

## Teacher's notes

# The Grass is Singing

by Doris Lessing



## SUMMARY

**T**he *Grass is Singing*, published in 1950, is Doris Lessing's first novel. The story takes place in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), in southern Africa, in the late 1940s. From 1923–1980 Rhodesia was a British colony, with its own white government. *The Grass is Singing* tells the story of a white woman and her unhappy marriage to Dick, a poor white farmer. The heroine, Mary, falls obsessively in love with her black houseboy. She treats him cruelly, as she treats all black Africans. The story ends with Mary's madness and murder.

*The Grass is Singing* is a powerful psychological study of an unhappy woman and her marriage. But at the same time, Lessing draws a picture of Rhodesian society; she shows us how badly many white people treated black people during that period. When *The Grass is Singing* was first published, it was an immediate success, both in America and in Europe.

## ABOUT DORIS LESSING

Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in Persia (now Iran), of British parents. When she was five years old the family moved to a farm in Southern Rhodesia, in southern Africa. Like all white people of that period, the family had black servants and farmworkers, who were paid almost nothing. Lessing could not accept this as she grew older. She left school at fifteen, then lived in Salisbury, the capital of Rhodesia, from the age of 18 to 30. She married twice but both marriages failed.

After the break-up of her first marriage Lessing became involved in left-wing politics. She was committed to helping the black cause for equality and freedom in southern Africa. However, she felt she could be more useful outside Rhodesia, in a country with more freedom. In 1949, at the age of 30, after the failure of her second marriage, she left for England with her youngest child, a boy.

Lessing's first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, was published in 1950 in Britain, America and Continental Europe. She joined the Communist Party for a short period, but left it in 1956. In that same year, the Rhodesian government declared that they would not allow her to return there. Since 1950, Lessing has lived in England.

## WORKS AND THEMES

Doris Lessing is best known as a novelist and short-story

writer, but she has written plays, poems, essays and non-fiction. Her work explores psychological, political and moral attitudes, and the role of women in modern society.

In the years 1952–69, Lessing wrote a series of five books called *Children of Violence*. The novels tell the life story of heroine Martha Quest, from her childhood in Rhodesia to the last hours of the human race in the year 2000. Lessing's most famous novel is probably *The Golden Notebook* (1962). This is about a woman author's failure to write a successful novel and is written in a modern, experimental style. In this novel and in *Children of Violence*, Lessing explores social problems of the period – left-wing politics, women's liberation, and the breakdown of society.

In 1993 Lessing published *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, using the pseudonym 'Jane Somers'. She wanted to discover how a novel of hers would be reviewed without her name attached to it. The book was accepted by her first publishers; they wrote to 'Jane Somers' saying that her writing reminded them of Doris Lessing.

## CHARACTERS AND THEMES

*The Grass is Singing* created a sensation when it was first published in 1950. It brought to public attention the terrible differences in relationships between black and white people in South Africa. Lessing did not do this in a crude and unsubtle way. Her portraits of Mary and Dick, the white couple in the story, are basically sympathetic. How can we not feel sorry for Mary? Her childhood was unhappy. When Dick asked her to marry him, she had no idea how hard life on his farm would be. She was simply unsuited to it, just as kind-hearted Dick was unsuited to running a farm. It is against this background that we place Mary's ill-treatment of black farm-workers and servants. Lessing does not excuse Mary, but we do see that the problem of black and white is not simply 'rich white, poor black'.

Moses, the black servant with whom Mary sleeps, is powerfully drawn. Lessing immediately shows us that this is an intelligent man intent on maintaining his dignity. There is a sexual attraction between Mary and Moses. However, an attraction between a black person and a white person was seen as unnatural in South Africa at that time, and tragedy ensues. Lessing also places Moses' murderous feelings against Mary in context. Mary treated him as being less than

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human, and his feelings are understandable although, again, not excusable.

At that end of the book, we are left with a feeling of great pity for the human condition. In writing *The Grass is Singing*, Doris Lessing contributed to the process of change in South Africa.

## RHODESIA

Southern Rhodesia is now called Zimbabwe. British settlers arrived in the land which was to become Rhodesia in the late 1880s; the Africans resisted them but by 1898 the British had won. In 1911 the British divided the country into Northern and Southern Rhodesia. Southern Rhodesia became a self-governing British colony in 1923.

Northern Rhodesia became independent as Zambia in 1963. However, the White-dominated government in Southern Rhodesia was opposed to majority rule by black Africans. In 1965, despite British opposition, this government declared its independence. Many countries imposed economic sanctions and these, together with internal guerrilla activity, forced the Rhodesian government to negotiate with the main black African groups. Finally, in 1980, a majority government of black Africans was formed and in that same year, Britain recognized the independence of Southern Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe.

## Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

## ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Give each student in the class a different fact from the Introduction in the book, written on a slip of paper. Ask students to remember their 'fact' and then to put the strip of paper away.

Students then have 10 minutes to collect facts by asking each other what their facts are. Students then return to their seats and write down the facts they have learned. The winner is the person who has listed the greatest number of facts.

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

## Chapters 1–2

- Put students into pairs. Students imagine that Dick has just asked Mary to marry him but Mary has not accepted yet. One student is Mary, the other is a friend who really cares for Mary. They have a conversation. The friend gives Mary advice, and Mary answers.
- Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss

what they have learnt so far from the novel about relationships between black and white people. How do they feel about what they have learnt?

## Chapters 3–4

Put students into groups. Ask them to discuss this question:

How does Mary treat her servants? What does this show about her character? Is there any excuse for her, do you think?

## Chapters 5–6

Put students into groups of three. One student plays a marriage adviser, the other two students play Dick and Mary. Dick and Mary have gone to the marriage adviser for help with their relationship problems. They must explain their problems to the adviser, who listens and tries to help them.

## Chapters 7–8

- Put students into pairs. Give them the following quote and ask them to discuss the question.

'She felt she was in a street, moving towards something final . . . She felt she was waiting and Moses seemed to be waiting too.' (page 42)

What do you think will happen? Why?

- In groups, students discuss the following question:

Do you feel angry with Mary or sympathetic towards her? Give reasons for your feelings.

## Chapters 9–10

Put students into groups of three. Each group contains a 'Dick', 'Mary' and 'Moses'. Students must explain to their group why their character deserves more sympathy than the others. Members of the group then vote on who they feel most sympathetic towards (they cannot vote for themselves!).

## ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students into groups of three. One student plays Moses, the other students play two judges. They must question Moses about why he murdered Mary (they can also ask him why he did not run away). Moses must answer them and then they must decide on his punishment.

## Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

## Chapters 1–2

**the bush** (n) areas of land in Africa which are still wild

**houseboy** (n) a black boy who works in a white person's house

**sergeant** (n) an officer of fairly low rank in the police

## Chapters 3–4

**candle** (n) a stick of wax that you burn to produce light

## Chapters 5–6

**beehive** (n) a place where bees are kept to produce honey

**frost** (n) a white powder of ice that forms outside when it is very cold

**malaria** (n) a serious disease that is spread by mosquitos (insects which bite)

**turkey** (n) a bird similar to a chicken but larger

## Chapters 9–10

**earring** (n) a piece of jewellery that you wear on your ear



## Student's activities

### Photocopiable

These activities can be done alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

### Activities before reading the book

- Read the Introduction in your book and answer these questions.
  - Where does this story take place?
  - When does it take place?
  - What do you know about Mary Turner after reading the Introduction?
  - Why do you think the servant might murder her?
- Describe the pictures on pages 12 and 52.
  - How do you think the two pictures are connected?
  - Who is the man at the front of the picture on page 12, do you think? What is his relationship to the black man and to the woman in the picture on page 52?

### Activities while reading the book

#### CHAPTERS 1-2

##### Chapter 1

Answer these questions.

- What did the Turners' white neighbours feel about them and why did they feel like this?
- What is the attitude of people who know the Turners towards the murder of Mary Turner?
- How does Charlie Slatter know the Turners? What has he made Dick Turner do? What kind of man is Slatter?
- What do you learn about Moses, Mary's murderer?
- What does Dick Turner do while the police are at the house?
- How long has Tony Marston been in the country and what is his relationship to Dick Turner?
- What do you think Tony Marston knows about the murder?
- What is the reason given for the murder at the trial? Do you think this is correct?

##### Chapter 2

- Are these sentences true or false? If they are false, correct them.
  - Before Mary goes to school, her parents' shop is the centre of her life.
  - After Mary leaves school she works as a shop assistant.
  - In her twenties, Mary is an attractive young woman and has a full and active life.
  - When Mary is over thirty, she overhears a conversation about her that upsets her greatly.

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- Mary accepts the first man who asks her to marry him.
  - Dick Turner likes the look of Mary when he first sees her.
  - Dick Turner owns a farm but has heavy debts.
  - Dick and Mary marry two months after Dick asks Mary to marry him.
- Talk to another student. Do you think Dick and Mary will be happy together? Give reasons for your opinion.

#### CHAPTERS 3-4

##### Chapter 3

'He had no right to marry, no right to bring her to this.'

Do you think Dick is right to feel guilty about marrying Mary and bringing her to his farm? Give reasons for your opinion.

##### Chapter 4

- Who is the speaker of these sentences? Explain the events leading up to these words.
  - 'He'll never get it like you want it.'
  - 'I'm not lonely.'
  - 'It's not me you're hurting, but yourself.'
  - 'You're a fool!'
- Work with another student and act this conversation.
 

*Student A:* You are Mary. Explain to Dick why you feel so angry with him and so unhappy with your life on the farm.

*Student B:* You are Dick. Listen to Mary and say you understand. But explain that you are angry too about the way she treats the native servants. Tell her that she needs to find a way to fill her time.

#### CHAPTERS 5-6

##### Chapter 5

- Answer these questions.
  - When a man calls Dick 'Jonah,' what does Mary realize about Dick?
  - Why does Charlie Slatter want Dick's farm to fail?
  - What problems does Mary have when she goes back to town?
  - How does Mary feel when she returns to the farm?
  - What happens a few months after her return?
- Talk to another student. Discuss this question. Do you think Mary could have stayed in town and found a job? Was this possible? How could she have done this? Would she have been happier in town?

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## Student's activities

## Chapter 6

Choose the right answer.

- Mary allows the workers
    - to have no more than one minute's rest.
    - five minutes' rest each hour.
  - At the end of the week, Mary takes
    - twenty per cent off some men's wages.
    - ten per cent off some men's wages.
  - Mary realizes that the farm is not making money because
    - Dick is a complete fool.
    - Dick is ill.
  - Mary wants to grow
    - small food crops.
    - tobacco.
- Talk to another student. Discuss this question.  
Why is Mary so cruel to black people? Why does she hate them so much?

## CHAPTERS 7-8

## Chapter 7

- Complete these sentences.
  - The tobacco plant fails because . . .
  - After the tobacco plant fails, Mary loses . . .
  - Mary sees that the sad truth about their lives is that . . .
  - Dick can't find a new servant because . . .
  - Mary recognizes the farm worker as the one she . . .
  - At first, Mary doesn't behave badly towards Moses because . . .
- Mary has different feelings towards Moses than towards the other natives she has had in the house. Describe these feelings.
- Work with another student.  
*Student A:* You are Moses. Describe the Turners and your work at their house.  
*Student B:* You are a friend of Moses. Ask him about his life at the Turner's house. Ask him if Mary is as terrible as people say she is.

## Chapter 8

- What happens immediately after these events? (Write one sentence only for each question.)
  - Moses makes Mary drink a glass of water.
  - Moses tells Mary that if she is angry again he will go.
  - Dick's temperature rises to 105°.
  - Mary wakes up from her terrible dream.
  - Mary says, 'Don't be stupid, I'm not afraid of you.'

- Work with another student and discuss these questions.
  - What acts of kindness does Moses do for Mary?
  - Why does Moses have power over Mary?
  - What do we learn about Mary's father?
  - Do you think this explains Mary's character? Give reasons for your opinion.

## CHAPTERS 9-10

## Chapter 9

- Answer these questions.
  - Why does Charlie offer to give Dick a good price for his land?
  - Why does Charlie feel amazed and disgusted by Mary's behaviour when he goes to visit the Turners?
  - Why does Charlie find a manager for the Turner's farm?
  - Why does Tony Marston tell Moses to leave immediately?
  - Why do you think Marston decides to do nothing about Moses?
- Talk to another student.  
Charlie Slatter obeys the 'law of the whites in Southern Africa'.
  - What is that law?
  - What is your opinion of this law? Give reasons.

## Chapter 10

Read these sentences from the chapter and answer the questions.

- 'How did it come to this? The evil there, I can feel it. . . I've lived with it all these years! But what have I done?'  
Why is the 'evil' there? What has Mary done?
- 'I'll find him and it'll be all over.'  
What does Mary mean by this? What causes her to think this?
- Why do you think Moses kills Mary?

## Activities after reading the book

Talk to another student.

- This book was published in 1950 and was an immediate success.  
Why do you think it was so successful? What is your opinion of it?
- What can be learnt from this story?

