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## **DISTANCING FROM INCOMPREHENSIBLE REALITY IN DORIS LESSING'S *THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK***

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In this paper the author analyses certain segments of speech uttered by the protagonists of the novel *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing, focusing on the sections "Free Women", where most instances of direct speech exchanges are found, and applying to them theoretical premises of modality. After defining the concept of modality and its pertinent notions of realis and irrealis, propositional and event modality, and negation, the author analyses relevant speech utterances in which the following aspects of modality can be detected: the abundance of modal verbs (especially their distal forms), negatives, interrogatives and conditionals – all considered 'irrealis', as opposed to the absence of declaratives – or 'realis' forms. These language devices reflect the protagonists' shattered perception of the world.

**Key words:** *modality, realis, irrealis, propositional modality, event modality, negation, distal forms, distancing, incomprehensible reality.*

### **1. Introduction**

The novel *The Golden Notebook* is the story of Anna Wulf, a divorced single mother and novelist. Fearful of going mad, she records her experiences in four coloured notebooks (the black one is about her writing life, the red about her political views, the yellow - her emotional life, the blue – everyday events). The novel is structured into four sets - each consisting of parts from the four notebooks – divided by sections titled "Free Women", tracking the day-to-day life of Anna and her friend Molly. The novel is rounded off by the fifth notebook – the golden notebook – which potentially holds the key to Anna's recovery.

This paper focuses on the sections titled "Free Women". They are especially suitable for an analysis we are concerned with, given the fact that it is in these sections that we find most instances of direct speech exchanges among the novel's characters. Dealing with the other sections of the novel, i.e. the notebooks, would require extensive research which would be beyond the scope of our interest in this paper.

Literary works are hard to think about only in literary terms, i.e. in terms of their literary value, characters, plot, motifs and suchlike. The linguistic thread of literary works also plays a major part in its texture, since, obviously, this texture is woven of words, combined into larger linguistic units – phrases, clauses, sentences.

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Modality as "a semantic phenomenon" (Frawley, 1992: 386) is of a considerable importance for us. Taking into consideration particular examples of speech uttered by Anna, Molly and the other people in their lives, we shall attempt to prove the following assumption: the two friends', but primarily Anna's, grasp of reality is so shattered that their perception of it is reflected in the language they use.

## **2. The Concept of Modality**

It is not easy to define modality and include all that it comprises in a single definition. That is why it has been defined variously, with different authors giving prominence to one of its component parts over the others.

### **2.1. The Notions of Realis and Irrealis**

For the purpose of this analysis, we find a definition stated by Frawley adequate enough (which is not to say that there are no others which would be similarly useful): "It is the content of an expression that reflects the speaker's attitude or state of knowledge about a proposition" (Frawley, 1992: 386). He further says that "[t]he basic denotation of modality is the opposition of actual and nonactual worlds, or more technically, *realis/irrealis*." Using the terms *the expressed world* for what is asserted in a proposition and *the reference world* for the actual world of speech, the here-and-now, he states that "[w]hen the reference world coincides with the expressed world, we get actual modality, or *realis*. When the reference world does not coincide with the expressed world, we get nonactual reality, or *irrealis*." The situation is rarely so extreme and the factual status of a proposition depends on the extent to which the two worlds coincide with each other (Frawley, 1992: 387-8).<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2. Propositional and Event modality; Negation**

Apart from the notions of 'realis' and 'irrealis', it is necessary to mention other divisions within the category of modality. Thus, Palmer talks about *propositional modality* (further divided into 'epistemic' and 'evidential' modality), which is concerned with the speaker's attitude to the truth-value or factual status of a proposition, and *event modality* (further divided into 'deontic' and 'dynamic' modality), which refers to events that are not actualized, events that have not taken place but are merely potential. There are three kinds of epistemic modality: 'speculative' (a possible conclusion, expressed by the modal verb *may*), 'deductive' (the only possible conclusion, expressed by the modal

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction *realis/irrealis* is commonly used, if variously defined. For instance: 'The *realis* portrays situations as actualized, as having occurred or actually occurring, knowable through direct perception. The *irrealis* portrays situations as purely within the realm of thought, knowable only through imagination.' (Palmer, 1986: 1).

verb *must*) and 'assumptive' (a reasonable conclusion, expressed by the modal verb *will*). There are mostly two types of evidential modality: 'sensory' and 'reported'. As for deontic modality, we talk about obligation and permission ('obligative' and 'permissive'). Dynamic modality refers to ability and willingness, which could be termed 'abilitive' and 'volitive' (Palmer, 1986: 8-10).

Sweetser talks about 'epistemic' modality (referring to necessity, probability, or possibility in reasoning) and 'root' modality (referring to real-world obligation, permission, or ability), the term which essentially covers the meaning of deontic modality (Sweetser, 1990: 49).

Frawley, however, adds a third type of modality to the two already mentioned. Namely, besides epistemic modality (or, in his words, possibly factual information) and deontic modality (or necessarily factual information), he also includes negation, or contrary to fact information, within the realm of modality (Frawley, 1992: 390).

Using the above-mentioned theoretical premises, we shall attempt to prove the assumption that the protagonist's perception of the world, distanced, confused and incomprehensible as it is, is reflected in the language she uses. We should also bear in mind the fact that when we say 'the world', we don't mean anything objective and inalterable, but "*the way the world is presented, the projected world, the world construed, [...] the model of the world we make up in our heads*" (Frawley, 1992: 20,24).

### **3. An Analysis of Modality**

In our analysis of modality in the novel *The Golden Notebook*, we shall argue the following:

- the declarative, marked by the absence of a modal verb and viewed as the most obvious 'realis' form (Palmer, 1986: 7), is almost absent from "Free Women";
- negatives, interrogatives and conditionals – treated as 'irrealis', or rather non-assertive forms, are abundant in these sections;
- 'distal' or past forms of modal verbs are more numerous than their present forms, both in occurrences of propositional and event modality;
- utterances are further modified by 'harmonic combinations' and 'hedges'.

Easy as it may be to divide the analysis into separate theoretical items as above, it is far more difficult to make divisions within the research based on utterances from the novel, which are, obviously, never exponents of only one aspect of modality, but are rather combinations of more. For this reason, we find the most adequate division the one provided by the writer herself, that is, into the five sections titled "Free Women."

### 3.1. Free Women 1

The very first sentence uttered by Anna goes as follows:

'The point is,' said Anna, as her friend came back from the telephone on the landing, 'the point is, that as far as I can see, everything's cracking up.' (25)

If she said: 'Everything's cracking up', that would be a simple statement, an assertion, a declarative form conveying a state of affairs in the present, objective at that, potentially based on some evidence we are not acquainted with. Obviously, this is not the case. Everything is cracking up, but in Anna's "*mentally projected world*" (Frawley, 1992: 18), which is clearly seen in the phrase she uses - 'as far as I can see' - by means of which she reduces the objectiveness of her utterance and makes it fully subjective. Firstly, she herself (or her *self*) is the center of judgement, or "the *epistemic centre*, the source of knowledge or the principal deictic point" (Frawley, 1992: 412). Secondly, she uses the modal verb 'can' with the verb of perception 'see', thus modifying her utterance by establishing a connection between sensation and modality, which is often the case with such verbs in English (Palmer, 1986: 47). It has been observed that "[a]ny sentence can be viewed under two aspects: as a description of a real-world situation or event, and as a self-contained part of our belief system (e.g. a conclusion or a premise)" (Sweetser, 1990: 64-5). We have seen that Anna's utterance is not a simple description of a situation; rather, it is molded through her own perception of it.

Talking about their lives as free women, her friend Molly says the following:

'Free. Do you know, when I was away, I was thinking about us, and I've decided that we're a completely new type of women. We must be, surely?' (26)

Again, these sentences cannot be viewed as simple statements. "It is perfectly possible to express modal notions without the use of modal systems, [which] can be achieved through the use of lexical verbs" (Palmer, 1986: 64). Molly uses the verb 'decide' to express this notion. Her conclusion belongs to epistemic modality - deductive, to be more precise - which is further indicated by the use of the modal verb 'must'. The verb 'must' which expresses inference is usually based on some observable evidence or known facts, not just the confidence of the speaker (Palmer, 1986: 34-5). Molly's inference is based on other people's attitude towards them. Her confidence, however, seems not be strong enough. Even though she uses a *harmonic* 'surely', which is supposed to reinforce the speaker's commitment (Palmer, 1986: 35), she does not assert her confidence, but asks a question instead. "[A]n interrogative may be used to

express doubt" (Palmer, 1986: 54) and we cannot but feel that this is the case here, that is, Molly is not so certain about the inference she has made.

The conversation about their status as free women continues. Further on, Anna comes to her own conclusions about men and marriage:

'The point is neither of us was prepared to get married simply to give our children fathers. So now we must take the consequences. If there are any. Why should there be?' (32)

As distinguished from the previous example, the verb 'must' here expresses deontic modality ('obligative'). That they must live the life they have chosen for themselves ('take the consequences') is not in doubt. What is in doubt, however, is whether there are any consequences, which is seen in the conditional sentence that follows. "[T]he function of the conditional marker *if* is precisely to suspend any commitment by the speaker to the proposition" (Verstraete, 2001: 1520). Therefore, the obligation imposed on the speaker and her interlocutor by herself is not doubted; what is not clear is the existence of, say, the object of obligation. This uncertainty is further indicated by the question that follows. 'Why should there be?' is one of the most common questions in the novel. The interrogative 'why' combined with the modal 'should' challenges the very reasons of existence of anything that is talked about, as if it would make no difference if the opposite were the case.

This is a proper introduction to the following sentence uttered by Molly to Richard, her ex-husband, after a lengthy exchange about her 'free' life and its potentially detrimental effect on their son, Tommy:

'What you say about me may or may not be true.' (41)

The two 'mays' from the above sentence are used to express Molly's possible conclusion as to the truth of what Richard has said, and as such belong to epistemic modality ('speculative'). Her uncertainty is stressed by the double use of the verb 'may', both in the affirmative and the negative. Also, 'what you say about me' is not necessarily 'what I take your words to mean' and is surely far from 'what I think about myself'. In 'what you say about me', the source of knowledge 'about me' is not the *self*, but the *other*, to use Frawley's terminology. *The other's* thought process leading to the expression of judgement is not available to *the self* for inspection, so *the self* cannot be sure whether what *the other* says is true or not.

Sometimes, however (more often than not, in Anna's case), the self seems to be as uncertain. Let us consider the following sentence uttered by Anna, in the course of conversation with Molly, Richard and Tommy about their common topic – the free life style and its influence on Tommy:

'Well perhaps we might still change and be better.' (53)

The modal verb 'might' is used here in the epistemic sense – Anna speculates about possible future outcomes of her and Molly's lives. 'May' is typically used in this sense; however, the past tense forms of the modals, or 'the modal-past', are often used to "express a lower degree of commitment, judgments that are more 'tentative'" (Palmer, 1986: 31). What is important here is that Anna distances herself from the possibility of changing and becoming better by using the past tense form, which is itself related to unreality, as has often been noted. Some of the terms used to express this notion are: 'remoteness from reality', 'distal' or "'semantic primitive of disassociative', past time being disassociated from present time and unreality from reality" (Palmer, 1986: 219-20). The 'harmonic' *perhaps* lends further uncertainty to her speculation.

We can draw similar conclusions about what Tommy tells Anna about her writing:

'You're afraid of writing what you think about life, because you might find yourself in an exposed position, you might expose yourself, you might be alone.' (55)

Here, we cannot help feeling that Tommy actually voices Anna's fears and speaks *her* mind. The verb 'might' is used here in the same sense as above – to speculate about the future. However, the 'distal' form seems to be used here so that Tommy could detach himself and his judgements from a highly possible future scenario, which could easily be stated in the first conditional: 'If you write what you think about life, you *will* find yourself in an exposed position, you *will* expose yourself, you *will* be alone.' It is evident on many occasions that Tommy knows Anna too well and he seems to be certain of the consequences he talks about, but he appears not to want to hurt her feelings, so he uses the 'remote' form of 'may'.

### 3.2. Free Women 2

Conversation about the notebooks continues. Tommy now asks Anna direct questions such as the following:

*Tommy:* Why do you have four notebooks?

*Anna:* I don't know.

*Tommy:* You must now. [...]

Why not one notebook?

*Anna:* Perhaps because it would be such a – scramble. Such a mess. (240)

This is one of the most significant exchanges in the novel because it succinctly sums up the way Anna views her life. Although she says that she doesn't know why she keeps four notebooks instead of only one, she is well aware of the reason, as Tommy is and we as readers are. She finds her life chaotic and she wants to bring some order into

it; that is why she compartmentalizes her life into separate parts and makes artificial boundaries between them. Again, she is too afraid of the consequences that she has to distance herself, by using the distal form 'would' with 'perhaps'. We wouldn't be wrong to say that her reality, the life she lives, is already chaotic, at times unbearable, so she needs to detach herself from it. Tommy's response 'You must know' may be interpreted both in the epistemic and deontic sense: he either means that 'it is necessarily the case that she knows' or 'it is necessary for her to know'. She does know why, but the knowledge is too painful that she hesitantly admits it, as in the following dialogue with Tommy:

*Anna*: I suppose it is. It's because I keep trying to write the truth and realizing it's not true.

*Tommy*: Perhaps it is true, perhaps it is, and you can't bear it, so you cross it out.

*Anna*: Perhaps.

*Tommy*: Are you afraid of being chaotic?

*Anna*: I suppose I must be. (247)

Her response could have been a simple 'I am'. However, for the reasons stated above, even when making 'the only possible conclusion' using the verb 'must' (Palmer, 1986: 6), she modifies it with a hedge 'I suppose', which reduces her commitment to the truth of her response.

Later on, Anna touches upon the subject of her free life with Marion, Richard's wife, who would soon divorce him.

*Marion*: Oh but I think I've come because I'm envious. You are what I want to be – you're free, and you have lovers and you do as you like.

*Anna*: I'm not free. [...] Marion, I'd like to be married. I don't like living like this. (251)

Here it so happens that, when someone else defines Anna as a 'free' woman, which is what she and Molly have been saying all the while, she denies it. What Marion says about her having lovers is basically true: Anna does have lovers and leads a life that Marion envies, being a disappointed wife of a man who doesn't love her and whom she doesn't love. Nevertheless, Anna denies the truth of her statement by negating it. "Negation is directly connected to factuality through falsity and denial" and as such it is associated with the irrealis modality (Frawley, 1992: 384-8). Besides denying what Marion says, Anna expresses her wish to get married by using the modal verb 'would', thus again marking a 'distance' between the 'real' state of affairs and unrealized events, which may be treated as 'irrealis' (Palmer, 1986: 13).

### 3.3. Free Women 3

In *Free Women 3* there is some conversation going on among Anna, Molly and the others. However, what is of the greatest importance here is Anna's internal monologue, which reveals the true state of her mental health.

She was thinking: If someone cracks up, what does that mean? At what point does a person about to fall to pieces say: I'm cracking up? And if I were to crack up, what form would it take? (344)

It is necessary to provide some insight into her train of thought, where the use of interrogative forms and conditionals is prevalent. She keeps asking herself questions and only rarely can she try and answer them. Obviously, her inner, or mental, self is as chaotic as the outside world, even more so, since the inner chaos is generated by the chaos outside. She rarely 'thinks' in simple statements. She either asks herself questions or imposes some obligations on herself, as in the following:

She thought: I've got to stop it, I simply must – though she could not have said what she had to stop. (348)

In her thoughts she often forces herself to do things. The verb 'must' expresses deontic modality (obligative, to be more precise): the obligation here is not external, it does not come from another person or authority, as is often the case, but from herself. "Must is [...] readily understood as a compelling force directing the subject towards an act" (Sweetser, 1990: 52). In this case, Anna is both the imposer and the imposee of the obligation. The problem is, she doesn't know what she has to do! She feels she must do something (to prevent her mental disintegration), but doesn't know what, which is what the author tells us, breaking her chain of thought.

#### **3.4. Free Women 4**

She thought: I wonder what I'm going to say? And I wonder who the person is who will say it? How odd, to sit here, waiting to hear what one will say. (451)

These lines suggest that Anna's condition is deteriorating. She is so confused that she questions even her own identity. Not only does she use such 'distancing' forms as questions, the verb 'wonder' and the phrase 'how odd', but she also distances herself from herself! Or rather, she splits her personality into several beings, no longer recognizing her real self. The distance she has held towards the language brings about the physical distance she feels between her different selves. In other words, both her language and her self distance themselves from (what's supposed to be) reality.

Anna is not the only one that doesn't feel at home in this world, as is evident in the following lines:

I know no one who isn't incomplete and tormented and fighting, the best one can say to anyone is that they fight – but I touch Janet and I immediately feel: Well, it will be different for her. Why should it be? It won't be. (457)

The first sentence is not a simple affirmative statement such as, for example, 'Everybody is complete'. It is negation: Anna denies the existence of 'complete' people or, at least, her knowledge of their existence. Rather, she talks about non-existence, about *what is not*, and *not what is*. That is why we can view her utterance, being negative, as 'irrealis'. She then goes on to think about her daughter Janet and imagines her future. First, she uses the verb 'will' (in the affirmative) to talk about her daughter's future. It has been argued that 'will' does not indicate pure futurity, but is usually conditional, since "[t]he future is not fully known and it is always no more than a reasonable assumption that a future event will ensue" (Palmer, 1986: 104-5). No sooner has she made the assumption than she corrects it and now uses the negative form of 'will' ('won't'). The change comes about after the repeatedly used question 'Why should it be?', as if there was no reason why Janet's future would be any different from Anna's and Molly's present. Anna's speculation about Janet's vague future is understandably uncertain, since the future is 'irrealis', unlike the present and the past, for the simple reason that the past is already gone, the present is being lived in, and the future is yet to be experienced.

### 3.5. Free Women 5

She said to herself: I don't know why I still find it so hard to accept that words are faulty and by their very nature inaccurate. If I thought they were capable of expressing the truth I wouldn't keep journals which I refuse to let anyone see – except, of course, Tommy. (565)

'Words are faulty and by their very nature inaccurate' is what Kiparsky and Kiparsky call a 'factive complement', which means that "the proposition in the complement is presupposed, i.e., accepted as true by the speaker (and, the speaker assumes, by the addressee)" (Palmer, 1986: 121). Anna is well aware of this and she doesn't question the truth of the proposition. Rather, her attitude towards it is questionable; she is perplexed by her inability to accept it as truth. The verb 'know' is what is termed "a *propositional attitude* verb (also known as a *belief context* or a *world creating predicate*): an expression that indicates something about the mental state or beliefs of the speaker. [...] Propositional attitude verbs induce referential opacity, the clouding of the determination of the extension of an expression that is otherwise clear, straightforward, or self-evident" (Frawley, 1992: 20). The above words uttered by Anna indeed reflect her mental state, as do the following ones:

It was a descent into banality; because as usual she concluded that any act she might make would be without faith, that is, without faith in 'good' and 'bad', but simply a sort of provisional act, hoping it might turn out well, but with no more than that hope. Yet from this attitude of mind she might very well find herself making decisions that would cost her life, or her freedom. (565-6)

We have cited the two excerpts above for the sake of further illustration of Anna's failure to come to terms with reality, which is again reflected in her words. The last excerpt bears witness to Anna's lack of faith and indecisiveness as to what course of action to undertake. The verb 'might' occurs several times in the excerpt, once again distancing Anna, this time from potential future scenarios.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Having provided several excerpts from the sections "Free Women", which we find crucial in terms of understanding Anna's character and her various roles in life, we hope that we have proved the assumption we started from in the introduction. The analysis we have conducted is far from exhaustive, but it is, nevertheless, representative enough for our purpose.

We can conclude that Anna's language is so structured that it reflects her state of mind, mental health and comprehension of reality, which is in itself a problematic concept. "Anything that can induce distance should potentially have a modal effect" (Frawley, 1992: 418), and this is exactly what Anna does. She uses such language devices as modal verbs, their distal forms, negation, interrogation and conditionals, among others, to modify her language and adapt it to her viewpoint and, in the process, to distance herself from all outside and inside her, which she finds incomprehensible and perplexing.

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### Apstrakt

#### UDALJAVANJE OD NERAZUMLJIVE REALNOSTI U ROMANU ZLATNA BELEŽNICA DORIS LESING

Ovaj rad se bavi analizom segmenata govora u romanu *Zlatna beležnica* spisateljice Doris Lesing iz ugla modalnosti. Najpre se definiše koncept modalnosti i svi relevantni pojmovi: *realis*, *irrealis*, propoziciona modalnost, modalnost događaja i negacija. Polazeći od ovih teoretskih premisa, autor analizira relevantne izjave protagonista, ograničavajući se na odeljke romana pod nazivom „Slobodne žene“, budući da u njima nalazimo najviše primera direktnog razgovora među likovima u romanu. Najznačajniji aspekti modalnosti u njima jesu: prisustvo modalnih glagola (naročito njihovih tzv. distalnih oblika), odsustvo deklarativnih rečenica (*realis*), upotreba odričnih, upitnih i kondicionalnih rečenica (koje potpadaju pod pojam *irrealis*). Na osnovu sprovedene analize zaključujemo da se percepcija sveta koju imaju protagonisti ovog romana – naročito Ana Vulf, spisateljica koja piše beležnice – odražava na njihov jezik, koji ukazuje na njihovo *udaljavanje* od neshvatljive realnosti.

**Ključne reči:** *modalnost, realis, irrealis, propoziciona modalnost, modalnost događaja, negacija, distalne forme, udaljavanje, nerazumljiva realnost.*