Writer’s Block in *The Golden Notebook*

Cause and Solution

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what the reasons are to the writer’s block that the main character Anna Wulf suffers from in Doris Lessing’s novel *The Golden Notebook*. Although there seem to be various reasons for the block, this essay focuses on the three main ones: Anna’s need to reflect reality in an objective way, her feeling of futility and her fear of the darkness in the world and within herself. The essay also tries to define what finally causes the block to lift so that Anna is able to write her second novel. It appears to be not only one, but many factors that contribute both to causing and to lifting the block and Anna needs to overcome all the difficulties in order to be able to write again.
Writer’s Block in *The Golden Notebook*

**Cause and Solution**

1. **Introduction**

In Doris Lessing’s novel, *The Golden Notebook*, first published in 1962, the main character Anna Wulf is an author who suffers from writer’s block. The reason for this block is something of a mystery. She clearly does not lack ideas for subjects to write about: “I have fifty ‘subjects’ I could write about; and they would be competent enough” (76). Nor does she seem unable to write since she is constantly keeping a record of the various aspects of her life in four different notebooks. In a red notebook she writes about events concerning the Communist Party, a black notebook is about her time in Africa and her novel *Frontiers of War*, a blue notebook tries to be a diary and in a yellow notebook she has written a novel about her own life where Ella, the main character in this novel, represents Anna herself. Different passages from these four notebooks are interwoven with five sections with the title *Free Women* and a fifth, golden, notebook and together they form the text of *The Golden Notebook*. Anna’s previous novel, *Frontiers of War*, became a bestseller but she is ashamed of it and claims to have decided never to write again, at least not for publication. It is not until the very end of the novel that she finally admits to having a writer’s block, “‘I could give you a dozen reasons why not, I could speak on the subject for several hours, 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’” (526).

Although this writer’s block seems to have various reasons, this paper will focus on three of the most significant ones and try to determine what causes the writer’s block to lift. When she finally manages to overcome the reasons for the block, it lifts and she is able to write another novel called *Free Women*. By the end of the novel we, as readers, understand
that the *Free Women* sections are actually a short novel written by Anna, about herself, as a result of her managing to overcome her writer’s block. The three reasons that will be discussed are Anna’s almost obsessive need to be ‘objective’ in her writing, her feeling of futility and her fear of the darker side within herself and in the world.

The first reason that will be presented in this paper is Anna’s need to reflect reality in an objective and truthful way. She is repeatedly crossing out what she has written, after deeming it too subjective and false. This need probably stems from the Communist Party and their attitude towards the purpose of art in general and Socialist Realism in particular.

The second reason that will be analysed is Anna’s feeling of futility. Her disillusionment because of what happened within the Communist Party gives her a feeling of being useless: “we have to admit that the great dream has faded and the truth is something else – that we’ll never be any use” (66). She wants to do something huge to change the world and feels that when the world is so chaotic and full of misery, writing is a waste of time. “Art is irrelevant” (57).

The third reason is her fear of the darker side within herself. In her notebooks, Anna uses different handwriting and brackets off certain parts that frighten her because they look shocking when she writes them down. Dreams play an important part in the novel and many of her dreams have to do with art and how she is incapable of performing it. Anna often talks about her dreams with Mrs. Marks, her psychoanalyst, who asks her to name the dreams and tries to find the meaning behind them. There is one kind of nightmare which Anna finds particularly terrifying. Throughout the novel she is naming different objects and occurrences around her in order to control them and she names this dream as being about joy-in-destruction or joy-in-spite. She has this nightmare many times and in the dreams there is a
malicious character who takes different forms and by the end of the novel Anna has a dream where she recognizes the malice in herself.

The three reasons mentioned will be compared to see if they have anything in common and if they might actually all be different aspects of the same cause. What finally causes the block to be lifted will, of course, also be analyzed and here we will take a closer look at the image of “the boulder-pushers” which plays an important role in reflecting Anna’s attitude towards writing and how it changes from a feeling of futility into hope.

2. Reflecting the Truth

Anna feels unable to reflect reality in a truthful way in her writing and she is constantly struggling to be objective. When she tries to write about her time in Africa, in the black notebook, she has to fight an impulse to make ‘a story’ of it. “I have to first switch something off in me … or ‘a story’ would begin to emerge, a novel, and not the truth” (78). Later, when she reads what she has written, she complains: “It’s full of nostalgia, every word loaded with it, although, at the time I wrote it I thought I was being ‘objective’” (150). She has the same problem when she tries to relate other episodes of her life, for example her affair with Michael: “the pattern of an affair … is seen in terms of what ends it. That is why all this is untrue” (210). After failing to relate her affair with Michael in a truthful way Anna comes to the conclusion that “Literature is analysis after the event” (210). When you experience something you see things in a different way than when you look back at it in order to write about what happened. While she was having the affair, she did not give importance to things that she could see much clearer after the affair had ended. John L. Carey comments on this in “Art and Reality in ‘The Golden Notebook’”: “On one occasion Anna tells herself that literature is ‘analysis after the event’” (GN, 196). She then speculated that, granted the truth of such a definition, she finds it impossible to understand how a novel could capture ‘reality’”
If it is true that all literature is analysis after the event, it is impossible to mirror reality by writing about events after they have occurred. Here we see similarities between Doris Lessing and Virginia Woolf. As Lynda Scott puts it, “Both writers … share an obvious distrust of memory” (n. pag.). The surname of Anna Wulf further suggests that Lessing wants her readers to make the connection to Woolf.

In an attempt to write more objectively, Anna decides to write down everything that happens in a day. After she has written about her day she crosses it all out, because she thinks that she has included too much of her own thoughts and feelings, and tries to write a more truthful, short record of it. She writes short, factual statements and continues like this for 18 months, but then she changes her mind again and crosses this out as well. “So all that is a failure too. The blue notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them” (412). For a time she stops writing and instead cuts out newspaper articles and pastes them in her notebooks. She is, obviously, searching for a method to express reality in a truthful way and is failing to find one.

While Anna is trying to keep a record of everything that happens in a day, she is worrying that because she has decided to write down what happens during this day, she might become more conscious and maybe this could change the day and make it special. She also happens to get her period this day and reflects about how the word ‘blood’ will give the wrong emphasis when she writes it down:

Simultaneously I am worrying about this business of being conscious of everything so as to write it down, particularly in connection with my having the period. Because, whereas to me, the fact I am having a period is no more than an entrance into an emotional state, recurring regularly, that is of no particular
importance; I know that as soon as I write the word ‘blood’, it will be giving a wrong emphasis, and even to me when I come to read what I have written. (304)

For some years, Anna is a member of the British Communist Party, and it is likely that her need to reflect reality as faithfully and objectively as possible is, at least partly, caused by the party’s view of art and the role of the artist. Here follows the definition of Socialist Realism as found in Encyclopaedia Britannica:

**Socialist Realism**, officially sanctioned theory and method of literary composition prevalent in the Soviet Union from 1932 to the mid-1980s. For that period of history Socialist Realism was the sole criterion for measuring literary works. Defined and reinterpreted over years of polemics, it remains a vague term.

Socialist Realism follows the great tradition of 19th-century Russian realism in that it purports to be a **faithful and objective mirror of life**. It differs from earlier realism, however, in several important respects. … In portraying [the struggle to build socialism and achieve a classless society], the writer could admit imperfections but was **expected to take a positive and optimistic view** of socialist society and to keep in mind its larger historical relevance. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, emphasis added)

So during the time Anna is a member of the Communist Party, in the 1950’s, the Socialist Realist method was the one promoted by the Soviet Union. In this definition of the term, we find that according to it, the purpose of art was to mirror life faithfully and objectively. This leads us to think that it is very possible that Anna’s need for reflecting the truth in an objective way may come from this view. We can also see that according to Socialist Realism
the writer was supposed to write in a positive and optimistic way and this might explain why Anna does not want anyone to read what she writes in her notebooks. Her thoughts about the world and the socialist society are far from optimistic. Tommy, the son of her friend Molly, accuses her of being dishonest when she only writes for herself to read and says that if she feels disgust then she feels disgust; “Why pretend not?” (55). He says that it is irresponsible of her to hide what she really thinks of the world, but Anna defends herself by claiming that “A very great number of people would say that it was irresponsible to spread disgust” (56). This great number of people probably refers to the members of the Communist Party. In the novel we find a couple of reviews, made by communists, about Anna’s novel Frontiers of War and they demonstrate how her novel deviates from the communist artistic ideals of the time. “No, this author must learn from our literature, the literature of health and progress, that no one is benefited by despair. This is a negative novel” (393). Anna’s unwillingness to let other people see her thoughts about the world also relates to one of the other reasons that will be discussed later in this paper: Anna’s fear of her own thoughts and the darkness within herself.

In The Other Side of the Story, Molly Hite seems to support the theory that the influence of the Communist Party is an important reason to Anna’s reluctance to write subjectively:

By the standards of those contemporaries who exerted most influence over Anna – and over Lessing, at least while she subscribed to the party line on literature – to write about the personal, the individual, the realm of “the emotions” was to descend into triviality; it was to fall short of the ideals of objectivity and comprehensiveness implied in the equation of “what’s real” with conventional realism. (57)
Doris Lessing, herself writes in the preface to the novel: “When I began writing there was pressure on writers not to be ‘subjective’. This pressure began inside communist movements, as a development of the social literary criticism developed in Russia in the nineteenth century” (12). In this statement we see very clearly that the pressure that Anna feels was something that many artists experienced and that, according to the author of *The Golden Notebook*, it came from within the Communist Party.

Anna’s fear of subjectivity comes to the surface when, at the end of the novel, she meets Saul Green, an American writer who suffers from some kind of mental illness, probably schizophrenia. During some of his ‘fits’ he starts talking randomly with an excessive use of the word “I”.

Then he began talking, and I swear it was at random, he might have chosen any other subject. He was talking about how to bring up a small girl. He was very intelligent about it all, and very academic. He talked and talked – I said something, but he did not know that I had. He talked – I found myself absent-minded, then with my attention half on what he said, realized I was listening for the word I in what he said. I, I, I, I, I – I began to feel as if the word I was being shot at me like bullets from a machine gun. (487)

In her article, “Freedom as Effacement in The Golden Notebook: Theorizing Pleasure, Subjectivity and Authority”, Tonya Krouse expresses a very interesting theory concerning Anna’s reaction in this instance. She suggests that Anna’s negative feelings about the word “I” reflect her feeling towards subjectivity. It seems logical that Anna, who is afraid of subjectivity, would react strongly against this use of the word “I”.
When Anna rejects Saul Green's "I" in The Golden Notebook, she reacts against not only his "I" but also her own "I", which she believes compromises her art. According to Anna's logic, the artist needs to erase her "I" from the text; in order to honor the demands of art, the personality of the author must be driven underground. (48)

So Anna believes that subjectivity, which is here represented by the word “I”, compromises art and that in order to honour the demands of art the artist must write in an objective way.

3. A Feeling of Futility

Anna wants to achieve something huge to change the world and she does not think that art is sufficient. At least not the kind of art she feels capable of producing. She wants to write a novel “with an intellectual or moral passion strong enough to create order, to create a new way of looking at life” (76) but she feels unable to do so, “I have only one, and the least important, of the qualities necessary to write at all, and that is curiosity. It is the curiosity of the journalist” (76). Anna thinks that the modern novel has become an outpost of journalism and it is clear that she does not approve of this change. She says that it is because society has become so fragmented, people read novels to learn about areas of life they do not know. We see that Anna does not see this kind of journalistic writing as real, important literature: “One novel in five hundred or a thousand has the quality a novel should have to make it a novel – the quality of philosophy” (75). Consequently, since she does not feel able to write this kind of philosophical novel that would change people’s way of looking at life, she does not think that her writing is at all important. She feels that she should be doing something else, something more useful, to help to change the world.

This belief that writing is not enough could also be caused by all the fast changes that Anna has seen in the world in the past years. In the section of Free Women 2
Tommy tells Anna that his father has said that “the result of the communist countries on Europe is that people can’t be bothered. Because everyone’s got used to the idea of whole countries changing completely in about three years – like China or Russia. And if they can’t see a complete change ahead, they can’t be bothered” (237). This is probably what has happened to Anna: she has seen so many huge changes in such a short period of time that the small and slow change that her writing might bring about seems insufficient and unimportant.

Another cause of Anna’s feeling of futility, which makes her think that writing is pointless, seems to be the fate of the Communist Party and the situation of the world in general. Anna has put all her faith in the party and after learning the truth about its horrible secrets and realizing that it is not the solution that they had hoped for, she is left with a feeling of being useless: “we have to admit that the great dream has faded and the truth is something else – that we’ll never be any use” (66). In the first pages of the novel, Anna tells Tommy that she has experienced feelings of disgust and futility and does not wish to spread these emotions by writing about them and the reason for this may be related to the Socialist Realist ideals of writing in a positive and optimistic way. When we consider the situation in the world at the time of the novel, it is easy to understand Anna’s feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy. She tells her psychoanalyst, Mrs. Marks, that she will probably never write again, because “I can’t pick up a newspaper without what’s in it seeming so overwhelmingly terrible that nothing I could write would seem to have any point at all” (229). Anna is very affected by all the terrible things that are happening in the world at this time, for example the development of the H-bomb. Up until this point in history, a weapon of this kind was unthinkable. Suddenly it is possible to delete a whole city by pushing a button and this gives Anna an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness.
She would like to achieve something huge to change the world and does not feel that art is enough. In the chaos that the world has become, art seems to be irrelevant. Later, because of the image of the boulder-pushers, which we will look at in more detail later in this paper, she will realize that what is important is to do something and not to give in. This realization is one important factor that will help her in the process to start writing again.

4. The Darkness and Violence in the World and within Anna

Another reason for Anna’s writer’s block seems to be that she is ashamed and afraid of the emotion that created her novel *Frontiers of War* and she knows that if she were to write another novel she would have to use the same emotion. “It is an immoral novel because that terrible lying nostalgia lights every sentence” (77). She feels responsible for the feelings that her novel creates in other people. “This emotion is one of the strongest reasons why wars continue. And the people who read *Frontiers of War* will have had fed in them this emotion, even though they were not conscious of it. That is why I am ashamed and why I feel continually as if I had committed a crime” (78). Anna is afraid of the powerful nostalgia for death that she claims is dominating her novel *Frontiers of War*. It is a part of her that frightens her and that she is ashamed of, it is one aspect of a frequent theme in the novel, joy-in-destruction.

Sometimes, in her writing, this darker side of hers is showing as “flashes of madness” and when she reads what she has written it frightens her so that she feels a need to make it appear less important. This is why she brackets off parts of the text in her notebooks. One example is when she has written about how she had imagined herself jumping out of a window and then how she “seemed to be standing by the body on the pavement … Blood and brains were scattered everywhere. I knelt down and began licking up the blood and the
brains” (246). After she had written this she had put brackets around it and then she had written about how she went to buy food, cooked and took her daughter to the park for a walk. Tommy asks Anna: “What makes you decide that the madness and the cruelty isn’t just as strong as the – getting on with living?” (246). She answers that “In a day when I buy food and cook it and look after Janet and work, there’s a flash of madness – when I write it down it looks dramatic and awful. It’s just because I write it down” (246). Anna says that she writes it and then crosses it out because “I keep trying to write the truth and realizing it’s not true” (247). When Tommy suggests that maybe it is true and that she is not able to bear it, she admits that perhaps he is right. This passage in the novel gives us both an example of Anna’s fear of her darker side and her aspiration to mirror exactly what happens. Similarly, when she was worrying about how to write about her having the period without letting the word ‘blood’ give the wrong emphasis, she says in this section that when she writes down the flashes of madness, it looks dramatic and awful. These glimpses of violence and darkness seem to frighten her more when she writes them down. It is as if the words become more powerful when on paper.

When Anna reads works of other people, the only texts she enjoys reading are the ones which have been written out of a powerful emotion. So even though she is afraid of the emotions that created her own novel, she finds all other kind of writing tedious. “I’ve been forced to acknowledge that the flashes of genuine art are all out of deep, suddenly stark, undisguisable private emotion … And so this is the paradox: I, Anna, reject my own ‘unhealthy’ art; but reject ‘healthy’ art when I see it” (311). These thoughts indicate that maybe she is starting to understand that this darkness, or feeling of joy-in-destruction, that she is afraid of also has a positive and creative side to it. Similarly, this seems related to her unwillingness to write about her own “private emotions” since this would result in
subjectivity, which the influence of the Communist Party has taught her to distrust. Maybe Anna’s confession that she only enjoys reading texts that have been written out of a strong emotion indicates that she is starting to question the way that the Communist Party looks upon art and the role of the artist.

Anna’s recurrent dream about joy-in-destruction seems to be what finally helps her to recognize the darkness within herself and accept it. In the dreams the malice takes different shapes. At first she perceives it as an evil dwarf-like creature. She tells Mrs. Marks about the dreams and Mrs. Marks asks Anna if there is nothing positive or creative in the dream as well but she answers that for her there is nothing like that. She has this same kind of dream many times and towards the end of the novel she recognizes the spite in herself.

I was the malicious male-female dwarf figure, the principle of joy-in-destruction … There was a terrible yearning nostalgia in the dream, the longing for death. … There was a terrible joy in the dream. When I woke up the room was dark … and I was filled with joy and peace. I wondered how such a terrible dream could leave me rested, and then I remembered Mother Sugar [Mrs. Marks], and thought that perhaps for the first time I had dreamed the dream positively. (518)

After she has discovered the positive and creative side of the dream, recognized the darkness within herself and been able to accept it, she is filled with joy and peace.

An important clue to the fact that Anna is starting to be able to accept all aspects of herself, even the darker ones, is when she decides to stop writing in different notebooks and start to write in one only. When Saul asks Anna why she keeps four notebooks she answers: “Obviously, because it’s been necessary to split myself up, but from now on I shall be using one only” (521). Anna buys the golden notebook without knowing what she wants it
for. Then she stops writing in her four notebooks and starts writing in the golden one, “all of myself in one book” (528). Now she seems ready to face the darkness within herself and also see the creative side to it.

In his article, “Doris Lessing and R. D. Laing: Psychopolitics and Prophecy”, Marion Vlastos supports the theory that with help of the dreams about joy-in-destruction Anna is finally able to accept the darkness within herself:

[T]he root of Anna’s self-alienation is a refusal to accept the fact of evil and the effects of evil as part of herself. … she becomes aware, that denying evil in herself only increases its power to possess her … The evolution of Anna’s dream about the principle of evil which she calls “joy-in-spite” records the gradual process of her self-acceptance at the most basic level. … Recognizing the naked, terrible essence of herself and Saul, Anna proves to herself that she is finally willing to face the evil within. (247-248)

So this dream of joy-in-spite is part of the process that finally will enable Anna to accept the fact that she too has evil within. She shows that she is able to face this evil by recognizing it in her dream.

5. Comparing the Reasons

The three reasons that we have been discussing in this paper appear to have some features in common. In her book Twentieth-century Women novelists – feminist theory into practice, Susan Watkins writes that the reason for Anna’s writer’s block is that “[s]he feels that anything she could write would be pointless when there is such horror in the world because it would merely create an untruthful version of reality” (64). This statement combines and
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unites two of the reasons mentioned in this paper: the feeling that art is pointless when the world is so full of violence and misery and her need to mirror reality objectively.

One common cause to all three of the reasons is the influence of the Communist Party. As we have already mentioned, the Socialist Realist view of art has most likely contributed to Anna’s need to write objectively. At the same time it seems to have caused her to feel ashamed of her negative thoughts about the situation in the world and hence contributed to her fear and shame of the darkness within herself. It is even possible to claim that the Communist Party contributed to the third reason as well; her feeling of futility. After learning the truth about the party Anna is left with a feeling of being useless. In addition, it was probably the Communist Party that made Anna used to huge changes in very short time which made her feel that art is insignificant in comparison.

The situation in the world at the time of the novel, the 1950’s, is also a common cause for the three reasons. Anna feels unable to mirror reality in an objective and truthful way when she is so emotionally affected by the violence and cruelty in the world. Her feeling of futility is also a result of the situation in the world and because of the violence, art seems irrelevant. Finally, her fear of the violence and evil in the world also contributes to her fear of the darkness within herself.

From this comparison it can be concluded that the three reasons mentioned all have been affected by the Communist Party in various ways and by the situation in the world at the time of the novel. The reasons have much in common so in part maybe they could be considered different sides of the same causes, but it is difficult to say this with certainty. They have all been affected by these two causes but there seem to be other causes behind each of them as well and these might not be the same for all three.
6. What Causes the Block to be Lifted?

There seems to be many factors that contribute to the solution of Anna’s writer’s block and not only one. In this section three solutions will be explored in depth: the image of the boulder-pushers, the role of dreams and the act of ‘naming’.

6.1 The Boulder-Pushers

In the yellow notebook Anna writes a story about a woman called Ella, Anna’s alter ego. Paul, Ella’s lover, compares Ella and himself to “boulder-pushers”. They spend all their lives trying to make people accept truths that the great men have always known. “The boulder is the truth … and the mountain is the stupidity of mankind” (196). This metaphor refers to the Greek myth about Sisyphus who had to push a boulder up a hill and every time he was about to reach the top it rolled back down and he had to start all over again. It is an image of futility and another example that illustrates the fact that Anna sees no point in writing.

The image of boulder-pushers comes up many times in the novel. In a dream, close to the end of the novel, Anna sees how Michael and Paul melt into each other and become one person. This person tells her that they are not the failures they think they are. He explains almost the same story as Paul told Ella about the boulder-pushers in the yellow notebook, only this story is more hopeful. He says that the great men rely on them, “and they are right; and that is why we are not useless after all” (537). Shortly afterwards, Anna tells Saul that she is going to be a boulder-pusher and explains the story about them. This time she mentions that when the boulder rolls down it always manages to end “a few inches higher than when it started” (544). She is starting to understand that although she cannot change the whole world with her writing, it is enough to do something. This addition to the metaphor also
changes it completely as an image of futility. Now the message seems to be that the small changes are enough and what is important is not to give in.

The ending of the novel is a bit ambiguous, because while the story in the five notebooks ends with Anna solving her writer’s block and writing her second novel *Free Women* as a result, the *Free Women* sections end with Anna giving up writing and deciding to start working as a marriage counsellor instead. At the end of *Free Women* her friend Molly, who, as a divorced woman, always has found pride in managing on her own, decides to marry a man apparently because it gives her a sense of security. Patrocinio P. Schweickart compares the novel *Free Women* with the image of the boulder-pushers:

[I]t has the form of "boulder-pushing:" Molly's intended second husband is suspiciously reminiscent of her first, and there is no reason to believe that Anna's prospective job with Dr. North would be any less frustrating and futile than Ella's job with Dr. West. The irony is accentuated further by the title. Here is a story titled *Free Women* about two women who gradually realize that they are not free, that they really cannot be free. (274)

So after having struggled with her writer’s block for so long, the character Anna in *Free Women* simply gives up writing all together. It is ironic that she starts to work as a marriage counsellor since her own relationships with men have been far from successful and her marriage ended after only a year. Molly, who in a time when being a divorced woman was seen as shameful was still proud of managing on her own and despised people with money, suddenly decides to marry a rich man she does not really seem to love. They both conform in the end to the norms of society despite having fought against these norms for so long and this could be seen as the moment when the boulder rolls back down again after the boulder-pusher has almost reached the top of the mountain.
When Anna refers to the beliefs of the members of the Communist Party as the “communist myth”, Tommy wonders what she lives by now. She answers that:

[Every so often, perhaps once in a century, there’s a sort of – act of faith. A well of faith fills up, and there’s an enormous heave forward in one country or another, and that’s a forward movement for the whole world. Because it’s an act of imagination – of what is possible for the whole world. In our century it was 1917 in Russia. And in China. Then the well runs dry, because, as you say, the cruelty and the ugliness is too strong. Then the well slowly fills again. And then there’s another painful lurch forward.’ ... every time the dream gets stronger. If people can imagine something, there’ll come a day when they’ll achieve it. (248)

When Tommy asks what there is for them now the answer is: ‘Keeping the dream alive. Because there’ll always be new people, without paralysis of the will”’ (248). This comment seems very closely related to the image of the boulder-pushers. Their mission as boulder-pushers is to try to make the great masses of the world accept the truth that the great men have always known and also to keep the dream alive until it will be possible to achieve. Maybe they are not able to achieve any huge changes, but their task is no less important.

In the story about the boulder-pushers that Anna tells Saul she says that when the boulder-pushers have got a few feet up “there’s a war, or the wrong sort of revolution, and the boulder rolls down – not to the bottom, it always manages to end up a few inches higher than when it started” (544). From this description it seems as though, in Anna’s opinion, the people initiating the communist movement were boulder-pushers, but that due to some reasons, “a war, or the wrong sort of revolution”, the beautiful dream failed and the boulder rolled back down again. The message seems to be that even though their effort did not
succeed it was not in vain, because “If people can imagine something, there’ll come a day when they’ll achieve it” (248). The boulder-pushers have to keep the dream alive and not give in. We begin to see that art and writing is not so irrelevant after all.

6.2 Dreams

Dreams play a significant role in the solving of Anna’s writer’s block and towards the end of the novel she has a series of dreams that will make her realize that because of her fear of the violence in the world, she has ignored the people that are enduring this violence and cruelty without giving in. She will also, eventually, understand that there is no one correct way of reflecting reality.

In one of these dreams, someone is going to make a television film about her friends at the Mashopi hotel in Africa. To her dismay she realizes that the director’s way of filming the events does not resemble what she remembers. It changes the story. She understands that what she remembers is probably untrue. Anna ‘names’ this dream as being about total sterility and decides not to write more in the black notebook since she cannot trust her own memories. Once again we see the distrust of memories which Anna shares with Virginia Woolf.

She has a couple of more dreams, similar to this one, where she has to go back and look at scenes from her life. This episode of the novel is very similar to what Virginia Woolf writes in A Sketch of the Past: “I find that scene making is my natural way of marking the past” (qtd. in Rubenstein, 14). In one of the dreams Anna realizes that what she has given emphasis to in her writing has not been what is important. In this dream she sees how the events she has emphasised have disappeared, leaving place to what is really important:

[I]t became a series of moments where a peasant’s hand bent to drop seed into earth, or a rock stood glistening while water slowly wore it down, or a man stood
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on a dry hillside in the moonlight, stood eternally, his rifle ready on his arm. Or a woman lay awake in darkness, saying No, I won’t kill myself, I won’t, I won’t.

... Still asleep, I read words off a page I had written: That was about courage, but not the sort of courage I have ever understood. It’s a small painful sort of courage which is at the root of every life, because injustice and cruelty is at the root of life.

(550-551)

In this episode Anna realises that she has been ignoring the importance of this sort of courage; the courage of the ones who refuse to give in despite all the suffering in the world. She comes to a conclusion: “the reason why I have only given my attention to the heroic or the beautiful or the intelligent is because I won’t accept that injustice and the cruelty, and so won’t accept the small endurance that is bigger than anything” (551). Now Anna understands that because she has been unwilling to accept the violence and cruelty in the world she has failed to see the people who endure this cruelty without giving in, even though these people are actually more important. This realization seems to be a significant factor in helping to lift Anna’s writer’s block. The small endurance that Anna has ignored, because she could not accept the cruelty and injustice in the world, seems to be what the image of the boulder-pushers is essentially about. Maybe this failure to recognize the small endurance and only focusing on what is heroic and beautiful has contributed to Anna’s feeling of never being able to reflect the truth in a satisfying way.

Molly Hite highlights how the dreams help Anna realize that there is more than one way of reflecting the truth:

It is only at the climax of her “breakdown” in the Golden notebook, when Anna finds herself viewing “conventionally well-made films” that parody the
conventions she herself has taken for granted in imagining this part of her life, that she realizes how limited her vision has been. ... The irresistible implication is that every perspective is as “correct” as every other perspective, that the whole is constituted by all possible perspectives, and that therefore an apprehension of the whole is, strictly speaking, impossible. (100-101)

So these dreams not only help Anna to understand that even small changes are enough and what is important is not to give in, but also that there can be more than one truth and that different perspectives can be equally correct. This idea is similar to what Gayle Greene writes in *Changing the story: feminist fiction and the tradition*:

All attempts to “cage the truth” (p. 660) by means of visual images of “facts” are as dependent as fiction is upon the ordering, selecting faculty of the mind. When Anna can accept that there is no reality apart from the mind that perceives it and the words that shape it, she can accept that none of her versions is true – or all are true, or truth itself is a fiction, invented rather than discovered (123)

Anna realizes that it is impossible to capture one true, objective version of reality. Even when using visual images, which might be perceived as being objective, the artist’s ordering and selection will affect the final result just as it does in written fiction. She understands that there is not one objective view of reality because everyone experiences the world differently.

6.3 ‘Naming’

Something else that seems to be important in the solving of the writer’s block is the act of ‘naming’. In one of her dreams, when Anna goes back and looks at scenes of her life, she has to ‘name’ the scenes in a new way.
It was the same act as when I was a child and had bad nightmares every night: before I slept each night I lay awake, remembering everything in the day that had a quality of fear hidden in it; which might become part of a nightmare. I had to ‘name’ the frightening things over and over, in a terrible litany; like a sort of disinfection by the conscious mind before I slept. But now, asleep, it was not making past events harmless, by naming them, but making sure they were still there. Yet I know that having made sure they were still there, I would have to ‘name’ them in a different way. (535)

When she ‘names’ the scenes in a different way she realizes that the emphasis and meaning that she has given to certain events might not be the only “correct” ones. It is during this ‘renaming’ that the image of the boulder-pushers becomes more hopeful. In *Changing the story: feminist fiction and the tradition*, Gayle Greene seems to suggest that it is because of the renaming that the story about the boulder-pushers come to symbolize hope instead of futility: “In this crucial instance of ‘naming in a different way,’ ‘boulder-pushers’ are renamed as ‘not failures,’ ‘not useless,’” (111).

In his article *Art and Reality in “The Golden Notebook”*, John L. Carey even goes as far as to claim that “This ‘naming’ finally resolves her writer’s block and enables her to face what she understands as the relation between art and reality” (448). The process of naming is no doubt an important factor in solving Anna’s writer’s block, but it does not seem to be the sole reason for its solution.

At the very end of the book, Saul asks Anna why she does not write another novel. This is the first time that she confesses that she suffers from a writer’s block. He tells her that she has to start writing again or otherwise she will crack up. She says that she would
if she could, but he tells her that that is not good enough. “[T]ell me, one simple sentence, why not ... I was thinking that if you could simplify it in your mind, boil it down to something, then you could take a good long look at it and beat it”’ (553). This could maybe be seen as a way of ‘naming’ as well. She has to name the reason for the block in order to beat it.

Anna actually manages to start writing again shortly after this episode so it is no doubt of importance.

‘Very well then. I can’t write that short story or any other, because at the moment I sit down to write, someone comes into the room, looks over my shoulder, and stops me.’ ... It could be a Chinese peasant. Or one of Castro’s guerrilla fighters. Or an Algerian fighting in the FLN. Or Mr Mathlong. They stand here in the room and say, why aren’t you doing something about us, instead of wasting your time scribbling?’ (553-554)

Anna’s answer shows us that she feels that she ought to do something more than just writing, because it does not seem to be enough.

Saul forces her to start writing and gives her the first sentence of the novel and we recognize this as the first sentence of both the Free Women sections and of The Golden Notebook. “The two women were alone in the London flat.” He tells her that it is important that she writes the novel. “‘You’re going to write that book, you’re going to write it, you’re going to finish it ... because if you can do it, then I can’”’(554). This passage seems to suggest that he sees them as a team and before Saul leaves Anna’s home he talks about them being precisely that.

There are a few of us around in the world, we rely on each other even though we don’t know each other’s names. But we rely on each other all the time. We’re a
team, we’re the ones who haven’t given in, who’ll go on fighting. I tell you, Anna, sometimes I pick up a book and I say: Well, so you’ve written it first, have you?

Good for you. OK, then I won’t have to write it. (556)

This passage seems to express a similar idea to that of the boulder-pushers. The image of the boulder-pushers is also referring to a group of people who do not give in, but continue pushing the boulder up the hill even though it rolls down again every time. When Paul tells Ella, in the yellow notebook, that they are boulder-pushers he also seems to view them as a kind of team. After Anna has told Saul about what the boulder-pushers are he tells her that he wants to be one of the great men standing on top of the mountain, but she tells him that he is a boulder-pusher just like she is. This shows us that she too counts them as belonging to the same group.

By the end of the novel, just before Anna succeeds in writing her second novel, something which shows us that she finally has managed to overcome her writer’s block, Saul tells her that they have to believe in the things they put on the agendas: “We’re going to be saved by what we seriously put on our agendas.’ ‘We’ve got to believe in our blueprints?’ ‘We’ve got to believe in our beautiful impossible blueprints’” (553). This can be seen as the same message as that of the boulder-pushers: to not give in and to believe in the dreams, because that is what is going to save them. It is also similar to Anna’s conversation with Tommy, where she explains what she lives by now: “If people can imagine something, there’ll come a day when they’ll achieve it.” And that their mission now is “‘Keeping the dream alive. Because there’ll always be new people, without paralysis of the will’” (248).

There is no clear moment in which the block is lifted and no one obvious reason for why it happens. It seems rather as though Anna throughout the novel gradually gets closer
to regain her ability to write again, thanks to many different factors. There are many chains of events that seem equally possible to be the ones solving the writer’s block.

One of these chains of events could be described in the following way. Anna is afraid of the darkness and violence in the world and in herself. She has the dream about joy-in-destruction and shortly after she decides to stop writing in the different notebooks and start writing in one only. She has recognized the malice in herself and accepted it and therefore also found the creative side to it. The fact that she starts writing in one notebook only, suggests that she has learned to accept all her sides.

Another chain could explain her need to write in an objective and truthful way. Because of the Communist Party, Anna feels a need to reflect reality in a truthful and objective way. She tries different ways to do this, but fails to find one. She has a dream where she sees scenes from her life and understands that she has failed to see what is really important: the people enduring the violence and cruelty without giving in. She realizes also that there is no one correct way of looking at life but that different views are equally correct.

A third chain of events starts with the fact that Anna wants to achieve something huge to change the world and therefore feels that art is not enough. In one dream she has to rename scenes from her life and the image of the boulder-pushers goes from symbolizing futility to becoming an image of hope. After this Anna understands that it is enough to do something even if it cannot change the world. She realizes that her mission as a boulder-pusher is to keep the dream alive until it can become reality and she can do this through her writing.
Anna gives many reasons to why she has chosen not to write again and it is not until the very end of the book that she confesses that she, in fact, suffers from a writer’s block. When she can admit this and ‘name’ the reason to it she is not far from lifting the block.

The writer’s block seems to have been caused by many things and it is not enough to overcome just one of them in order for the block to lift. Eventually Anna succeeds in overcoming all the reasons to the block and is able to write again.

**Conclusion**

There are several reasons for Anna’s writer’s block and in this paper we have analysed three of the most important ones: her need to reflect reality in an objective and truthful way, her feeling of futility and her fear of the darkness in the world and within herself.

The need to mirror reality in an objective way is most likely caused by the Communist Party’s view of art at this time, Socialist Realism. She tries many different ways of writing in her search for a way to mirror reality without being subjective. In a dream she realizes that there is more than one correct way of viewing the world and that there is no one objective truth.

Her feeling of futility is probably caused by the situation in the world and the fate of the Communist Party. She wants to achieve something huge to change the world and art does not seem to be enough. At first, the story about the boulder-pushers illustrates this feeling of futility, but after she has renamed it in a dream it comes to symbolize hope instead. This change of the metaphor helps her to understand that doing something is enough even if it does not change the whole world.
Anna is afraid of the darker side within herself and uses her notebooks to separate things off from each other and make order in her life. When she writes down something that shows her darker side she thinks it looks shocking and puts brackets around it. She tries to use her different notebooks with brackets and different handwriting to control her darker side and when finally she decides to use only one notebook we see that she has learned to accept all parts of herself, also the darker ones. She has various dreams about joy-in-destruction and at the end she recognizes the malice in herself and discovers the creative side to the dream.

Dreams are important in solving the block and so is the image of the boulder-pushers. Thanks to her dreams she understands that there is no one objective truth but all perspectives are equally correct. The message of the story about the boulder-pushers is that it is enough to do something and what is important is not to give in.

There seem to be many factors that contribute both to causing and to solving the block and there is no one single reason to its solution. Gradually, throughout the novel Anna learns to overcome all her difficulties and finally lifts the block. As a result she writes the novel *Free Women*. 
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