Although it’s an interesting topic, nothing much has been said about the narrator in *To Room Nineteen*. In a comparison with Godwin’s *A Sorrowful Woman*, it does say however that the story “reads like an elaborate case history” (Halisky 48). I will not contradict this overall impression of the story, but add a comment or two.

The narration is especially intriguing in the beginning of the story. It starts off immediately with a bold statement about the general theme of the story, followed by an ominous conclusion: This is a story, I suppose, about a failure in intelligence: the Rawlings’ marriage was grounded in intelligence.

This sentence already provides a narrator with prior knowledge and points out one shouldn’t expect this story to have a happy ending, although it has been suggested that only just at the words “and yet ( . . . ) there must be a certain flatness” the author “explicitly indicate[s] that something is “wrong” with their marriage” (Bell 181). Moreover, the subtext of the first page reveals a lot of hyperbolical irony, quietly waiting to be contradicted. For example, how “nothing was a surprise to them” and “their infallible sense for choosing right”.

Apart from the first sentence, Lessing consistently chose for a third person narrator throughout the story, while one might argue that a first person narrator would’ve been a more logical choice for representing one’s inner life. Then again, by describing events from a more neutral point of view, there springs a lively interaction between Susan Rawlings’ thoughts and this unknown narrator. Because, from a certain point on, the narrator is constantly restricted to Susan’s own ideology, all sentences can be related to her train of thought.

Another appealing aspect in *To Room Nineteen* is the fascinating psyche of its protagonist. Therefore a lot of analyses of the text contain psychological approaches. A recurring theme is the sense of imprisonment. This feeling is often linked to the pressure she experiences from her role in the family: Susan feels “hopelessly bound to her roles as wife and mother” (Bell 181), she “finds herself a prisoner in her role as self-sacrificing angel-in-the-house” (Nordius 172) and “there’s a sense of [her] being trapped ( . . . ) by the affections of [her] family” (Halisky 47). Such a connection is undoubtedly there in the story, as evidenced by a phrase like “a human cage of loving limbs”. Nevertheless, her family is not the only mentioned cause of pressure:

Not for one second, ever, was she free from the pressure of time, from having to remember this or that. She could never forget herself; never really let herself go into forgetfulness. Judging by this fragment, it also seems that mere existence in society, with its accumulating deadlines, is too much weight for her mind to bear. In this view, one can see Susan’s deterioration develope parallel to a quest for three different levels of freedom. At first, there’s the evasion of various emotional pitfalls by Susan’s and Matthew’s “foresight” and their “intelligent” choices, which resulted in their marriage. This means freedom in its most original sense: the freedom from a “painful and explosive world”; to be an autonomous family that can support itself. Secondly, there’s her withdrawal from her family, which eventually leads to her alienation from all other members of the human race. This second level of freedom separates her from all the “others” around her, who might put several sorts of obligations upon her. The last level of freedom, eventually, is to free her even from herself and “to evade her impending self-
awareness” (Bell 181), and can only lead to a flight from life itself. So, in death she finds her ultimate freedom.

In the process of her mental decline there’s a certain phase where Susan makes a division within herself between a natural, more “essential Susan” and an artificial Susan. She tries to blot out this new identity but fails trying to:

She felt as if Susan had been spirited away. She disliked very much this woman who lay here, cold and indifferent beside a suffering man, but she could not change her. So she has to “learn to be [her]self again”. More concrete, this underlying dichotomy is reflected in the other identity (Mrs. Jones) she has created for herself.

The friction that arises between Susan’s “intelligent” way of living and the emotions she has to deal with later on is another important element in this short story. Lessing explicitly indicates intelligence as the villain of the story. After all, she characterizes the story as “a failure in intelligence” in the very first sentence. As Janina Nordius argues, “Susan Rawlings gives up on intelligence” (Nordius 172). So we can make a distinction between Susan’s rational self and her emotional self, which correspond to, respectively, the artificial Susan and the essential Susan. By the way, it has been suggested that “women have been encouraged to deny their emotional, instinctive- irrational- natures in order to celebrate the cerebral, the rational” (Halisky 50) and that mid-twentieth-century Western culture demands that “the female personality seek[s] acceptance and definition by aligning itself as far as possible with male norms” (Halisky 50). In the first part of the story however, Susan still tries to withstand the call of this emotional nature, regarding it as a threat to her security: “the enemy: irritation, restlessness, emptiness, whatever it was”. A very relevant passage in To Room Nineteen concerning the intelligence-emotion dichotomy is this:

(. . .) forgiveness is hardly the word. Understanding yes. But if you understand something, you don’t forgive it, you are the thing itself: forgiveness is for what you don’t understand. Nor had he confessed - what sort of word is that?

In this passage, “to forgive” is associated with emotions and “to understand” with intelligence. Therefore Susan also found it absurd to have described Matthew’s confession with another emotionally charged verb. Within their ideology such a thing was after all unimportant. Eventually, this was the unavoidable pitfall of their so-called “intelligent” management. In the end, Susan leaves intelligence for what it is and defies reason, in favour of her natural, essential- irrational- self. So she behaves “in ways which confound and leave [reason] powerless (. . .) [as a victim] of a world view which can only interpret [her] resistance to its norms as evidence of madness” (Halisky 54).

However, Western culture of the twentieth century is not always blamed by everyone. Some readers may interpret Susan’s alienation “as a phenomenon of gender” (Nordius 172). By applying a Jungian approach, for example, other levels present themselves in the story. More specifically, the passage of the devil with the long crooked stick becomes much more meaningful. The devil then becomes “[a] personification of Susan’s animus (. . .) and (. . .) an ally rather than an enemy (. . .) which represents potency, life and strength rather than sexual desire”(Watson 54). Susan only needs to recognize and accept this animus to attain individuation, “[a] connection between ego and Self [which] is vitally important to psychic health” (Watson 55). By failing to do so, her subsequent suicide is to be predicted by any ardent admirer of Carl Gustav Jung.

1 The idea of a Jungian interpretation of the story is completely indebted to Irene G. Watson’s article Lessing’s To Room Nineteen
Nevertheless, one needs to put the truthfulness of Watson’s argument in perspective, because it states that “a Freudian analysis fails to understand the nature of Susan’s trauma” (Watson 54). Thus, her article becomes a mere product of the ongoing polemic struggle between Freudians and Jungians. In such texts, the objective to contradict Freud may overshadow the aim of producing a neutral and relevant analysis, which puts Watson’s explanations on the line.

Now that the theoretical backgrounds of the story have been discussed, it is time to examine how Lessing has put the ideas into literary practice. A lot of attention will be spent on the imagery and symbolical meanings in To Room Nineteen.

A first topic is the opposition between dry and wet. In the beginning of the story, the marriage was compared to “a small boat full of helpless people in a very stormy sea (. . .) of which the inner storms and quicksands were understood and charted.” In this comparison, the sea represents the outside world and the storms and quicksands refer to the “dangerous” emotions, which are to be avoided. So the wet element comes to signify emotion, but analogous the dry is also to be linked with intelligence, as illustrated by the following passage:

People like themselves, fed on a hundred books (. . .) could scarcely be unprepared for the dry, controlled wistfulness which is the distinguishing mark of the intelligent marriage.

The images of river and water have already been interpreted “as vehicles for [the] protagonist’s critique of modern marriage (. . .) [and] water (. . .) to represent the vitalizing element in the dubious domestic bargain she enters into with her husband” (Nordius 172). The image that her family members “could grow like plants in water” is to be understood as an emotional drainage. It's because of this Susan has to turn to the river “taking it into her being, into her veins.” It foreshadows “the gas that pour[s] (. . .) into her lungs, into her brain, as she drift[s] off into the dark river.” Another image demonstrating this opposition is “the big civilized bedroom, overlooking the wild, sullied river”. In this topographical opposition, the (dry) bedroom represents the intelligent marriage and the (wet) river the irrational emotions.

Another important opposition is that between movement and inertia. The inertia is reflected in Susan’s wish for peace and quiet, for the tranquillity of solitude. Movement, on the other hand, is shown in the river flowing by and the people outside, passing by her window. They represent, by contrast, togetherness, but also “the eternally moving natural current of death” (Bell 182). This can be related to the pressure of time and the third level of freedom mentioned before.

The colors mentioned in the story have also been interpreted symbolically. The green of the garden and the brown of the river “[have been] associated with the freedom of nature and procreation” (Bell 180), with “the naturalness of a fertile and productive life” (Bell 181). The artificial green of the room she hires then becomes “a ‘hideous’ substitute for the natural garden, (. . .) provides Susan temporary relief from her emotional turmoil” (Bell 181-182).

Susan’s new status as an outsider in her own family is beautifully portrayed with a metaphor: she stands outside, looking in at the kitchen window, watching her family. She notices Molly, one of her twins, being sick “looking at the three grownups (. . .) in exactly the same way [she] looked at the four (. . .): she was remote, shut off from them.” Just as she wants to go embrace this child of hers, she notices how the au-pair girl Sophie does exactly that. She regards herself as no longer wanted, as this younger version of herself is taking up all her prior

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2 Indebted to the insights of Janina Nordius in Lessing’s To Room Nineteen
3 The symbolism of the colors in the story is argued more thoroughly in Glenna Bell’s Lessing’s To Room Nineteen.
responsibilities. She even suspects Matthew to end up with her after she’s gone. It provides a latent answer to the earlier posed question “why (…) Susan [felt] (…) her children were not her own.”

Finally, Lessing also incorporates intertextual elements in this story. It reflects Eliot’s tableau in part 2 of *The Waste Land*, showing a woman who is brushing her hair in front of a mirror. The scene appears twice in *To Room Nineteen*. It's "an icon of the failure of genuine communication" (Nordius 172). There are also biblical elements, like the image of a snake that refers to the snake in the Garden of Eden, who brought about the fall of mankind. Its significance is reflected in the hissing sound, which appears both in the mirror scene and at the end, where it represents the gas filling her lungs and her brain.4

Bibliography

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4 The analysis of intertextual elements is inspired by Janina Nordius' article " Lessing's To Room Nineteen "