No Way to Live
A Postcolonial Analysis of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*

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Abstract

This essay is a postcolonial reading of Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing*. The essay will focus on the discourse that constructs the segregated Southern Rhodesian society. The discourse does not only make life impossible for the oppressed black majority but also destroys the lives for the British colonisers that cannot uphold it. It will be argued that the pressure the discourse puts on the coloniser is so strong that it destroys the people who cannot live according to it. Lessing’s novel draws on the idea that a weak coloniser poses a threat to the segregation laws and the colour-bar system by acting against the discourse of the Southern Rhodesian society. In this study of Lessing’s novel I will use the postcolonial appropriation of the concept of discourse.
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Introduction

Doris Lessing's debut novel *The Grass is Singing* is a multifaceted story that depicts the life and eventual demise of the married farmer couple, Dick and Mary Turner and their black houseboy Moses. The novel is set in Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s and 1940s. The aspect that will be analysed in the following essay is how the segregated society and the colour-bar system\(^1\) that separate the ruling white minority and the oppressed black majority affect the lives of the novel's two main protagonists, the characters Mary Turner and Dick Turner.

Previous criticism on the novel has spent much time on Mary Turner but Dick Turner has rarely been up for analysis. The two characters will now be analysed in connection to their inability to follow the discourse and the consequences this has on their lives.

This paper will be a postcolonial study of Lessing's novel. The novel depicts a colonial society and deals with problems and situations that are central to this society. Michel Foucault's notion of discourse and how it creates and upholds power structures, and controls the people, is the basis for this essay. Foucault never used his understanding of discourse in connection to colonised or previously colonised countries, but his interpretation of the term has been transferred and used within the field of postcolonial studies.

The different systems of domination that have been used by the white man on the black population of colonised, or previously colonised, countries have often been discussed...
and analysed. The starting point of this said research has most often been to look at these power systems in how they affect the black population and the black population’s chances of a free life. These analyses are of course of great importance. However, when reading and rereading *The Grass is Singing* I always end up pondering how the discourse very much ruined Mary and Dick Turner’s lives too. The power system of division that Southern Rhodesia’s society was built upon had to be upheld by the ruling white class so as not to fall apart. Therefore, it is interesting to see what happens to the people of the ruling white class that cannot obey and act in the way that the discourse expects them to. It is fascinating to analyse what the social mechanisms are that put the Turners in the position of being a threat to all colonisers and how this separates the Turners from the other British colonisers. How the Turners fail to uphold the lie of the white man’s supremacy and how this shortcoming is received among their fellow whites are worth analysing.

The Turners cannot play their assigned part in the segregated system of Southern Rhodesia. They cannot act and live as white British people are supposed to. Thus, they are bound to go under due to the pressure that piles up on their shoulders.

I have chosen to divide the analysis into three separate subsections. The first section will discuss Mary and Dick Turner as a unit and how they together, through their actions and their position as poor whites, pose a danger to the white society and challenge the white ruling class’s sovereignty. I will then move on to two sections that individually analyse Dick and Mary. The decision to have an individual section for each of the two characters is based on the fact that it will be helpful for the reader if Mary’s and Dick’s individual problems are analysed separately.
Theoretical Framework

Among Doris Lessing’s works *The Grass is Singing* has not been given the same attention as for example, *The Golden Notebook*. Although the novel depicts important topics such as racial segregation and male–female power structures, the criticism on the novel is not as vast as one would think. The criticism published focuses mainly on the character Mary Turner and has then dealt with Mary as a feminist character, the importance of Mary’s gender for her situation, her inner turmoil, and the reasons for her mental breakdown as well as her subordination to Moses. Moreover, the relationship between Mary and Moses and how the novel depicts female–male power relationships and the white women’s perception of black Africans have also been analysed. Furthermore, focus has been put on if Lessing disputes the segregationism and the colour-bar system or unintentionally reaffirms the system.

The term of most importance to this essay is *discourse*. The term is complex and therefore needs to be explained. Sara Mills states in her book *Discourse* that it is when analysing colonial discourse that Foucault’s description of discourse is most valid (94). Foucault believes that the different discourses that exist in the world are all constructed and upheld with the help of the society in which the discourse exists. Moreover, Foucault’s idea of discourse can be applied on colonial societies and Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that the discourse forms the reality for both the colonisers and the colonised: “As a social formation it works to constitute reality not only for the objects it appears to represent but also for the subjects who form the community on which it depends.” Thus, the discourse also restricts the colonisers from actions that do not comply with the discourse (37).

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2 See Roberta Rubenstein’s *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness*
3 Sheila Roberts’s *Sites of Paranoia and Taboo: Lessing’s The Grass is Singing and Gordimer’s July’s People* and the chapter on *The Grass is Singing* in Paul Schlueter’s *The Novels of Doris Lessing* are two good examples of this criticism. Victoria Rosner’s paper *Home Fires: Doris Lessing, Colonial Architecture, and the Reproduction of Mothering* is also of some interest, even if she mainly focuses on the homes of the British colonisers.
4 Katherine Fishburn’s *The Manichean Allegories of Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing* is the most prominent work that discusses this important though problematic dilemma.
Foucault separates *discourse from discourses.* Whereas *discourse* is the set of rules and procedures for the production of particular discourses (Mills 55) *discourses* on the other hand are sets of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think (Mills 55). The discourse in Southern Rhodesia was clearly fortified by different social sectors, which the discourse had produced. One of these was the educational system. Foucault states that by schooling the population from an early age in the discourse of the society the people grow up knowing it as the truth of the world (Foucault 125). This schooling can be compared to the one that Europeans were given about the Orient, and how this schooling consolidated certain ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contributed to the functioning of colonial power (Loomba 43-44). If one learns certain things and sees them as the truth one does not challenge them. Or rather, why should one not believe the truth?

In "Truth and Power" (Foucault 109-133) Foucault points to three main cornerstones that are important in order for a discourse to have an impact and consequently be cemented in a society. These are *truth, power* and *knowledge* (Mills 16). Truth is created by making sure that the majority of the population considers an opposing thought to be untrue (Foucault 132). Through making the majority believe a certain statement this becomes the truth and competing thoughts on the matter become untrue (Mills 17). Mills further states that the idea of *truth* that Foucault presents shows that discourses do not exist in a vacuum but are in constant conflict with other discourses and other social practices which inform them over questions of truth and authority (17). This adds to the importance of Foucault's interpretation of the term discourse for this essay. As the discourse that the British minority has constructed in Southern Rhodesia is under constant threat by other discourses it is all the more important for the white population to preserve the notion and *truth* of their superiority. Mills states that
actions such as the above-mentioned often are done with the help of discourse and by discrediting other discourses (17).

It is here that the idea of exclusion within discourse comes into play. Discourse operates on the idea of exclusion and exclusion is ţone of the most important ways in which discourse is producedÔ(Mills 60). The discourse establishes what is natural as well as unnatural, and as a result the unnatural is looked down on (Mills 17). This is one reason that validates the segregationism and the colour-bar system in Southern Rhodesia. However, the idea of exclusion can also be seen among the British colonisers. Failed British colonisers, in this case Dick and Mary Turner, are excluded from white society, as it is unnatural for a white British coloniser to be poor and not be able to improve ones Ôfinancial situation and living standards. Being a failed coloniser also means that one is a threat to the system of a society that favours the white. This is another reason for excluding certain colonisers by branding them unnatural. Therefore, this certain exclusion is of importance for this essay.

Certain behaviours and ways to think are established with the aid of institutions (Foucault 110-112). Therefore power is central to the preservation of a certain discourse (Foucault 119). It is the people in power positions that stand by the ideas that form a discourse. Additionally, these people are also the ones that have to make sure that the discourse does not change so that the power structure will remain the same. Foucault points out the density of the term power and he contests that power is one Ôs ability to hinder people from doing what they want (119). Rather, FoucaultÔs way of looking at power is that it is everywhere in society and in all forms of relationships: Ôit needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social bodyÔ(119). Thus, as Loomba states when discussing FoucaultÔs notion of power, Ôit is part of daily action, speech and everyday lifeÔ(50). Power, according to Foucault, also creates and restricts behaviour at the same time (119), a notion that will be used when discussing how the discourse puts the colonisers in a
favourable position over the black population while it, at the same time, restricts how they as
British colonisers are allowed to live. Dick Turner can, according to the discourse, not live as
he does. He is a failure as a farmer in a country and system that find failed white people
dangerous to the power structure that is created and upheld through the colour-bar system and
the discourse. Like all power structure systems of its kind it is fragile and only functions as
long as everyone plays their part and sticks to the assigned task that has been given through
the discourse. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that the growth of empires, was
accompanied by the capacity to confirm European notions of utility, rationality, discipline as
truth.(64). Therefore, this is what every white settler has to do and what the black people
have to follow. If enough people challenge the system and its power structure, by for example
stepping out of line, not following the orders that they have been given, the whole system can
very well collapse. It is by being undisciplined and irrational in his farming, thus not making
any profit, that Dick infringes the white British colonisers way to act and behave.

Foucaults third cornerstone as to how discourses can be anchored in a society is
knowledge (Mills 17). Foucault believes that knowledge is produced by the people in power
and therefore produced to restrain the people that might threaten their power position (119).
Thus, knowledge and power can here be seen as somewhat overlapping as Foucault believes
that all knowledge derives from clashes over power (Mills 19). The notion that power and
knowledge are strongly connected is supported by Loomba who states that: Knowledge is
not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power.(43). The truth that a
discourse feeds the population of a society comes from the knowledge that the people in
power supports. In the society Lessing depicts in her novel it is the British colonisers that are
in power. Thus, it is also the British colonisers ideas that end up being the truth. Ashcroft,
Griffiths and Tiffin put this Foucauldian idea in the following way: A discourse is a strongly
bounded area of social knowledge, a system of statements within which the world can be
known\(\text{(62)}\). Foucault also states that people are not merely executing power or subjugated by power (Mills 19), rather they are \textit{the effects or instances of power relations}\(\text{(Mills 19)}\). This complexity of the discourse is supported by how Lessing depicts the society of her novel. Mary and Dick are in one way in a position where they are executing power, being British colonisers, but they are also in a position where they are repressed by power, being far from good examples of colonisers. Furthermore, this position makes them into what Mills refers to as \textit{the effects or instances of power relations}\(\text{(19)}\) as it is the discourse that forms their personalities.

\textbf{Plot Summery}

\textit{The Grass is Singing} depicts the lives of Mary and Dick Turner, a married British couple that lives in rural Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s and 40s. In the beginning of the novel the reader is informed of the murder of Mary and that Dick has gone mad. The story then takes the reader back in time. Mary\'s pre-marital life in town is depicted together with how she ends up marrying the farmer Dick. The reader then follows the struggling lives of Dick and Mary and gets insight into the situations that lead up to their eventual demise. Mary struggles with adapting to life in the country and the required interaction with the black servants and workers. Dick, on the other hand, cannot make the farm profitable and cannot consequently improve his and Mary\'s living conditions. The novel ends with Mary\'s death, a crime committed by their black servant Moses.

\textbf{Analysis - The Turners}

It is in connection with the colonial discourse that the situations of Dick and Mary Turner are interesting to analyse. Whereas the black character of Moses breaks the written rules and laws imposed on him, Dick and Mary cannot play the part that they, according to the society, are
supposed to play and as a result they break the unwritten rules and challenge the colonial discourse. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that colonisers were expected to uphold the colonial power (194). Mary and Dick cannot do this, instead they unintentionally challenge it.

With this in mind, Lessing's choice of giving Dick and Mary the surname Turner might be a way of showing the reader that the Turners are in fact a danger to their society. Through their incapability of playing their assigned part in society they are in many ways upturning the values of the society they live in. Moreover, Dick's inability to concentrate his farming on one crop and his projects that are constantly changing is a sort of turning from one project to another. Furthermore, one could also transfer this idea of a play on the surname Turner to Mary. Mary is, when living unmarried in the city, not a threat to the white society and its values. She first turns into a threat when she marries and becomes a Turner. Additionally, the Turners also turn away from the other white citizens in the district.

With the failure to fulfil their roles in society the Turners in many ways create an unbearable life situation, one that ultimately acts as an agent of their downfall. All this comes from Dick's and Mary's inability to be fit and proper colonisers that uphold the thought of the colonisers' supremacy.

The Turners do not just have their own created situation to fight against when it comes to their chance of survival. One of the numerous reasons why these two characters' situation in life in the end is intolerable is the fact that they are disliked by the other white farmers in the district. This is something that is told to the reader in the beginning of the novel when the following is said about the relationship between the Turners and the other farmers: “Long before the murder marked them out, people spoke of the Turners in the hard careless voices reserved for misfits, outlaws and the self-exiled (2). According to the society's discourse the Turners are unnatural as they are too close to the black population in terms of living
standards. That they might give the black population ideas that challenge the order of the society’s power structure is probably a common thought among the other British colonisers.

The poverty of the Turners is certainly also something that scares the other colonisers of the district, which base many of their values on the idea that they are superior to the black population. Furthermore, if the Turners have fallen to the level of the black people, what stands in the way for other British colonisers to fall into the same situation? The Turners’ financial position makes all these conceivable situations visible and causes great despise for the Turners. The basis for this contempt is according to Antony Beck that the white population in Southern Rhodesia had an inability to countenance loss of status and prestige vis-à-vis the blacks (69). The reason why they could not tolerate this is quite simple. If the white population is not higher in the hierarchy than the black population they will find it harder and harder to claim their superiority. Therefore, every threat is seen as potentially dangerous to the white rule of Southern Rhodesia. This threat can be a black person not following the colour-bar or as in this case, a white couple living in standards that are too close to the black population’s, and without the ability to work themselves up and take command of their land, as a proper colonialist should do. In the novel, Slatter functions as a representative of society (6) and he, as a successful colonialist, has worked himself up and has along with his growing success built a nicer house, expanded his farming and made sure that his own sons have got a posh education and become gentlemen (8). All this shows how a white colonialist should improve his land and life and consequently it highlights what society expects of the white population. Moreover, as Dick is the opposite of the thriving Slatter, it helps the reader understand why the Turners are so disliked.

Much of the hate directed towards Dick and Mary can be found in the fact that they never participate in any of the social functions that are important to the white community of their district. The character of Mrs Slatter has the function of highlighting this through the
invitations to come and drink tea, play tennis or engage in some other activity that she sends Mary throughout the novel (193). Mary constantly turns these invitations down. One can understand Mrs Slatter’s reaction of anger and the hate that the Turners receive from the white community as they in many ways say no to being British by not participating in these British activities. In the eyes of their white neighbours the Turners distance themselves from British ways and traditions even though the discourse says that one should stay close to one’s homeland or home. Keeping a connection to one’s heritage was of great importance to colonisers and their descendents. For the British settlers this connection was maintained by distancing themselves from the black population (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 86) through, for example, activities that were seen as particularly British and by making sure that their houses were built according to British standards. The idea that the homes of the white population have to be better and differ from the homes of the black population is brought up by Victoria Rosner. Rosner describes how the model and quality of the British settlers’ houses should be with the help of Southern Rhodesian settlers’ guidebooks. In these guidebooks it is said that the house should have a British style (Rosner 65) and that the house should provide a solid barrier between the settler family and the unfamiliar landscape (67). The reader is given insight into the state of the Turners’ house in the first chapter of the novel as Tony Marston, the would-be caretaker of the farm, reflects on the house:

He looked up at the bare crackling tin of the roof, that was warped with the sun, at the faded gimcrack furniture, at the dusty brick floors covered with ragged animal skins, and wondered how those two, Mary and Dick Turner, could have borne to live in such a place, year in year out, for so long. Why even the little thatched hut where he lived at the back was better than this! Why did they go on without even so much as putting in ceilings? (23)
Marston examines the state of the house and he cannot get his head around how the Turners could live like they did. As Marston points out, the Turners did not merely live in this ramshackle of a house during a short period of time. They lived in these conditions during their whole marriage, something that the rest of the white community cannot tolerate. Marston also compares the house with the hut that he lives in during the time that he spends on the farm. He earnestly feels that his hut is better than the house and this gives the reader an insight into why the white people of the district have such strong feelings of hate when it comes to the Turners. The house is a slap in the face to the other whites as it sends the signal that the Turners do not care to uphold the difference between the British colonisers and the black population. Within the white community it was probably debated why the Turners would be interested in preserving the colour-bar if they were not interested in being British, a conclusion that the state of their house, farm and standards of living supports.

The Turners’ unwillingness to partake in the varying social functions is through the eyes of the white population both seen as an insult and as if the Turners have something to be ashamed of (2). The fact is that the Turners are ashamed of being poor. They are seen as ṭpoor whitesotts by a large portion of the district’s white residents, and never seem to make any progress in moving away from this state. This is what is behind their decision not to fraternise with other white farmers and their families. Society demands that they improve, but since they do not, they isolate themselves from the rest of the white community in the district.

It must be mentioned that far from all British people of the district thought of the Turners as ṭpoor whitesotts. The Turners were after all British and ṭpoor whitesotts were Afrikaners, never Britishotts, a notion that has its roots in the fact that a great number of Afrikaners were impoverished after the Anglo-Boer War (du Toit 536) and these ṭbecame the core of the ḏPoor White Trashotts (du Toit 536). Furthermore, Brits saw themselves as more cultivated and civilised than Afrikaners, and therefore the British colonisers were too good to
let themselves be \textit{poor whites} (3), at least according to themselves. This idea of the British being more civilised might very well come from that, as Brian M. du Toit states, Afrikaners were mainly based in the country whereas the British population was largely based in the city (538). The discourse therefore supported the idea that it was more natural that Afrikaners were poor than Brits. All this meant that the discourse and the white community\textit{“esprit de corps”} (3) stopped many of the other British colonisers in the district from thinking of the Turners as poor whites, even if their standards of living put the Turners in that category.

To make it clear how Dick and Mary differ from the rest of the white society one can once more compare their way of life to the life of Charlie Slatter. Slatter is every bit the successful landowner and farmer that Dick strives to be but is not. Slatter has a large farm, a large house and is in a good financial situation. He can actually not stop making money (7). All this makes him a good coloniser that with the help of his farm underpins the racial situation and aids the coloniser\textit{“s} thoughts that say that the black population is inferior to the white man. Moreover, Slatter is a capitalist and Loomba stresses how capitalism worked to reinforce the coloniser\textit{“s} right to rule as well as the racial hierarchy in societies such as Southern Rhodesia (127). Capitalism did rely on the ideological idea of white superiority, but it also reinforced it so that the white farmers could continue to make profit and so that the white man could continue to be in charge (Loomba 127). The Turners\textit{’} failure to be proper colonisers is moreover seen in the passage of the novel where Charlie Slatter pays the Turners a visit for the first time in more than a year. Slatter\textit{’}s attention is drawn to the earrings worn by Mary and the inexpensive textile covering the couch in the Turners\textit{’} living room (201). Both products originally designed for and solely sold to black people, due to the quality of the material. This, along with Dick\textit{’}s mentioning that he and Mary are using the stock from their failed kaffir store themselves (201), elucidates that Mary and Dick\textit{’} standards of living are now well beneath what is fit and proper for a married British couple, an impression that is
shared by the rest of the British rural community which in this case is represented by Charlie Slatter. This view of their living conditions is clear as it shocked Charlie to see it in a white man's house, referring to the products designed and sold only to the black population.

The Turners cannot uphold the British lifestyle that the Southern Rhodesian society requires from them. Therefore, they have not merely sunk to the status of poor whites but they also pose a threat to the society created by the white minority. This view of them being a threat to the white society is expressed in different passages of the novel. At the start of the novel Charlie's special fear is mentioned and one can from the context understand that the special fear is the rise of the black man causing the fall of the white man's rule. However, this opinion is never as clear and undisguised as in the following passage: He was obeying the dictate of the first law of white South Africa, which is: thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are. The importance for the white minority to uphold this power structure is further underlined a few lines down as it is stated that this is the strongest emotion of a strongly organised society. That the society's view is expressed through Slatter is clarified at the start of the novel: Who was Charlie Slatter? It was he who, from the beginning of the tragedy to its end, personified Society for the Turners, thus together with the previous quotes one can understand that society looked at the Turners' fall and failure as a threat to their way of life. Moreover, this demonstrates the Turners' inability to exist in society and that this is a reason for Mary's death and Dick's madness.

**Analysis - Dick Turner**

One of the problems that Dick has is that he does not drive his workers hard enough. Whereas Charlie Slatter is as hard as everyone expects him to be (7), and treats the black men that work
on his farm as he is supposed to, Dick is too kind. Dick’s inability to get his workers in line does, according to Slatter and other successful white farmers, mean that the workers get lazy and his farm cannot produce what it could have and be an example that reinforces the notion that the white man is above the inferior black man. Instead it takes the form of something that goes against the “imperial rhetoric” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 114) and the thought that the white man has the right to exploit and take the colonised land merely because the black man is inferior to him (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 38). It is in connection with the discussion above that the character of Dick Turner and his situation in the segregated Southern Rhodesian society are most appropriately analysed. Here one can argue that the discourse of society and the power structure it supports create an unbearable situation for the character Dick. Hence, this intolerable situation is the main reason why even he succumbs.

Dick is a failure as a farmer and all through the novel the reader is given proof of his futile attempts to make profit from the land that is his to reap. The first insight into this is given to the reader at the beginning of the novel through the character of Charlie Slatter. Slatter is exactly what the discourse says that he should be and wants him to be: rational, determined, successful, and therefore a good colonist. Dick, on the other hand, has many of the traits that are associated with the black man and thus should never be traits of a British coloniser. He is irrational, unsuccessful and without the chance to improve his financial position and his position in society. Slatter, being a thriving farmer (6), is posed as an opposite to Dick Turner. The difference between these two is shown by the quote that follows below. Slatter drives to see Dick down on the farm. While driving through Dick’s land he gets an insight into the disintegration of the farm:

As he drove, he kept a sharp eye for signs of neglect. Things seemed neither better nor worse. The fireguards along the boundary were there, but they would protect the farm from a small, slow-burning fire, not a big one with the wind
behind it. The cowsheds, while not actually falling down, had been propped up by poles, and the thatched roofs were patched like darned stockings, the grass all different colors and stages of newness, reaching untidily to the ground in untrimmed swathes. The roads needed draining: they were in a deplorable state. The big plantation of gum trees past which the road went, had been burned by a veld-fire in one corner; they stood pale and spectral in the strong yellow afternoon sunlight, their leaves hanging stiffly down, their trunks charred black.

(196)

All this goes to show how miserably Dick has failed and how far he is from being the successful farmer that he desires to be. Moreover, that it is Charlie Slatter that sees this bare skeleton of a farm marks the difference between these two men and points out Dick’s failure. Dick’s shortcomings and traits can very well make the black population question the white man’s superiority. Dick is, for that reason, a bad colonist and a danger to the British power.

Dick Turner separates himself from farmers such as the ones that Charlie Slatter represents by having a different relationship with the land and the soil. Whereas Charlie Slatter, and his peers, see their land strictly as property (194), Dick Turner, on the other hand, has a way of looking at the land in a more romantic and idealistic way: “He loved it and was part of it” (138). He does not only want to take from the land, he also wants to take care of it (138). In comparison to his neighbour Slatter, Dick is not acting rationally when it comes to making a profit. Turner is inconsistent when it comes to the crop he plants and he constantly grows “a little bit of everything” (195) instead of focusing on one specific crop (87). This has a large effect on the economic side of his farming. By only growing small portions of a large amount of different crops he never makes any great profit from a season (195). This unorthodox and failed tactic can also be seen in how he constantly changes his mind in what the farm’s main focus and source for earnings should be. This can clearly be seen in the
passage where the reader gets to see Dick changing his mind from beekeeping (92) to raising pigs (96-99) to raising rabbits (100), as well as opening up a kaffir store (101). This is not rational and therefore it is not the way of a good coloniser and the flourishing farmer, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin state that a proper coloniser ought to be rational and that this trait marks the difference between coloniser and colonised: “The will of European nations to exercise dominant control over the world, which led to the growth of empires, was accompanied by the capacity to conform European notions of utility, rationality, discipline as truth” (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 64). A large part of Dick’s problem lies in this and it further creates problems when it comes to following the rules of being white in Southern Rhodesia, or in any colonised or previously colonised country for that matter.

Moreover, Dick cannot merely use the land and its soil until it no longer is fertile and therefore useless for farming, as Charlie Slatter does with his land (195). Dick has a sense of responsibility for the soil. An example of this is how there are no trees at Charlie Slatter’s property, as they took up space and land that could be used in a more profitable way. Dick Turner’s farm, on the other hand, has a hundred acres of planted trees (138).

All this irrational searching is a quest for that one special thing that can make his farm profitable and thus bring Mary and him out of poverty. One can say that this hunt for profit makes Dick blind to the fact that sticking with an idea or focusing on merely one crop will solve his problems, something that is obvious to the other characters of the novel and can be seen in Mary’s futile attempts to try to convince Dick to give the growing of tobacco, something that in general was very profitable, more than one season (146-148). What stops Dick from giving the growing of tobacco a real chance, as well as blocking Dick from improving his and Mary’s financial situation, is in many ways Dick’s pride on the matter of borrowing capital. Instead of making a serious investment in his projects, Dick takes shortcuts to save money. He therefore never becomes a successful farmer.
Dick’s way of acting irrationally, as stated previously, is also something that shows both the white and the black population that the difference between the black population and the ruling white class may not be that big. In *The Grass is Singing*, Lessing makes it clear to the reader that this is something that the members of the white society are persistently frightened that the black population will understand.

**Analysis - Mary Turner**

Roberta Rubenstein says in *The Novelistic Vision of Doris Lessing: Breaking the Forms of Consciousness* that *The Grass is Singing* traces the story of Mary Turner, a conventional white South African woman, as her personal vulnerabilities intersect with the repressive social and psychological pressures of her environment (18). The aim here is to put focus on the social pressures that Rubenstein mentions in the beginning of her chapter on *The Grass is Singing*, and look at how this social pressure and the situation it creates play a part in the inevitable death of Mary Turner. Mary Turner is a woman that is trapped in colonial preconceptions (Roberts 73) and she is unable to understand the structure of her community (73). The community that Roberts refers to here is the rural one that Mary becomes a part of when she marries Dick. This community is all through her married life hard to grasp for Mary and she is never really incorporated into it. This is somewhat her own fault as she constantly turns down the invitations that are sent to her (193). As badly as Mary fits into her new community and as much as she struggles with the structure of it (Roberts 73), as perfect is town life for Mary. In the town Mary was in many ways an important member of the social scene (34) and at work she was the personal secretary of her boss (33). Furthermore, and most importantly, she did not have to deal with questions such as how to handle the black population and what was expected of her as a white person. The passage that depicts Mary’s life in town helps the reader to see the immense contrast between her town and country life. On the farm
Mary is isolated and out of place. How misplaced she is in the country is evident through her first encounter with the farm (51-54) where she wears high heels (53) and reacts strongly to the look and smell of the house (53). Moreover, Mary’s problem with swapping town for country life is evident in her contact with the black population. When living in town they were outside her orbit (33). However, Mary is now forced to have daily interaction with the black servants. Roberta Rubenstein states that Mary’s incapability of properly managing the black population is merely the culminating crisis in a process already well underway (20). However, it can be argued that Mary would not have been killed if it were not for her inability to handle the black servants (Rubenstein 20) as the discourse stated. There are clear hints at the outset of the novel that Mary’s doom comes from her inadequate knowledge of how to act according to the discourse. Tony Marston, the would-be caretaker of the farm, states the notion that one has to adapt to and follow the power structure of the society in Southern Rhodesia to survive within it: Yet Tony, too, wanted to be accepted by this new country. He would have to adapt himself, and if he did not conform, would be rejected (22). However, Mary clearly cannot adapt to the rules that all her actions should be based on and therefore she cannot survive the life that comes with being white and having to protect the segregated society and the colour-bar system. Mary’s problem with the black population comes from the fact that she is not able to grasp the rules, both written and unwritten, that are at play in the contact between the white ruling class and the black servants and workers. The root of Mary’s problematic relation to the black population can be found in her pre-farm and pre-marriage life. The reader is given insight into Mary’s contact, or rather lack of contact, with black people at the beginning of the novel where it is said that she rarely thought about them: race, meant to her other women’s servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets, whom she hardly noticed (32-33). Mary learns from hearsay that the natives were getting cheeky (33) but she does not have the ability to put this into context, which underlines how little she knows of the relation
between white and black people. So what Mary does when she gets married to Dick Turner is leave a life in which she has had pretty much no contact with the black population for a life that suddenly puts her in a situation where she is forced into having day to day interaction with black people. In many ways depending on them as they provide the workforce that Mary and Dick rely on to make their livelihood. Mary cannot deal with this new situation that she is both unfamiliar and uncomfortable with.

One can argue that Mary, who has grown up in this system of segregation should be familiar with the discourse and the truths that it is built upon. However, Mary has never had direct contact with the black population, and although she has been schooled in the ideas of colonial discourse she has never been aware of this schooling. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out that this was very common as individual colonising subjects are not often consciously aware of the duplicity of their position, for colonial discourse constructs the colonising subject as much as the colonised. Mary is born and bred into the discourse of Southern Rhodesia and therefore she has never been in a situation which has required her to ponder and evaluate segregationism. Mary’s lack of knowledge creates a cluster of problems and altercations with the black people on the farm that springs from situations that she, if she had understood the discourse, should be able to handle. Mary’s constant arguments with her different houseboys are proof of her difficulties of understanding how one preserves the power structure through one’s way of interacting with the black servants. A valid example of this is that Mary, on her first full day on the farm, is upset over Dick’s way of speaking of the black population. Dick’s remark that Samson, the then current houseboy, is a good servant by stating: He’ll look after you: he is not a bad old swine upsets Mary at first. The reason for this is that she does not understand that this is Dick expressing endearment towards Samson, while at the same time controlling him. Mary does not comprehend that she lacks
this knowledge of the discourse and therefore she is eager to not let her inexperience with black people stand in her way of making life on the farm bearable.

Still, Mary’s insufficient knowledge poses an obstacle, as can be seen by her strained relation with Samson. The long-time servant of Dick finds his situation as a houseboy under Mary deteriorating as the understanding that Dick and Samson share on Samson’s allowance of groceries is revoked by Mary. This action by Mary leads up to the row she has with Samson and results in Samson leaving the farm (67). Rubenstein refers to this specific event and comments upon Mary’s actions, saying “She alters the prior understanding between Dick and his houseboy by cancelling the few unspoken kitchen liberties that guaranteed the latter’s loyalty and efficiency” (20). This passage of the novel and this specific event give an insight into how little Mary knows of the interaction between the white people and their black servant and workers. Her inadequacy when it comes to dealing with black people, so far into the novel exclusively houseboys, develops her distaste for Africans into open hatred (Rubenstein 20), an emotion that Mary prior to these events did not know she had, as she never reflected upon her perception of the black Africans.

It is stated in the novel that Mary had been schooled in segregationism and the colour-bar’s way of creating fear of the black man among colonial white women: “She was afraid of them, of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be” (60). One can argue that this shows that Mary has a clear standpoint when it comes to the black men, this being that she is afraid of them. However, even though she was afraid of the black men she had never reflected upon why this was. An explanation to why she had never thought about her fear of the black man is given by the quote above. She was, like all South African women, raised to fear the black man, but she was not raised to reflect upon why. This fear was created and served chiefly to unify whites and perpetuate their racist stereotypes (Rosner 72). Fishburn supports this by arguing that Mary, as well as other colonials (8) are
well schooled in connecting black men with malevolence (8). Also Schlueter writes on this matter and states how deeply rooted this fear was. Schlueter argues that Mary believes that the natives, if left to their own discipline, would rape and murder and in general operate by means of primitive emotions (17), a notion that is not that odd, knowing the education Mary and her fellow colonisers have received.

Additionally, Mary has no education in how to interact with the black population except to stay away from them, or in how to act under the current laws and regulations. Rubenstein correctly points out that Mary's repugnance against the black population originates from her own misinterpretation of how the master and servant relationship should work (20). This point is interesting as it stresses that Mary's insufficient understanding of the master and servant relationship is an important reason for her strained relationship to the black servants and workers, which in the end causes her death. To highlight Mary's shortcomings in the above-mentioned matter, Rubenstein brings up the example that Mary considers it to be a sign of fraudulence from her servant's unwillingness to make eye contact with her (72). However, as Rubenstein points out, this is a sign of politeness (20), not a sign of personal dishonesty.

It can be argued that Mary's most deeply rooted problem in dealing with the black servants does not come from her lack of knowledge of the discourse. She is, as can be seen in many of her actions, well familiar with the thought of the white man's supremacy and that she as a member of the white population, even if she is a woman, is considered the master. What she misses is familiarity with Dick's way of organising life on the farm and the all so important awareness of how one, as a master, is supposed to act towards one's servant to not drive them away. Mary's inadequacy in this matter can be seen in the altercation with Samson mentioned earlier. Dick states that Mary just could not get on with natives, and that was the end of it (89), referring to her inability to understand his system on the farm. Mary lets Samson go
without his share of the groceries (63), she lets another houseboy work without a break for dinner (78) and she can not see the point in giving the men working for Dick on the farm a five-minute break every hour, or even a chance to drink water (133). She is simply without understanding for this agreement between master and servant that allows them to work together. The consequence of this is that the houseboys (83), as well as the farm workers (127), resign, stranding Dick and Mary in a tougher financial position that creates tension and hostility between them. The resentment that is created between husband and wife due to Mary’s inability to interact and get along with the black population is one of the reasons why Mary turns away from reality and gradually loses her mind.

When Mary subsequently gives up on life she also makes her gravest mistake, at least in the eyes of the white population. Mary lets her then current houseboy Moses gain control over her. Mary has had a previous altercation with Moses before he was named houseboy by Dick. That quarrel ended with Mary hitting Moses with a whip, something that gives their new relationship an extra dimension. Moses’ control over Mary includes him telling her what to do and clearly stepping out of line when it comes to how to address Mary appropriately. Moses’ way of speaking to his missus is observed by Slatter and the white community’s shock when discovering this can be seen in Slatter’s reaction: “in that tone of surely indifference, but with a note of self-satisfaction, of conscious power that took Charlie’s breath away” (203).

Moreover, the odd relationship between Mary and Moses does not stop here as Moses also dresses and consequently touches Mary. By doing this they break the law that says that a black person is not allowed to lay hand on a white person (5). In the novel there is constantly a hovering feeling that the relationship between Mary and Moses will turn sexual. Though never confirmed the hints of a physical relationship act to show how low Mary, according to her white countrymen, has fallen. It also highlights how badly she manages to handle what is asked of her as a member of the white community, namely to uphold the power structure.
between the white and the black population. This is underlined by Slatter's quick precautions to cover up that Mary's relationship with Moses is the real reason behind her death. Through these actions Slatter protects the white community by reinforcing the stereotype that says that the black population consists of thieves and murderers (1). Slatter is eager to preserve this 'truth' about the black population. It is the discourse that creates and marks what truth in a society is (Mills 16) and Slatter does not want this truth challenged by anyone knowing what really happened between Mary and Moses.

One can argue that it is Mary's lack of knowledge of how to deal with the black population and the discourse that regulates this interaction that leads up to her unavoidable death. She cannot do what is asked of her as a member of the British society in Southern Rhodesia and the consequence is that she becomes a threat to the white rule. The white society's fear of a collapse of the system is evident through their reaction to Mary's actions and the fact that she breaks the rules of how a white British woman should act. Fishburn states that Mary 'has broken their biracial sexual taboos' (2) and therefore 'the other whites see her as a threat to the myth of their own cultural superiority' (Fishburn 2). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that it is vital all members of a colonial society conform to the discourse (38) and Mary's controversial neglect of this makes her a threat. Moreover, the example of Mary makes it clear that it is not merely the subordinate people that have to comply with the discourse, as understood with the help of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (38). Fishburn mentions the 'colonial status quo' (2) and how Mary by stepping out of line becomes a threat to it. This way of looking at the 'status quo' as a thing of great importance to the colonial society (Fishburn 2) is also discussed and reinforced by Schlueter as he argues that 'the society of which Mrs. Lessing is writing is essentially a rural slave society, with masters and servants clearly knowing their places and never upsetting the racial status quo' (21). It is the discourse that guides everyone in how they should or should not act and what they are allowed to say (Mills 57). Moreover, the
fear that Mary’s actions creates among her fellow whites can also be seen in how the death of Mary is used as propaganda to strengthen the white community and the segregation system (1 and 20). This strengthening is done, as earlier mentioned, with a cover-up organised by Slatter and a sham inquiry into her murder by neighbors and by colonial officials (Wander Zak 482). Therefore a situation that could have been dangerous to the power structure of white supremacy is turned into a cautionary tale: “for other white women in Southern Rhodesia, with Mary death only serving to document the impossibility of such relationships being started or maintained to the advantage of the whites (Schlueter 14). The fact that Mary dies before her actions challenge the order of society does make her less of a danger to the white population, and the oppressive society that they go to such lengths to maintain.

Conclusion

What I have set out to do in this essay is to analyse how the discourse of the British ruling society in Southern Rhodesia restricts how the white population can live and act. I have analysed how the discourse puts pressure on the white colonisers and what this does to the lives of Mary and Dick Turner. The Turners cannot live as the discourse asks them to. Therefore, their lives are unbearable.

My hypothesis was that the discourse, and its way of controlling not only the black population but also the colonisers was making life impossible for the Turners. One can quite clearly see that Mary and Dick Turner struggle to live up to the demands of the discourse. They are poor and their living standards are closer to those of the black population than those of their fellow Brits. Moreover, they are incapable of improving their ramshackle of a house and to make the farm profitable. The Turners put themselves in the position of being poor whites, something that creates hatred towards them among the other colonisers in the community. The Turners do not socialise with any of the other British colonisers, an act that
is seen as them turning away from being British and opposing the British rule. Thus they are challenging the colonisers’ ruling of Southern Rhodesia.

Further evidence that Mary and Dick cannot behave according to the discourse is given in their separate failures when it comes to the discourse. Dick understands what the discourse demands of him but is not able to act accordingly. He is aware of the fact that he as a British settler has to be an example of a good coloniser. He has to be a man that proves that the white man is superior to the black man and that he because of this has the right to govern the country and cultivate its land. The pressure the discourse puts on him in many ways makes him act irrationally, a trait most often given the black population, and this hinders him significantly. Although his efforts are great he cannot get out of debt, improve the house or make his farm profitable. Mary does live according to the discourse and follows it strictly. However, what Mary does lack is the capability to work around the discourse so that she and the black servants can get along. As a girl very much comfortable with town life she is badly equipped for a life on a farm, where she has to be in regular contact with the black servants. Mary is simply not able to grasp how one has to work around the discourse so that everyone can be satisfied and therefore she is in constant conflict with the black people working on the farm. Moreover, she breaks the strongly fixed taboo of having a relationship, which goes beyond master-servant, with Moses, the houseboy that ultimately murders her. This relationship, physical or not, might deeply challenge the power structure of the Southern Rhodesian society, hence the rapid cover-up organized by Slatter and aided by the police.

Lastly, it is evident that the discourse and its demands on the colonisers create an unbearable living situation for Mary and Dick Turner. They fail to represent the British colonisers according to the requirements of the discourse and therefore they are not the proper upholders of the white colonisers’ society, its discourse and truth. The inner and outer
pressure, as well as problems that originate from all of this, are what led to the demise of the Turners.
Works cited


