The Golden Notebook was published in 1962, and is perhaps the best known of all Mrs Lessing’s novels. Its publication came in the middle of the Children of Violence sequence, after A Ripple from the Storm and before Landlocked. Through her new protagonist, Anna Wulf, Doris Lessing explores and extends aspects of Martha Hesse; in particular, the two characters share similar feelings of alienation and division within themselves. Indeed, division and fragmentation and how they are overcome is a major theme of this novel, and one which later feeds back into the two final volumes of Children of Violence. One of Mrs Lessing’s aims in The Golden Notebook is to give readers an idea of the intellectual and moral climate of Britain in the mid twentieth century, and she does this by using themes which seem to her to convey that climate. In fact, this novel was written ‘before its time’ in that it anticipated cultural trends (such as feminism and attitudes towards madness) which were not generally accepted until some years later. In The Golden Notebook Mrs Lessing reconsiders the colonial material she used in her earlier novels, but this time the focus has shifted because she examines the process of turning that material into fiction. She also looks again at Marxism, through Anna’s involvement with the British Communist Party. And through her characters, she discusses the role of women in the mid century.

Politics, madness and the roles of women – all these are by now familiar Lessing themes. What is different and new about The Golden Notebook is its form, which itself echoes the content in its fragmentation, so that theme and form reflect each other. As was said earlier, A Ripple from the Storm marked the temporary exhaustion of Mrs Lessing’s attempts to convey truth through traditional realism. In The Golden Notebook she takes the novel form apart to see how far, if at all, fiction is capable of truth-
telling. One of the problems looked at in the novel is writer's block, the cessation of artistic creativity. It considers not only the psychological features of this condition, but also the technical ones. Is it possible that the form of the conventional novel can act as a block to the writer who wishes to express the irrational and the unconventional? In *The Golden Notebook* Doris Lessing acknowledges this difficulty, and sets out to free Anna's creativity through her exploration of the novel form.

'Form', the *way* in which something is said, and 'content', *what* is actually said, are always inter-related. One affects the other, although in prose this may not be so obvious as in poetry. We are perhaps so familiar with the realist novel that we barely notice its formal aspects, and we usually concentrate instead on the story. But the realist novel relies on a set of conventions which are often disguised by its highly referential language and its attempt to imitate the familiar surfaces of real life. These conventions include an omniscient viewpoint; a chronological, causal narrative with a beginning, middle and end; conventional sentence structure; a substantial investment in individual characters as knowable, and non-reflexive subject matter – that is, the realist novel seldom examines its own form, but looks outside itself to the real world. These realistic conventions are characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel, and they operate most successfully at a time when there is a generally agreed consensus about what constitutes reality.

At the turn of the century the movement known as 'Modernism' eschewed the mimetic quest of the realist novel, and veered towards self-examination. The linear narrative structure gave way to more fragmented prose, or else fluid, unorganised thoughts were expressed without formal sentence structures in a 'stream of consciousness'. The omniscient viewpoint, with its assumptions of cognisance and authority, was superseded by a multiplicity of apparently random impressions. The chronological, causal narrative was modified or abandoned and the modernist text often concentrated on a short period of time, spanning hours rather than years. Modernism embraced the non-rational, the subconscious, the uncertain, the evanescent and, moreover, insisted that these aspects of life were as true, if not more true, than the carefully constructed strata – 'slices of life' – presented by the realist novel. Doris Lessing greatly admired the nineteenth-century