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Creating Oneself as a Mother:
Dreams, Reality and Identity in Doris Lessing´s *The Fifth Child* (1988)

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"With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future, too" (Schlueter 71). In this extract from an interview by Jonah Raskin in 1969, Doris Lessing explained the importance of dreams in her major work, *The Golden Notebook*; but it could just as easily be applied to a large part of her extensive novelistic corpus. Throughout her diverse literary output, Lessing uses traditional narrative methods such as tales and fables "as a creative vehicle to examine the states of consciousness of the human soul" (Galin 23). Through use of all these fantastic elements, she endows several of her novels, such as *The Fifth Child* (1988), with a dreamlike atmosphere in which reality and imagination merge. If dreams can define one's entire life, they will also provide the clues to one's own identity, illuminating areas that we do not have access to in conscious life. Identity is a major issue in the novels of Doris Lessing, especially those dealing with female protagonists trying to define their own selves amongst the different roles they perform in life. The subconscious, through dreams and imagination, plays an important part in this quest, since a person's identity is built up by both conscious factors and subconscious forces.

The aim of this paper is to show how Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* can be read as a valid representation of a failure in the construction of identity; the novel dramatises the way in which the dreams and fantasies of the subconscious can destroy or fatally interrupt the identity-building process. *The Fifth Child,* which is described by Jones in the *New York Review of Books* as "a horror story of maternity and the nightmare of social collapse" (30-31), combines dreaming, imagination and a sense of female identity which is endangered and comes close to disappearing**.** A closer look into *The Fifth Child* and its multi-layered treatment of identity as a form of troubled self-creation will help us to appreciate its integral role in the Lessing canon.

As Cederstrom notes, in the period in which the *Children of Violence* series was published (1952-69), Lessing's literary approach began to change from a Marxist-Realist philosophy to psychological, particularly Jungian, criticism in her later novels. This change responds to a transition on her part from a focus upon her political concerns towards one of her growing preoccupation with psychoanalysis. This renewed emphasis on inwardness brings about a concentration on a very specific thematic area in

Lessing's canon: the construction of selfhood, which Jung calls "individuation". This term defines the process whereby the impulses from the unconscious are assumed and integrated in the conscious life, and through which the self grows into a full, organic awareness, "a sense of oneness and firmness" (Hall and Nordby 1973: 47). It is possible, therefore, to argue that *The Fifth Child* dramatises the difficulties and eventually the impossibility of fulfilling this process in the case of its protagonist, Harriet.

The Fifth Child includes the two modes of artistic creation that Carl Jung described. On the one hand, the psychological mode deals with the materials from human consciousness that constitute the conscious life of a man (lessons of life, emotional shocks, crises and the like). The other mode is the visionary, which includes materials unfamiliar, obscure, beyond human understanding, originating in dreams, night-time fears and the darkest side of our mind (Jung 1930: 174). Lessing's novel includes both modes since there is a realistic side to it, corresponding to the factual life of the family; yet, the visionary mode seems prevalent through the arrival of the fifth child and the sense of fatalism related to him.

Doris Lessing is not the only author in this novel. Another creator, Harriet, desires to fulfil an act of creation and the construction of narrative form; she aims to build a family with both factual and imaginary components, shaping her life according to her own perception of how she desires it to be. Harriet's creation of her identity works in two different directions: first, she wilfully bears five children according to her idealised vision of traditional family life and to her dreams of motherhood. Imagination is very powerful all throughout this process since her family (and more precisely her son Ben) seem to become in reality what she has previously experienced in the form of dreams, nightmares and fantasy. Secondly, when her imagination seems to escape her control, going far beyond her will and leading her life close to chaos, Ben's dependence on her will confine her to an exclusively maternal role which will contain the darkest, most negative aspects of motherhood.

The historical context in which the plot is developed must also be considered. Written in the late Eighties, but set in the Sixties and Seventies, the plot coincides with major events such as the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich makes a distinction between women's relation to their potential reproduction and their children (in Rich´s terms, "experience") and the objective of keeping those potentialities under men's control ("institution");as a result, the mother figure of Second Wave Feminism comes to be inclusive, implying the acceptance of a diversity of "motherhoods." This was a period of great productivity on the part of feminist theorists - Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969), Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) - and, therefore, many women, such as Harriet, started facing the mismatch between what they had been educated for and their real experience. This phenomenon was a further step against the reductive tendency to homogenize female identity by assuming a universal feminine desire of a child.

From this point onwards, I will be following Harriet's development as a character. The very first scene in which we meet her seems to suggest that she constitutes no independent self; in fact, she is

presented as blurring with her environment: "From across the room (…) Harriet was a pastel blur. As an Impressionist picture, or a trick photograph, she seemed a girl merged with her surroundings. She stood near a great vase of dried grasses and leaves and her dress was something flowery" (4). Her first consciousness of an identity is expressed to a large extent on a "relational" basis.[1] She emblematises the traditional Western concept of the virgin and is waiting to have her first sexual experience "like a present wrapped up in layers of deliciously pretty paper, to be given, with discretion, to the right person" (5). Harriet's identity depends on her position towards the couple and marriage as she will later on depend on motherhood. She constructs herself under the basis of her relationship to her husband and children. At this early stage, Harriet is yet to create her own identity and simply accepts labels that others impose upon her.

Although she is indifferent to the symbolism of virginity and its implications, Harriet is consciously willing to embrace the motherly. What Harriet searches for in motherhood is an idea, an abstract construction which has infinite particular representations; whether one calls it archetype (in Jungian terms) or institution (according to Adrienne Rich). As Julia Kristeva has pointed out (alongside other theorists such as Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich) there is an element of circularity in the idealisation of the mother in Western culture. This implies imagining a motherhood which is just "the fantasy nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory" (Kristeva 161); what is idealised, in fact, is the relationship to one's own mother, an idealization based on a primary narcissism. This is indeed what occurs in *The Fifth Child*: in her determined attempt to embody the established cultural prototype of the Mother, Harriet unconsciously seeks to establish a link to her own mother in the first days of her existence. However, her real experience does not match this fantasy.

Harriet interiorises the process she underwent as a child: after the primary identification with her mother, she is forced to enter the Symbolic realm through the acquisition of language and social roles, which entails her entrance in the family structures and rules under the Law of the Father (Felman 104). In her adult life, she tries in her turn to perpetuate the traditional concept of the family. In addition, and if we follow a Jungian perspective, identification with (and dependence on) the mother throughout the early years creates a "hypertrophy of the maternal element" in the daughter, which accounts for childbirth becoming, ultimately, the only goal of a woman. One of the potentially disturbing aspects of this complex is that, as we see by the end of *The Fifth Child*, the husband is secondary to this type of woman and he is seen as a mere instrument for procreation. Furthermore, even the woman's own personality vanishes as her life is lived through the lives of others and as she identifies thoroughly with her children (Jung, "Archetypes" 87-88). To summarise, the protagonist's chosen identity as a mother is idealised, relational and built upon a paradox. All of these aspects are strongly sustained by her fantasies: for instance, the lifestyle into which she soon settles along with her husband is sometimes referred to as "the dream" (15).

[1] "Relational self" is a concept from the Object Relations School, with D.W. Winnicott and Nancy Chodorow as its main figures, which explains the construction of the identity under the basis of the relationship between the Self and the Other.

However, their desires seem feasible as they match their family plans to the actual structure of their newly bought house, which constitutes the token of their dream and sets a layer of fact on their fantasies.

Harriet's supposed maternal instinct is soon fulfilled and her four first pregnancies run happily. Family life becomes increasingly stressful but Harriet does not want to accept that her former views on the family turned out to be totally unrealistic. She pretends that she will not give in to the mainstream ideas of modern society and adds that their choice is what everybody really wants although "they have been brainwashed out of it" (27). Such an opinion places her among the last survivors of the previous and more traditional ideology on motherhood, because, in an era of great feminist debate, the bulk of society had changed its mind in relation to women and the family. As a result, both Harriet and David outstandingly try to deny the drawbacks of a big family by using fantasy again:

> "Often, when David and Harriet lay face to face, it seemed that doors in their breasts flew open, and what poured out was an intensity of relief, of thankfulness, that still astonished them both: patience for what seemed now such a very long time had not been easy, after all." (21)

At this point, Harriet can be said to have fully acquired her identity as a mother: just as the artist's creation gives him a status as author, so Harriet's work, her family, gives her a solid maternal authority. Acting maternally, breastfeeding each new baby, talking about motherhood in terms of happiness, promoting family unity and calling it a "miracle", allowing children into bed to cuddle and play games, Harriet performs all the positive aspects present in the Jungian Mother Archetype: maternity, femininity, wisdom, spirituality beyond understanding, goodness, protection, nurturance, growth, fertility and the like (Jung, "Archetypes" 82).

Having achieved this balance between dream and reality, Harriet´s self-creation reaches a dramatic moment of crisis with the unplanned arrival of Ben, the fifth child. The mother's attitude towards this fifth pregnancy is the clue to what will come later: her imagining that this new foetus is poisoning her. So far, Harriet had performed the archetype of the Good Mother; but now, her non-acceptance of a new baby is the root of a new language of myth and tale that she adopts for herself in order to account for what is happening inside her. This incorporation of myth makes her sink into the negative features of the Jungian mother, thus showing her other side, since all archetypes have a dual nature. Aspects of motherhood more closely related to the secret, the hidden, shadows, abyss, death or fear (Jung, "Archetypes" 82) are brought about by her own comments about "this savage thing inside her" (41) or "the enemy" (40), or by her constant daydreaming, which includes frightening scenes of "hooves and claws cutting her inside flesh" (41). Her uneasiness, mental rather than physical, contrasts strongly with the pleasures of her previous pregnancies, which she had lived as experiences of joy and eager anticipation, as her ideals dictated. Absorbed by her own fantasy, which is at its peak at night-time, Harriet isolates herself. Thus, with Ben's birth and childhood, an important inner change is on the verge of taking place in Harriet´s process of self-construction.

Ben's abnormality starts the second phase of Harriet's inner development, which entails a process of destruction of all that she had previously built. A new Harriet is born, and the novel clearly exemplifies how "in Lessing's ideal, while child and adult are certainly 'bound each to each' the relationship is both mutual and progressive: we see the child, in the process of becoming, giving birth to the woman she was meant to be" (Rege 6-7). Ben's birth is described very differently from those of his siblings: it takes place in a hospital rather than on the big family bed, with no outburst of sentimental weeping by any family member and with no champagne. The whole scene is a fearful one: Harriet finally faces the creature she had imagined but she only feels pity for him, because she dislikes him so much. The mother's detachment is shown by her giving up breastfeeding with no hesitation, as it is too painful for her, although she had always enjoyed it with her other babies. Bottle-feeding constitutes much more than a simple plot detail, since we can see it as related to Melanie Klein's idea of "the good mother" and "the bad mother". According to each modality of nurturance; the prototype of "the good mother", with all its implications of goodness, patience, maternal generosity and creative capacity, is emblematised in the breast ("the good primary object"). Conversely, when the breast is absent, it keeps not only milk away from the child, but also love and care, thus bringing about connotations of mistreatment, abandonment and non-recognition of her own child (qtd. in Velasco 138-9).

The central issue in *The Fifth Child* is "a mother who cannot love her son because she fears him" a situation before which "we wonder whether there is anything really wrong with the child or whether the woman is deluded" (Jones 30). Several comments on the part of doctors and specialists posit that Ben is "A normal healthy fine baby" (51), and "there's obviously nothing much wrong with him" (55) or that "he's a hyperactive child" (63). This makes Harriet furious as she seeks confirmation of Ben's abnormality by the medical profession. Contrarily, she is believed to be the one who has the problem; her belief in Ben's monstrosity is kept inside the private family circle where the question, "What was he?" (67) is constantly repeated. Only Harriet's mother gives readers a hint that the degree of Ben's unusual nature may depend, to a large extent, on the family's parameters: "He may be normal for what he is. But he is not normal for what we are" (65).With this debate we realise that it is not only reality and fantasy that merge and blur, but also concepts of normality and abnormality. There is certainly something grotesque in Ben, but this condition springs from his mother´s early non-acceptance of him and of her subsequent fantasies. Ben may be exceptional, but Harriet enhances his faults and causes his peculiarities to be taken negatively. As a result, everybody sees him as fearful, he is called names as "the nasty little brute" (54) and treated without any love or tenderness. In Lessing´s later novel, *Ben in the World* (2000), the sequel to *The Fifth Child,* we come to know the same story from Ben's, rather than Harriet's, viewpoint; most readers are potentially surprised to see how he has feelings of his own and they eventually come to like him. As we see real emotion and goodness in the character, we must conclude that his past brutal attitude and alienation were the result of his experience of the family as a hostile context of hatred and rejection, and of Harriet's failure as a mother.

While, as previously mentioned, Doris Lessing's novels of this period are clearly indebted to some aspects of the work of Carl Jung, there are elements of the relationship between Ben and his mother that can also be approached with the help of the perspective furnished by the psychiatrist and theoretician Jacques Lacan. These two authors should not be seen as antithetical; while both elaborate upon theoretical groundwork established by Sigmund Freud, each takes their own slant and concentrates on different areas of the psyche and its development.

It would indeed be possible to interpret Harriet's situation according to the Lacanian differentiation of the three realms a child goes through seen from the perspective of his mother's psyche. Ben occupies a place in his mother's imagination and in her dreams even before his birth, a place that is very much conditioned by the fact that she did not want to have another child so soon. During the pregnancy, there is a *Real* baby (using the term "real" in its Lacanian significance) inside her body who progressively comes to match his mother's previous representation of it. When a baby is born, the mother constitutes the first object of its narcissistic attachment, which inaugurates a mirroring relationship that Lacan calls the *Imaginary*. However, in Ben's case, the relationship with his mother does not seem to conform to the mainstream; as she is actually rejecting him, it becomes aberrant rather than normal. Then, there is a problematic further step that has to be taken: both mother and child need to enter the realm of the *Symbolic*. The mother has to do so as a subject that is incomplete again; she has acquired a new identity as a mother of this new-born child, who, in his turn, will have to do so as a new subject with his own name. Finally, the child encounters the Law of the Father and enters the world of language and the social order, which, again, for Ben, occurs in a peculiar way, as he does not seem to master language in his first years nor to understand social rules (Felman, 102-105). In fact, Ben completes the creative process that Harriet had undertaken some years before: her imagination endows him with an already fixed identity from the outset, and thus forces him to develop in an unnatural way. To complicate things, as Ben is growing up as a "freak", he starts to express himself through violence, which results in the family's acting defensively against him. Just as the project of a large family was referred to as "the dream" in the first pages of the novel, days are said to be a long nightmare at this point (62).

Harriet's identity crisis reaches its peak when she starts wondering whether Ben recognises her as his mother at all, since for her he has always been an outsider, even inside her own womb. From this point onwards, her own destruction follows, precisely because she had defined herself in terms of the mother category. Not being able to identify his mother as the first love object, Ben does not experience a proper prohibition or socialisation, and cannot enter the Symbolic order, in which basic processes take place (such as constructing language or incorporating mechanisms of repression), all of which only adds to his supposed monstrosity. With only her 'monster' son, her depressed son left, and her other children away on boarding school, motherhood has now become more of an obsession for Harriet, and her entire self-made identity is shattered.

It is not until the moment when Harriet reluctantly gives in to the family pressure to put Ben into a mental institution that she experiences a sense of guilt, for example, when she exclaims "He's our child" (74). Before that, although unattainable and/or destructive desires are normally relegated to the subconscious, Harriet appears to be fully aware of them as far as Ben is concerned. In her mind, the *id* (the lawless and amoral source of libido and psychic energy) works at its full, for instance, on the occasion when she enters Ben's bedroom, finds him on the window-sill with the window open and thinks that it is a pity to have come in. Her superego, the moral censoring agency fighting to keep these immoral impulses into the subconscious creates a major sense of guilt in her: a feeling which, to a lesser degree, is a tendency of all mothers but which, in Harriet's case, only arises in the most extreme and horrific moments, after her destructive tendencies against Ben have been unearthed.

The institution turns out to be nothing less than a centre of confinement before an early death, where all types of afflicted children are waiting to die. Adding to the fantastic component of the novel, this matches a familiar idea of subjugation and destruction of the child by the mother, present in several classical myths: Pasiphaë keeping the Minotaur in a prison and Jocasta exposing her son Oedipus to die in a mountain (Jones 30). Such myths are to be found in the collective unconscious that Harriet shares with the rest of the adult characters, and it is also from that collective space of fear that come the names that Ben is called throughout the novel, such as "hobbit" (102), "dwarfey", "goblin" and "hobgoblin"(105-106). Defining an individual exclusively as a mother means deleting many other of her potential functions in the social system; significantly enough, Harriet accepts the fact that taking care of Ben will destroy the rest of the spheres that build her life, ignoring her mother's warning that she is neglecting her husband and her other children.

Ben gives Harriet a taste of her own medicine. In the same way as she has provided the child with a monstrous identity, Ben begins to change her assumed self as the Good Mother into that of the phantom mother postulated by Jungian psychoanalysis (that is, the image of the dreaded mother who is omnipotent since she gives life and can control it). Ben will not die because his mother is determined to make him survive (Velasco 136). Other aspects of the phantom mother are brought to light by Harriet´s other children, such as the fear of being denied the most primary needs and being abandoned, which is announced by little Jane when Ben was taken to the institution: "Are you going to send us away, too?" (p.76). Luke, Helen, Jane and Paul have to deal with their mother's absence, in terms which are almost Lacanian: these children will forever long for the mother which they feel to be absent, a lost object of which they were a part long ago, in their very early childhood.

Harriet becomes the only parent to Ben, since David avoids this responsibility and concentrates on taking care of the other children. Trapped in the role that she had chosen so many years before, she falls into a sense of non-transcendence, of lacking a real project and of feeling the impossibility of exercising her own freedom. All of these factors fall squarely into the state that Simone de Beauvoir called "immanence" in *The Second Sex,* the state in which a woman, losing the possibility of having a vital

project, is reduced to the state of thing-like facticity (qtd. in Moi 174-175). Being an extreme case of this kind of immanence, Harriet is not even free to choose to live through her children's lives.

In a remarkable moment towards the end of the novel, Harriet mentions the other children she had planned to have, as if her dream was still possible. Instead of this, disintegration of the family unit is what she gets: all its members are scattered as the grown-up children impose their will to go to boarding schools and stay with grandparents for the holidays and weekends. The youngest of the so-called "real" children, Paul, needs professional help as a result of his mother's absence, and he spends the majority of his time at the psychiatrist's home, in order to find company and comfort there**.** Meanwhile, Ben has already joined the gang that keeps him out of the house for hours. Eventually, after years of childrearing and care, Harriet begins to stay alone at home for hours at a time. Harriet and David are distant from each other and they have to rely on imagination again, simply to be able to feel how "the ghosts of young Harriet and young David entwined and kissed" (112).

In the novel's closing pages, Harriet feels like the destroyer of the family for having rescued Ben from death. She is trapped in an eternal sense of guilt which now works in two directions: both for having taken Ben to an institution in the first place, and for having taken him back to the family. After the destruction of her entire life's work, she believes that she has been punished for her idealistic plans and for having *decided* that she and her family would be happy; but this is once more a product of her imagination, which rules her life until the end. Even when reality is at its worst, she takes refuge in fantasy, as in the moment when she is reluctant to sell the big house simply because, as David puts it, "she could not finally give up her dreams of the old life coming back" (119).

The exploration of imagination and dreaming as factors configuring female identity is a common characteristic in Lessing's canon. In her first novel, *The Grass is Singing* (1950)*,* we see how Mary Turner identifies her desires with reality, imagining how it would be having a child and starting a marriage. *The Golden Notebook* (1962)*,* Lessing's masterpiece, has a lot to do with imagination as a tool in the process of writing, but also in the creation of one's own identity, through elements such as personal diaries and the development of a critical self-consciousness. *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) is also remarkable in this aspect since dreams give the protagonist the clues to the new identity she has to build after her functions as wife and mother appear to be obsolete. But it is not until *The Fifth Child* (1988) that we are shown how imagination actually *creates* an identity. The main contribution of *The Fifth Child* in Lessing's work is the merging of reality and imagination in the novel and in the subjectivity of the protagonist. By doing this, Lessing is crossing literary boundaries and achieving a literary mode that stands between two forms of fiction: the mimetic and the marvellous. The novel successfully manages to blur the limits between the two and make a serious statement about the projection of fantasies over reality (Rubenstein 61-62).

In conclusion, what I have tried to demonstrate in the present article is that it is possible to view *The Fifth Child* as a representation of a collapse in the creation of identity: instead of integrating the

subconscious into conscious life, the protagonist's imagination dominates, and ultimately erases, the reality around her. In the process, I hope to have shown that Jungian and Lacanian categories can also prove useful in clarifying the main thematic areas of this novel (and, by extension, of female identity as a whole through Lessing's work). The novel ends with Harriet's vision of Ben's future life, as he finally takes leave of her: this is another dreamlike vision in which Harriet foresees her roles as a mere spectator following her son's comings and goings, thus condemning herself to living vicariously, through Ben's life. As a prediction of her future life, this final day-dream reinforces the opinion by Lessing that started this essay: "With a few symbols a dream can define the whole of one's life, and warn us of the future, too."

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