access to the world, & to have a limited life (for instance no education). I don't think my novels have any general 'woman more sensitive than man' theme. I hope you are enjoying - or, rather, & living a hot lively city, and near the Bowell Collection! All best wishes to your works

Iris  
Mordoch

S. Giovanni in Oliveto,  
Civitella nella Chiana (AR.)  
52040 Toscana, Italia.

22nd November, 1988.

Dear Ms. Anderton-ter Heide,

I am writing to say that Muriel Spark was extremely touched by your letter to her. However I am afraid she never answers questions.

She asked me to send you her best wishes to which I add my own.

Yours sincerely,

*Penelope Jardine*  
Penelope Jardine,  
Secretary to Muriel Spark

Ms. Marja A. L. Anderton-ter Heide,  
19 Huntly Gardens,  
Glasgow G12 9AT

Scotland, U.K.

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- 230      13 April 1967, p. 301.
- 231      13 April 1967, p. 13.
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- 233      Midgley, p. 13.
- 234      9 January 1964, p. 21.
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- 236      13 January 1967, p. 50.
- 237      "Child's Play," TLS, 19 January 1967, p. 41.
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- 239      Bradbury (1968), p. 72.
- 240      22 June 1967, p. 7.
- 241      ibid..
- 242      6 July 1967, p. 604.
- 243      cf. Colin Haycraft's article on how Bainbridge's novels saved the ailing Duckworth publishing house.
- 244      Yakovleva, p. 144.
- 245      May, p. 49.
- 246      Times, 27 September 1972, p. 11.
- 247      5 October 1972, p. 6.
- 248      "Young Pretenders," Spectator, 14 October 1972, p. 584.
- 249      "The Tsar Next Door," TLS, 6 October 1972, p. 1184.
- 250      Guardian, 5 October 1972, p. 5.
- 251      "Introduction to The Golden Notebook," p. ix.

- 252 "A Woman Writer" in Wandor (1983), p. 159.  
253 quoted in Sprague and Tiger (eds), p. 106.

### Part III Female Fiction 1945-1968

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- 1A *see Addendum*  
1 in Susan Koppelman Cornillon ed., Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives  
(Bowling Green: Bowling Green U.P., 1972), p. 9.  
2 *ibid.*, p. 13.  
3 *ibid.*, p. 12.  
4 The New York Times Book Review, 31 December 1961, section 7, p. 1.  
5 *ibid.*  
6 "Women Novelists," Bookes, 375 (Autumn 1968), p. 88.  
7 Showalter (1977), p. 35.  
8 Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1981), p. 3.  
9 *ibid.*, p. 67.  
10 *ibid.*, p. 170.  
11 (London: Vision Press, 1974), p. 45.  
12 *ibid.*, p. 83.  
13 Haffenden, p. 33.  
14 Miles, p. 155.  
15 *ibid.*, p. 183.  
16 *ibid.*, p. 196.  
17 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 3.  
18 *ibid.*, p. 158.  
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20 Kenyon, p. 13.  
21 Boulder-Pushers: Women in the Fiction of Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing and Iris Murdoch (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979), p. 202.  
22 *ibid.*, p. 203.  
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25 *ibid.*  
26 Wilson, p. 194.  
27 *ibid.*  
28 *ibid.*, p. 207.  
29 *ibid.*, p. 155.

- 30        *ibid.*, p. 161.  
 31        (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), p. 67.  
 32        *ibid.*, p. 84.  
 33        *ibid.*, p. 79.  
 34        Hewison, p. 198.  
 35        (London: Heinemann, 1938; rpt. Virago, 1987), p. 88.

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 2        M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 113.  
 3        Felski, p. 133.  
 4        *ibid.*, p. 141.  
 5        Felski, p. 79.  
 6        Showalter (1985), p. 221.  
 7        Doris Lessing: The Problem of Alienation and the Form of the Novel (Frankfurt: Lang, 1980), p. 38.  
 8        From Society to Nature: A Study of Doris Lessing's Children of Violence (Gotenborg: Univ. of Gotenborg, 1980), p. 124.  
 9        "The Female Novel of Education and the Confessional Heroine," Dalhousie Review, 60, 3 (Autumn 1980), p. 472.  
 10       Eire-Ireland, 17, 1 (1977), p. 82.  
 11       Dunn, p. 81.  
 12       transl: "It is mostly women who because of a divorce or the death of a partner, are faced with the responsibility of rebuilding their own lives" (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1978), p. 273.  
 13       *ibid.*, p. 274.  
 14       Biles, p. 119.  
 15       Abrams, p. 136.  
 16       Kenyon, p. 35.  
 17       "Feminist Values in the Novels of Iris Murdoch," Review des Langues Vivantes, 40 (1974), p. 522.  
 18       "Angels Dining at the Ritz," in Bradbury and Palmer, p. 169.  
 19       Poland, p. 257-258.  
 20       "The Ambiguities of Female Identity: A Reading of the Novels of Margaret Drabble," Partisan Review, 46, 2 (1979), p. 241.  
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- 3 (Urbana: Illinois U.P., 1979), p. 18.
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- 11 "From Subtext to Dream Text, The Brutal Egoism of Iris Murdoch's Male Narrators," Women and Literature, 2 (1982), p. 230.
- 12 Alan Sillitoe, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (London: Allen, 1958; rpt. 1966), p. 211.

## Chapter III Working Heroines

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- 4 *ibid.*, pp. 392-393.
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## Conclusions

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- 2 Felski, p. 169.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 155.
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- 5 Jane Lewis (1992), p. 7.

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## Addenda

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It is worth noting that after the early formalists, who were purely concerned with language, the later structuralists came who, while still focussing on form, developed some less restrictive ideas. The notions of textuality and intertextuality, i.e. how texts function in relation to each other, as developed by Gerard Genette, among others, is particularly relevant to a discussion of fiction. Genette in his essay "Structuralism and Literary Criticism" shows how texts develop meanings which lie outside the control of the author: "...in the sense that outside the conscious control of its authors, it forms a living example of a living textuality. Words are created by words, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors".

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French feminists like Cixous and Kristeva, in particular, have formed theories about fictionalisation. They try to read texts as discursive constructs rather than as reflections of an individual author's experience. Because the "I" position in language, according to these French feminists, is male (the child's sense of identity is formed through a language in which the "I" is male), women are left to explore this otherness through their writing. Thus it is in their writing that women can imagine new identities, which might lead to the construction of a new female identity (cf. also "writing is precisely the very possibility of change" quoted from Cixous on p.234 above).

