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Tracking Through the Tangles: The Reader's Task in Doris Lessing's The Grass is Singing

Abstract

Over the past fifteen years there has been a burgeoning of literary criticism on the writing of Doris Lessing, above all in the United States. But there has not as yet been any research into her work that entails the use of methods developed from reader response theory or reception aesthetics. Nor, with the exception of a single article by Jenny de Reuck on the Alita short stories by Sarah Gertrude Millin, has any criticism of Southern African writing been published that employs techniques that are influenced by this important branch of modern theory. And yet, over

the past ten years, literary journals on both sides of the North Atlantic have featured regularly, sometimes in entire special issues, articles dealing with the process of reading, the nature and limits of interpretation, the confrontation, transaction, or interrogation between texts and readers. Furthermore, even though the content of each of the Lessing titles produced over the past three and a half decades has attracted much debate, Lessing’s style has been relatively neglected. Indeed, it may be said that she has been regarded by many as a writer worthy of academic study despite her style, which is usually treated as a medium inferior to the message it carries. A noteworthy exception is the excellent full-length study of the form of the writer’s work, Betsy Draine’s Substance under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing.
The roofing of the lodge
was waterproofed with plastic shopping bags.

His face anointed
with ochre clay
to mark his passage into manhood,
Duma came back to Rhini:
no work, even for those
who'd passed a harsh Matric with dignity.

Last news I had
he'd moved to some big city near the Reef:
vizored, helmetted,
questing for cash,
he welded trucks,
wielding a bright-blue, oxy-acetylene lance.

EVA HUNTER

Tracking Through the Tangles:
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The model adopted in this article on The Grass is Singing — a model that was given its most sophisticated formulation by Roman Jakobson — views the literary text as a form of communication. The author and the reader of a text are related to each other as the sender and the receiver of a message. The transmission and reception of any message depend on the presence of one or more shared codes of communication between sender and receiver. Reading consists, therefore, of a process of decoding what has by various means been encoded in the text. Such criticism is therefore both rhetorical and audience-orientated. A key notion will be that of the Implied Reader. This notion was first consistently adopted by Wayne C. Booth. The implied reader is regarded as only one of the meaning-producing elements in the text, a shadowy presence differing from an actual reader in that it is created by the work, and functions, in a sense, as the ideal interpreter. The constitution of the characteristics of the implied reader is regarded as an interpretative strategy, such characteristics being constructed from markers within the text and then used to validate a reading. The term ‘implied reader’, is, then, a relative one, guaranteeing the consistency of a reading without claiming its absolute validity, in accordance with the awareness that no text or critic is objective, that meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world, and that even if within that situation one is part of a community, one is part of an ‘interpretive’ community (the term is Stanley Fish’s).

The method adopted is to identify and describe the textual markers (or codes) that constitute the characteristics of the implied reader. Among such markers are: explanations and definitions formulated by the narrator, cultural and literary allusions, and the use of deictics (‘here’, ‘now’, etc.) which indicate, for instance, the distance the text posits between reader and narrator and reader and text. Such scrutiny of the discourse situation leads to consideration of ‘traditional’ features of criti-
cism, such as irony. Thus, the systematic analytical study of the work—a study which is intended to reveal the codes by which the author inscribes her audience within the work—will be accompanied by an interpretative level of enquiry. This level of enquiry will lead to consideration of the following question: what are the codes or conventions, aesthetic and cultural, to which the author refers in facilitating or complicating, or perhaps even frustrating, the reader’s sense-making operations?

Explanations and definitions formulated by the narrator constitute a marked feature of Lessing’s work. The third person narrator of the *Children of Violence* series, says Nicole Ward Jouve, has a ‘totalizing’ voice and a ‘totalizing’ intention.

In an article entitled ‘Of Mud and Other Matter — *The Children of Violence*’, in which Jouve both declares her admiration of Lessing and criticises some of the writer’s basic tenets and techniques, she states that Lessing’s ‘changes of heart’ in the series contradict the claim that the narrative voice makes, ‘from the start’, to be ‘inclusive’. There is ‘a totalizing intention written into every line of the prose’ (p. 96). ‘You are never given to understand that there is going to be more, or there has been more [than] the text is going to tell you’; instead, ‘as you read [passages from the novels] you know that the authorial consciousness, either through, or in default of, its characters, claims to be complete’ (p. 97). And this is why the text ‘cannot afford contradictions.... That is perhaps why all of Martha’s dreams are so clear, readily and totally interpretable. Darkness, unintentionality, are not allowed in.’ And yet ‘they are there. The gaps, the contradictions, are everywhere’ (p. 97). Jouve’s criticism, argued with meticulousness and zest, convinces, and the implications for analysing Lessing’s attitude to her implied reader are obvious. What does such a very confident tone (or, evidence of a desire to exercise such inordinate control?) signal? Anxiety? Due to lack of confidence in her ability as writer? In the reader? Over-confidence in her ability to instruct the reader? More important than such speculation is the fact that overt strategies of control may disguise covert methods of complicating, even frustrating, the reader’s sense-making operations.

In *The Grass is Singing*, too, the narrator’s voice signals completeness of knowledge, and the text encodes, consistently, explicit markers as to the attitude the implied reader should adopt. Judgement is elicited from the reader on, most importantly, the central character Mary Turner, and also on the white settlers, while the reader’s assessment of the murderer, Moses, and response to the presence of the African landscape in the novel also contribute to the reader’s final attitude to Mary.
The reader is invited to judge Mary both as a representative of the white settler community, and as their victim. To the extent that the narrator’s sympathy with Mary is shared, the reader will judge the settlers to be more culpable in their treatment of Mary while she is alive and in their reaction to her murder; to the extent that the reader, along with the narrator, rejects Mary, we condemn the settlers along with her. Condemnation of the settlers is inescapable; towards Mary there is a covert ambivalence in the narrator’s attitude that makes the reader’s final judgement of the central character problematic.

Before encountering the narrator’s explanations and definitions, the reader is alerted by title and epigraphs to expect cultural and emotional poverty within the pages of this novel. The title phrase ‘the grass is singing’ is repeated in the first epigraph, an extract of fifteen lines, where it is situated in its original context, *The Waste Land*. The reader is supposedly one literate enough to understand the implications of this extract from T.S. Eliot’s poem (and to agree with the narrator that Tagore is second-rate, escapist stuff — see p. 141). In the second epigraph an Author Unknown instructs the reader to understand that it is ‘by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses’.

Lessing’s guidance is less disguised when she assumes her own narrative voice. At the start of Chapter One, in the paragraph immediately following the ‘newspaper extract’ that begins the tale, the reader is told: ‘When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have.’ And this feeling is ‘a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected’ (p. 9).

On page 13 the narrator makes a pronouncement on the paternalistic ramblings of a District Native Commissioner on native law (‘Remarks like these ... have become since’). On page 27 the reader is told that «white civilization» ... will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person’.

And this is the narrator on the Turners’ lack of awareness that they provide ‘the staple of gossip’ among local farmers: ‘People who live to themselves, whether from necessity or choice, and who do not trouble themselves about their neighbours’ affairs are always disquieted and uneasy if by some chance they come to know that other people discuss them’ (p. 179). White people have (always) ‘this feeling’ of anger and satisfaction when ‘natives’ commit crime. People ‘who live to them-
selves' are 'always' disturbed by evidence of the attention of their neighbours.

Lessing’s implied reader is in need of information, is obviously an outsider to the colony, does not know its ways, but is interested in discovering the connections between the brutality and ignorance of white settlers (the collective) and the decline into madness of one of their number (the individual). The reader is also, unlike Mary and most South Africans of that time, according to the narrator, informed on the terms 'class' and 'race': 'These things [Mary’s privileged economic status] did not enter her head. «Class» is not a South African word; and its equivalent, «race», meant to her the office boy in the firm where she worked, other women’s servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets, whom she hardly noticed' (pp. 36-37). The reader is also, of course, the reader of 1948-49 (Lessing brought her manuscript and infant son to England in 1949). At that time the battle to free the African colonies of the British ‘yoke’ (as it is usually termed) was still to gather its full impetus: a deal of boldness, determination, courage was needed in order to condemn so firmly, and so sweepingly.

Perhaps this is a reason for Lessing shortening the distance between narrator and reader (and lengthening that between reader and the action in the text — the ‘newspaper cutting’ that places the action in a reported past is one device for achieving this effect). Acceptance of the claims of a voice that condemns so confidently and tartly, might lead to the desire to enter into complicity with it, to share its coolly bitter, laconic, and intimate stance of defiance of the Establishment (a stance that sustains the entire thesis of the novel that British ‘civilization’ imposed on Africa is so wicked as to have both a representative and a victim in mad Mary). A negative response to the narrator’s confident, tart voice might result in irritation and a desire to reject its claims.

Distance between narrator and reader is shortened by certain observations on characters that the narrator confides in the reader, the use of colloquialisms, the sparse use of irony, and by the choice of a vocabulary, syntax and sentence structure that generally promote the suggestion of frankness, straightforwardness, the sharing of comfortable agreement between teller of the tale and listener.

There are observations on the human fallibility of the settlers: they are too afraid to discuss the murder, yet secrete the newspaper clippings ‘among old letters, or between the pages of a book’; they glance at the ‘yellowing’ pieces of paper from time to time with ‘closed, secretive faces’ (p. 9). The reader possibly shares with the narrator a knowingness about
the settlers' motives, their state of fear, and a feeling of indulgence toward their human weakness.

Colloquial phrases reduce the distance between narrator and reader and so encourage identification with the narrator's point of view. On page 10, these are 'and that was the end of it', 'an hour or so's companionship', and 'positively grateful', and, on page 13, 'Well...'. There are also colloquial phrases that explicitly guide the reader in 'rating' responses: 'that was the most extraordinary thing about it' (p. 9), 'the most interesting thing about the whole affair' (p. 10), and 'The more one thinks about it, the more extraordinary the case becomes' (p. 11).

The implied reader is possibly appreciative of other devices that convey frankness, assertive vigour, and a flair for the dramatic; these are: the brevity (less than ten words) of some sentences, the structural uncomplicatedness of even long sentences, the simple, everyday vocabulary, the clear markers of stages in the action of the narrator's commentary, and a sparse use of irony. The short sentences seem to crystallise the thoughts or emotions of preceding or following sentences (Morphet, p. 15). 'The newspaper did not say much', 'And then they turned the page to something else' and 'The murder was simply not discussed' all appear on page 9, on which there are only 10½ sentences apart from the newspaper extract. On page 10 there's the racy description of Slatter: 'He was still a proper cockney, even after twenty years in Africa. He came with one idea: to make money. He made it. He made plenty. He was a crude, brutal, ruthless, yet kindhearted man, in his own way, and according to his own impulses, who could not help making money' (p. 14).

Even long sentences are relatively undemanding in analytical terms when they function on the principles of repetition and accretion and employ co-ordinating conjunctions ('and', 'but', 'or'). On page 9, the two sentences that have more than thirty-five words ('People all over ... have been expected'; 'Many must have ... secretive faces') have just these features.

Easy acceptance of the reader's narrative guide is also invited by the simple vocabulary and clear markers on the progress both of the action and the narrator's commentary upon the action. In the first nine paragraphs of the novel there are eleven such 'markers'. Those designated with an asterisk also begin a paragraph and so articulate connections between structural elements of the text larger than sentences:

When
And then*
Irony invites the reader to inhabit with the ironist a position that is morally or intellectually superior to whoever or whatever is the butt of the irony. On page 9 there is a one-line paragraph, ‘And then they turned the page to something else’, which is preceded by the information that when the ‘people all over the country’ (as opposed to ‘the people in «the district» who knew the Turners’) glanced at the report of Mary’s death they felt anger and satisfaction. Lessing’s reader might deduce, from the isolation of the sentence as well as its brevity, the limited imaginative and analytical powers of such cursory colonial readers of newspapers.

Who might the implied reader be? (S)he is probably English, and so the more sensitive to the attacks on institutions British (and Lessing did take her manuscript to England). The implied reader is perhaps a newcomer to The Group, is perhaps someone like one of those RAF officers who joined the small band of Southern Rhodesian communists the intricacies of whose debates and love lives are chronicled by Lessing in the *Children of Violence* series?

The reader has, in fact, a (failed) surrogate within the text, Tony Marston, the young Englishman. As an outsider who becomes for a short time involved in the action, he functions as a touchstone of the duties of the sensitive observer: ‘Tony [Marston] was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day’ (p. 27); ‘...the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to [Marston], was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives’ (p. 23).

This is precisely what the following chapters encourage the reader to do. The implied reader of *The Grass is Singing* will not fail, as does Marston, to ‘understand’.

The distance between reader and action is at first somewhat extended. Twice the deictic ‘then’ (as opposed to ‘now’) is used in the first nine paragraphs. The start of the narrative, pages 9-14 of Chapter 1, is placed in some uncertain time after the day of the murder (enough time has elapsed for newspaper cuttings to turn yellow, p. 9), while chapters 2 to
11, which tell of Mary’s life up to and including the day she dies, are an extended flashback. After page 14, Chapter 1, for the most part (pp. 15-26, 28-31), recounts events the morning after Mary’s murder and features use of the historic present and some dialogue, which would tend to close the distance between reader and action; however, the frequent interjections (explanations usually of emotions, thoughts, and motives) of the narrator ‘alienate’ the reader from character and action, insist on critical judgement.

Dialogue creates an external impression of the lifelikeness of characters: there is very little dialogue in this novel. The lifelikeness of Mary Turner, as of other Lessing characters, grows predominantly from the rendering of their psyche. From Chapter 2 onward the text invites the immersion of the reader in the consciousness of Mary Turner, an immersion that would be likely to lead the reader past fear and vague pity to the enlightened sort of ‘understanding’ Lessing is soliciting for the mad woman at the heart of *The Grass is Singing*.

By the end of Chapter 1 the reader has been primed to assess Mary’s decline within the framework of the settlers’ weaknesses and prejudices. The narrator has exposed their vices, they exhibit these themselves (Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham feel for Mary not pity but a ‘bitter contemptuous anger’, p. 20), and Marston’s shock at the behaviour of Slatter and the policeman act as further commentary. As the reader approaches Mary, she has already been depicted as seen through the eyes of two settlers and by an outsider watching the settlers watching her. Loathing and fear are what the two settlers feel toward her, while there is pity and ‘a little disgust’ from the fresh-faced Englishman (p. 20).

The reader is therefore being prepared on a rational level to regard Mary with sympathy. Yet, perhaps the reader is also being readied for revulsion against Mary and what she is? The first description of the central character is presented, it seems, through the narrator’s point of view (as well as the narrator’s voice), rather than Slatter’s: ‘He turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that...’ (p. 17). The narrator (not only Slatter and Denham) depersonalises Mary. And aren’t the gruesome touches (inserted for the sake of ‘realism’?) of the dogs licking Mary’s blood and the stiffened arm of her corpse knocking ‘horribly’ against the narrow door of the police car more likely to stimulate in the reader disgusted recoil than pity (pp. 17, 25)?
In Chapter 2 the reader learns of Mary's early life up until the time she marries Dick Turner. The geographical, social, economic, and emotional features of her setting are supplied with economy — and emphasis, so that certain features have both an objective 'reality' and an added layer of meaning, for Mary, and also for the reader. These are the store, dust, and the box on stilts. When Mary finds these elements of her unhappy childhood returning to plague her adult life, they will stimulate in her a sense of being trapped in repetitive patterns set by her childhood. This is Mary's reality, delineated by the narrator as such. Is the reader, too, however, encouraged to attribute particular ('symbolic') significance to these features? It would seem so: and if this is so, then the reader is likely to share Mary's sense that her fate is predetermined. 'Dust and chickens; dust and children and wandering natives; dust and the store — always the store' (p. 35). The reader will probably become keyed to a symbolic level of meaning signalled by repetition and by recall of the epigraphs. 'Dust', dryness, aridity; Eliot. Mary's inheritance of bleakness, aridity, and poverty, material, emotional, intellectual, cultural.

The third prominent feature of Mary's childhood, the box on stilts, is mentioned three times in five pages (36, 37, 40). Epithets for the house like 'fly-away little' (p. 36) and 'sordid little' (p. 37) appear to convey the narrator's point of view as well as Mary's; the reader becomes attuned to the metaphoric level of signification, to the existence of an emotional and psychic state involving containment, entrapment and a precarious, insecure sense of place in the world.

The Freudian emphasis on the definitive influence upon the adult of crucial childhood experiences is even more overt in the dreams recounted on pp. 172-75: the mark laid by Mary's father upon the child's sexuality is overlaid by the dominating phallic presences of those men who enter Mary's adult sexual life, Dick, and the fearsome ('black') black man, Moses. The reader is encouraged to regard Mary's career as ineluctable. This is despite the narrator's assertions that Mary could, at certain points, have chosen to change her life. 'If she had wanted, she could have taken a flat and.... There was nothing to prevent her living by herself.... She could have become a person on her own account' (pp. 37-38).

Sympathy is likely to be the reader's response to the details of the early life of this child, whose mother's reaction to the father's alcoholism is to become a self-pitying nag and teach her daughter emotional and physical 'frigidity' (pp. 34, 36). The reader must surely feel sadness for a child whose happiest time occurs when her parents grieve for her dead brother and sister, because it is then that they stop quarrelling (p. 35).
But the narrator’s repeated statement that Mary has times when she is ‘very happy’ (pp. 35 (twice), 37, 38), when offset against the ‘impersonality’ Mary opts for (p. 36), and the reminder that her aloofness from ‘intimacies and scenes and contacts’ is a ‘weakness’ (p. 38), begins to sound ironic, even sarcastic. How are we to judge Mary; in, for instance, the passage on page 40 beginning ‘If she had been left alone’ and ending ‘hard as rock’? The reader may pity Mary, and yet could, like Marston, stay ‘a little disgusted’; for Mary is a character hard to like.

She seemed not to care for men. She would say to her girls, ‘Men! They get all the fun.’ Yet outside the office and the club her life was entirely dependent upon men, though she would have most indignantly repudiated the accusation. (p. 39)

At the age of thirty, this woman who had a ‘good’ State education, a thoroughly comfortable life enjoying herself in a civilized way, and access to all knowledge of her time (only she read nothing but bad novels) knew so little about herself that she was thrown completely off her balance because some gossiping women had said she ought to get married. (p. 46)

Is the reader meant to become impatient with Mary? this pathetic woman who lives ‘at bottom’ from a ‘feeling of superiority to men’ (p. 46), this ‘hollow’ (Eliot, again) woman (p. 45)? Perhaps the reader ought to manage to stay just this side of sympathy (but only just?).

Various factors aid the reader in maintaining this position. (Poor) Dick Turner, whom Mary grasps at, and marries, may be more likeable than his wife (Slatter’s abuse of his land and labourers offsets Dick’s respect for his), but he is weak. His failure to put a ceiling into the house carries irresponsibility to the point of cruelty.

Furthermore, when Mary exhibits her worst characteristics, to Dick and the labourers, the narrator prompts recall of the fact that she has learnt her chilling behaviour from her parents (pp. 57, 83, 95, 121). Such reminders could, however, have the result of de-individualising Mary for the reader.

Towards the end of Chapter 10 and in Chapter 11, the final chapter, in which Moses murders Mary, there is a series of paragraphs which are the longest in the novel: pp. 196-98 has 63 lines; 206-9, 84 lines; 210-11, 65 lines; 216-17, 61 lines. These passages evoke the workings of Mary’s mind. The longest of all runs from pages 206 to 209 (‘What was it all about? ... It snapped shut: the vision was gone’).

Again, sentences of less than ten words punctuate the writing:

I don’t understand, she said, I don’t understand...
I don’t understand, she said again.
I understand nothing.
Even the words were not her own.
How many?
Long before she had ever come to the farm!
Even that girl had known it.
But what had she done?
And what was it?
What had she done?
Nothing of her own volition.
And justly — she knew that.
But why?
Against what had she sinned?
She could see the house, empty, its furnishings rotting.
First would come the rats.
And then the rains would break.
People would search for the house.
It snapped shut: the vision was gone.

These sentences, which appear to mark key points in the whirl of Mary’s thought, feature questions, and negatives (‘don’t’, ‘don’t’, ‘nothing’, ‘not’, ‘Nothing’, ‘empty’, ‘rotting’, ‘gone’). They suggest confusion, self-hatred, guilt.

Longer sentences are, as in the ‘dust’ passage quoted above, repetitious and incremental. Repetition and accretion are perhaps the most powerful elements of Lessing’s style. For the reader they are likely to function two ways: to suggest the obsessiveness of the thought patterns of a character, but also, when encountered in novel after novel by Lessing, and when linked to her love of exhaustive analysis (of power relations and of emotional patterns in heterosexual relations, for instance) to evoke a quality of the writer’s mind. Repetition and accretion of words, phrases, images, are the main means by which the reader gains the impression of following Lessing to the heart of things, and to deep layers of the psyche.

Sentence A

It was a torment to her, in that momentarily pitiless clarity,
1. to see herself. That was how
   they would see her, when it was all over, as
   she saw herself now: an angular, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the life she had
   been given to use but one thought:
2. that between her and the angry sun was a thin strip of blistering iron;
   that between her and the fatal darkness was a short strip of daylight.

The numbers 1. and 2. mark the two repeated sections, which in the case of sentence 1 are varied. Colons mark the start of incremental parts of the sentence.
The following sentence has similar features:

Sentence B

And time taking on the attributes of space, she stood balanced in mid-air, and while she saw Mary Turner rocking in the corner of the sofa, moaning, her fists in her eyes, she saw, too, Mary Turner as she had been, that foolish girl travelling unknowingly to this end.

The use of colons in sentence A and the word 'and' in B makes for coordination instead of subordination: thoughts, insights, judgements accumulate as a weightier and weightier mass, suggesting the obsessiveness of Mary’s mind.

While such devices are managed with skill, Lessing’s control of point of view (and therefore of the reader’s attitude to character and the values involved) is less sure, and this is true of the vital section of the paragraph in which Mary considers her guilt or innocence.

1. The evil is there, but of what it consists, I do not know.
2. Even the words were not her own.
3. She groaned because of the strain, lifted in puzzled judgement on herself, who was at the same time the judged, knowing only that she was suffering torment beyond description.
4. For the evil was a thing she could feel: had she not lived with it for many years?
5. How many?
6. Long before she had ever come to the farm!
7. Even that girl had known it.
8. But what had she done?
9. And what was it?
10. What had she done?
11. Nothing, of her own volition.
12. Step by step, she had come to this, a woman without will, sitting on an old ruined sofa that smelled of dirt, waiting for the night to come that would finish her.
13. And justly — she knew.
   But why?
   Against what had she sinned?
   The conflict between her judgement on herself, and her feeling of innocence, of having been propelled by something she did not understand, cracked the wholeness of her vision.

In the first sentence the reader hears Mary’s voice rendering her point of view. In sentence 2 the voice is the narrator’s rendering either the narrator’s point of view or one shared by both Mary and narrator. In sentence 3 voice and point of view appear to be wholly the narrator’s, as indicated by the personal pronoun ‘she’, describing Mary’s state of mind. The first part of sentence 4 appears to feature Mary’s thoughts indirectly.
represented; this is more clearly true of the words after the colon. Sentences 5 to 10 indirectly render Mary’s point of view; but whose point of view does the reader receive in ‘Nothing, of her own volition’ (sentence 11)? Or in ‘And justly — she knew that’ (sentence 13)? These are both crucial points in deciding the reader’s attitude. And there’s the uncertainty about point of view in sentence 2. It is one thing for Mary, deranged, to feel irrationally guilty and quite another for her creator to suggest that she has done nothing ‘of her own volition’ yet is ‘justly’ to be condemned as having partaken of some ‘evil’.

Mary cannot alter the tracks set for her in childhood. The narrator defines this as precisely where Mary fails — until she chooses to do otherwise, but this choice brings her face to face with Moses, and her death:

She rose to her feet with a queerly appropriate dignity, a dignity that left Tony speechless, [clearly, it is the narrator who finds Mary’s ‘dignity’ ‘appropriate’] for the protective pity with which he had been going to address her, now seemed useless. She would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she had to learn. (p. 231)

The narrator endorses, by her use of the word ‘appropriate’, Mary’s decision — yet, has not Mary shown a thoroughly healthy instinct in appealing to anyone to help her save her life? She cannot appeal to Dick; he is too far gone himself. (And there are further signs, in the description of the murder, that the narrator regards Mary’s death as desirable. See Bertelsen, 1985; Hunter, 1987.) Why cannot Mary choose to have a holiday on the coast, as the district doctor recommends? The text closes over these options, and the weight of the narrator’s approval is placed behind Mary’s self-willed death. The narrator, and ‘Africa’, it seems, require her death, her guilty self-sacrifice. As Mary dies, the lightning flashes along the blade of the weapon (picked up in the bush) wielded by an agent of ‘the bush’, an African man, Moses; and then the storm breaks (p. 218). The ‘bush’, tormented Mary, jilted Moses, and the reader — who has been immersed in Mary’s sufferings — all experience relief; and the reader is to understand that Mary has atoned.

But there are serious contradictions here: in no way is the ‘bush’ or, more importantly, are the African people bettered by Mary’s death. Furthermore, while the rational discourse of the novel elicits ‘understanding’ (besides the sufferings of Mary’s childhood, there are those of her marriage: poverty, the heat, the absence of useful and challenging work, the slobbering dogs, the servants whom she loathes and fears, Dick’s clumsy sexual fumblings); yet there is also, at some irrational or prerational level a powerful rejection of the character, to the point of
killing her off. The reader is likely to feel horror at the nature of Mary’s death, but also to see the worthlessness of this woman who ‘gives in’ (like Mrs Quest, but unlike Mrs Quest’s daughter Martha and unlike Lessing herself), and so to endorse the purging that has taken place. It is not only Mary whose ‘vision’ is split between ‘judgement’ and ‘feeling’: the writer rejects her character, to the point of killing her off. The novel is not merely cautionary, it is also punitive of its protagonist, while even the note of high seriousness on which Mary’s death takes place is double-edged in that it entails glorification of an act of (female) self-sacrifice that benefits no-one.

NOTES


5. Fish, Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980).


7. To quote Jouve at greater length: ‘The fact that changes of heart are shown to occur in the course of the sequence means that they are not integrated. And they are not, cannot be, integrated, because the voice from the start claims to be inclusive. There is a totalizing intention written into every line of the prose. And it is because of this that one cannot allow the contradictions and lapses to go their own way. Or to signify in the way that, say, gaps would signify in a Balzac, or a Stendahl novel. In the famous passage in which Julien Sorel goes to kill Mme de Renal and in which nothing whatever is recorded of his state of mind, the very absence of verbal matter acts as infinite wealth. Whichever way you choose to interpret it, you know that the truth of the character lies also in what cannot be made explicit — in the non-written as well as in the written. But then Stendhal’s prose, his way of jumping from chapter to chapter, of moving across time, has made that kind of interaction between the written and the non-written, black and white (or red), possible. There is an abundance of absence, of ‘more’. Nothing remotely like this occurs in Doris.
Lessing’s prose. You are never given to understand that there is more to Martha than the text gives you — because whenever there is going to be more, or there has been more, the text is going to tell you ... the authorial consciousness, either through, or in default of, its characters, claims to be complete. And this is why it cannot afford contradictions’ (pp. 96-97).


9. Jouve comments, while examining a passage from Landlocked, that one ‘keeps wondering who knows what is being told’, and that ‘gaps also appear if one wonders who is seeing, and who is speaking from where’ (p. 120).

10. Evelyn Bertelsen, ‘History into Fiction: Doris Lessing’s Rhodesia’, paper presented at Colloquium on Publisher/Writer/Reader: Sociology of Southern African Literature, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1982. Published in English in Africa, 11, No 1 (1984), 15-40. Hunter, ‘Marriage as Death’: A Reading of Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing in Clayton. Bertelsen emphasises the identification of Moses with libidinal aspects of the colonial (white) psyche; in my article I stress rejection by Mary’s creator of the kind of woman who becomes like her mother, a rejection necessary to Lessing (who leaves her family of origin, husband and child, and Africa), and to Martha Quest, in order to gain a wider scope for their intellectual and emotional powers.

Book Reviews


In Soyinka’s latest play enlightened demystification and satire are again to the fore, as they were in his earliest dramatic successes, The Lion and the Jewel and the Jero plays. This play’s action repeats Swift’s famous practical joke on the astrologer Partridge. Under the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff, Swift forecast the date and time of Partridge’s death with a suitable parade of mumbo-jumbo, and then, when the unfortunate astrologer insisted on maintaining his continued existence ‘Bickerstaff’ argued that, since his calculations were infallible, Partridge’s fraudulent corpse must be masquerading as a living being. In Soyinka’s version it is the Nigerian astrologer’s servant who publishes his death-forecast, and at the play’s climax persuades the distracted charlatan to sham death in order to pacify the mob, furious at seeing a dead man shamming life. Swift’s is not the only Enlightenment literary influence apparent in the play. Its tone echoes Jonson and